

A Deal... Signed in Blood

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For August, it was hot. Hotter than normal. All the grass was brown around the little country church, but that didn't matter to three nine year old boys full of mischief.

Tommy had some fire crackers left over from the fourth, and Luke wanted to do something special. Brian was a little reluctant, because his granddaddy had two razor straps. One was a single length of leather about three feet long, and the other was shorter with two strips. He had felt the sting of both on his tender bottom.

Not that his grandfather was mean or cruel, he deserved the few spankings he had received. He just didn't want any more. He knew if he got caught, there would be leather flying through the air. Flying through the air and connecting with his tender back side. No, they had to make sure that they wouldn't get caught. There must be adequate planning, and no mistakes.

There was a revival going on at this little country church, and the pastor had invited brother William T. (Willie) Taylor to be the guest preacher. James Coffee was a good man. He was our pastor, and we trusted him. But this Taylor guy was a little too flashy for a country church, where on a good Sunday there might be twenty men women and children in the pews. Mostly women and children. Taylor was a snappy dresser, always wearing a three piece suit and black shoes so shiny that you could see yourself in them. So it was settled then. We would put a fire cracker under his car.

Now I have always had an abundance of logic and reason at my disposal. I'm not sure why. Whether it was genetics, luck, or just a good up-bringing, I don't know. But a calculating mind I have always had. It was reasonable and logical that the explosion must take place away from the church. Preferably on the departure of the "Hell-fire and Brim-stone" preacher "Willie" Taylor.

Mechanically I was the smarter of us three boys. Thanks to my granddaddy, I was always privy to explanations of how things worked and what made-em tick. The trick was going to be how to get the fire cracker lit without our assistance.

Now in those lazy days of my youth, I had noticed that the distributor on the farm tractor sparked from time to time. The wire that goes to the spark plug had a little crack in the insulation, and would be replaced as soon as granddaddy could afford it. This got me to thinking. All cars had engines. And all engines had distributor caps. But not all wiring insulation was cracked. But if something, say a fire cracker fuse, were left under the edge of one of the wires where it connected to the distributor cap, it just might light up.

Now we weren't mean kids, we just had one of those "cup-runneth-over" with mischief things going. We didn't want to see Willie hurt. We just wanted to give him a big "send-off". We taped three fuses together and lit them. Too fast. We settled on seven fuses, taped together with scotch tape. Seven was a good number, who knows why, but it sounded good.

On a Friday, the last day of the revival, it was time to make our move. Luke wanted to back out, but between me and Tommy, we convinced him to stay in the blood brotherhood of crime. It was not a real blood brotherhood, but we had seen enough "Cowboys and Indians" on TV to understand the concept. When it came time to shed blood, we had opted for a simple joining of hands together. We figured that our sweaty little hands were enough of a mingling of fluids for it to work.

We were sitting on the back row, as we normally did, and Tommy was the first to get up and head for the door. Luke followed, but I hesitated. Luke looked at me, and grimaced as he nodded toward the door. I took a breath and got up and followed suit.

I need to say this before I continue. I have always been absolutely against embarrassing situations. I don't like them, and they don't like me. I would almost rather die than be embarrassed in front of people. Ok, back to the crime scene.

When we all got out the door we all let out a sigh of relief. This life of crime was scary, but it was exciting and exhilarating too. We headed for the back of the church where Tommy had hidden the stash of firecrackers. We retrieved the special one and headed back up to the front of the church where the cars were parked.

In the days of my youth, cars, trucks, and almost all vehicles did not have much in the way of security. Oh, you could lock your doors, but almost no one did. But the one thing that worked really well for us, was the fact that you could "pop" the hood of any car or truck around. This made things quite easy for us budding criminals.

So we popped the hood of brother Taylor's car and proceeded to place the explosive device near the distributor while Luke stood watch. Everything was going according to my well thought out plan until brother Coffee stepped out of the front door of the church into the bright sunlight. Luke coughed and we had just enough time to close the hood and step away from the car before brother Coffee's eyes adjusted to the bright light.

There was a small fence in front of the cars and we casually leaned against it as brother Coffee approached.

"What are you boys doing out here?"

"Nothing, sir, just takin in the sunshine." Tommy was quick to speak.

"Well, ya'll better get back inside, brother Taylor is about to finish up."

