



HOUSE  
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OF  
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PRAYER

NO. 2

*A Writer's Journey Home*

Mark Richard

WINNER OF THE PEN/HEMINGWAY AWARD

*The Ice at the Bottom of the World*

*Fishboy*

*Charity*

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HOUSE OF PRAYER No. 2

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*A WRITER'S JOURNEY HOME*



MARK RICHARD



*Nan A. Talese* | DOUBLEDAY

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO

SYDNEY AUCKLAND

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Richard, Mark, 1955–

House of prayer No. 2 / Mark Richard. —1st American ed.

p. cm.

1. Richard, Mark, 1955– 2. Authors, American—20th century—

Biography. I. Title.

PS3568.I313Z46 2011

813'.54—dc22

[B]

2010006317

eISBN: 978-0-385-53406-2

v3.1\_r1

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to my father

for my sons



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*And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said,  
Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not.*

—GENESIS 28 : 16



# Contents

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*Cover*  
*Other Books by This Author*  
*Title Page*  
*Copyright*  
*Dedication*  
*Epigraph*  
  
*First Page*  
  
*Acknowledgments*  
*A Note About the Author*



SAY YOU HAVE A "SPECIAL CHILD," which in the South means one between Down's and dyslexic. Birth him with his father away on Army maneuvers along East Texas bayous. Give him his only visitor in the military hospital his father's father, a sometime railroad man, sometime hired gun for Huey Long with a Louisiana Special Police badge. Take the infant to Manhattan, Kansas, in winter, where the only visitor is a Chinese peeping tom, little yellow face in the windows during the cold nights. Further frighten the mother, age twenty, with the child's convulsions. There's something "different" about this child, the doctors say.

Move the family to Kirbyville, Texas, where the father cruises timber in the big woods. Fill the back porch with things the father brings home: raccoons, lost bird dogs, stacks of saws and machetes. Give the child a sandbox to play in, in which scorpions build nests. Let the mother cut the grass and run over rattlesnakes, shredding them all over the yard. Make the mother cry and miss her mother. Isolate her from the neighbors because she is poor and Catholic. For playmates, give the child a mongoloid girl who adores him. She is the social doctor's child and is scared of thunder. When it storms, she hides, and only the special child can find her. The doctor's wife comes to the house in desperation. Please help me find my daughter. Here she is, in the culvert, behind a bookcase, in a neighbor's paper tepee. Please come to a party, the doctor's wife sniffs, hugging her daughter. At the party, it goes well for the nervous mother and the forester father until their son bites the arm of a guest and the guest goes to the hospital for stitches and a tetanus shot. The special child can give no reason why.

Move the family to a tobacco county in Southside Virginia. It is the early sixties, and black families still get around on mule and wagon. Corn grows up to the backs of houses even in town. Crosses burn in yards of black families and Catholics. Crew cut the special child's hair in the barbershop where all the talk is of niggers and nigger-lovers. Give the child the responsibility of another playmate, the neighbor two houses down, Dr. Jim. When Dr. Jim was the child's age, Lee left his army at Appomattox. When Dr. Jim falls down between the corn rows he is always hoeing, the child must run for help. Sometimes the child just squats beside Dr. Jim sprawled in the corn and listens to Dr. Jim talking to the sun. Sometimes in the orange and grey dusk when the world is empty, the child lies in the cold backyard grass and watches the thousands of starlings swarm Dr. Jim's chimneys, and the child feels like he is dying in an empty world.

The child is five years old.

Downstairs in the house the family shares is a rough redneck, a good man who brought a war bride home from Italy. The war bride thought the man was American royalty because his name was Prince. Prince was just the man's name. The Italian war bride is beautiful and has borne two daughters, the younger is the special child's age. The elder is a teenager who will soon die of a blood disease. The beautiful Italian wife and the special child's mother smoke Salems and drink Pepsi and cry together on the back steps. They both miss their mothers. In the evening Prince comes home from selling Pontiacs, and the forester father comes home from the forest, and they drink beer together and wonder about their wives. They take turns



mowing the grass around the house.

The company the father works for is clearing the land of trees. The father finds himself clearing the forests off the old battlefields from the Civil War. The earthworks are still there, the stuff is still just lying around. He comes home with his pockets full of minié balls. He buys a mine detector from an Army surplus store, and the family spends weekends way deep in the woods. One whole Sunday the father and the mother spend the day digging and digging, finally unearthing a cannon-sized piece of iron agate. The mother stays home after that. On Sunday nights she calls her mother in Louisiana and begs to come home. No, her mother says, You stay. She says this in Cajun French.



THE LITTLE GIRL DOWNSTAIRS is named Debbie. The special child and Debbie play under the big pecan tree where the corn crowds the yard. One day the special child makes nooses and hangs all of Debbie's dolls from the lower limbs of the tree. Debbie runs crying inside. Estelle, the black maid, shouts from the back door at the special child to cut the baby dolls down, but she doesn't come out in the yard to make him do this and he does not. She is frightened of the special child, and he knows this. If he concentrates hard enough, he can make it rain knives on people's heads.

Maybe it would be best if something were done with the special child. The mother and father send him to kindergarten across town, where the good folk live. The father has saved his money and has bought a lot to build a house there, across from the General Electric Appliance dealer. Because he spent all his money on the lot, the father has to clear the land himself. He borrows a bulldozer from the timber company and "borrows" some dynamite. One Saturday he accidentally sets the bulldozer on fire. One Sunday he uses too much dynamite to clear a stump and cracks the foundation of the General Electric Appliance dealer's house. The father decides not to build in that neighborhood after all.

In the kindergarten in that part of town there are records the teacher whom the special child calls Miss Perk lets him play over and over. When the other kids lie on rugs for their naps, she lets him look at her books. During reading hour he sits so close to her that she has to wrap him in her arms while she holds the book. The best stories are the ones Miss Perk tells the class herself. About the little girl whose family was murdered on a boat and the criminals tried to sink the boat. The little girl saw water coming in the portholes, but she thought the criminals were just mopping the decks and doing a sloppy job. Miss Perk told about the car wreck she saw that was so bloody she dropped a pen on the floor of her car for her son to fetch so he wouldn't have to see the man with the top of his head ripped off like he had been scalped. On Fridays is Show-and-Tell, and the special child always brings the same thing in for Show-and-Tell, his cat Mr. Priss. Mr. Priss is a huge, mean tomcat that kills other cats and only lets the special child near him. The special child dresses Mr. Priss in Debbie's baby doll clothes, especially a yellow raincoat and yellow sou'wester-style rain hat. Then the special child carries Mr. Priss around for hours in a small suitcase. When his mother asks if he has the cat in the suitcase again, the special child always says, *No, ma'am*.

