



*At Odds
with the Devil*

EVIL TAKES SHAPE BENEATH THE ORDINARY
BUT UNEASY SURFACE OF THIS SMALL RIVER TOWN.

Karen Watts

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*I would like to dedicate this book to my Mother,
who has moved on to a kinder realm.*

*Through her I learned that it didn't matter much what I did,
as long as it was creative, didn't hurt anybody, and was
something I could be proud of.*

I'm trying, Mom.

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It is September 17th, 2001, and I am packaging this up to go to the publisher. Little did I know in July of this year, as I typed the verse on the next page, that the events of last Tuesday the 11th would lend it new significance.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the thousands of fine American patriots who lost their lives on that day of terrorism.

God Bless America!
KW

*At Odds
with the Devil*

*A time to kill,
And a time to heal;
A time to break down,
And a time to build up*

Ecclesiastes 3:3

Chapter 1

Her mother was pouring the iced tea when Pug heard the familiar whistle. Two long and low notes, two short and shrill, but all softly. The family was settling into their favorite spots on the porch. Pug was certain she was the only one to hear the signal, and tried not to show it beyond a slight cocking of her head to be certain of the direction. Yes, there it was again, definitely coming from the creek that ran fifty yards behind the house, through the walnut trees and down the rocky bank. Her mind raced ahead with the promised excitement of meeting Luther. But first she had to plan her escape, which came quickly and from an unexpected source.

"A dollar, Pug, if you'll take my books back to the library". This from San Marino as he hoisted his athlete's body up on the porch rail, and balanced his iced tea on his muscular, tanned thigh. Her older brother's name was Alan, but Luther

named him San Marino, thinking it much more fitting for a handsome collegiate football hero. Luther renamed everyone. It was his theory that people should not acquire permanent names until they were older and an appropriate name could be assigned. Hence, Pug's Mom and Dad were Ike and Mamie, and her older sister, Elaine, was Vendetta, for reasons that will become obvious.

Not wanting to seem too eager, Pug replied, "Make it two bucks and you're on." As he reached into the pocket of his faded cutoffs, she unfolded herself from the glider and picked up his books, stuffing the dollars into her jeans.

Mamie called out to her as she rounded the corner of the house, "Don't be late coming home. Remember what happened to the MacCaffrey girls."

Yeah, yeah. As if anyone would forget about the MacCaffrey twins. 16-year-old high school girls, Christie was by far the prettiest, although Claudia was the one most people liked the best. She was the smart one, while Christie was merely beautiful, and not very well liked by her classmates, or anyone else for that matter. It was Claudia who disappeared one afternoon in late March.

Eight days later, a 10-year-old field hockey player chasing a wayward kick into the edge of the woods stumbled over her battered body half hidden in a pile of leaves. The poor kid still gets hysterical at times, it being a terribly gruesome find. It was later determined that her death had occurred elsewhere, and she had been dumped at the edge of the woods hurriedly, as evidenced by the lame attempt to hide her. As for Christie, it was said that she hadn't uttered a word to anyone outside her family since Claudia's disappearance, and hadn't returned to school since her death.

This had all happened at the end of March, the 22nd to be exact. It was Luther's birthday. This being August 1st, it was still very much discussed. The police, if they had a suspect, weren't divulging it to the public. As for the townspeople, all

13,014 of them had a theory. Pug herself didn't give it much thought, being much too preoccupied with her own 14-year-old life to have a reasonable theory about the death of someone she barely knew. Luther, being 16 and closer to Claudia in school, told Pug he had talked to her a few times in the hallway, but he appeared too indifferent to talk about it much. They were both a little in awe to think that there might actually be a murderer in their midst.

As soon as Pug was out of sight and sound from the front porch, she broke into a run, and only slowed down when she approached the steep rocky creek bank. Her mom's words still echoed in her ears. Why she was dwelling on it now was a mystery -- perhaps because it brought back the memories of Luther's birthday and what happened that day.

That day was memorable, because they had met Podunk and Oshgosh down by the button factory on the banks of the muddy Missouri. It was their favorite meeting place, being off-limits, and a fairly dangerous place to hang out, which of course is what made it so attractive to them. Outside the gates of the factory was one of the wonders of the world to them...a mountain of discarded shells that grew three stories high at times. The factory churned out millions of iridescent pearly white buttons in every size and shape imaginable. But it was the mountain of discarded shell bits that held their interest. It was a real challenge to climb this pile of sharp rubble, and they never tired of the game. The pile itself was beautiful, especially with the sun shining on it. It sparkled iridescently, like a mountain of diamonds they imagined on a beach in South Africa.