We resumed our positions on the back row, with our pastor standing right behind us. The little drops of sweat began to creep from our pores as we tried desperately not to look at each other.

The fifteenth repeat of the hymnal "Just as I Am" was finally played and we were heading for the door. Our escape was blocked by our intuitive pastor Sam Coffee.

"Now you boys don't run off, I want to talk to you before we have lunch."

As was customary in a lot of little country churches, almost everyone brought a "covered dish" and we all had a huge dinner after the service. Some folks called it lunch, but most every body I knew had dinner at noon, and supper at night. We really didn't care what it was called. Food was food, and there was always lots of it. And for three growing boys, it was just what we needed to get our tanks full for another few laps on the mischief track.

We each shook brother Sam's hand and made quick exits around the side of the church.

"Did he see us?" Tommy voiced our concerns.

"I don't think so. Luke YOU were suppose to be keepin watch!"

"I WAS! I coughed when I saw the door open!"

"Ok, ok... lets not panic. If he did see us, maybe we can make him feel sorry for us if we tell him we'll get horse whupped if he tells our folks. Wha-da you think Brian?"

"I don't know. We got-ta get our story straight if he talks to us one on one."

"We could tell him we just wanted to look at brother Taylor's motor..."

"Right Luke, but if they find that fire cracker, were busted."

I was feeling the noose growing tighter as we stood there trying to figure a way out of our life of crime. We jumped when a booming voice called from the front of the church.

"Ok boys, come on let's go inside and talk."

Our pastor was a towering man with red hair and freckles. I had never seen him without a smile on his face and a gleam in his eyes. But today, standing by the front of the church, he had neither. It was hard to read him, not smiling, but not frowning either. We began that slow walk to the gallows without a solid story between us. Our time had run out.

We stepped inside the sanctuary and heard the door close and latch behind us. Every creak of the floor was amplified as brother Coffee walked past us and opened one of the class room doors.

“Come on in here and have a seat, boys.”

We swallowed hard and I wondered if anyone else could hear my heart thumping. It was certainly loud enough for me to hear it.

“That’s right, Tommy, that’s good. Brian, come sit right here next to me.”

I knew right then that all the Holy Powers of the Universe were about to descend and consume me and Tommy and Luke.

“Do you boys know why I wanted to talk you?”

With heads bent in shame, and arms on the table, we each shook our heads without looking up.

“You boys are at the age of accountability. That is, you are old enough to know right from wrong. Am I right?”

Tommy was the first to speak. The weight of the pastor’s hand on my arm was tremendous as I tried not to squirm.

“Yes sir.” was all Tommy managed to eek out.

“Luke, how about you?”

“Yes sir.”

“I don’t have to ask you Brian, do I? I know Brian has a good heart.”

Yeah right! A calculating EVIL heart! I thought silently. I could almost see the bright light shining in my face in some tiny smoke filled room, with the detective leaning over, his glaring face in front of mine.

“I know you boys all have good hearts. And I know you have all been to Sunday School and heard all the stories from the Bible.”

Wait a minute... maybe this isn’t about the fire cracker. For the first time, I looked up into Sam Coffee’s face. He was looking at Tommy, but maintained his grip on my tiny arm. His face was not wrinkled in wrath, but glowed with hope and compassion. I sat up out of my slouch and gave him my full attention.

“Tommy, how did brother Taylor’s preaching make you feel?”

There was an uncomfortably long pause until Tommy finally spoke.

“He made me feel bad, like I done something wrong. And I didn’t even know what I did.” Tommy looked up into our pastors face.

“Luke? How did it make you feel?” Brother Sam asked.

“Uh, I guess the same way as Tommy.”

“Did you really feel like you had done something wrong, or was it...” Tommy interrupted our pastor.

“Ya know I think he just scared us. We don’t know what we did wrong, but we was about to git whupped any ways.” Tommy said.

“Brian, how ‘bout you, you’ve been kind of quiet.” The preacher said.

I hesitated for a second as I realized that this wasn’t about the fire cracker at all.

“Well, he’s not that easy to listen to, I mean, not like you. He did kind of scare me when he was talking about how we better hurry up, ‘cause ya never know when you are gonna die in a car crash or something.”

“So you felt pressured?” he said as he held my arm.

“Yes sir.”

The others nodded in agreement.

