

A thirteen-year old boy who is scientifically precocious but socially unconfident deals with a neighborhood inventor, the local Episcopalian priest, schoolyard bullies, and his girl bodyguard as he aspires to make the school track team.

Bethany Park

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/2602.html?s=pdf>

BETHANY PARK

Copyright © 2006 Glen Sharp

ISBN-10 1-60145-009-5

ISBN-13 978-1-60145-009-8

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Printed in the United States of America.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2006

BETHANY PARK

Glen Sharp

Chapter 1

When I was seven years old and in the second grade my teacher and the principal of my school wanted to place me in the fourth grade. But I was kind of shy and not very big, even for a second grader, so my mother and father thought my moving into a higher grade would be too much of an adjustment for me. It's a good thing my parents didn't think I was very well adjusted, because that would have made me a freshman in high school now instead of being a seventh grader, and I never would have made the track team this year.

I probably wouldn't have tried out for the track team if I hadn't read about Dr. Delano Meriwether in *Sports Illustrated*. Dr. Meriwether had been watching a track meet on television and after watching some sprinters race he told his wife he could beat those guys. He started training and entering track meets, and now he does beat them.

I knew I couldn't outrun any sprinters I saw on TV because I'm not even the fastest guy in my neighborhood. But Dr. Meriwether is a hematologist, which is a scientist who studies blood, and that means he knows a lot about biology and chemistry, like I do. I thought track and field might be a sport for scientists who aren't good at other sports. I thought track and field might be a sport for someone like me.

I used to think when I grew up I would be the center fielder for the Chicago Cubs, and after that I would help Marlin Perkins on *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. But in the last two years of Little League I got only one hit each season, so I don't think I have much of a future with the Cubs. It's a good thing I'm better at biology than I am at baseball.

I have chemistry and biology sets on a workbench in the basement my father built for me. Technically, he built the bench for my sister Sally, too, which is a problem at times. But I'm the one who uses it the most.

I don't perform many chemistry experiments anymore, but I have a lot of chemicals and equipment. I have beakers and flasks and test tubes. I have stoppers and a Bunsen burner. But after you have

GLEN SHARP

burnt sulphur once or twice and made the basement smell like rotten eggs, and produced CO₂ gas by mixing vinegar and sodium bicarbonate (NaHCO₃) a few times, chemistry gets a little boring. That's why I like biology better.

I learned how to dissect animals by reading the book, *How to Dissect*, written by William Berman, and I have dissected a lot of frogs. Mr. Berman wrote that dissection unfolds stories of the past and provides a basis for knowing more about the animals of the present. But I'm not as interested in how the past is like the present as I am in how frogs are like people.

Mr. Berman thinks that all animals, even worms, provide clues that help to understand man's anatomy. I don't think you learn much about human anatomy from the worms you dissect, but, except for not having a belly button, a frog is the closest thing to a person you will ever look inside.

Frogs might not look much like a human being on the outside, but you don't have to look too hard on the inside to see something pretty similar to the human anatomy. The circulatory system, the skeletal system, and the neurological system are basically simple versions of our human systems. Frogs are like little people in a lot of ways.

Mr. Berman believes that dissection is how animals tell us the story of their own individual lives and at the same time show us how life has evolved to more complex forms. It is fairly easy to understand the story of evolution, and to see how biological life has become more complex over time. But what is harder to understand is the story of metamorphosis in animals, of how, for example, a tadpole turns into a frog.

A frog doesn't act or look anything like a tadpole, and you could never tell by looking at a tadpole that it would ever become a frog, or tell by looking at a frog that it was once a tadpole. If you didn't know for sure that a tadpole turns into a frog you would never be able to imagine that it happens.

I don't dissect frogs anymore, although I still think about them a lot, and usually I sit at my workbench when I am wondering about them. My father built a workbench for himself, too, that he has set up

BETHANY PARK

on the other side of the basement. He does a lot of electronics for a hobby, and his bench is where he keeps all his tools and equipment. He built our first color television set, the one my sister and I watch in our basement, from scratch on his bench.

Sharing the color television with my sister is not as difficult as sharing the workbench, though. The workbench our father made for my sister and me is a lot bigger than the one he built for himself. Maybe our parents think it is big enough for both of us, and that's why they want us to share. But all my sister does is draw or paint or play with this little make-believe kitchen that bakes cakes that are about as big as a quarter. I need a lot of room for my chemicals and microscope and stuff.

When my sister gets in my way I let her know it. Sometimes I'll put a couple frog balls in front of her and say, "Why don't you paint a few of these?" That always gets her mad and she goes straight to our mother, who always takes my sister's side when it comes to frog balls.

"Why can't you two get along?" my mother asks.

