

Four Years from Home

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This is a work of fiction. So don't get upset if you see your name mentioned. There are thousands of people with the same name as you. And if you think anything in this story is an incident from your past don't be paranoid. It is not about you, really.

For Cicely, Dan, and Tom

Chapter 1

My name is King Thomas of Ryan, so crowned as firstborn of Daniel, Earl of Ryan and his consort, Helen, and ascendant to the royal throne upon my birth September 12th, 1946. My domain stretches from horizon to horizon, my power is absolute, my word law.

Load of crap, you say? Maybe... But as the firstborn child of five and male, I was *special*, and my parents, being allegedly of sound mind and body, recognized that; for I was the culmination of their union, the be-all and end-all of their existence. And, as such, I always got the biggest and best of everything;

and as for whatever was left over? Well, that went to the others. Examples? Who got all the new clothes and who got the hand-me-downs? Who had the only complete baby photo album and who got maybe a couple dozen snapshots each? With me went the Ryans' highest expectations, with them, only vague and unspoken hopes for the best.

The *others*... That's how I had always thought of them. They were an amorphous mass of humanity whose sole purpose was to annoy me. I had never asked for them, nor was there ever even the slightest intimation on my part that I preferred some demeaning power-sharing arrangement over absolute rule in my kingdom. I was totally at ease with having two loyal and subservient subjects to do my bidding. Life was so simple and so right. Life was good. When I was too young to talk, I would simply point and they would fetch. It was a thing of beauty that only got better when I was just learning to speak. I could say anything from 'goo goo' to 'uh uh' and they would go to ludicrously extreme lengths to try and figure out exactly what I wanted. "Does Tommy want his bottle?" No, don't you understand? I want *that*. "Does Tommy want his Clancy doll?" Poor Clancy. He deserved a Purple Heart for the wounds I inflicted on him. "Does Tommy want to play with his ball?" Bingo! Bring it here, Mom Servant. King Tom wants to take a shot at that lamp over there.

Yes, all was going famously - they seemed overjoyed with me at the center of their world, and I

was definitely happy with the five-star service. That was why I was so surprised when Mary came along. First of all, I don't recall ever granting *my* permission for her to enter *my* realm. And second, a sister? Why would anyone want a sister? A dog maybe, a bird possibly, a fish - that was a stretch, but a sister? Why would anyone want something that came with a built-in Guard-all shield? Don't get it? Just try and hit a girl and you'll see what I mean. Nowadays we'd call it an invisible force field, but back then, a Colgate metaphor was the best we could do. Live with it.

Her appearance on the scene was so totally inexplicable an occurrence and so completely defied all logic that it took me a good ten minutes to figure it out. I had immediately ruled out an act of god since, after all, I was the only god in my universe. An act of the devil? I didn't think so - I was also the devil in this world. Just ask my parents after I had made my true aspirations known at age two. No, she was clearly a mistake and, in my infinite mercy, I would allow my parents one mistake. After all, they were only human, plus I had no choice.

But to my disappointment, the mistakes continued in Sam and then Kate. Royal pains in the butt they were, I being the royal and they the pains. Yet somehow I survived them and their various assaults on my authority and my shining armor bore no permanent dents. I was, after all, still the future king of the Ryan family and my siblings would bow down before me. Or else...

Eventually, I actually came to enjoy having *the others* as indentured servants to do my bidding and, more importantly, take the blame for my dirty work. I could easily bully my weakling sisters and get away with it (though I still had trouble hitting them) and Sam was not physically powerful enough yet to stand up to me. And they realized early on that their sheer numbers were no match for a real king. They knew that I could do whatever I pleased to them and get away with it. And the icing on the cake was that I could just as easily implicate them in whatever scheme I had hatched, thus transferring the blame and punishment to them. I had perfected the "who me?" look quite early in life and had a long list of patented excuses which always worked like a charm. God, life was good then.

But then Harry came along on Christmas day in 1950 and everything changed. With Harry it was different. My usual tactics didn't seem to work on him. Mom and Dad always seemed to take his side in everything. *The Field Manual of Dirty Tricks and Assigning Blame* was totally useless. It baffled me. Why was he any different than the others? I mean, I could push Mary down the steps, blame it on our blind cat and get away scot-free. But do the same thing to Harry? Dad would instantly produce the results of DNA testing (which didn't even exist back then) and a fingerprint analysis proving the culprit was me and, boy, would I get walloped. It was unbelievable how far

Dad had advanced scientifically and technologically after Harry's untimely birth.