“Ok. I’m going to tell you boys something, and I want each of you to listen carefully to what I’m going to say. Each person that lives here on this earth has a choice to make every day that we live. We get up in the morning and have breakfast, or not. We have milk or...” Tommy butted in again.

“Or Coffee?” Tommy giggled with Luke. They loved teasing him about his name.

“Yes Tommy, or coffee.” He smiled his radiant fatherly smile. It always made you feel like you could tell him anything, anything at all, and not be laughed at or ridiculed or chastised. He was the best pastor and kindest man I’ve ever known.

“The point is, we all make choices every day of our lives. Some choices last just a short time, and others can last a life time.”

This little bit of information would become one of the corner stones of my life. Those often overlooked little events that can set the whole tone for a life, can sometimes pass by barely noticed. This one struck a chord.

“I know brother Taylor can be a bit intimidating, and I’m sorry he made you boys feel like that. I just called you boys in here to tell you that Jesus, from everything I have read and studied about him, would not have wanted you to be afraid of him. On the contrary, he gives an invitation, not a summons. You boys know what a summons is don’t you?”

As usual, Tommy was first to speak.

“My paw got one from the sheriff, ‘cause he got drunk and drove our car through Mr. Freeman’s fence and hit one of his cows.”

Luke snickered and Tommy elbowed him hard.

“It ain’t funny Luke!”

“Boys, BOYS!” the pastor calmed them down while squeezing my tiny arm.

“Tommy, I’m sorry your father wrecked your car. And Luke, this is no laughing matter.”

I had never seen Luke get so serious, so fast.

“The point I am trying to make to you boys is that a summons is a demand. And I don’t think that is the intention of an invitation. You see, God has offered you this invitation, and it’s up to each of you boys whether you accept it or not. It’s all about choices. Choices we make every day.”

At this point, our pastor patted me on the arm he gripped so long, and stood up.

“That’s all I wanted to say to you boys. I’m going to check and see how the ladies are coming along with dinner.”

As he opened the class room door to leave, he stopped and looked back.

“Ya know, I’m really proud of you boys.” His warm honest smile could melt ice.

“Don’t be too long, I think I smell fried chicken.” He walked out and closed the door behind him.

The weight of guilt bearing down, was like one of those highway department trucks had backed up and was dumping its whole load on top of us.

“I can’t believe we didn’t get caught.” Luke spoke first. “Do you think he knows?”

“I don’t know, but if he does and he is still proud of us... I don’t know. Tommy?”

Tommy was silent for a long minute, twiddling his fingers and tapping his foot on the wooden floor. He had an unusual frown on his face as he stared at his busy fingers.

“Tommy!” I shouted as quietly as I could.

“Whaa... oh, sorry, I was thinkin’ bout what he said... we got-ta make choices.”

“Well?” Luke asked waiting for direction.

Tommy was from a poor family. His father worked in the oil fields, but was always broke. I guess it costs a lot to keep a man in whiskey. But Tommy was the leader of our little pack. I was the brains, and Luke would have followed us to the gates of brimstone and stood guard while we played tricks on the Devil himself. But Tommy seemed stumped by this new challenge.

“Tommy!!” Luke and I said together.

“I think he wants us to walk-the-isle.” Tommy looked at me.

I don’t remember which of us came up with that phrase, but it was a standing joke between us. It was not uncommon for us to joke about people we saw “walkin-the-isle” every Sunday to get redemption and salvation for their weekly sins. We had one boy in our church, (he wasn’t all there) that want to get “saved” every Sunday morning, rain or shine. And after people did “The Walk”, they would stand up front while all the members walked by and shook their hands and patted them on the shoulder and said how happy they were for the their decision.

We weren’t mean about it, we just thought it was funny that some people did the same thing week after week. And of course I was mortified at the thought of having to walk down there with everybody staring at me. Embarrassment was NOT my middle name.

“Brian, I think he wants us to get saved...” Tommy’s eyes pleaded for support.

“Ok... what do we know.” I had their full attention. I really liked this feeling of power over a captive audience.

“We know what we’ve learned in Sunday School. We know what we’ve heard in church. And we know that Willie Taylor said that if we die without Jesus, we’ll burn in HELL!”

“I don’t want to burn in Hell!” Luke chimed in.

“Me neither!” Tommy agreed.

“We know God can burn bushes...”

“I wish he’d burn some of the cactus on our place.” Luke laughed.