I used to say, "You'd know why if you had to be around her as much as I do, Mom," but my mother doesn't like to hear that, so I just think it now.

My mother holds out the frog balls in the palm of her hand, like I've never seen any before. Does she think I don't know what they look like? "Why do you have to tease your sister with these...these...frog parts?" she asks me. My mother doesn't like to say balls, so she says parts. She doesn't like me to say balls either, really, but that's what they are. "You know she doesn't like it when you do that," my mother says.

Of course I know she doesn't like it. That's why I do it. "I don't like somebody baking a cake around me when I am trying to dissect a frog," I tell my mother.

"There is enough room for the both of you to play, Eddie," she says.

"I'm not playing, Mom. What I do is science. That's not play. Baking a cake that no one is going to eat. Now that's playing."

GLEN SHARP

My mother knits and crochets and plays around with artsy stuff, too, like Sally, but I don't see her bothering Dad for half of his bench. I don't know why it has to be different for me.

Fortunately on Fridays my sister isn't interested in being in the basement so I can have it all to myself. If I'm hungry when I get home, which happens a lot since I started seventh grade, I make myself a sandwich. Or sometimes two. My mother is usually making dinner by then, and when she watches me pile enough bologna and cheese on my bread to make the sandwich worthwhile she asks if I get enough for lunch at school. I try to take a bite of my sandwich as quickly as I can so my mouth is full and I can't talk because I don't like to think about school when I don't have to.

I can tell by looking at my mother that she wants to tell me not to spoil my dinner, but there is no need to and she knows it. I never spoil my dinner. I always eat everything on my plate, and I'm willing to eat what's on other plates, too, although you can't tell by looking at me.

Friday after school is also the only time of the week my mother lets me drink a whole bottle of Dr. Pepper by myself. Every other day I have to share my Dr. Pepper with my sister, or else I can only drink half and put the rest in the refrigerator until later. But by the time my mother finally gives in and says it is later, which sometimes isn't until the next day, the fizz is gone and I don't want it as much anymore, so I might as well have given some to Sally anyway.

But the real reason Fridays are my favorite day of the week is that my weekly issue of *Sports Illustrated* always arrives in the mail on that day, too. So as soon as I get home I change into some more comfortable clothes, make my sandwich, and take my Dr. Pepper and *Sports Illustrated* to the basement so I can be alone to read. And that's how I was lucky enough to find out about Dr. Delano Meriwether, and track and field, in the January 18, 1971 issue of *Sports Illustrated*.

I'm no good at baseball, and I'm not tall enough or quick enough to be good at basketball. My mother thinks I am too little to play Pop Warner football. The only other sport in junior high school is track and field, so I knew it was my last chance to be an athlete.

Chapter 2

The Saturday morning after I found out about Dr. Meriwether I ate breakfast and brushed my teeth. Then I went to the basement to check on the rock candy I was making. We live in what is called a tri-level house, and the basement is only half in the ground, and half above it. The basement has full-sized windows that let in a lot of light, especially in the morning, so it is more like another room in the house than it is a basement. Half of our basement is like a family room, where my sister and I usually watch TV, and the other half is a workshop.

Rock candy is a crystal that you can make for yourself by mixing two cups of sugar in one cup of boiling water and stirring until it is dissolved. My mother won't normally let me have two cups of sugar, but if I tell her it is for a science experiment she seems to be less bothered. You pour the sugar water into a beaker. Tie a paper clip to a piece of string and then hang the string in the sugar water. Tie the other end of the string to something that rests across the top of the beaker. The longer you let the water set the larger the crystals grow. Pretty soon you have your own supply of candy, and you don't even have to use your allowance to get it.

A crystal is the basic molecular structure that makes up rocks and minerals. Technically, rocks are aggregations of minerals, but I call most everything a rock when I am talking about rocks and minerals because it sounds less confusing when you are talking to someone who doesn't know a lot about rocks and minerals. I decided to let my rock candy to grow a bit more before I started eating it.

I also have a rock tumbler, which is a machine that is basically a motor that turns a large jar I fill with rocks and a little water and some grit. Grit is the stuff on sandpaper, which is basically a bunch of little rocks. The jar lies on its side in a metal rack and is turned by the motor so the water and grit erodes the rough and sharp edges of the rocks until they are smooth and shiny.

I turned off the motor and emptied the rocks from the jar and rinsed the old grit off them. I put clean water and a finer level of grit back in the jar with the rock, and then put the jar back in the rack.

GLEN SHARP

The finer level of grit you use, and the longer you let the rocks turn, the smoother and more polished the rocks become.