In desperation, I even enlisted the aid of Mary, negotiating a temporary non-aggression pact with her for her help in torturing Harry. Of course I never called it that to her face. I'm not stupid, you know. I told her that it was all part of making sure Harry grew up to be a man; that we were really doing him a big favor; that it was all part of the 'big' picture. The part I left out was that the 'big' picture was actually that now there would be two to share all blame, two for Mom and Dad to choose from when trying to figure out the intricacies of my grand scheme. We were golden, or so I thought.

It just shows how wrong royalty can be. I had developed intercontinental ballistic building block missiles that were effective at an incredible range. It was the perfect weapon and it left no evidence, since the ammunition ended up where building blocks belonged anyway (in the play pen), essentially leaving no trace of anything out of the ordinary. And any minor injuries caused could easily be explained with a lie-detector-proof "I guess he hit his head on something," which was true in a manner of speaking. It was the perfect campaign.

Mary and I positioned ourselves within sight of Harry's play pen and commenced our vigorous and historic "alphabet bombing campaign" (as it became known in later years) scoring direct hit after direct hit. It was inspirational, fun, even educational, spelling out

things like "Take that!" and "Bye bye, Harry" with the sequential barrage of wooden blocks. Then Mom caught us in mid-victory. It wasn't because Harry was crying, which he wasn't. He was simply watching us and laughing, probably because we were such lousy shots. It was because Mom and Dad always seemed to be keeping a special eye out for Harry with their newly developed, state of the art, parental radar. They told me that he was a "special" child, a gift from God, and I had to learn to deal with that.

Oh, I dealt with it, believe me I used every weapon in my arsenal to deal with it. But every dismal foray against Harry's impregnable position, even with reinforcements in the form of my conscripted siblings, turned out to be worthless. My best diversionary tactics, garnered from years of watching *Combat!* on TV were useless, making me wonder what Vic Morrow and Sergeant Saunders had that I didn't. All this led me to the inevitable, sinking feeling that I had been deposed.

But this is not about me. This is about Harry. Oh, I hated him all right. I hated the threat he represented to my world. I hated his lack of reaction to my attacks and his better-than-thou attitude. In short, I hated his guts. And I just didn't realize it at the time I was bent on his destruction that my parents were right. There *was* something about Harry that was different, special. It wasn't his sandy hair or his slightly crossed eyes or even his thin, bony frame or that stupid smile I couldn't wipe off his face. It was his attitude about

things, about everything. Nothing ever seemed to upset him... And believe me, if I couldn't upset his applecart, nobody could. I'm not bragging, but Mom didn't name me the "Holy Terror" for nothing. I remember when he was five I covered him in cooking oil and chicken feathers and was busily tying him to the porch railing in preparation of running him out of town when I was caught by the parental torture-detector and summarily banished to my room to await further punishment from Dad. Even then Harry only smiled at me and laughed when he saw his tarred and feathered self in the mirror.

I joined a "gang" in fifth grade. Well, it might be more accurate to say I *formed* a gang in fifth grade. It consisted of every boy in my class that I could beat up. Harry was just starting first grade at St. Catherine's. As our collective initiation into the Gang of Seven, we ran Harry down on the playground, dragged him off under cover of a clever nun-diversion (which I devised, naturally), and buried him up to his neck in the dirt on the edge of Miller's field, telling him he would be resurrected if his faith were strong. He believed us and remained quietly entombed until Jean Mykita dined us out to the principal, Sister Concepta, and she sent the goon squad to save him. I can now tell you how just how hard the good Sister can hit one-handed with a belt and just how many nail heads there are on the floor of the sanctuary of the church since my friends and I had to polish every one of them to her liking

while she walked among us preaching the gospel and taking her best shots.

