

# The Legacy

by

Thomas G Kimpel

The day is already dead and I'm not even awake. Everything I'll need for the next God knows how many hours is neatly laid out for me on the kitchen table. I want to puke. Thanks, mom. The urge to run is almost overwhelming but, obedient child that I am, I don't. Instead, I sit down and take a deep breath, try to focus on the task at hand. But it's hard, because my breakfast still wants to come up. Yale—*it figures*—has its own, separate application. Why can't they just use the common one like everyone else? *Because they're better than everyone else*, I hear my father, the eminent Andrew David Jenkins III, MD, say. Not usually given to emotion, he lit up, actually smiled yesterday when mom pulled the thick manila envelope out of the mail and handed it to me. She saw it too. I know because of what she said next, that I needn't worry about it right then. She said it just to annoy him and it did; caught him off guard big-time. Still, he recovered quickly and did his best to stay agreeable, to keep up a united front. My parents believe this is necessary for effective child rearing—something they approach with the same, cold obsession my father uses when following an instruction manual or my mother a recipe. Dad may have been fooled, but not me. Her expression was smug as she patted me on the back of my shoulder with a hand that felt like metal and whispered in my ear. *You can just start it in the morning, dear.* What she didn't say aloud, what I understood to be part of the deal, was that I would also finish it tomorrow, which is actually today. A whole fifteen hour reprieve! What difference does it make anyway? A third generation legacy applicant with near perfect SAT's and a 4.0 GPA, I'm going to get in. In eight years I'll be Andrew David Jenkins IV, MD. Truth is, I have no idea what I really want to do. Still, it's not something I give much thought to because, whether I like it or not, it's my destiny. Why fight it?

The thermometer outside the kitchen window reads 82 degrees. In a couple of hours, it'll be pushing a hundred, so humid just stepping outside will leave me soaked in sweat. August in Indiana. I look at the array of resources in front of me. There's a stack of legal pads and a box of fifty sharpened pencils; a pencil sharpener just in case. She's written down about a hundred "useful links" and has my laptop fired up, even took it out of sleep mode so it would be ready to go and I wouldn't have to waste even five seconds waking it up. I have to stifle a laugh as I scan the comprehensive list of awards she's compiled for me. I don't think the no-hitter I pitched in Little League or the bake-off I won in fourth grade will be what pushes me over the top.

The number of pages seems to have multiplied since I took them out of the folder five minutes ago. It's going to take hours to get through them all, maybe days. I look at the instructions and see that it's not even due until January. I set my pen down and get up, quiet as a feather, but it makes no difference. "Andrew, is that you dear?" my mother's voice calls out from the living room. *How does she do that?* "Is something the matter?"

"I'm taking a break, mom."

"But you just started."

"I'm going outside before it gets too hot."

"Oh, well alright then," she says, unable to hide the disappointment in her voice. It's like some kind of freaking tragedy.

"Don't worry, mom, I'll get it done. Okay?"

"And when, precisely, might that be?"

"This afternoon," I say in a well-practiced, level tone. If I don't get out of here soon I'm going to explode. I step out into the garage, pulling the door behind me.

"Well have fun, dear," she says. "And be careful." The sound of her voice hits me like a heat sensing missile. I slam the door shut the rest of the way and at the same time, with my other hand, smack the garage door opener. *Be careful.* The words grate on my nerves like sandpaper, rubbing them raw and leaving me frazzled, just like all her other annoying adages. *Don't forget to say thank-you; be a good boy; hard work yields healthy rewards.* Blah, blah, blah. What about, *all work and no play makes Andy dull boy?* I hear the chain engage and watch the door fold up. Sunshine crawls up my body until it warms my face and I start to relax.

Janie, my eleven-year-old little sister, flies up the driveway on her new mountain bike, no helmet, and skids into the garage. Grinning at me, she jumps off and chucks it aside. I watch it slide down the side of my father's Mercedes and come to rest on the concrete floor. At first I don't know what to think. Then I realize it's a show. A show that is, on some level, for my benefit. She pops a bubble and skips up to me like some kind of Sesame Street character—and trust me, my sister is not, has never been, a Sesame Street kind of kid. "What's up, bro?"

"Dad will kill you when he finds your bike lying on the floor like that."

"No he won't," she says, looking up at me and wiggling her eyebrows up and down Groucho Marx style, "be-

cause you'll pick it up."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because, dodo, if you don't, it will be you dad kills, not me." She's right, of course. Unlike me, who gets away with nothing, Janie gets away with everything. A newfound fondness for my sister washes over me. I laugh and reach out to grab her but she slips away.

