**The Jell-O Brigade**



Jack Powers

**Chapter 1**

It started as a joke, a stoned joke we all laughed at and would have forgotten – except for Junior who couldn't let go of a challenge, any challenge. So he rolled it around in his head until it killed him.

We huddled beneath the ten-foot Association dinghy propped on wooden horses for winter storage. In a swirl of pot smoke, we brainstormed senior pranks as low-tide waves slapped against the seawall that held the dock’s parking lot from tumbling into the bay. Gray wooden docks hauled onto the gravelly lot for winter storage hung a few feet over the seawall’s edge. Around us, association members’ boats filled the parking lot like kids’ toys piled into a closet.

The near-full October moon dyed the night a silvery white. Two Hundred and fifty miles south in Washington, the Watergate burglars had been indicted, but the Nixon is not yet a crook. But under the dinghy, we were focused on pranks. Everything was bathed in the electric blue tint of the tarp draped over the boat and skirting the hard ground. The blue-gray cloud of pot smoke was broken only by our shadowy forms and the orange red tip of the joint.

Junior lit and passed while gently prodding Jerry, Frizz, Lisa and me to come up with the greatest prank in Woodcove High School history. Smoke swirled around our heads trapped for passive hits by the blue tarp. Even though she was just passing the joint, Lisa was bound to get a buzz. This was her first appearance – and potentially first buzz – since the summer – Junior insisted she be there to plan our final big adventure.

“The class of 1973 must live,” Junior said, imitating the crackling voice of an old radio broadcast, “in infamy.”

“I thought the bad guys lived in infamy,” I said. Junior relied on me to be the skeptic, especially with Frizz ready to enshrine every word that came out of his mouth.

“Shhh!” Junior put a finger to his mouth. “We’re on a roll.” I knew he was winking at me in the darkness although I couldn’t see it in the shadow of his hair.

Our roll consisted of a car in the cafeteria and a brick wall in front of the office doors. “Been done,” I said, taking a hit. I held the smoke in and grunted through tightened lungs, “Let’s think of something original.”

“And something that won’t get us arrested,” Lisa added. I put my arm around her shoulder as a show of solidarity, but also because I seized any excuse to make body contact with her.

Our Friday nights had turned into stone-athons and even though she and Junior were still going out, Lisa decided in September she couldn’t afford a B. Or maybe an A. Anything less than an A+ was a personal insult to her – a failure of will. The rest of us were going to any college foolish enough to let us in, but Junior and Lisa’d go to some howdy dow school all ivy and brick.

“Lisa. Davy,” Junior said with exaggerated patience. “We’re *brain*storming. You *must* respect the process.” He slipped into an impression of our English teacher, Mr. Corwin. “*Accept* all answers.” His hands reached out and bounced to the beat of the words. “Please kids, *do not* judge.” He started to laugh, blowing an otherwise perfect impression.

“We could call the radio station,” Frizz whispered through a lung full of smoke, “and cancel school.” He scratched his fingernails into his fuzzy brown ringlets and peeked over at Junior.

“You need a password,” I said reaching for the joint in Frizz’s hand.

“We could, like, let a pig or a cow or something loose in the halls,” Jerry said and lit a joint from his own stash.

“Class of ‘69,” I said.

“You’re not accepting, Davy!” Junior shouted in mock anger. He took the joint from me and turned it around. Before putting it backwards in his mouth, he said, “You’re judging!” and blew a shotgun blast of smoke out the end of the joint and directly into my face. His long brown hair, parted in the middle, swung back and forth as he leaned into me. I sucked in the stream of smoke. It kept coming, directly into my nose. My lungs were burning, searing, but still he blew. My mouth, my throat, my eyes filled with smoke until I raised my hands in surrender and fell back coughing, laughing, hacking, gasping for breath.

“Ow! Shit!” Junior yelled, banging his head on the boat and spitting the hot roach out from between his lips. “Shit. Shit. Shit,” he shouted as he wiped the sparks from his lips. “Shit, that burned me.”

I started to laugh and my coughing grew worse.

“I want you to know that hurt me more than it hurt you. Ow!” Junior licked the raw spot on his lip and lit another joint. “Now will you please respect the process?”

Lisa said nothing, but I could sense her attention flagging with our adolescent antics. A year ago, she would have been right in the middle of it. Had she really moved on that completely? She and Junior always being together seemed like the only guarantee in our world that was about to explode with graduation and college.

After that I kept my mouth shut at the long list of lame suggestions: covering the cars in the faculty parking lot with shaving cream, toilet papering the trees in the courtyard, throwing tires on the flagpole and, of course, streaking lunch.

“We could fill the pool with Jell-O,” I said, putting the roach of the joint between two match heads and snorting it.

“What?” Frizz asked, thinking I was making fun of his ideas again.

When I finished inhaling, I said it again through held-in breath, “We could fill the pool with Jell-O.”

