

In 1964, four Chicano youths help a runaway white girl.

Westward Eden

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WESTWARD EDEN

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Joaquin Batista

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DEDICATION

To all the *pochitos* of 1964

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual, persons, living or dead; events, or locales is entirely coincidental. Note: although the existence of Oak Grove School is real, the Gifted Children Class is purely fictional.

I couldn't tell whether it was a dream or not. Either way, I struggled against a fog that grew thicker with each passing second, swaddling me in misty cotton wool. Nothing like this had ever happened before. One moment I'd been walking through a pristine meadow hedged with redwoods and the next, a blanket of moisture fell on me without warning.

I flailed against the clammy clouds, shouting, "Maxey, Adán, Emily, Kenny..."

Anguish wracked me at the thought of Kenny. Why? I couldn't remember. He'd always been there with me on this hike.

It got colder. Dampness seeped into my muscles and joints.

Where are those guys? Then something entered into the swirling fog. A ball of light pierced the mists, and grew brighter, spreading warmth that melted away the numbing cold. The heat. Oh, that blessed heat. Then the orb pitched forward but didn't reach me. It fell to the ground, bursting into flames.

I leapt back; roiling smoke and shooting flames took on a life of their own. A frenzied brush fire raced toward me.

The blaze raced alongside me, nearly trapping me in its fiery snare. As if the situation wasn't hot enough, the billowing smoke rippled and parted and a huge transparent mask loomed above me. If I knew my anthropology, I'd say it was a Mayan design. And it was coming at me! I ran even harder.

The mask's eyes glowed; then it shouted: "Marty, turn to your left, leap through the smoke and keep running!" I recognized that voice: The Gnome Eye!

I had trouble with the concept of trusting an eerie, airborne mask, but at the moment I didn't have an idea how to stop from being burned alive! I leapt through the smoke and landed on grassy ground. Was the blaze real? I didn't stick around to find out.

The earth rolled beneath me. Something was erupting out of the ground ahead. Whatever it was, it was my only chance. As I got closer, I recognized it: a rock-faced rise. I leapt—and landed upright on it with both feet! At this point I knew it was a dream: that rise was ten feet high.

Instantly it was encircled by a sea of flames.

Was I safe—or had I just jumped from the frying pan?

Suddenly, a shadow loomed over me. I turned and saw a silhouetted giant—wielding a gleaming scythe. I screamed.

Like the Gnome Eye, the Grim Reaper's eyes glowed. He stepped up to me. I darted around him. But where could I go? The rocky rise was fifty feet wide. I wondered how long I could duck that scythe if he chose to come after me.

Surprisingly, the Reaper proved to be more of a sentinel than soul catcher. He seemed frozen to the spot. "Marty, I'm sorry I'm late."

I turned around to that voice. Kenny was behind me.

"Is that you?"

"Yep. But don't worry, we'll get out of this predicament."

I gasped. The Grim Reaper wasn't real anymore—he had changed into a billboard! Thirteen-year-old Kenny sensing my distress, stepped up to the Reaper, and with the palm of his hand, tipped over the monstrous board. It fell with a crash. Kenny turned back to me. "Feeling better, Marty?"

I was tongue-tied, but not for long. "What's going on, Kenny? What does all this mean?"

"It means that our tour has come to an end. By tonight, you won't be dreaming about us any longer."

So it was a dream. But why would I be dreaming of Kenny—I reeled; the confusion was making me dizzy. I stumbled near the edge of the rise, but Kenny caught me before I fell. "Careful, Marty. You aren't going out—yet. I have some explaining to do before you go."

Yes ... I was starting to see through all this, and didn't like it at all. There I stood, ragged and covered with soot, but Kenny was squeaky-clean with his scout shirt, neckerchief, and that game warden hat of his. He hadn't changed at all.

He looked the same as he had in '64—twenty years ago. And so did I. My mind folded in on itself. I was thirteen again.

"Don't try to rationalize it, Marty. I'll do the talking. Remember the campground where we all stayed overnight? And when I woke up crying and said that 'I might be seeing you, Maxey, Adán and Emily twenty

years into the future.’ Marty, that future is now, and it’s here but you won’t be dreaming of me anymore.”

“No!” I yelled. Though I was experiencing a mental melt-down, I understood where it all was leading: this private world of mine had kept Kenny alive all these years. Now it was falling apart. “You’re not going to die!” I screamed, grabbing him by the shirt collar.

