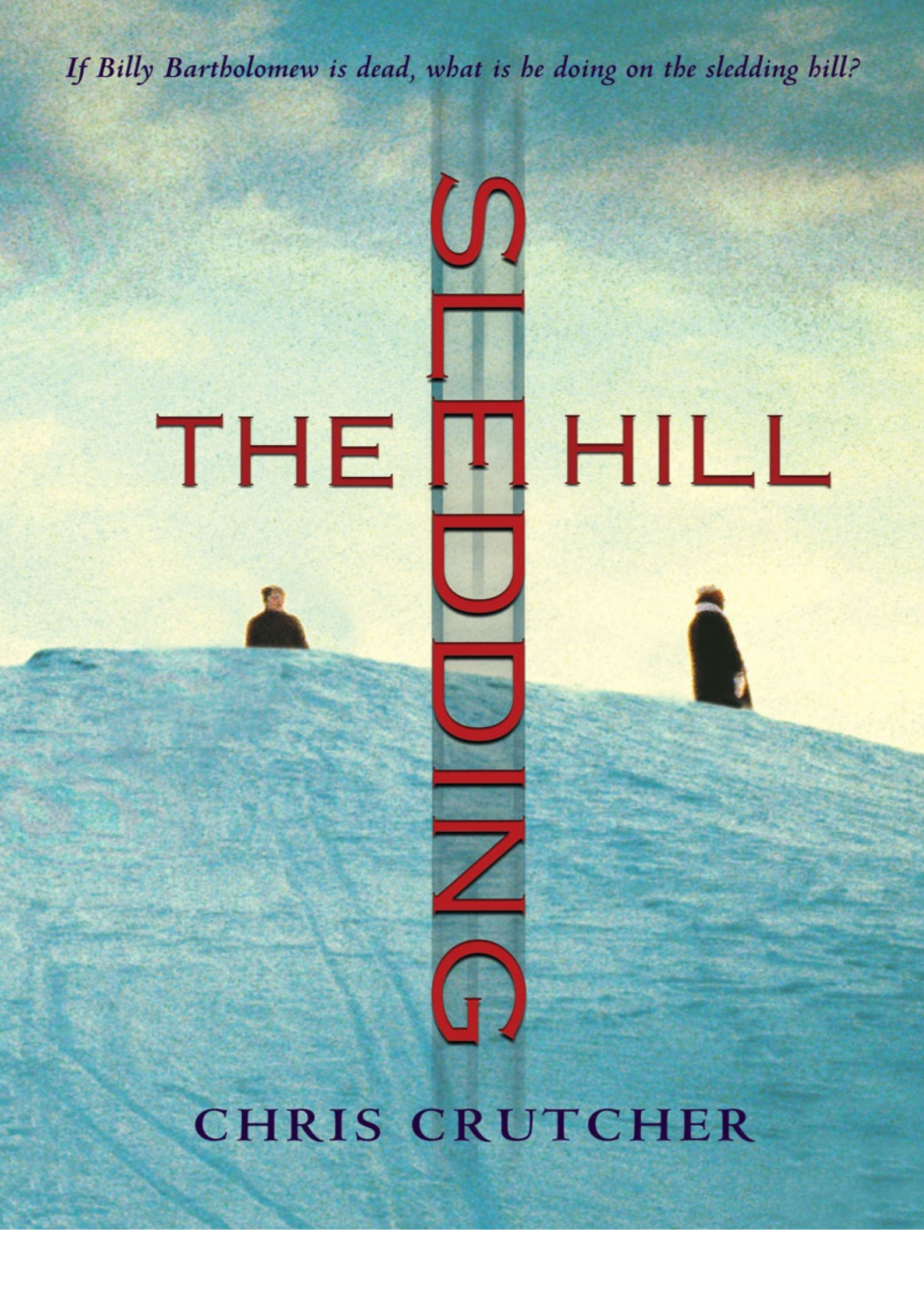


If Billy Bartholomew is dead, what is he doing on the sledding hill?



THE SLEDDING HILL

CHRIS CRUTCHER

The Sledding Hill

Chris Crutcher

 HarperCollins e-books

**IN MEMORY OF ZACH CLIFTON,
WHO SPOKE WHALE TALK**

Contents

- [1 Death Does Not Take a Holiday](#)
- [2 Life After Life](#)
- [3 Billy Bartholomew aka Freddy Krueger](#)
- [4 Sorting Out](#)
- [5 Black Like Cain](#)
- [6 Winter in the Middle of Summer](#)
- [7 Dead Authors Beware](#)
- [8 Protecting Impressionable Minds](#)
- [9 The Universe Takes a Hands-off Position](#)
- [10 Holy War Wholly Declared](#)
- [11 Good Guys and Bad Guys](#)
- [12 Jesus Loves a Good Book](#)
- [13 Something about the Author](#)
- [14 If the Game's Too Easy...](#)
- [15 Unedited Testimony](#)
- [16 How to Prepare Your School for an Author Visit](#)
- [17 First-Name Basis](#)
- [18 Getting Published](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by Chris Crutcher](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

DEATH DOES NOT TAKE A HOLIDAY

When we were in grade school most kids thought Eddie Proffit was stupid because he would ask questions no one else would think of. It's human nature to think if you weren't the person to think of something, it must be dumb. But Eddie knows things.