That was the first of many moments that I’ve gone over and over. If I’d done this instead of that. If I’d said nothing instead of something. Something instead of nothing. That was back when I thought what I said and did had the power to change things.

Frizz shook his head scornfully. “You can’t fill a pool with Jell-O,” he said. “You need little bowls and a refrigerator-”

“I thought we were brainstorming,” I said and tried to wink at Junior. It was good he couldn’t see my weak attempt in the darkness. As usual my wink looked more like the tic of a comic madman.

Junior was staring at his index finger as he pointed it at me and chanted, “We could fill the pool with Jell-O! We could fill the pool with Jell-O!” He clenched his hands into fists and shook them to the beat. “We could fill the pool with Jell-O!” he shouted and Jerry and Frizz joined in. “We could fill the pool with Jell-O!”

He seemed to like the idea.

“Of course we’d need a lot of little bowls and refrigerators,” I said and ducked as Frizz tried to shove my head against the side of the boat. Junior dove over Frizz’s arm and drove me to the ground, grabbing me by the shoulders and shaking.

“Careful, he’s a genius!” Junior shouted. “You must be gentle with the genius, Frizz!” He was using some weird Vincent Price accent as he tapped my head against the ground. You had to watch a lot of old movies to get half of Junior’s jokes. “Gentle with the genius,” he said again and again as he shook my head.

“You’re damaging the genius’s brain!” I tried to shout but I was drowned out by stoned laughter, some of it my own. Even Lisa was laughing. Maybe the swirl of pot smoke was breaking her down.

“SHHHH!” Frizz pointed to an imaginary sound. “Did you hear something?” We listened to the darkness around us. Old Lady Miller’s hemlocks shielded us from her yard and the next closest house was a quarter mile down the seawall that curved around our little harbor. We heard nothing but the sound of low-tide waves licking the wall.

For a moment all was frozen: Junior’s raised profile dark against the tarp, his bangs falling on each side of his eyes, a hint of his nose and mouth visible in the blue/gray shadow; beside him Frizz crouching with a lit joint in his hand, his brown hair corkscrewing against the blue tarp background, his face dark except for a minute square of reflection in his left eye; Lisa to my right with her ear cocked to the world outside; and behind them all in deep shadow, Jerry sitting Indian-style with his head down, his uncombed red hair covering his face, a joint in his hand. No, the moment wasn’t frozen; it was cooled to set in an upside down, electric blue Jell-O mold with my best friends suspended like sliced bananas – a message from the future I couldn’t decipher. What I thought I saw was a weird pot-induced hallucination that made me wonder if Junior had given me a concussion or the pot was laced with PCP. I blinked my eyes and joked my way out of it.

“I thought I heard some asshole,” I whispered, “shouting, ‘He’s a genius.’”

"Seriously, I heard something," Frizz said for the thousandth time since he'd moved to town before ninth grade. “Junior, are you sure no one can hear us?”

“Maybe Old Lady Miller?” I said.

Frizz scoffed, apparently thinking I was serious. “She couldn't even hear us if we sat in her living room and used a megaphone.”

"No one's said anything yet.” Junior adjusted his legs to a lotus position. "Maybe they don't call the cops because they're all afraid it's their kid out here.” He chuckled to himself and we sat awkward and silent. He could be talking about any of our parents. We all lived on Markum Point: Junior and his mother across the cove; her boyfriend, Sam, in the big house on the tip of the point; and the rest of us in middle-sized houses a block or two from the water.

I couldn't see Junior’s expression, but there was a raw edge to his voice. His poker face was hard enough to read in the light.

"Is your mother going to marry Suppository Sam?” I asked, regretting it immediately when Junior stiffened.

"Your mother's getting married?” Frizz asked. I felt worse. I thought it was public knowledge. I felt Lisa tense up beside me. Junior took an extra beat to reply.

"I don't know. She's a big girl. She can make her own decisions...” He shifted into his best stern Ward-Cleaver-in-the-den. "But, I told her, 'Don't expect me to bail you out if it doesn't work. Don't come running to me.'“ He shook his finger and laughed. We sat quietly, again wondering whether to fake a laugh or ask him what the hell he was talking about. Finally, he looked up. "Private joke, I guess.”

Junior lit another joint and said softly, “The Woodcove Warrior’s brand new pool full of Jell-O. There’s a nice irony in that.”

Maybe double irony since we’d spent the last three years helping the swim team raise money to build the pool. Except for our Friday night meetings under the dinghy, we were serious swimmers: Junior the sprint star, Frizz the distance workhorse, Jerry the top diver and me the, well -- the second banana and star’s best friend. Lisa was the star of the girls’ team.

“It would take a lot of Jell-O.” Junior passed the joint to Jerry. “I mean, twenty-five meters long is what? Thirty yards? Twenty yards wide? Maybe an average of six feet deep.” He paused for a few seconds to run the numbers through his calculator of a brain. “Thirty-two thousand four hundred cubic feet? Does that sound right, Jerry?”