When I came back upstairs into the kitchen I grabbed my coat and told my mother I was going outside. She said, "Okay, Eddie. Be careful." My mother is always telling me to be careful. I was walking out the door which led into the garage when I noticed my sister smiling at me while she was eating her cereal. My sister smiling at me is not a good sign.

"You're going to Martin's aren't you?" Sally asked. "You're going to ride his go-kart, aren't you?" She wasn't asking questions, though, because she somehow already knew what I was going to do.

I stopped walking and would have shaken my head except that I knew my mother was looking at me. I didn't want it to look like I was mad at my sister even though I was. I stared at Sally. She was still smiling at me. I don't think Sally has ever forgiven me for the time I lied to our mother after I had crayoned the water heater and said my sister did it. I was six years old but Sally was only three, and because she was younger she got into a lot less trouble than I would have. But I don't think that is ever going to matter to her, and every time she causes me trouble I can't help but think it is because of how I lied.

"I don't want you riding any contraption that Martin built," my mother said. "Do you hear me, Eddie? She was standing about five feet behind me, so I heard her. I could also hear her take a breath and knew she was about to say something else.

"What's a go-kart?" she asked. "I don't want you riding any go-kart." I wanted to ask her how she knew she didn't want me to ride a go-kart when she didn't even know what one is. But it wouldn't have helped me out.

"It's kind of like a car. But it has a lawn mower engine and no doors."

"I don't want you riding in that, Eddie. Do you hear me?" I had turned around and we were face to face. How could I not hear her?

But my sister wanted to make sure I was listening. "Did you hear her, Eddie?" Sally asked. She was giggling.

"I hear you," I said.

BETHANY PARK

“I don’t care if other kids are foolish enough to risk their lives on Martin’s inventions,” my mother said. “I don’t want you risking yours.”

“Okay, Mom,” I said. As I walked out into the garage Sally said bye to me.

My father was tuning up the car and saw me walk out through the open garage door. “Bye Dad,” I said.

“I’ll see you, Eddie,” he said back to me. “Don’t have too much fun.”

How could he have known I wasn’t supposed to have any fun? How could he have known what Mom just said? The only explanation I can think of is that maybe fathers know that mothers don’t want their sons to have fun. “I won’t,” I said to him, as I left for Martin’s house.

Martin and I live in a neighborhood called Bethany Park, because Bethany Park is the name of the church that sells the land to real estate developers to build houses. Martin Maxwell’s house is at the front of the neighborhood, right next to the road that runs through the middle of the town I live in, Rantoul, Illinois, and turns into a state highway in the country.

Mr. Maxwell, Martin’s father, is a mortician, and the Maxwell Memorial Chapel shares a parking lot with the church. Martin lives in a house that sits on the other side of the chapel.

The quickest way to get to Martin’s house is to walk along a sidewalk that separates Father Tom’s yard from his next door neighbor’s, and leads to the church parking lot. Father Tom is an Episcopalian, and runs the church. He reminds me of Santa Claus because he has a round belly and a heavy beard that is completely grey, and he laughs a lot. Father Tom isn’t like anybody from a church I have ever known. I haven’t known many, but he’s not like anyone else I know.

I like Father Tom a lot because he tries to answer all my questions, even though I never go to his church, or even to Sunday school. I went to Sunday school in a different church until the fifth grade, when my Sunday school teacher told me I ask too many

GLEN SHARP

questions. She didn't want me to ask any more questions and I had a lot of questions to ask.

When I told my parents they said I didn't have to go to Sunday school any more if I didn't want to, and I didn't. I asked Father Tom once if he thought I asked too many questions and he said no. I told him what my Sunday school teacher said to me, and he said, "How in God's name could anyone ever say something like that?"

Father Tom always says "How in God's name" when he is talking about something that doesn't make sense to him. I'd like to talk like that, too, but it sounds kind of dumb when I say it, because I don't even go to church or anything. But when Father Tom says those words they sound kind of important. Sometimes I feel guilty for hanging around Father Tom so much and asking so many questions. Sometimes I think I should at least go to Sunday school at the Episcopalian church to make up for all the questions I ask him. But he never says anything to me about going to Sunday school, so I try not to think about it too much.

When I walked past his house on the way to Martin's, I saw him getting out of a brand new rust-colored Camaro. The sales sticker was still on the window. "Father Tom," I asked, "is this your new car?"

"Yes," he said. "I just got it yesterday."

Father Tom always has a nice looking car. "That's the best looking car I've ever seen," I told him. My father always gets cars with four doors. Father Tom's Camaro only has two doors.

"Thank you," Father Tom said. He was happy with his new car. When he rested his hand on the roof, it almost looked like he was going to pet it, just like you would a dog.

"How come you got a new car?" I asked.

"Because the ashtrays were full in my old one, Eddie." Father Tom was smiling.

