

Icarus Hadwell and The Book Of Fates

ICARUS HADWELL
and
THE BOOK OF FATES

a novel

Chapter 1

Icarus Carver was happy.

A slow, sunny Sunday afternoon passed gently outside the window of his blue painted room. Aside from noticing the rays slicing through the mini-blinds, he was unaware. Something about the color of his walls - the faded blue of a summery sky - was enough. All his attention was riveted to the scene playing out before him. Splayed across the gray-carpeted floor of his bedroom were tens of action figures: old He-Man toys, second-hand Transformers from the 1980's (a few of which still actually transformed), some Lord of the Rings figurines (most of scarred with age, though they were the newest of the lot and several were missing limbs), and even some old Barbie dolls (most of these were scalped - their hair entirely gone).

Cary - as Icarus was known to everyone in Happy Endings, Texas - though he had no friends, had combed garage sales using money he made mowing his neighbors lawns to find the action figures.

He was especially picky over which figure he wanted. It was not the condition which mattered overmuch, rather the *reality* of the toy was of tantamount importance.

"A warrior? A princess? A wizard? A potential false god?"

These were the questions twelve year old Cary would ask himself as he searched boxes of unwanted junk. The point was all around him just then. He arranged many of these toys in an epic battle, plastic reality took up every corner of the bedroom he sometimes slept in. It was not *his* bedroom.

Bird, his foster-father, occasionally allowed him to play there. Still, Cary thought of it as *his* room. Mostly because it was blue and as the guest room was rarely used by anyone else. Cary would sleep there when it was otherwise unoccupied, or Bird was too drunk to stop him.

The story of the battle around him unfolded delicately as the Sunday afternoon passed, but only for Cary. He knew the history of each character, had constructed those histories himself. Kneeling over a decrepit Castle Grayskull he had fished from a trash dump, Cary slowly walked up a battered Gandalf action figure - his favorite -

towards the Castle, speaking out loud as he did so.

"I order you, Lord Durth the Nasty, to open the Castle of the Broken Skull!" Cary said, dropping his voice as low as he could, though it was still quite squeaky.

Cary Carver was not a large boy, not even five feet tall and his crystal blue eyes set in a delicate face made him look younger still. Combined with his voice, which was light and sweet and slightly feminine, one could easily assume he was years younger than he truly was.

"I will rain *the* Thunder Magic down upon you!" Cary said, waving Gandalf threateningly at the yawning green plastic Castle.

He was alone in the room, which was quite normal. Cary never played with anyone else. He shook Gandalf at the Castle one last, meaningful time. "*You* cannot fight *my* magic, Durth! Must I *force* you? Must I prove here and now which of us mightier?"

Trying to change his voice again, hoping to sound sinister, Cary said, "Bring your lightnings!" It was sentiment stolen from a book series The Wheel of Time. "And I will dance with them!" Cary cackled as he wiggled a scalped Barbie doll up from behind the Castle of the Broken Skull. The Barbie wore half an old sock painted with symbols, tied loosely around her stick frame and held a staff made of toothpicks. The doll's left arm fell off.

Cary sighed and put the arm back on.

He waved Gandalf this time directly at the Barbie doll.

"Ark vard bordax deera!" Cary shouted, excitement carrying his voice up to an even higher octave than normal. A bolt of purest white energy shot out from the Gandalf doll's hand. He *saw* it crash into the Barbie-doll "Durth", killing the evil sorceress instantly.

"It is not done, Bavort!" Cary-as-Durth said, voice lowered and sinister as he could manage. "By the third Moon, I swears it!" He made gurgling noises, deep in his throat as he mimed "Durth's" death throes. Cary fell to the floor with "Durth", his little body shaking alongside "Durth" the Barbie Doll's amidst mock death throes.

He was still for a moment. "Durth" the Barbie Doll was dead on the floor, Bavort the Gandalf Doll clutched to his chest. Cary Carver was *happy*. He had won. "Durth" had been destroyed, finally.

A slow creak drew Cary's attention to the door. He sat up quickly, scattering Gandalf and Barbie, toppling Castle Grayskull over with a plasticine clatter. Cary's arms flew across his chest into a protective X as his happiness fluttered out into the sunshine slicing in through the blinds.

A head peeked around the door with a face Cary most definitely did not want to see.

"You're *not* supposed to be *playing* right now, Ickie." his foster-sister Lana growled. She was looking down her narrow nose at him, past the little brown mole which sat near the tip of her left nostril. Her expression was a hawk sighting a particularly fat, timid mouse. She smiled a Russian wink at him, pleased at using the nickname he was mocked with at school. Cary hated his name, it was a curse. Lana always enjoyed saying it at him.

"I'm going to tell *Bird*." Lana said.

Standard Lana. Her usual threat. Bird was *her* natural father, a fact she never purposefully let Cary forget. "MY Dad is going to make you toss all this *crap* in the trash. *AGAIN*."

Cary clutched Gandalf tighter under the cross of his arms. Sweat from inside his elbows wet the figure. He looked away from Lana, close to crying and not wanting her to scent the tears out. He was not quick enough.

"Going to cry then little baby? Huh? Little baby girl, Ickie?" Lana said moving into the room fully, her face alight with the game she loved: humiliating Cary.

Cary rolled into a ball around Gandalf. He knew what was coming. Lana tickled his sides, just above his hips. Her fingers were pointed and sharp, poking. Unable to control himself Cary was soon laughing loudly, painfully. Lana did not stop. Less than a minute later, Cary had wet himself. Only then did Lana let up.

"Little baby Ickie pissed himself!" Lana said. She kicked at the battle setup, scattering figures across the room. "Little faggy Ickie had better clean this shit up. Bird is gonna be home soon." Lana paused, her eyes swept the room, luxuriating. When they landed on the scalped Barbie-doll she screeched painfully loud.

"You little faggot shit!" Lana said. "Is that MY BARBIE-DOLL?"

Moving faster than Cary could have she grabbed the doll and looked at it with faux sadness. But her eyes held only anger when she turned them back on Cary. For the moment she was speechless.

Cary gasped and wiped snot from his nose. He looked down forlornly at his soiled pants and realized he did not have time to wash them and clean up the guest room before Bird came home from his weekend-long hunting trip. Bird was many things - few good - but strangely he was usually punctual in returning from hunting trips, though these had become increasingly few in recent months as Bird's drinking spiraled him downward. Seeing Cary stare aghast at his own pants, Lana laughed, realized she had enough in the Barbie-doll to see Cary punished severely, and so she darted out of the room, slammed the door behind her.

Sniveling and glaring angrily at the door, Cary opened the door and left out of the room to the hall closet. Glum, he got a change of pants and underwear. He heard Lana plop herself down in the living room in front of the television, Jerry Springer reruns booming.

Grabbing a pair of old khakis and threadbare briefs, Cary went to the bathroom he shared with Lana. It was a small: a mirror set into the wall above a sink next to a toilet with a narrow bath and shower combination beyond. Cary grabbed a towel from the drying rack and turned on the shower. Aware he had to hurry, he rinsed himself off as opposed to truly washing. As quickly as he could he dried off and dressed.