Kenny gripped me in return, his expression controlled but caring. “Trust me, Marty. The end of this dream world of yours isn’t the wrap-up finale for me, but a new beginning for both of us!”

Suddenly everything blurred as if the rise were trying to shake us off. “An earthquake?” I sputtered, both of us hanging on to each other.

The quake started to crack the rise into slabs, which slid downward into the jaws of the inferno.

The fire rushed closer.

The rumbling grew louder.

The rocky surface swayed and rose like an ice floe. Kenny caught me before I fell into a fissure that had opened before us.

“Kenny—we’re gonna die!”

“Not if I can help it, Marty!”

Staggering to my feet didn’t help as we both skidded to another fissure. Kenny was right: everything was coming to a head.

The rise splintered into larger cracks, edging us closer to the fiery depths. I shut my eyes. The sound of crashing rock shattered my ears.

“Marty—this world is going down, but you’ll wake up from it!” Kenny soothed me.

The rumbling made my bones shake.

“Hang on, Marty! Here we go-o-o-o-o!”

The rock floor buckled and dropped. We fell. Kenny held on to me, not letting go. Below, the flames rushed to greet us.

I tried to scream but couldn’t; free-fall took my breath away.

With a thundering groan, the sky fell.

Sunrise

I snapped awake and found myself back in my 1984 world at my parents' place. I looked around, relieved that I was no longer plunging into the fiery depths.

Traumatic as the nightmare was, I couldn't ask for a better wake-up call. The brilliant morning light streamed through the bedroom window. With such a glorious sight, who'd believe I'd just come back from hell. And despite everything, I'd overslept. Jet lag will do it to you.

Marty—don't block me out along with the nightmare. I'm still here, you know. We have an appointment with destiny! See you tonight!

Yeah, Kenny. I know exactly what my role is tonight. I'm just not sure of yours. But that's okay. You'll surprise me—as always.

I walked to the window. More than anything else, I needed some fresh air.

Though the oak and maple trees were shedding their leaves it was still September. The distant hills and mountains to the west stood ageless. I looked at my watch: it said 10 a.m. Though I'd awakened late, it didn't matter. I had plenty of time to prepare myself for tonight's event in Santa Rosa.

I pulled away from the window, yanked on a sweater and went downstairs. As I reached the bottom steps, I could smell breakfast; it reeled me into the kitchen like an expert angler. On the round wooden table were pancakes, cereal, coffee and eggs kept warm under covered dishes. I poured syrup over the pancakes and dipped my fork in.

There was a note next to the milk pitcher. Mom and Dad respected my wishes to be alone most of the day. I guess my talk with them last night was convincing: I needed some time to myself before going to tonight's Children's Rescue Foundation Shelter event. Besides, they would be scouring the Santa Rosa department stores for clothes to wear. They appreciated the importance of the foundation event. They saw the ceremony as a positive outcome of the tragedy that had occurred twenty years ago.

The phone rang right on cue. I'd instructed my assistant to call me when all the principal members agreed to attend.

"Mr. Montmajour, all the members have indicated they'll all be present tonight." I could tell the poor bastard had been up all night, securing their commitments to attend the event.

"Just the same, James, read out the list." I had to hear it for myself. I had to know.

"Mr. and Mrs. Gonzales, Mr. and Mrs. Ozuna, and Miss Spinoza."

"Anything else I should know?"

"Nothing that I can think of. Everything is going according to plan, sir."

"James—take the weekend off and get caught up on some sleep."

"Yes, sir." I heard the dead space of the dial tone. James had earned his rest. He'd done the dirty work I should've done myself. Have I become a coward at the ripe old age of thirty-three, Kenny?

That's a non sequitur, Marty! Only the most cowardly are capable of being the most heroic.

Kenny, no one is aware of the whole story. I'm not even sure of it myself. Those who didn't know you can only conclude that you were an innocent, a momma's boy...and a voice that now exists in my head.

Can't you just accept what has happened? See you there, Marty!

A large display case in the living room was filled with framed photos. I studied the pictures of Dad, Mom, myself, and our relatives. And of Adán, Maxey, and of course, Kenny. My best friends. The brothers I never had. All of us in our summer shorts. Autumn in Ives Park. Hunting Easter eggs. I picked up a black and white photo in a silver frame: this must have been Mom's doing. A portrait of Kenny—with that permanent upbeat expression. I turned the frame over. On the back it read "Kenny's Seventh Grade picture, Spring 1964."

It was all so hard to accept—all so unfair! But the memories began to pour and I couldn't stop them.