"But you don't smoke, Father Tom. How could your ashtrays be full?"

Father Tom started laughing hard, his Santa Claus laugh. His head was tilted back and his belly was shaking. When he laughs like that he almost makes me wish Santa Claus could be real. I don't

BETHANY PARK

know how Father Tom can make you wish something like that is true even when common sense tells you it's not, but he does. He kept laughing as he patted me on the head and walked to the front door of his house.

I walked past Father Tom's house, through his backyard, and into the parking lot of Maxwell Memorial Chapel and the church. Martin and his older brother, Greg, get to use their garage as an automotive shop and warehouse for whatever tools or parts they want to keep. The garage door was open and Greg was working on his old MG, which was parked in front of the garage. The floorboard of the MG had rusted away and you could see the ground beneath the car when you sat inside of it. I told Greg once it reminded me of the kind of car Fred Flintstone would drive, but he didn't think that was as funny as I did. Greg is in high school, and although he is thin, he is stronger than he looks. Martin says that Greg has to shave every day.

Once, when Greg saw me sitting in his MG pretending to be Fred Flintstone, he lifted me out like I was a bag of groceries. But Greg is nice most of the time. He even lets us look at his *Playboys* when he is through with them. As I walked past him he waved to me and said hello.

Martin was working on his go-kart in the garage. Martin is little like me. He wears glasses and looks a lot like Albert Einstein, except his hair is brown instead of grey. I don't know what my mother would do if Martin was her kid, because she doesn't like me to leave the house unless my hair is combed. She wants me to comb my hair just to take out the garbage. I don't know if Martin's hair *can* be combed.

I walked into the garage and stood next to Martin as he was tightening nuts on his go-kart. The Maxwell garage has not seen a whole car for a long time. Go-karts, mini-bikes, automotive parts, and electrical supplies cover the walls and floor and hang from the ceiling.

Martin is the only inventor I have ever personally known. He knows more about engines and electricity than anyone else I know except for my father. My mother doesn't think that Martin is as smart

GLEN SHARP

as I do, though. I don't think she likes me to associate with any inventors.

"Hey Martin," I said, but Martin was too busy looking for something to bother saying hello. He gets that way sometimes. Martin isn't rude. He just becomes pre-occupied easier than most people. I was still pretty excited from finding out about Dr. Meriwether and track and field the night before, but I didn't tell Martin because he doesn't care about sports at all. I've never known anyone who cares less about sports than Martin.

"You almost done?" I asked.

"Yeah," Martin said. He couldn't seem to find whatever he was looking for in the pile of tools lying around him.

"Tell Greg I need a nine-sixteenths," Martin said.

I looked over at Greg, but I didn't want to ask him for a wrench. He didn't like Martin borrowing his tools. I knew that from experience. "Maybe he's using his, Martin," I said.

"I only need it for a minute."

I didn't want to bother Greg. He takes his mechanics seriously. And sometimes he thinks we are just kids, you can tell by the way he acts. But Martin was impatient with me.

"Eddie," he said. So I walked outside the garage towards Greg.

I stopped next to the MG watching Greg work, but I didn't say anything. I think he noticed me because my shadow covered the engine he was working on. "What's up, Eddie?" he asked.

"Not much, Greg."

Greg didn't stop working, though, and it took me a few moments to realize he wasn't going to unless I spoke up.

"Martin wants to borrow your nine-sixteenths."

"Where's his?" Greg didn't even look up.

"I don't think he knows."

Greg was tightening some nuts. I don't know if he was thinking about whether or not to lend Martin the wrench or if he was just waiting for a stopping point in what he was doing. Finally, he reached in his tool box and pulled out a wrench. He didn't even look at it before handing it to me, but when I checked to make sure it was the size Martin needed it was a nine-sixteenths.

BETHANY PARK

“Tell Martin to bring it right back,” Greg said to me, loud enough for Martin to hear. “As soon as he’s done with it. I’m his brother, not the Mac Tool Man.”

“Thanks, Greg,” I said as I walked back to Martin.

I handed the wrench to Martin and he quickly tightened two bolts on the frame of his go-kart. When he finished he tossed the wrench into a pile of rags and other tools. I looked at where Martin threw the wrench and then I looked at Greg.

Martin stood up and pushed the go-kart outside the garage. He pull started the engine, and Greg looked up and ran over to us. He was excited.

“Martin,” Greg said. “It’s running.”

“Yeah,” Martin said. He adjusted the governor on the engine and then asked, “Who wants to go first?” Martin is the most unselfish person I know. He is always willing to let other people try his inventions first.

All I could think about was how mad my mother would be if she ever found out I had been the first driver of Martin’s go-kart. About how mad she would be if I was the fifty-ninth driver.