Outside the bathroom, as he stuffed his soiled clothes into a plastic grocery bag until he could wash them later, he froze when he heard the sound of Bird's pickup pulling into the driveway. Lana, uncaring or oblivious as she watched her talk show, crowed with laughter.

A spike of terror shafted through Cary. He had to get the guest bedroom picked up, *before* Bird saw it. Though sometimes allowed to play there, it was never a sure thing, and if Bird had been drinking...

Rushing, Cary tripped over himself several times as he picked up toys: banged his knee against the bedpost, smacked his forehead against a dresser, stubbed a toe on the chest-of-drawers. He was just tucking Castle Grayskull into the box where he kept his toys when the

front door slammed, announcing Bird.

"Lana!" Bird shouted, his drawl making it sound more like "Lonner." It told Cary all he needed to know.

He's drunk.

Cary shoved the box into the closet, pushed some detritus in front of it, closed the doors and rushed out of the room. He hoped he could start a load of laundry before Bird got the low-down from Lana, *before she tells him I wet myself again*. She would leave out *she* had caused it and Bird would not believe Cary if he told the truth about what she had done.

Cary slipped down the hallway to the washroom opposite the hallway closet. What little hope which buoyed him went flat. The washing machine was already whirring. Lana had started a load of clothes. Looking down forlornly at the plastic grocery bag of soiled clothes, Cary had to concentrate very hard not to cry again. A scream shattered the relative quiet.

"ICK-RUS CAHR-VER!"

It was Bird's slurry voice, screaming full bore, so that Icarus Carver sounded more like "Icka-rous Car-vah"

Cary sighed. He didn't wait to go to Bird, had learned not to give Bird a reason to get angrier when he was slurring drunk.

As soon as Cary made his way into the living room he saw Bird sway as the man tried to walk from the dining room to the sofa.

Each step it seemed Bird must overcompensate and fall over; yet he managed, almost heroically, to catch himself each time. When he finally made it to the sofa Bird tried to sit down on it backwards. Bird's body failed him and he slid straight to the carpet with a thud and a drawled curse. Unfortunately at precisely this moment he caught sight of Cary. Red, swollen eyes narrowed.

"Come *here* kid." Bird waved. Cary didn't need to turn around to know Lana was behind him now, watching. Seeing Bird demean Cary was her idea of great fun. However, she knew better than to show her face yet, as drunk as he was, Bird could lash out at her just as easily. Though it was unlikely, given Cary was already present.

At least she hasn't had the chance to tell him I wet myself yet.

Cary took two hesitant steps towards Bird, trying to stall for time

and get a chance to gauge just how drunk Bird was. The television was still flashed out Jerry Springer. Lana had pressed the mute button before she fled the living room, likely the moment she had heard Bird's door slam. She knew Bird hated Jerry Springer. Cary soon forgot about being thankful Lana had not gotten to Bird first.

"An' what the hell is THAT?" Bird slurred, pointing in the general direction of Cary's hand.

He still held the sodden plastic bag full of soiled clothes. Hadn't even realized the bag had been hanging from his arm while he hurriedly picked up the bedroom. In mute horror Cary's stare drifted down to the bag, his mind not even bothering to search for an excuse. What could he say?

"Answer me, kid!" Bird said louder, trying vainly to push himself upright. Cary inched backward by rote.

As Cary backed up he bumped into Lana. She pushed him forward before he could get his footing. He toppled forward toward Bird. The plastic bag slung out of his hand and plopped within arm's reach of his foster-father. Lana laughed and moved past Cary into the room. Bird had not seen her push Cary.

"He wet himself Daddy." Lana said, her tone simpering and fake girly. Bird's expression glazed over for a drunken moment as Lana's words sunk in.

"I has about had it, *boy*." Bird snarled and using the sofa to get to his feet. He picked up the bag of soiled laundry in the same motion and hurled it at Cary's head. Never very coordinated even when not terrified, Cary failed to duck. The bag smacked him across the face with a wet, acrid slop. Lana laughed so hard it was nearly a shriek of expelled air. Bird chuckled without smiling. Before he could fall over from the effort of chuckling, he finally planted himself on the sofa. Inwardly Cary breathed in relief, the man was too drunk to actually try and hit him.

"That's not all, Daddy," Lana said, moving to the other side of Bird. Still, Cary noticed, she, too, stayed beyond arms reach. "He was playin' with them toys again, the ones you said he cain't, *and* he was

TALKING to them *again*. AND he had my Barbie Doll. Messed her all up.”

Cary looked at the carpet, his feet. He had known she was going to tell on him but he still had hoped... And now... he knew if he kept looking at Bird or Lana he would cry. Which would enrage Bird like nothing else. As it was, Cary barely managed to stifle the snuffle.

“After *everything* I done for you! Raised you like you was my own, loved you moren' you deserved, clothed and fed ya...” Bird trailed off, burped loudly. He rubbed his stomach as though it suddenly pained him. Hearing Bird say these things actually helped Cary quash his tears. The bald-faced lie Bird had spouted made Cary's insides twist in such an angry manner tears suddenly became out of the question. He looked up, face screwed up angrily. Bird noticed.

“OH YEAH? Think you a man now, boy? Want to try old Bird, then?” Bird said. And wonder of wonders, the drunken lout managed to get to his feet and put his balled fists up before him.

“Get 'im, Daddy.” Lana said, pointing at Cary from behind Bird's back and over his shoulder.

With supreme effort, Cary wiped the angry look off his face. Did his best to look properly, pitifully ashamed. It wasn't terribly hard as he truly felt pitiful and ashamed. Bird saw the change, nodded, burped, swayed and fell back on to the sofa.

“Right, kid. Don't think age's made old Bird any less of a slugger!” Another burp and few punches thrown at the air. Lana, as Cary caught a quick look at her, was obviously disappointed.

“Listen up, kid. You too, Lana. I'm tired of working all day and comin' home...” Cary could not help it, he snorted in derision. Bird hadn't worked a whole day in all Cary's memory. Cary had only learned how Bird made his money one day by *accident*, when checking the mail years earlier. A letter made out to Bird, the second line reading “Guardian of Icarus Hadwell,” had made Cary so intensely curious he opened it.

How many people named Icarus can there be?

He had thought at the time.

The letter had contained a check made out to Bird and a register of monthly payments of the same amount. All from the State of Texas. It hadn't taken Cary long to figure it out why.

I'm not really Cary Carver. My real name is Icarus Hadwell. And the State pays him to keep me.

Somehow, for some reason, Bird was being paid hundreds of dollars a month to take care of *Cary*. He had never been able to figure out exactly why though. Maybe it had something to do with being a foster child, he just wasn't sure. But why had he changed Cary's last name to match Bird's own?

Bird had burped again when Cary snorted, covering Cary's noise. Lana heard, however, and her face was full of indecision as she tried to figure out whether she should interrupt Bird to tell him or not. With a frustrated glare, she decided not.

"And finding out you've been doing what you ain't s'posed ta be doin'... House ain't cleaned, chores prolly ain't done and you've been in *that damned guest room* for God knows how long talkin' to yourself like some damn crazy person!"