As he grew, Harry became the shining star in our family. He was the smartest, the funniest, the most successful at everything he put his mind to. He was, hands down, the best. And when I finally gave up trying to kill him, I must admit I actually liked him. You see, I finally realized that he represented no threat at all to me since his success was of the non-material variety, so I could rest easy on my laurels as the secular king of the family. Of the five children, he was the one Mom and Dad saw as the one most likely to become a priest. In their Roman Catholic eyes, this was the highest calling for a young man and any material success was entirely secondary for one with "a vocation." They would settle for material success for their other children. (Well, actually, for me they would have settled for my keeping out of prison, I think.) This, their Irish immigrant ethic looked upon as exemplary, having come from very little to a comfortable middle class life the hard way. But this was not the case for Harry. Harry was special, important. His life was their blessing, and for fifteen years it was just that.

Grandma Ryan always said that she saw "the light" in Harry's eyes, "the light" being the calling to become a priest. She was very old and very Irish and we could hardly understand a word she said, but we all respected her (and the back side of her hand). After Sunday dinners at her house and a rousing game of

'five hundred,' we would sit on the sofa while she talked on and on about God's calling and the "devil." Harry was the only one who really listened to her. Maybe he was the only one who understood her. I don't know. I had a hard enough time with 'five hundred' comprehending Grandma when she called out "hearts are the good ones." I never saw what was so good about them. But we could all see that Harry was destined to be a priest. This was the absolute highest calling a boy could aspire to, the dedication of one's life to God and the salvation of others, including me, I guess. Mom and Dad prayed every night with us, and in their prayers, we all saw our futures. God bless Tom (please, dear God, bless Tom) and Mary and Sam and Kate and give them all long, happy and successful lives. And God bless Harry and make him the holiest priest ever.

I'm sure the words were not exactly like that. Years have a way of clouding the memories. But that is my recollection of it; and Harry did indeed grow in God's grace and gentleness throughout his years at Saint Catherine's. He went on retreats all the time, spent hours on end with the parish priests and nuns being disgustingly helpful, became an altar boy, and even spent a summer after sixth grade at a seminary to get himself acclimated. He did it all. It was nauseating. The nuns talked in stage whispers about the first saint to come out of Saint Catherine's and the girls idolized Harry to the point of making me want to puke. Of course this made the school bullies torture him

relentlessly. I was in the ex-bully category by then, having graduated "bully cum laude." But I saw it all and Harry was totally oblivious to it. Ultimately, the decision was made that he would skip the eighth grade and go right into seminary, so seventh grade was to be his final, crowning year. That was the year our grandma Ryan died. That was the year she made him promise on her deathbed to become a priest. That was the year Harry changed.

I doubt if my parents realized it at first, but I knew. I still had quite an intelligence network in the parish even though I had moved on to high school; and I was the first to know that Harry was skipping daily mass and going to the park. And it wasn't like he was meeting a girl there. That I could understand completely. He would sit on a bench alone, seemingly enjoying the day - very weird for a seventh grader. He started doing that the week after grandma's funeral. Then he started skipping Sunday mass, lying to Dad about having to serve an early service. Midway through seventh grade, Harry announced at the dinner table that he had changed his mind about going to seminary; that he wasn't ready for it; that he wanted to finish eighth grade at St. Catherine's and go to South Catholic and maybe do seminary after that. That bombshell took weeks for my parents to come to grips with. Dad had Father Harkins, our Methusilan pastor, talk to him. Mom had Sister Jean Lorette, his sixth grade teacher and most trusted confidant on matters of utter holiness and penmanship, talk to him. Both were

usually quite influential with Harry but not this time. I even offered to come out of retirement and intimidate Harry into going. I told Dad I wouldn't even charge them for the service. Oddly enough, I think that is what finally did it for my folks and made them give it up. But it might also have been a major conference with a seminary counselor from Saint Anselm's. I never actually heard what went on in that meeting between Mom, Dad, Harry and the priest, but when I asked Harry later, he just said that the priest understood about his calling and explained it to the folks. So seminary was pushed off for four years until high school graduation. I had an uneasy feeling about all that.

Mom eventually accepted this as just a little bump on the road less traveled. To her way of thinking, Harry was still destined for sainthood but, like Paul, had to endure some hardships along the way. (You know Paul, that guy who wrote all those indecipherable epistles in the Bible in a secret code unbreakable even by my Captain Midnight Decoder Ring?) And I could not agree with her more that South Catholic high school was a hardship, having endured more detentions with Mr. Baracco than I could count.