Although I am not in the Boy Scouts, the book I read most is the *Boy Scout Manual*. I read some part of it almost every day. Part of being a good scout is living up to the Scout Law, which says that a Boy Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. That’s not always as easy as it sounds.

The Scout Law is not a bunch of rules that say you have to do this, or you can’t do that. By doing your best to follow the Scout Law, you are a scout. But intentionally breaking the Scout Law means you are not a scout.

I try to follow the Scout Law, but sometimes I wish the law wasn’t so hard. Like the law about being obedient to your mother and father. It’s easy to obey your father because you know what makes him mad, and so you just don’t do it. But obeying your mother gets in the way of a lot of adventure. How are you supposed to have fun and obey your mother at the same time?

GLEN SHARP

I wanted to be the first to try out one of Martin's inventions sometime, but I didn't want to get in trouble. So I was glad when Greg spoke up.

"You should go first, Martin," he said. "It's your baby."

"Yeah, Martin," I said. "It's your baby."

Martin finally agreed. He sat in his go-kart and put it in gear. He took off quickly into the middle of the parking lot and after a couple of wide, circular laps Martin began making faster and sharper turns. Greg was really happy for his brother, and it was fun watching.

But as Martin was coming out of one turn, Greg and I could tell that the steering wheel tension went slack. Martin was turning it back and forth but the go-kart wouldn't turn and it was heading straight toward the brick wall of the funeral home.

Greg ran toward Martin. "Take your foot off the gas," he yelled. "Take your foot off the gas."

Martin must have heard Greg, because the go-kart slowed to a stop a few feet away from the wall. I ran toward Martin, but Greg reached him before I did.

"Are you alright, Martin?" Greg asked.

"Yeah. I couldn't steer."

"Man, that was close," I said, and Martin nodded his head in agreement. Greg was checking the steering linkage.

"Look," Greg said. "This bolt almost came out. You didn't tighten the tie rods tight enough." Greg examined the rest of the front end. "I need a nine-sixteenths," Greg said, but neither Martin nor I said anything.

I looked in the garage at the pile of rags where Martin threw the wrench, and when I turned back to look at Martin he was looking at Greg. "Where is it, Martin?" Greg asked. "Where's my nine-sixteenths?" But all Martin could do was shrug his shoulders and look at me, hoping I could remember where Greg's wrench was. And since I did, I was the one who went back to the garage to find it.

Chapter 3

While we were walking to English class on Monday morning I gave Betty Brown, my only friend in my seventh grade class, a rock that I had polished with my rock tumbler. Betty was wearing a dress that was kind of frilly on the bottom, and her hair had been combed straight and braided into a little pigtail. She wore shiny black shoes and white socks. That's the way she looked every day. The rock I gave her was a calcite crystal (CaCO_3), which is called calcium carbonate. You can find a lot of calcite in Illinois, especially closer to the Mississippi River.

Although calcite looks a lot like bone, it's not exactly the same, even though bone contains calcium, too. Human bone is a calcium phosphate ($\text{Ca}_{10}(\text{PO}_4)_6(\text{OH})_2$), and is the same stuff teeth are made of. Rocks you find on the ground come in a lot of different shapes and sizes, and sometimes colors, but they all have the same molecular structure. Rocks can look a lot different on the outside but be the very same thing on the inside.

Every time I give Betty a rock I explain to her that my rock tumbler washes the rocks and the grit and the water over each other until the edges are smooth. It works like a river, only faster. But she doesn't care. She doesn't care that what happens to the rocks in a rock tumbler makes them prettier than they would be just lying in the ground naturally. Rocks are neat in whatever condition you find them, but they are a lot neater after they have been smoothed and polished.

If she likes a rock I give her she says how fantabulous it is. Fantabulous is her favorite word, I think, although I don't know if it is even a word, really. At least it's not in my dictionary at home. Betty likes it when I give her fantabulous rocks, but she really doesn't care about rocks other than what they look like. That's why I give her and my mother the prettiest rocks and keep the rest in my top dresser drawer with my underwear.

While I was explaining the molecular structure of calcite to her she pointed to my *Sports Illustrated* that I was holding with my

GLEN SHARP

schoolbooks, and asked me why I brought it. Betty will do anything to stop me from talking about rocks.

I opened my magazine to the page that had the article on Dr. Meriwether. The hallway was crowded and people had to walk around us as we slowed down to look at the article.

"I'm going to try out for the track team," I told Betty. "Just like Dr. Meriwether."

"What do you mean just like Dr. Meriwether?" Betty asked. "Look at that picture of him. We were looking at a picture of Dr. Meriwether crossing the finish line as the winner of a race. He is tall and has long legs and arms, and when he was reaching for the finish line he looked like he was about to take flight.