Bird had worked himself up into a righteous rage, and drunk as the man was Cary knew he was powerless to stall it. Lana knew this as well, and wisely kept silent too, knowing Bird's anger could easily turn to her. *She* certainly hadn't cleaned up or done any chores either.

Just as Bird was about to catch his stride and likely launch into a furious tirade which almost always ended in a spectacular spanking, the doorbell rang. Bird swayed forward and stared in momentary dumbness in the direction of the front door, just past a narrow foyer connected to the living room they were currently in.

Bird burped again. Rubbed his stomach. Lurched forward. Miraculously made it to his feet. After - he gave his body a full-on shake, which should have ended with him face down on the floor - the

man walked purposefully to the door as though he had somehow sobered up. Cary had seen this before as well. It was temporary at best. Selective sobriety.

When Bird reached the door, both Cary and Lana edged forward to peek from the foyer. Lana - taller, stronger and more aggressive than Cary - pushed him aside, into the wall. He grunted wordlessly, soundless as he could. Cary made sure to stay behind her after. Bird opened the front door.

Standing beyond Bird, face washed out by harsh orange porch light, was their across-the-street neighbor Lurlene Darxis. Her iron gray hair was short and severe, her gray eyes cold and piercing. Even Bird flinched under her metallic gaze; swallowed and thrust his chest out angrily, as though Lurlene had challenged *him* to a fist fight.

"What is it, Lurl," Bird slurred "-ene." Bird added seeing the woman's face quickly anger. His voice sounded much clearer than it had mere moments before.

How does he DO that?

Bird *was* still blindingly drunk, Cary was sure of it, but he no longer sounded it. Not unless you knew him as Cary did.

Lurlene's full lips pursed and her eyebrows arched into slanted lines of anger. "You parked your....truck on my lawn again, *Bird*." Disdain and condescension in Lurlene's voice was apparent, even to Bird, whose upper lip twitched.

Looking out past Lurlene into the semi-darkness of the yard between their houses, Bird whistled. He laughed.

"Well I'll be damned" Bird said, combing his hand across his hair. "Sorry 'bout that Lurl..ene. Cain't always see so well at night no mo'. I'll move it right fast, don't worry none."

Bird was significantly taller than Lurlene, though the woman somehow always made Cary think of a leopard or big cat waiting to spring. Like she was full of hidden strength. She managed to look above and around Bird despite the difference in height, her eyes

falling on Cary and doing the quickest one-up from Cary's toes to his head. Her attention snapped right back to Bird. If Bird noticed, he gave no sign.

Lana noticed. Cary heard her in-taken breath prove it. "Well then, Bird. See you don't damage the grass."

Without another word Lurlene turned on one heel and strode, long powerful steps, full of purpose, back towards her house. She did not look back.

This was not the first time Lurlene Darxis had shown up without warning and saved Cary from an impending episode of Bird's savagery. When he thought about it later that night Cary realized it happened rather frequently. It was as if the woman had some sixth sense and underneath her rigid front sincerely desired to insure Cary was relatively unharmed. The idea made him strangely, mildly comforted.

Is this how having a semi-real parent feels?

Cary could *never* confuse Lurlene for a *real* parent. Even when he mowed her lawn she was cold to him, never invited him inside. Never asked him about himself or seemed to care about him otherwise, except that her grass was precisely the length she desired. Still, unknowing or not, she had saved his hide so many times no matter how cold she was he found himself thinking of her warmly.

After he moved the truck, the effort of keeping himself momentarily sober had to have sapped off all of Bird's head-of-steam. No sooner had he come back inside than he had changed the television to some hunting program on the Discovery Channel and promptly fallen asleep. Cary could hear the man's stuttering-bear snores even from behind the partly closed door of the guest room.

Cary had put his soiled clothes into the washer and put Lana's into the dryer, gathered up the toys he had missed and stowed them away under some old blankets and quilts in the hall closet . He had not seen Lana the whole time. When Cary finally fell asleep he had the

strangest dream. It was of Lurlene Darxis: only she was dressed as a monk from one of Bird's Steven Seagal movies, her clothes all gray and mummy-wrapped about her stick-like frame. The dream was simple: Lurlene chasing behind Cary as he ran, her arms outstretched, her face hungry with undisguised desire. Though for some reason Cary *knew* she couldn't actually see him. He was only steps in front of her no matter how hard he ran, but still, she *could not* see him. Yet he also knew, as surely as he knew his name, she *was* looking for *him*.

She knows who I am!

Who am I?

Cary sat up in the dark, gasping. The dream was still vivid in his mind. A feeling of strangeness hammered at him, a frisson. A single question holding his just awoken attention.

Who am I?

The dream began to fade as dreams do and with a shake of his head, Cary forgot it. Less than a minute later Cary was again fast asleep.

Chapter 2

Time passed in the same fashion as it always had for Cary. He finished his seventh grade year at Happy Endings Junior High with only a few books he had stolen from the school library to show for the effort of daily attendance. His grades were fair, never outstanding. He never raised his hand in class. Truthfully, didn't care much for any subject, though part of him felt he might have liked science, but his teachers disagreed.

"You need to study harder," Mr. Deville, Cary's chemistry teacher told him. Cary nodded, sighed and had forgotten about the comment after walking two doors down the hall.

Several new things made Cary extremely happy about the summer between his seventh and eighth grade year.

Lana had gotten a new game console for her birthday: an Xbox 360. As it was far better than the Super Nintendo she had before, Lana had thrown the Super Nintendo into the garbage, where Cary fished it out. He put it in the hall closet with his clothes, under the blankets, where he hid the few things he tried to keep secret from Lana and Bird. He could not play with the thing while Lana was in the house, she would likely destroy it before she deigned let *him* enjoy it. Worse, she had grown several inches over the summer. Cary had not. Her frequent harassment episodes usually ended with Cary in a headlock which served to reinforce to him just how much stronger than him she was.

Two weeks into the eighth grade another great thing happened.

A neighbor several houses down from where Cary lived moved away and the house remained vacant most of the summer. One bored afternoon, a balmy Saturday in August, Cary had been walking past the place when a sudden and nearly overwhelming desire to investigate overcame him. His feet turned up the driveway. After looking around to ensure he was not seen, Cary tried the carport door.

It was unlocked. With another wary glance, Cary ducked inside. He had not known the people who had lived here, only they had had two children about Cary's age, who also had went to his school. Cary had never bothered to learn their names.

The inside of the place was empty, desolate looking. Cabinet doors swung open to empty insides. Carpets still bore marks of absent furniture. Sections of wall were discolored in perfect squares and rectangles where pictures had once hung. Even though the family as only weeks gone, the place seemed as if it had been abandoned far, far longer, a dusty loneliness pervaded it. Making his way through the house, Cary came to the living room. The floor plan was almost exactly the same as Bird's house. Sitting abandoned, adding to the feel of loneliness, its wooden casing cracked, was an old console television. Happiness surged through Cary like an electric jolt.

I have a Super Nintendo. And now I have a television.

If he could find *somewhere* to plug them both in, he could play video games!

Might as well wish for superpowers.