The Gifted Child

September 1964, my fourth attempt for first prize at the Science Faire project. I was determined to win. My last attempt had only netted an honorable mention. Not good enough! President Kennedy had said that the future of America was through the sciences. It was almost a year since his death, but his vision was very much alive in me.

Honorable Mention certificate? The hell with it! I'd crumpled it up and tossed it in the ditch on my way home. I also believed in something else President Kennedy said: that you couldn't succeed in life by being second best. The Montmajours are born winners. Including me—Marty (Martín), former seventh grader. Two weeks from now I'd be an eighth grader at Oak Grove Elementary. I had one more year to win that First Prize. And to live up to my nickname, "The Whiz Kid."

I glanced out the classroom window. It was almost three in the afternoon. Oak Grove school is on a hilltop. From the classroom window, I can see what a plain town Graton is with its general store, gas station, two bars and post office. But the sinuous street that winds from the school to Graton is lined with lush pine and spruce, typical of the small towns and hamlets that flank the rugged hills of western Sonoma County, California.

Other towns in the West County weren't as comfortably well off as Graton—particularly those that nested ten miles away along the Russian River. From Rio Nido to Monte Rio they were poor and rundown. Our town was luckier than most because the Gravenstein apple industry provided jobs and income for the local residents. Too bad about those river towns. They'd had their high moments with logging and summer resorts. That's all gone now; the river communities are shabby remnants of what they once were.

Their grammar schools fell into the same poverty-stricken quagmire. Yet our school not only put out its best effort for us kids but was very progressive with its Gifted Children Class. Oak Grove was way ahead of its time.

What was also special about Oak Grove Elementary School was the ethnic mixture of the enrollment. Many in the Graton Community approved of the racial diversity within the gifted class but there were

others who did not. Not the class, mind you. They just felt “certain” kids didn’t deserve to be in the Gifted Children Class and were somehow getting a free ride.

During the summer months the gifted kids met for one period, two hours a day not to make up for lousy grades during the school year but to supplement our studies for the coming school season.

I had only one thing in mind—to win that first prize in next year’s Science Faire. How could I win it? I’d began to think that there might be more to it than study and research. Did the Fates demand something else from me in order to succeed? Kenny once said that truly heroic efforts always achieved their goals. Maybe there was nothing heroic about my projects. Maybe to be worthy I had to pass a trial that included personal sacrifice. Was I ready? I wondered.

What I didn’t know at the time was that it would involve a girl named Emily.

Bobby Sox & Lace

I didn't really know her at all. I remembered seeing her two years before, on the school playground during recess. Once when we passed each other in the hallway, I caught her looking at me. It was a nice smile that curved up easily. Her bright indigo eyes smiled too. But that was the extent of it.

She had her downside. She was kept back a grade. A “problem” child, she was transferred to the opposite end of the school, the restricted area—where all “troubled” kids wound up. Soon I had forgotten her name.

Now she came up to me as I was walking home. If I hadn't known better, I'd have thought she'd been waiting for me. She wore a dainty white sweater and a blue and white striped skirt. Her shoes were pretty, sparkling blue with frilly white bobby sox. The ribbon in her dark hair was also blue and white. She also wore gloves—white gloves.

“You're Marty Montmajour. Can I walk with you?” Her smile was better than ever. “I'm Emily Spinoza.”

Emily—that was her name. I remembered it then. Despite her having called me by name, I had to fight off the notion that she was talking to someone else. Involuntarily I looked behind me. I wasn't exactly what you'd call a “lover boy.” Nor was I lucky enough to have a pretty girl like Emily single me out!

“Sure, Emily. Hi,” I managed to respond. I didn't want to let on that I had forgotten her name. I wanted to appear cool. “What can I do for you, Emily?” Oh how stupid! How stupid could one get? She hadn't gotten dolled up just to ask me to help with her homework.

“I heard you're some special guy, and I wanted to get to know you. Want to walk me home, Marty?” This was too good to be true. Was it so easy? Instantaneous girlfriend? Though she was pleasant enough to look at two years before, now she'd grown taller and had a fantastic neckline—was I up to walking her home? Did I have any choice over walking home with a kid-version of Diane Baker?

Diane Baker had to be Mom's favorite actress. I mean, she dragged me along to see all those womanly movies like “Stolen Hours” and “The Best of Everything.” Though I complained, I found Baker very pretty,

especially in the film preview of an upcoming movie, “Mirage,” though I wasn’t about to tell Mom that.