"I probably can't even beat that brother," Betty said. Betty always calls black guys brothers and black girls sisters. I didn't think Betty could outrun Dr. Meriwether either, although she is the fastest runner I know. She is even faster than Charles Hareson, who is the fastest guy in our class. But I didn't think she could be faster than Dr. Meriwether.

"I know you can't beat him," I said. "He's one of the fastest runners in the world. He beats guys on TV." I wanted to defend Dr. Meriwether because he is both a scientist and an athlete, just like I wanted to be.

Betty didn't read the article, but after I told her about Dr. Meriwether she asked, "What kind of doctor runs track, anyway?"

"Dr. Meriwether is a hematologist."

"A what?"

"He studies blood. He knows a lot about biology and chemistry, just like me. And now he runs track. Just like me."

"Look at him," Betty said, pointing to the picture again. "It looks like he is about to fly like an eagle. You can't fly like an eagle. You fly more like a turtle." It's true I'm not the fastest guy in the world, but I like to think I'm faster than a turtle.

"And look at his muscles," Betty said. "You might have a brain like him, but you don't have a body like him. You've got to have some kind of muscles in you if you want to run fast. Like me."

BETHANY PARK

Betty made a fist so I could see the muscle in her arm as she finished talking. But I knew what she meant. I couldn't beat her in arm wrestling either.

"How are you going to make the track team?" she asked. You can't even beat me."

"I don't have to beat you. Only boys can be on the track team."

Betty didn't like that, and as soon as I said it I wished I hadn't. She gets mad sometimes because there aren't any sports teams for girls. She didn't say anything back to me for what seemed a long time. She just kept walking, looking straight ahead. Betty almost always has something to say. Not only is she the fastest runner I know, she has the fastest mouth, too.

Finally, Betty said something to me. "What's the longest race they let seventh graders run?"

"The 440, I think. Why?"

"That's what you should run," she said. You're too slow to be a sprinter. You should run the 440. If you can run that far."

"Of course I can run that far," I said. "It's only a quarter of a mile." I didn't want to have to run that far, but I could if I had to. I wanted to be a sprinter like Dr. Meriwether, but I knew the chances of that happening were pretty small. Not only am I kind of small, I'm kind of slow, too.

"I would never run that far," Betty said. "I don't know why anyone wants to run that far. People only run that far when they have to."

I knew I was probably going to have to run that far. "I can run a quarter mile," I said. "I've done it before. My Dad drove around a block in our neighborhood to measure it and it is exactly one-fourth of a mile. I can't get anyone in my neighborhood to race me, though."

"That's because most people have more sense than you," Betty said. That was more like the Betty I know.

Just then Barney Cousins, the only other boy in our class as skinny as me, ran up from behind me and knocked my books on the floor. He ran off ahead of us before turning around to look at me

GLEN SHARP

picking up my books. He was laughing very loudly. When Barney laughs he cackles. He almost sounds like a crow.

“Barney,” I yelled at him, but he just kept laughing.

As I was picking up my notebook, Frank Valdez, another boy in my class, handed me my *Sports Illustrated*. Frank is one of the biggest guys in our class, and he played Pop Warner football. But he is always nice to me. I have never seen Frank bully anybody, although if anyone wanted to be a good bully, he could.

“Thanks, Frank,” I said. He nodded at me and walked off. Frank doesn’t talk much.

Betty stood a few steps away from me as I picked up my books. When I had them we continued walking to English class.

“Why do you put up with that from him?” she asked.

This time I didn’t say anything. It’s no fun for a guy to have to listen to some girl ask him why he isn’t tougher than he is.

“He’s going to keep doing this until you whip him, you know,” she said

“If we fight again I’ll get in real trouble with Mr. Randolph.”

Mr. Randolph is the school principal. Barney and I had been in a fight, or at least the beginning of a fight, during study hall after English class earlier in the school year.

Barney and I had been playing football in study hall, the game where two people sit on opposite sides of a desk and flick a paper football with a finger towards their opponent’s edge of the desk. The football is a sheet of school paper folded into a triangle, and if any part of the football hangs over the edge of the opponent’s side of the desk, which is considered the goal line, a touchdown has been scored.

I thought I had scored a touchdown on Barney, but he wouldn’t give me credit for scoring. The guys in our class who were watching thought the only peaceable way to settle our difference was by fighting, so we did.

I felt sorry for Barney. We are both scrawny, but he is weird, too. His head is too big for how much hair he has, and he looks like he is going bald, even though he is only twelve years old. He has big ears that stick out like an elephant’s. He is a pest and almost

BETHANY PARK

everyone picks on him. I was the only guy who didn't because I felt sorry for him. I think that might have been a mistake.