He had watched Lana playing so many times, and wanted so badly to play himself, only to be grossly disappointed, it hardly seemed real he might get the chance.

Too good to be true.

Life with Bird and Lana and his own secrets had taught Cary a very valuable life lesson about things which appeared too good to be true. Cary's hand shook as he reached down to find the cord and plug to the television. The cord in his hand, his brain shifted gears. A wave of doubt crashed over him.

Who leaves a television behind?

Unless it's broken.

He felt as though his heart were a soap bubble and the unspoken question had just burst it.

It won't work. It can't work.

Still, almost as if it were required, despite the probability of imminent failure, Cary reached down with the plug and pushed it into the socket. He unconsciously found himself mouthing the word *work* to himself. Sighing aloud, Cary reached over and pushed the worn power button.

Nothing happened.

Cary pushed his lower lip into a pout no one could see and said, "Figures."

Something in the back of his mind flared to life. The word *work* resounded against the inside of his skull along with a surge of emotion. Small, yet it jolted Cary. A voice in his mind. One which *sounded* like his own, but somehow not. Older, stronger, and full of a confidence Cary had never had, even in his own mind. It said: "*Try again.*"

Gritting his teeth against the wave of disappointment he knew was coming, Cary reached over and pressed the power button again.

Work. Work. Work.

A click and buzzing sounded as the TV flared to life. A louder, insistent hissing came from the set as flecks of gray and white snow flickered across the screen.

"YES! It works!" Cary shouted. Realizing the noise he was making Cary quickly turned the set off and looked around cautiously. He knew he was being silly. The house was *empty*. He swallowed hard anxiety. No one could hear him. Making up his mind in a snap, Cary went all around the house to all the doors and locked them. He even attached the little chain locks dangling from the kitchen and front doors. He locked all the windows, except one: in the rear of the house which lead to a nearly exact replica of the bathroom he shared with Lana. The window was too high for him to get easily in or out, without some kind of step. He hoped that fact would keep others out as well. Cary climbed up and out of the window, landing on his butt as he jumped out and fell to the grass-less ground with a light thud. He

didn't even notice the ache in his backside he was so excited.

Bring a box next time to step on.

A smile plastered over his face, Cary ran home full of daydreams about the fun to come.

Street Fighter 2. Final Fantasy 2. Super Mario World. Earthworm Jim.

Games he had so often watched Lana play. Had hoped he could one day play but eventually forced himself to accept would never happen. His feet wandered on their own volition, his head lost in happy thoughts. Cary Carver was happy, until...

He walked headfirst into Lana. She was like a brick wall and he fell backwards on to his butt, the second time in only a few minutes. It hurt more this time. He shouted. Shock and surprise and pain. Lana glared down at him, her expression mean, full of cunning and considering.

"What are you so happy about?" Lana barked.

As Cary stared up at her the Sun flared brightly around her. She became a mass of black shadows; a menacing evil looming over Cary. The image passed as his eyes adjusted. He saw her cruel expression as she waited for his answer.

Think fast...

Obviously not on his feet, since he was still sitting on his throbbing backside Cary said, "I was having a good day." Lana snorted. She glared for a moment longer, maybe deciding whether or not she would torment him further. Cary sighed, prepared to wait and see, though he ached to rush away, he feared to give her a reason to chase after him. Also, if she were going to hit him it was better he remain on the ground, as he'd only end up there again. But something drew Lana's attention away.

Lurlene Darxis walked down the garden path which ran in front of her house. Cary hadn't realized he was so close to home.

"What are you two doing?" Lurlene asked. Her tone implied Cary and Lana had been about to do something horrible. Like try and burn

her house down. Or steal her cable television service. Lana's mouth worked but no words came out. Lurlene did not like Lana. Cary had thought so for years. She was far colder to Cary's foster sister than to him, ice from space compared to a melting cube from the freezer. Lana only an inch or two smaller than Lurlene clearly understand the same thing about the gray haired woman Cary did: a hidden strength was in her . It was ridiculously stupid to challenge her. Lana gulped and looked down at the sidewalk, away from Lurlene.

"Nothing, Miss Darxis." Lana said to the far-off concrete. Lurlene harrumphed in her throat.

"Well be about nothing somewhere else will you? The last thing I need is you two hooligans making a racket outside my house while I am trying to get my work done. Now. GO!" Lurlene said, her eyes narrowed dangerously, they were a shade of electricity infused gray which made Cary never want to meet their gaze for long.

Lana attempted a nonchalant shrug, but her nervous expression fouled it. Cary smiled, enjoyed seeing his foster-sister so bothered. With a look which promised further torture as recompense, she turned and walked away towards home. Cary got to his feet and brushed himself off, careful around his sore butt, and no longer smiling. He started to follow Lana.

"Wait a minute, Cary." Lurlene said. Her tone was not any softer. She waited for Lana to disappear. "That odious girl. Your sister?"

Cary didn't know what to say. Bird preferred, insisted in fact, Cary refer to him as Dad and Lana as his sister, though Cary had never understood why. Bird had never even mentioned the name Hadwell to Cary. He was supposed to be Icarus Carver, Icarus Hadwell was a secret. Saying anything otherwise only got him a severe spanking and/or a grounding. Yet, standing there with Lurlene looking haughtily at him, some force compelled Cary to tell her the truth, as he knew it. "No. She's my foster-sister. My real name is Icarus Hadwell, not Carver." Lurlene's eyes widened, those gray depths sucking the

image of him in, her face lighting up before it clouded over once again. It happened very fast. Without another word she stomped off up her garden path and went inside her house, slammed the door behind her.

Cary gaped at the spot where Lurlene had been. Realizing he was safe from Lana for the moment, he dashed off before his foster-sister came back for revenge. The happiness he had found discovering the television was still there and the paranoid feeling Lana would find out about it all but gone. Cary had all the rest of Saturday to sneak out the Super Nintendo from the hall closet and retrieve the games he had carefully hidden around the house. Somehow get them to the vacant house down the street.

A thought occurred to him which had not occurred for a long time.

It would be so much more fun if I had a friend to play the Super Nintendo with.

He had wished many times for a friend. Just one. Had tried several times to befriend other kids his age at school. Sometimes after prodding from Bird or relentless jokes by Lana, but it had never worked. Most of the other kids just found something about Cary too odd to be around and Cary knew it. Cary was trying to reclaim his happiness but the knowledge he lacked friends threatened to pull him down.

“Super Nintendo!” Cary said aloud, resolute. He said it again and again times until he smiled with the anticipation of it. By then he was inside. Bird's truck was gone. No sign of Lana, though Cary suspected she was around. Somewhere. He had seen her come in after all.

Ambling about the house he took a minute to search for Lana before he fished out the Super Nintendo. Satisfied she was elsewhere, or behind her locked bedroom door, Cary opened the hallway closet and fished out his goods: the Super Nintendo console. He sneaked about to get the five games but didn't have anything to put them in, so he wrapped it all in a beach towel. His steps took on a hurried quality

as he made his way for the front door.

Don't forget to get a box.

The old torn-up neighborhood center will have something. I'll go there.