Miss Perk says the way the other children follow the special child around, that the special child will be something someday, but she doesn't say what.

The father and the mother meet some new people. There is a new barber and his wife. The

new barber plays the guitar in the kitchen and sings *Smoke! Smoke! Smoke that cigarette!* He handsome and wears so much oil in his hair that it stains the sofa when he throws back his head to laugh. He likes to laugh a lot. His wife teaches the mother how to dance, how to do the Twist. There is another new couple in town, a local boy, sort of a black sheep, from the country folk, who went away to Southeast Asia to be a flight surgeon and is back with his second or third wife, nobody knows for sure. At the reckless doctor's apartment, they drink beer and do the Twist and listen to Smothers Brothers albums. They burn candles stuck in Chianti bottles. The special child is always along because there is no money for a babysitter and Estelle will not babysit the special child. One night the special child pulls down a book off the doctor's shelf and begins to slowly read aloud from it. The party stops. It is a college book about chemicals. In two more months the child will start first grade.



AT FIRST, FIRST GRADE IS EMPTY. Most of the children are bringing in the tobacco harvest. The ones who show up are mostly barefoot and dirty and sleep with their heads on the desk all day. A lot of them have fleas and head lice. Most of them have been up all night tying tobacco sticks, their hands are stained black with nicotine.

At first, first grade makes no sense to the special child. The child wants to get to the books but the books are for later, the teacher tells him. *You must learn the alphabet first.* But the child has learned the alphabet already; Miss Perk taught him the letters perched in her lap on her desk when the other children napped, and he taught himself how they fit together by making words sitting close to her as she read from children's books and *Life* magazine. The special child thought the tobacco children had the right idea, so he put his head on his desk and slept through the *As* and the *Bs* and the *Cs*.

He won't learn, he doesn't learn, he can't learn, the teachers tell the mother. He talks back to his teachers, tries to correct their speech. He was rude to kind Mr. Clary when he came to show the class some magic tricks. You better get him tested. He might be retarded. And he runs funny.

The special child is supposed to be playing at the General Electric Appliance dealer's house with his son David. The son has a tube you blow into and a Mercury capsule shoots up in the air and floats down on a plastic parachute. The special child may have to steal it, but first he decides to go to visit Miss Perk's. Maybe she has a book or something. Miss Perk does not disappoint. She is glad to see the special child. She tells him that the Russians send men up with Mercury-capsule things and don't let them come back down. She says if you tune your radio in just right, you can hear their heartbeats stop. She says if you ever see a red light in the night sky, it's a dead Russian circling the earth forever. *Can I come back and be in your school, Miss Perk?* No, you're too big now. Go home.

Back at the General Electric Appliance dealer's house there's nobody home. It is too far to walk home, so the child lies in the cold grass and watches the grey and orange dusk. At dark his life will be over. There is a gunshot off in a clay field a ways away, and something like a rocket-fast bumblebee whizzes through the air and thuds into the ground beside the special child. He stays real still. There's not another one. The child is beginning to learn that things can happen to you that would upset the world if you told about them. He doesn't tell anyone about the thing that buzzed and thumped into the ground by his head.

Y'all should do something with that child, people say. The mother takes the child to Cub Scouts. For the talent show, the mother makes a wig out of brown yarn, and the special child memorizes John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech. They laugh at the child in the wig at the show until he begins his speech. Afterward, there's a lecture on drinking water from the back of the toilet after an atom bomb lands on your town, and everybody practices crawling under tables. For weeks afterward, people stop the child and ask him to do the Kennedy thing until finally somebody shoots Kennedy in Texas and the child doesn't have to perform at birthday parties and on the sidewalk in front of the grocery store anymore.

The mother starts crying watching the Kennedy funeral on the big TV the father bought to lift her spirits. She doesn't stop. The mother won't get out of bed except to cry while she makes little clothes on her sewing machine. She keeps losing babies, and her mother starts to won't let her come home. The father sends for the mother's sister. They pack a Thanksgiving lunch and drive to Appomattox to look at the battlefields. It rains and then snows, and they eat turkey and drink wine in the battlefield parking lot. The mother is happy, and the father buys the special child a Confederate hat. After the sister leaves, the mother loses another baby. The father brings the special child another beagle puppy home. The first one, Muddie Puddle, ran away in Texas after the father drove it from Lake Charles, Louisiana, to Kirbyville, Texas, strapped to the roof of the car. He had sedated it, he tried to tell people who were nosy along the way. When they got to Texas, there were bugs stuck all in its front teeth like a car grille. When the dog woke completely up, it ran away.

This new dog, in Virginia, the special child calls Hamburger. The mother cries when she sees it in the paper sack. Maybe we need to meet some more friends, the father tells the mother. Okay, the mother says, and wipes her eyes. She always does what her husband tells her to do. She is trying to be a good wife.

There's the big German, Gunther, with the thick accent and his wife who manage the dairy on the edge of town. They have a German shepherd named Blitz who does whatever Gunther tells it to do. The special child is frightened of the vats of molasses Gunther uses to feed the cows. The child is more interested in the caricatures down in the cellar of Gunther's old house. Gunther's old house was a speakeasy, and someone drew colorful portraits of the clandestine drinkers on the plaster wall behind the bar. They look like people in town, says the special child. It's because the cartoons are the fathers of people in town, says his father.

Gunther's wife finds the special child lying in the cold grass of a pasture watching the sun dissolve in the orange and grey dusk. *You shouldn't do that*, she tells him. If an ant crawls in your ear, it'll build a nest and your brain will be like an ant farm and it'll make you go insane.

Later, Gunther falls into a silage bin, and his body is shredded into pieces the size a cow could chew as cud.

