

Martha's Grove

Another restless night of tossing and turning as Jim's face was there every time I closed my eyes. If somehow I managed to dismiss his image, it was replaced by the smile of my grandfather's friend. Just when I was close to drifting away, I remembered the near miss episode on my bike and the certainty and shock of that poor lady who swore she saw someone. Her description of a tall man in a baseball cap was now haunting me. Was Jim the man that stepped in front of her car that day? Was it Jim that kept me from being struck? Was Jim my grandfather's friend? Was Jim returning from 1955? If so, who is his daughter and why wasn't she mentioned in his obituary? There were so many unanswered questions.

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Chapter 1

The bedroom curtains danced in the morning breeze. I could hear Dad's mower in the distance as the sweet aroma of fresh cut grass lured me from my bed. It was Saturday and it was springtime. April had finally arrived, ushering out a long, cold winter. When you're 10-years old, weeks seem like months and months like years. Yes, I liked building snowmen and ice-skating as much as any kid. Winter was OK, but my first love was baseball. Playing baseball, watching baseball, even talking baseball was my heart's desire. So, springtime meant baseball season, but more important, this Saturday meant opening day of the 1995 little league season in Martha's Grove, Indiana. A season I will never forget.

My dad grew up a Pirates fan. I loved listening to him describe Bill Mazeroski's ninth inning, game seven home run to beat the Yankees in 1960. His eyes would sparkle, as he walked me through every inning leading up to this legendary shot, ending the game and the series against the unbeatable Bronx Bombers. Dad's excitement was contagious and often I tried to imagine myself as Mazeroski on that glorious autumn day in 1960.

A 10-year-old's imagination is powerful. It wasn't long before I was convinced; Mazeroski's heroics could be duplicated on this day. I wanted to see and hear my dad tell a similar story with the same sparkle in his eye. Only this version would include the late game heroics of his 10-year-old son, Michael Todd Wagoner. Of course, the tale would end with my teammates carrying me off the field on their shoulders as I wave to my teary-eyed mother...get the picture?

Maybe it was Grandma always telling me if you close your eyes and imagine something wonderful, long enough and hard

enough, it just might come true. If she only knew how many times I lived and re-lived such a moment in my mind. On a thousand nights, I drifted between rest and slumber watching the ball disappear behind the left field fence. Some episodes included cheers so loud; I would wake up with goose bumps. Then, amidst the reality of a dark and quiet bedroom, I usually drifted back to sleep gazing at the smiling face of Ernie Banks. My dad met this Cubs icon at a banquet after he retired. He was gracious enough to sign an old baseball card, which was proudly displayed on my nightstand. His smile, warmed by the glow of a nightlight, always comforted my heavy eyes.

Ernie Banks signature was special to me. Oh yeah, he was a Hall of Fame player, so were Bob Gibson and Al Kaline. I had their autographs too. No, it was the one word preceding his signature, which left a lasting impression on me. The word was “Hope”. Maybe he included it on all his autographs. As far as I was concerned, it was an original. I was convinced he was saying “Michael, there’s hope for you. You can do it. It’s your destiny.”

As I stretched and sprang to my bare feet, I noticed at the foot of my bed was a uniform. Mom had folded it neatly and made sure it was positioned to be the first thing I noticed that morning. She knew the significance of a little boy’s first uniform. Patched, with faded grass stains, it was as good as Yankee pinstripes to me. I wanted number 14, because of Banks. To my disappointment, the older players got the higher numbers. So I had to settle for number 1.

Fascinated by player’s superstitions, I pondered over putting the socks or jersey on first. This was a critical decision knowing it could have an outcome on my performance. Furthermore, playing well this day meant such habits become rituals because you never change what works. So after a long deliberation, the socks got the call. Even though I modeled this uniform

practically every day since the coach dropped it off, today was different. Today was game day.

The only full-length mirror in the house was in my parent's room. Knowing this was forbidden territory; I called down to Mom to make sure there were no objections. With her blessing, contingent on no cleats, I eased open the door. There it was in the corner of the room. Standing tall and erect, like a scene from Alice and Wonderland. It was almost calling to me as if to say "Have I got a surprise for you." With eyes shut tight, I walked slowly to the spot carefully calculated in my mind as the perfect position.

