Walking High Above the World

You ever notice how the smell of gunpowder makes you thirsty? Because after the fireworks I’m aiming us for where the food carts are parked along the street, thinking about an ice-cold lemonade, how clean it will taste, and for a moment I almost forget that Freak is riding on my shoulders.

“Amazing perspective up here,” he’s saying. “This is what you see all the time.”

“I’m not that big,” I say. “This way you’re like two feet taller than me.”

“Cool,” he says. “I love it.”

We’re working our way through the crowd and we’re almost to the food carts when Freak tugs on my hair. “Cretin at two o’clock,” he says, real urgent. “Two more at three o’clock.”

I go, “Huh? What?”

“The Blade and his gang,” Freak hisses. “They’ve locked on to us. Their trajectory is converging. Go to the left,” he says. “Make it quick, if you want to live!”

I turn and see Blade before I can see him. Hear his wicked laugh, so mean and dirty it makes my stomach freeze up and my knees feel squishy.

“You! The freak! You and that giant retard, I’ll cut you down to size. Dice and slice, baby! Freak show time!”

And now I can see him, see that pointed white grin and his eyes so dark and cruel, and he’s
swaggering through the crowd, he’s got us surrounded with punks, everywhere I turn there’s another mean face trying to look as tough as Tony D.

In a small voice I say, “Tell me what to do,” and Freak pats me on the shoulder and says, “Just give me a nanosecond to process the alternatives.”

“Slice and dice!” That’s Blade, and he’s reaching into his back pocket.

“Make it quick,” I hiss, and then Freak is kicking my right shoulder and I turn that way and he’s saying “Go! Go!” and I run right over this punk, he’s so surprised he loses his bubble gum and he tries to grab my leg but I kick free and I’m running right and then left, running blind and just letting Freak decide which way we should go because he must have a plan, a dude as smart as that.

Which I’m right about, he does have a plan. Only the plan is to run out into the smelly millpond and drown us both.

“Go on!” he’s shouting from up above my head. “Trust me, we’ll be okay!”

Blade is shouting, too, and I can hear his feet pitter-patter behind me. Catching up.

“Warp speed!” Freak is shouting, and he’s kicking with both feet now, which means go straight. “Head for the H2O!”

The pond is right ahead of me, and I’m sort of running along the edge, crunching over the bottles and cans and candy wrappers, and then I hear this zingy sound and I just know that Blade is swinging a knife, cutting the air right behind us, and there’s nowhere to go but into the pond, like Freak wants me to.

I almost lose it right there, taking that first step, because it’s a gunky pond and the mud is really oozy and deep and it sucks right up to my knees. But I’m so scared of getting cut by Tony D., so scared he might bite me with those wicked teeth, I just keep going. There’s this great ugly sucking sound as my feet come back up out of the mud and I stretch out as far as my legs will go and I take another step and I just keep going.

I’m going so fast that the water is up to my chest before Freak gets my attention, he’s tugging at my hair with both hands. “Whoa!” he’s saying, “slow up, we did it.”

The mud is up around my knees and it’s real hard to turn around. Finally I get so I’m facing back at the shore and there’s Blade, just his head above the water, and he looks all white and scared. “Help!” he’s blubbering, choking on that dirty water, and then his punksters are splashing in to rescue him. Man, they can hardly get him loose, the way he’s stuck deep in that mud, and before they drag him to shore they’re all covered with slime and mud. They’re gasping like fish, almost too tired to cuss it out, but that doesn’t last.

Blade is covered with mud right up to his neck, which on him looks natural. He turns to his
Freak the Mighty

gang, who look as slimy as he does. "Get some rocks, it's target-practice time!"

"What do we do now?" I ask, because the mud is still sucking me down. It's over my knees now, and the water is right up under my arms and even Freak's feet are getting wet.

"Wait," Freak says. "The cavalry is coming, can't you hear that bugle?"

I'm listening, but I can't hear anything except for Blade and his gang, and how they're scrambling around trying to find some rocks to heave at us.

I can see Blade rearing back to throw, and the first one misses us.

"Can you move?" Freak says.

"I don't think so."

It's true. The mud is up over my knees, and I'm locked in place. I can't even fall down, that's how stiff it is. I'm like a big fence post, and everybody knows a fence post makes a good target.

More splashes as the rocks fall short. At first they're throwing stuff that's too heavy. Pretty soon they smarten up, and Blade says, "Smaller rocks! Get me smaller rocks!" and I know in my heart we're doomed.

Then up above me there's this really loud, high-pitched screech. Freak has his fingers in his mouth and he's whistling. Real shrill and shivery and so loud it almost hurts my ears. And then I see what Freak has been seeing all along, a cop car cruising real slow along the road around the pond, which is what they always do after the fireworks.

Freak is whistling and the cop car spotlight comes beaming around the pond until it settles on us. I'm blinking because the light is so bright, and Freak is making a fuss and waving his arms and we hear the metal megaphone sound of a cop voice ordering us not to move. Like we could even if we wanted!

It's hard to see in the glare of the spotlight, but Freak tells me that Blade and his punks are running away. Like snakes on sneakers, Freak says.

"Officers!" Freak is shouting into the white light. "We request assistance!"

They finally have to use ropes to pull me out of there. Freak won't let go, he stays right where he is on top of my shoulders even when this cop in a boat tries to lift him off, and then we're up on the bank of the pond and everybody is being real nice and giving us blankets and Cokes and saying they know all about Tony D., they'll keep an eye on him, don't you worry.