Dad, on the other hand, seemed to take it harder than Mom. He actually became friendlier with me after that and we did things together without Harry there to bug me. I suppose desperation drives people to do crazier things but I can't say that regaining some of my former stature with him was much of a plus. Dad and I

had little in common at that point. I loved him but I was a deposed king and he a workaholic engineer. And being a junior in high school, I was more interested in girls and in making trouble than in baseball games and grabbing a bite to eat at the diner to talk about life.

The road less traveled became even bumpier after I left home for college. God, I was hell on my parents, even from hundreds of miles away, and Harry? Well Harry was now officially a fallen away Catholic. He traded in his clarinet for a guitar, spent all his free time teaching himself to play folk music, let his hair grow long, and began frequenting the coffee houses in Oakland and Shadyside - Pittsburgh's dreaded hippy district of the sixties. He was never into drugs - I knew that for sure from my Pittsburgh-based spy organization - but he had definitely gone weird. To say that he had joined the fringes of society would have been a major understatement. Harry was out there, way out there.

So, it was no surprise to me when he chose the seminary-avoidance route again and applied to only one college - Kenyon - some non-sectarian place in the middle of Nowhere, Ohio that I had never heard of. I mean, they had zero computers on campus, no mainframe, not even a mini-computer. Zero. Even in the late sixties that was a sign of a totally backward institution. Mom and Dad were crushed, absolutely devastated, and totally against it. I wanted to kill him for going back on his promise to go to seminary not

only because he was threatening my rule by refusing to move quietly into the non-aggressive realm of the religious, but also because he really hurt Mom and Dad with this one, him and his damned independent thinking. What a jerk!

But Harry had received a full scholarship and was going. He wouldn't argue about it. There was no fighting, nothing to talk about. He simply said that this was the next step on his life's journey. Believe it or not, Dad even had me talk to him at one point toward the end of the summer after high school, right before he went away, but I confess that metaphysics has never been my strong suit. I freaked on him when he lost me in the distinction between rationalization and conceptualization, and that was that for my 'talk.' To me there were good guys and bad guys, black and white, Vic Morrows and Sergeant Krugers. Harry simply couldn't understand this at all.

When Harry left for school for his freshman year at Kenyon, he almost left without saying goodbye. I remember to this day the last thing he said to Mom and Dad. I know you're expecting something profound and flowery from the boy who cut his own path through life, but all he said was: "Don't worry about me, Mom, Dad. I'll see you later. I love you." And that was that. He was gone.

For four years, Harry never came home again and Mom and Dad never went to visit him. He wouldn't let them and he always had some lame excuse for it. He rarely wrote, never called, and invariably found a job

there over the breaks and summer vacations. His letters were overly formal, typed, report card-like messages - "Got all As, very happy with classes, people are great, miss everyone..." Even I realized they were emotionless and not like Harry at all. He had transformed into someone so completely different that he was unrecognizable as Harry to any of us. No one spoke of him at the dinner table or wondered aloud how he was really doing or why he had changed. His picture disappeared from the living room mantle. It was as if he had ceased to exist, had never existed, that the shining star had in fact been but a passing comet lost in time and memory. It hurt Mom and Dad a lot, so much that even I realized it. It hurt everyone - except me. I didn't care.

But enough of that... Me? Miracle of miracles, I was headed to grad school at M.I.T. My parents had tolerated well my rebellious years and apparently it paid off. I turned a corner my junior year, my ship came in, my star rose in the East, and the king was reborn. Actually, it wasn't quite that dramatic but I'll take what I can get. I had lucked into getting partnered with Kelly Erickson for our junior honors Computer Science project at Pitt and we (well, actually she more than me, but who's keeping track?) invented "in concept" a punchcardless computer that would revolutionize the industry. All we had to do was build it. Kelly and I continued the project through our senior year and were both accepted at M.I.T. on full fellowship, with the expectation that we would

continue the grandiose plan, making us famous, and them richer. So when Harry left, I left, too, though my departure was with far more fanfare and pomp and circumstance.

