

The Cowboy of Carlstadt

Perverts, for one reason or another, always used to descend upon Carlstadt while I lived there. Not that we didn't have our share of weirdos already in stock. There was my friend's father, Mr. Tebbet, who was so proud of his name being the same backward as well as forward that he named his sons Bob and Otto and his daughter Hannah. And then there was my uncle Wally who lived with us. He was always spitting up food because he'd laugh and then cough while his mouth was full; once, while he was having a bowl of vegetable soup, my father told him a joke, which made him laugh and choke until a lima bean shot out of his nose. But, weirdos aside, Carlstadt was a nice place to grow up in.

Except for the perverts. Whenever it seemed that being a kid was pretty smooth sailing, some horrible, disfigured maniac, usually fleeing from justice, would find his way to a secluded spot in town and begin a reign of terror that often lasted for months. And when The Cowboy first arrived, of course it was Judd Brand who told us.

"You guys got nothin' better to do?" said a voice which broke our concentration. Bob Tebbet, Toby Mitchell, and I had been in the middle of a spirited baseball card trading session on my front steps, and I had just acquired Duke Snider and John Roseboro for Luis Aparicio and a player to be named later.

"I said, ain't you guys got nothin' better to do?" Standing at the curb and wearing his usual greasy, ripped blue jeans and greasy camouflage shirt was Brand. He was also wearing his usual smirk, his trademark when talking to younger kids.

"What's wrong with baseball cards?" I asked.

"Everything!" Brand snapped back, "a waste of money. But what do you

ninnies know about money, except what your mommies and daddies hand you for being nice little boys. Baseball cards--what a joke."

"Look, if we want to trade cards, then we'll trade cards," challenged Toby, standing up. "Besides, it's our money and nobody invited you anyway."

I stood up, along with Bob, to show support for Toby, but I was hoping there wouldn't be a fight. Toby was probably four inches taller and forty pounds heavier than Brand, but Brand was a lot older and he was crazy. He was the kind who would grab anything, a rock, a piece of glass or metal, and go right for the face. Besides, I heard he carried a knife.

"Well, I just came by to tell ya a little news," said Brand, brushing a swirl of greasy black hair away from his eyes. "You remember Ernie the Hatchet? I hear now there's someone even worse around--The Cowboy. Just thought I'd let you know."

"You mean there's two of 'em?" asked Bob.

"No, jerk, Ernie skipped town when they tore down the shack near the cemetery."

"Then where does this Cowboy of yours live?" asked Bob, trying to bore a hole into Brand's story.

Not MY Cowboy--YOURS! He don't mess around with the older kids. Just your age. Little ones, too."

"Whattya mean 'mess around'?" I asked.

You know--s-sex stuff," said Brand, and suddenly his voice got a lot softer, and he looked away from us, talking, instead, to the curb. "He just t-touches kids all over and threatens them not to ever tell. Horrible."

Then Brand realized he had forgotten himself momentarily and he glared at us.

"Look, I told ya enough," he hissed in anger. "You wanna know where

The Cowboy lives? It's that old, abandoned shack on Broad Street, the one that looks like a barn, the one you ninnies pass EVERY DAY on the way to school."

"Oh yeah?" I replied. Then where did he come from, and why did he come here to Carlstadt?"

"Why don't ya ask HIM those questions!" Brand shouted, and then he stalked off down the street.

We watched him for a few moments before anyone could think of anything to say. Finally Bob broke the silence.

"You think he's telling the truth?"

"About what, The Cowboy?" I asked.

"About everything, said Bob. "Especially that stuff about what he does to kids."

"I don't know, but wouldn't the cops go after him if he did what Brand said?"

"Not if kids didn't report him," replied Bob.

"Well, he better not mess with my sister," warned Toby, looking in the direction where Brand had now vanished. "I'm a lot bigger now than I was back then, and I don't care what kind of sex maniac he is--just let him try anything...."

The "back then" that Toby meant was clear to both Bob and me, but we didn't want to say anything to remind him any more. One night a few years before, Toby's older sister Maureen had been grabbed by someone wearing a ski mask, but she had broken free and run home hysterical with fear. Everybody figured the guy who attacked her had to be Brand's older brother Lyle, and I had heard that when the cops went to question him, his mother said he had run away from home and she didn't care if he never came back.

And he never did; at least, he was never seen around town again. So everyone forgot about the whole incident--except Toby. As he grew up, he became Maureen's protector, even though she had a boyfriend, Chet Massey, all-county tackle and human sequoia, who could protect anyone. And every time he saw Brand, he remembered a night not that long ago when an eight-year-old boy had to watch helplessly as his sister sobbed unconsolably in the arms of their mother.

We went back to our card trading, but only for a little while; Brand's announcement had put our minds elsewhere. Besides, Uncle Wally called me in for dinner, and I had a great joke that I was going to spring on him in the middle of our beef stew.

But as it turned out, I never did try my joke out, and I guess I must have been pretty quiet at the table. My mother asked me if there was anything wrong, but before I could say anything, my older brother, Vince, had the answer.

"Sure, he's a REtard," offered Vince.

I was all set to launch a nice, gravy-covered potato chunk at him with my soup spoon, but my father stepped in just in time.

"I thought I told you about that name, mister," he said, shaking his fork menacingly.

"And for your information," added my mother, "your BROTHER made high honor roll last marking period."

It was time to bask in the glory a little. Usually, I didn't like to be fussed over, but when it involved my brother, I welcomed any chance.

"Well that PROVES it," said Vince, holding out his palms as though delivering his summation to the jury. "He makes high honor roll, and he can't talk. He's a RE--"

"VinCENT!" bellowed my mother.

"All right, all right," he acquiesced. "Here, have some more stew, genius."