"Okay, boys, you'd better give us your names and we'll call your mothers," this one cop is saying, and there's this other guy who is looking at me funny and he says, "Hey, isn't that Kenny Kane's boy? Must be. Old Killer Kane, is he still inside?"

Freak is still holding tight to my shoulders and when they ask him for his name, he says, "We're
Freak the Mighty

Freak the Mighty, that's who we are. We're nine feet tall, in case you haven't noticed.

That's how it started, really, how we got to be Freak the Mighty, slaying dragons and fools and walking high above the world.

8.

Dinosaur Brain

It turned out to be a cool summer.

I figured we'd get in trouble for running into the pond. It looked bad for a while when the cops drove us home and I got out all soaking wet and covered with gook, and when Grim was hosing me down he had this really pruney look on his face, like he was smelling something bad, but the cops made out like I was a hero or something, rescuing the poor crippled midget kid. So Grim listens to the cops and then he gives me this weird look, like, imagine my surprise, and he goes in the house and then Gram comes running out in her nightgown with this big fluffy towel and she really makes a fuss.

Me rescuing Freak. What a joke, right? Except that's how it must have looked from a distance, because they never knew it was Freak who rescued me — or his genius brain and my big dumb body.

Gram is there rubbing me with the towel and her hands are shaking and she's saying, "Oh, I
saw those blue lights and I thought the worst," and Grim is behind her looking at me real intense and shaking his head, and he’s saying, “Who’d a thunk it, Mabel,” which is some kind of joke because Gram’s name isn’t Mabel.

Anyhow, they take me inside and the first thing Gram does is give me a bowl of ice cream, and Grim, he keeps shaking his head and he goes, “What this young man needs is a cup of coffee. Real coffee,” and then he gets busy putting the filter in the machine and measuring out the coffee and standing by while it drips through, and he’s got this stern look like he’s thinking deep thoughts. By the time I polish off the ice cream, Grim is handing me coffee in a china cup, from the set they never use.

He gives me that cup like it’s a really big deal, maybe because I’m not allowed to drink coffee yet, and he’s so Grim-like and serious I open my mouth to say what’s the big deal, you really think this is my first cup of coffee (yeah, right!), and something happens and the words come out: “Thank you, sir,” and it’s like I’m possessed or something, I’ve no idea where the things I’m saying are coming from, or why.

I go, “Thanks for the towel, Gram. And the ice cream. Could I have sugar in the coffee? Two teaspoons, please,” and Grim claps his hands together and he says, “Of course you can, son,” and it’s like whoa! because he never calls me that. Always Max or Maxwell or “that boy.”

Next thing he’s clearing his throat and coughing into his fist and Gram is looking at the two of us and she gets this Gram-like glow, like this is how it’s supposed to be, the way things always happen on The Wonder Years, with the family getting all gooey and sentimental about some numb thing the bratty kid did while he’s having all his wonderful years or whatever.

Gram says, “I want you to promise me something, Maxwell dear. Promise me you’ll keep away from the hoodlum boy and his awful friends. Nobody got hurt this time, but I shudder to think what might have happened.”

And Grim, bless his pointed little head, he goes, “Maxwell can handle himself, can’t you, uh, Max?”

Right. Uh, Max. Not son. Which is okay by me.

“I can run,” I say to Gram. “I see Tony D., that’s what I’ll do.”

“Good boy,” Gram says. “I thought, because you’re so much bigger than he is . . . well, you just do that, dear. You run away.”

“He’s not running away,” Grim says, real impatient. “He’s taking evasive action. Avoiding a confrontation. That’s a very different thing, right, Max?”

I nod and drink my coffee without slurping and decide it’s better not to mention that Tony D. carries a knife and he’s probably got guns,
too, because then Gram would only worry and she's such a clunker when she's worried.

Like I said, it turns out to be a pretty cool summer. Usually what I do is just hang around and look at my comic books and watch the tube, or go shopping with Gram if she really makes a fuss. I hate the beach because the beach is stupid, the cool crowd looking sleek and tanned and aren't-we-gorgeous?, and because if you saw me lying on a blanket you'd go, hey, why is that albino walrus wearing sunglasses?

So mostly I just vegetate in the basement and pick my navel, to quote Grim, Mr. Belly Button Lint himself.

Freak changes all that. Each and every morning the little dude humps himself over and he bangs on the bulkhead, wonka-wonka-wonka, he may be small but he sure is noisy. "Get outta bed, you lazy beast! There are fair maidens to rescue! Dragons to slay!" which is what he says every single morning, exactly the same thing, until it's like he's this alarm clock and as soon as I hear the wonka-wonka-wonka of him beating the bulkhead, I know what's coming next: fair maidens and dragons, and Freak with that wake-up-the-world grin of his, going, "Hurry up with the cereal, how can you eat that much, you big ox, come on, let's do something," he's so full of eveready energy you can practically hear his brain humming, and he never can sit still.

"Ants in the pants," I say one morning when he's ready to yank the cereal bowl off the table, he's in such a hurry to do something, and he goes, "What?" and I go, "You must have ants in your pants," and he gets this funny look and he goes, "That's what the Fair Gwen always says, did she tell you to say that?" and I shake my head and finish the cereal real slow and Freak goes, "For your information there are two thousand two hundred and forty-seven known subspecies of hymenopteran insects, Latin name Formicidae, and none of them are in my pants."

Which cracks me up, even though I don't understand a word he's saying.

"I propose a quest," he says. "We shall journey far to the East and see what lies there."