But believe it or not, I somehow missed that boat, as big and unstoppable as it appeared, and ended up a designer for a board game company that was looking to the computer as the future of its business. They sent a recruiter to campus the first week of school, he found me, and made me an offer I couldn't refuse. I accepted on the spot. All I had to do was work with them to develop games and *my* invention and get it patented before Kelly did the same at M.I.T. Piece of cake. I had their resources behind me and Kelly had nothing. No contest.

That was the last I saw of M.I.T. and it was good riddance - what a bunch of over-achieving dopes. I didn't have to leave if I didn't want to, though. I could have stayed and gotten my degree and enjoyed torturing the nerds. The company didn't care. They would have paid for it. They just wanted the technology and the games. But it was better that I left then - it never sat well with Kelly that all our work had somehow been mysteriously lost in the move to M.I.T. And in one of those spur of the moment decisions, I made up my mind not to tell anyone in the family that I had left. After all, it was none of their business and it made for better dinner conversation. "Oh yes, Tom is at M.I.T., you know. He's working on a fellowship with... What's her name, Tom? Judy? Kelly? How is she

doing anyway? Any future plans for you two?" It was just so much more convenient for them to think I was still there. Actually, the company told me I could work from *anywhere* as long as I kept in touch and fed them work on a regular basis. I could have set up shop in Hawaii, or Alaska, or even Nowhere, Ohio.

There had been so much snow the Christmas Eve of Harry's senior year that I was lucky I had gotten in several days before. My drive home had taken me twice as long as usual. The roads were a mess. The Pittsburgh airport had been shut down around midday and all flights canceled in and out. But the entire family had made it, well, everyone but Harry. We weren't really expecting him, so it was no big deal, at least not for me. I had pretty much written him off and assumed everyone else had done the same. It was easier that way, less painful. Just forget about him. The world had bigger problems. It was a real mess. Nixon had just been reelected in November, him and his stupid silent majority. I had voted for George McGovern. George was our only hope for getting us out of Vietnam. Nobody liked that war, not even me, and I'm not exactly a peacenik. Army was my favorite game to play and picking on other kids my favorite pastime. You'd think that going to war would be a perfect fit for me; but, along with millions of other draft-age young men, I desperately wanted us out of that war.

Everything seemed subdued to me Christmas Eve. I guess it was the snow. There was a lot of staring out

the windows at the wonder of a white Christmas by Mom and Dad, not much singing of carols though (thank God), and plenty of punch and cookies. But the holiday warmed up Christmas morning with the traditional opening of presents and continued to build in spirit throughout the day. It was almost like old times. Sam opened a present that I promptly commandeered and broke *accidentally* when he tried to get it back by putting me in a headlock. Kate mysteriously misplaced a bracelet that we later found dangling from the dining room chandelier. Just like old times.

We were at the dinner table Christmas night, laughing and joking about all the crazy things we had done on Christmases past, filling in the cracks with pumpkin pie and coffee when Kate started retelling a memory: "Remember when Harry..." She stopped; everyone stopped. Once the lid to the forbidden box had been opened, there was no going back. Pandora was out, Christmas was officially over and we all knew it.

Mom had begun clearing the dishes when the phone rang. Dad answered it in the kitchen with his usual: "Yallo." You have to elongate the first syllable to get the full effect of Dad's patented greeting, something like "eeeeee-allo." None of us paid much attention to the conversation until we all heard him say "What? What did you say? Dear Lord..." He paused. I think he was crying but Dad never cried. Mom stood frozen with a stack of dishes in her hands. Kate was

studying her in horror. Sam and Mary were looking at each other. I looked out the window. The snow was pounding on the window like a hammer... no, that was my heart racing.

"No, that will be fine. Tomorrow then... Yes, goodbye." We heard the click when he hung up the receiver and the creak of the third step as he headed upstairs to his bedroom. I had doctored that step myself to create the telltale creak so I would know when the enemy was approaching my bedroom. This came in very handy when I was shooting my BB rifle out the window at the neighbors. A chilling dismay spread across the dining room; the blue-white ice collecting on the windows as the snow melted and refroze bore the face of a cold, heartless death.

"Mom?" Kate whispered hoarsely.

She ignored the little brat and whispered: "Tom, make sure your father's all right." Mom set the dishes on the table, sat down and tried to take a sip of tea. The cup rattled nervously on the saucer. I made a mental note that this would make a great lie-detector test at some point. I would call it the Rattling Cup and copyright it.