"Sure.” Jerry shrugged, not bothering to search for his pad and pen in the darkness. “Hey! Can we make it flavored?" he asked. "Like Wild Woodcove Raspberry or something?” When he started shrieking at his own joke in his high-pitched chuckle, we realized that he had been sitting there smoking two joints all by himself. I pinned him down, banging my head on one of the seats of the dinghy. Frizz ripped what was left of the joint from one hand. I grabbed the other.

"Ow!" Frizz yelled as the roach burned his fingers. "Dammit! The bogart smoked the whole thing.” He wiped the sparks from his lap while Jerry squealed.

"How much Jell-O does each box make?” Junior asked. He'd shifted into his supervisor's voice. He sounded like his father when he used to lead the Markum Point spring boat-launch. "A quart? A pint? Anyone know?” He took a deep hit off the joint I handed him.

"That's a lot of boxes of raspberry Jell-O," Jerry said and Frizz and I laughed. Junior was too focused on the problem.

He grabbed my shoulder, tilted his head and leaned in close to look me in the eyes. "How many gallons in a cubic yard?"

"Damn!" I said slapping my pockets. "Where’s my conversion chart?"

Junior laughed politely for a moment, but then he was back at it. "But roughly, what do you think? Twenty? That would be twenty-four thousand gallons."

"Let me see. Eight boxes for a gallon, roughly 39¢ a box, that's uh......” I pushed the buttons on an imaginary calculator.

"About $70,000.” Junior shook his head and scrunched up his lips. "There's got to be another way to make Jell-O."

"As long as it's raspberry," I said. A comic book picture of the pool filled with rubbery red Jell-O appeared in my head.

"Raspberry's fine.” He nodded and called for a vote. "Raspberry all right with everyone?"

When we started voting, I should have known we were in trouble. When we fantasized about breaking into the White House and leaving a note for Tricky Dick, we just laughed and forgot about it. But when Junior called for a vote, he was getting serious, trying to make us think we were involved in the planning. The votes were always about something trivial, like color. They were “pseudodemocratic facades in the despocracy that was our group friendship.” At least that’s what Jerry said one time. It sounded good. The truth was all our adventures were designed and supervised by Junior. We could vote on the day or our fake names, but even then he usually supplied the choices.

After we agreed on raspberry, talk turned to the other pranks we’d pulled off in the past. Frizz loved to go over and over them, exaggerating his own role and asking minutely detailed questions about the ones he’d missed before he’d moved to town. Eventually he asked me to tell the story of our first adventure in fifth grade, sneaking into the gym of Old Woodcove Elementary to play basketball on a chilly November Saturday.

Junior and Jerry and even Lisa jumped in with the details I’d forgotten. Junior claiming he’d planned it for months, scoping the route up a tree, over the cafeteria and through the boy’s locker room window. Jerry swearing he hit a hook shot from half-court. Frizz asking about Robby Carter who tossed around a few milk cartons and was banished from further adventures.

In high school the adventures escalated to more serious breaking and entering, but they always seemed innocent thanks to Junior’s insistence on taking nothing and leaving every place cleaner than we found it. When we broke into the old movie theater downtown for a private showing, we wore old suits he found at a thrift shop and called each other Spencer Tracy and Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn. (At least we called Lisa “Katharine Hepburn,” – and sometimes Frizz.) When Frizz turned the popcorn machine on, Junior insisted we clean it all up and leave five dollars for the kernels (“We’re adventurers, not thieves”), but he forgave Frizz since he was so pathetically sorry about it. When we pool-hopped from one end of town to the other (Junior said he read it in a book), he bought matching swim suits and gave us Olympic swimmer names. When we snuck into the library and borrowed books we always filled the cards out, filed them where they belonged and returned the books within two weeks.

They were all harmless if odd pranks planned to a T, just Junior being Junior. But a pool full of Jell-O seemed too ridiculous for even Junior to be serious about. It was crazy, sure – but fun crazy, not dead crazy. Even at the end, when I almost blew up the whole prank to get help for Junior, I never really thought that he would die.

**Chapter 2**

In the morning I sat on my bed and tried to sketch the picture I had made in my head of the pool full of Jell-O, but of course I couldn’t get it right. I thought it might make a good cartoon for the school paper, but it came out too dark, too vague. Put something in front of me and I can draw it, but as soon as I have to rely on memory or imagination, my lines all turn into shaky blurs. It’s like my eye and hand know how to draw but my brain doesn’t have a clue. Or maybe I just don’t have any talent for creating a world, only for copying it.

I even tried to use a ruler and two point perspective to construct an architectural-plan-looking pool, tinting the surface with a red pencil. But when I tried to add Junior and the gang swimming in the Jell-O like suspended fruit, the drawing fell apart.