By now I know what a quest is because Freak has explained the whole deal, how it started with King Arthur trying to keep all his knights busy by making them do things that proved how strong and brave and smart they were, or sometimes how totally numb, because how else can you explain dudes running around inside big clunky tin cans and praying all the time? Which I don't mention to Freak because he's very sensitive about knights and quests and secret meanings. Like how a dragon isn't really just a big slimy fire-breathing monster, it's a symbol of nature or something.

"A dragon is fear of the natural world," Freak says, "An archetype of the unknown."

I go, "What's an archy-type?" and Freak sighs
and shakes his head and reaches into his knapsack for his dictionary.

This is true. He really does keep a dictionary in his knapsack, it's his favorite book, and he pulls it out like Arnold Schwarzenegger pulling out a machine gun or something, that's the fierce look he gets with a book in his hands.

"Go on," he says, making me take the book, "look it up." And now I wish I hadn't said anything about this archetype dude because I hate looking up stuff in his stupid dictionary.

"Start with A," he says.

"I know that."

"A-R," he says, "Just go along the A's until you come to A-R."

Yeah, right. Easy for a genius to use the dictionary, since he already knows how to spell the words. And R's never look like backward E's to Freak, which is the way they look to me sometimes, unless I really squint and think about it.

"Careful," he says. "You'll bite off your tongue and then we'll have to waste the day at the emergency room, getting it reattached. Microsurgery is such a bore, didn't anybody ever tell you that?"

"Huh?" I say, but I do close my mouth so my tongue doesn't stick out. I'm still looking in the dictionary for "archetype" and I'm looking for words that are underlined with red ink, because that's what Freak does the first time he looks up a word, he makes a line under it, and you'd be amazed how many are underlined, there are whole pages like that, where he's looked up every single word.

Finally he spells out all the letters for me, and I find the stupid word.

"There's nothing about dragons here," I say, squinting hard at the stuff under the word. "It just says 'pattern.' So what is it, a sewing type of thing?"

Freak has this disgusted look and he takes the dictionary and he goes, "You're hopeless. Pattern is the first definition. I was referring to the second definition, which is much more interesting. "A universal symbol or idea in the psyche, expressed in dreams or dreamlike images.""

Like that helps, right? I'm getting bored with the dictionary, so I pretend to understand and Freak finally gives up and he shakes his head and goes, "I don't know why I bother. Dinosaurs had brains the size of peanuts and they ruled the earth for a hundred million years."
9. Life Is Dangerous

So out we go. It's a habit by now, Freak riding up high on my shoulders and using his little feet to steer me if I forget where we're going. Not that we always know. Freak likes to make things up as he goes along. You think you're just walking down this ordinary sidewalk and really you're crossing this dangerous bridge, the kind made of vines that hangs high up in the air over a deep canyon, and when Freak makes it up it seems so real, you're afraid to look down or you'll get dizzy and fall off the sidewalk.

"Don't ever look down," he says. "Just keep your eyes closed." And then he puts his hands over my eyes and tells me to keep walking straight. "One foot," he says. "Now the next."

I'm fighting to keep my balance, and his hands are making me dizzy.

"One more step," Freak says. "Steady. Steady. Now lift up your hoof — I mean your foot. There, we made it!" And he takes his hands away and I see we've crossed the street.

Life Is Dangerous

"Go East," he says when I get to the end of the block. "That way, mighty steed! Yonder lies the East!"

I go, "How do you know which way is East?" And then something is glinting in my eye and Freak is showing me this little compass.

"The Official Cub Scout Compass?"

"That's a clever disguise so you don't know how valuable it is," he says. "This is actually a rare and valuable artifact passed down for generations. Lancelot used it, so did Sir Gawain, and for a time the Black Knight kept it on a chain next to his heart."

I go, "So the Black Knight was a Cub Scout, huh?" and Freak laughs and says, "That way. We go to the East on a secret mission."

We walk for miles. Way beyond the pond and the playground and the school, and for a while we're going through this really ritzy neighborhood of big white houses and blue swimming pools. Freak keeps saying stuff like, "That's the Castle of Avarice," and, "Yonder lies the Bloated Moat," and when we go under trees he'll say, "Proceed with caution," or, "All clear," depending on how low the branches come down.

"We must be East," I say. "Have we got to yonder yet?" because my stupid feet are getting sore, but Freak pats me on the head and says, "Yonder always lies over the next horizon. You could look it up if you don't believe me."

"Oh, I believe you."

On and on, block after block, through all these
neighbohoods that Freak says are really secret kingdoms. I'll bet we've gone ten miles at least, because my legs think it's a hundred, and even as light as Freak is, he's starting to feel heavy. "We're almost there," he says. "Turn at the end of the block."

"Where is it we're going?"

"You'll see," he says, "and you will be amazed."

Ahead there's this busy intersection, cars whizzing by, and it all seems sort of familiar.

"Can we stop for a Coke?" I say. "Grim gave me a dollar, big deal, but we can split it."

Freak goes, "Then that shall be your reward, faithful steed — tinted sucrose and bubbles of air. Onward! Onward to the Fortress!"

It turns out the Fortress looks like part of a hospital, which it is. The regular hospital is around in front and there's this new building added on out back. Medical Research, it says over the door, and I know because I made Freak spell it out.

"Does that mean they do experiments and stuff?"

Freak says, "Indeed they do."

"What kind of experiments?" I ask.

"Can you keep a secret?" he says. "Do you swear on your honor?"