Soon Ross Road was dead ahead of us. I hadn’t planned to walk anywhere near that area. Not just because it was in the opposite direction from where I lived, but it led to “No Man’s Land” for kids like me. Bookworms were “easily” squished on Ross Road. It depressed me to think that Emily lived there. I suggested we stop first at The Fountain for a soda. Along the sidewalk near the town hangout stood a high wooden fence—the kind that Tom Sawyer wouldn’t tackle with a ten-foot paintbrush. Above the fence leaned five kids whose main purpose in life was to stomp kids like me into the turf.

I recognized two of the five. Charlie Jacinto and his sidekick, Woody Palo. The other three I didn’t know—or particularly want to.

“Hey, guys—get a load of what’s walking our way! It’s Marty Monkey-man-jerk, the Whiz Kid!” Charlie laughed. His buddies joined in. The catcalls and wolf whistles echoed to the back lot as they slapped their palms and hammered their fists on the fence. Emily obviously was appreciated. A twisted expression crossed Charlie’s face. “Hey, Marty—who’s your white squeeze? She looks hurt—hurtin’ for a real man!”

“I’m doing just fine, Charlie. And so are you—sitting on the sidelines where you belong.” I knew my big mouth would cost me. I didn’t care.

“*Chale*, Marty. Guess what—I’m gonna do a scientific experiment with you. Which is gonna bust open first? My knuckles or your face?” He dropped a leg over the fence.

Woody quickly pulled him back and whispered something loud enough for me to hear. “Charlie, better not do it! Don’t you remember? Marty is in tight with *El Maldito!*” (That magic name had worked prior miracles for me.)

Charlie’s eyes grew wide as doorknobs. First he looked at Woody, then at me, then back again at Woody. Instantly, all five slid behind the fence and Emily and I were left to ourselves once more.

Emily looked calmly at me. Charlie & Co.’s chest pounding hadn’t disturbed her in the slightest. Something didn’t quite add up here.

“It’s getting awfully warm, Marty. Lets get some sodas. I know I picked the right boy to walk home with.”

The Inscriptress

The strawberry frosty went down smoothly—just as advertised. But Emily's interest in me made me suspicious.

"Marty, I need to ask you a favor." She'd finished her drink before me. From the hesitation in her voice, I could tell she expected something more than just helping with her homework.

"I need you to take me to Monte Rio to meet up with my step-mom at the River's End trailer court."

Monte Rio? The tackiest town in Sonoma County? Just as I suspected. No homework! I would have preferred that.

"Emily, there are cars and buses that can take you where you want to go easier than..." I stopped. Emily angrily knitted her brow. Not a good sign.

"I know that! Who do you think you ..." she clammed up. Did she worry that her cute little act was becoming too obvious?

"What I mean, Marty," her cloying sweetness returned, "... is that I can't be seen on the bus—especially by my Dad's friends. To be honest with you, Marty, I'm running away from him to meet up with my step-mom."

"Your step-mom is not living with you?"

"Dad divorced Mom—kicked her out." The bitterness in her tone was genuine. "I want to be with her, not with him. I called her one night and said I wanted out and why. So we cooked up a plan. We figured once I got to her place we'd split from Sonoma County and get as far away as possible."

"Won't your dad head straight to her place once he notices you're missing?"

"Nope. Dad thinks Mom's living in Guerneville, not at the River's End Trailer Court. When he looks for me he'll be running in circles, following one dead lead after another. Mom and I'll be home free—elsewhere."

I rose out of the chair. "Running away is one thing, but my helping you is even worse—for me, that is."

Emily gently touched my wrist with her gloved hand, pleading for support. “Marty, this isn’t a game I’m playing. I have to leave. Y’see, my Dad beats on me. I can’t take it anymore.” Her eyes moistened.

“You can go to the school counselor or the police...”

“And they’ll believe me, right! They know I’m nothing but a troublemaker—a problem child.”

All of this was too fantastic. Too sudden.

“Emily... maybe all this isn’t as bad as you think it is.”

“No? You tell me what I’m supposed to think about this!” Then she took off her sweater and I was shocked by the bruises—a bunch of them—like tattoos along both her arms. She lifted her blouse to show me more bruises on her waist. “Still say I’m snowin’ you?”

“No. But they’re the proof you need for the police.”

“Thought about that. They’d take me away from Dad—for a while; then I find myself in a children’s home. He’d swear to be good and not to hit me anymore, then I’d be sent back to him.”

