

THE CROOKED PATH

By
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Inspired by True Events
A Short Story by
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William had found all but one of his Lego pieces. They had flown under his bed and scurried to the corners of his small, scantily furnished bedroom. He sat in dismay, wondering if he would ever find the last red piece that served as the robot's head. With his tiny bruised fingers, he held tightly to the leg and torso part of his construction, subconsciously apologizing for the state it was in.

His small, drafty bedroom contained a black, metal-framed, rickety bunk bed wedged in one corner and a skeletal, twin mattress on the opposite side of the room. William sat on the floor staring up at the plastic sealed window that served as his only source of filtered light. Two more inches of growth and he would be able to reach the top of the locked window, he thought.

William had always been small for his age. Bouts with asthma and a suppressed appetite caused him to often be mistaken for a kindergartner.

"Now honey, you belong in the red line. This line is for second graders," the teachers at Woodrow Elementary would say.

William crawled around on all fours in search of Rodney's red Lego head. The old wooden floors had served long past their usefulness. Now, on top of that, William had to deal with shavings of broken glass that resulted from the violent crash of his desk lamp. William lifted up the mattress that laid on the floor; no head was found. With the back of his hand, he wiped the trickle of blood that ran down the right side of his round face. He looked at his hand for an instant, and then continued rummaging through the disheveled room. There—finally he spotted a square shaped plastic Lego piece. William smiled briefly and with unsteady hands, returned Rodney's head to its rightful position.

He turned the small desk upright back on all fours and placed Rodney and the remains of the broken lamp on top. With a distant look in his eyes, William sat rocking himself back and forth. Draped down his right arm were a series of cat-like scratches. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head in an attempt to counteract the lightheadedness he felt. He breathed deeply, hoping to keep himself from passing out. The filtered glare of the sun caused the broken glass pieces to shimmer. He picked one up and examined it. The contradictory smooth surface and sharp edges intrigued William. He wondered how something so clear and flawless could also be so dangerous.

William's tongue traveled along his gum line and stopped at the corner of his abandoned smile. He held the tiny broken mirror up to reveal his swollen, bloody lip. He pressed it and winced. It appeared as if his lip had swallowed a marble. It throbbed underneath the skin, causing a pulsating sensation. He noticed his left eye slanted downward and made him look as if he were of Asian descent. It was swollen too.

Little William contorted his arm to reach the very nape of his neck, where he felt a warm dripping sensation. He walked his fingers north and found soft, gushy flesh. William dropped the glass and laid his head back, resting it on the mattress of the lower bunk bed. With his eyes closed, he went to his magical place.

The early fog nestled closely in the valley, creating a mystical look. There, amidst the Sequoia trees and the sprawling shrubs, William stood. With his rock climbing gear securely fastened and his mind unafraid, he peered up at El Capitan Mountain. The granite faced mountain in Yosemite National Park stood over seven thousand feet tall. William planned to be the first seven-year-old to climb it. He clutched the cold stone and positioned his feet perfectly. This time William was confident he would make it all the way to the top.

"Reach and grab, step up and push," he recited. The mountain began to tremble. He climbed on, but the higher he ascended, the more it shook. Tiny stones skipped past him, causing him to reposition his grip. The rocks became increasingly larger as they bulldozed their way down the mountain with a loud roar. They pelted him on the face, arms, legs, and torso. The booming sound grew louder and louder. Then suddenly he lost his grip and was free falling.

He awoke.

"Little boy, I told you to clean up all this mess."

Julia Stone loomed over William's tiny, lifeless body. The shadow of her large frame spread across the room, causing the light to withdraw.

“Why are you sittin’ there lookin’ at me? she taunted. “You know this is your own fault. I’m not gonna keep spending money on gloves that you keep losin’.”

William kept his head low and braced himself for the next blow.

“I paid two whole dollars for those gloves to keep your little dirty fingers warm and you loose ’em? Next time it’s gonna be worse.”

Ms. Julia’s reflection was multiplied a hundred times in the tiny fragments of broken glass. It made her mountainous presence even more horrifying. To William, she was an unconquerable giant. Her trunk sized legs stomped across the room, causing the scattered items on the floor to tremble in fear.