I ended up closing my eyes and trying to recall the picture of Junior and Jerry and Frizz frozen in space under the dinghy. Keeping my eyes closed to keep the picture in my head, I sketched quickly with a black conte crayon on rough blue paper trying to capture the gestural slump of Frizz’s shoulder, the confident tilt of Junior’s head, the slope of Jerry’s crossed legs. When I opened my eyes, I could see a sketchy outline of that moment. I added dark shadows, obscuring the faces and rooting the bodies into the ground.

It wasn’t perfect but I felt I’d captured something of the experience. I gave the joint a pale orange head and took a light blue conte to pull the scene into focus with a line of the reflected light along the edge of Junior’s jaw and the outline of Jerry’s right leg and a tiny square in Frizz’s eye, but I ruined it. I lacked the skill to pull it off or maybe the scene resisted pulling together.

Monday before second period, Lisa was waiting for me in front of Mrs. Warren’s Physics classroom.

She was biting her lower lip so I knew something was up.

“I hate to keep coming off as the Mom,” she said and I was startled. That lip bite was very un-mom-like to me, and then for a moment, just the pink tip of her tongue slipped between her teeth. What would it be like to kiss those lips?

“The mom?”

“*Don’t do this. Don’t do that*. I know what it sounds like,” she said. “I can hear it as I say it and I think…” She trailed off. “Call it women’s intuition or whatever, this whole thing feels like a disaster waiting to happen.”

“The prank?” I whispered, feeling like Frizz for looking around before I said it. We moved into an alcove by the science office even though the halls had cleared as the bell rang. Physics would have to wait.

“Yes, the prank.” Lisa wiggled her head in irritation. “We haven’t done anything big in years,” she said. “And nothing ever this big. And Junior’s just off. And we’ve got more to lose with college admissions and – We’ve all worked too hard to screw up. It’s just dumb!”

When Lisa was excited her eyes would open wider at key moments and her nostrils would flare a little as if punctuating the music of her words. I was hearing her on a delay as I watched her. A beat late, I realized she’d stopped.

“I know, I know, I know.” I stalled for time. “You’ve been working hard. I know that. Don’t want mess it up. But Junior is getting in wherever he wants. And Frizz and Jerry and I will just go to any school dumb enough to –”

“Did you even hear what I just said?”

“Yes,” I said. “Junior’s off. Prank’s too big. College, college, college.” The last part came out harsher than I meant it. “I mean, I’m sorry. He’s not quite himself, but his dad died, his mom’s whatever with Sam, we’re all– ”

“You think this is a good idea?” She said it like a challenge, like my answer would determine whose side I was on – would be on – from here on in.

“Well, yes and no,” I said and she rolled her eyes. “Just listen: it would be an awesome prank, right? I mean they’d talk about it forever. But, but, but,” I said raising my hands before she could interrupt. “It’s kind of crazy. I mean, can it even be done? And if it can’t, we had fun thinking about it and no harm done.” I stopped while I was ahead, thinking I’d come up with a pretty good answer.

“You’re willing to take that risk?” She stared at me and shifted onto her left hip.

I thought she was going to put her right hand on the other hip to create that sexy window of a curve when –

“David!” she yelled, startling me out of my dream state. Was I becoming a complete pervert? I couldn’t even pay attention to something important.

“Sorry… Sorry I… uh. I.” I put up both hands like I was surrendering. “It’s not like we’re going to say, ‘Junior, this is a bad idea,’ and he’s going to say, ‘Oh yeah, good point,’ so… let’s be there, point out the flaws, steer it into the ground if we can.” I raised my eyebrows and dropped my hands into “maybe” shrug.

She seemed to be relaxing.

“How about I’ll be the dad?” I said. “You don’t have to be the mom. And if by some miracle Junior finds a way, we’ll be there to make sure everything works.”

I took her hand and massaged it a little trying not to get distracted by the softness of her fingers. “We can’t just leave him to Frizz and Jerry,” I added. “Right?”

“All right,” she said and turned the handhold into a handshake. “So we’re in this together?”

“Mom and dad,” I said. “The parental units.”

“How about Aunt Lisa and Uncle David?” she said and laughed.

“Yes! The cool aunt and uncle!” We said the last part almost in unison and held hands a little longer than a handshake.

Finally she pulled away.

“Women’s intuition?” I said.

“Well, yeah.” She cocked her head to see if I was being sarcastic.

“Isn’t that like an insult or something?” I said, smiling. “Like a term old dead white guys used meaning, ‘Women can’t think, they just feel’?”

“Women can think *and* feel,” she said, dead serious. “Sometimes I don’t think you do either one.”

“Sometimes.” I nodded my head. “How about most of the time?”

“Pardon my Eddy Haskelling, Mrs. O’Malley,” Junior said that night at dinner with my family, “but this Jell-O is delicious.” He held a shivering spoonful in the air as he spoke. My mother’s ivory skin blushed to a deep red and her pale blue eyes seemed to twinkle as she thanked him like a school girl on a date with the captain of the football team. Junior’s effect on older women was always a marvel to me. He had the same ability his father had to flatter you, while at the same time admitting it was ridiculous and making fun of himself for doing it. “Is it raspberry?” he asked and gave me a quick wink.