“Maybe your father will learn from his mistakes...”

“It’s me who’s gonna learn from my mistake! He said if I ever finked on him, he’d finish me off.” Emily tilted her head to one side and made a sound like bones breaking.

“Think about it, Marty. I’ll make sure before I croak, the marker on my stone will read, ‘Thanks for nothing, Marty Montmajour.’ ”

Stunned speechless, I wondered if it might happen—and would it be my fault? Emily pulped to death? No!

“Why me, Emily? There must be others who would be more helpful...”

“Because you’re honest and true. And you’ve been in the Boy Scouts. You know your way around. And also, I heard Marty Montmajour’s word is gold. That’s what I heard. Is it true or just a pack of lies?”

I was flattened against the wall—and flattered. Emily saw me as heroic.

Maybe it’s time to live out my destiny and commit myself to this mission of mercy: The Rescue of Emily Spinoza!

“And,” she continued, “we’ve got to go back country or Dad will find us before we get there.”

“All right, Emily. I’ll do it. I’ll round up some of the guys and make it like a weekend excursion. But it has got to be my way.”

“Oh, Marty—you’re wonderful!” She leaned across the table and kissed me on the lips. Wow!

Mission of Mercy

The next day I went to the multi-purpose room to meet up with the guys. In the summer we gifted kids had access to any room in the school. They sat at a large table, going over their final assignments for the summer. My plan to break the news about Emily would be a bomb exploding our previous getaway plans, an overnight camp-out at the McMillan's outer meadow.

Adán Gonzales sat next to me. He was a great kid. And most unusual. Too bad most of the kids—except in the gifted class—thought he was the spookiest, most dangerous kid in town. His black hair and cinnamon skin highlighted distinct Mayan features. During Social Studies classes, kids learned how artistic—and magical—the ancient Mayans were. However, the stories of enchantment and spells of the Meso-American people didn't help Adán's reputation as the dreaded Gnome Eye. Adán, you see, could make his eyes glow.

According to the doctors, his condition was caused by an odd combination of adrenaline and an unusual retina arrangement—it made his eyes glow like a cat's eye during the day.

But that didn't explain why kids were able to “feel” the full impact of his gaze—especially at night. I should have asked him to volunteer for a science experiment, but who would have wanted to be the guinea pig? The only friends he had were in this class!

Maxey Ozuna was a combination of James Dean and Jimmy Cagney. A tougher kid you'll never meet. He could scowl like no other. Where he lived, he had to look mean. The smallest of the four of us, he stood up against the toughest punks in Graton with his infamous grimace and wiry strength. Luckily our school principal discovered Maxey had a aptitude for mathematics and persuaded his dad to enter him in the gifted class. His father was a whole lot tougher than any punk Maxey was likely to come up against.

Then there was Kenny, Kenny Oseguera, our literary genius. Although he was the biggest and strongest of us, we had to look after him as if he was a baby brother. His mother boasted of their Castilian heritage full of noble knights and proud conquistadors, but Kenny took

all this in stride. He wasn't conceited about it. In fact, vanity never entered his mind.

It was time to drop the bomb—that is, during the next break period.

The dreaded moment came. Adán, Maxey, and Kenny had finished their snacks. We were all in the multi-purpose room, discussing our weekend camping trip to celebrate the end of the summer extension course.

"Uh, guys, there's been a slight change of plans for the weekend. I invited another kid to come along with us."

"Someone else?" Maxey shot plaintively. "This is kinda sudden. What's the lowdown, Marty? Getting paid? Your face in the *Sebastopol Times* for a good deed? Daddy twisting your arm? No—wait, it's a science experiment, right?" Maxey was pissed; he doesn't like surprises.

I felt a little embarrassed—it wasn't anything related to Maxey's suggestions. I wished it was.

Kenny noticed I was in trouble. "Hey Marty, you have my full support! Is it anyone we know?"

Adán propped his feet on the desk. "I got this funny feeling it's gonna cost. Big time." His eyes seemed to brighten—and it wasn't the warm and fuzzy kind of brightness. It was the kind that blazoned "Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!" But he went along with Kenny. "Our last camp-out was boring."

"See?" Kenny leaped from his desk and went behind me, patting my shoulder. "Adán agrees! Whoever he is—he's welcome! I'm right behind you on this!" he beamed at me.

"You'd better watch out, Marty," Maxey snickered. "Kenny's bubbling over again. He might lose control of himself where he's at, heh-heh."

Both Adán and Maxey giggled.