The three other foster kids were lined up on the far wall within reach of their own beating. Emma, the littlest one, hadn’t learned to make herself invisible yet and whimpered uncontrollably. Justin was the oldest and had been with Julia for nearly three and a half years. He pulled her tiny body in closer and used his hand to muzzle the sounds of her cry.

Ms. Julia continued her rant as she marched out of the room and down the hallway of their small, two-bedroom apartment. Justin ran over to William.

“William, are you okay?” he asked.

William said nothing. Justin had just turned thirteen and felt well-equipped to handle matters such as this. William watched as Justin’s tall, lanky body disappeared around the corner. He returned with a small, damp washcloth and a bottle of antiseptic. Remembering Ms. Julia’s rule about keeping the floor clean, he picked up his book bag amidst the rubbish and threw it on the top bunk. Justin carefully navigated the wet towel around William’s protruding forehead, almond-shaped eyes and full lips. Justin dug deep in his back pocket and found the last Snoopy Band-Aid, courtesy of the school nurse.

“You’re gonna be okay,” Justin promised.

William sat there stone faced, without shedding a tear or saying a word. Justin pulled his foster brother in for a hug. It was then that he noticed the sticky substance that ran down the back of William’s neck. He ran out and seconds later returned with more bandages. Justin held the cold towel on William’s scalp and counted to thirty. He peaked under the towel to see if the bleeding had stopped. Again he counted to thirty.

“Take slow, deep breaths,” Justin said, mimicking the school nurse’s prior instructions. “Come on. Let’s get you in bed. I’ll clean up this mess.”

William slowly stood and with unsteady legs limped to the table to retrieve Rodney, and then back to his lower bunk bed. Justin pulled back the thin bleached sheets to reveal two lost gloves joined together with a safety pin. Justin picked them up and handed them

to his bruised little brother. William sat on the edge of the bed and wiggled each finger into the vacant gloves. He lay back in bed with a deep sigh. Rodney lay next to him on his pillow. William's eyes stayed focused on the red and black missing gloves, wondering how something so simple could cause so much pain. In a trance-like state, he returned to the mountain, starting his ascent once more.

William awoke the next morning for school to the unrelenting squeal of Ms. Julia Stone. He focused his eyes and looked around the room. It was remarkably clean considering the angry attack that Ms. Julia had unleashed on it. William pulled himself out of bed. His head was wrapped in white gauze, and for the most part, his swollen eye and lip had rescinded.

“Here, put this on,” Justin said. “We have to be ready. You know the rules.” He threw William a pair of black sweatpants and an oversized shirt that engulfed him, and when he picked up a nearby black hood, he tossed that to him and added, “Put this hat on too. You're gonna have to wear it all day.”

William couldn't wait to reach the safe haven of school. Yet he remained apprehensive about the judgmental stares and unrelenting questions he would be bombarded with.

All four children sat at the makeshift table in the cramped kitchen. They ate their oatmeal in silence. Ms. Julia explained to them how to be good, Christian children.

“I'm gonna need you all to get this Bible after school and re-learn those Ten Commandments; especially you, William.” Julia stood over them with a cup of scolding, hot coffee in her right hand and a black Bible in her left hand. “You know it says you supposed to obey your parents. That's the first commandment and the most important.”

She put her coffee down in an attempt to find the location of the scripture, but soon gave up. “Your spirit ain't right. I don't know how much more of my speaking in tongues I'm gonna have to use up, only to have you disrespect me as your parent.”

William refused to look up, thinking to himself that she was not nor ever would be his parent. The sooner he chocked down his white, lumpy oatmeal, the sooner he would be able to leave.

Ms. Julia continued on. “When you all get to school, you behave like you have good home training. I don't want any foolishness. If I have to get one more call from that school of yours, somebody's gonna get it,” she scolded. William looked up for a second, knowing her long limbs could easily get one of them right then. Ms. Julia saw no problem with beating them for preventive measures.

Everyone except Emma received a small cup of water to wash down their oatmeal. Ms. Julia grew tired of beating Emma for spilling her water every morning, so she revoked her privileges. She could no longer drink anything for breakfast until she overcame what Ms. Julia called her “shaky nerves.”