Then we all broke out laughing at that thought. Laughter really helps ease the tension in some situations. It’s good for the soul my granddaddy use to say. And it was good for us in that tiny classroom.

“He parted the Red Sea for Moses... and all that other stuff. And it says he sent his only son Jesus and all that stuff about dying on a cross. Do you think that really happened?”

“I don’t know.” Tommy looked back down at his fidgeting hands.

“Me neither, but I don’t want to burn.” Luke added.

“Choices.” I said, “It all comes down to choices. Either we do it, or we don’t.”

“I don’t want to burn!”

“Yes, we know, Luke! None of us wants to burn. Somebody said, He knows what’s in our hearts. He knows what we’re thinking... now *that’s* a scary thought.”

“I just don’t want to die... and burn in hell.”

“WE HEAR YOU LUKE! Enough all ready! So what do you think, and do NOT say you don’t want to burn again?”

“Me?”

“Yes YOU, Lucas too-kass!”

“I... uh... I think we should do it.”

“What? Walk the isle?” Tommy looked at Luke like he was crazy.

“Yes, why not. It can’t hurt, can it?” Luke replied rather forcefully.

There was another one of those long moments of silence, while the three of us thought long and hard about the proposal Luke had submitted.

“Look,” I said, “If God knows what we’re thinking, He’s gonna know if we’re lying. I mean, if we do this, and we don’t mean it He might send lightening and strike us dead!”

“I don’t want to burn...”

“Shut up Luke!” I looked back at Tommy.

Tommy looked up at me and a tear trickled down and hit the table.

“I say we do it Brian, what do you think?”

“Ok... if we’re going to do it, I don’t want to be walking up from the back row. If we are really going to do it, I want to sit on the front row, right in front of the preacher. So we don’t have to walk-the-isle and have everybody staring at us.”

“Agreed.” We both looked at Luke.

“I just don’t... never mind. Ok, agreed.”

“I’m hungry...” I said, “let’s eat.”

We all got up and headed toward the door.

“Wait...” I stopped as I grabbed the door knob. “When?”

“Got-ta be Sunday, ain’t no church tomorrow.” Tommy said.

Luke nodded his head and shrugged his shoulders.

“Ok then, Sunday it is.” I stuck my hand out and we all joined hands like a mini football team heading for the next play.

When I opened the door, the smells of fried chicken and brisket and green bean casserole and all the other wonderful foods flooded over us like a bursting dam. One of the best things about growing up in a small country community was the way people got together around the dinner table. Every body brought something to share. Some could only afford meager offerings, like a pan of cornbread, but it never seemed to matter.

There was always enough to eat, and always enough left over to send plates home with those less fortunate. Life was good. Especially good when it was time for three growing boys to eat. We fidgeted while the prayer of thanks was offered by our pastor, opening our eyes from time to time and planning our assault on the feast that lay before us.

After “seconds” and sometimes third trips to the “pie” section, we drifted back through the empty church and out into the blinding summer sun to find some shade under one of the trees. It was a time for reflection, or planning, or just a time for boys to be boys.

“I think I’m gon-na be sick.”

“Hey, nobody forced you... Lukee-pu-kee.” I said as we sat in shade on warm earth and grass.

“I know... I... I’m too full to talk.”

“Then shud-dup already. I’m trying to think...” Tommy snapped.

“Dang Tommy, who bit you on the butt?” I said in Luke's defense.

“I’m sorry Luke... I...”

“What?” I waited for hours it seemed. “What? WHAT!?!?”

“Well...”

“I’m gon-na smack you Tommy. What?”

“What he said... you know, bout choices...”

“Oh, we’re back to that.” I settled back against the tree.

Luke had perked up and looked as if he was ready to re-enter the non-puke society.

“So...?”

“I just don’t know what my dad’s gon-na say.”

“He ain’t gon-na do nothin, Tommy. And if he does, me and pu-kee Lukee will back you up. Right Luke?”

“Right!”

“You guys can’t be there all the time... you know what he’s like.”

There was another one of those long moments of silence, when a boy has to take all the information and process it through the corn grinder. Sometimes the cob gets stuck, and you have to wiggle it back and forth to make it come out right.

“Look Tommy, if you don’t want to do it... we’re in this together. Right Luke?”

“Right.”

“No, I ain’t backin out... it’s just the right thing to do. I just don’t want a whippin.”