"What is it, Maxey? Are you teasing me again?" Kenny leaned on Maxey's desk. His weight strained the desk. Maxey wasn't impressed. "Maxey, if you're teasing me—stop it!"

"Kenny, did anyone tell you you're real cute when you're rattled?" Maxey shot back. This time the giggling was louder.

Kenny lost his voice and dropped his head. He was defeated.

Poor Kenny, he could never take on an aggressive posture. It wasn't in his nature.

Maxey's smile vanished to be replaced by his sourpuss grin. "Well, Marty? Who's the Birthday Boy?"

"Guess what, guys? It isn't a boy." I answered.

Adán shot up from his desk. "Aw shit. *I knew it!*"

"*A girl?*" Maxey and Kenny chorused.

Maxey's grin spread wider, menacing. "What's she promised you, Marty? A big wet kiss?"

"No. I already got that."

"She promised—*more?*" Maxey was the worldly one among us.

"Way to go, Marty! You finally woke up—and smelled the panties."

"Maxey! —How crude!" Kenny shouted. "If Marty invited her, you can rest assured it was for a noble cause!"

"All right, Marty, let's have the rest of it. Spill it—what's her name?" Maxey was getting annoyed.

"Emily Spinoza." A quizzical look was tossed around like a hot potato.

"I don't know that name," Maxey said. "Either she's a rich girl or one that lives down on Ross Road.

Kenny got curious. "Why there?"

"Lotta girls out there don't use their real names—mostly handles—you know, nicknames." Maxey turned to me. "Go on, describe her."

I did, down to the minutest detail.

"Only one girl comes to mind—but trust me, you're the last kid in the world she'd ever kiss!" He gave me a sharp look.

"Oh, Marty—we're in the middle of a mystery!" Kenny said, brimming with excitement.

"Still, the girl you described wouldn't wear a dress. She's a tomboy. She's been snowin' you. But there's more, right?" Maxey persisted.

I told him of Emily's intentions.

Kenny gasped. Adán's gaze pierced me. Maxey stared, too, and rose from his seat, his hand gripping the desk. For a moment, hard emotions swirled in him. We stared at each other like tomcats. Then he exhaled.

"Have you totally flipped? You want the cops to push their way up your—our butts? If her old man gets wind of this, we'll all be in deep

shit! I don't know about you, Marty—but the lights under a line-up are way too hot!”

“That’s okay, Maxey. You don’t have to come along.” He got the message. He knew by the look on my face, I had made up my mind. Then I turned to the others. “So, are you with me?”

“A Mission of Mercy for Emily Spinoza—who could resist the challenge? Yeah, Marty!” Kenny said gleefully.

Adán wasn’t as excited as Kenny, but agreed to come along too. “Like I said, it’s been boring, hasn’t it?”

“Okay, okay! Let’s get organized here. First, we use our scout shirts to get past the town—I’ll get Emily one tomorrow.”

“Scout’s shirt?” Kenny voiced. “What’s scouting have to do with Emily’s mission?”

“Because, Kenny,” I explained, “Maxey says Emily’s a tomboy. If she just wore hiking clothes, she’d be easily recognized and wouldn’t get to see her mom. But disguised as a Boy Scout with sunglasses and a hat for her hair, who’ll know the difference?”

“Perfect!” Adán jumped in. “The disguise should fool anyone. We can march right through the middle of town and no one will be the wiser!”

“Like I said, we’ll all wear our scout shirts and neckerchiefs. Plus jeans and any kind of hat we want. At least we won’t have to dress completely like scouts—just enough to fool the town folks. Besides, by eleven a.m., most of the people are either at Memorial Beach or out picking apples.”

“Marty—how brilliant! Heroism becomes you!” Kenny said.

“Okay,” I said, “We’ll get supplies at Spooner’s and ...”

Maxey sat quietly, still not impressed.

When the three of us walked out of the multi-purpose room and into the hallway around the corner, Maxey lagged behind.

I stopped quickly, motioning the guys to wait. I counted on Maxey’s bravado to push him into our adventure. He wasn’t the type to be left out—even if we chose to jump off a cliff. And who would buddy up to him if we were gone? No other kid in this town liked him. We were it! Then the echo of his hollering reached us. “Wait—you lunkheads!”

Someone's got to show you guys how to shuffle them leg irons we'll be wearing while we're building the new Highway 101 North!"

As soon as he spun around the corner into hallway, Maxey slammed into Kenny, bounced off him like a ball, sending him sprawling on the floor.