I was Billy Bartholomew, smartest kid in class; arguably smartest in school, which was supposed to be a minor miracle because my father is the school janitor. It is also human nature to define a person by his or her job, which is a mistake when it comes to my dad. He doesn't have a huge drive to get rich, so he's considered ordinary. At any rate, I was supposed to grow up and rattle the world, and Eddie was supposed to grow up and run his father's gas station. Everyone thought our friendship was odd; what was a smart kid like me doing hanging out with a kid with an IQ short of triple digits? True is, Eddie's IQ turned out to be off the charts. His mind bounces from one thing to the other pretty much however it wants, though, and long before he should be finishing up one thought, he's on to something else. Eddie doesn't come to very many conclusions.

In fifth grade, when my dad discovered Eddie scored sixty-five on his IQ test, he asked Eddie what happened, because Dad knew that couldn't be right.

"I was answering the questions," Eddie said, "and then I started seeing what a neat pattern I was making filling in those little ovals, and before I knew it I was making neater and neater patterns."

"You weren't even reading the questions?"

"I wasn't even keeping it to one answer per row," Eddie told him. "Did you see my answer sheet? It looks way cool."

So my dad went to the principal, who was about to put Eddie in special ed for every class but PE and told her she can't do that. "He scored a *sixty-five*," my dad said, "without reading the questions."

The principal was all into protocol and all out of taking advice from the school janitor and wouldn't let Eddie retake the test. But Dad had a key to every room and file drawer in school, so he found a test, took Eddie to the furnace room, and had him answer the questions five at a time. Eddie added almost a hundred points to his IQ that afternoon. When the principal told Dad he was out of line, Dad took the test over to the Chevron station to bring Eddie's dad up to speed.

Eddie didn't attend any special ed classes.

The principal went ahead and recorded the sixty-five IQ on his permanent record anyway and no one knew the story of the second test, so it was generally thought I did Eddie's homework for him when he started to get good grades. I didn't do one of his assignments. He would go to the furnace room for an hour and a half after school every day, and my dad would break up his homework with little jobs to keep him focused, and Eddie did great. But he continued to ask strange questions and challenge teachers when they said something he thought couldn't be true, and he was pretty much considered a pain in the neck.

Eddie and I used to run everywhere. We'd been winning the annual Fourth of July races as long as we could remember and had decided when we got into high school we'd be the heart of a stellar cross-country team. We were both too skinny to play football, and in a high school this small it is no

considered cool to go sportless, so cross-country was it.

—So it's early summer, five days after Eddie's fourteenth birthday, and he's getting ready to bike out to the hot springs with me to spend the afternoon swimming and rolling in the warm mud. Eddie's been working four hours a day, eight to noon, at his dad's service station, the last full-service gas station in the solar system, to hear Mr. Proffit tell it. It may not be the last one in the solar system, but it's definitely the last in Bear Creek, population 3,065, situated high in the Idaho panhandle, a few miles from the Canadian border. Anyway, Eddie has been helping his dad fix truck tires all morning and is ready to hit the warm water.

Bear Creek is a mess. Duffy Reed Construction has been hired to widen Main Street. They've got the pavement dug out from city limit to city limit along with another two feet of dirt below that, so if you step off the sidewalk without looking you could take a serious header. Proffit's Chevron, which Eddie's dad used to call Non-Proffit's Chevron, is the only place in town that fixes truck and heavy-equipment tires, and Mr. Proffit has been doing just that twelve hours a day—four hours with Eddie's help and eight by himself—to keep up with Duffy Reed's sharp-rock punctures.

He's got it down to a science. Air up four tires at a time to find the leaks, let the air out, break them down, remove the tubes if they have them, patch them, throw them back together, air them up, and roll them to the rack out back so the next driver with a flat can replace it with a repaired one and roar out in under six minutes. Four at a time. John Proffit's a tire-fixin' fool.

That day Eddie's dad stops only once to have lunch with Eddie's mom—her name is Evelyn—and he's back to fixing tires, somewhat disgruntled and distracted because he got chicken salad instead of tuna, and he forgets to let the air out of one of the tires before breaking it down.

Eddie's mom catches Eddie and me just as we're about to head out to the hot springs, and she gives Eddie a monster hunk of chocolate cake and some milk in a thermos to take to his dad.

But his dad is lying in the middle of the wash bay next to an exploded truck tire, nose plastered onto the side of his cheek like he was maybe painted by Picasso, his blood trickling into the drain, deader than a doornail. No chocolate cake and milk for John Proffit today.

Eddie stands there staring. This *can't* be. His dad has told him eight jillion times how dangerous the lock ring on a truck wheel is. You *always* make sure the air pressure is zero before breaking it down. When it's repaired you place it inside the wire cage before airing it up or, in the absence of a cage, turn it facedown on the concrete. If the lock ring isn't locked, it might just as well be a bomb. It will take your head right off your body. Eddie knows that as well as he knows to brush his teeth before bedtime. "It'll take your head right off your body, buddy." Eight jillion times.

I'm waiting outside by the gas pumps, so Eddie just walks back and gets on his bike and we pedal off to the hot springs. He doesn't tell me what happened because he knows it isn't real. He's had dreams like this; not about truck tires, maybe, but dreams where you come home to find the house empty and no sign of your parents. Shoot, even *I* used to have that dream. It freaks you, but when you finally wake up, there they are.

"Hey, man," I say when we've pedaled about a mile, "hear those sirens? Let's go back and see what it is."

"Naw," Eddie says. "Probably just Mrs. Madden set her hamburgers on fire again."

I'm easy to convince. We've been planning to bike to the hot springs for a week.