“Hey,” a light came on in my corn grinder, “they say Jesus was whipped. Maybe it’s like a sign or something.”

“Maybe. I been whipped before. I guess one more won’t kill me.”

The worried look on Tommy’s faced eased a bit and we settled back against the faithful tree and thought thoughts that only nine year old boys with full tummies can think.

Too soon it seemed, our ponderings' were interrupted by the required going home ritual. We locked our hands in a three way and pledged to meet right here, Sunday morning, and not breathe a word to anyone, so nothing would get back to Tommy’s dad.

My ride home was uneventful. We didn’t crash, and I didn’t die. I did however have time to think about all that had happened, and the impending journey I was about to embark upon. The weight of the gravel truck was on me again. Was I really going to do this thing? What if I did it any way, and really didn’t mean it? Would I be struck dead for lying to God, while all the church members looked on?

This was a lot of weight for a nine year old boy to carry. But, as with most boys that age, as soon as the car door opened and I tasted freedom again, the worries just rolled away like thunder.

The night’s sleep seemed to wash away any thoughts of the pact we had made. Saturdays were made for nine year old boy explorers. With my trusty single shot .22 rifle in hand, and a trusted dog at my side, it was a day full of little adventures and make believe. Of course when the dinner bell went off inside, it was time to head for the house. But as soon as the last bite could be swallowed, chased by a big gulp of iced tea, it was back to exploration and adventure.

The sun never stayed up long enough on Saturdays. It seemed to always be rushing to get to some far off land, yet unexplored. But it also meant time for supper, and feeding scraps to my faithful companion. If there is a doggie heaven, Sandy is waiting there for me still.

My last thought that night, kept me awake for several minutes. Just as that last deep breath escaped from my parted lips, my eyes popped open. The pact! I rolled over on my back and looked into the darkness above my bed. This was going to be a big

change in my life. Now I was going to have to live a life with out mistakes. I was going to have to be good, and perfect.

As I stared into the darkness, I began to think I was about to make a mistake. I had no idea what adventures might come my way in the future, but if I did this thing I was about to do, I might not be able to do some things that I might want to do. But what if I did them any way? The thought of dark billowing clouds crept toward me, shooting lightening bolts in all directions. I closed my eyes tight and tried to make the clouds go away.

The clouds did roll away, and I drifted into a peaceful sleep.

“Breakfast is ready.” My grandmother was a rock... a foundation stone.

Every morning, as I grew up, I heard those three precious words echo into my slumber. There are some things that are carried with us through out our lives. This is a memory that I will gladly bear until the end.

“Come on, it’s gon-na get cold.” She coaxed me into willing submission.

I jumped from my warm bed and headed to the bathroom to splash away the signs of peaceful slumber. When I got to the table, everyone was waiting. I took my seat next to my grandfather at the head of the table. We bowed our heads and listened as he thanked the Lord for all the blessings we had been given.

For the few moments spent at the breakfast table all was at peace. Then came the hammer.

“Hurry up now, time to get ready for Sunday school.”

My mother. Another good woman in my little world.

“Come on, get a move on. We don’t want to be late.” She said.

In that split second it took for me to answer, all the lights came on. I had to stay home... under my bed preferably... lightening can’t go through a mattress... can it?

“I don’t feel good mom.”

“Well you felt good enough for more pancakes. Come on, get going!”

It didn’t appear that I was going to get a pardon from death row. I had already reasoned that if I skipped church today, I wouldn’t have to tell God a lie, and I wouldn’t be struck dead in front of the whole church. I didn’t want to be trapped into a life with boundaries. For this is what it seemed to be at the time.

The seconds and minutes pounded away like my grandfathers hammer on the anvil. Each stroke banging away, drawing me closer to my doom.

The ride to church was deafeningly quiet for me. While my mother and grandmother sat in the front seat talking, I sat in the back, enclosed in sound proof glass. Of course this was all in my imagination, for which I was overly blessed. None the less, I was at the bottom of the lake of deep thought.

Almost before the car stopped, I was out the door and running around the side of the church looking for Tommy and Luke. They were just where they should be, together, talking and waiting for me.

“Hey.” I said as I broke from my run and walked up to my team mates.

“Hey.” They said in unison.

“Are you ready?” Tommy asked.

“Look guys, I don’t know if I can do it.”