"Sure. On my honor."

Freak is really excited, he's shifting around on my shoulders so much, I'm afraid he'll fall off.

"That's not good enough," he says. "You need to swear by blood."

"You mean like cut myself?"

"Well, no," he says, and you can tell he's thinking about it real hard. "An actual incision is not necessary. It's the same thing if you just spit on your hand."

"Huh?"

"Saliva is like blood without the red," he says. "Do as I say, spit in your hand."

So I spit in my hand, just a little drop, but Freak says it doesn't matter how much, a single molecule would work, because it's the principle of the thing. "Now put your hand over your heart," he says.

I put my hand over my heart.

"Now swear on your heart that the data you are about to receive will be divulged to no one."

"I swear."

Freak bends down and he's got his hand cupped around my ear and he's whispering: "Inside the research building is a secret laboratory called The Experimental Bionics Unit. The unit's mission is to develop a new form of bionic robot for human modification."

"What's that?" I say.

"Shh! Speak of this to no one, but at some future time as yet undetermined, I will enter that lab and become the first bionically improved human."

"I still don't know what it means," I say.
"Bionics. And please don’t make me look it up in the dictionary."

"Bionics," Freak says. "That’s the science of designing replacement parts for the human body."

"You mean like mechanical arms and legs?"

"That’s ancient history," Freak says. "The Bionics Unit is building a whole new body just my size."

"Yeah? What’ll it look like? A robot?"

"A human robot," Freak says. "Also it will look a lot like me, only enlarged and improved."

"Yeah, right," I say. "Let’s go home, my feet are tired."

Freak tugs hard at my hair. "True!" he says, with his voice getting high and excited. "I’ve been in there, in the special unit! I have to go every few months for tests. They’ve taken my measurements, analyzed my blood and metabolic rates. They’ve monitored my cardiac rhythms and my respiratory functions. I’ve already been X-rayed and CAT-scanned and sonogrammed. They’re fitting me for a bionic transplant, I’m going to be the first."

I can tell he really means it. This isn’t a pretend quest, or making houses into castles or swimming pools into moats. This is why we came here, so Freak could show me where he’s been. The place is important to him. I understand this much, even if I still don’t understand about bionics or what it means to be a human robot.

"Will it hurt?" I ask. "Getting your parts replaced?"

Freak doesn’t answer for a while and then he says in his stern, smart voice, "Sure it will hurt. But so what? Pain is just a state of mind. You can think your way out of anything, even pain."

I’m pretty worried about the whole deal, and I go, "But why do you want to be the first? Can’t someone else be first? Isn’t it dangerous?"

"Life is dangerous," Freak says, and you can tell he’s thought a lot about this. After a while he kicks me with his little feet and says, "Home."
One thing that happened over the summer, I grew even more.

Grim takes a look at me one day and he goes, "All that walking you do, it must be stretching out your legs. And carrying poor Kevin around, that seems to be putting real muscle on you."

"He's not that heavy. And anyhow it's not fair everybody always says 'Poor Kevin,' just because he didn't grow."

Grim gives me this long, sorrowful look and then he clears his throat and says, "You're quite right, he is a rather remarkable boy."

"He's memorized almost the whole dictionary. You can ask him anything and he knows what it means."

"You don't say," Grim says, and he has this smug look like maybe Freak is lying and a total goon like me would never get it, and I want to tell him he's wrong about Freak and the dictionary, but instead I just shut my face and go down under.
tell he’s not telling me everything, which he almost never does, not all at once.

“Truth,” he says. “The treasure is hidden in a storm drain. This has been confirmed by visual observation.”

“Treasure in a storm drain? You mean like gold and diamonds kind of stuff?”

“Possibly,” he says, acting mysterious. “Anything is possible.”

The deal is, we have to wait until night, so no one can see us messing with the storm drain. Not just night, Freak says, we need to do it at exactly three in the morning.

“Optimum darkness occurs at oh-three-hundred hours,” he says, looking at the new watch his mom gave him, the kind that tells you what time it is in Tokyo, just in case you’re wondering. “We must dress in black and cover our faces with soot.”

For the next couple of hours we try to find soot, but it turns out you need a fireplace for soot, or at least a chimney, so Freak finally decides that my idea about using regular dirt will have to do.

“I’ve got black dungarees,” I say, “but no black shirts. Can I just wear a dirty shirt?”

Freak makes a face and says, “What a disgusting idea. Don’t worry about the shirt, I’ll get you one. Can you manage black socks?”

You ever notice how long it takes for things to happen when you know they’re supposed to happen? My fake Walkman has a built-in alarm, and I set it for two in the morning and wear the headphones to bed, but before you can wake up you have to fall asleep, and I never do fall asleep because I keep waiting for the alarm to go off. Which is, I know, typical butthead behavior.

I’m lying awake in the dark on a hot summer night and I’m thinking, Treasure in the sewer? What kind of quest is this, huh? Is Freak completely making this up or what?

Meanwhile there’s this cricket making this creaky cricket noise that normally is okay, except when you’re trying to fall asleep then it’s not okay, and you want a big can of Raid, send it to Disney World or insect heaven or wherever it is that dead crickets go.

Question: How come Freak knows about this stuff in the storm drain?

Question: How come we have to put dirt on our faces?

Question: How come three in the morning?

Question: How long do crickets live?

Finally I give up on the first three and work on the cricket problem, but the little critter is pretty clever, it stops cricketing whenever I get too close and I never do find it and squash it with my shoe, which I swear I am ready to do, even if crickets are supposed to be harmless.