The timber company gives the father a partner so they can reseed the thousands of acres of forests they are clear-cutting down to nothing. Another German. The German knows everything, just ask him, the father says. The German and his wife have two children the special child is supposed to play with. Freddie was the boy's name. Once, when the special child was spending the night, a hurricane came, and Freddie wet the bed and blamed it on the special child. After that, the special child broke a lot of expensive windup cars and trains from the Old Country.

From the helicopter the father uses to reseed the forests farther south, you can still see Sherman's March to the Sea, the old burnage in new-growth trees, the bright cities that have sprung from the towns the drunken Federal troops torched. *Yah, yah, zat iss in der past, say the German, you must let it go.*

The father and the German are in North Carolina cutting timber in the bottom of a lake the dam to make the lake isn't finished yet. The father and the German have become good friends. Sometimes they do their work way back in the deep country away from company supervisors, and sometimes they walk through empty old houses on land their company has bought for timber rights. In the attics they find rare books, old stamps, Confederate money. One day eating lunch in the bottom of the lake, the father and the German figure how much more timber has to be cut before the water will reach the shore. The father then says, *You know, if you were able to figure exactly where the shoreline will be, and buy that land, you could make a small fortune.*

On the weekends, they break their promises to picnic with their families at Indian caves they have found and ride everybody around on the bush motorcycles they use to put out forest fires. Instead, the father and the German spend every extra hour of daylight cutting sight lines with machetes, dragging "borrowed" surveying equipment, and measuring chains around the edge of the empty lake.

The money they give the old black sharecropper for the secret shoreline is all the money they can scrape out of their savings and their banks. The old black sharecropper accepts the first offer the father and the German make on the land left to him by his daddy. Most of the shoreline property they buy from the timber company, but they need an access road through the old black sharecropper's front yard, past his shack. Everyone knows the lake is coming but the father and the German don't tell the black sharecropper the size of their shoreline purchase, just as the sharecropper doesn't tell them he has also eyeballed where the shoreline will appear and is going to use their money to build the state's first black marina with jukeboxes and barbeque pits right next to their subdivision. He doesn't tell them they just gave him the seed money to build H. W. Huff's Marina and Playland.

Twenty acres of waterfront property, two points with a long, clay, slippery cove between them when the dam closes and the lake floods. The German gets his choice of which half of the property is his because he was somehow able to put up ten percent more money at the last minute. He chooses the largest point, the one with sandy beaches all around it. The father gets the wet, slippery clay bank and muddy point. The father tells the mother it is time to meet some new friends.

Meet the American Oil dealer, the one with the pretty wife from Coinjock, North Carolina, a wide grin, and a Big Daddy next door. Down in the basement of his brand-new brick home on a brick mantel the oil dealer has a little ship he put together in college. Most people, they were even guessing, foot up near the fire, glass leaning with bourbon, take the little model to be a Viking ship. It is not a Viking ship even though little fur-tuniced men seated along both rails pull oars beneath a colorful sail. *Who is that man tied to the mast?* asks the special child. Upstairs the adults play Monopoly in the kitchen and drink beer until the father drinks a lot of beer and begins to complain about Sherman's March, and Germans, and it is time to go home.

Later on, the special child is guarding his house with his Confederate hat and wooden

musket while his mother and father are at the hospital having a baby. The oil dealer drives over in his big car and spends the afternoon with the special child. He has a paper sack full of Japanese soldiers you shoot into the air with a slingshot and they parachute into the shrubbery. He shows the special child how to make a throw-down bomb with matchheads and two bolts, but best of all, in a shoe box he has brought the special child the little ship on the brick mantel and tells him who Ulysses was. It is a good story. The only part of the story the child does not quite believe is that somehow Ulysses was older than Jesus. He doesn't say anything to the oil dealer, because the oil dealer was being nice, but he will have to ask Mr. Perk about that later.

Here's some pieces that have come off the ship over the years, the oil dealer says. There are a couple of Ulysses' men in his shirt pocket. Thank you, says the child. The child spends the weekend at the oil dealer's house with his wife and children waiting for his mother and father to come home from the hospital empty-handed again.



**MORE BAD LUCK.** The people at the dam the father calls the idiots keep turning the knobs on the water back and forth. One day the father and the German take their families on a surprise picnic to look at their waterfront property, and way up from their land they can see the lake way down there over miles of mud. Then one day they come back and find Mr. Huff sitting on the front porch of his sharecropper's shack surrounded by water. *All y'all's land underwater* says Mr. Huff. *Ain't nothing you can do about it. Man came round and said so. Said it's in your deed.* The father and the German go to see a lawyer. Mr. Huff is right.

One night while his mother is fixing supper, bad luck starts for the special child. He is in the living room, where he had seen an angel pass through Easter morning, watching *The Three Stooges* with the sound turned down real low because *The Three Stooges* upsets his mother. It is a good *Three Stooges*. It was the one where Moe and them run back and forth up and down some train cars and stuff happens and there's a lion loose out of the baggage car, but the best part is when Moe keeps stubbing his toe on somebody's little suitcase every time he runs past it until finally Moe opens the train door and throws the little suitcase off the train into the night. And Moe doesn't stop there; he keeps throwing suitcases off the train, all by himself. He just keeps throwing suitcases off the train in the middle of the night until he looks around and sees that he has thrown everything off the train he possibly could, and then he can relax and be himself again and not be angry anymore. The child has seen this *Three Stooges* before but this is his favorite. The only problem, this night, watching it with the sound turned down real low while his mother cooks supper waiting for the father to come home, the only problem is that partway through the show, the child hears a truck just outside slam on its brakes and blow its horn, and he hears a dog yelp, and he hears cars slow down and people getting out and men talking and somebody going around the neighborhood knocking on doors and asking whose dog is that, and he hears the people downstairs answer the door, he hears Prince say, Yeah, he thinks he knows whose dog it is, and he hears Prince call up the stairs to the mother she might want to come down 'cause it looks like a dog looking like their dog got hit by a log truck, and the mother says, *Oh no*, and comes in where the child is watching Moe start to throw the suitcases from the train with the sound turned down real low, and she says, *We'd better go see about Hamburger*, but the child does not move from the TV he

kneeling so close in front of, and the mother has her coat on now and says, *Did you hear me? Hamburger just got hit by a truck*, and still the child does not move, does not make movement to get up, even though he loves his dog and if it were true that his dog were dead, then he would want to die as well, but the child kneels in front of the TV and concentrates on Moe throwing the suitcases off the train, because deep inside him he knows that he can concentrate really hard, like when he learned the Kennedy speech, like when he stepped on a copperhead and the snake would not bite him, even though it should have, the child knows that if he can only concentrate hard enough, Moe will keep throwing everything off the train forever and time will stand still and he will never have to die because he will not have to go downstairs and see his dog twisted and smeared across the street and hear somebody, maybe the nervous log-truck driver, maybe Prince himself, make a joke about what his dog's name used to be and what the dog is now.