Flash forward three weeks. I'm trying to hook up with Eddie to hang out or bike back out to the hot springs. I have been way cool, doing everything I can to help Eddie back to his regular life after his dad was suddenly gone and his mom's brain got kidnapped by the Red Brick Church. Since the day his dad died, ask Evelyn Proffit any question and the answer will include God's Plan, which, by the

way, you seldom hear about unless something awful happens or one person escapes death in a situation where nobody else did. Eddie's been attending church with her Wednesday nights and Sundays, but it doesn't help much. For one thing, he can't keep his mind on Reverend Tarter's sermons for more than thirty seconds at a time, and for another, he's mad at God. Eddie figures if God's Plan included his dad taking a bite out of an exploding lock ring, well, God can plant a big one on Eddie's keister. Also, he ran out in the middle of his dad's funeral and the Red Brick Church people have taken to treating him like one of the lepers to which the Reverend Tarter so fondly refers in every third sermon.

I was one of those dweebs who loved having information other people didn't care about, so I hated it when Eddie got thrown out of class for talking out of turn or for not stopping after the fifth or sixth time the teacher said, "That's enough, Eddie." On his worst days he spent more time in the office than in class. I loved how he'd just tell a teacher she was wrong or ask questions at a machine-gun clip without raising his hand if she said something he thought was suspect. So I started working with him on ways to stay in class. Once we pooled our money and bought one of those electronic dog collars you can use to shock the dog by remote if he starts to pee in a corner of the living room or tears after his mother pushing a baby stroller. Eddie wore the collar on his ankle and sat directly in front of me in class. Every time I'd see him start to speak out of turn or do something that clearly indicated he was fixin' to make an unplanned exit, I'd give him a jolt. Most of the time it worked, but if I didn't catch him before he blurted, he'd get out about three words and a scream as the shock hit him. The idea was solid in theory, problematic in execution.

Then I started noticing when we'd ride our bikes, Eddie could stay on any subject, and the harder we rode the more focused he was. Since we both liked to run and bike, I started holding most of my important conversations with him on the move, and he seemed like a way different kid. I tried to tell our teacher that if she'd just let him pace the perimeter of the room at an accelerated gait, he'd be the smartest kid in class. Again, easy theory to formulate, harder to sell.

Eddie discovered I was right, though, and started running and biking everywhere he went, whether I was with him or not, which created a demand for deodorant until he started carrying fresh clothes in a backpack and people got used to him showering at their houses whenever he came to visit. The more he exercised, the calmer he got.

So, biking is what Eddie is doing while I'm trying to catch up with him on this day, and when I can't find him I realize I'm so bored I might as well go help my dad with summer maintenance on the gym up at the high school. Only Dad's out running an errand, and for some reason that really hacks me off and (this was a *real* lapse) I kick a stack of Sheetrock leaning precariously against the stage and turn around to stomp out. The operative word in that last sentence is "precariously." Four of the sheets fall forward as I walk away, and the upper edge catches me at the base of the skull, knocks me down, and snaps my spine.

Guess who finds me.

Around noon, after a ten-mile bike ride to the radar site on West Mountain, during which he has some choice words with God about who goes and who stays on this stupid planet, Eddie pedals over to my place. My dad is eating lunch and says if Eddie will run up to the school to see if I'm there, he'll feed us, which sounds to Eddie like a better plan than lunch with his mother because he's really hungry from riding so hard and at his house saying grace now takes longer than consuming the meal and turns into a way bigger deal than simply asking God to make sure the food isn't full of botulism. Eddie whips up to the school and there I am; only we have had our last lunch.

He can't lift the Sheetrock high enough to get me out, but he does get me turned over partway,

and sees what you could only call a ghastly expression on my face.

~~Let it never be said that Eddie Proffit doesn't know what to do when he finds a dead body. He pedals straight out to the hot springs, sheds his clothes, and buries himself in the warm mud right up to his neck and sits there the rest of the afternoon, trying to make what he's just seen into a fantasy, like he was able to do with his dad for a few hours before his world caved in on itself.~~

Only he can't pull it off; he has recently had the experience of it not working and because his mind is bouncing like a Super Ball in a racquetball court. So he rinses off and pedals back to my house, because one thought that finally scoots across his brain is, he better tell my dad. Of course by that time the whole town is humming with the news and half of it is looking for Eddie, because my dad told them he must have seen me because of how the Sheetrock was moved. What a guy. In the middle of his crippling hurt, he thinks of Eddie.

Eddie is seriously glazed over. Rollie Mount, the county sheriff, catches up with him riding down the mess that is Main Street, loads his bike into the trunk, and drives him home, where Eddie doesn't want to go because he's afraid of what he might say if his mother mentions God's Plan. But Mrs. Proffit is out looking for him, so Rollie stays.

Rollie says, "Hey, man, I know you're messed up, but I have to ask a few questions."

Eddie nods.

"You found Billy, right? Under the Sheetrock?"

Eddie nods again.

"Did you try to pull him out?"

Another nod.

Rollie takes a deep breath. "Was he still alive, when you were trying to pull him out?"

Eddie's mind explodes. He never thought of that. What if *he* killed me, trying to get me out from under all that? He opens his mouth to speak, but the answer weighs on his chest like an anvil and suddenly he can barely breathe. Coherent thoughts won't form, and his mind spins. It will be awhile before anyone hears another word from Eddie Proffit.