With his hand on the handle of the front door Cary glanced back one last time looking for Lana, to be sure.

Nothing.

The house was quiet and *seemed* empty. Cary smiled and opened the door, ducked out back into the bright sunshine of the East Texas August Saturday. Comforting heat washed over him. Though it *was* a tad stifling he was too buoyant to care. His steps took a jaunty quality almost like skipping. A smile was plastered across his face. Several neighborhood kids rode their bikes down the street. Cary knew Jonathan and Eric and Tommy, knew they disliked him intensely. They eyed him suspiciously.

They did know Cary. Everyone did. If at least only as the weird Carver kid. They rarely missed an opportunity to be mean to him, especially if Lana was around to egg on. Now they just stared, their bikes stilled beneath. Perhaps it was because he was carrying a lurid pink beach towel emblazoned with Barbie dolls - an old one of Lana's - or maybe because he had been smiling happily at nothing as he almost-skipped down the sidewalk.

Cary froze, then walked normally, forced his buoyancy away. It was only as he passed them and their heads turned to follow Cary realized it was not such a good thing they had seen him carrying anything, much less almost skipping. They would be curious now, they knew full well *Ickie* didn't have things worth hiding in a beach towel. They might even tell Lana, if they noticed his happiness, they were part of her group. Cary wiped the smile off his face. He tried to pretend to be carrying something he would rather not be. He held it out like the towel smelled of old socks.

Don't notice me. Don't notice me. Don't notice me!

Swallowing nervously Cary passed the boys. He didn't look back

to see if they still watched him. Not until he got to the driveway of the vacant house did he turn back for a glimpse.

No one there.

Again buoyant, Cary dashed up the driveway, under the carport and around the side of the house into the backyard where he deposited his burden under the eave of the back door. Confident it would remain unmolested, Cary left the backyard and made his way towards the half-demolished neighborhood center two streets over, where if he was lucky, he could find a box to stand on.

It took longer than it should because a group of older teenagers hung around the place. Smoking and cursing and occasionally doing things which made them all scream with the same loud, nearly synchronous, "WHOA!"

Cary hung back near a small thicket of trees on the south side of the lot and thought endlessly about the fun he was going to have with those video games while he waited. Second to creating his own stories, Cary could imagine little more exciting than what he assumed playing video games would be. He loved reading and it was currently his second favorite thing to do.

Playing the video games will be even better than that.

An escape he could interact with. Watching Lana play those games had been sort of fun for him. Especially when a character had some special power, like the white ninja guy in Street Fighter who could shoot some kind of energy fireball from his outstretched hands. Or the one who could send ripples of electricity across his body. Or Super Mario's invincibility when he touched a bouncy star. These things fascinated Cary, so much so he would rush back to the guest room after spying on Lana's game playing and imbue his characters with those very same skills. Infusing the powers into the action figures inhabiting his created reality.

If I had super powers. I'd shoot that ball of energy at Lana. And Bird. And everyone who's mean to me.

At odd moments he would fall back to the floor, eyes unfocused as he dreamed of putting his hands together and shooting the white ball of energy out at his tormentors, or knocking people down with a simple touch, or bolts of electricity flying out of his fingertips.

I'm too old to believe in wishes.

And if I did I'd find a way to get away from Bird and Lana and Happy Endings. To make a friend or two. To know who I am.

Cary's happy mood faltered further. This happened any time he thought of getting away from Bird and Lana or about his non-existent past. It made him wonder sadly. About his parents.

Who had they been? Why did they leave me with Bird? Did they hate me so much?

These were questions he had asked, tremulously to be sure, even to himself. Bird had never given an answer beyond some drunken, bawling explanation which usually involved berating Cary for being a drain on Bird and his finances, as Cary had learned never to ask such questions if his foster-father was anything less than completely tanked.

"Ungrateful to boot, to even ask about such a thing." Bird would still slur.

Lana had been no help either. Anytime Cary had asked questions Lana had immediately hounded him once Bird was out of hearing:

"No one loved you because you weren't born! You're like some alien or something and *your parents* even thought you were too weird so they left you in a pillowcase on the side of the road!"

There was a great variance to Lana's stories of this ilk. Cary learned to just look hurt and stomp off. Which would usually satisfy his foster-sister enough into leaving him be. He contemplated just this when he realized the only sound he could currently hear were his own feet crunching the twigs scattered between the trees.

The teenagers are gone!

Triumphant, Cary rushed out of the thicket and began to comb the lot for a suitable box on which to stand. It took him the better part

of an hour to find one which could hold his weight he could also manage to carry the two streets over to the vacant house. By the time he was hefting the wooden box down the street, grinning almost madly, the Sun drooped into late afternoon. Cary hardly noticed.

During the half hour trek back to the vacant house, he had to stop several times to adjust his grip on the box. It was heavier than it looked. Half a block from the vacant house, Cary wished again.

I wish I were the strongest boy in the world.

Cary swallowed excited by this thought, his toe struck a jutting piece of sidewalk and he tripped. Amidst his terror as he fell forward there was a strong tugging sensation just under his heart. He spent an idle moment imagining the things he would do if he *were* super strong.

Beat up Lana.

Destroy Bird's pickup truck.

Maybe build a tree-house somewhere.

Steal somebody's bike.

He was at his destination. Not bothering to look around and see if he was watched, Cary trotted up to the little chain-link fence gate on the side of the carport and carried the box into the backyard. He dropped it roughly just under the bathroom window. Just before the box hit the ground Cary saw footprints in the dirt but the cloud of dust from the box hitting the ground obscured any traces.

Just my own prints from earlier.

He went over and picked up the towel wrapped bundle with the game console and cartridges in it. Clambered up the box and opened the bathroom window. Carefully he put the bundle on the shelf beside the window inside the bathroom. Climbed through the hole, careful not to knock the shelf or slip into the toilet as he stood on the tank above the bowl.

Once inside Cary shut the window, grabbed the bundle and skipped into the living room. He spent ten joyful, expectant minutes hooking the console up. Making sure the wires were run properly and

not lain about all higgledy-piggledy. His hands shook when turned the television on, inserted Street Fighter 2 into the console, and turned it on as well. Grabbing a controller, Cary's whole body now shook with anxious excitement.

This is going to be GREAT!

Minutes later he had chosen the white ninja, the guy's name was apparently Ryu. His first opponent was a pig-tailed young girl named Chun-Li. Cary's body moved side to side as he pressed the buttons in a flurry. He tried to discern which buttons caused which actions.

How do I make the ball of energy fly from the guy's hands?

I want the ball of energy!

Inexplicably, it happened. The ninja grunted and said something which sounded to Cary like the ninja character saying its own name, "Ryu!"

A mushroom-cloud-shaped ball of white energy flew from his hands. Little tracers raced behind the ball which crashed into Chun-Li. She flew upwards into the air and died.

"YES!" Cary said. "RYU!"

"What the HECK are you doin'?" A voice said angrily from behind him. Cary tossed the controller in shock. He turned around and saw one of the three boys who had been watching him carry the towel bundle earlier. The boy was tall and gangly. A year or two older than Cary at least. His face was broken out with pimples and his hair held back in a pony-tail reaching past his shoulders.