And then after almost forever it gets to be two-thirty and I figure that’s close enough, I’ll go up and wait under Freak’s window like I promised. There’s no moon, the sky is dark and empty,
and the back yards are so lonesome it feels
creepy and exciting — the truth is, I've never
been out alone at this time of night.
I only fall down a couple of times, which
isn't bad considering how hard it is to see. When
I get to Freak's bedroom window, he's waiting
for me.
"You sound like a car wreck," he says. "Here,
you better put on this shirt so you don't glow
in the dark."
Out of the window he hands me this silly-
feeling shirt.
"Hey wait a minute, this is you mom's
blouse!"
"It's black," he says. "That's what counts. The
camouflage factor."
"Forget it," I say and give him back the Fair
Gwen's blouse.
Freak sighs. "Okay," he says. "Roll around
on the ground and darken yourself."
That's easy, and better than wearing some
dumb blouse. "What about you?" I ask, when
I'm covered with dirt, enough so I want to
sneeze.
Freak goes, "Beware the Force, earthling," and
he stands up in the window and I can see he's
got a Darth Vader costume on, except he's not
wearing the mask part. He opens the window
all the way and I lift him out and put him on
my shoulders.
He goes, "Pledge to me your fealty," and I
say, "Huh?" and he says, "Never mind, there's
no time to look up 'fealty.' Just promise you'll
do what I say."
"I promise."
"Go to the end of the block," he orders. "At-
tempt to conceal us in the shadows."
That's easy, because the street is one big
shadow. It's so dark I can hardly see my feet,
or maybe I got some dirt in my eyes, but the
point is no one sees us because there's no one
to see us. You'd never know anybody lived here,
let alone a whole blockful of people, it's like
we're on an empty planet or something.
"Was the real Darth Vader as tall as this?"
Freak asks, from where he's riding high up on
my shoulders.
"I thought it was just a movie."
"You know what I mean. What's that!"
"That" is a cat that runs out from under my
feet so out-of-nowhere sudden that my heart
goes wham.
"Was it a black cat?" Freak wants to know.
"Too dark to tell," I say. "Are we almost
there?"
Finally I figure out it's hard to see because the
Darth Vader cape is hanging in my eyes, but by
then we're at the end of the block and the storm
drain is right there by the curb.
"See if you can pull it open," Freak says. He's
standing with his arms folded, and the expres-
sion on his face — well, he really does look like
a pint-sized Darth Vader.
I hook my hands in the storm drain grate and
give it a heave but nothing happens.  
"I can't budge it."

"Try again," he says with his arms folded, like he's a lord of the universe.

I try again and it's like the grate is Super Glued or something. No way can I pull it up. Freak is tugging at my leg and he goes, "Option Two is now in effect."

He reaches inside his little cape. Out comes a flashlight, one of those small kinds that look sort of like a cigarette lighter, and also a spool of kite string.

"I devised a special retrieval device," Freak says.

"Looks like a bent paper clip on a string," I say, and Freak tells me to shut up and follow orders.

"You hold the string," he says, and then he gets down on his knees and shines the little flashlight through the grate. "Can you see it?" he asks. "Can you?"

I look, but it's hard to see anything and it smells like something died in the storm drain, which come to think of it, it probably did. Rats or worse.

"Down there," Freak says. "The beam is hitting it right now."

"That? That's just a piece of junk."

"Wrong," Freak says, real fierce. "It looks like a piece of junk. It may very well contain fabulous wealth. Drop the line down and see if you can hook it."

I'm thinking, boy, what a butthead, rolling in the dirt for this little Darth Vader so he can play pretend games in the middle of the night, but I do what he asks, I drop the hook down, and much to my surprise, it actually hooks into something and when I pull up on the kite string I can see what it is.

"A purse," I say. "Looks like a grotty old purse."

"Careful," Freak says. "Pull it up to the grate so I can grab the strap."

I bring it up an inch at a time, and Darth — excuse me, Freak — manages to get his small hand down through the grate and grab hold of the soggy old purse and then he almost drops it. I yank up on the kite string and we both manage to squeeze the slimy purse up through the bars.

"Whew! Mission accomplished," Freak says.

The old purse is torn and wet, and I don't want to touch it unless I have gloves on.

"Gross," I say. "Somebody must have flushed this down a toilet."

"No way," Freak says. "I saw one of Tony D.'s punks stuff it down there yesterday morning."

"Yeah? They must have stole it."

"No doubt," Freak says, and he opens the clasp and points his little light inside the purse.

By now I know there isn't going to be any treasure, but still this is pretty cool, recovering
stuff that Blade’s gang ripped off from some little old lady or whatever.

“A wallet,” Freak says, and he flips open this cheap-looking wallet, the kind that’s made to hold credit cards.

There’s no money inside, but there is a plastic ID card, and on the plastic card is a lady’s name. “Loretta Lee,” Freak says. “I’ll bet you anything she’s a damsel in distress.”

Which, as it turns out, is almost true. The real deal is that she’s a damsel who causes distress. Which we find out the very next day.

11.

The Damsel of Distress

The address on the ID card is this place on the other side of the millpond. They used to call it the New Tenements, but now everybody mostly calls it the New Testaments, which Gram told me has nothing to do with the Bible.

“People will make their jokes,” she says. “Call that place whatever you want, but you are not to set foot over there. Is that clear, Maxwell dear?”