On March 22nd, a Saturday and his birthday, Pug met Luther at the top of the heap and was alarmed to see blood dripping from his eyebrow. It was a deep and long cut, inflicted he said when he slipped going up the pile. It was bleeding profusely, aggravated by his poking and prodding finger.

"I hope it makes a really good scar. Then I can be Scarface." Luther had never been able to settle on a name for

himself or for Pug either. Instead of Jennifer, she remained Pug, a family nickname originating from an unforgettably lucky blow delivered by her tiny fist to the nose of her Dad as he bent over her crib. Seems she was tough even then, as the infant blow broke his nose, thus earning her, forever after, the title of Pug. Luther had been, at various times, Lucifer, spawned during a particularly nasty Halloween prank last year, then Sir Walter, born the day they smoked their first cigar together. And at other times, for other reasons, Picklock, Moon Boy, Lightfoot, and Digger. At the moment he was just Luther, waiting for fate to deliver his true name.

Luther and Pug had been close friends since the day his Mother, Hannah, died. A victim of a fatal car accident that occurred the night she had run away with her boyfriend, Luther rarely talked about her. When he did, it was always in the present tense, as if she were still alive. Just yesterday he had mentioned that "Jezebel will have quite a theory about the MacCaffrey girls soon as she gets back." Once Pug asked him where she had gone, and it seemed to cause him so much distress that she never queried him again. She simply went along with him when he talked about her. He knew she was dead; of that Pug was certain, having remembered him at the gravesight during the funeral, scuffing his good shoes in the loosened dirt, his eyes darting everywhere except at the hole in the ground. Pug, at her Mother's prodding went over to him to say hello. He looked at her nervously, and with a quick glance at his Father asked her if she wanted to see something really cool. When Pug said, "Yes", he grasped her hand and pulled her toward the black hearse parked at the curb, in the dark shade of a thick elm tree.

The vehicle's back doors were standing open to reveal his Mother's ivory coffin, ready to slide out and into her final resting place. He jumped into the rear and put his hands on the front handles of the coffin, and said, "Come on. Don't be scared." Pug, against her better judgement, jumped up to join

him as he struggled to lift the lid. By now Pug was shaking, but didn't want him to see how afraid she was, and tried not to look at the deathly face. But Luther bent down to kiss her and fuss with her clothing. Straightening he said, "Look at all this stuff". Tucked all alongside her body were letters, dolls, a favorite small needlepoint pillow, a large bottle of cologne, some crude childish drawings, several books and a large blue velvet jewelry box which Luther opened. He took out a small gold ring, obviously a wedding band, and put it in his pocket. "You want to take something?" he asked Pug. When she looked at him, horrified, he picked up a gold locket on a thin gold chain and thrust it into her hand.

"Luther, where are you?" His Father's voice called, and they both jumped, as the coffin lid closed with a loud thunk. They scrambled out of the hearse and back to the gravesight as two men arrived at the hearse to remove the coffin. Luther rejoined his Father and their parish priest at the head of the grave while Pug returned to her Mother's side. Luther looked over at her and patted his trouser pocket where he had secreted the ring, and winked at her. Pug returned his wink with a quick pat of her sweater pocket where she had placed the locket.

When the ceremony was over Luther's father, Neal, asked Pug's Mother if she could return to the house with them, and he would see that she got home safely after spending some time with Luther. He explained that he needed to talk to the priest privately, but didn't want Luther to be alone while he was gone. Neal's eyes were red-rimmed and puffy. He seemed very distressed by his wife's death, and blew his nose loudly and often during the graveside service.

Ike and Mamie gave their permission for Pug to go home with Neal and Luther, and that evening was to be the beginning of their deep bonding. Luther seemed to have no other friends, and when she questioned him about buddies he had at school, he answered rather ominously that they all thought he was nuts.

In short time Pug came to agree with all the would-be buddies, that Luther was indeed nuts. But it was his sense of adventure that she was attracted to. And he didn't hold it against her that she was a girl. He just took it for granted that she could do anything he could do; though often it took a lot more effort on her part. Especially that Saturday of bleeding faces and strangers in their midst.

After examining the rather impressive gash on his face, Pug dabbed at it with a dirty tissue, told him she was sure he'd have a great scar, and quickly bored with the subject. Picking up a handful of broken shells, Pug started throwing them toward a line of trees that hid a railroad track that ran alongside the riverbank. The shells weren't heavy enough to go over and beyond the trees, and most of them fell short into the brush. They had never ventured beyond the trees, but once had crawled up the slight bank they rimmed and were surprised to hear voices down by the tree-concealed tracks. Neal had often warned them to stay away from the tracks, as had, of course, Mamie. There was talk off and on in town of vagrants that rode the rail cars and camped along the riverbank. They had never seen anyone, but late one afternoon as they were walking past the factory they saw smoke from a campfire beyond the trees. Luther wanted to investigate, but Pug made the excuse of it being too late.