He never goes downstairs. He just concentrates in his mind to make the story go on forever, and the news comes on, and his mother comes up from the street, and she looks at him in a new way, like maybe what some people and some teachers say about him is true and maybe they ought to have the special child tested.

The father comes home late that evening after hand-digging a firebreak by almost himself down in some cornpone county where the rednecks came out to watch the fire burn a star of company pine. For about eighteen hours the father and a pulpwood contractor and his pimply son worked to turn a fire that sometimes stood fifty feet high in the trees over their heads and flanked them a hundred yards either side, sometimes closing. It was good not having to think about his life savings underwater or his sad wife and her lost babies or his strange son or Sherman's March, digging, shoveling, trying to breathe. The father can barely climb the steps up to the top of their house. All he wants is a drink and a hot soak. He has recently started sipping whiskey rather than the beer. His hands are raw, and his back and shoulders ache. In the last hours the fire had lit a turpentine stump and about a hundred snakes had spit themselves up out of the ground and flowed like a stream over his boots. His nerves are still a little jangly.

Up at the top of the stairs stands his special child hardly able to catch his breath from crying so hard and not wanting to wake his mother. The special child clings to his father's pants by the pockets and tells his father he wants to die because his dog Hamburger has, isn't there something his daddy can do about it, and all the father can do about it is pet the boy on the head and go back downstairs, get the fire shovel out of his truck, and hope he has enough strength to bury what is left of the little dog in the corner of the cornfield out back of the house.



HERE IS SOME MORE LUCK the German and the father have. One day they are driving the German Volkswagen bus up a cliff road to check on some land the company is clearing. A log truck loaded with company logs comes around a corner in the middle of the road. The German always drove in the middle of the road. In the collision the flat-fronted bus folds forward and the German's legs are pinned and broken in several places. The father is luckier. He raises his arm to his face in time to protect it as he goes through the windshield. In his luck he goes through the windshield and then over the cliff. He flies over the cliff and lands on

some railroad tracks at the bottom. Luckily, the train is late that day. They find his eyeglasses perfectly balanced on a train rail, unbroken.

Here are some of the people who comfort the family: Dr. Jim's wife on the one side of the house. The other next-door neighbors, the Shorts, next to them, the Longs. Down the street whole block of Misses, Miss Laura, Miss Effie, Miss Roberta, and Miss Henrietta, who used to be a Mrs. until her husband had a heart attack and died the first time they had sex, everyone said. Down the next block, another, older block of spinsters, bitter children of Reconstruction too old to come out to bring food but who send Negro maids with bags of bad fruit from trees in their yards. The barber and his wife come, and the doctor with his third or fourth wife and Prince and his Italian wife are always there. The father, laid up with a broken leg, busted head, split ribs, and ripped arm, teaches his son to play chess on a little folding set he had from college. The mother sits at the foot of the bed and watches. They all wait for the oil dealer to come. The oil dealer always brings a paper sack of cold beer and ice cream and silly jokes.

You ought to meet my cousin Ruth Ann, the oil dealer tells the mother. She's a lot of fun and she has a daughter they say ought to be tested too.



THE SPECIAL CHILD HAS NEVER SEEN a movie before. He is stunned. *Misty of Chincoteague* on a mile-high drive-in screen. In Ruth Ann's Rambler she drives fast down the middle of the highway, he and the mother in the front seat, the two special children in the backseat. The little girl with impossibly tangled red hair, Christie, says *Misty* is for babies. Christie says if the special child liked *Misty* so much, then he ought to come over and watch the *Invisible Man* on TV on Saturday. She says she knows how to make the house dark even in the afternoon. She says she knows how to make it scary. The special child is still hungover from concentrating on *Misty*. It was almost better than Moe throwing suitcases from the train. While he is thinking this, Christie says to her mother that she is going to vomit. Ruth Ann keeps her Rambler fast down the middle of the highway talking a mile a minute to the mother and says for Christie just to do it out the window. Lean way out and try not to get any on the car.

The special child holds Christie's legs as she leans way out and vomits. It felt as if she would crawl all the way out if he did not hold her. He wraps his arms around her legs and presses his face against her bottom. When she is through, he pulls her in the window, her red hair a solid mass of tangles. The special child helps clean her mouth and face of popcorn and 7Up with an old black slip that for some reason is crumpled up in the floorboard of the backseat of Ruth Ann's rambling car.



WHEN THE FATHER IS FEELING BETTER and up on crutches, he decides to drive them down to Louisiana and the mother packs that day, even though they will not leave for a week or so. He says they will have a vacation, visit some battlefields on the way down, make a long trip out of it. He will "borrow" a car from the company, a grey sedan with a two-way radio in it.

Before they leave on their vacation, the school invites them to have the special child tested on the first Saturday after school closes for the summer. First grade is over. Bring good

pencils.

When the special child shows up with the mother for the testing, the mother is glad to see Ruth Ann there with Christie and Christie's cousin Lynn. They are all three going to be tested together. Most of the test is written and is fun, but some of the test is given by a witch. The witch has cards and blocks and boxes of gears. Once during the testing, Christie has to vomit. Lynn doesn't even care Christie had to vomit. Christie was always vomiting. That is one reason she is being tested.

The closer they get to Louisiana on their vacation, the madder the father gets. Maybe it is all the battlefields. Maybe it is all his broken places in his body. Maybe it is all his land underwater. Maybe it is all the driving time he has to think about everything, driving on the roads before there were interstates between Virginia and Louisiana. Maybe it is going home. Maybe it is because everybody thought he would go real far in life and should be there now. Maybe it is because him near the top of his class in chemical engineering at Rice, the people at NASA wanting him bad, and then in his senior year him switching to LSU and forestry so he could be out in the woods by himself all the time. Maybe that is underneath it all, riding in a hot car over asphalt and tar with a trembly wife and special son for days. Maybe he just doesn't like people at all. Maybe that is it.