Both Adán and I reached down to help him up. "Hey, did anyone get the license plate of that kid?" Maxey babbled.

Kenny remained standing with his hands folded behind him. He tilted his tousled head to one side and snickered, "Like you said, Maxey, you're real cute when you're rattled!"

By Rodin's Hands

"Are you finished, gentlemen?"

Our attention was riveted by that icy voice, including the dazed Maxey. Mrs. Stevenson, our gifted class teacher, stood before us. She frowned upon any counter-productive activity—including horseplay.

"Maxey, are you all right?" The concern didn't come from Mrs. Stevenson but from her instructional aide, Miss Charlotte Carver. She knelt in front of Maxey, "Can you stand?"

"Sure, Miss Carver. It's just a concussion, you know. I crashed into Kenny." The aide pulled Maxey to his feet. He didn't want her help but didn't stop her either.

She turned to Kenny. "Are you all right, Kenny?" she asked with more concern.

"Sure, Miss Carver. I'm quite durable."

"Now that you gentlemen have yourselves under control, how about moving some books from the multi-purpose room to the resource center before you're excused for the summer?" Mrs. Stevenson asked.

She was cashing in on our excess energy. Still, we could make short work of those books with plenty of time to head for Spooner's. "Okay, Mrs. Stevenson. Just for an hour. We have big camp-out plans for the weekend."

"My, my, such an enterprising endeavor to celebrate the end of the summer session," Mrs. Stevenson declared.

Mrs. Stevenson was very strict with us. But one thing was clear: without her support, we wouldn't even be enrolled in the class. Some school board members had actually opposed our being there.

Though they didn't think alike, both teacher and aide were in complete agreement on one thing: they thought the world of Kenny.

As I put the last of the books in the resource room, I overheard: "Such an exquisite boy our Kenny truly is," Mrs. Stevenson enthused. "Totally *marble*-ous, as though he was fashioned by Auguste Rodin's own hands—don't you think?"

"Yes, Mrs. Stevenson," Charlotte gushed. Most guys couldn't stand Kenny's chiseled good looks, but women loved him. Tall for his age,

bright as well as good looking, Kenny Oseguera was what all the teachers—women, that is—responded to.

Other kids saw him as a teacher's pet. That wasn't true. Kenny was friendly to everyone. Nevertheless, this made ordinary kids distrust him.

The fact is that Kenny wasn't by any means an "ordinary" kid. He wrote wonderful essays and book reports. He'd read just about every children's classic from Robert Louis Stevenson to Rudyard Kipling, from Mark Twain to L. Frank Baum. Mrs. Stevenson supervised his reading material with his mother's approval.

But Kenny wasn't all that happy. He couldn't understand why he wasn't able to "click" with the other guys. I tried to help him, but he was oblivious as to how to get "with it." This was his mother's handiwork: she treated Kenny like a baby.

He was taller than the average thirteen-year-old. To be exact, he was as tall as a tenth grader. Others might have appreciated this except for one thing: the lingering baby fat. Mind you, he wasn't overweight. But baby fat softened his growing body and made his face look like an thirteen-year-old Christopher Jones, the new Hollywood sensation.

Worse, he had the voice of a cherub to go with it. Try as he could, with all his diction and vocabulary, Kenny couldn't hide the immaturity inside him—and it bothered him to no end.

The outside air cleared my head. As I looked around the school entrance, I saw Maxey leaning on the flagpole while Kenny and Adán wrestled on the manicured lawn.

Though Adán was taller than Maxey, he was the weakest of the four of us. His ability to rip through punks and bullies with his glaring eye made life too easy. But now Kenny had him flat on his back, his arms outstretched and pinned. Adán's face was red as he huffed and puffed. "I said 'you win,' Kenny. Now will you let up?" Adán sputtered. He then noticed me. "Look, Kenny—Marty's here. Sic 'em, boy!"

"Marty!—what took you so long? We waited forever." Kenny leapt to his feet as Adán exhaled, relieved to have Kenny off his stomach.

"Last minute shuffling of books. Miss Carver needed more help than she realized."

“Marty, you should have told me. I’d have been more than happy to help with your share of the job!”

“Are we all through with the ‘Book-A-Rama’ bit?” Maxey said,
“‘Cause if you are, Marty, let’s book to the north entrance.”

Something Wicked ...

I stared toward the coastal mountains and thought about our upcoming trip. Reaching Monte Rio through such rough terrain was more challenging than anything I'd ever done before. I looked away and decided to ponder the upcoming science faire; it was much easier.