Jonathan.

He's friends with Lana.

Cary had seen Lana hanging around the three boys at the neighborhood center lot. Throwing bricks around, smoking, and teasing each other. Cary struggled to think what to say. His mouth moved. Nothing came out. Unable to think properly while he looked at the older boy Cary stared at the ground. Something about Jonathan's fine-cheekboned face was fascinating to Cary and he saw it

in his mind's eye though he stared at the slightly dusty carpet. The tinkling music of the video game was the only sound in the room.

"You ain't supposed to be in here." the other boy said. Cary flinched when Jonathan moved closer.

"I know." Cary said to the carpet.

"If Lana knew she'd beat you up."

"I know." Cary said. He shivered in fear. Not just of getting beaten up by Lana. He had gone through *that* enough to fear the humiliation more than the pain.

What if she takes the Super Nintendo back? Tells Bird?

Lana didn't want the game console. She had thrown it away after all. But if she saw Cary with it, she *would* suddenly want it again. She was predictable like that.

Jonathan loomed over Cary. His feet were just under Cary's face, occupying the space of carpet Cary had been focusing on.

"I'm not going to tell her, you know." Jonathan whispered.

"OK." Cary said, not believing him.

"Why are you so weird?"

"I don't know." Cary said. And he didn't know. He knew talking to himself was strange in others' eyes. He knew playing with action figures made him seem gay to other boys his age, something Lana readily told him. Being bad at sports and small and skinny and weak invited the other kids to torment him further. Cary knew all of this.

I can't even ride a bike, even if I had one.

You could if you were ever allowed to have one.

There was the confident version of his voice again. Cary shook it off, still staring resolutely at the carpet. Jonathan sat down cross-legged a couple of feet beyond Cary. "That's a really old game, dude." Jonathan said, his tone flat. Cary's eyes caught Jonathan's strangely slender hands caress the cartridge sticking out of the battered game console.

"I know." Cary said. He wanted to say more, like, "I know it's old

but I've never played it before and it seemed like a lot of fun. Lana wouldn't ever let me. Do you want to play?"

But those words just wouldn't make it out of his mouth.

"You're Lana's brother. You're like twelve aren't you?" Jonathan asked.

"I know." Cary said, then catching himself with a little shake of the head, he said, "Yeah. Twelve."

"Why don't you have any friends?"

"I..." Cary started to say. Something sounded from the other side of the house. It was unmistakable.

Someone climbing in through the bathroom window.

Cary gasped and got to his feet. He looked frantically around for somewhere to hide. Anywhere.

I can't get caught here!

Prolly Eric and Tommy.

They'll just pick on me and egg Jonathan into it too.

"There's a closet in the hallway..." Jonathan offered.

Cary gaped, finally made eye contact with the older boy for a second. Time slowed down and Cary considered the Lana's friend again. Studied his angular face. As if it was the first time. Jonathan's face was odd: his nose upturned and his eyes a shade too-wide giving him a look of being continually surprised. His brown eyes seemed kind and was smiling. Braces-covered teeth waved crookedly.

"OK." Cary managed to say.

Cary knew there was a closet. The house was almost a duplicate of Bird's and that was Cary's closet. But Jonathan wouldn't have known that. Cary dashed out of the living room and into the hallway, shoved himself into the dusty, dark closet and pulling the door mostly closed just open enough so he hoped he could hear. His heart thumped wildly, his breathing accelerated to quick, sharp buffs.

The closet smelled bad, like mold and dirty clothes and dirt. Cary tried to ignore it. Thoughts about dark places, spiders, bugs, and

demons were things in general he cared little about since Lana had loved locking him in closets as a toddler and screaming wildly outside the door to terrify him. Eventually he had just gotten past it.

"What are you up to Jonathan?" a girl's voice came from the living room. Cary recognized the voice with an involuntary twinge and a sinking feeling.

Lana.

"Nuttin, L. Playin' Street Fighter 2. My house is too whacked right now. Parents being evil and stuff." Jonathan said, sounding effortlessly unconcerned and cool.

"This house is empty right?" Lana said. Cary leaned into the door which caused it to move a hair, to creak with a low, soft noise.

"Shit!" Cary said and froze in fear at the sound of his own voice.

The tone of Lana's voice was so weird!

He struggled to process it. Then the answer came.

She likes Jonathan!

Either way she was definitely being nicer than she ever was to Cary.

"Yeah, I think so. The Carpenters moved out like two months ago? They left this old P.O.S. TV though. And this SNES." Cary gulped. All Lana's games were marked, and if she inspected them or the console too closely she would know they were hers. He shuddered to think what would happen then.

Don't look at the games. DON'T LOOK AT THE GAMES.

"That's cool." Lana said, almost a purr, ignoring the console, focusing on Jonathan. "So..." Cary heard movement sounds, as though someone was dragging feet across the carpet. "Empty house and just us here..."

Cary goggled, stifled a laugh at the empty darkness around him.

She is flirting with Jonathan!

"Yeah..." Jonathan said and Cary thought the other boy's voice sounded wavering. Panicked.

"So, I mean, just *us* here.." Lana said suggestively.

One of them coughed.

Jonathan.

"I gotta get home though. I been gone too long already, my Mom is gonna freak because I didn't mow the lawn."

"I thought I saw you mow it last week." Lana said, her tone gone rapidly angry. Cary didn't blame Jonathan for panicking. Lana was meaner and stronger than most boys her age, though not taller.

Who wants to kiss that?

Jonathan stuttered but eventually squeezed out a reply. "My mom... is trying this new thing about ...keeping the grass low... so,um... fleas stay away." He paused. "So yeah. I gotta run, but I'll see you at the lot tonight, right? Everyone is comin'..."

"Um. Yeah. I gotta sneak out after Bird passes out. If my shit-ass foster brother doesn't do anything stupid."

Lana said with a barked laugh. Jonathan gave a fake sounding chuckle in response.

"Totally. Right, so see you...um, later."

Footsteps.

"Mowing grass my ass." Lana said.

Jonathan was gone.

On instinct, Cary moved away from the door. Ducked under some shelving. There was nothing left to hear and he didn't want to chance making any noise which would give Lana a reason to look around.

He heard footsteps.

Sounds like she's leaving.

Cary sighed in relief and started to come out when he heard the rustle of wires and plastic. He froze.

NO! She's looking at the SNES and the games!

Unsure why he did it or what he expected to accomplish, Cary burst out of the closet and ran into one of the bedrooms. The one which corresponded to Lana's. He had locked the window in the room

earlier, but it was low to the ground and faced the front lawn and the street. Moving by adrenaline Cary unlocked the window and with a strength he didn't realize he had, thrust it upwards, and open. He turned his head and shouted behind him, a wordless shout, trying to make sure Lana didn't recognize his voice. A demonic, hate-filled shout.

I hope she's scared.

And he ran. As fast as he could, arms pumping. His feet carried him across the lawn in front of the vacant house and he rounded the house next door and ducked to the side. Cringed down beneath a large hedge-like bush twice as tall as he was. Three times as wide.