“Close.” Mother smiled, “Strawberry.”

“We only have Jell-O for dessert at out house,” Junior said. “And I’ve never had it with these bananas before.”

As my mother enthusiastically shared her banana in Jell-O technique, I stared at the pale yellow slices silently trapped by the shiny gelatin on my plate. The small black seeds in the middle looked like closed eyes or tiny dead ants. I thought maybe some pot remnants were breaking loose in my brain and took a quick bite to break the spell before the ants moved. I followed with a forkful of mashed potatoes and a bite of chicken before they too came alive before me.

Junior’s visits to our dinner table had become fairly regular since his mom was usually out somewhere with Sam. The dinners were strained affairs compared to the way we used to laugh when Lisa or Jerry and I would eat at Junior’s when his father was alive. But having Junior here sure beat eating with just my family.

“Do you need anything, Junior?” Granny asked, pretending she could still be helpful. She scanned his plate of Jell-O, lumpy mashed potatoes and overcooked chicken like she’d proudly made it herself. “Salt?” She reached over and patted Junior’s tan fingers with her pale, veined hand. “Uncross your knife and fork,” she said, “before it causes an argument.”

“Thanks,” Junior said. “I’m fine.” Accepting a Granny offer of help would lead to a long painful wait while she hobbled around the kitchen without her walker. “I don’t want you to pull a muscle, Granny,” Junior said. “We’re doing the three-legged race again at the Association picnic, right?”

Granny turned red with laughter. “Your father used to say that,” she said and sighed. “God willin’, I’ll be there, Junior.” She knocked three times on the wooden table before returning to her butter-soaked and salt laden mashed potatoes.

“How’s school, Junior?” my father asked, taking a stab at being a replacement dad. He’d skipped his gin and tonic since Junior was over and even missed the last half of the evening news. His ruddy Irish skin still made him look like he’d had five Harps with a shot of whiskey. He smoothed his gray waves off his forehead. His “How’s school?” question would be followed by “How’s the swim team going to do this year?”, “How are the college applications going?” and then some fatherly advice.

“School’s going well,” Junior answered dabbing the milk at the corner of his mouth with a napkin. “I’m sure Davy’s told you that we’re in a few of the same classes again this year. And swimming starts next month.” His answers were a little better than my usual “Fine.” or “Nothing.”

“We just finished *The Great Gatsby* in English. Fortunately your brilliant son Davy was there to explain all the hard parts to me.” He smiled with such absolute delight at his transparent bullshit that everyone had to laugh.

“And the swim team? How does it look this year?” my father asked. Before I could say, “Good,” Junior went off on a detailed analysis of the weaknesses at middle distances and the lack of depth in diving. I realized as he spoke that he sounded just like his father. It dawned on me that my father was trying to be his father, that Sam was trying to be his father, and that Junior was trying to be his father, too.

No one, of course, could be Mr. Walker.

Before Junior’s dad crashed his BMW into a tree, he and Mrs. Walker weren’t just the *center* of social life in Marcus Point, they *were* the social life. She was the “Little General” turning each spring boat launch weekend, fall dock cleanup, or mid-summer break-out-of-the-blahs Association picnic into a self-catered, activity-packed affair. They even organized a Polar Bear Plunge every New Year’s Day.

Junior Walker Sr. made them fun, invented songs for each occasion, dressed in some appropriately outlandish costume, teased the other parents into acting foolish, and left everyone laughing. Even before he sold his printing company for a huge profit in the middle of our tenth grade, he had the option to be wherever he wanted to be. Weekdays and summers he was often the only father on Markum Point. And Lisa, Jerry, Frizz and I were happy to be part of their family for barbecues on their back lawn or sailing picnics out to the islands or field trips into town.

When Mr. Walker hit that tree and died at the end of our sophomore year, the whole gang went into mourning, maybe all of Markum Point. He was the last person you would think could die. And every event, every day that summer and at some point everyday after, was haunted by his long shadow.

“That’s weird that we had Jell-O for dinner,” I said, falling back into the couch in the basement.

Junior and I’d escaped after dessert. It wasn’t much of a playroom, just Granny’s old couch, two stuffed chairs from a tag sale, a cheap record player and a black and white TV. The wood paneling glued to the cement walls was buckling and the fish netting covering the pipes was in tatters.

“Yeah!” Junior smiled and looked up from his air guitar. “It’s a sign.” He gave a short laugh and raised his eyebrows.

I found some old Gary Cooper cowboy movie on TV and Junior put on a Hendrix album and began to play air guitar in an undulating Hendrix imitation. Only Junior would think a Gary Cooper movie needed a Hendrix soundtrack.

A sign of what? I wondered but said, “Where’s Lisa, tonight?”