After dinner Toby called me to see if I could play in a three-on-three stickball game the next day. All the while we talked, I never mentioned Brand or The Cowboy, but I could just sense he was thinking about them, and I was sure he knew that I was, too. Instead, we stayed on baseball and our chances of becoming major leaguers and facing each other in the All-Star Game, me the blazing lefty ace of the National League against the fearsome bat of American League clean-up hitter Toby Mitchell.

That night I went to bed feeling excited about the stickball game but still troubled about The Cowboy. It was a beautiful night, and every few seconds a cool breeze flowed through my window screen and all over me. I lay there, thinking I should have been feeling great, but I wasn't. It had been only a couple of weeks ago that we stopped throwing pennies at the shack where Ernie had been holing up. The idea of the pennies came from something that the older kids were doing. If a good-looking girl walked by, a few of the big guys would flick pennies near her feet, so that if she stooped to pick them up, which no girl ever did, the guys could proclaim "Hey, so-and-so goes down for pennies!" We didn't dare try the same thing because if a girl ever did pick up the pennies and smile at any of us, we would have done what any virile, cocky twelve-year-old would have done--run like hell.

Our way of copying the older guys was to throw pennies at people we didn't see, namely the perverts who had lately been invading our town. We hoped that if we annoyed them enough, they'd move on to some place

where they'd feel more welcome. Uncle Wally didn't see it that way. "Morons in Training," he called us, and I have to admit that he came up with some pretty funny lines when vegetables weren't spewing from his face.

But now that Ernie was gone, we'd have to deal with The Cowboy, one way or another. Word would spread among us, and we'd start bombarding the Broad Street shack with pennies while we'd jeer and taunt just like Mrs. Blakely taught us Odysseus did to Polyphemus. That was one way. Then there was the matter of protection. It was hardest for the kids who had a sister or brother to watch over. Not knowing what hid behind the door of the hayloft of that dilapidated barn that time had painted the color of dried blood was spooky enough. But being responsible for someone else's welfare, in addition, made it that much worse. I thought Toby had it the roughest out of all of us, until the next day at stickball, when I'd find myself sharing his dilemma.

We had just finished off our opponents, 9-1, and we were sitting up against the strike-box wall at the school and savoring the ice cold soda the losers had to buy for us. I was turning the brand-new, pink Spaulding Hi-Bouncer over and over in my left hand, replaying in my mind the two-ball, two-strike curve I had snapped off into the low, outside corner of the box and the subsequent cloud of chalk dust that announced the game was over. I had all I needed to be content--another one in the "W" column, my friends, my Spaulding, and a cold soda on a warm afternoon. The last thing I needed was Frizzy Chatsworth.

And I do mean "thing." Frances Ursula Chatsworth was probably ordained to be miserable, having been released upon the world with three initials as bad as they come. She was a short, compact, high-strung gossip machine whose only pleasure was to know everyone's business and

and then spread stories around like some kind of malignant town crier. When she showed up around the eighth inning, her hair its usual network of black steel wool, I knew she was getting ready to interrupt our program for a special news bulletin. This time, at least, she waited until the game was over and our opponents had left.

"Hi, Ronnie," she said, giving me one of her famous I-know-something-juicy smiles. I decided to fight fire with water.

"Hey, Friz, what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

It didn't work; there was no deterring her. When she had her quarry lined up, she went right for the vitals. She had a bright future either in news reporting or hand-to-hand combat.

"Guess who's got a crush on you?"

"I don't know," I replied, "a hydraulic press?" Bob spit up a mouthful of orange soda, though not quite with Uncle Wally's flair, and Toby collapsed onto his side.

"No, smarty," she continued, "Jill Thaxton--GORgeous Jill Thaxton--Miss Perfect Jill Thaxton. I hear she's gonna ask you to the June Soiree. What have you got to say now, Ronnie?"

I had nothing to say. The Friz had struck again. I watched her saunter away, but I couldn't come up with anything for a parting shot. All I could think about was Jill--and The Cowboy. Jill was pretty, real pretty, with her shiny yellow hair that bounced as she walked. As did the back side of her snow white shorts that were stuffed so smoothly. What would The Cowboy do to her? Or did it matter to a pervert? Girl or boy, pretty or not-so-pretty--would he sneak up behind and grab Jill like Lyle Brand had done to Maureen Mitchell? Or could he somehow lure her near his creepy shack and then force her inside to his torture chamber? No, not

Jill. She was too intelligent to go near a pervert, especially one who was so deformed. Judd Brand had seen us at the school that morning and told us more about The Cowboy. "Ugliest b-bastard you'd ever wanna see," Brand had said, "got yellow and brown teeth all crooked, got a bad eye that s-stares at nothin', and wears a white cowboy hat with stains all over it--wears it tilted to cover a big scar over that d-dead eye."

I kept that picture of The Cowboy in my head all weekend; I thought that nothing could even temporarily take my mind off such a wretched face. Was I ever wrong. When school let out on Monday, I was in a hurry to get home. There was a big game that night in Little League, and if all went according to plan, I would pitch my V.F.W. team into first place by beating our arch rival, Lions Club. But I got as far as the outside door, where Jill was waiting for me.

"Hi, Ronnie," she said, smiling. I looked into those sparkling blue eyes and gleaming white teeth, and I felt my bones start to melt.

"Hi, Jill," I replied coolly, keeping my composure, at least for the moment. I should have been prepared for what was going to come next, thanks to the Friz, but when it came, it was a head-on collision at eighty miles an hour.

"Ronnie, will you take me to the June Soiree?"

I felt myself swallow ten pounds worth. Any veneer of control I thought I'd had was immediately stripped away. I was alone, gawking at the most beautiful girl in the world, and she had just asked me if I would take her to the June Soiree.