It’s not like I wanted to go into the Testaments, so it was real easy to keep that promise, and then the day after we pull that soggy purse out of the sewer Freak explains how it’s okay to break a promise if you’re on a quest.

“There may even be a reward involved,” he says.

“The lady won’t have much money if she lives in the Testaments,” I say. “Poor people live there, and dope fiends.”

What we do is go down to the playground and cut over behind that little patch of trees, just in
case anybody is looking, and then we can circle around behind the pond. Freak is riding up top, which he almost always does now. That way he doesn’t have to wear his leg brace or carry his crutches, and besides, I like how it feels to have a really smart brain on my shoulders, helping me think.

Freak is talking a mile a minute, more stuff about the Round Table and how important quests are, and why knights are bound up with oaths, which is not the same thing as swearing, and I’m trying to listen and not ask questions because if I ask questions, he’ll pull out his dictionary. . .

When we get to the Testaments, though, Freak shuts right up. It’s this big, falling-apart place with a bunch of apartments, and it looks sad and smells like fish and sour milk. There’re a lot of bikes and toys lying around, mostly bashed up and broken, and the little kids who live there look almost as busted up as the toys. When they see us coming they make these screaming noises and run away, but you can tell they’re not really scared, they just want to pretend like we’re a monster or something, eek eek.

“Maybe we should reconsider this particular quest,” Freak says. He’s up there on my shoulders and he’s getting fidgety, squirming around.

But we’re already outside the apartment door, and I go, “Maybe she really needs that ID card,” so it’s my fault what happens next.

The door opens before we even ring the bell, and this hand comes snaking out and reaches for the mailbox and finds this rolled-up newspaper and pulls it back inside. And there’s something about the blind way that hand moves that’s creepy. Get out of here, I’m thinking.

Then, before I can get my feet moving fast enough to leave, this woman’s voice is cussing us out.

“Iggy!” she says. “Iggy, come here and see this!”

Now she’s standing in the doorway, this scrawny, yellow-haired woman with small, hard eyes and blurry red lips. She’s wearing this ratty old bathrobe and she’s smoking this cigarette and squinting at us and making a face.

“Iggy,” she says out of the side of her mouth, “come here and tell me is the circus in town or what?”

Next thing there’s this big hairy dude in the doorway, he’s got a huge beer gut and these giant arms all covered with blue tattoos and he’s got a beard that looks like it’s made out of red barbed wire.

“Ain’t the circus,” he says, spitting a big gob on the step. “This here is the carnival.”

Freak isn’t saying anything, and I want to get out of here, so I go, “Sorry, wrong number,” and I’m trying to back away and not fall over a tricycle when the hairy dude comes out the door real quick and gets in my way.

“Not so fast,” he says. “Who sent you?”

“I know the big one,” the woman is saying.
Freak finally says, "Please excuse us, we have the wrong address. We were, uhm, trying to locate a Miss Loretta Lee."

The tattoo dude hears that and he starts to laugh, this fat sound way down in his big belly, and he goes, "You hear that, Loretta? This an old flame of yours or what?" Then he reaches up and pokes me in the chest hard enough to make me catch my breath, and he says, "Cat got your tongue, kid? What is this, a Siamese-twin act?"

All I can think to say is, "Oops," because we have the right address after all. The squinty woman in the robe is Loretta Lee, and even more important, Iggy is Iggy Lee, and I feel like a total butthead because I've heard of Iggy Lee, he's the boss of The Panheads, this bad-news motorcycle gang.

"We found your purse!" Freak blurts out, and he tosses down the purse and Iggy Lee catches it with one hand and he gives Loretta this secret look, like he's going to have some fun here.

"You better come inside," he says, looking up at Freak. "You and Frankenstein."

"Sorry," Freak says, and his voice is chattery high. "We'll have to decline your kind invitation because we, uhm, we have to leave now."

Loretta flicks her cigarette butt at my feet and she says, "Iggy says come inside, you better do it."

So we go inside. I have to take Freak off my shoulders so we can get in the door and that's when Loretta looks at me real hard and she says, "I know that one. It's like a flash from the past, Iggy. You know him?"

Iggy isn't paying any attention to her, he's pointing at this ratty chair and he says, "Sit down, it makes me nervous looking up."

Loretta comes around and she says, "Don't be making Iggy nervous. Not this early in the day. Last dude made him nervous, they had to —"

"Shut up, Loretta," Iggy says in this real quiet voice. "I'm thinking. You're right, he does look familiar."

I'm sitting in this chair, which feels like it might bust apart, and Freak is right next to me and I can see he's trying to stand straight but it's not easy because he's all bent up inside.

"Names," Iggy says.

Freak clears his throat and tries to make his voice sound deep and more grown up. "We're sorry to disturb you, but we have to go home now. It's a matter of some urgency."

Iggy reaches out and he flicks his fingers at Freak's nose, whack. I can tell it hurts, but Freak doesn't say anything, he just tenses up.

Iggy goes, "I ask a question, you better answer, get it? Names. I want your names."

Freak tells his name and then mine and Iggy
reaches down and pats him on the head. "Very
good," he says. "Now that wasn't hard, was
it? Next question, where'd you get Loretta's
purse?"

Freak tells him we found it in the storm drain.
He doesn't mention us dressing up all in black,
or the Darth Vader costume, or anything about
knights or quests.

"Next question," Iggy says. "Where's the
money?"

Loretta coughs on her new cigarette and says,
"But Iggy, there wasn't any money," and he
goes, "Shut up, Loretta," and she coughs again
and shuts up, you can tell she's afraid of Iggy,
the way she holds herself tight whenever he says
anything.