Not wanting the suspense to end, I slowly opened my eyes to gaze upon this little league legend standing before me. As much as I wanted to look like Lou Gehrig or Mickey Mantle, my attributes were more of a cross between Lou Costello and Mickey Rooney. Not many major leaguers, past or present were famous for chubby cheeks and freckles. Nonetheless, I was determined to change all that. Practicing a full round of game face expressions was important because I knew someday this mug would be on a baseball card.

"Mikey, you look so cute," were the words my mom used to shatter this daydream. Turning to see her smiling face, I knew I was busted. It's OK if you're a girl to primp in front of a mirror or your mom. If you were a young aspiring power hitter, such behavior would leave the likes of Ty Cobb or Yogi Berra shaking their heads in disgust.

"Mom, ballplayers aren't supposed to look cute. We're supposed to look tough," I replied.

"OK tough guy, come eat your breakfast before it gets cold," she gently responded.

As I made my way downstairs toward the kitchen, I realized this wasn't just any breakfast. This was my first pre-game meal. In my mind, a major league breakfast had to consist of steak and

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eggs. All tough guys ate steak and eggs. Even astronauts' standard pre-flight meals are steak and eggs. So, seated in front of a big glass of milk, I informed my mom I liked my steaks medium-well.

With a smile and all the maternal wit she could muster, she calmly inquired, "Well sweetie, how do you like your oatmeal?"

Oatmeal is a unique delicacy. Its versatility is tied to the consistency. If prepared thin enough, you can feed it to a baby. If prepared thick enough, you can use it to patch holes in plaster walls. I preferred my oatmeal to resemble ice cream after a little melting and a lot of stirring. Toss in some butter and brown sugar and it's almost like eating a hot oatmeal cookie. Somehow, I just couldn't imagine any big leaguer sitting down to oatmeal, cookies, or ice cream before an important game.

"Oatmeal...only sissies eat oatmeal," I declared. About that time my dad walked into the kitchen.

"Honey, what would you like for breakfast?" she asked him.

"Oh, some of that oatmeal you're fixing for Mikey looks good," he replied enthusiastically.

Now, if my brother had witnessed my previous statement, he would have pounced on this opportunity like a cleanup hitter on a hanging curve ball. Not Mom. She was something of an Aunt Bea-June Cleaver hybrid. No, only my mom would take this opportunity to reinforce her love for me by resisting the temptation to exploit my editorial comments in front dear old Dad. With a smile that seemed to say, "you owe me one", she handed Dad and I a bowl filled with hot oatmeal, a lot of love, and some butter and brown sugar.

To put an exclamation point on the moment, she added, "I was just telling Mikey how you tough guys need to eat your oatmeal." Nice touch Mom.

Those of us, who were fortunate enough to have a loving mother while growing up, remember moments like these. As I

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humbly ate my oatmeal, I watched my mom go about her business. Bustling around the kitchen in her old robe, I knew she was something special, even at the age of ten.

Martha Joan Wagoner was born and raised in Martha's Grove. She was the daughter of Frank and Margaret Straud. She was also my Dad's high school sweetheart. Her father passed away in 1985. Her mother, my Grandma, was still living and very much a part of our life.

Joseph David Wagoner was also born and raised in Martha's Grove. His father was a railroader from Pittsburgh who met his mother in Martha's Grove and settled down here working for the B & O. His dad was never around much when he was growing up. He worked long hours so Dad was basically raised by his mother and sister. Grandpa Wagoner died in a tragic railroad accident the year after Dad and Mom were married. A year away from retirement, he was working as a switchman in the local rail yard. Somehow communications broke down and he was accidentally crushed by a moving rail car. A couple of years later Grandma Wagoner was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and moved to Indianapolis to live with Dad's sister. A year later she was in a nursing home and two years later she passed away.

Dad was a loving father but definitely believed hard work was the cure for everything. Having trouble in a class? Study harder. Need some extra money? Get a second job. If you're in a little slump, take more batting practice. Dad's approach to counseling was pretty much a matter of figuring out what's broke and then figuring out how to fix it.