LIFE AFTER LIFE

When you first die, you don't know you're dead. You know something is way different, but you've been playing the game with such intensity, it's hard to realize you've just stepped out of it. The good news is, there's no pain. First I'm pinned to the floor and there is no physical sensation except I can't move, and then I look to a spot on the floor right beside me and suddenly I'm at that spot looking back at a seriously expired Billy Bartholomew, and I'm thinking, Dang! That was dumb. I'm on the bleachers by the time Eddie finds me, and I try to holler at him before remembering that when you weigh only twenty-one grams—the difference between the weight of a live body and that same body croaked—you have no room for a voice box. So I watch and root for him as he tries to pry my body from under the Sheetrock, which is just too heavy. And I think, Eddie just went into a *dark* room in his Earthgame; two important guys dead in one month, and he found them both. And then he is out of the gym and out to the hot springs, and I keep trying to get his attention to let him know it's okay, but I don't remember how to do that yet.

The longer you're dead, the clearer you become about what the deal is: that your Earth life, which lasted what seemed like a long fourteen years, was not even a subatomic blip in eternal time, and that you just hit TILT! You also remember instantly that emotions are for the living and you don't need them anymore, and in fact they aren't available. There is huge joy—not the emotion of happiness, but the pure joy of *knowledge*—and a sense of coming home. The knowledge itself is monstrous, huge and expanding at warp speed, and you laugh in wonder at all the crazy considerations you had while playing the Earthgame because you were so focused you thought things were important. You immediately understand what the *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* book was about. You know that in the blink of an eye to the minus one billionth, universe time, when all your friends will also be dead, you can bump into any one of them you want to, so even if you could feel emotion, it wouldn't be sadness.

I could take right off, but once I see my friend struggling so hard to get my abandoned body out from under all that weight, then fleeing to the hot springs, curiosity and my sense of connection to him draws me to stay. I wonder if I can help; not to get my body free, but to deal with what seems to him like a hurricane of calamity in his life. He looks so freaked out.

So I hang around a second, universe time.

In case you think that's some big sacrifice, you should know that once you're dead again—which is like being truly alive—you can haul yourself around eternity at soul-boggling speeds. Earth scientists consider the speed of light to be the ultimate speed. We travel at the speed of *imagination*. Light speed is to imagination speed as the forming of the Grand Canyon is to NASCAR. Times a zillion. Hard to explain in the relative language of Earth. You have to be here. The point is, I can hang around a second and at the same time whip back and forth rediscovering the knowledge of eternity, which I left at the doorstep when I entered Earth. You did, too. So did Eddie Proffit. But the unique thing about Eddie is, he brings the ghost of a memory for his life before life to his Earthgame. That's the good news and the bad news—more accurately, the advantage and the challenge—for him, because while it gives him incredible insight, it also makes him touchy, as in sensitive, and his bouncing brain

doesn't allow him to focus on any one thing for too long. Eddie can light on a truth and be gone before he ever knows he was there. What I know now that I'm dead is that there is a microminisecond when his brain is in mid bounce, when I can bump him.

Two dead bodies in a month. Both loved ones. That much loss can take out the best of us. If you had seen the desperation on his face, the *intent*, while he was trying to get me out from under that Sheetrock, and felt the pounding of his heart while he was buried in the mud at the hot springs, you'd know why I'm going to watch a second, universe time.

Eddie sees right away that a big advantage to falling silent is that you get to stop explaining yourself. You're allowed a period of grace if the condition seems to have sprung from the violent deaths of your father and your best friend, and that period of grace gives you a head start into a later time when adults in charge and other detractors decide you have grieved long enough and it's time to speak up.

There are disadvantages as well. Over a relatively short period Eddie irritates virtually everyone with reason to communicate with him. Also he goes without certain luxuries—like the feather-light, iron-tough pair of New Balance running shoes at Bowlden's Sporting Goods, or the four-pound butter horn in the window of Stiburk's Bakery—and even a few necessities, because staring longingly at something you want might just make those capable of giving it to you, *not* give it just to see if they can make you talk. Eddie accustoms himself to a certain level of deprivation.

In the end, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. For one thing, while irritating certain people may fall into the negative column, irritating others, such as the Reverend Sanford Tarter, is most definitely a plus. Eddie and I have been anticipating Tarter in our lives for some time, with significant trepidation. The reverend is a fire-and-brimstone, eye-for-an-eye kind of preacher who can make a simple thing such as being a sinner seem like taking center stage in a Stephen King novel. Under normal circumstances a sinner could avoid him by simply staying away from his church, but he's also one of three Bear Creek High School English teachers, so unless you drop out of school after junior high to work in the lumber mill, he'll get his hands on you.

You start hearing about Tarter around fifth grade, and the day you hear about him is a good day to start worrying. He is the king of creative discipline. Somehow he has cleared with the school board certain techniques of torment, such as requiring student insurgents to stand before the class with their arms extended to the sides, like a crucifixion without the cross, or sit with their backs against the wall as if in a chair, without benefit of that chair. He calls these "stress" positions, and they are evidently perfect to assume when you need to think about what you've done wrong, like chewing gum or talking out of turn or trying to get the attention of a friend when you're bored almost blind.

Eddie has many reasons for wishing his dad was still around, but a big one right now would be to insulate him from Tarter. They were exact opposites; Tarter is five-six and weighs 132 pounds and John Proffit was six-five and weighed 231. (*That's* a little coincidence only I, from my privileged vantage point, know.) Eddie's mom and dad were very different in their religious beliefs, Mrs. Proffit far more traditional and "fundamental" in her quiet way, and Mr. Proffit a believer only in what he could see and touch. Mrs. Proffit attended church religiously—pun intended—and Mr. Proffit attended on Christmas and Easter to hear his wife sing in the choir. Eddie started going to Sunday school in first grade because that was prerequisite for Friday night roller skating in the church basement. I went too, to protect him, because when your mind wanders the way Eddie's does, skating on a crowded roller rink is classified under "danger to self and others."