Junior shrugged and looked down at his fingers on the air frets. “Some big paper.” He dropped to his knees and pretended to play the air guitar with his teeth. “Big project. Big paper. Always something.”

“The Knicks are on a roll lately,” I said, trying to make a little sports talk to get back to the way things used to be.

“Yeah.” Junior lowered his air ax and gave his head a brief shake. He lip synced the words to the song, squinting his eyes and puckering his face in response to each guitar note coming from the stereo. It was hard to believe that he was the same kid who spent hours in his driveway making perfect Clyde-like behind-the-back passes while I worked on my Dick Barnett knee-kick jumper.

On the TV, Gary Cooper clenched his jaw in a close up and nodded his head. I couldn’t hear the dialogue but I knew he was going to have to shoot somebody and he didn’t want to do it.

“How’s your mom doing?” I asked.

“No problem,” he said pretending to hold out the final note of the song. “She’s fine, I guess,” he said before hitting the first note of the next song.

“Sorry about bringing up her engagement.”

He shrugged.

I sat back and watched the TV and tapped out the Buddy Miles drumbeats on my leg. Cooper drew his revolver from his holster with lightning quickness and fired, but it gave him no pleasure.

“Does Gary Cooper die in this one?” I asked.

Junior nodded his head while the fingers of his left hand took turns pressing against an invisible guitar neck and his right hand flicked an imaginary pick. I gave up. Maybe Lisa was right. Maybe there was something wrong with Junior. It seemed like years from the times we used to stay up all night and argue about whether Walt Frazier was better than Jerry West (I said Frazier, Junior said West) or whether Herman Hesse took LSD (Junior said it wasn’t invented yet, I said he must have taken something) or whether we could win the war in Vietnam (I said no and Junior said we shouldn’t but we could). I wasn't sure what to do with this sudden silence, but I figured maybe Junior just needed me to leave him alone.

At about eleven o’clock Junior yawned, called it a night and, after a round of hearty goodbyes to my parents, headed out the door for the short, cold walk to his empty house.

**Chapter 3**

I caught a ride after school from Junior that Friday afternoon. My mom needed to borrow my old red Bug. We pulled up the slight hill of Junior’s driveway in his yellow almost-new Bug convertible and parked next to Suppository Sam’s powder-blue Caddy. As we climbed out of the car, the storm door of Junior’s house opened revealing Junior’s mother and behind her, Sam-the-man himself. He gave us a big wave and loud hello.

“Hey big guy!” he shouted to Junior. “Daveeee!” he yelled and pointed both index fingers in the air. Mrs. Walker smiled at him like he was a mildly embarrassing older brother and greeted us with a little wave.

“We’re going shopping,” she said. Her brown hair was cut short and her blue eyes seemed to be almost twinkling again. “There’s chips and soda in the kitchen. We’ll be back with supper.” She gave Junior a quick peck on the cheek as she went by and then slipped into the Caddy as Sam held the big door for her. He closed it with a flourish and walked around the front of the car with a swagger. You could tell he was proud of the car. Its fins always shined with wax and the body was in perfect condition. The car was at least fifteen years old, but I knew asking him about it would get a long story. Junior seemed intent on not admiring any of Sam’s toys.

“Take your time,” Junior said and smiled thinly. “We’ll be fine.” I don’t know if he meant stay out and enjoy yourself or don’t bring Sam back any sooner than you have to.

Sam started the car with a roar, put it in gear and backed out of the driveway. The Caddy rocked to a stop in the street like a swaying cabin cruiser in rough surf. Junior’s mother gave us another little smile and wave. Sam grinned broadly and, pretending his hand was a pistol, took a parting shot at us. Junior aimed carefully and shot back. Sam shifted into drive, thundered down the street blowing leaves aside as he passed, braked and, with a lurch, turned at the corner onto Sound Beach and disappeared from view.

“He makes a quiet exit, doesn’t he?” Junior asked.

“Your mother seems better.”

“I guess,” Junior said, continuing to stare at the ghost of the car at the corner as if the image still burned in his retina. I stared too, hoping to see whatever it was he studied so intently. I looked at the yellow leaves on the road turning brown at the edges and the weathered old stones of the wall across Sound Beach Avenue that bordered the Markum Point Beach and the white caps in the gray water across the Sound. The on-and-off roar of Sam’s Caddy continued for what seemed like minutes before fading into the sound of the wind and the sea. Junior stared off wordlessly. I used to think I always knew what he was thinking, but now I didn’t have a clue.

“How many gallons do you think he gets to the mile?” I asked in an attempt at a wise guy tension release.

More silence. The stench of the tide told me it was just about all the way out. The seagulls were squawking and working hard for their lunch.

“Can you think of one adult,” Junior said at last, still looking at the last spot Sam and his mother had occupied, “that doesn’t have some kind of fatal flaw?”