I felt so sorry for him that I didn't want to hurt his face, but I did punch him in the stomach a couple of times. He hit me with one jab that I barely felt. I couldn't believe how weak he was. I felt even sorrier for him after he hit me that once.

Mrs. Lindsey, our English teacher, broke up our fight before much had happened, but the guys watching the fight judged Barney the winner because he hit me once in the face and I only hit him in the body. Those guys don't know anything about boxing. They don't understand the importance of body punching.

Ever since then I have been considered the weakest guy in class, even though I'm really only the second weakest guy in class. Almost everyone thinks they have a right to pick on me. This really went to Barney's head, because he is always teasing me, doing to me what everyone else used to do to him.

As Betty and I turned into Mrs. Lindsey's room, I said, "He didn't win the first fight."

"Nobody won," Betty said. And you can't call what you guys did fighting. That was the most pathetic excuse for a fight I have ever seen."

Barney was already in his seat as we walked past him to sit down. Betty made a face at him, and he returned the favor. Being given credit for beating me had done wonders for Barney's self-confidence.

"I didn't want to hurt him," I told Betty.

"Hurt him?" Betty said, sounding kind of surprised. "Hurt him?" she said again, like I hadn't heard her the first time. "You have to touch him to hurt him."

Chapter 4

In a corner of the basement of Martin's house Greg has built a darkroom, where he develops his own pictures. Greg built a printing press and prints advertisements that have his own photos in them. When Greg isn't around Martin sometimes uses the darkroom, too.

But Martin isn't interested in photography. He uses the basement to experiment with electricity. I think Martin likes electricity more than he likes engines. He says that electromagnetism is life, and that when he grows up he wants to be an electrical engineer at some place called Bell Laboratories. He is the only kid I know who talks a lot about wanting a regular job when he grows up.

Lately, Martin has been talking a lot about something called quantum mechanics. All he cares about is electricity and engines, and now quantum mechanics. He never does any homework, and I don't think he even pays attention in school. I at least pretend, when I am around adults, that I like school, but Martin doesn't pretend at all. He was even held back one year in school because he hasn't learned how to pretend he is interested, not even a little bit.

Martin had built an electric chair in his basement using an old dining chair and a hand-turned generator, and we were in the basement because Martin thought we needed some privacy. Martin didn't think other people would understand why he needed to build an electric chair. He didn't even think the people in his family would understand. I am pretty sure my mother wouldn't.

Copper plates had been screwed to each arm of the chair, and wires leading from the copper plates to the generator made a complete circuit. I had never seen an electric chair before, not even in a movie, so I watched Martin connect the wires to the generator because I wanted to see how one is made.

"The electricity from the generator flows through these wires and to the copper pads," Martin explained to me. I was standing by the chair. "Whoever's hands are on the copper pads when the generator is being turned gets electrocuted."

"Is this the real thing?" I asked.

"Just like in Sing Sing."

BETHANY PARK

“Wow,” I said. I think my mother might be wrong about Martin not being a genius, because how many minds would ever think about building an electric chair.

When Martin was done tightening the wires he looked at me and said, “Okay, Eddie.”

“Okay what?”

“We’re ready to go.”

“Ready to go where?” I asked. Martin pointed at the electric chair. “Me? You want me to go first?”

“We’re ready to test the electric chair,” Martin said.

I had wanted to be the test pilot for one of Martin’s inventions for a long time, but I didn’t want to be the test pilot for an electric chair. This was the first time that I wasn’t obeying my mother when I said I didn’t want to be the first to go. I really didn’t want to be the first to go. I wanted to test something that you could brag about afterward. I wanted to test something that other kids would wish they had the guts to try first. If you test out an electric chair and it works, it’s all over for you. After I was gone, no one I knew would be walking around wishing they had been electrocuted first. I wanted to test something that looked like fun. Getting electrocuted doesn’t look like much fun.

“Why do you have to test it on me?” I asked.

“There’s only two of us here.”

“Yeah, but why do I have to be electrocuted first?”

“Who else can it be?” Martin asked. I’ve got to be sure the chair works alright. I have to monitor the test.”

“I’ll monitor the test.”

“You don’t know what to monitor. You don’t know what I’m looking for.”

“You’re looking for an electrocution.”

“Not a real one,” Martin said. He must have thought this would calm my nerves because he tried to sit me down in the chair, but I wouldn’t move.

“If you electrocute me first, I won’t be around to electrocute you,” I said.

“Yeah, you will. I won’t electrocute you all the way.”

GLEN SHARP

You've never electrocuted anyone before," I said. "How do you know if you are going all the way or not?"