Sunday school is where Eddie first ran afoul of Tarter.

His first difficulty came when we were eight. Mr. Foster was our Sunday school teacher, and he

had just told us the Old Testament story of Jonah living in the belly of a whale. The way Eddie's mind works, when he hears some great story like that he has to picture it, imagine what it would really be like. He'd seen *Pinocchio*, and Pinocchio also spent time in the digestive tract of a fish, so he could see how a cartoon character could pull it off, but the Question Man inside him, the Man Who Seeks the Truth No Matter the Consequence, told him if you were a real human inside a real whale it would be seriously dark and you'd be working your way through all kinds of slime if you were looking for a way out, which you most certainly would be.

"What kind of protective rain gear did Jonah have?" Eddie asked.

We all looked up.

"Excuse me?" Foster said. Foster ran Three Forks Auto Parts and volunteered reluctantly as a Sunday school teacher.

"My dad told me the digestive juices in a human stomach are strong enough to dissolve a jawbreaker like a sugar cube in hot water," Eddie said. "A whale's gotta have at least as strong digestive juices as us, right? And if Jonah's in there wearing his regular Bible clothes, it seems like they'd get, like, seriously eaten up. So I thought he must've had some kind of special rain gear or something."

"God was taking care of Jonah," Mr. Foster said.

"I know," Eddie said back. "That's what you said. So did he give him a special suit? Or did he just make the whale's stomach acids not work? That's no fair to the whale. I mean, even if he's gonna spit Jonah up whole in a day or two, there has to be a bunch of other stuff down there he needs to digest. I mean, whales just suck in everything. You know—" Eddie stopped because I put my hand over his mouth.

"Eddie, being a true Christian is about having faith. It is disrespectful to question lessons from the Bible. What you hear in this room is true."

Eddie gave a muffled okay, because I wouldn't take my hand away. I could see by the marble popping up at the top of Foster's jaw that Eddie was close to trouble, which happened often when he went ahead and said what he was thinking.

But when your mind bounces like Eddie's, it's easy to forget what you've been told, and a couple of weeks later, when we were hearing about Moses allegedly parting the Red Sea to help his people get out of Egypt, Eddie started wondering about the sea life on the bottom.

"I could see how the fish could just swim off to the side and stay where the water is," he said, "but what about the crustaceans and stuff that lived on the bottom? It had to take a while for the Israel guys to get across, right? I mean, it's a sea, not just like a small lake. Wouldn't the animals that lived on the bottom dry up or drown in the air?"

"God takes care of all his creatures," Foster said, and Eddie could see the marble growing again, but when you're Eddie you get pretty used to being in trouble, especially in places where you're supposed to be quiet or speak one at a time, so being in trouble isn't an abnormal or distressing circumstance.

"Yeah, I know you said he takes care of all his creatures—and I won't even count the chipmunk my mom killed in the car on the way to school Friday—but did he move them over so they could still be under the water, or did he just make it okay for them to be dry?" And before Foster could answer: "Oh, he would of moved them over, or all those Israel guys would be stepping on them." And before I could get my hand over his mouth: "Course that would give them a lot better traction."

Foster was up and out of the room, and the next face we saw was Tarter's and we got to see some biblical *wrath*, because now *Eddie* was up and out of the room and his feet didn't touch the floor once. I couldn't hear exactly what Tarter said to him, but I did hear the word "blaspheme" four times. I got anxious for class to be over so I could see if Tarter had disappeared Eddie. He hadn't, but he sure

made him stand with his arms out for a long time.

~~Mr. Foster began sending Eddie to a wooden bench in the hall when he got tired of not answering~~ his questions adequately. Eddie was grateful for the bench, because it was a lot easier to sit there than it was to stand in the outer alcove with his arms extended. Between the bench and my hand over his mouth, that was the last time we saw Tarter that mad for a while, though Tarter stopped us a week later as we were leaving the Sunday school and asked Eddie if his dad was putting him up to this.

Eddie said, "Up to what?"

"All the foolish questions."

"I thought you said there was no such thing as a foolish question."

"Your dad *is* putting you up to this."

Eddie shook his head, incensed because he resented that Tarter thought he wasn't smart enough to come up with his own foolish questions. In truth, Tarter would rather they came from Eddie than Mr. Proffit, because Eddie's dad was the smartest gas station owner in five states and Tarter couldn't make him stand with his arms out like he could with Eddie.

BILLY BARTHOLOMEW AKA FREDDY KRUEGER

For a while, right after all the dying, it seems to Eddie like it's All Tarter, All the Time. He's going to church with his mother because, well, because she makes it hard to refuse. Without benefit of speech, it's tedious to come up with an excuse, so he listens to her sing and lets his mind wander.

He listens in short spurts to Reverend Tarter's words and imagines his father arguing with him down by the gas pumps, and he starts smiling and sometimes giggling, which is right about the time he gets his mother's elbow in his ribs.

Once school starts he'll have Tarter as a teacher every day, as a preacher on Wednesdays and Sundays, *and* Tarter has started coming to his house two or three times a week to help Eddie's mom with her "grieving process." *That* doesn't feel quite right, because often he stays for dinner and sits where Eddie's dad once sat. It is not a good way for Eddie to spend dinnertime, particularly with Tarter urging him to consider what his silence is doing to his mother, to rejoin the world, which he never really unjoined; he just reduced his participation. Eddie isn't talking, so he can't say that, and Tarter rambles, undeterred. Eddie continues to imagine his father answering.