The great thing about Dad was his unselfishness. Fixing a math problem or a bicycle or a skinned knee was his mission. Making something or someone look, work or feel better was his passion, especially when it came to his family. I always knew when I took a problem to Dad; he would do whatever it took to

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help me find the solution. His love for our family was not filled with a lot of emotion, but was just as genuine as Mom's.

"Well slugger, what do you say we head for the backyard and start getting that arm loose for today's big game?" Dad said as he made his way toward the kitchen door.

My dad loved to play catch. His old glove had been restrung at least a dozen times since high school. As a third baseman his abilities were limited by his own admission. Every little boy places his dad on a pedestal whether deserving or not. I was no different. To me Brooks Robinson was the second greatest third baseman of all time.

Dad was the best coach I ever had. I think it was his patience and his love for the game. You could always tell he was having as much fun as anyone. Chasing wild throws or taking one off the shin, he never lost his patience. Calling a timeout, his focus would turn to adjusting my footwork or release.

My older brother, on the other hand, could turn playing catch into cruel and unusual punishment. If it was just Billy and me, you could count on the session lasting no more than five minutes and always ending with a round of progressive name-calling. With a three-year advantage, he could obviously throw the ball much harder and always did. I was the bulls-eye for these brief rounds of target practice, which would usually conclude with the ultimate insult "sissy". At that point my glove would hit the ground and I would hit the back door searching for the ultimate sympathizer in Mom.

On this glorious day, it was just me and Dad. The way it should be. Until my neighbor Johnny Adams came running over with his glove shouting, "Can I play?"

A high priority with my dad was making sure his two sons learn the importance of sharing. For me it was easy sharing my toys, bike, or even my dog. The toughest lesson in sharing involved my dad. Selfishness seems childish only because

children make no attempt to hide it. Even though I tried, it was obvious Dad was one of my most precious treasures and the toughest to share. Nevertheless, Dad knew the importance of sharing himself with Johnny. Maybe, he felt sorry for Johnny because he knew what it was like growing up without a father around. I'm sure setting an example for his youngest son played a role as well. More than anything my dad was just a good man with a big heart.

"You bet," was Dad's reply.

Johnny was an only child who lived with his mother and grandmother across the alley. He never mentioned his dad and I was under strict orders from my parents not to ask. Not a strong student, he was two years younger and three years behind me in school. Johnny was an O.K. kid. His problem was attention starvation and he would do anything to satisfy his appetite, except around my dad.

"Hey Johnny, want me to tie those shoestrings so they won't come loose?" asked my dad. Looking down, Johnny didn't answer until he realized the magnitude of the offer. Then he dashed toward Dad, plopping down in front of him with one foot raised in the air. I'll never forget how he gazed into my father's eyes as each shoe was patiently tied with the famous double knot. Nothing was more important on that day, to Jonathan Patrick Adams, than to have someone that he adored take the time to tie his shoes. And with that, came another lesson in sharing. Thanks Dad.

It wasn't long before Mom came to the back door and shouted "Mikey, we're going to have to leave in a few minutes. You better come in."

As Dad and I started for the house, Johnny asked where we were going.

"Mikey's got his first game today," answered Dad. "Would you like to go with us?"

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“Oh wow, that would be awesome,” was the response.

“Well, go make sure it’s alright with your mom,” Dad said with his arm around him. Like being shot out of a canon, Johnny headed for home.

“I’ll be right back,” he shouted as he disappeared inside his house.

Heading for the garage meant crossing paths with brother Billy, finishing up his bowl of porridge.

“Hey dork,” when translated means “good morning little brother.”

Of course we spoke the same language so my response was “Hey dork,” which conversely means “good morning big brother.” As is the case with most male siblings of this age, these terms of endearment represented the extent of our ability to exchange pleasantries.

William Benjamin Wagoner finished his little league career the previous year. As a 10-year old, he didn’t play much. At the age of 11, he started out slow but finished strong. Between his 11 and 12-year old season, Billy received a healthy dose of testosterone for Christmas and found himself the tallest kid on the team by spring. As a result, he became a dominant player leaving some very big cleats for little brother to fill.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t a humble bone in Billy’s body. He was good and he knew it. The bar had been raised for his successor and opportunities to exploit this fact were taken advantage of routinely. His favorite expression was “you couldn’t carry my bat”. If defensive skills were the topic, it would be his glove I couldn’t lift.