“WHAT? Unh uh, no way! You can’t back out, and I ain’t gonna burn!”

“What happened Brian?” Tommy wanted details.

“I don’t know, Tommy, I just don’t want it to be a lie.”

“I ain’t gonna burn!”

“SHUT UP Luke!” Tommy and I said together.

“Look,” Tommy began, “you believe all that stuff from Sunday school, right?”

“Yeah, but what if we can’t do things like we used to?”

“I don’t know. But I told my mom, and she told my dad, and he’s here, Brian, he’s here. I ain’t backin out now!”

“Me neither.” Luke through in for good measure.

“I don’t know Tommy, lying to God is serious business.”

“You ain’t lying... you... you just ain’t positive. He ain’t gonna kill ya!”

“But what if He does?”

“If he does Brian, me and Luke will back out of the deal. Right Luke?”

“Uh... I... I don’t...”

“Luke!” Tommy doubled up his fist and presented it for examination.

“Yeah, ok.”

“Yeah ok what?” Tommy’s fist remained for inspection.

“Yeah, if God kills you we’ll back out of the deal. There, happy now?”

I still wasn’t convinced that there wouldn’t be some kind of punishment involved, but at least where ever I was sent for eternity, I would have friends. Two of the best, most loyal friends a boy could hope for.

“Front row?” Tommy looked at me for reassurance.

I nodded, and we placed our hands one on top of the other.

“Front row!” echoed three distinct voices, and we broke for Sunday school.

Sunday school was a blur that day as I sat squirming and fidgeting in my chair. Luke and Tommy seemed more at ease and answered questions directed their way. Fortunately, no questions came my way, for I was again encased the in sound proof glass cell of my own mind.

“Hey!” Tommy punched me. “Let’s go!”

It was over too soon. I hadn’t resolved a thing in my hour of self imposed isolation. My mind had drifted over a thousand thoughts, but none lingered. They all faded like an August shower falling on thirsty land.

Tommy led the way to the front, with Luke in tow. I brought up the rear guard. Tommy sat down in the front pew followed by Luke to his left, and I packed in next to Luke. We must have looked like sardines in a can. Three boys packed tightly together, frozen in fear on the front row.

Time is an amazing thing to look upon. Sometimes it seems to take for ever for the second hand to click to the next slot. And then there are times like that Sunday, when a one hour sermon is over in three seconds.

The music began to play and some of the off key voices joined the rest. We had planned to stand up and step forward as soon as the song began. That was my idea. Get it over with, as quickly as possible was my reasoning. Maybe they wouldn’t keep singing the chorus over and over like they normally did, while we waited to scramble out the door.

Tommy took the step, and Luke was right behind. I however, did not stand up. This was my last chance at life. For surely something terrible would happen if I stepped up.

As our pastor was talking softly to Tommy, and the music played softer, Luke realized that I was not standing at his side. He turned and motioned for me to come on, and be quick about it. If at that moment, the whole front of the church didn't glow red, I don't know why. I could feel my whole face instantly turn scarlet. Calculating the level of Luke's hand gesture above the pew, I knew everyone had seen it.

I was mortified. But by yielding to peer pressure, I might be able to save some small smidgeon of dignity. The pastor spoke to Luke and then to me. He hugged me and turned us around to look upon the masses. To this day I can not recall what he said to me, or why I was singled out for a father's hug. Maybe he knew I had no father at home. Maybe he thought I was special. Maybe he was protecting me from God's mighty wrath. I may never know. My head was spinning too much to pay attention.

The pastor made the announcement, and all the members of the congregation filed by, one after another. Some shook hands, some gave life threatening hugs, while others patted us on the shoulders and welcomed us into the fold. Even Tommy's dad, looking out of place, came up and shook each of our hands.

We had been instructed by brother Sam, that after everybody came by, to sit back down and wait for him.

Phase two. If the lightning didn't get me, I would surely drown being baptized.

Yes, that was the after-shock speech. We were to undergo the "dunkin-doughnut". It is so funny how kids can label things. God must have a great sense of humor. If he didn't, there would be fewer kids I'm guessing.

So it was settled then. Tonight we would get dunked.

We really didn't speak as we walked out into the bright August sun except to say "by" or "see ya". Tommy ran to his dad's car, where he was waiting and smoking a cigarette. Tommy got in the car and they made a quick exit from the church grounds. I waved at Luke and his folks as they drove away. My mom and grandmother were talking Mrs. Jeffery as I walked passed them.