"Wait," I'm not sure what I want to say, I just don't want her to leave me alone. "I was just about to go on a bike ride, too," I lie. "How about we go together? What do you say?" She looks at me, eyes narrowed.

"Do I have to wear my helmet?" I think about this a moment too long and that's all it takes.

"See ya later," she says and disappears.

I put her bike away all nice and tidy and check my father's M. The scratch is easy enough to rub out with a little wax. When it's good enough so he won't notice I decide to go ahead with the bike ride even though it's something I rarely do. I look at my helmet. Stare at it for a long time. Finally, I give in and put it on. I'm off.

*Be careful, don't go too fast.* I shift into high gear, pedaling as hard as I can. I go and go and go until I have no idea where I am. Row after arrow-straight row of harvest ready field-corn stretches out endlessly on either side of me, flickers by like an old fashioned movie. The road smooth under my tires. I picture Janie riding beside me, golden hair trailing her grinning face, flapping like a flag. I unfasten my helmet, fling it into the ditch. Better, but there's more. Janie would know. I close my eyes. *Let go*, she tells me, *for once in your life let go of everything and just be.* I relax my grip on the handlebar. *All the way...good...now spread you wings and fly.* I hold my arms out to the side and I'm flying. I scream out for the sheer joy of it.

Suddenly part of the universe, I feel endless and whole and free instead of like some man-made computer chip, always processing someone else's idea of who I am. I'm real. Maybe, I think, this is how we're supposed to feel, what it means to be truly alive. I'm not sure, but I like it. I want hold on to it forever. Screw everything else. I open my eyes to an endless blue sky; feel the hot August sun on my back. Reaching the crest of a hill, I stop pedaling. My speed picks up. Faster and faster I go, lost in reverie. Then something snaps me out of it, a horn. I haven't noticed the bend in the road and find myself face to face with a red Ford pick-up.

You know that thing about life flashing by, I mean when you're about to die? Well, it's true, and, for some

reason I'm amused by this reality as the last few seconds of my life play out like a series of movies. The first several are boring, not worth the price of admission. But that's alright because the last one, this, is worth it.

Then I remember Janie.

I don't want to leave her all alone. I start to say, "I'm sorry," but the sound of tearing flesh, of teeth and bones shattering, life ending—my life—cuts me off. I've hit the pavement, or maybe it's the truck. I don't know, and anyway, it doesn't matter. It doesn't hurt, either.

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I hate this tossing and turning in bed, unable to get back to sleep. It seems like hours, though it probably hasn't been all that long. Still, it's driving me nuts. One of my lovely nightmares woke me up. Again. I'm not sure which one and I don't care. They're all the same anyway, just different flavors of me killing my big brother. Forget it, I tell myself then laugh because here, at least, is something I'm good at. Not that anyone gives a shit, but still. I'm a pro at taking nasty, unwanted thoughts or emotions and making them disappear. Poof! it's like they're not even real. And, believe you me, in this house, where my perfect brother once lived, where my parents never talk, forgetting is not optional; it's a survival skill. That old anger is rising up inside me. I need to squelch it before it turns into rage, before it takes me over. Forget the nightmare, I tell myself, forget about it.

Forget about everything.

It's too freaking early to get up, but what else can I do? In one furious motion, I throw back the covers, roll out of bed, and stand up. Eyes closed, head throbbing, I focus on the spinning sensation, the tinge of nausea in my gut. Concentrate. It passes. Was I worried about something? I can't remember. Whatever, I need to pee anyway.

Yawning and stretching, I drag my tired ass down the hall to the bathroom. I sit down on the pot, start to tinkle, and whamo! this memory comes back to me. It's strange because I haven't thought about it since...since before my brother died. How weird is that? Anyway, I was just a little girl, maybe four? five at the most. I hid in the shower stall and waited for my brother, so I could watch him pee. It was so cool that he could go standing up. Naturally, I had to try it too. You can guess how well that worked out. I laugh to myself at the memory, still wondering where it came from, then flush the toilet.

Back in my bedroom I pull on a bright red Indiana University sweatshirt and a pair of black sweat pants with "666" written across the ass. Mom asked me one time what it meant, and I told her it was religious, which isn't actually a lie. She looked genuinely pleased, told me that was nice and was I going to start attending church again? Right. I was surprised she even noticed, but still, she's such an idiot. Dad's even worse. He probably wouldn't notice if I wore my pink t-shirt with "For Sale" written across the tits.