Sibling rivalries are unique and complicated relationships. It was years before I recognized the insecurity. At the root of his comments was an underlying fear that someday I might be a better player. On the flip side, I never acknowledged how much I looked up to him and his accomplishments. That is, never to

his face. If someone in the neighborhood made a derogatory remark about his game, I was ready to fight. In situations where a bigger kid offered the comment, I made sure Billy knew who and what was said. Strangely enough, cutting me down was an exclusive privilege reserved and enjoyed by Billy and no one else. Any third-party cracks about my diamond inadequacies incurred the wrath of big brother. Looking back, these rare momentary lapses filled with loyalty and decency stand out as the fiber weaving an unexplainable eternal bond. This amazing code of conduct, unspoken and unwritten, is only understood by those of us who grew up with a brother.

Once in the garage, I slipped on my new rubber cleats knowing the uppers would never be as clean and black as they were at that moment. Mom wouldn't let me wear cleats around the house so they weren't exactly broken in. In fact, this pair had been on my feet only twice. The first occasion was at the sporting goods store. The next was about 30 seconds after we arrived home with package in hand. A test drive across the back yard was necessary to confirm the proper traction and increase in speed.

The last piece of equipment needed to complete the package was the most important. Leaning against the wall, next to my cleats was the "stick". Weighing in at 20 ounces, this 30-inch tapered cylinder of aerospace aluminum was specifically designed to launch baseballs into orbit. Armed with a new pair of batting gloves, I was confident this bad boy could blast a ball 400 feet into a stiff wind.

There I stood, as the garage door went up. Poised as the most intimidating of figures I emerged amidst a sunbeam in full uniform with glove on one hand, bat in the other, and new cleats on my feet. Imagining a host of angelic choruses raining down from the open heavens, I made my way to the family mini van, alias the "team bus".

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Lining the parade route to the van were my proud parents, a cheering Johnny Adams, and brother Billy just shaking his head. Not since throwing up in church had I been such the center of attention. Not since winning the potted flower contest in Miss Gilbert's class, had I felt so important. And, not since I pounded Ricky Clishman for kicking my dog, had I felt so invincible. It was a good day to be Michael Todd Wagoner.

One of the great things about little league opening day in Martha's Grove was the way the whole community embraced the occasion. For example, all the teams met at the volunteer fire station and rode to the ballpark on fire trucks. With sirens blaring, the trucks would creep down Main Street as friends and neighbors came out to wave and cheer us on. There was no ticker tape raining down from skyscrapers, but to a 10-year-old kid from a small town in Indiana, this was a big deal.

You could smell the brats and burgers a block away from the park as old Joe McComb had his huge grills belching their traditional smoky inferno. Joe owned Mac's Diner. He opened this little greasy spoon soon after he and his wife were married. Over the years it had become a local landmark. Unfortunately, Joe lost his wife in 1991 and the restaurant was going downhill. I always thought the local firemen stuck around to watch the games. I later learned they were just there for some free food and to make sure Mac didn't set one of the dugouts on fire.

Everyone called him "Mac". Manning his grills on opening day was as much a part of this little league tradition as the games themselves. Aside from his great food, Mac was famous for his enthusiastic demeanor. Tragically, Mac's smile had lost some of its luster since losing his wife. She was his partner in life and in business. Now in his mid-sixties, it was obvious he would never overcome her loss. When talking with Mac, every other sentence would begin with "My Annie would always say..."

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Community events like this would always restore his magical smile. Maybe it was the gold tooth that always drew my attention. Or maybe it was his genuine love for children. Mac and his wife volunteered for everything around town if food or kids were involved. If someone needed a Santa Clause, they called Mac. No one loved playing the role more or could fill out the red costume so naturally. It was never difficult to figure out Mac was behind the white beard, mostly because he always smelled like a big French fry. We didn't care. Every kid in town knew and loved this jolly old elf.