It would be hard to articulate how much Eddie misses his dad. Before my dad started helping him, if it hadn't been for *his* dad, Eddie would have accepted the mantle of dumbest kid in our class. Most of his schoolwork indicated that his parents should have thrown him back. But Mr. Proffit's brain was the prototype for Eddie's, so he taught him to deal with it. "When teachers say you have a disorder," Eddie's dad told him, "they're full of it. Your mind just works differently. Most kids dwell on one thing at a time, which is usually whatever boring thing the teacher is talking about. You pick the parts that have the power to hold your attention, and when they aren't interesting anymore, you move on, like anyone who doesn't want to die of boredom should. And besides, listen to you," he went on. "You and Billy sound like a couple of English profs."

Any time Eddie came home crying, once again in trouble for not paying attention or for speaking out of turn, his dad told him not to worry; that he'd be an astronaut while the rest of us were balancing other people's taxes or selling insurance or teaching school. Then they'd retire to the backyard and find the North Star or the Big Dipper or Orion's Belt, and Eddie would pay attention just fine.

Eddie does not like looking to the head of his kitchen table at the Reverend Tarter instead of his dad.

I've been dead a good two months, Earth time; Eddie no longer visualizes my coffin as it disappears into that dark hole (believe me, *I* didn't go there with my body that *could* be feeding worms and mud varmints but instead is filled with formaldehyde and stuffed into an airtight box so it can do *no* environmental good), no longer automatically wonders what I'd say about the latest Seattle Mariner trade or whether Montana West is the craziest girl in school.

And then he closes his eyes one night and there I am, all dead and stuff, staring at him exactly like I was the day he tried to turn me over. When I get his full attention, I *smile*. If he weren't so freaked out, he'd want to know what I think I have to smile about, but he *is* freaked out and pops

awake like he's spring-loaded. And there I am, framed in his bedroom window, staring through the blackness, and he leaps up and pulls the drapes, except he knows I've found my way into his closet, because he can *hear* me there! And he flips on the light and jerks open the closet door, but the noise is suddenly behind him in the big storage closet on the other side of the room, so he jerks *that* door open and it is seriously dark in there. If he wants light, he has to walk a good ten feet into the darkness and screw in the lightbulb, which there is *no* chance of his doing, so he slams the door and sits on his bed with the lights on, sweating like he's going to melt.

Now, you gotta know it isn't really *me*. I might try to scare Eddie into the next time zone if I were alive, but scaring him while I'm dead could get him a mental-health diagnosis.

His mother hears the closet door slam and hollers up from her bedroom, though she knows he won't answer because mute guys, by definition, don't answer, and he flips out the light and crawls under the covers, because he wants her to think he's asleep if she comes up and he wants me to think he's *gone* in case she doesn't.

After that night Eddie thinks he's going stark raving mad, and if I weren't privy to information the living aren't, I might have thought that, too. In his mind, I'm everywhere. Mrs. Proffit opened the service station again because "We have to eat," and while she's filling the tank and checking the oil in some customer's car, Eddie washes the windows all the way around, and guess whose face fills up the back one, looking the same, all dead and smiling. (I didn't look *that* bad the day he found me.) He sees me in stores. Out at the hot springs. I almost scare him into talking, but he doesn't know who to tell.

It comes to a head on a Wednesday night. Mrs. Proffit is ready for church, and Eddie sits on the couch watching TV. She is getting better at decoding his style of communication, such as it is, understanding that if he doesn't move once she's ready, he's probably not going unless she makes it a big deal.

He doesn't imagine his mom would be much help should I decide to suck his blood or scoop out his eyeballs with a spoon, but there's comfort in having somebody—anybody—in the house when you're under ghostly siege, and his mom isn't gone more than fifteen minutes before he wishes he'd gone with her. But it's too late, so he turns on every light in the downstairs part of the house, microwaves a bag of Paul Newman's buttered popcorn, turns on the TV, loud, and wraps himself in a blanket on the couch.

Wind whistles through the branches on the large pine tree next to the house, and fat raindrops begin splattering against the windows. In the distance, thunder rumbles. The sky lights up, and he throws off the blanket and scurries around the living room, pulling the drapes. The last thing he needs is theatrical lighting behind my smiling dead head, should I make an appearance.

I said before, when you're dead there are a few people you can *bump*, and Eddie is a prime candidate. But you can't bump them just anytime, because you weigh twenty-one grams and you are feathery. You are subtle. You need an *in*. I would give Eddie a big break right here, but he gives me no *in*. He is busy being deranged, which clogs all his avenues.

He flips to the Discovery Channel because how bad could *that* be, and that's exactly what he finds out. The Discovery Channel has discovered a real live haunted house. A woman in a small town in Massachusetts was murdered in this house generations ago. The police never solved her murder, but at certain times the current occupants encounter what looks like a stain on the wall but turns out to be the ghostly outline of the victim, screaming. The stain is brownish red and if whoever sees it summons the courage to *touch* it—like why would they? Eddie wonders, but they do—it feels wet. Now while this might be, given his current emotional state, a good time to see if he can find Lassie on the Animal Channel, he can't pry his gaze from the screen. A family member will be minding their business and the stain appears behind them and they turn around and see it and Eddie pulls the blanket over his head and then, like a soldier calling in friendly fire, makes a sight tunnel and keeps right on watching for

the next victim. Outside, the wind howls and rain slaps against the windowpanes like running soles on wet pavement.