Luther joined her in throwing shells, as he continued to pick at his face with his left hand. "You haven't given me a birthday present," he said as he picked up another handful of missiles. Looking at him blankly Pug replied, "Well, what do you want?"

Luther's face was a dead giveaway as he glanced slyly at her, and Pug knew that look meant trouble. "I want you to do something with me." He said nonchalantly. And warily she answered, "What?" knowing that what was coming wasn't going to be anything she remotely wanted to do.

Grabbing her hand they half fell, half ran down the

mountain of shells, landing in a painful heap at the bottom. "What?" she repeated while they dusted themselves off? "Let's go down to the tracks and spy on the hobos".

Her immediate thought was to say "No way", but, as was often her dilemma with Luther, Pug didn't want him to think she was afraid. So she replied, "Don't you think it's getting too dark?" It was almost 4:30 and they were both due home at 5:30 for supper. "Come on, don't be a chicken shit. We can be home in plenty of time," Luther coaxed. And with that said, he turned and ran toward the trees, never doubting for an instant that she would be behind him. Against every bit of better judgment she'd ever had, in her heart of hearts she knew she would follow Luther through the gates of hell. They had no way of knowing that was precisely where they were headed.

Pug was out of breath and huffing raggedly when she hit the bank and started the climb up to the tree line. Luther reached back and grabbed her hand, tugging her along impatiently. They lay on their bellies in the tall brush at the top of the ridge. Chests heaving, they tried to catch their breath. Suddenly, two strong hands grabbed them by the scruff of their necks like tiny kittens, and held them aloft, feet kicking helplessly at the air. Pug smelled rancid breath on her neck as an icy chill ran down her entire body. Luckily, she resisted her first inclination to scream as a deep raspy voice said, "Either one of you screams and you're dead meat." Then with a sound, almost like a chuckle, the man released them and demanded, "Now turn around here and let Podunk get a good look at you."

Luther spun around quickly, both hands on his hips ready to confront whatever trouble they had landed in. Pug turned reluctantly, and slowly faced whatever it was that had her knees shaking. What she encountered took her breath away. What stood before her was unlike anything she had ever seen or dreamed possible in a human. The man was a rag-tag sum of tatters - both his clothing and his face and skin. It was impossible to tell where his flesh ended and his raggedy clothes

began. One give-away, however, was his ruined face. It was the dirtier, with grime that seemed to go an inch deep into a dread-locked skull much too large for its body. When he spoke, a black hole in his face moved with his words and flashed a chow dog's blue-black tongue.

Luther twitched, readying himself for flight, but Podunk was quicker in his anticipation, and jutted out a skinny, corded arm to snatch him mid-air. "Where you goin', boy? We aint even properly met yet. Now sit yourself down here and meet Podunk and Oshgosh, the ashcan king."

At the mention of another person, they became aware of an enormous, quivering blob of human flotsam that rose up from behind a boulder. Larger than any single human could possibly grow to, Oshgosh was a rotted mountain of flesh that waddled on short, bare scabrous legs emerging from what looked like a filthy beach towel wrapped around his bloated belly. Pug's stomach lurched at the smell of this man, as waves of almost visible rot poured off him. Standing rooted to the ground, her legs screwed deeply into the rocky soil, he lumbered past her to stand beside Podunk, facing them.

Pug glanced at Luther, ready to follow whatever lead he could muster, but was surprised to see that he was every bit as frightened as she was. This turned her legs into jelly as she went down in a heap before these two misfit humans. Podunk reached toward her, but she quickly rolled away, not wanting to be touched by such a hand, which prompted another chuckle from him. It was an eerie squealing that brought goosebumps to her scalp; a sound not unlike one made by their old sow when she got stuck in the barbed-wire fence.

"Let's have a look at you, girl", he snarled, suddenly tired of being amused by them. His claw-like, gnarled hands grabbed her at the wrists and pulled her closer to him, peering into her face with red-rimmed milky eyes. Pug held her breath until he dismissed her with a grunt of disgust, shoving her to one side. "You stay put girl while I look over your brave

boyfriend here," he said, pulling Luther toward him and holding him at both wrists. Luther, with a small showing of spunky defiance, lifted his head high and glared at Podunk, trying very hard to look tough, and not scared out of his wits as Pug suspected him to be. "You gonna do what I say Boy? Or do I let ol' Oshgosh here have a little fun with you and your skinny girlfriend?"