To get to the other entrance we walked down Oak Grove's central aisle that sliced through the two rows of classrooms. As we reached the exit, the oak tree ahead of us nearly concealed a man we had hoped wouldn't return next school year: Mr. Beaufordhunt, the administrative clerk. Silhouetted under the oak, his gaunt body walked toward us. Once outside the oak's shadows, I noticed he carried a large briefcase.

Beaufordhunt was here to put his office in order. The clerk wasn't a young man. He was old as Boris Karloff. He even looked like Karloff, tall and wiry, with features that seemed chiseled out of granite. We heard he suffered from diabetes. Too bad all that sugar in his blood didn't sweeten his lousy disposition.

Beaufordhunt's face was covered with sweat, his hair plastered over his forehead. He nodded at us with that familiar cruel smile that could sever sunshine from the sky.

"Well, I'm honored to be graced by the presence of Oak Grove's finest: The Gifted Four!" He gave us a phony bow looking like a praying mantis just before it strikes. As he bowed, the hump on his right shoulder became more noticeable. The kids had nicknamed him "Buffalo Hump."

Beaufordhunt once had another duty within the school system he cherished: administering corporal punishment. When a kid found himself draped over the clerk's lap, Beaufordhunt used a ruler of his own design so that the punishment was slow and well measured.

Four years before Beaufordhunt had me across his lap, ready to dole out my just punishment when Kenny suddenly burst into the office and grabbed him by the wrist. He shouted at Beaufordhunt, threatening to "sic" his mom on him. Apparently it worked; Mrs. Oseguera was on the school board back then.

When Mr. Cooper became principal, corporal punishment was banned from Oak Grove, which made Beaufordhunt an unhappy camper.

The frustrated ex-disciplinarian straightened as he took us in. “I trust we’ll all have a productive school year, children.” He grimaced obscenely—a grin that gave Maxey the cue to butt heads with old Buffalo Hump.

“Well, well—if it isn’t Oak Grove’s own all-time *culo*. Heh-heh.”

“*Culo*? What’s that supposed to mean, Master Maxey?” His fixed cadaverous sneer slid away for a moment. But it returned. “Oh—a Spanish word, I presume.”

“Yeah, It means you’re super cool—sir,” Maxey said gleefully.

The clerk frowned. He knew Maxey was putting him on.

“Koo-lo.” The word slurred through his shriveled lips. “Yes, that sounds just about right. But, of course, I’ll have to verify it with a Spanish teacher. You understand that, Maxey.” His mouth flickered back to his cruel grin. He stepped closer to Maxey, like a rising corpse.

“I have my eye on you, Maxey. Rest assured, one of these days, you’ll slip up and then I’ll have you right where I want you!”

“Anytime, anywhere, Buffalo Hump.”

“Consider yourself lucky the school isn’t officially in session. Otherwise, I’d have you turned in for insubordination.” He turned his attention back to us, his eyes swiveling like a chameleon’s. “Insidious little cretins,” he growled. “Each one of you are taking up space in the gifted class while other children—more deserving children, I might add—are left wanting! There are forces at work to restore the balance at Oak Grove School. And I’ll see that justice prevails!”

Contradicting adults wasn’t my game. But this time Beaufordhunt had gone too far.

“You’re wrong, sir, we do belong in the gifted class. We met the requirements. We have rights. This is America—I read the Declaration of Independence. That means you don’t have any right telling us how far we can go,” I said evenly.

“*Why, you little wet—!*” The clerk cut short his breath with a gasp. I knew he was prejudiced against Mexican-American kids but didn’t want to admit it outright. This time he gave me a respectful nod, his watery yellow eyes turning bloodshot.

“Well served, Mister Montmajour. I see why you’re the leader of the Four—and the most dangerous boy in Graton. But I promise you next time we meet, I’ll expose each of you for the pretenders that you are!”

Beaufordhunt turned and walked up the aisle that led to his office, jabbing his finger in the air as he continued the conversation with himself.

“Mark my words, you dark imps—your day of reckoning is close at hand!”

For a moment neither of us said a word—except Maxey. “Man! What a total asshole!”

“Maxey,” Kenny cut in. “He brings to mind the carnival owner in Ray Bradbury’s ‘Something Wicked This Way Comes.’ ”

But leave it to Maxey to have the last word. “Worse, Kenny—the carnival left without him!”

In 1964, four Chicano youths help a runaway white girl.

Westward Eden

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