Their work at the local parish will never be outdone. The McCombs couldn't have children but they made sure there was never a hungry child in Martha's Grove. Over the years, his wife Annie probably gave away as much food as Joe ever sold. She was a saint. My dad once told me that St. Mary's Catholic Church couldn't hold all those who turned out for her funeral. Every business in town was closed and diner patrons from miles away were there to honor this matriarch of the community. I'm sure no one ever suggested to Mac he remarry. It just wouldn't seem right. Besides, how could anyone ever replace his Annie?

When Mac was happy he was whistling. So what if the melody was an unrecognizable tune. All that mattered was the old Mac was back. His happiness was contagious and his personality powerful. It is a rare gift when your mere presence can brighten someone's day. Mac could have such an effect on those around him. Everyone's heart ached for old Joseph "Mac" McComb. I guess that's why seeing him smiling and whistling again, added to the significance of the day.

As I hopped off the fire truck and made my way past the smoking grills, he turned and smiling shouted, "Beautiful day ain't it boys? Which one of you guys are going to hit me a home run today?"

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All the other guys just smiled and waved as we paraded past him in his grease stained apron. I was bringing up the rear.

Once the rest of team was at a safe distance, I turned and running back proclaimed "I'll hit a home run for you today Mr. Mac. I promise." Chuckling, Mac laid down his spatula. Kneeling, he put his arm around me and asked, "Aren't you the little Wagoner boy?"

"Yes sir," I replied.

"I remember your dad bringing you in my diner when you were just a little guy," Mac said tenderly. "My Annie thought you were a real cutie."

Standing slowly Mac smiled and said something I'll never forget, "You don't have to hit a home run to make me happy son. Just go out there and have fun. That's all you got to do for me. Just have fun."

I remember thinking Mac didn't believe I could or would hit a home run. Smiling, I just said "OK."

As I started to walk away he offered "Hey tiger."

Turning to look, his outstretched hand was holding a hot dog. I don't know if it was butterflies or Mom's oatmeal, but for some reason I just wasn't up for a hot dog.

"No thanks," I said.

"You sure?" he asked. "You home run hitters got to keep your strength up."

"Maybe after the game," was my response.

"OK, I'll keep it right here for you," Mac promised as he wrapped and placed it on a table next to his grill. "Don't forget to come see me after the game," he shouted as I ran to catch up with my teammates.

Chapter 14

The next week I walking everywhere. It goes without saying; biking privileges were revoked for a week. If not for some nifty plea bargaining and some community service time around the house, the duration of my sentence would have been two weeks.

I couldn't get Jim off my mind. No matter where I went, my thoughts were focused on finding out as much as I could about this guy. Nothing was adding up. If he played a brief period with the Cardinals, then why did he say he was a Browns fan? What was he doing in Martha's Grove and why didn't I ever see him around town. More importantly, why was he interested in me?

These were questions that would have to wait until the next Saturday afternoon. I assumed he wouldn't care that I stood him up the previous week, due to the weather. My investigative methods had to be subtle. I didn't want Jim to think I was suspicious of him or his motives. I never felt vulnerable or threatened around him, although I probably should have. His desire for our relationship to be so secretive should have set off alarms. For whatever reason, it didn't.

Friday came around pretty quick. I was looking forward to another game and another outing with Jim. Becky made sure I never walked anywhere by myself that week. This day was no different.

Our after school walk was pretty uneventful. I left Becky smiling and waving from her front porch just as always. The rest of my journey home was with Billy. We would usually race the last block. He would always give me a decent head start only to beat me by an unequaled margin. Usually, Mom would let Rusty wander out to the driveway to meet us.

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On this Friday I got my usual lead as we approached the final leg of our destination. Brother Billy shouted “Go” and within seconds he was racing by me in a blur. As I watched him approach our driveway he pulled up in an unusual fashion as Rusty approached him. Dropping his book bag, he knelt down as if something was wrong.

Pulling up behind Billy I could see he was looking down at something in front of our dog. It wasn’t until he stood up and looked at me with the most horrified of expressions that I realized what had occurred.