Half a minute later he heard Lana run past. He saw her feet. Panting, he leaned against the wall of the house.

It worked.

But his heart sank. Now Lana knew about the television. And the empty house.

I won't be safe there.

Cary sneaked back around the house, looking around the whole time for Lana. He started to wish she would just never come there again, but that was silly. It was nearly dark and he wondered if Lana was hurt by Jonathan's lie.

Serves her right.

He eased back into the vacant house from the bathroom window and packed up the SNES. Tucked it away in the hall closet. There was nothing he could do about the console television. Likely Lana would come back after the fright wore off. Maybe even tear the television apart, as she would have torn him apart had she known he overheard her get rejected.

Once the SNES was hidden Cary went back and locked the front bedroom window. Left the house. It was past dusk now and he knew if he didn't get home soon Bird might go out looking for him. Cary would be in truly deep trouble then.

Chapter 3

Weeks passed with little change. Bird stayed out a bit later at night, came home drunker. Neither Cary nor Lana would complain. Bird was asleep minutes after he stumbled in, passed out face-down on the sofa, reeking of cheap whiskey and cigarettes. Cary watched several times as Lana pilfered Bird's pockets of any money or smokes as he snored. She caught Cary spying on her near the end of November.

"If you ever do that again....I will beat you in your sleep you little fa..." Lana shouted. "and don't even THINK about telling Bird!"

School passed in much the same fashion. Cary both avoided others and was avoided in return. Nothing unusual there with the sole exception of Jonathan. They were not at the same school, Jonathan being a freshmen across the street at Happy Endings High. Cary in his eighth grade year at Happy Endings Middle. Yet, Jonathan often managed to catch Cary on the way in or out of school and say hello. Cary thought little of it, aside from finding he enjoyed the attention, focused as he was on getting to his hidden SNES to play Lana's old games.

"Hey... um Cary," Jonathan had said from the shadow of a pillar in front of the school, where he would lean as Cary walked by. The older boy moved in a blur and suddenly loomed over Cary. Cary shrank back in fear.

No one else was around. It was a Friday afternoon. School had let out thirty minutes prior. Cary had remained behind to avoid unnecessary contact. He blinked at Jonathan, said nothing as he shook and tried to hide it.

"So, yeah, maybe we could...um, get together at the house again, sometime? Play *Street Fighter II*?" Jonathan said as smiled hesitantly. Cary stepped backwards, he sensed a trap.

Jonathan looked alarmed and annoyed at Cary's backing up. "No

man, really, I'm not messing with you, um... I just thought. I dunno. Don't you, um... want a friend?"

The question caught Cary at such unawares he froze on the spot. His head tilted to the left as he considered Jonathan as if seeing him for the first time. The jug ears, the duplicate swaths of pimples on both cheeks, the stringy hair and the lean, gaunt stretch of the slightly older boy's shooting frame. Cary had no response to overcome his fear.

Jonathan sighed. "I guess you heard that stuff with your sister over the summer..."

"Yeah, she's been trying to get me to ask her out or make out with her ever since Tommy went with Julie and dumped Lana." Jonathan said. Cary shook bodily. *Make out?*

Jonathan paused and looked directly at Cary. "Don't talk much do you?"

Cary had no ready response. Was there a quick response for it? He couldn't be sure. Worse, he didn't know the answer to Jonathan's question. *Do I talk much?* He'd never had the opportunity with others. *Does that even count?* The corners of his mouth twitched into the start of a smile. Jonathan snickered.

"Yeah. It's cool. So, seriously man, if you want to hang out sometime, just us, it'd cool. I won't tell the guys, or.. or Lana. And don't worry, I promise not to be a jerk to you like they are."

Cary blinked several times in rapid succession. It sounded nice and warming to hear from Jonathan. *What about when you've been a jerk in the past?* As the words sunk in Cary realized he wanted to believe Jonathan. Wanted to hang out with Jonathan. The idea of having a friend, though rather alien, was suddenly quite compelling. As if he had never considered it before.

"OK." Cary finally said. He stared dead at the sidewalk as he said it, little above a mumble, using the toe of his shoe to trace an arc across the cement.

Jonathan twittered a little laugh. "Cool. I'll be around the...house,

tomorrow, after ten in the morning...''

Is he nervous? Why would Jonathan be nervous?

Cary wanted to agree, his throat just wouldn't work. Instead his feet decided to take control and he jogged lightly away, thoroughly confused. Still, he really hoped Jonathan would be there the next day, even if Cary didn't, or couldn't, go.

After making it home, Cary did his chores and avoided Lana except for two quick run-ins. Both of which ended with hard slaps to the back of the head. He had himself secreted under the covers of the bed in the small guest room before it was fully dark outside.

He was too excited to sleep however. His mind rolled over things to talk about with Jonathan, made lists. He hoped doing so would make easier for him to actually be able to talk with the other boy. Cary worried about his lack of skill with Lana's old video games. *Would that make Jonathan second guess being friends?* He also worried about Lana showing up. *How would they get out of that?*

Before Bird made it home, nearly three hours after dark, Cary fell into a fitful sleep.

He had a vivid, lurid dream...

Jonathan and Cary sat two feet apart, cross-legged on the dusty carpet of the vacant house, playing Street Fighter 2. Cary played the white ninja, Ryu; Jonathan the handsome, blond twin of Ryu, Ken. Unlike Jonathan, Cary wasn't using a controller, he sat in front of the television reading a book aloud and everything he read, every word he spoke, Ryu did. Jonathan simply could not keep up. It was a massacre which ended with Cary saying out loud, "RYU!"

It was followed by a ball of white energy shooting from the Ryu's hands, killing Jonathan's Ken. The room went entirely dark. Voices screeched wordlessly from the surrounding darkness, like birds cawing as they swooped down towards prey. Jonathan looked frightened and alarmed. Cary was merely curious. The darkness lit up: in an instant it flashed to a brilliant and

blinding white. Cary covered his eyes with his arm and barely saw Jonathan do the same just before the light grew too bright to endure. From behind his arm and closed eyes Cary felt the light dim. He opened his eyes and standing there was a shape of darkness, the outline of a human being. Two arms, two legs, a chest, a head and a midsection. The entire body haloed by an undulating white sheen. The head was featureless black in the shape of a human head. Eyes flashed open and they were a ghastly red. Cary screamed.

Cary sat up, panting in bed. It was chilly in his room; dark and quiet outside. The sounds of the television from the living room were low. Even Bird's snoring was muted. Bleary, Cary rolled over to look at the wall clock. It was nearly four in the morning. He yawned and rolled back over. Tried to go back to sleep, but could not. The excitement of his upcoming meeting with Jonathan wouldn't let him.

Instead he got up and went to the bathroom. Lana's door was shut, likely locked.

She might not even be in there.

After he brushed his teeth and washed his face, Cary soft-footed to the living room and checked on Bird.

As usual. Face down on the sofa. Snoring. At least I don't have to deal with his drunken bullsh....

Something hooted in the night and Cary froze. He sighed. *Just an owl or something.* Bird's stale liquor reek soured the room. His clothes appeared unchanged. *He's been wearing the same Wrangler jeans and ratted plaid button-down for half-a-week at least.* Cary crept to the kitchen and poured himself a bowl of off-brand Corn Flakes. Which he ate with water. There was no milk in the fridge.