At the mother's mother's house in Louisiana, they have spicy chicken and rice and beer coolers in the kitchen and black coffee and fried bread and brothers coming in off shifts from the oil fields and refineries to see their big sister, the brothers tossing the special child up in the air and taking him out back to see how they are putting a stock car together. Cousins and uncles and aunts come over, all speaking French, and Uncle Comille with his pigeons and Buddy with his five sons. Only the mother's father sits a little away from things at the table playing solitaire and smoking unfiltered cigarettes. In his life he has been a miner, a baker, a rigger, a cowboy, a pipefitter. To make ends meet, he now drives a mowing tractor at a good course, bringing home buckets of old golf balls he runs over. Maybe now he is tired.

It is quiet across town at the father's mother's house. You can hear the grandfather clock in the back gallery ticking all through the house. Dinner will always be at high noon. There are no brothers or sisters. One cousin, somewhere. Big Bill, the father's father, lets the special child, his only grandchild, sit in his lap and play with his Shriner's ring and fiddle with his warts. Before high-noon dinner of turkey and dumplings Big Bill balances a shot glass on either arm of his chair, one shot glass filled with bourbon, the other filled with ice water. The special child likes the moments in between the bourbon and the water when the body he has slumped against relaxes and the warm deep breath blown out down on the top of his head smells sweet.

The father's mother is a big woman from Sumrall, Mississippi, who was used to more than her husband has provided over the years. He was away a lot on Huey Long's Special Police force and then later on the railroads, and when he comes home, he goes away on the weekends hunting and fishing with his best friend, Dr. Goldsmith, a Jew. The father's mother did not like Huey Long, and she doesn't like Jews. She had a pet Negro growing up named Scrap. When Big Bill takes their laundry into the black part of town, Big Bill often stays a morning, listening and talking and eating fried-oyster po'boy sandwiches. Now that Big Bill has retired and come home for good, he mostly stays in his shop in the garage putting people's broken clocks together. The big clock at the nearby convent is always stopping, and



when he goes over there to fix it, the nuns feed him lunch and make him stay all day.

On a side trip to New Orleans the women go shopping with the father along to watch the bags and Big Bill takes the special child to Jackson Square to feed the pigeons. It is hot, and Big Bill takes the child to some bars off Bourbon Street to get out of the sun and to meet some friends of his from the old days. In the bars are friendly people with parrots on the shoulders, big laughing bartenders in white shirts and black bow ties who give Big Bill two shot glasses and the child ginger ale colored with maraschino cherry juice. Big Bill lets the child sit on his lap on his bar stool while they watch the street go past the open barroom doors.

Up on a glass shelf in one of the bars they go into, the child sees a windup toy lit from underneath with green and red lights. The bartender takes it down and winds it up and sets it on the bar. A little monkey in a fez plays the drums, nodding his head and kicking his feet. It is like Moe throwing luggage, like Misty swimming in Chincoteague; as long as that monkey keeps playing the drums and nodding his head and kicking his feet, time stands still for the special child. Wind it up again, wind it up. *Can we wind it up again, please, sir?*

*Come on, Snort,* Big Bill calls his grandson, and Big Bill takes them out of the bar and onto a streetcar out to Audubon Park. A lady in her bathrobe on the streetcar has a plastic flower in her hair and carries a long piece of wrought iron tipped like a spear. It looks like a piece of something she has pulled out of someone's fence. She asks Big Bill for a dime, and he gives her a dollar. Where you going? she asks. I'm taking my grandson to the zoo. Well, say hello to my uncle, says the lady. He works at the zoo? says Big Bill. They got him locked up in the monkey house, says the lady, *'cause he's a monkey's uncle.* Well, we'll say hello, says Big Bill. We're on our way to the monkey house. My boy here seems to like monkeys.

It's incredible, the monkey house. A big castle surrounded by a moat with millions of monkeys playing with themselves like humans and shouting at the tourists and sometimes flinging a handful of poo-poo at the people leaning over the rail.

I want to stay here all day, says the special child. Okay, says Big Bill, we will, and they stay until it is time for them to go.

On their way out, the special child sees a man walking around the monkey house. The man is picking up trash with a nail on the end of a stick. He carries a big burlap sack slung over his shoulder for the stuff he finds. He doesn't even have to bend over to pick it up, because he has the nail on the end of the stick.

*Is that that man's job?* the special child asks Big Bill.

*Yes,* says Big Bill, *that's what he does.*

*He gets to walk around the monkey house all day with a nail on the end of the stick finding stuff,* asks the child.

*Yes,* says Big Bill.

In the storeroom off the back gallery of Big Bill's house the child finds lots of treasure. There are *National Geographics* from the very first year. The child mostly likes the castle, ships, and monkey issues. He finds his father's helmet from when his father was in the Army. There is one thing he finds that he likes a lot better than the *National Geographics*, a box of old photographs of blown-apart people and horses lying dead in snow.

When Big Bill was a young man, he was enlisted from deep within the bayous to fight the Germans in the Great War. Some officers took Big Bill into French towns with them because

he spoke a kind of French, and because Big Bill got along well with the French people they met. The French people liked Big Bill and made allowances for the coarser Americans, his Army superiors. As a gift, an officer had given Big Bill a simple box camera. With the simple box camera, Big Bill took photographs of his friends struggling and dying with their horse-drawn artillery in the heavy snows of the Argonne forest. The only happy photograph was taken by a stranger on the returning troopship—a very thin Big Bill and two other soldiers, all who were left of the cannonade they had been.

When the special child pulls the box of photographs out and asks about it, they take it away from him, and on his later visits the box is gone.

*Here is something you can play with*, the grandmother tells the special child. She sets an old Royal typewriter on the dining room table. *Write me a letter, write me a story*. The child tries to type the story of Misty of Chincoteague in several sentences. It takes most of the afternoon.

When it is time to go back to Virginia, they spend one last night at the mother's old house and she cries and begs to stay. Here, take some food I am making for you for the trip, the mother's mother says, ignoring her crying. The mother's mother cooks spicy food and fries up some bread, and this makes the father angry because he hates when his clothes smell like fried bread. The child is afraid he will have to return to Virginia with his father by himself.