Freak goes, "I've got two dollars in change,
you can have it but we have to go home now."

Iggy gives him this look like he's thinking se-
riously about throwing up and he says, "What
is it with you, you've gotta go home? We're
having a nice little talk here, don't spoil it."

All of a sudden Loretta jumps up and she
goes, "Iggy! Iggy! I've got it! Kenny Kane! Re-
member Kenny Kane?"

For a second I think he's going to hit her, and
then he relaxes and really looks at me and his
eyes go wide and he nods and says, "Sure.
That's it. Kenny Kane. You're right, he's a ringer
for old Killer Kane. Must be his kid, huh? Sure
it is."

Loretta looks real happy that she finally fig-
ured it out and she runs into the kitchen and
kicks some stuff out of the way and pulls open
the refrigerator and we can hear her laughing
and saying, "I knew it, I just knew it."

When she comes back in she's got two cans
of Bud and she pops them both and gives one
to Iggy. "Breakfast of champions," she says.
"What a flash, huh? You remember that time old
Kenny —"

"Shut up, Loretta!" Iggy says, then he chugs
the Bud and squashes the can in his fist and he
drops it right on the floor. Which is the first time
I notice all the other crushed cans, they're every-
where, the whole place is like a trash can or a
big ashtray or something.

Meanwhile Freak is giving me this look like
he has no idea what's going on, and that look
scares me more than Iggy Lee and all his tattoos.

"I've got him, too," Loretta says, snapping her
fingers. "The midget or dwarf or whatever he
is. He must be Gwen's kid, you remember
Gwen? Stuck-up Gwen?

"No," Iggy says, and his eyes are burning into
me. "Never heard of Gwen."

Loretta goes, "Doesn't matter. What a flash
this is. Kenny Kane. Time flies, huh, Ig? I can
remember when these two were born. And then,
what was it, a couple years later Kenny does his
thing and he's in the yard, right? Doing time."

Iggy says, "That he is. I know a guy knows
him inside." He gives me this creepy look and
he says, "You go up there to visit the old man,
you tell him Iggy says hello, okay?”

“I doubt he even knows his father, Ig. He was only a little kid when it happened. Right?”

I don’t say anything and Freak is looking at me like he’s never seen me before and then Iggy says, “Killer Kane. What a tough hombre he was.”

Loretta says, “I heard he seen the light in there. He’s got religion, is that true?”

“I don’t know.”

Iggy snorts and he says, “He don’t know. You don’t know much, do you?”

I shake my head.

Loretta says, “He’s some kinda retard, Ig. He don’t even know how big and strong he is, I’ll bet.” She pokes Iggy or tickles him and in this strange giggly voice she says, “Why don’t you find out? Find out if he’s as strong as he looks?”

Iggy scowls and he goes, “Give me a break, Loretta.” He gives me this long look and then he hooks his thumb at the door and says, “Show time is over, boys. Get out of here, the both of you.”

Loretta says, “But, Iggy, we could have some fun.”

“You’re the retard, Loretta,” Iggy says. “What if Killer Kane hears I was messing with his kid? No thank you.”

“He’s in for life,” she says. “What’s the harm?”

“Life ain’t life, how many times I tell you that?”
12.
Killer Kane,
Killer Kane, Had a Kid
Who Got No Brain

I feel real bad for Freak, because he hates it when people try to rub his head for luck, but I don’t say a word, I just run us home, thumping the short way back around the pond, and my big feet never even trip me up because I’m on automatic, I’m this running machine.

“What!” Freak says when we get to his house.

“Now that was an adventure, huh?”

“An evil dude like Iggy Lee, we were lucky to get out of there alive.”

Freak goes, “No way, that was all talk.”

Yeah, right. The real deal is that I was scared the whole time I was there, and so was Freak, even if he won’t admit it now.

“That stuff about my father was true,” Freak says, studying his fingernails and acting real cool again. “The Fair Gwen won’t talk about it. All she says is, ‘He made his decision and I made mine.’ But I know he ran away because of me. And you know why?”

“What?”

“Good riddance to bad rubbish.”

For some reason that really gets me laughing. Something about the way he says it, or maybe it’s all that nervous stuff left over from the New Testaments. Whatever, I’m rolling on the ground like a moron and Freak is strutting around and saying stuff like, “Loretta my Queen, wouldst thou accept my hand in marriage?” and, “Sir Iggy, wouldst thou do us all a big favor and fall upon thy sword?” And I’m laughing so hard I can hardly breathe.

Everything is pretty much okay after that. One thing we don’t do, though, we don’t talk about my father, good old Killer Kane. Which is fine by me.

School.

For the last week or so it’s like getting jabbed with a little needle every time I hear that word. Gram is trying to pretend how excited she is I’m finally in the eighth grade, like this is a really big deal. Which is a joke, because the only reason I got passed from seventh grade is because they figured this way the big butthead can be — quote — someone else’s problem, thank God, we’ve had quite enough of Maxwell Kane — unquote.

Gram takes me out to the mall to get new clothes, which is about as much fun as going to
the dentist, except maybe worse because at least at the dentist you’re mostly just in a chair with the door closed, where at the mall with Gram it’s like hello, world, here I am, take a good look.

This girl at the shoe store, she’s got a little smirk and she goes, “Thirteen triple E? Do they make shoes that big?” and Gram goes, “I’m quite sure they do, dear, you go ask the manager.” And then she looks at me and she goes, “Maxwell, this is not major surgery, so you will please, as a special favor to me, wipe that wounded look off your face and try to be polite.”