The sun is just above the horizon, what the fuck am I doing up so early? Right, I remember, the nightmare, and that's all it takes. A riot breaks in the Alcatraz of my memory. Before the guards can get it under control, Andy is free, running around my brain, messing with me. Shit.

I need to get him out of my head. It's not good to think about my brother. It always goes where I don't want it to; loneliness, regret, anger, guilt. Maybe, maybe if I could talk about it with... but there is no one. I miss him more than he could imagine and I hate him for leaving me all alone. I often wonder if he realized how important he was to me, how much I looked up to him, how much I loved him. Probably not, I was such a brat. But I depended on him, I needed him. I still need him.

Here's another memory. After the police were done with the bike, Dad claimed it, brought it home. He spent the next two weeks in the garage, renovating, until it was mint condition, maybe better. Then he padlocked it to the wall he cleared off, next to a bunch of trophies and framed certificates. Andy's shrine. I tried to get Dad to talk about it, asked him about this and that picture, what the trophies were for, or what a certain certificate was about, but he wouldn't answer. Son-of-a bitch. He and mom never talk about it, not then and not now. Never say a fucking word. Like, how am I supposed to...

Breathe I tell myself, let it go. Forget it, forget, forget...

I let go of thought and concentrate on physicality. I'm hungry. I stumble downstairs to the kitchen and sweet aroma java soothes my senses. Dad's awake. Poor fella has to make his own coffee these days. Mom stopped

doing it for him a couple years ago. I think it backfired, though, because he's more proud of this newfound talent than he is of his doctoring skills. He's so weird. And there he is, sitting at the kitchen table drinking his perfectly brewed, PH tested cup of Starbucks' finest and reading the paper. Except, I notice, he's not really reading. He's just staring at it. I look at the clock. It's 6:05 AM. Something is wacko already and the day hasn't even started. "What day is it anyway?" I ask him, but there's no answer. No nothing. No surprise either. I bend down, tilting my head slightly until I can see the newsprint above today's headline. It's Saturday. Saturday? what the fuck am I doing up? I don't get up this early on school days. Neither does Dad, for that matter. "Whatcha doing up so early, Pops?" I say, knowing I will get an answer this time. The Indianapolis Star falls away from his weathered face and a pair of generic, pale-blue eyes glare at me.

"Do not call me by that ridiculous epithet. And watch your grammar, young lady."

"Gee, Pops, maybe you could just answer the question for a change?"

He shakes his head and sighs. Then, disgusted by the sight of his good-for-nothing teenage daughter, lifts the paper back up until it covers his face. "I have to go to work."

See, that wasn't so hard now, was it? But wait a second, "I thought you were on call last weekend."

"I was."

"So," I say, confused because he never takes call two weekends in a row, "why do you have to go in?" He grunts, tired of my annoying questions. I know he's not going to work, so why is he ditching us? The answer, suddenly obvious, freezes me. I'm hit by a tsunami-size wave of nausea. I feel dizzy, like I might pass out, and crash down so hard I almost miss the chair. A closer look at the paper and I see the date: August 17. The fifth anniversary of my brother's death.

Awash in a flood of emotion, I want to cry, to scream, to break something, anything. And yet, all I really need is someone to hold me. Someone to keep me safe, stop me from falling into the abyss. Someone who won't let go even if I kick and scratch and scream and bite and pound on their chest with my fists. Someone who's not afraid to squeeze until it hurts me. We never fucking talk about it. Never. I want, no, I need someone to talk to, someone who'll listen to me, so I can, finally, finally, get it all out.

I let out a breath, expelling my anger with it. In a moment of hopeful delirium, I look up. But all I see is Dad, hiding behind the headlines. I reach out, tear the precious paper from his hands and shred it. First two, then

four, then eight pieces and more, and still he says nothing. He does nothing.

I stop, put on a smile, and tell him I'm going to take my bike out for a little ride. But it's a lie. I have no intention of using my bike. Instead, I go straight to the wall. Dad has never told anyone the combination, not even mom, but it's easy enough to figure out. I dial up 05-20-09, the date Andy would have, should have, graduated Yale, push up then pull and bingo, it's open. I'm off.

On impulse I head down County Road twenty-nine, the way Andy went. I've never done this before, I've always thought it would spook me, but it doesn't. I stop at the bend in the road, where it happened. Wow! Andy's presence is so totally here, all around me. It's awesome. A gentle breeze blowing through the corn sounds like forgiveness.

I'm okay.