They have a big going-away barbeque for the mother, and her brothers tie her up in the backyard and wash her hair for her with the hose until she says uncle. Everybody laughs except the father, who watches from the garage where the stock car and tools are, sipping beer. When the child tries to save his mother, one of his uncles sets him on top of the garage roof and later makes him ride a pony.

Sometimes on the drive back to Virginia, because the company grey sedan with the two-way radio looks like an unmarked police car, the father drives up behind people he thinks are driving too fast and flashes his lights and makes them pull over, then he speeds off. He stops doing this when in Georgia he accidentally pulls over an unmarked police car and the state trooper is very angry at the father. Later on in North Carolina, the father seethes and speeds faster.

It has been so hot while they have been away in Louisiana that the candles the mother has stuck in the Chianti bottles are drooped over on the mantel.

There is a lot of mail. There is a letter from the invention company where the father has sent them an invention. It is for a device that hooks onto a kite string that sends paper airplanes up to the kite and then releases the airplanes so they can float to the ground. The father had gotten the idea watching the special child trying to slingshot his Japanese parachutists as high as he can in the backyard. The father tried to explain the idea to his brothers-in-law in Louisiana, and they were polite about it, but you could tell they didn't understand why anyone would want an invention like that. Right on the spot, the brothers-in-law took some pipes and welded together a cannon that shot old golf balls about a hundred yards. You can take it back to Virginia with you, they told the child when they were leaving, giving him the cannon, and they said good luck to the father about his invention, even if they didn't understand it. When the family got home from Louisiana, the invention company didn't understand the invention and they didn't want it, either.

In the mail are test results. One test result says the mother is most likely pregnant again.

The other test result says the special child is eligible for a special school if the father can afford it.

The father goes down to check on his underwater property. While he and his family have been away in Louisiana, the idiots at the dam finally adjusted the water levels on the lake just right. The shoreline is exactly where he and the German had predicted it would be. In the lowering fluctuations of the lake all the German's beautiful sand has washed along the father's shoreline and blanketed his property with long, broad beaches. Where the German's beautiful beaches had been are ugly slick stretches of slippery red clay corrupted through and through by the black roots of drowned trees. *Zat iss in der past, you must let it go*, the father tells the angry German. The German and his family move away.

In the fall the special child starts second grade. His second-grade teacher is Miss Caroon. Miss Caroon has seen his test results, so she lets him spend as much time as he wants reading *The Boxcar Children* and Mark Twain in the cloakroom while the other children struggle with Dick and Jane and Baby Sally and Spot. Miss Caroon lets him wear his father's Army helmet in the classroom if he wants to, and she lets him try to pass off the wad of Confederate money he always carries. At Thanksgiving, when he draws the Pilgrims coming to the New World in a Chinese junk greeted by Indians selling Live Bait and Cold Beer, she hangs his picture on the wall with all the rest without extraordinary comment.

Miss Caroon gives the children in her class a list of words from which to make a story. In the stories the class turns in, dogs get up on the furniture when they aren't supposed to, and someone finds a coin. From the special child she receives "The Ancient Castle," in which the Good King goes away to conquer an enemy and while he is gone an Evil King comes and lays siege to the Good King's castle. The Evil King's men scale the walls, and some of the Good King's favorite men are shot full of arrows and beheaded. Just when all seems to be lost everyone looks up and sees a brilliant flash of light on a distant hill. It is the sun shining on the Good King's shield. The Good King and his men come and slaughter the Evil King and all the Evil King's men. The people in the Good King's castle are so happy, they have a huge banquet and feast on roast duck and turkey. After they have eaten all they can eat, they begin singing the Good King's favorite songs. Miss Caroon reads the child's story out loud to the class. She especially likes the last sentence in the story and takes her time sounding it out—*And the singing went on for days*.

Miss Caroon hands back the stories, and the child receives an A-minus because he misspelled "Ancient" in the title. This is a very good story, she tells the child. When his mother comes on visit on Parents' Day, Miss Caroon tells her that her son is a special child, that he could be a writer someday if he wanted to be one. The mother shakes her head sadly and tells Miss Caroon the truth. She has to tell Miss Caroon that all the child wants to be when he grows up is the man who walks around the monkey house all day with a nail on the end of a stick.



SAY YOU ARE THE SPECIAL CHILD. Say one reason you are special is because there is something wrong with your legs. You cannot run. Your legs will not move fast enough. When you try to run your hips click and pop. When you have to run a race, like at the going-away party at the doctor's house in the old town, when everyone was running toward the doctor's house that would burn completely to the ground the next year, you pretend to trip and fall and not

finish the race. You avoid footraces; you avoid running at all. When something bad happens and everyone else runs away, rocks thrown through greenhouse glass, loose spikes thrown passing caboose windows, fishing boats untethered along a riverbank, you know you will have to face whoever is coming at you in their anger. You learn you must never get caught.

In the new town the teachers don't say you are special as the teachers did in the old town. They use the word "slow." And you are slow. But they also say you are slow when you are sitting at your desk unable to color the state bird. You can't get the red crayon to work on the cardinal in a way that makes the teacher happy. Your father has said to be careful about signing your name to anything, so you don't put your name on your homework. A suspicious teacher has said that if your parents are really from Louisiana, you must be able to speak French. *Oui*, you say. You try to speak with a French accent, you still try to spend your Confederate money, you still wear your father's Army helmet to school. No one can understand what you are saying, and big boys from out in the county want to fight you in line to the cafeteria. They come up behind you and flip off your helmet and you have to fight them almost every day. The fighting finally stops when you break a boy's hand. When your mother finds out, she cries because she is afraid the boy is the son of a new friend of her. You get the feeling it was selfish of you to break the boy's hand.

A good afternoon in the new town is when the school is struck twice by lightning. Everyone else starts crying when the lightning strikes the swing set first. You stand at the window. It's raining and thundering and the lightning strikes the roof, but the sun is also shining, and you heard from your father's mother that when it rains and the sun is shining, means the Devil is beating his wife. As the big boys from the county and all the little girls cry for their mommies and the teacher is shouting for everyone to get into the cloakroom, you clap and laugh and shout, *The Devil is beating his wife! The Devil is beating his wife!* The children and teacher are afraid of your loud laughter, you can tell by their looks as they crowd into the cloakroom as you stand by the open window getting soaked by the windblown rain, the special child.