The first thing catching my eye was Rusty. He was covered with dirt. What I saw next explained Billy’s reaction and sent chills down my spine. There lying on our driveway between a panicking brother and our tail wagging, panting canine was a dead rabbit. Only, this was no ordinary dead rabbit, this was Mrs. Bloom’s rabbit. This was her pride and joy “Fluffy” covered with dirt and deader than a doornail.

Sandra Bloom was our next door neighbor. She was a widow and pretty much a recluse. My bother and I thought of her as the neighborhood grouch who basically hated kids. I’m sure she didn’t, but she never passed up an opportunity to complain to one of our parents if me or Billy or Rusty strayed into her yard.

The only object of her affection was Fluffy. She kept this over-fed snow white bunny in a special cage adjacent to her garage. Every morning and evening you would see Mrs. Bloom exit the side door of her garage, lift the lid on Fluffy’s cage and begin this feeding ritual of coddling, petting, and disgusting baby talk. This side show would usually last about twenty minutes.

My parents felt sorry for Mrs. Bloom and would scold me and my bother if they heard us grumbling about the “old grouch next door”. Unfortunately, she was a difficult person to befriend, even for my parents. She was always one of those

“half-empty” people who constantly complained. My brother and I avoided her like the plague.

Even worse was her attitude regarding Rusty. Twice she called the police when he wandered into her back yard. At least a dozen times she would provoke my brother and me with threats of calling the local dog pound. It wasn't as if we let Rusty just run around the neighborhood. In fact Rusty seldom was left unattended outside the house and he rarely strayed. Granted, when he was younger, Rusty's curiosity would get him into trouble a little more frequently. Now, Rusty was too old and too lazy to be adventurous.

Unfortunately for Fluffy, Rusty still had some mischief left in him. Our old dog had just committed a capital crime and there was enough evidence on him and our driveway to send our faithful companion to the bad dog pokey for a long time. Billy didn't have to say a word. I knew he was thinking the same thing I was...hide Fluffy.

“Come on,” he said as he reached down and scooped up Fluffy.

I followed his lead to the back yard where he quickly hid the carcass behind a shrub.

“Oh there you boys are...” came Mom's voice from behind us.

Jumping to attention and looking guiltier than a couple of mice in a cheese factory, Billy managed, “Oh...hi Mom.”

Immediately Mom sensed something was up, “All right you guys, what's going on?”

About that time Rusty appeared from behind Billy, “Rusty, look at you...you're filthy,” adding “No wonder these guys were protecting you. Where have you been?”

Even Rusty knew he was in trouble. As he started for the back door with his tail between his legs, Mom stopped him,

“Oh no you don’t. You’re not going back in my house without a bath.”

“Bath ...yeah...right...bath...Mom,” stumbled Billy. Now covering, “Yeah, you busted us Mom. We were going to give Rusty a bath to keep him out of trouble.”

Mom responded, “Awe, that’s sweet Billy.” Continuing, “If you’ll do that for me I’ve got a couple of errands I need to run.”

Billy right away, “Oh yeah, go ahead ...no problem. We’ll give Rusty a bath.”

Mom turned to leave, “O.K. but you’ll have to drag out the washtub, and I don’t want him in the house or in my bathtub.”

Billy, almost too agreeable, “Yeah...no problem. We’ll use the washtub.” Now turning to me, “Hey dork, go get the washtub out of the garage.”

Yeah, now there’s the old Billy. As I bolted for the garage, Mom said her final goodbye. Dragging out the washtub, I was confident my conniving brother had some devious plan to get all of us out of this huge mess.

“What are you going to do?” I whispered.

“Shhhhhh...” he motioned back. “Go get some old towels and tell me when Mom’s gone.”

I ran back into the garage and rounded up some old towels my dad kept near his workbench. Returning, Billy asked, “Is Mom gone?”

“I think so,” I said.

“Go make sure,” he ordered.

Running around the side of our garage, I saw Mom just clearing the end of the driveway. She immediately saw me and rolled down her window, “Did you need something Sweetie?”

Never quick on my feet, especially under pressure I offered, “Ah...yeah...ah...How about some...ah...oatmeal...yeah oatmeal?”