“Come on now. You all get your coats and get goin’,” Ms. Julia said. “Your bus will be here soon.”

Ms. Julia shoed them out in the frigid upstate New York air. The winters were always brutal and several feet of snow still sat unplowed on the sidewalks and yards. The streets, however, were cleared; sending relief to Ms. Julia’s foster children that school would still be open.

Once outside, William’s racing heart slowed and his body relaxed. He raised his head to the sky and felt the warm sun against his dark skin. He opened his mouth and let his own breath mingle with the frigid air, creating billows of smoke. Emma mimicked William and blew out smoke too. They smiled briefly.

“Now listen,” Justin said, “We can’t have any calls going home today, so we’re gonna all have to stick to the same story. We’re gonna tell the teachers that William got in a fight on the way home with some bully.”

Emma, William, and Alex huddled together to listen to Justin.

“We’ll tell them Ms. Julia found out who it was and already took care of it,” Justin ordered.

“William w-won’t say anything. He’s just d-dumb,” Alex scowled.

His dark, raccoon eyes searched for a place to settle. They landed on William.

When William had first arrived, he rebelled against Ms. Julia’s neurotic rules. He talked back and scurried away from her violent attacks. Ms. Julia made it her full-time job to beat William into submission. Soon he realized there was no escape, causing him to shut down completely and retreat to his own fantasy world.

It was seven months ago when William spoke his last words. There was neither a plan nor forethought to this vow of silence. He just made the decision after arriving home from church one sunny afternoon that he would no longer talk.

Alex who was always a nervous wreck was the second oldest, arriving a few months after Justin. Emma arrived at three and was now five. Ms. Julia no longer beat her because of the complaints she kept receiving from the school nurse at Little Toddlers

Daycare. Notes came home, meetings were scheduled, social workers visited, but Ms. Julia was able to fool them all.

“William, we gotta stick together on this one. Do you want them to take you away to somewhere worse?” Justin chastised.

William missed his mom and sisters. He wished things could go back to the way they used to be, before the lady in the blue suit took him away kicking and screaming. At first he thought perhaps he would be gone just for the weekend, giving his mom adequate time to recover from whatever illness she professed to have. But as the weeks snowballed into months and the beatings intensified, his hope diminished.

Growing up, William’s older sister, Loni accepted the role of parent, often times stepping in to ensure her siblings were cared for. She manipulated government services and programs to maximize the family’s monthly allotment of money, food stamps, and Medicaid assistance. Loni used her attractive smile and charming speech to deceive judges, officers, and social workers, but her favor had eventually run out.

When the family split up, Loni’s prescription to reunite them involved a variety of legal and illegal measures. This resulted in her discovering the location of her brother.

William recalled the day his sister finally appeared.

Loni stood outside William’s window in the sweltering summer heat, dripping with sweat. Freedom was right out side his window. He ran down the dark, narrow hallway, headed for the front door. He entertained no thought as to what Ms. Julia would do to him should he get caught. He just knew his sister had come for him, and he was going home. The blast of a shotgun froze William in his tracks.

“Get away from that door right now,” Ms. Julia said as she cocked the gun for a second time. She then shoved William away from the door, kicked the screen door open, and waved the rifle in the air. “You better get away from here if you don’t want a bullet in your backside.”

Loni took off running, hurling every four- letter word she could think of at Ms. Julia. William came to the realization that Loni’s attempt to free him only sent more punishment his way.



On Sunday, Ms. Julia made each of the children line up down the hallway. “Hands out so I can see them,” she demanded. She directed the flashlight toward the tops of their hands. “Now flip them over.” She continued to inspect them for cleanliness.

She panned the flashlight over the hands of Emma, Justin, Alex, and then William. William's heart raced and his breathing quickened when Ms. Julia doubled back. She stopped in front of Alex. The rest of the children let out a sigh of relief. Alex, on the other hand shook his head violently.

"No, it's n-n-not me. Look, l-l-look at Emma's hands."

Alex jerked Emma's hands closer.

"Hers are worse than mine," he begged.

Ms. Julia picked up the bleach bottle and a coarse scrub brush meant for scrubbing steel wool pans and handed them to Alex.