One morning you do not have to go to school. Your father does not put on his formal clothes—khaki shirt, denim jeans, snake pistol, long-sheath knife, the boots with wire laces that won't burn in case he gets caught in a forest fire and has to make a run for it. He puts on a coat and a tie, and you get in the car with him. He drives you to Richmond, through swamps, low woodlands, fields turned over for peanuts and corn. Neither of you speak there's just the tires on the corduroy road and his flying-tiger class ring clicking the window when he lifts his cigarette ash to the rolled-down crack at the top. You always keep an eye out for the tiger, you never know when it may fly across your face.

Your father turns the grey sedan in to a long driveway between green lawns to a place that looks like a museum. Your father signs you in, and you take an elevator upstairs. The place smells like linoleum wax and medicine and shitty diapers.

You and your father sit on folding chairs in a long dark hallway with other fathers and mothers and what an odd boy who lives in the place later calls *sin spawn*: children with withered legs, legs of different lengths, bent-up legs, legs in steel and leather braces, hobbling kids crying and carrying the smell of places where people live who tote water in buckets from a well and go to the bathroom in sheds out back. A lot of the people waiting have long greasy hair that needs cutting. You can tell some are missing teeth when they talk and smol

and spit in the metal trash can by the exam room door.

A woman in a white uniform comes out with a clipboard and hands it to your father. You can read the top of the paper, and you understand why you are special when you read *crippled CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL*.

The doctor has seen your X-rays. He twists your legs and makes your hips crack and pop on the white-papered table. The doctor doesn't answer your father's questions. The doctor says he will try nails in your hips. Your father wants to know if the doctor will put the nails in your hips himself. The doctor doesn't answer your father. He says nails are the best remedy. Your father asks if there is any other *remedy*, and he says it in a way that makes him sound like a smart-ass. The doctor stares at your father and says loudly, *With or without the nails your son will probably be in a wheelchair by the time he's thirty anyway.*

To cheer you up, your father takes you to the Hollywood Cemetery, where some of your heroes are buried, President Jefferson Davis, Major Generals J. E. B. Stuart and George Pickett. You and your friends have spent many afternoons playing Pickett's Charge in the park across from the Episcopal church, running into withering cannon and musket fire, and because of your legs you are always the first casualty as the minié balls rip into your arm and throat, falling dying in the grass, sometimes crawling beneath the azalea bushes where Robert E. Lee sits astride his iron-grey horse Traveller, him saying down to you sadly, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it was all my fault.*

After you visit the grave of the doctor who amputated Stonewall Jackson's arm and tended to Lee's heart attack on the eve of Gettysburg, you go see the big black iron dog that guards the little girl's grave. By the time you get to the grave of Jefferson Davis's five-year-old son, John Davis, you are ready to go home.



AT THE HOSPITAL THEY strip you naked and scrub you with tar-smelling delousing soap in a deep sink in an old tiled room full of drains even though you had a bath that morning before leaving home with your family. A nurse takes the green cardboard suitcase your mother had packed for you that morning and says she'll deliver it to your father in the reception office. It's the green cardboard suitcase you used to carry your cat in. Here are your new clothes, nice and clean, with somebody else's name in the worn waistband of the donated shorts and in the collars of the two old summer camp shirts. One of the shirts is a good one, yellow, red, and white madras, and in the coming months you will trade for it back when it goes through the laundry and is given to someone else.

Here is the T-shirt to sleep in, here is a fresh sheet for your bed, once a week put the old sheet on the bottom, the fresh sheet on top, and here is your bed on the sunporch. The boy ward is crowded in summer. Your bed looks out over the rigging and masts, the bars and chains of the playground swing sets. That night it will all look like shipwrecks in the green streetlight when you turn away from the crying around you and stare out through the metal safety rails of your bed.

Your mother sat in your father's car in the parking lot earlier that afternoon nursing your baby sister because your mother's luck has changed. She's had a baby and she's going to have another. She and another lady went into the little Catholic church to put fresh flowers on the altar on Saturday afternoon, and the priest came out of the sacristy with a rope belt and Scotch on his

breath. Women in culottes defiling the altar. *Whores!* The priest swung the rope belt, and her weekly call to her own mother later in Louisiana, your mother says she has left the Church for good.

*Then you are going to hell*, her mother tells her. *Goodbye*. On the extension, you hear someone take a breath quickly after your grandmother says this, and don't know if it's your mother or the long-distance operator who sometimes listens in and lives down your street. A sorrow-filled house with her three children who used to be four children until one drowned in the frozen pond behind the cemetery like a lot of people seem to do, including Mr. Richardson one street over.

From your sunporch bed that afternoon you saw your father return to the car with your green suitcase and tell your mother something, and it seemed she didn't understand, but later you could tell she was crying as she nursed your little sister.

Your father walks over to the empty playground where no one is allowed because it is not playtime and he sits in one of the swings and you watch him chain-smoke for a while until he sees your mother burping your sister and he looks at his watch. A nervous boy comes up to you and says some kid died that morning. You figure out you got the dead kid's bed. When you look out next, your father is gone, there's an empty swing swinging in the swing set. The morning you go out on the playground with all the other crippled children and you find the swing where your father sat, the smoked tobacco and cigarette butts ground into the ash dust.



IN THE NEXT DAYS they draw your blood and take your temperature. They X-ray you some more and forget you in a hallway until suppertime. They make you walk naked in front of an auditorium of young student doctors and nurses from a college. *Walk. Run. Stop. Stand on one leg. Hop. Run some more.* Also in the audience are boys your age and girls your age. They see how you can't run naked, how you can't hop naked, how you can barely walk naked. They laugh at first until they realize in a few minutes a nurse will remove their gowns and make them jump, run, walk, and hobble naked, too.

One day after lunch, instead of a nap, a nurse takes you and her purse out in front of the hospital to wait for a taxicab. The taxicab takes the two of you to a laboratory downtown. By the way the nurse pets your head, you know this is going to be bad. They give you a shot that makes you drowsy and begin to dream, but you don't fall all the way asleep. While you are drowsy and beginning to dream, they lay you on your side and push long needles into your spine. Somebody in your dream is screaming.

It's you.