With a puzzled smile she answered, "Well, O.K. Sweetie. I wasn't going to the grocery store but I'll pick you up some oatmeal."

Smiling and waving I responded with a half-hearted, "Thanks Mom."

Watching her drive away I remember thinking, "Oh great...nice job...I'm not only sick of oatmeal, I just asked her to make a special trip for more...I am a dork"

Returning to my brother, he was already filling the washtub with water.

"O.K....she's gone," I announced.

"Alright, grab Fluffy," Billy instructed.

Not wanting to touch this nasty dead member of the rodent family, I came back with, "Ah, how about I fill the tub and you get the rabbit."

"Oh all right, you big sissy, here..." he snapped and handed me the hose.

Retrieving the rabbit, he promptly threw it into the washtub and snatched the hose out of my hand.

"What are you doing?" I exclaimed, adding "That's Rusty's bath water."

"No dork, that's Fluffy's bath water," he replied.

"What?" I shouted.

"Keep your voice down," he instructed. "Don't you get it? We give the bunny a bath and put it back in its cage. Mrs. Bloom comes out, finds her poor Fluffy who obviously has died of natural causes." Feeling pretty good about his plan he added, "Sad, but Rusty's off the hook."

Shaking my head, I said "This will never work...she'll never buy it."

Billy fired back, "Well, she better buy it or it's goodbye Rusty."

"O.K., O.K." I agreed.

Watching him scrub up this dead rabbit almost made me sick. It may have been the smell or just the thought of getting caught. Nonetheless, here I was thinking “Why me?”

“Hey dork, hand me one of those towels,” Billy snapped.

I handed him two and after lots of blotting and wiping, Fluffy still looked like a dead, wet rabbit.

“There’s no way that looks natural Billy,” I said.

Billy stood up and stared at this matted mess. Throwing down his towel, I could tell he was starting to doubt whether we could pull this off.

Then suddenly it came to me, “Billy, how about a blow dryer?”

Billy just stared at me and with a smile and an almost evil nod he agreed, “Yeah, great idea...run get Mom’s blow dryer.”

I bolted into the house and quickly emerged with Mom’s best 1800 watt pistol gripped styling machine.

Billy, with the rabbit wrapped in a towel motioned me into the garage. He laid Fluffy on Dad’s workbench, found a plug and began the gruesome task of blow drying a dead rabbit.

After a few minutes we both stepped back and agreed maybe this would work. Fluffy wasn’t looking good but he was looking as good as a dead rabbit could.

“O.K...now what?” I asked.

Billy answered, “We put him back in his cage and whatever happens...happens.”

“What if we get caught?” I questioned.

“We won’t,” he proclaimed, adding, “Let’s go.”

Keeping Fluffy wrapped up in a towel; my brother marched right over to Mrs. Bloom’s garage, opened the lid to the rabbit’s cage, and plopped a very clean but dead rabbit back where it belonged. Man, was I proud to be his brother. Rusty and I watched as he walked back cool and confident that we had just pulled off the scam of the century.

We emptied the washtub and gave Rusty his bath. Mom had not returned home, so we just decided to grab a soft drink and relax on the deck. We had a perfect view of Mrs. Bloom's garage and Fluffy's cage.

It must have been fifteen or twenty minutes before Mrs. Bloom made an appearance to water her flowers. As she exited her garage and walked by her rabbit cage she stopped and looked thru its screen. Immediately she started screaming, backing away from the cage.

Billy and I looked at each other as if to say "What have we done?"

We both hopped up and ran for Mrs. Bloom. Billy reached her first and placing his hand on her shoulder said, "Mrs. Bloom, what's wrong? What's the matter?"

As I reached their side, Mrs. Bloom turned to both of us and cried, "I buried this rabbit yesterday and it's back!"

Billy turned to me with eyes as big as baseballs. My jaw hit my chest. With a pair of screams we both turned and ran for home as fast as we could.

We never told our parents what happened that day. After Billy and I got over the initial shock, we laughed our tails off. It wasn't a month later that Mrs. Bloom sold her house and moved in with her daughter. As for Rusty, well I'm sure he enjoyed the bath and all the attention.