"Oh Brian! I just have to give you one more hug."

Mrs. Jeffery was just a few years younger than my grandmother. I don't know why she liked me so much, but she did.

"You are such a good boy, I'm just so proud of you. You've got a really good heart, Brian."

I was just about hugged out. Really good heart did she say? Yeah, really good and black. I was really feeling ill for the lie I would live for the rest of my short life. But I managed to hide my blackened heart from almost everyone.

“Thank you mam. Mom, I’m going to wait in the car, ok?”

“Yes that’s ok, we’ll be along in a minute.”

I closed the back door of my moms green Chevy and leaned against the warm vinyl. I could feel my ears getting hot and the blood rushing to my brain.

“If you’re gonna do it, do it now. Just don’t hurt my mamma’s car.”

But I was not struck down by lightning.

I jumped as the car door opened and my mother and grandmother got in. We turned down the gravel road that led home. The steady roar of the tires on the gravel road, hypnotically soothed my troubled mind. I could feel the vibrations right to my bones.

“I said... are you alright son?”

“Huh... oh, yes mam.”

“Are you sure?”

Did she know? Was she aware that she brought such a black heart-ed evil monster into the world?

“Yes mam, I’m sure.”

Now I’ve done it. I’ve lied to her too. See how easy it is? One lie after another. I love my mother... how could I do that? My head was spinning as I got out of the car and ran to my room. I threw myself across my bed and buried my head in my pillow. There was a knock on the door.

“Brian...? Are you sure you’re alright?”

She sat down on the bed next to me.

“Is it about this morning?”

I didn't answer. I kept my head buried in my pillow. Maybe I would suffocate.

“Well... it’ll be alright. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes son.”

She got up and headed for the kitchen to help my grandmother. I got up and headed outside.

“It’s almost ready, don’t wander off too far!”

I looked back at the radiant face of an angel... my mother.

“I won’t, I’ll be right back.” The truth tasted like honey as it flew to my mother’s ear.

I knew what I had to do. I had to have a talk. A talk just between me and the Greatest One of all.

Now it just so happened, that not far from my grandfather’s house, there was a plumb thicket. It was a mass of small plumb trees, most not very big, all clumped together along the fence. When the plumbs were ripe, they were the color of the sun, and very sweet.

In the middle of this thicket was the largest one of them all. It was hard to get to, but there was just enough space by the trunk to sit down and think, and look up at the clear blue sky. It was a very private place. No one could see me when I was there.

I sat down and began to talk out to beyond the blue.

“Ok, if You know what everybody is thinking, and what is in everybody’s heart, then I don’t have to say a thing, do I?”

I could hear the gentle breeze drifting softly through the trees.

“And if You know me, then You know what I did this morning.”

I waited for an answer but only heard a gentle rustling of the leaves.

“I want to believe, I really do, but You know how I hate to be embarrassed... I just don’t want to be embarrassed.”

Now there are those that hear voices in their head. Some are locked away in institutions. And some won’t admit to it no matter what. But that day... under that plumb tree... I heard a voice as clear and gentle as anything I have ever heard before or since.

“If you believe in Me, I will never be the cause of embarrassment in your life.”

That was all it took.

“Deal.” I said as an indescribable peace washed over me.

As I grabbed the tree to pull myself up, a tiny thorn pricked my palm. I left a tiny drop of my own blood on that tree, that hot day in August.

It has been fifty years since that deal was signed in my own blood. It seems like yesterday.

All three boys survived the “dunkin”. A year later Luke was diagnosed with leukemia and his family moved away. I never saw or heard from him again.

Tommy’s family also moved. I never knew what happened to him either.

The plumb thicket still stands by the field that my grandfather once plowed. It is mine now. And I wonder sometimes, if a hundred years from now, any one will ever know what happened to me that hot August afternoon.

I am not perfect. But in fifty years and counting, one of us, never broke the deal.

Do I hear voices? I heard one that day.

Was it caused by stress or some chemical imbalance? I don’t know.

It all comes down to choices. We make them every day.

You either believe, or you don’t.

Did the firecracker blow up? We never found out.

There are mysteries in this universe that perplex the greatest of mortal minds.

This may be one of them.