Instinctually, I wanted to respond: "Who elected me?" but for some odd reason I simply nodded and left the table. Even I, with my usual insensitivity, knew that something was really wrong. Really wrong... My mind jumped at once to thoughts of death. After all, it was the Christmas season and that was usually when old relatives kicked the bucket. Maybe Great Aunt

Nola had finally passed. She had to be at least a hundred. Or Uncle Bill - he had been battling cancer for years. It's amazing how many names of potential candidates can crowd into one small corner of your mind in those thirteen steps from the first floor to the second floor of the family split level home. There's probably a Guinness World Record for it. And the more names I filled my pea brain with, the less room it had for the dread we had all felt, so the list grew until I knocked lightly on Dad's door and entered.

"Dad? You OK?"

He was sitting on his bed rummaging through an old Tom McAnn shoebox. He pulled a black and white photograph from the box and slowly ran his thumb over it. Physically I was there in that time and place with him, but when I glanced at the photo I was suddenly eleven years old again and was standing beside Harry in front of our house on Gaylord Avenue. The six year old Harry was holding a leg brace bravely in one hand, staring stoically at the camera. I was smiling and packing a snowball to throw at Dad when he was done taking the picture. Harry had just come back from the hospital with Dad after the doctors removed his brace - the last vestiges of his yearlong bout with a broken leg. When he was five, Harry's leg had been crushed under a car when the wagon he had been riding in hit a bump and flew into the street, putting him directly in the car's path. But after one year and three operations and months in the hospital, he had triumphed. Even I had to admit, it took a lot of

guts for a kid his age to pull through that ordeal.

"He was so brave..." Dad's voice trailed off.

"He wrecked my wagon," I answered angrily, without thinking, realizing I had just replayed my eleven year old response when I had seen my Radio Flyer in pieces on the pavement, totally oblivious to my brother lying under the car screaming.

Dad looked up at me, his eyes glistening with moisture. A faint smile crossed his face. "Yes, I remember that. You weren't a happy camper for the longest time."

Something I had not remembered in years came back - "And that story you made up about it being insured and not to worry - that was a good one." He had replaced the wagon a week after Harry's accident. That sort of made it right, but it was not the same.

"You were such a damn brat, Tom. I knew you'd be whining for weeks if I didn't get you another wagon. And I didn't want you to feel bad about your overreacting." Dad's voice softened. I could barely hear him. "But, you turned out OK. You're a good boy, Tom. A good man... And I'm proud of you." His gaze returned to the photo and he kissed it lovingly. This was one of those awkward moments normally requiring an appropriate response from me, something attributing all my success to him, but he gave me no opportunity to reply. He was crying. Dad never cried.

"Dad?" I sat beside him and surprised myself - I put my arm around him. It was then that I noticed that the shoebox was full of photos. The box lid, which lay on

the floor, had one word written on it in red magic marker - "Harry." My journey into the forbidden reaches of Mom and Dad's bedroom was always one of revelations and here was yet another. Harry had not ceased to exist these past four years. He had merely been put away in Mom and Dad's closet into a shoebox to be brought back at the appropriate time, that time when he would be returning to the family. And that time was now. The phone call - it had been Harry.

"Dad? Is Harry coming home for Christmas?" I asked, certain then that Dad's tears were of joy. I had only ever seen my Dad cry once before, and only then for a moment, when I broke his arm playing touch football by cruelly piling on him after he had slipped, so I was not really experienced at the nuances of fatherly tears. But that would explain the phone call, the shoebox, the tears, the joy at his favorite prodigal son finally returning to the fold. I immediately began devising a plan to ruin the homecoming.

"Yes, Tom. Harry's coming home." He didn't sound overly happy. Parents were such odd creatures.

"That's great! I'll tell the others. If you want to take a nap, I'll wake you later when we have the punch and cookies, OK?"

I had work to do before Harry got home. I got up to leave but Dad grabbed my arm. "Wait," he rasped. "There's something I want you to tell everyone and then, yes, I will lie down for a bit."