"Whaaffcrss!" I replied intelligently. That was Panic for "Why, of course!"

"What?" Jill asked. Apparently she hadn't heard my reply clearly so she still viewed me as someone with an I.Q. I decided to stick to mono-syllables.

"O.K., sure!"

"Thank you, Ronnie."

"O.K., sure!"

"I'll let you get ready for your game," she said, "but I'll be there to cheer for you. Walk me home afterward?"

"O.K., sure!"

I watched Jill as she walked down the steps and then ran out of the schoolyard and up to the corner, where two friends were waiting for her. The three huddled up for a few moments, laughing, giggling, and laughing some more before they started walking home. Jill waved good-bye just before they were out of sight.

I think I waved back; I don't remember. Thoughts were staging the Kentucky Derby through my brain. Damned if the Friz wasn't right; she could singlehandedly put Ouija out of business. Suddenly, two forces were tugging at me from opposite directions. One was hot and it wanted me to shriek to the heavens "MY GOD! JILL THAXTON LIKES ME!" while the other was cold, and it said, in a severe voice, "So now you've got a girlfriend. Smart move, Ace. Gonna have the time to walk her home from school every day and at night after baseball games? Gonna be able to keep her safe whenever you two walk past that old red barn on Broad Street? What if The Cowboy can't get his fill of young kids by luring them inside? You gonna fight him off if he goes after you--or worse, your girlfriend? You know how rough it's been on Toby because of his sister, and now you've put yourself right where he is. Boy, you are a RETard!"

And evidently the stampede of thoughts hadn't by the time the game began. We won, but no thanks to me. I gave up seven runs, all earned, in three innings, and when I walked the leadoff batter in the fourth, my manager, Mr. Van Dyke, came out to the mound to give me the hook.

"Ronnie, you o.k.?" he asked, taking the ball from me and patting me on the right shoulder. "This is more runs than you've given up all month. Anything wrong?"

"No, I'm just a little tired, I guess. Sorry, Mr. Van D."

His cheeks were empty so I knew he had just spit. Not tobacco, sunflower seeds. All of us on V.F.W. used to marvel how he could process a huge mouthful without using his fingers. His mouth would constantly move, softening the shells, splitting them open, ferreting out the seeds, and storing the opened and unopened shells in separate cheeks. He looked like a squirrel with a nervous condition. Then, when he'd eaten all the seeds, he'd draw in his cheeks, gathering his ammunition, and spit, machine-gun-like, a steady stream of spent, black husks, pausing only a few minutes before he'd reload.

It was the only thing I had to look forward to as I went back to the dugout. There was a lot of cheering, half from the V.F.W. rooters telling me "nice try" and half from the Lions Club supporters telling me "glad you got your butt simonized." Fortunately, Toby bailed me out. Danny O'Hara, my replacement on the mound, held the Lions scoreless for the last three innings, and then in the bottom of the 6th Toby blasted a three-run homer for an 8-7 win. It was the longest shot anybody ever remembered, soaring over the center field and perimeter fences, and landing in the back parking lot of Steve's Sizzling Steaks on Route 17.

Toby was mobbed after the game, and I made sure I got in my pat on

the back before I left the field. There was still so much spinning around in my head that I never saw Jill in the stands, but she was waiting for me with an ice cold soda and a smile that made me feel like I'd just pitched a no-hitter. She had on a pink, sleeveless blouse and lemon yellow shorts that ranked right up there with her white ones.

"Hi," she said, handing me the soda, "thought you might want this."

"Yeah, thanks, but I don't know whether I should drink it or pour it over my head."

"Drink it," she admonished. Look, Ronnie, your team won again. Only this time they did it without your help. That's why you guys are so good; everyone pitches in. Besides, when you win the Little League championship, I'll pour one over your head."

We talked and joked all the way up Broad Street on the way to Jill's house. I could feel the clutter inside my brain dissolving as our only concerns for the moment were Mrs. Blakely's upcoming English test, what color dress Jill should wear to the Soiree, and my chances of making it to the major leagues. It was sunset; the sky was all pink, lavender, and grey, and there was a cool breeze that wisped Jill's hair, like gentle fingers stroking her forehead. I felt good in a way I had never known before.

But the good feeling abruptly ended. Off to our right, set back about fifty feet, stood the old barn, glowering like some kind of beast whose territory we encroached upon. I stared at the hayloft door, a big, rectangular eye that at least for the moment was closed. Right then I wished I could've been Chet Massey so I could have just tromped right across the rocky front yard and up the back staircase, smashed through the back entrance, grabbed The Cowboy by the throat, and proceeded to

kick his ass right out of town. But I couldn't; I had to just stand there while anger, fear, frustration, and anxiety made a triumphant return inside me.

Add affection, too. From just the short time I had spent alone with Jill, I wanted to be her protector. It was only then that I knew how Toby really felt. A voice from within wanted to issue a challenge to the rectangular eye, "HEY, COWBOY! YOU SEE THIS PRINCESS NEXT TO ME? SHE'S MINE! WANNA TRY SOMETHIN'? JUST COME ON DOWN--YOU'LL HAVE TWO DEAD EYES, AND I'LL STUFF THAT FILTHY WHITE HAT RIGHT INTO THOSE FILTHY YELLOW AND BROWN TEETH OF YOURS!"

I became aware of a tugging on my left arm, which directed my attention from the barn to Jill. She looked concerned, frightened.

"Ronnie, what's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing," I lied.

"NOTHING? You stopped dead in your tracks when you saw that barn, and then you were glaring at it like you wanted to burn it down. Come on, we've got to go."