"N-no, Ms. Julia. I'll d-do it b-b-better next t-time." He stammered.

"And you better clean them good. 'Cause if I have to do it, I'll scrub 'em till the white meat shows."

It was a ten-minute drive to Friendly People's Baptist Church. Alex's hands were tucked in his coat pockets, still bleeding and raw. Ms. Julia pulled up to her reserved parking spot up front. It was because of her griping about the perils of raising four of God's children that she claimed to need some assistance from the church, one of which was a permanent parking spot near the entrance.

William enjoyed these rare moments of happiness. The members at Friendly People's Baptist Church truly epitomized their name. Even Ms. Julia changed once entering thru the stained glass doors. She used her best church manners and spoke in her best church voice.

"Yes," she told a male congregation member, "the Lord's work must be done, and I'm just playing one small part in helping to keep these children on a straight and narrow path."

William quickly knew that she had all of them fooled. The path she had them on was in no way straight or narrow. But at least her bogus conversation kept the focus off of him for a while.

Following the benediction, William wandered down the hall to the bathroom. He knew in a few minutes they would be leaving and headed back to the nightmare. He sat on the bathroom commode as the fear and anxiety welled up. Under the stall, he could see two men enter, one in a black robe the other with shiny black shoes. He exited the stall to see Reverend Albany washing his hands and face.

“Hey there, young man,” he said. After using a paper towel to dry his hands, he reached out and shook William’s hand.

William nodded his head, but refused to speak a word.

“Did you enjoy service today?” the reverend asked.

Still William remained silent. He so wanted to tell the pastor how Ms. Julia treated him and his other foster siblings, but experience told him that Ms. Julia held a higher position than even the Reverend Albany. William heard Mr. Shiny Shoes whisper to the reverend that he was the boy who had stopped talking.

“Oh I see,” he replied. “Can I tell you something son? Don’t let anyone on this earth steal your voice. If you have something to say, you pray to God for wisdom, and then you let your voice be heard. You are a child of God, and you deserve the very best.”

The reverend bent down and pulled William in for a hug. William felt warm, safe, and loved. When he released the child, Reverend Albany asked, “Do you have your own Bible son?”

William shook his head no, and Reverend Albany instructed Mr. Shiny Shoes to give him the one he was holding. William smiled and accepted it. He wrapped his frail arms around the reverend’s waist.

“You’re welcome, son.” Reverend Albany returned the boy’s smile and patted William on the back. “I want you to go home and read...,” Reverend Albany hesitated for a moment, and then finished with, “the book of Psalms, chapter five.”

William nodded his head.

“Come see me next Sunday, and let me know what you think it means.”

William ran out of the bathroom. He shoved the book down the back of his pants and made sure his jacket hid the wonderful gift that he had just been given. It was his prayer that he would one day have the kind of life that Reverend Albany said he deserved.



The threat of a tornado loomed over Ms. Julia’s house, but that didn’t stop her from driving to Buffalo County Medical Center. Apparently Ms. Julia hadn’t forgotten William’s attempt to escape three weeks ago and this was to be her day of reckoning.

In the hospital elevator, William tugged on Ms. Julia’s shirt and threw up his arms as if to ask why they were there.

“Oh you’ll see soon enough why we’re here,” Ms. Julia responded with a devious grin on her face.

William sat in one of the waiting room chairs as Ms. Julia filled out the necessary paperwork. She was neither concerned with the pellets of hail pounding the window nor moved by the booming thunder. When she finished, the nurse behind the desk placed a yellow wristband on William and ushered them to room 245. He was then handed a white, miniature-sized, hospital gown with brown teddy bears on the front. William removed his clothes and obediently put it on. He sat in the hospital bed terrified, knowing that whatever Ms. Julia had up her sleeve, it wasn't going to be good. When the doctor entered the room, William jumped out of the bed and tried to escape his ill-fated predicament.

"Whoa, little buddy; get back in bed," the doctor ordered. Two nearby orderlies came in and lifted William back into bed.

"If you don't stay in bed, we'll have to use the straps . . . and we don't want to do that."