Yeah, right. The manager, when he comes out with these Brand-X running shoes, he wants to help me take off my old shoes, like he’s pretty sure I can’t do it by myself, but I give him this look and he backs off and lets me do it myself.

“I wish you’d tie those laces, dear,” Gram says when I’m squishing around in the new shoes.

“That’s the fashion,” the manager says with this heh-heh-heh laugh. “Actually, they’re designed that way. You don’t need to lace up.”

Just to prove what a jerk he is, I tie up the laces and that makes Gram happy. Which is funny sometimes, how little it takes to make her happy, except you can’t really figure what until you’ve already done it. Does that make any sense?

Finally we escape from the mall and I’ve got enough new clothes to last me, as Grim points out, a week or so.

“You could just keep letting down his cuffs,”
cool and acting cool and showing off their new outfits, they hardly notice us in the hall, Freak riding high on my shoulders, or the deal where his desk is always right next to mine. That wears off, though, and by the time we leave math, which is just passing out the textbooks and a bunch of numbers chalked on the blackboard, you can hear the whispers in the hall.

Like, hey, who’s the midget? And, there goes Mad Max; and, excuse me while I barf; and, look what escaped from the freak show; and, oh, my gawd that’s disgusting.

“Maxwell Kane?”

This is from Mrs. Donelli, the English teacher, she’s new to the school, and when I nod and raise my pencil, she goes; “Maxwell, will you please stand up and tell the class something about your summer?”

Which, if she wasn’t new to the school, she’d know better, because getting up in the class and saying stuff is not something I do.

“Maxwell,” she goes, “is there a problem?”

By now there’s a lot of noise and kids are shouting stuff like, “Forget it, Mrs. Donelli, his brain is in his tail!”

“Ask him to count, he can paw the ground!”

“Maxi Pad! Maxi Pad! Ask him quick about his dad!”

“Killer Kane! Killer Kane! Had a kid who got no brain!”

Mrs. Donelli has this look like she stepped in something and she can’t get it off her shoe. The shouting and singing goes on and on, and pretty soon some of the kids are throwing stuff at us, pencils and erasers and wadded-up paper, and it’s like Mrs. Donelli has no idea what to do about it, the room is out of control.

Then Freak climbs up on his desk, which makes him about as big as a normal person standing up, and he starts shouting at the top of his lungs.

“Order!” he shouts. “Order in the court! Let justice be heard!”

For some reason, maybe because he looks so fierce with his jaw sticking out and his little fists all balled up and the way he’s stamping his crooked little feet, everybody shuts up and there’s this spooky silence.

Finally Mrs. Donelli says, “You must be Kevin, is that right?”

Freak has this look, he’s still acting really fierce, and he goes, “Sometimes, I am.”

“Sometimes? What does that mean?”

“It means sometimes I’m more than Kevin.”

“Oh,” says Mrs. Donelli, and you can tell she has no idea what he’s talking about, but she thinks it’s important to let him talk. “So, Kevin,” she says, “can you give us all an example?”

Next thing I know, Freak has his hands on my head and he’s getting himself on my shoulders and he’s tugging at me in a way that I know means “stand up,” and so I do it, I stand right up in class and I can see Mrs. Donelli’s eyes getting bigger and bigger.
Freak the Mighty

I'm standing there with Freak high above me and it feels right, it makes me feel strong and smart.

"How's this for an example?" Freak is saying. "Sometimes we're nine feet tall, and strong enough to walk through walls. Sometimes we fight gangs. Sometimes we find treasure. Sometimes we slay dragons and drink from the Holy Grail!"

Mrs. Donelli is backing up to her desk and she says, "Oh, my, that's very interesting, I'm sure, but could you both just sit down?"

But Freak is riding me like he's the jockey and I'm the horse, he's steering me around the class room, showing off. He's raising his fist and punching it in the air and going, "Freak the Mighty! Freak the Mighty!" and pretty soon he's got all the other kids chanting, "Freak the Mighty! Freak the Mighty! Freak the Mighty!" even though they don't know what he's talking about, or what it means.

I'm standing up straight, as tall as I can, and I'm marching exactly like he wants me to, right and left, backwards and forwards, and it's like music or something, like I don't even have to think about it, I just do it, and all those kids chanting our name, and Mrs. Donelli has no idea what's going on, she's definitely flipped out and more or less hiding behind her desk.

The whole class is raising their fists in the air and chanting: "Freak the Mighty! Freak the Mighty! Freak the Mighty!"

Killer Kane, Killer Kane, Had a Kid Who Got No Brain

I can't explain why, but it was really pretty cool.

Anyhow, that's how Freak and I get sent to the principal's office the first time together.

Mrs. Addison, she's the principal, she takes one look at us waiting outside her office, and she goes, "What have we here?"

"I'm afraid there has been a slight misunderstanding," Freak says. "If you'd be so good as to allow me to explain."

Mrs. Addison is this really serious-acting black woman with tight gray hair in a bun and these suits that make her look like she works in a bank or something. She has this funny little smile like she's sucking on a lemon and it quick turns sweet, and then she goes, "By all means. Let's hear what you have to say. Convince me."

I can't really remember what Freak said, except that he used so many big words, she had to keep looking stuff up in his dictionary, which she seemed to get a real kick out of, but the important thing is, whatever Freak told her, she fell for it.