Some totally irrational voice tells him he can scare me out of his head with the likes of *this*. It's like with forest fires, he thinks. Firefighters create a controlled fire around the uncontrolled fire to stop it from spreading. It makes a certain kind of sense, because even though the story on the Discovery Channel is supposed to be real (it is only about 6.3337 percent accurate), the family members are actors and the face, though big-time scary, lacks the power of being a real live dead person, unlike yours truly. Eddie pulls the blanket tighter. A girl, the youngest daughter, stands at the kitchen counter making a peanut-butter sandwich. She is alone, and behind her the shadowy stain begins to form. The low, dark music builds, and if Eddie were talking he'd scream at her, but he's not and the stain becomes more and more pronounced. The girl pats the top of the sandwich as violin strings increase to a scream and—

CRACK! A bolt of lightning flashes so close to Eddie's house that deafening thunder roars simultaneously and the room goes black. Eddie screams, because that's not exactly talking and he couldn't help it if it were. His heart hammers against his chest as he hyperventilates like an industrial strength respirator. It's darker than a bat cave (which is blindingly bright compared to a black hole, but Eddie doesn't have a black hole to compare with), and he's *sure* something's going to grab him, so he throws off the blanket and leaps up, whirling in the middle of the living-room rug like a kickboxer sensing fingers millimeters from his neck.

Above the beating rain and the howling wind, a voice in his head says, Turn into the slide. (I swear it isn't me.)

He freezes; listens: *Turn into the slide.*

On a Saturday afternoon the winter before he died, Eddie's dad took Eddie behind the service station to teach him to drive his pickup on ice. It would be several years before Eddie was eligible for his license, but Mr. Proffit liked to stay ahead of the game with important things, wanted Eddie ready for the tough challenges. Eddie's dad pushed the seat all the way back, let Eddie sit between his legs so Eddie could operate the steering wheel while he operated the brakes (and take over the wheel if the situation called for it). Mr. Proffit put them into slide after slide. "Everything in you will tell you to turn the wheel away from the direction of the slide," Mr. Proffit said before the first try, "but that will just throw you further out of control. Trust me."

Easier said than done. His dad was right. *Everything* in Eddie said turn away, and he did and the slid across the back lot, time after time. But eventually Eddie got the hang of it, and finally his dad hit the brakes and Eddie turned into it and lo and behold the pickup straightened out. To Eddie it seemed like saying "yes" while shaking his head no, but there was a *free* feeling to it, like he'd tricked the universe, or at least discovered one of its minor secrets, which, in fact, he had.

That is the feeling Eddie now seeks, and the voice is telling him to go in exactly the wrong direction to make things right.

He feels his way along the wall to the kitchen, slowly past the table, the stove, the fridge, to the closed door to the stairway leading to the cold, unfinished basement. He steps through, pulls it shut, grips the handrail like a lifeline, and moves slowly into the pitch black.

It's been weeks since Eddie first saw me dead, and he is sick to death of being scared; so sick he's willing to give up and die to escape the dread, or at least thinks he is. At the bottom of the stairs he releases the handrail, moves to the middle of the room, and sits on the cold concrete. If you're coming for me, Billy B., he thinks, just do it. He hears himself sobbing, but he will sit here in the middle of the basement floor in pitch black until something gets him or until he's not scared anymore. He trembles and sobs, and he waits, past the embarrassment of being newly fourteen and crying like a baby, past the belief that the universe hates him and is killing off those most important to him, past

the awful emptiness of his loss. This is what I loved about my friend when I was alive. He's a skinny little guy who can run like the wind, but at some point he turns and stands his ground. If I weighed more than twenty-one grams I'd grab his hand and lead him up the stairs.

I'm turning into the slide, he thinks over and over and over.

Eddie doesn't know how much time passes, but finally his heartbeats slow and he realizes *nothing bad is happening*. He hasn't seen my face once. His tears dry. He stands, chilly in just his pajama bottoms and bare feet. He works his way slowly back to the steps. I'm gonna be okay, he thinks. I beat it.

And a mouse runs across his foot.

He screams so loud his voice would be hoarse for two days if he were using it and dashes toward the closed door, slipping twice, cracking his forehead on a stair. He kicks the basement door open, then the kitchen door, then the back porch door and is suddenly screaming down the street. Unaware until later of the throbbing in his forehead or the freezing pavement beneath his feet or the wind whistling in the trees around him, he runs. All of Bear Creek is dark; not a streetlight shines, not a car moves. He runs past the station, past the Mercantile and Woody's Grocery, gouging his bare feet in the gravel intersections, feeling nothing. For days afterward, people will talk of the awful shrieking that pierced the black of that night, though no one will know its source.

Exhausted and terrorized, Eddie crawls in under the low branches of a tall pine tree on the courthouse lawn, eight blocks from his house. In the fraction of a second between his feeling of terror and that of safety, I see a window and swoosh through. "*What are you doing here?*"

He glances around, sees nothing.

"*Does the combination of lightning and a tall tree concern you at all?*"

"Who's there?" he says.

I lose him.

"Who's there?"

Another quick window. "*What would be a good next move?*"

When Mrs. Proffit arrives home from church, she finds Eddie sitting in the middle of the living room, soaking wet and out of breath beneath the blazing lights, staring at a blank TV screen.

SORTING OUT

There were *two* separate voices. One told Eddie to turn into the slide, and the other asked him what he was doing sitting under a tall tree in a thunderstorm. He knows the turn-into-the-slide voice wasn't real. He hears that voice all the time; it's just memory. You hear something that works at one point in your life, and then it comes back at another point in your life when you need it. That's the voice of reason, of common sense.