"I'm Doctor Jacobs, and I'll be the one doing your surgery for today." He extended his hand to shake William's, but William did not oblige. Tears began to well up in his eyes having now discovered why he was there. The doctor turned his attention to Ms. Stone. "Your request to circumcise your son at such a late age is somewhat unorthodox," Dr. Jacobs said as he flipped through the chart.

Ms. Julia sat in the guest chair and for the first time, looked somewhat uneasy. William crossed his fingers and toes underneath the stiff, white bed sheet hoping for a miracle. He prayed that they would see through her disguise and foil her plan to hurt him.

Ms. Julia explained once again to the doctor that she wanted it done so late in his life for religious reasons. The doctor ignored the old and new bruises that flanked William's body, and signed off on the paperwork.

"Okay then, the nurses will come and get him in about twenty minutes," Dr. Jacobs said before quickly exiting the room.

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After the surgery was over William laid in the hospital bed, immobile, with his midsection wrapped. The painkillers they had pumped him with caused the white, sterile room to spin, yet they still did not drive away the throbbing sting. It was excruciating, but William chose to focus on the comforting words that Reverend Albany shared with him last Sunday.

*"Did you get a chance to read Psalms five?" Reverend Albany asked.*

*William bashfully nodded yes, although most of the words were a struggle to pronounce. The Reverend leaned back in his swivel chair and placed his hands under his head.*

*“My favorite part is ‘Lead me in the right path, O LORD and make your way plain for me to follow’,” the Reverend shared.*

*William sat in the cream-colored, oversized chair listening to Reverend Albany’s husky, male voice. Occasionally he glanced at the door hoping Ms. Julia didn’t intrude on their special time.*

*“And we’re all gonna make mistakes from time to time, just get back on God’s path and follow it as best you can. He will never leave you,” Reverend Albany said as he finished up.*

*William realized the precious time he had with the reverend was now over. The idea of never being left alone again felt comforting. He peeled himself out of the chair and shyly approached him. Reverend Albany pulled him in for a tight hug and rubbed his back as he prayed over him. It was time to leave. William grudgingly left the reverend’s warm, safe office. He counted down the days until his next visit.*

William opened up the hospital Bible that sat on the small table next to his bed. He turned to Psalms, chapter five, having almost memorized it and silently read:

*O LORD, hear me as I pray;  
pay attention to my groaning.  
Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God,  
for I pray to no one but you.  
Listen to my voice in the morning, LORD.  
Each morning I bring my requests to you and wait expectantly.*

*O God, you take no pleasure in wickedness;  
you cannot tolerate the sins of the wicked.  
Therefore, the proud may not stand in your presence,  
for you hate all who do evil.  
You will destroy those who tell lies.  
The LORD detests murderers and deceivers.*

*Because of your unfailing love, I can enter your house;  
I will worship at your Temple with deepest awe.  
Lead me in the right path, O LORD,  
or my enemies will conquer me.  
Make your way plain for me to follow.*

*My enemies cannot speak a truthful word.  
Their deepest desire is to destroy others.  
Their talk is foul, like the stench from an open grave.  
Their tongues are filled with flattery*

*O God, declare them guilty.  
Let them be caught in their own traps.  
Drive them away because of their many sins,  
for they have rebelled against you.*

*But let all who take refuge in you rejoice;  
let them sing joyful praises forever.  
Spread your protection over them,  
that all who love your name may be filled with joy.*

*For you bless the godly, O Lord;  
you surround them with your shield of love.*

The loud voice of Ms. Julia rumbled down the hallway. He quickly closed the book and placed it under his pillow. Her massive shadow entered the room first, stealing every bit of sunlight. She closed the door behind her, checked over her shoulder and approached him with fire in her eyes.

“You better not ever try to run away again, or I’ll have it cut off,” she said.

Ms. Julia balled up her fist and thrust it toward William’s achy crotch, stopping short just before making contact. She turned on her heels and walked back out. William realized that there was no one bigger than Ms. Julia; not his family, not the reverend, and not the doctors. No one could help him.