We continued on to Jill's house. My "Oh, nothing" was good for about twenty seconds so I told Jill the whole story about The Cowboy, most of it, anyway. I was amazed at how much she had already heard, not from Brand, but from good old Friz; even news about perverts got sucked into her vacuum. Jill said she understood everything except for one thing--why were boys always stopping by the barn on their way home from school and throwing pennies at the door while they yelled "Hey, Mr. Cowboy!" or something like that? I explained that they were trying to get him to open the door and come out, and that if he did, all of them would promptly drop a load in their pants. Jill thought the whole idea

was ridiculous, and when I told her they were just copying the older guys' version of fun, she thought that was just as bad. "Who'd be stupid enough to throw pennies at sex maniacs or pretty girls?" she said. In the past month or so, according to my calculations, I had been stupid enough about twenty times.

By the time I walked Jill to her door and said good night it was almost dark, and I knew I had to get right home. I could have taken a short cut down the steps of Woods Hill and avoided passing by the barn again, but this time I wanted to see that sleeping red monster and whatever it was that lurked behind its rectangular eye. I arrived just as the last bit of daylight drained from the sky. The sun was already down, and all that was left was the blood-red wake where it had just fallen. The breeze had become a wind, slithering through the short sleeves of my uniform and wrapping its coldness around my entire body. Staring at the eye, I thought about what Jill had said. She was right; it was stupid to throw pennies, for whatever reason. Still, there was the specter of the unknown. What would it take to force a showdown with The Cowboy? The pennies didn't work--all right, maybe this would.

I seized an egg-sized rock with the same anger that had suddenly seized me. An overhead street light cast a weak, silver glow over the entire area, but it was bright enough so that I could see the eye clearly. Gripping the rock firmly, I yelled, "COME ON OUT, YOU SON OF A BITCH!" and let go with my best fast ball. It was a direct hit. There was a loud bang, and the hayloft door flew open all the way. My first impulse was to run for all I was worth, but all I could do was take a couple of steps back and stare into the rectangular blackness, waiting for The Cowboy to appear. Nothing. No Cowboy. No noise. Just the pounding of my heart, that I was sure I could hear.

I waited for a few moments, but nothing happened. Nobody came to the opening, and nobody made any noise from within the barn. That didn't mean there was nobody inside, and I knew it; I had to see for myself. I grabbed another rock, about the same size as the first, and then skulked along the edge of the yard until I reached the back staircase, the only way up to the hayloft. The steps were old, weather-beaten, and worn, just like the barn, and though I climbed as cautiously as I could, each step squeaked and groaned under my weight. I felt a throbbing in my neck, and my throat felt like it was coated with sand--but I was ready. With my left arm cocked, the rock ready to fly, I used my right hand to grasp the edge of the back door and then rip it open. It crashed against the side of the barn, and I jumped at the sound. Then it was dead quiet. The icy light from Broad Street filtered through the double opening, and I could see it was safe to go inside. I felt a wave of relief gush over me, but I held on to the rock, just in case.

There was nothing to fear that particular evening, but there were certainly signs that The Cowboy had been around. The big room was empty, but on the dusty, wooden floor, off in one corner, was an olive drab army blanket, and scattered all around were empty, small cans of beef stew, chili, and spaghetti, which had leaked their last few orange and brown drops into little, greasy pools where they lay. Also on the floor, among the used, white plastic forks strewn all about, was another white, plastic object, cylindrical, with a nozzle right-angled at the bottom. It was an inhalator, the same thing my cousin Eugene used whenever his asthma flared up. It, too, was empty but lying off by itself in a far corner. That was all there was to see in the loft so I left, making sure I closed both doors on my way out. I flipped the rock onto the front yard and then got out

of there as quickly as possible; now I would have to face a different kind of hostility in my own house.

When I got home, everybody was at the dinner table, where I should have been an hour ago. I didn't bother to change out of my uniform; every second counted. My plate and the lasagna square on it greeted me coldly while everyone else was digging in to one of my mother's homemade parfaits, a dessert I would kill for.

"Here, you can't eat it cold," my mother said, whisking the plate away just as I was about to start. Apparently my father was designated prosecutor for this one. He looked sternly at me while Vince smiled bloodthirstily and Uncle Wally hurriedly finished his parfait, probably fearful that someone would say something funny and he'd wind up disgorging pudding and whipped cream through his nasal passage.

"And just where were you, mister?" my father began. "We saw kids coming from the ballpark over an hour ago. Your mother was worried sick."

"I'm sorry--I walked Jill home, and I guess I forgot about time."

"Jill? Jill who?" asked my father. He probably thought I had started a defense he could rip to shreds. But I was ready with my knockout punch.

"Jill Thaxton," I replied. "Mom, she asked me to the June Soiree, and then I walked her home after the game."

My mother immediately softened. The June Soiree was to the seventh grade what the Graduation Ball was to the eighth. All mothers hoped their sons would escort a girl, but my mother knew Mrs. Thaxton from P.T.A., and she thought Jill was Miss World. And now her son--yes, I was her son again--was going with Miss World to the June Soiree! Suddenly, she was hugging me, kissing me, and telling me how proud she was. My father, seeing that his case was obviously dismissed, shook my hand and congratulated me. So did Uncle Wally. But Vince couldn't pass up the chance

to be Vince.

"Wait a minute, let me get this straight. Jill Thaxton asked you?"

"You know her, Vince?" my father interrupted.

"I know who she is. Let me tell you, Dad, that is going to be one nice-looking girl in a couple of years."

"Whattya mean 'going to be,'" I challenged, "what's she right now, a scarecrow?"

"Oh, no--not at all. But you know--going to be," he said, cupping his hands in front of his chest.

"VinCENT!" bellowed my mother.