"I know, Harry's coming home; roll out the red carpet. When, anyway? Probably not till after

Christmas with this snow and all, unless he's already in town... Harry's in town, Dad?" My excitement grew and I realized that I, too, might have missed Harry these last four years. He *was* a part of the family whether he wanted to be or not, and that made him a part of me. His leaving had just been a phase in his growing up, a phase which none of the other children fully understood, but one which we all tacitly accepted. I was still going to ruin his homecoming. Something smelly, perhaps... "Is he at the train station? If the street cars are still running, he can be here in a few hours. He can still make it for Christmas."

"Stop!" Dad didn't yell often, but when he did it commanded attention and obedience. I'd worked hard on mimicking technique that but in the end it was easier for me to use deception and cleverness to get my way. "Harry's *dead*, Tom. That's what you have to tell them. He's *dead*." He said it as if it were just sinking in for him, too. "They just phoned from school. He had an accident or something at the college and was killed. I... I don't remember any more except that someone is coming here tomorrow. Please, just tell them. I don't think I can face them right now." Dad lay back on the bed, dropping the shoebox to the floor, and rolling onto his side to face the wall.

I left him sobbing in the dark room and walked back down those thirteen interminable steps to the first floor. I didn't want to be the one to face the others. I didn't want to be anywhere *near* the others. A part of me, a part of my life, had just been ripped out of my

scrapbook, crumpled up and thrown in the trash. I was at once angry and despairing, sad and afraid. How dare you run off like that and die without saying goodbye? Oh God, Harry, I miss you. What will happen to Mom and Dad? You bastard! Do you really think Kate will understand? She's too young, too vulnerable. Please, God, make it all a lie, an ugly horrible lie, and make Harry come home alive and well.

By the thirteenth step I realized I had been praying. I can't remember the last time I prayed, or if I ever really *had* prayed and meant it, but I meant it then. And I felt ashamed. All those years of shunning God and religion and now, like some damned hypocrite, I was praying like the kid who had just been told that the world was ending tomorrow unless we all repented. I stopped at the bottom of the steps and cleared my throat, tried to clear my head, and walked quietly into the dining room and took my seat.

Mom took my hand, saying nothing, looking at me quietly. It was *that* look. I remembered it from that time when I was in eighth grade and had been caught throwing snowballs at cars on Connor Road. We had just nailed our second victim when our neighbor Mr. Welty walked up behind us and marched the four of us to his car and, one by one, dropped up off at our homes. I don't know what he told the other parents but the only thing he said to Mom was: "Hello, Helen. Tom here has something to tell you about what he has been doing." Mom took me into the kitchen and sat me

down and held my hand in just the way she was now, waiting for me to confess to my crime. Total denial was out of the question - Mr. Welty was too reliable a witness. Coercion by the others? Not a likely tack. Mom would see right through that one. Temporary insanity? I had seen that one in action on a Perry Mason episode but I was sure she had seen the same show. We all used to watch Perry Mason together, even Harry. No, there was no getting around it. The only safe plan was the truth. I lied most of the time anyway, so maybe she wouldn't believe the truth and I would then counter with a superbly concocted, believable lie. If she checked with Mr. Welty, I could always then claim that she didn't believe me when I told the truth, so I resorted to the next best thing.

“Dad got a call from Harry's school.” I couldn't get another word out. It was just like the time Nicky Amendola had grabbed me by the throat in the locker room after St. Catherine's grade school basketball team had gotten trounced again by St. Bernard's. He threatened to stuff me in my gym bag if I ever showed my face anywhere near him again. I wanted to protest that I wasn't the only one who had missed every shot he took, that just because he, Nicky, had made our only four points in our 24 to 4 loss did not make him the only kid worthy of playing. I wanted to reason with him and explain to the big thug that he could not be a one-man team, but he was crushing my windpipe and all I could do was grunt and nod assent.

Mom saw the tears welling in my eyes and the flushed face that I could feel as my hands trembled. I fought back my desire to up and quit just like I had quit the grade school basketball team in eighth grade rather than spend my life in a gym bag. I have absolutely no idea how she knew, but she knew. All Mom said was: "Oh my Harry, dear God, not my Harry." She covered her mouth with her hands and began to sob, then cry. My heart broke. For the first time in my life I clearly saw the pain my mother had endured and the heartache, and the deep love she felt for my brother, Harry. But, more importantly, when her eyes met mine, I saw that she loved me, too. She'd always loved me. I was just too blockheaded to see it.