By five in the morning Cary was dressed, ready to go. He softly opened the carport door and gently closed it, breathing in heavy, but controlled gasps. *I can't believe I'm sneaking out. I'll be hanging out with Lana next.* He laughed. *Fat chance!*

Cary left for the vacant house. He was just past the driveway

when a car roared down the street. Unsure why, Cary ducked behind a bush and lowered himself so he could not be seen. The car came to a stop in front of the driveway of Cary's house and the car door opened, releasing a prodigious cloud of smoke. As if emerging from a cloud, Lana stepped out. She turned and leaned back into the car, swaying like Bird in full drunk-mode. Lana said something loud and raucous to whomever was inside. Cary could not make out the words. She turned away and slammed the door, but over-extended herself and fell down, laughing hard as the car revved up and sped away, tires squealing. Lana glanced around as her laugh died off. She struggled back to her feet, a mighty effort. In slow, halting steps she made her way up the drive, several times pausing and swaying before continuing on. Cary watched from behind the bush until she made it inside and shut the door behind her.

Taking a deep breath, he was off.

Minutes later Cary climbed inside the bathroom of the vacant house. He had not been inside in weeks. Not since the first time. Nothing looked different, even the television seemed untouched. Cary sighed in relief. He got out the SNES and hooked it up. Began playing.

At least I can get better at it. Before Jonathan gets here. Cary played for hours, unaware of the light blooming outside, or the chirping of birds. The passing of the occasional car. Nothing drew his attention away from the game. He stayed with Ryu the entire time and eventually figured out the secret of the ball of energy. The first time he understood the proper keys to press on the controller, a memory of his strange dream returned. *I wish my life was like part of the dream, wish I could just read from a book, imagine, and wish things into reality.* For a moment his mind became distracted by far off visions of what he could do with such ability. But the game drew him back.

Cary was immersed hours later and Jonathan was able to come in and get all the way into the living room before Cary was aware.

"Wow," Jonathan's voice said from behind Cary. "you're pretty

good.”

Cary would have shrieked if he could have found his voice. But no sound came out of his mouth. He did drop the controller, jumped halfway to his feet in shock, prepared to make a run for it.

“Whoa!” Jonathan said, holding both hands up. “Um... I didn't mean to startle you there...” He was laughing, uncomfortably, but though Cary's first reaction was to assume the other boy was laughing at him, Jonathan's expression said otherwise. “Calm down, we're friends remember? Right?”

Cary's mouth closed. *Are we?* He looked down at the carpet and nodded. As he stared downward, he smiled.

Friends. I have a friend?

He looked up and his smile faded.

“So, you like playing Ryu, I see?” Jonathan said, sitting down and grabbing the second controller Cary had meticulously lain out. Hesitantly, Cary sat back down as well.

“I like Blanca. That electricity thing he does is cool.” Jonathan said.

They restarted the game. Chose their characters. Jonathan made small talk the entire time, and much to Cary's surprise, seemed fine with Cary's lack of response. It was soon comfortable enough Cary could almost speak back.

“It would be so *cool* to do this kind of stuff, like for real, you know?” Jonathan said, laughing. “I read a lot, fantasy stuff mostly, like Jordan and Tolkien and stuff...and” Jonathan looked sheepish. “Harry Potter. Man, can you imagine what it would be like if we could do magic?”

Cary went rigid at the mention of Harry Potter. Harry Potter was his favorite series. He had battered, stolen copies of every book. Had read most of them several times. He turned to look wide-eyed at Jonathan, who noticed and returned a quizzical glance.

“Yeah...?” Jonathan murmured.

"Magic." Cary said, his first words. Jonathan didn't make a big deal of the first thing Cary had managed to say. He seemed to understand.

"You've read Harry Potter, then? He's so...I don't know. I'd rather be Draco. But. Yeah magic would be the bomb dot com!"

Cary nodded and he smiled.

They went back to the game without talking again for some time.

Several hours later, Cary had managed to win more than half the matches at Street Fighter. He got further along in Earthworm Jim and Final Fantasy 2 than Jonathan, though the other boy had clearly played both games before. Even better, Cary managed to get several more, whole sentences out. By the time Jonathan had to go, sometime around three in the afternoon, they were almost conversing.

"So, you'll be going to Happy Endings High this fall right?" Jonathan said as they packed the SNES up and hid it back in-the hallway closet.

"Yeah." Cary said. "It's not bad is it?"

Jonathan laughed. "Nah. I mean, it can be. But most of the idiots are much more concerned with getting cigarettes and booze than anything else. Or school dances. Dating." The way Jonathan said this made it clear he thought little of these things. Cary thought he might feel the same way. After years of living with Bird he had absolutely no desire to drink or smoke. The very idea of dancing terrified him like Bird on a bender or Lana with a baseball bat.

No one would ever date me.

When they were done packing the games and SNES console into the closet, they headed for the bathroom window. Jonathan turned back to Cary and said, "Tomorrow, same time?"

Cary, again unable to speak, nodded. Jonathan climbed up on the toilet tank and out the window. Ten minutes later Cary was at home wrists deep in soiled water, catching up on chores. Lana was just waking up, having slept the day away from her all-night outing. Her

face drawn and haggard, her skin slightly green as though she might throw chunks. Bird and his truck had been blessedly gone since before Cary got back home.

I guess she got hammered last night. She's just like Bird.

"I'm hungry." Lana said, by way of greeting. In a tone of command. Cary frowned and kept washing dishes. Lana pulled out a chair and sit down. A moment later she was snoring, head down on the table. Cary tried to wash the dishes quietly, hoping she would stay asleep long enough for him to finish. Unfortunately he accidentally dropped a cup on the floor. It didn't break, but the noise jolted Lana awake.

"Make me some cereal Cary, I feel like sh...." Lana said, her hoarse voice breaking into a cough. He turned back to see her head sway and her cheeks bulge dangerously. Cary sighed and grabbed a just-washed bowl, and the box of off-brand Corn Flakes. He was tempted to do something foul to the cereal: spit in it, put dirty dishwater in it but found he couldn't.

Lana grunted and said, "Be quiet, gah."

Cary smacked the bowl of cereal and water on the table in front of Lana.

"No milk?" Lana grumbled. Cary shook his head. "Bird hasn't gone to the store in two weeks."

Lana said something under her breath which would have earned her a heavy slap had Bird been around to hear it. Cary went back to the sink and finished up. He drained the sink, put away the dried dishes as Lana slowly gulped down her remaining water-logged flakes. She complained to herself the whole time.

Hours later, Cary lay in bed, trying to catch sleep, and found himself unable. Whole new worlds had suddenly opened up as he imagined himself in the coming year at Happy Endings High...

...with a friend.

Whenever the mean voice in his head, which sounded

suspiciously like Lana, would say “He won't *WANT* to be your friend when other people are around!” Cary would shake his head lightly and dispel the voice. Eventually he fell asleep.

Eventually, Cary fell asleep, happy.