"O.K., truce" he gave in, "but please excuse me; I've got to go up to my room to recover from this one." He got up and went as far as the stairs, but then he had to try one more shot.

"Hey, Ron, maybe I underestimated you--or maybe I overestimated Jill Thaxton," he said, and then he disappeared behind the wall.

"Hey, Vince," I yelled after him, "why don't you try closing your eyes and skipping across Route 17."

Of course, I didn't tell my parents about my going into the barn. My mother would have been horrified to think I could have been attacked by a pervert, and my father would have been thrilled to learn that I had been trespassing on private property, pervert or no pervert. I did tell Toby, Bob, and a few other guys in school the next day. No, I hadn't actually seen The Cowboy, I had said, but based on what I had found in the hayloft the night before, it looked as though he had claimed the barn as his home and was planning to stay in Carlstadt.

So life went on for the next few weeks, and, despite The Cowboy's

presence, it was a sweet life indeed. May had turned into June, and so much was happening. School was winding down, V.F.W. had beaten Lions Club in three more head-to-head confrontations, virtually assuring us of a divisional title, the June Soiree was just a day away, and my two best friends also had dates. Toby was asked by Nancy Cardone and Bob by Kathy Simms; asking girls to the June Soiree was something seventh grade boys just didn't do.

But the sweetest part of life was Jill. She was always so much fun to be with, whether we went out or just sat around, talking. And we did plenty of that. In the month that we'd been together, I spent so much time at her house that I was treated like one of the family; in fact, her parents invited me to spend a week in August at their summer home in Cape May. It would be just me, Jill, and the rest of her family--her father, John; her mother, Janice; her younger sisters, Jennifer and Jessica; and their French Poodle, Jasper--a quirk I let slide since Jill had not yet seen Uncle Wally do his impersonation of a gargoyle.

When school ended that Thursday, I walked Jill home, as usual, but this time I had to get going right away. My mother was taking me to get new shoes, to go with my new suit, for the Soiree the next day. I thought about taking the short cut down Woods Hill, but I was feeling so good I forgot about time so I took the long way down Broad Street.

Lost in my thoughts about the upcoming fun, I was about halfway down when I suddenly jolted to a stop. From my vantage point above the old, red barn I saw someone walk down the back steps and onto the front yard. He wasn't wearing the dirty, white, cowboy hat I expected, but instead it was a dirty camouflage shirt that I saw and knew too well. It was Brand, and I watched as he crouched and scoured the ground, hurriedly picking up

objects as he went. Stones? NO--PENNIES! The Cowboy, Ernie the Hatchet, and all the other "perverts" of recent months had been providing Brand with a nice little income from a crowd of kids who never realized they were being had. Jill was right; it was stupid--we were stupid--I was stupid. The word "REtard" suddenly flashed in my brain as I felt outrage welling inside me. I didn't care if Brand was older, or if he was crazy, or even if he carried a knife--he wasn't going to get away with this.

Carefully I made my way down close enough so that he wouldn't have enough time to run away. I knelt behind a bush just off the outer edge of the yard and watched, coiled for the attack. When Brand stood up, both fists clenched full of our stupidity, and gave the yard a once-over with his eyes, I knew it was time.

"BRAND!" I yelled, springing out from the bush and charging at him. He turned, saw me, and tried to bolt for freedom, but I tackled him hard, Chet Massey style--shoulders in, arms locked, drive with the legs--and a cluster of pennies burst from out of his hands upon impact. He landed face down upon the ground, and I kneeled astride his legs and pressed down on both his shoulders to help keep him immobile. He wasn't nearly as strong as I had expected.

"Damn you, Brand--what's the big idea!" I demanded.

"No...please...Cowboy...please...don't touch me...", he whimpered, and then he started breathing in huge gasps, making an eerie whistling sound that scared me so I got off him and sat down next to where he lay. He rolled to a sitting position and then slid back a few feet, but he made no attempt to escape; he just sat there, wheezing, staring at the ground.

"C'mon, Brand, what's the idea!" I repeated. I didn't understand his calling me "Cowboy," but that didn't matter; there was no Cowboy, only a smart-assed older kid who'd taken advantage of some dumb-assed younger ones.

He reached into a pocket of his jeans and pulled out not a knife, but a white inhalator just like the one I had seen that night in the hayloft. He squirted it twice into his mouth, closed his eyes for a few seconds, and gradually his breathing settled down to normal. Then he spoke.

"Awright, so ya caught me, so now you're a hero. Whattya want, a medal?"

"No," I replied. "I wanna know why you've been taking our pennies all this time."

"Because I gotta eat!" he snapped back, and before I had a chance to express my confusion, he continued, "You an' everybody else--ya come home from school every day and there's always somebody there to take care of ya. I ain't got no old man, never even met the b-bastard. And my old lady--all she does is booze and get laid, never gets out of bed--prob'ly can't. So I've been usin' the pennies to buy cans of spaghetti, stew, and stuff like that, and that's what I've been livin' off of. But I ain't got no money for the medicine I need, and when this thing runs out, I gotta go without breathin.'"

I thought of the inhalator and the empty cans I had seen in the hayloft, and then I remembered the blanket.

"Don't you even go home to sleep?" I asked.

"Only when there's nobody shackin' up with the old lady. I jus' can't take seein' it no more. Anyway, some of the creeps that show up want more than jus' her so they go after me. The b-bum who's around nowLook, I told ya what ya wanted to know. Happy?"

"Well, why don't you just get a job?" I offered. "You could make enough to pay for whatever you need."