I turned the question over in my head searching for the meaning of it. “Junior,” I said turning my palms up in surrender. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Seriously.” He turned and cocked his head. “Every adult we know has some serious defect. It makes you wonder if it’s some side effect of adulthood, some operation they perform in college when everyone’s passed out at the keg.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“Okay, Sam’s too easy,” Junior said deciding to explain with examples. “He’s just an idiot. My mother seemed fine until she met Sam but now the mere fact that she’s willing to be seen with him in public exposes her flaw. Coach has heard his own pep talks for so long that he now believes that it’s all about ‘Pride, Desire and Sacrifice!’ Lisa’s Dad is a drunk. Her mom is, pardon the expression, a dingbat. Maybe that’s the only way to live with a drunk. Frizz’s parents are stuck in some situation comedy from 1955. Jerry’s parents with their opera and antiques are out of the 1800’s. Your parents aren’t as bad as you think but...” he paused. “Okay, maybe they’re not all fatally flawed but I still don’t want to grow up to be any of them. ”

“Whoa. Easy.” I put my hands up to stop the ranting. “Nobody’s perfect. Is that a news flash?”

“You are,” he said and, when he saw me blush, quickly added, “well, not perfect but you have no fatal flaws. And Lisa is. And me and Jerry. Well maybe not Jerry. And my parents were...” His voice faded and he looked back down the street.

“But now your mother’s flawed because she goes out with Sam?”

“Well, think about it.” He furrowed his eyebrows in scorn. “I know she’s lonely but does she have to settle for the first bozo to beep his horn at her?” He smiled but there was no mirth in it and the smile faded to a frown. He turned again to study the road and wall and water beyond.

I looked at the back of his head. A gust of wind swayed the brown hair on the nape of his neck. His tan had yellowed and his hair had darkened with the coming of fall.

“Low tide,” he said without turning.

“And your father?” It slipped out before I could close my mouth.

“He’s dead,” Junior whispered and was silent for a moment.

As I thought about shooting myself for bringing it up, Junior turned his head and a smile started in his eyes and spread down his cheeks into his lips. “If that’s not a fatal flaw, I don’t know what is.”

A laugh burst out of my nose and mouth. A spitting, nose-blowing explosion from the pit of my stomach. Junior followed with his own snorting laughter. We leaned into each other, holding each other’s shoulders for support until we gave up and slid slowly to the ground.

“That is sick!” I tried to say, but the words choked in my amazed laughter. Instead we both just continued snorting and gasping for breath. The sounds mingled and rose to the cold blue sky.

“That is the sickest, most tasteless joke I have ever heard,” I said when I finally caught my breath. We sat up breathing hard in unison and letting out the last few giggles. “I can’t believe you said that.”

Junior rubbed his neck and smiled a broad, happy, smile, making me realize how rare a lack of irony had become with him. “Neither can I.” That smile too soon faded as our breath returned to normal. “It just makes you wonder if growing up is all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Well, we don’t have to be like that.”

Junior shook his head. “That’s what I used to think.”

I wish now that I’d followed up with a few questions but what Junior’d said made a weird kind of sense to me at the time. Down deep I must have known something was wrong. Junior’d always had a suspicion of any adults besides his parents, but I’d never seen Junior so mad at his mother or seen him hate anyone like he hated Sam. I could understand it, in a way. All the fatal flaw stuff seemed a little dramatic, but I had more than a few doubts of my own about becoming an adult. Junior’s words hung in the air for a short moment before rising up and disappearing with a gust of swirling wind.

Jerry knocked on Junior’s kitchen door right at 8:00. We collected the joints we‘d rolled, put on our winter coats, crossed the yard and hopped up onto the seawall for the walk to the docks. Jerry was already giggling and, from the glassy look in his eye, he’d already smoked a joint on the way over. I was starting to worry about him. Junior and I were still sticking to the Friday-parties-only rule; we got high only on Fridays and only together. We’d made a pact years ago that we’d prove that everyone who smoked a joint didn’t have to end up like Lisa’s brother or Jerry’s.

The weather had warmed up in the last week to just cold rather than freezing, although, with Lisa there, I wouldn’t have minded a little close huddling. We walked behind the Bartons’ house next door to Junior’s and then followed the seawall as it curled through a marshy inlet full of snakes and rats that we used to catch when we were little. We heard one rat scurry along ahead of us and slip down the side to the marsh.

A dog howled somewhere down at the end of the Point. It sounded like the Christie’s old Bassett Hound.

“Do you think dogs talk to each other?” Jerry asked.

“Sure,” Junior agreed immediately while I considered the question.

“They say stuff like, ‘Get out of my yard,’” I said, “or ‘Your butt stinks.’”

“Or nice tail, baby. You want to come over to my dog house?” Junior said and laughed.