*William returned to the fog covered mountain. He wasn’t sure how many times it had been since attempting this record-breaking climb, but he was determined.*

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That Monday morning, against doctor’s orders, Ms. Julia sent William off to school with the rest of the children. William entered his classroom undetected. He quietly sat down at his desk and pulled out his overdue library book. He opened the book, thumbing through the colorful pages that described the various state parks in the U.S. His favorite picture was on page forty-nine. He stopped turning and gazed at the enormous mountain called El Capitan.

“Good morning, William, how are you doing today?” Ms. Ford, the second grade teacher asked. William lifted his head and forced a smile across his pale, flushed face.

“My goodness; are you okay, sweetie?” she said as she caressed his cheek. William pulled out a piece of paper and wrote: *I cant go to gim today. Ms. Julia sed so.*

Ms. Ford placed her hand over William’s forehead. “You don’t feel warm. Do you need to go to the nurse?”

William shook his head no. He wrote on the paper: *Im ok.*

“To help you feel better, I’ll share my snack with you. It’s what all mountain climbers need, chocolate and peanut butter s’mores.”

William smiled, impressed that she had remembered the paper he wrote on mountain climbing. His report explained how to be a great rock climber. In it, he listed the strength, nourishment, and equipment needed. He found it unbelievable that the mountain climbers would sleep on the side of the mountain all night by tying themselves to a ledge. He hoped to have that kind of courage one day.

Ms. Ford chose William’s paper as one of the top three in the class. William beamed with pride and almost allowed himself to speak that day.

Ms. Ford’s classroom had a warm, vibrant, and lively atmosphere. The colorful alphabet cards lined the top of the wall over the simple, wooden desk where Ms. Ford sat. Today she was dressed in a grey, plaid skirt and a white, buttoned-down shirt. Her short, crop afro was neatly trimmed. Her earrings always sparkled and shimmered like tiny chandeliers. Ms. Ford’s soft, tender response to the problem du jour comforted William’s fragile, emotional state. She restored his confidence that there were indeed nice people in the world.

“Come see me at snack time and we’ll make the s’mores together,” Ms. Ford said as she rubbed his back.

William hadn’t felt that kind of love and attention since his grandfather died. Pa Pa Johnny made it a point to make William feel special. He enjoyed football games, tending to the vegetable garden, and walking to the corner store. His eldest sister, Cookie, resented this special treatment and used every opportunity to dispense cruel and unusual punishment toward William. Not a day went by where William wasn’t “accidentally” tripped, kicked, or injured in some way at the hands of his sister, Cookie.

So the sudden death of Pa Pa Johnny hit everyone hard; especially his mother who was later diagnosed with clinical depression and was unable to care for her children. The lady from the State who wore the blue suit came to visit one day and decided that enough was enough. She sent the unsupervised, barely clothed, famished children to live in what she called a “more conducive environment.”

William rubbed his growling stomach. It was close to lunch time, and the bowl of lumpy oatmeal had long since worn off. Fifteen more minutes and he would have all ten of his fingers wrapped around a graham cracker, chocolaty marshmallow treat.

“You’re not supposed to wear a hat in class,” Becky Newberry matter-of-factly stated.

William looked up at her with a sour expression.

“No one else wears a hat. So you can’t either.”

Just then, Ronnie, the class bully, decided to join in on the taunting. He was on the stout side with an odd surgical cut over his lip. When he spoke, everything moved except his upper lip where the scar was. He had already been held back twice, once in

kindergarten and again in the second grade. His clothes looked two sizes too small, and he often smelled of burnt leaves.

“Becky,” he snapped, “You leave him alone.”

William’s eyes veered toward Ronnie surprised that this seasoned bully had come to his rescue. Becky’s eyes bulged in shock. She stormed off with pigtails swinging.

“Now that she’s gone, we can get down to business,” Ronnie said.

William was confused. He wasn’t sure what kind of business Ronnie was referring to.

“That one was free, but the next time it’s gonna cost you,” Ronnie said. He rubbed his hands together as if he were warming them over an open campfire.

“Consider me your security. If you want my services then bring me five dollars on Monday, and I’ll make sure no one bothers you,” he said with a folded brow. “If you don’t, then you’re gonna have everyone after you . . . including me.” He gave William a shove as he walked off.