"Oh, sure--and jus' where am I gonna get a job? In the factories around my house? I'm only sixteen. Besides, that's where all the creeps that screw my old lady hang around. And nobody'd give me a job in town, either. My name's Brand, remember? I'm the no-good brother of the maniac that grabbed your buddy Mitchell's sister, remember? Well, I got news for ya--Lyle didn't do it, couldn't've. I was home the day the cops came, but Lyle was already gone over a week. Jus' took off--told me he was gonna. Couldn't stand it no more, my old lady, the booze, the creeps. So don't talk to me about gettin' a job!"

I sat there for a moment, trying to think of something to say. Then Brand stood up and started to walk away. I sprang to my feet and caught up to him from behind.

"Wait a minute," I said, placing my right hand on his left shoulder as an offer of friendship. Brand spun around to face me, shrugging free of my grip.

"Get your goddamned hands offa me!" he snarled. "You had your fun. Whattya wanna do, show your friends how tough ya are?"

There were a group of six or seven boys looking on from the opposite corner, but I ignored them. I was trying to be as gentle as I could with Brand.

"No," I said, "I wanna help. And I can; I can get you a job at Mr. R's."

"Whattya nuts? He hates me! I can't even go in there to get a slice of pizza--he said if I ever came into his joint again, he'd personally boot my ass out the door. I don't think"

"Wait," I interrupted, "I can get you a job. Look, Mr. R is my neighbor, and he likes me a lot. He lets me work any Saturday I want.

If I tell him you're o.k., he'll give you a chance, I know it. Besides, it's good pay and you get dinner every day you work. C'mon, whattya say, Judd, I just wanna help," and I extended my right arm to shake hands.

He glared at me for a few seconds, and then his eyes filled and tears started streaming down his cheeks. He started to lift his right arm, but he began sobbing uncontrollably so he turned and ran off down Broad Street, right past the crowd which had, since, increased in size. All the kids came over and started patting me on the back and shoulders, but all I could do was watch the figure of a poor, sick, frightened, little sixteen-year-old disappear out of sight, and with him vanished The Cowboy, our fears, and Judd Brand's chances of making it through the upcoming weekend.

As soon as I got home from shopping, I went over to Mr. R's. Mr. Rinaldi's restaurant, Mr. R's, had the best pizza and Italian food anywhere, and Mr. R. was always so nice to all the kids. But he was especially nice to Vince and me. We were the sons he never had, explained my mother, and she always said she felt sorry for him because he had to raise his two daughters by himself, after his wife had run away with the cheese man. Sometimes I worked at the restaurant, and other times, when he took his family on vacation, I'd go next door and take care of his dachshund, Pepperoni. So when I walked into the restaurant that afternoon, he was, as usual, glad to see me.

"Hey, Ronnie, my friend!" he said, smiling, as he smoothly ladled pizza sauce all over a circle of outstretched dough. "How 'bout a nice, fresh slice just out of the oven--on the house."

"No, thanks, Mr. R., I'm having dinner soon. I came by to talk to you, if you aren't too busy."

"Never too busy for my friend Ronnie. What's on your mind?"

"Well, could we talk in private?" I asked.

He said, Sure" and then told Mario, who was slicing cold cuts in the back, to take over up front. Mr. R. wiped his hands, smoothed his black mustache with his fingers, and then we went into the dining room next door. There were only a couple of tables occupied, but we went to one in the far corner for privacy.

"Now," he said after we both sat down, "what can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if you could give a friend of mine a job."

He smiled broadly, showing all of his clean, white teeth, and then said, "Of course! Any friend of yours is a friend of mine. Is that all you wanted, Ronnie? You didn't have to ask me in private about something like that."

"But this is different," I said timidly, "I'm talking about Judd Brand."

Mr. R.'s eyes flashed with anger. Just the mention of that name changed his entire mood.

"JUDD BRAND! Listen, I told that strunz if he ever set foot in my place again, I'd boot his little fanny right out of town, where he belongs. How can you be friendly with a cockroach like that?"

"No, Mr. R., that's not how it really is," I pleaded. I always thought the same thing about him. But I just found out the truth. He's got a terrible home. Nobody cares about him. All he eats is little cans of food. And he's not a bad kid--he's just scared. Oh, please, Mr. R.!"

I felt my eyes filling up, but I was able to blink away the tears. I took a deep breath and waited for Mr. R. to say something. He tilted his head slightly, and his eyes lost their glare of anger.

"Hey, Ronnie, you're serious"

"Yes--I'll even train him for you, free of charge. Please, Mr. R., he really needs a job."

Mr. R. stared at me for a few seconds while he was thinking. Then he pursed his lips, gave a short, affirmative nod of his head, and said, in a businesslike tone, "O.K., I trust you, Ronnie, you know that. If you say he's O.K., I'll take your word for it. Turns out I'm looking for someone for about twenty hours a week, maybe more if things work. Sure, O.K. And you don't have to train him--just tell him to stop by next week, and tell him 'no hard feelings.'"

I said "thank you" about sixty times, and I was in such a rush to get home to call Brand up that when Mr. R. put out his hand to shake, I grabbed his forearm, instead, and then raced to the door. Mr. R's was located right in the middle of the business district on Hackensack Street, and a lot of people stared at me as I came flying out of the restaurant, really whooping it up. They probably figured it was just another dumb kid putting too much hot pepper on his slice.

As soon as I arrived home, I grabbed the phone book to find Brand's number and tell him the good news. But there was no listing so it would have to wait. There wasn't time to go to his house; he lived on the other side of Route 17, in the industrial area, and it was a pretty good hike. Besides, I had just enough time to change into my uniform and get down to the field for my game that night; I was pitching against Fire Dept., Bob's team, the worst team in Little League. Still, it would be nice, I thought, to have a nice, easy game and then a nice easy walk to Jill's house on the evening before the Soiree. Things were certainly looking up.