"You know when you're going all the way. I'll stop before that."

"What if you can't stop? What if you can't stop the electricity from coming out? I'm too young to go all the way. I'm only twelve years old."

"When you tell me to stop, I'll stop. I won't go any further than you want to go."

I was shaking my head. How could I be sure that Martin could stop, even if he wanted to? Maybe I wouldn't be able to tell him to stop. Maybe when you are in the middle of being electrocuted you can't talk clearly. Maybe you can only make noises that other people can't understand. Martin was becoming flustered. He wasn't used to people not wanting to try out his inventions.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Eddie," Martin said, trying one last time.

"I know you're not," I said. "Because I'm not going to be electrocuted."

"If you don't go first, who are we going to find for a test electrocution?" Martin asked.

Martin was as sure as I was about not going first. I guess he didn't trust me not to go all the way with him, either. But I was stumped about finding someone who would be willing to test the electric chair until I thought of Bobby Reed.

Bobby was in the second grade, but there aren't any kids his age in the neighborhood, so he likes to hang out with us as much as he can. He has to try hard at everything he does because he is smaller than the rest of us, but he never stops trying. Bobby is the only person in Bethany Park who will race me all the way around the block, a quarter mile, but beating a second grader is not much to brag about.

I mentioned Bobby to Martin, and Martin asked, "Do you think he'll do it?"

I said, "Yeah. He always wants to show us how tough he is. We'll tell him this is his big chance to prove it."

BETHANY PARK

“Don’t tell him it’s an electric chair until he’s here,” Martin said. “Just say I built something we want to show him.”

“Yeah,” I said as I was leaving to find Bobby. “There’s no need for him to get scared until the last moment.”

Bobby was excited and happy that Martin and I wanted him to hang out with us. He was excited and happy until he realized we wanted him to sit in the electric chair. Then he looked kind of shocked. But fortunately his desire for us not to think of him as just a second grader was stronger than his desire to not be electrocuted, so he sat down in the chair. He let Martin strap his wrists to the armrests, so his hands lay on top of the copper plates.

Bobby was nervous as he sat in the electric chair and Martin tightened the hose clamps around Bobby’s wrists that locked him to the chair. When Martin was sure the clamps were tightened enough he stood back from Bobby and said, “I’m ready. Are you ready, Bobby?”

“He looks ready to me,” I said.

Bobby looked up at me and swallowed. He didn’t say anything but I knew he wanted to ask why I had to come for him today. He probably was wishing he had gone grocery shopping with his mother.

“I guess I’m ready,” Bobby said. He turned toward Martin and asked, “Are you sure this isn’t going to hurt?”

“You won’t feel a thing,” Martin said. That didn’t seem to calm Bobby down much. Martin stood next to the generator and began turning the crank, showing me how electricity is generated. “You turn the crank, Eddie. Remember, the faster you turn the more volts you get out of the generator.”

I began turning the crank, slowly at first, as I watched Bobby to see what was happening. He smiled and I could see him become less scared.

“Can you feel it?” Martin asked.

“I can feel it,” Bobby answered. He was smiling. “I’m being electrocuted and I can feel it.”

I began to turn the crank harder and faster then. Bobby stopped smiling and kept his eyes on me. Martin stood back with his arms crossed and watched us. When I was turning the crank as fast as I

GLEN SHARP

could, I could see Bobby become nervous. He lifted his fingers off the copper plates, and the look of discomfort was immediately gone. I kept cranking, and Bobby kept putting his fingers on the copper plates and pulling them off.

“I bet you can really feel it now, can’t you, Bobby?” Martin asked.

“Yeah, it’s too much, sometimes.”

Finally my arm began to get tired, and so I began to turn the crank much slower. As I slowed down, Bobby left his fingers on the copper, but as I sped up, he lifted them off. We began to play a game. He was trying to guess when I would speed up, so he could lift his fingers without being electrocuted too much. And I was trying to guess when he would put his fingers back down, so I could speed up the generator to give Bobby a bigger dose of electricity. I asked Martin why he made the chair so people could lift their fingers off the copper and avoid being electrocuted.

“You have to, Eddie,” he said. You could hurt someone with an electric chair if you’re not careful.”

That was a good enough answer for me, and it certainly was a good enough answer for Bobby. We all started laughing, and suddenly I wanted to be electrocuted, too, so the three of us took turns electrocuting each other until we were too tired to turn the crank on the generator anymore.

A thirteen-year old boy who is scientifically precocious but socially unconfident deals with a neighborhood inventor, the local Episcopalian priest, schoolyard bullies, and his girl bodyguard as he aspires to make the school track team.

Bethany Park

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/2602.html?s=pdf>