William was sure that no one could hurt him any worse than Ms. Julia. He lowered his head and his mind had just begun to visit El Capitan Mountain when Ms. Ford’s announcement broke into his fantasy.

“It’s snack time. Everyone clean up,” Mrs. Ford yelled followed by a series of three claps.

When the desks were cleared to her satisfaction, the students, table by table, went to their backpacks and pulled out their snack. Ms. Ford set a napkin down on William’s desk and placed six graham crackers, three chocolate squares, and three small marshmallows on it.

As William bit into his snack, he was startled by the screams of Judy Willow who sat to the right of him. She had long blond curls and a big mouth. “Yuck! Look at his pants,” she yelled.

William looked down and saw patches of blood that had seeped through his circumcision bandages, soaking his khaki pants. He dropped the cookie, covered his private area and scurried out of the classroom. Calming the other students, Mrs. Ford said, “Everybody sit down now. I will be right back,” and then she ran to catch up with William.

Ms. Ford chased William down the hallway, catching up with him four doors down. William trembled in fear as streams of tears rolled down his face. He felt the wet, sticky blood pressed against his inner thighs.

“Honey, I want you to look at me.” Ms. Ford took a deep breath and tried to reassure him. “Now calm down. It’s okay.” Ms. Ford held his waist in an effort to keep him from

running. “It’s okay. Listen to me. I’m here. I’ll help you,” she said with desperation in her voice.

William finally surrendered in her arms. She picked up his fragile, undernourished body and carried him down the hall to the nurse’s office. On the way, William’s hat fell to the floor to reveal a two by two shaven head, haphazardly bandaged. Everyone in the front office gasped as they saw William being carried in.

“Mrs. Princeton, can you please get someone to cover my class?” Ms. Ford asked the front office administrator.

“Sure thing and I’ll page Nurse Belleview and tell her to come immediately.”

“See if you can get his older brother, Justin, in here too,” Ms. Ford said as she laid William on the table.

Ms. Ford continued to comfort William as he stared up at the ceiling with no expression. When Nurse Belleview arrived she lowered his pants and examined his soaked bandages. He wondered how long it would take for her to start asking more questions. He had to stay out of trouble.

William pretended to listen as Ms. Belleview’s lips moved, but he had already begun making his ascent up the mountain.

“Sweetie, please listen to me,” Nurse Belleview said. “What happened to you?”

William stiffened as he maintained focus on the stained, white squares on the ceiling. He counted ten squares across and eight squares down.

“Maybe we should call home,” his teacher said.

William sat up quickly and shook his head no. He couldn't let that happen. He opened his mouth to tell them, but the knot in his throat prevented anything from coming out.

Ms. Ford begged William to use his words. He wanted to tell her everything. He knew if anybody could help, she would. Still nothing came out.

“I'm going to call his mom,” Nurse Belleview whispered.

She quietly walked away. William wanted to scream, but he couldn't. Instead, he jumped off the table only to run into Justin at the door.

“What's goin' on?” Justin yelled.

“Justin, your brother is bleeding in his private area and has a bandaged head. Both of which we were unaware of. We just want to know what happened,” Ms. Ford said.

“It was a bully,” Justin said, using the same excuse that he'd used three weeks ago.

“Well, Nurse Belleview is calling your house right now.”

“No! You can't do that,” Justin replied. “I mean, she's not at home, and she doesn't want to be interrupted.”

“Okay.” Ms. Ford looked back at William, then to Justin. William watched as Ms. Ford's eyes traveled down Justin's partially exposed forearm. She reached for Justin's hand and raised the rest of his sleeve. “Justin,” she said, “how did you get these round burn marks?”

Justin pushed his sleeve back down. “Come on, William. We're goin' home,” he said demandingly.

Ms. Ford's facial expression said it all. She had finally put it all together. Just then Nurse Belleview returned to the room.

“Ms. Stone is on the way,” Nurse Belleview reported.

“You don't know what you've done!” Justin blurted out to the school nurse.

William watched his brother frantically pace the floor with a panicked look on his face. He had always been the strong one, but right now he just looked scared. The school nurse blocked the door in an attempt to stop Justin from taking William.