We won the game 12-0. I gave up four hits, two of them to Bob, who

was the best shortstop in either division. Too bad he had to get stuck on such a dismal team like Fire Dept. Actually, though, that night nobody cared about baseball; everyone was buzzing about the Soiree and the half day of school the next day for only the seventh graders. All the talk was centered around who was going with whom, what color dresses the girls were going to wear, and where everyone was headed afterward. Not once, among all the conversation going on, was the demise of The Cowboy ever mentioned. I figured that those same kids who saw me with Brand had, by game time, spread the word all around. Maybe they had, but, at least, nobody was talking about it. Eventually, the parents who were there broke up our gab session. Jill rode home with her mother, but that was all right; there would be plenty to talk about in about twenty-four hours, the most important night to any seventh grader living in Carlstadt, New Jersey.

And what a night it turned out to be. The gym was decorated to the ceiling with balloons, crepe paper, and posters of all colors. All around the perimeter of the dance floor were linen-draped tables for socializing, and outside the gym, in the hall, parents and teachers served finger sandwiches, doughnuts, and fruit punch. Both inside and outside the gym, on every flat surface available, were help-yourself bowls of potato chips, pretzels, peanuts, popcorn, and candy kisses. Chaperones kept constant vigil over the bowls, and as soon as one was empty, it was filled immediately. For some, eating was what they came for, and they couldn't have been disappointed.

For most, however, it was the dancing. And could the girls dance! At first, whenever the DJ played a fast song, we high-tailed it out of the gym to take a food break just long enough for the record to end.

But the girls quickly caught on and dragged us back onto the dance floor. I was amazed how athletes like ourselves could be transformed into elephantine creatures who plodded back and forth while all the girls tried to translate our stumbling into a rhythm they could cope with. Even the Friz had closed up her wire service for the evening and was giggling and laughing with all the girls, who, in their pastel pinks, blues, greens, and yellows, whirled, spun, and flitted around us like butterflies around stationary fixtures. Jill was a white butterfly, who, along with the others, finally managed to coax enough life into our legs so that when the evening finally ended, we left completely satisfied, not only because of a great time, but also because we could claim, for the first time, that at a school dance, we danced.

Afterward, of course, most of us went to Mr. R's, as if there hadn't been enough food at the Soiree. We had a couple rounds of pizza and soda and then we split up to walk our dates home. I hadn't had the chance to be alone with Jill since Thursday afternoon, and we had so much to talk about, especially now that the Soiree had just ended. We walked up Broad Street, right past the old, red barn that was now nothing but an old, red barn, and turned onto Fifth, Jill's street. When we got really close to Jill's house, she abruptly changed the conversation from light to serious.

"Ronnie," she said, taking my hands into hers and looking distressed, "thank you for sticking up for me the way you did, but did you have to hurt him?"

"Hurt who? What are you talking about?"

At the Soiree tonight Franny Chatsworth told me you beat up Judd Brand, even made him cry, because he said some bad things about me."

It took me only a couple of seconds to realize what had happened.

Apparently, the kids who saw me on Thursday afternoon put two and two together and got five. And dearest Friz, of course, was both quick and eager to spread the rumor.

"No, Jill, none of that is true," I said, and then I proceeded to tell her the whole story about my catching Brand, making him confess, learning about his situation, and offering my help. "In fact, right after I came home from shopping," I added, "I went right over to Mr. R's and got Brand a job. I'm going over his house tomorrow to tell him."

I saw the concerned look vanish from Jill's face and, instead, her eyes sparkled and she smiled. What happened next is hard to describe but easy to remember. She removed her hands from mine and placed them onto my shoulders. Then she looked right into my eyes and said, "Ronnie, you're very nice--I've always known that." Before I could reply, she brought her face up to mine, closing her eyes just as our lips touched. She gently squeezed my shoulders at first, but as the kiss strengthened, she slid her arms around my neck, and I placed mine around her waist. For the first time in my life I felt a kiss that I wished would never end. Even after she withdrew her lips from mine, we embraced for a while, and as she rested her head on my shoulder I glided my fingers along the silky skin of her neck. At last, all the troubles of the past few months had come to a peaceful end on this warm, gentle night, and I had never looked so forward to the next day of my life as I did when I finally arrived home and went to bed.

I woke up early the next morning; I figured that Brand probably wasn't an early riser so there was a chance he'd be home. Besides, even if he wasn't, I was sure his mother would be glad that Judd had a friend and a job as a bonus; I'd just leave a message. I didn't exactly know

where Brand lived, but I did know that his house was on Thirteenth Street, among all the factories; it wouldn't be that hard to find. Just as I was about to walk out the front door, my mother saw me.

"Honey, you're up early for a Saturday. You and Jill got something to do?"

"No," I replied, "I've got to tell a friend some news that's gonna change his life."

"Well, don't be out too long. There's supposed to be a bad storm on the way."

I used the traffic button to help me get across Route 17. As soon as I made it to the other side, the light turned green, and cars, trucks, and buses resumed their grim procession in both directions. Factories were all around me, and the narrow streets were covered with oil and grime. I heard the first rumble of thunder in the distance, and the sky was whitish-grey, just like all of the buildings that surrounded me. To save time I walked into an auto body repair shop and asked one of the workers where Thirteenth Street was. He said "One block down" and pointed in what direction. When I got to the corner of Thirteenth Street, I didn't have to look any further.

Off to my left, on an unpaved dead end, was a house, the only house on the street. What was once a yellow exterior was now the color of the sky, flaxen, like grass parched under an oppressive sun. Thunder became louder and more frequent. The wind picked up, making cellophane wrappers and bits of paper skitter along the ground and race alongside me as I approached the scarred, peeling, wooden front door. There was no doorbell, just the jagged remains of wires that hung limply from a hole in the wall. I knocked, just before a violent clap of thunder made me jump where I stood.