We always found ourselves in these kinds of conversations with Jerry, long after we should have grown out of it. He was always pointing to clouds that looked like toothbrushes, and dogs that looked like Edward G. Robinson, and boots that looked like they had eyes and nose and mouth. Even before drugs, perhaps from an accident during childbirth, Jerry had his own way of seeing things. And we were happy to go along with him until it was time for one of us to pull him back to reality again.

“No, I mean like really talk,” Jerry insisted. “And think and… and wonder about things?” I looked at him in the moonlight. With his shaggy hair, mouth hanging open and his big brown eyes, he looked like a big thinking, talking Irish setter himself.

“Why not?” Junior said. “Why should we be the only animals who think?”

We quickly decided that if dogs could think, why not the rest of the animal kingdom? We asked the rats the time of day, the answers to simple math problems and if there was life on other planets. (Junior said if they were really smart they might know things that people didn’t.) In an effort to speak their native language, we began to bark hello to the dogs and caw greetings to the gulls.

Jerry, I think, believed. He wasn't just joking around like Junior and me. I think that’s why he became a vegetarian. Not me; I figured if chickens could think, why not tomatoes? So I ate everything.

As we settled in under the dinghy, we continued to chitchat about the swim team and SAT’s and college. We used to think we'd all end up going to the same college, but it was clear that our little family was going to break up. Junior would go to Harvard or Yale or someplace. Lisa would go to Stanford like her father, and Jerry some engineering school like his father, and Frizz would go to some school near an Ivy so he could pretend he went there. And I’d probably go to a state school, with a good art program – at least I hoped so.

We talked about everything but the Jell-O. Junior waited until everyone was there. Jerry pulled out some hash he got from his brother and we smoked a little while we waited. I figured a two-hit limit would keep my wits about me. I wanted to be sharp with Lisa there.

"I spent a couple hours in the library reading about gelatin," Junior said after Frizz and Lisa arrived and settled in. She gave my leg a squeeze after sitting down to my left between Junior and me. Junior took a joint out of his cigarette pack and lit it with exaggerated ceremony. Lisa passed the joint without comment, so I passed it, too, as a sign of solidarity.

“Sounds pretty serious to me,” Lisa said, jabbing Junior verbally and sticking a sharp nail into my thigh.

Junior’s research could be like a history lesson. He told us about farmers making gelatin by boiling calves bones after treating them with acid, how somebody figured out a way to package it and make money, and how we could drain some of the pool, add boiling hot water mixed with gelatin and red food coloring, and then mix.

“You found that in the library?” Frizz asked.

“Actually I found it right here,” Junior said and pulled a box of Jell-O out of his pocket and read the Speed Set recipe:

DIRECTIONS: COMPLETELY DISSOLVE GELATIN IN 3/4 CUP BOILING WATER. COMBINE 1/2 CUP COLD WATER AND ICE CUBES TO MAKE 1-1/4 CUPS ICE AND WATER. ADD TO GELATIN, STIRRING UNTIL SLIGHTLY THICKENED. IF NECESSARY, REMOVE UNMELTED ICE. CHILL. SOFT SET AND READY TO EAT IN ABOUT 30 MINUTES.

Jerry and Frizz smoked the joints and laughed the whole time Junior spoke, so it was more like a stoned history lesson – in the dark, under a row boat, in the freezing cold. But it was impressive none the less.

When Junior was done, Lisa stuck a fingernail again into my leg and broke her silence. "You’re making this sound easy,” she said to Junior. “It’s not.” She squeezed my leg and shifted to her knees ready to crawl out from beneath the boat. “I’ve got to go, but just for the record I want to say this is insane. First, it’s incredibly expensive.” She held up her hand and stuck out her thumb. "Second, you’ll need an army of people and equipment.” She stuck out her index finger. “Third, you’ll never get the water cold enough.” She straightened out her middle finger. “Fourth, it’ll probably ruin the pool.” She uncurled her ring finger. “And fifth, everyone’s going to get caught and thrown out of school.” She added her pinkie.

It sounded like an impressive argument to me as I admired the outline of her fingers against the blue tarp, but Junior just laughed. “But besides that?” he said. “Any other objections?”

“Junior, I’m serious.” Lisa shook her head slowly.

“Okay, good point, Lisa” he said. “I need you guys to be thinking like this,” he said turning to Jerry, Fizz and me, before turning back to Lisa. “But say I could I find a cheap, safe, doable way to pull it off without ruining the pool, will you help us?” Even in the darkness, I could see he’d put on his most charming smile.

“That I’d have to see,” Lisa said. “Gotta go.” She gave Junior a quick kiss, lifted the tarp and slipped out. “Good night, guys!” she called from outside.

“Good night, Lisa!” we called in unison like a first grade class.

Junior laughed. “We’ve still got some research to do,” he yelled. I watched the shadow of Lisa’s legs on the blue tarp as she walked along the side of the boat, then grabbed the joint from Frizz and took a big hit. “If we do it in February, it should be cold enough,” Junior said loud enough for Lisa to hear. “We’ll need a little luck with the weather!"