The *other* one, however, was a *voice*. When he was running through the streets tearing up his feet, there was not a soul in sight; all of Bear Creek was like a ghost town. And yet there under the tree he *heard* it. His *eardrums* rattled. Now he sits, dried off in his well-lighted room with the voice from under the tree adding to his fears. Have I gone stark raving nuts?

I'd help him, but all his windows are slammed, and painted shut, and nailed.

Eddie hears breathing in his doorway, looks up, and guess who's filling it? Well, not *filling*, because he's only five-six.

"Your mother tells me you're in some distress," Tarter says.

Eddie looks behind Tarter for his mother. She's not there.

"She thought it might be the kind of problem I could be of help with, though it was my idea to come to your room," Tarter says. "I seize opportunities as they present themselves."

Freaked as he is, Eddie's bouncing brain adds this to his list of bad things about not talking: You can't tell your mother to keep her friends out of your room. He looks directly, and inoffensively, at Tarter, displaying no emotion.

"This selective mute thing is not serving you well," Tarter says.

Oh, but it is. Eddie raises his inoffensive eyebrows.

"Do you have any idea what this is doing to your mother?"

Eddie sighs. Technically, that's not talking.

"She blames herself," Tarter says. "She thinks there is something she hasn't done as a parent that is contributing to this. She must endure the loss of her eternal mate and this, too. I think it's time you gave her some respite."

Eddie's look softens, letting Tarter know he heard. But if he were talking, he'd tell him that if his dad was her eternal mate, then she hasn't lost him, has she? He misses his dad as much as his mother does, literally aches when he thinks of him.

"About that distress. Your mother says she found you in quite a state of agitation when she came home this evening. You might have avoided that had you accompanied her to church, but of course that's your choice. At any rate, she believes you're having unsettling dreams, that you're roaming the house at night. She also says she's heard what she calls whimpers of agony out of your sleep."

Eddie does not like his mother telling Reverend Tarter private things about him, and he does *not* like the term "whimpers of agony." He's fourteen, for crying out loud. He gives the reverend more eyebrows.

Tarter sits on the end of his bed. "May I?" It ends in a question mark, but it isn't a question. "I'm

aware many of your friends and classmates have already been baptized,” he says. “For some reason you haven’t taken that step.”

That reason would be Eddie’s dad, who did not believe that symbolically cleansing your soul by getting dunked in a toga in Arling hot springs has much to do with truly cleansing your soul. Those were Mr. Proffit’s words. Also, at one time or another during the year, half the kids in town peed in the hot springs; Eddie knew it for a fact—he used to be one of them—so even if your soul does get cleansed, there’s your body to consider. Swimming there is one thing, cleaning up for eternity quite another.

“I believe God is sending you an important message with these terrors,” Tarter says.

Terrors? Eddie thinks. A minute ago they were unsettling dreams. But he perks up. What message would God send with *terrors*? As much as he is not a fan of the reverend, if there’s a message, he’d like to hear it so he could tell God he *got* it and maybe strike a deal. Eddie doesn’t know yet that the universe doesn’t deal.

“The Lord works in mysterious ways,” Tarter continues, “and I’ve pondered your situation extensively. It may very well be the heavenly father is telling you if you turn your life over to him, these fears will subside. A lot has happened to you this year, Eddie. Do you know the story of Job?”

Yeah, Eddie thinks, I know the story of Job. Job is the guy in the Bible who ate it big-time. God brought plague and pestilence down on him. God offed his whole family. When Job didn’t complain, God gave him another one and made everything okay. It was a story he used to hear in Sunday school. Eddie got in big trouble when he aired his concerns about that first test family. God threw one whole family away just to see if he could make Job crack? If he were talking, he’d tell the reverend he thought God did a job on Job.

But right this minute, Eddie’s thinking, Is he saying God is trying to scare me to test me? Whoa. It seems like that would be a job for the devil.

“It’s something to think about,” Tarter says.

The reverend doesn’t understand that Eddie is not talking because it’s one of the few things he can control when everything else is out of control, and it feels *good* not to be sticking his foot in his mouth all the time, like he’s done pretty much every day of his life since he can remember. Eddie feels the need for *focus*.... I need to understand what’s happening to me. I need to understand how the world works, how people can just be there and then not be there, which means I need to keep right on shutting up and watching. And I need to know WHY MY BEST FRIEND BILLY BARTHOLOMEW IS STALKING ME!

“In our church you are required to testify before the congregation prior to your baptism. I have to say that, until you decided to cease all oral communication, you were the most articulate young man your age I’ve encountered. Along with Billy, of course. I have taken the liberty, with your mother’s permission, of going back into your elementary-school files to see some of your previous schoolwork. Though your records reflect to the contrary, I believe you were working three to five years ahead of your grade, when you bothered to finish what you started. I expect that, were you to put your mind to it, you could testify rather handily. Once you do that, and accept the Lord into your life, I guarantee you’ll begin to understand.”

Eddie takes a deep breath. He likes it when people know how smart he really is. He spent much time in elementary school when that wasn’t true. Most people who looked at his records didn’t bother to see what he wrote; they just noticed he never finished anything.

Tarter says, “I’ll be having dinner here night after tomorrow, thanks to your mother’s generosity. I want you to decide by then. I think your life would be much easier. And I think your mother’s life would be easier, too. You owe her that.”

Mr. Tarter’s words irritate Eddie. He’s living up to his reputation; telling you what he wants and

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