I knocked again and a woman's voice from within called, "Yeah, whooizzit?" She sounded tired; I thought maybe I had awakened her.

"Is this Judd Brand's house?" I asked out loud.

"Ain' locked--'mon in," the voice slurred.

I entered into a small living room, and I couldn't believe what I saw. There were empty beer cans all around the floor and stains all over a filthy, worn, green carpet. On the top of a small coffee table were two pizza cartons, each one containing a couple of slices all covered with fuzzy, green mold. Off to my left was an old, battered couch with torn, grey upholstery, and some of the stuffing was showing through in a few places. There were no windows open, and there was the same sweaty, musty smell I knew from the gym locker room. But the most shocking thing of all was what I saw when a voice, the same voice I heard when I was outside, said, "Well, whattya want?"

Sprawled on a bed in the far corner of the room was a woman wearing only a white bra and panties. At first I didn't see her because all the shades were down, and the room was pretty dark. Then lightning flashed, thunder vibrated the whole room, and the woman drew up her legs, lolling them from side to side.

"C'mere, I won' hurtya," she said and then made a long, low, moaning sound.

I walked over to the bed, which was right under a window where I could see the shadow of a tree flailing its branches in the wind. Behind the closed door of an adjacent room I heard the sound of water running.

"I'm sorry if I woke you, Mrs. Brand," I apologized. I was embarrassed to see a grown woman with almost no clothes on, but it didn't seem to embarrass her. She just lay there with her right arm resting on

her forehead, and her eyes half-closed.

"Name's Wilson," she corrected, "but whattya want?"

"I've gotta see Judd Brand--does he live here?"

"Use ta," she said, expelling a breath that reeked of beer.

"Used to? What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean, he took off, jus' like his brother an' their ol' man. Mus' run in the fam'ly--the're all bums." A loud clap of thunder boomed overhead. She closed her eyes and groaned.

"Isn't he coming back?" I asked, and then my confusion turned into anger. "Don't you care where he's gone? What about his food? And his medicine? He's really sick--DON'T YOU CARE IF HE DIES?"

She opened her eyes, and, I think, for the first time really saw me. Then she tried to sit up, but she just groaned and sank to her back again.

"Look," she said, "you a friend of his? Didn't think he had no friends. He don' like it here--that's his problem. Me an' Sammy got our own life to live. Don' need that little bastard aroun'. An' Sammy's been so good to him, too. Tried to be like a father. Was kind to him, even affectionate. But d'ya think Judd appreciates it? No, he takes off. Well, good, let'm go. He's old enough."

I started to reply when I heard the water stop running and saw the door open. Out from a small bathroom stepped a tall, skinny man wearing only a pair of dirty, greasy, tan slacks. I felt my anger drain and fear start to fill me when I looked at his face and saw his vacant stare, caused by his right eye, which was made of glass. And above his glass eye was a red, jagged, crescent-shaped scar that only added to the flood of panic rising in me.

"Well, howdy, handsome," he said and then put both hands on his hips and stared at me, as though sizing me up for something.

Judd's mother said, "Sammy, this here's a friend callin' for Judd. I tol' him the bum took off so he was jus' leavin', too--weren't ya?"

I wanted to say something in return, but I saw Sammy staring at me, smiling, showing a mouth full of crooked teeth, all yellow and brown. And on a night table on the other side of the bed rested a cowboy hat, white, with stains all over it. I had no rock in my hand, and suddenly I felt ten times more frightened than I did that night at the old, red barn.

"Well, now, hold on there, partner," said Sammy, smiling at me and unbuckling his trousers, "you don't wanna go just yet. Bad storm brewin' out there. Besides, me an' the little lady was jus' fixin' to have some fun. Why don' you come an' join us--I'll clean all your pipes good."

I turned and bolted out of the house, never bothering to look behind to see if Sammy chased me. I didn't even wait for the traffic button; I darted across Route 17, and a few cars honked angrily as they whizzed by. The sky was as dark as night, the wind suddenly ceased, and the air smelled of the impending rain. The storm surrounding me was poised, ready, powerful, but it was weak compared to the storm I was feeling inside. I made it to my house just as the first drops began to fall, and I whisked inside my front door just as the deluge began. My mother was there to greet me.

"Hi, honey, I was getting a little worried--looks like you made it just in time Ronnie, honey, what's wrong?"

"Oh, God!" was all I could manage, and then I ran, eyes already blinded by tears, to the waiting embrace of my mother.

It took a few days before Dr. Morgan would let me out of bed; he said he'd never seen me that weak before. But he was nice to me, and the medicine

he prescribed worked really well. So did the news that both Sammy and Mrs. Wilson had been put away. Sammy was arrested and shipped back to New Mexico, where he was wanted on a couple of child-molesting charges. Mrs. Wilson was sent to a home for alcohol rehabilitation. Knowing that made me rest a lot easier. And knowing I had family and friends who cared about me helped me get through a rough time.

But Judd Brand was never found, and eventually he, like the perverts he took with him, was forgotten by everyone. Everyone, that is, but me. I felt great to get back to school, to my team, and to just being a twelve-year-old in the greatest little town in the world. Still, whenever life was as wonderful as it could be, whether it was in the middle of a noisy party or a quiet walk alone with Jill, something in my mind always made me pause to reflect. I'd be reminded of someone who acted tough, but really wasn't tough at all. I'd picture a skinny, greasy-looking, little kid who ate out of a tin can and breathed through a plastic tube. I'd remember Judd Brand, the creator and, as it turned out, the only real victim of The Cowboy of Carlstadt.