“I called the ambulance and security is on the way,” Nurse Belleview said.

“Ms. Julia did it.”

Nurse Belleview, Ms. Ford and Justin turned and looked at William with astonishment.

“What did you say, honey?” Ms. Ford asked.

William licked his lips, swallowed hard and spoke again for the first time in several months. It felt weird hearing his own voice, soft, barely above a whisper. “It was Ms. Julia,” William cried. “She’s the one that hurt me.”

William’s achy cries reverberated in the nurse’s office. Unshed, stored-up tears now flowed freely, released from their captivity.

Ms. Ford continued to caress William’s hand as he lay there on the table crying. A flood of emotions and relief swept through William.

Nurse Belleview yelled into the principal’s office, “Pull the other children out of class and call Social Services.”

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The ambulance and paramedics had arrived in eight minutes flat. They began addressing all of William’s injuries, including re-wrapping his midsection. Justin, Alex, and Emma sat in the lobby with members of the Buffalo Police Department and their assigned social worker. The medics began to roll William down the hallway when Ms. Julia appeared.

“Get him off that gurney right now,” Ms. Julia yelled.

The paramedics continued to buckle down William, securely fastening him on the rigid gurney.

“Ms. Julia Stone?” Officer Redding asked.

“Yes, what is it, officer?” she asked in a sweet and charming voice.

“You are under arrest on suspicion of child abuse.”

The officer grabbed her wrists to apprehend her but she pulled away.

“Get your hands off me,” she shouted. “Tell them! Tell them I take good care of you all!”

Additional Buffalo police officers could be seen marching down the hallway.

“I’m doing you all a favor, trying to raise these bad kids, and sometimes they just need a beatin’. Nobody else will want them.”

Alex, Justin, and Emma huddled together, unsure of their fate.

Ms. Julia pointed a stiff finger toward William. “You hear that? No one wants you!”

“Ms. Stone please step away from the gurney. I repeat. You are under arrest.”

Sensing that she was no longer in control, she lunged for the gurney in an attempt to pull William off.

The police officer quickly responded by firing his weapon. The twelve-hundred volt Taser sent Ms. Julia crashing to the floor in a spastic fit.

“God’s gonna destroy you,” William said.

The officer turned the rotund woman on her stomach, placed a knee in her back and handcuffed her. They instructed her to not move or she would be Tasered again. When she disobeyed, the children and administrators watched in horror as Ms. Julia was Tasered a second time. Her body convulsed violently and drool bubbled from her mouth. The mountain had finally been conquered.

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Emma, Justin, and William settled into their new home. Alex was the only child that had to be separated. His paralyzing, unending anxiety never subsided. He was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and sent to live in a loving home that would adequately treat his illness.

Justin and William helped Emma unpack the last of her belongings. The pale pink walls and white canopy bed provided the type of surroundings that every little girl dreamed of.

“It’s time for dinner,” Reverend Albany said.

William sat in the rocking chair and quietly spoke. “Do we get to stay?” he asked Reverend Albany.

“Yes, William.” The reverend smiled. “We get to keep you.”

Emma, Justin, and William ran to the reverend and hugged him tightly. Reverend Albany swooped up Emma in his arms carrying her downstairs to the dinner table. William and Justin followed closely behind.

“Is anybody hungry for some chicken pot pie?” Mrs. Albany asked.

An elaborate spread of casserole, salad and rolls laid across the table. The newly joined family bowed their heads in prayer as Reverend Albany gave the blessing.

“Oh merciful Heavenly Father, we thank You right now for watching over these children. Even when they thought there was no hope, You shielded them from destruction until Your glorious master plan was made manifest. Thank You that we will love each other, support each other, and raise these kids in the admonition and fear of the Lord. Children are a heritage of the Lord, and we will respect them and treat them as such. We ask that You fill Emma, Justin, and William with the spirit of forgiveness and love so that they may grow into the mighty kings and queen that they truly are. Bless and equip me and my wife, and fill us with your divine knowledge and power to give these children what they stand in the need of. Right now we ask that You bless this food and the hands that prepared it. May it provide healing, nourishment, and satisfaction to our bodies, in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

The End

And I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them. (Isaiah 42:16)