Later in the taxicab back to the hospital the nurse holds you in her arms like a backseater. *pietà*, the sunlight burns your eyes, and the telephone wires hang and loop, hang and loop. In the hospital auditorium you had noticed these words painted in large letters over the stage.

SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN TO COME UNTO ME.

*Who said that?* you ask the nurse who took you to the laboratory, the nurse who sometimes sneaks Coke in your metal spout cup when everybody else gets tap water. Nurse Wilfong.

*Jesus. Jesus Christ*, she says.

What kind of jerk would want little children to suffer? you wonder.

Nurse Wilfong says you're constipated. They keep track of everyone's bowel movements on a ledger. You didn't know you had to report a bowel movement while you were still walking around, if they hadn't sent you upstairs yet to let the young student doctors practice taking you apart and nailing you back together.

Nurse Wilfong wants you to drink chalky stool softener while you want to talk about what a jerk Jesus must be if that's what He said about children and suffering. It's creepy, like the older boys going around saying a kid down in North Carolina went into a department store bathroom and some man cut his penis off with a pocketknife. The older boys say it was in the newspaper.

The hospital is crowded with children from Appalachia with knees that have to be cut up and legs that have to be sawed off. They're a pretty happy bunch. They love the food so much you give them yours, you don't eat it anyway. The first night you went into the lunch table room there was a black kid sneezing snot into his plate of food right before the blessing. The woman who ran the lunch table made everyone slide down one plate so you could squeeze in, and you got the plate with the droplets of snot on the rim, the rest of the snot having disappeared into the stewed tomatoes and cabbage and boiled meat. The Appalachian kids start eating off your plate as soon as it's set down in front of you. One of the Appalachian kids had been sent home with a long cast on his leg, and when he comes back and they cut off the cast, they find bugs have nested in there.

The black kid who blew snot all over your food is on a respirator now. You lie awake and watch the stoplight change out on Brook Road and wonder if there was enough of something in that one spoonful of stewed tomatoes you choked down so that you'll start coughing up bloody snot yourself. The ward overflows with deformity and crying kids at night. It's been two weeks, maybe they've forgotten about you again.

Then one night they get you.

The night nurse and the night porter jerk and wheel your bed into the prison spotlight of the night nurse's desk lamp so she can better see to tie No Breakfast signs to your bed rails. The young doctors will be waiting upstairs for you in the morning. They'll make Ben or Howard or one of the other black orderlies come down and fetch you. You hope you will come back alive because everyone knows, even the little boys on the other end of the ward that not everybody comes back from upstairs. Sometimes boys end up on a gurney covered with bloody sheets and tossed-off scrubs down in the basement waiting for a station wagon from the state to fetch you, Big Mike says. Big Mike has burns over ninety percent of his body and carries a single condom in an otherwise empty wallet. He knows things. You begin to pray to God directly, forget the creepy men's room Christ who wants you to suffer, and you hope somebody has called your parents because sometimes they forget to do that too.



NO ONE TELLS YOU that you will wake up in a body cast, so it is a surprise when you wake up and you are in a cast that reaches from under your arms and goes down to your knee on one side and down to your toes on the other. You vomit a lot coming out of the anesthesia as harelip kids bang around under your bed playing cowboys. You remember trying to push yourself out of the cast like an insect molting its shell and only the searing burn of the stretching of fresh stitchery covering the hammered-in nails around one hip makes you stop.

The heat of the place in the day and the fear of roaches that might crawl down into you cast at night make it hard to sleep. The nurses put you out on the smaller sunporch that has some books that aren't worth reading, mostly schoolbooks written before World War II. For a while, there are two Jerrys. One Jerry is the guy who is called the Human Skeleton. His clothes look like scarecrow rags. He ranges around on his bed waiting for someone to come too close so he can bite the person with his large buckteeth. He has one large testicle that sways back and forth when he crouches at the foot of his bed, chomping at the air. Later, when you are in a wheelchair and you can sit beside his bed and feed him crayons, he lets you pet his head like a dog and he pats your arm and howls.

The other Jerry is from Appalachia. He has calm, even features and a trusting smile and the eyes of a schoolbook pioneer standing on a mountaintop leading a wagon train into a lush green valley beyond. Already the doctors have taken off one of his legs. In the daytime it doesn't seem to bother him too much. But at night, as you watch for roaches crawling along your bed rail so you can flick them off, you see Jerry in silhouette against the Brook Road streetlight, and you see him stare down at the place where his leg used to be. You pretend you are asleep. Jerry throws himself back onto his pillow and Jerry cries, and you know he is trying not to. You want to tell him that it's all right, that everyone here cries at night.

Here is a miracle—you find a game board and a box of chess pieces, none missing. You teach Jerry to play chess. At nap time, when all must be quiet, Jerry sets up the board on a small table beside his bed. He touches each of your pieces with just the tip of a finger, waiting to see if that is the piece you want to move. You nod your head. He moves the piece. You clear your throat for the number of spaces, point a finger to adjust direction.

When Jerry moves his pieces, you see he's playing a cautious defensive game. Castling confounds him. Only when he almost makes the most fatal errors do you snap your fingers and he looks up to see you tapping your temple, telling him, *Think!* You don't want to keep beating him, and he knows this and tries harder. Just when you are about to quit one afternoon, he puts you in check, and if he weren't missing a leg and you weren't flat on your back in a body cast, you'd both get up and shake hearty hands. Instead, the two of you clasp hands without making a sound because it is nap time and all must be quiet.



ON SUNDAY MORNINGS, Jerry's family comes down from the mountains somewhere near Cumberland Gap. They leave their houses in the dark and drive across the state just to be with Jerry for a few hours. They stand there and hold on to his clothes as if he might float away. Jerry's family doesn't bring him anything to eat, and you know it is because they don't have anything to bring. His parents look at Jerry in his face and hold on to his clothes and Jerry looks down at the leg that he has left, and there you are across the way, with grease all over your fingers, eating a fried chicken box lunch your parents have brought, knowing Jerry's family is all hungry and will drive back across the state without stopping. Your mother has also brought you a toy with the fried chicken box lunch, a blue plastic plate and a stick. The idea is to spin the plate on the end of the stick. The first time you try to spin the blue plastic plate on the end of the stick it flies off and hits Jerry's father on the back. Jerry's father picks up the blue plastic plate and kindly passes it back to your mother, and she smiles and hands it to you and you are ashamed.



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