Oshgosh, hearing his name, seemed to come alive with a quiver that set his whole body in motion in an undulating movement, from his red wet mouth down through his gelatinous, dirty white body. Pug wasn't certain of the meaning of Podunk's words, but their effect on Oshgosh was reason enough for her to be absolutely certain she wanted no part of any such "fun".

"Go stand over by your girlfriend and shut up", Podunk hissed at Luther with a shove that sent him sliding past Pug on his knees and the palms of his hands. Luther got up brushing off his knees and quickly wiped away the tears that were welling up in his eyes. Luther chanced a look at Pug out of the corner of his eyes and gave her his trademark wink of bravado she was sure he neither felt nor believed, but it had a welcomed effect of reassurance. Being forgotten for the moment, she chanced a whispered, "What shall we do?" to Luther who had once again landed them in this frightening predicament. "Whatever they tell us to do, and wait for the right time to run." was his none-too-inspired reply. She was about to whisper a protest when the men turned their attention back to them.

Oshgosh walked behind Luther and put his fleshy arms around him and held him tightly to his body. Hugging him to his filthy belly, Luther's feet lifted off the ground, kicking uselessly. Podunk turned to Luther and jabbed him in the chest with each word he uttered, "Oshgosh can make a grown man cry and wish he'd never been born. I once watched a man after several hours with Oshgosh walk straight for a cliff and jump off as fast as he could into the welcome death of a dry riverbed 400 feet below.

So unless you'd like to make Oshgosh a happy man, I suggest you 'n your girlfriend do as I say. Put him down, man." he said to Oshgosh, who look disappointed but did as he was told. "Here's the deal. You got to bring us some money. Don't care how you get it, but you get it. Now what you got in your pockets? Turn'em inside out. Both of you. Else I'll have Oshgosh do it for you. He loves puttin' them meaty paws in folks' pockets."

Luther and Pug exchanged a look of pure dread, as they stood frozen with their fists jammed in their pockets; Luther clutching his mother's wedding band, and Pug with the gold locket cutting into her palm. They were never without these items. They had become the charms and the unspoken talismen of all their adventures. Oshgosh, seeing their exchange of looks and slowness to respond, took a step toward them. Quickly withdrawing their hands from their pockets, turning them inside out, they let the few harmless items fall onto the ground. Podunk stirred his foot, moving a few coins, two movie stubs, a key, pocket knife, and a roach clip Luther had found down by the factory fence. "OK, kiddies, what's in the hands? Open'em up, or Oshgosh does it for you."

With feelings of utter helplessness they both opened their fists to disclose the ring and the locket. "Well, looky here," from Podunk, the evil grin cracking his face again. Oshgosh took a step closer to peer into their palms, and stood there giggling silently, all of him jiggling obscenely. Pug prayed for all she was worth that God would send a lightening bolt to fry these two abhorrent creatures to a crisp before they touched her again. But God was too busy keeping her teeth in her head and her jeans dry.

Luther begged, with a whine in his voice Pug had never heard before, "Please don't take them. They belong to my Mother."

"So she can get more from your worthless old man". This from Podunk as he carefully picked the jewelry from their

hands and held them up for Oshgosh to see. "You don't understand", pleaded Luther. "She's dead."

Podunk just looked at him and shook his head saying, "Then what's she need jewelry for?"

The tears from Luther's eyes spilled over, mixing with the dried blood and etching a rusty pattern down his face. But he persisted defiantly, "If I bring you lots of money, will you give us back the ring and locket?"

Podunk cocked his head and his face appeared interested as he took a step closer to Luther. "And just where would you be gittin' lots of money? And how do I know you won't bring the cops back here?"

Luther, running brick-red tears from the chin that protruded bravely, countered, "You don't know, but you've got the jewelry, and I'll have the money for you".

"Tomorrow." said Podunk. And it was not a question. "You two both be here tomorrow at noon with the money and we'll see about the jewelry." Oshgosh looked disappointed as the deal was made, and took a step toward them. They had been standing on the rim of the cliff above the riverbank and both automatically took a backward step to avoid his outreached hand. Oshgosh stretched to reach them, his balance failing as he lurched forward flailing his arms to try and remain upright. All three watched in silent horror as he stumbled and windmilled forward with the gaining momentum of his gargantuan weight and his unbalance. With a grace undoubtedly like none he had ever exhibited, he dived headfirst over the edge to fall, bounce, and roll his way silently to the bottom of the bank over 100 feet below and into the shallow water, where he lay motionless as a beached whale, looking up at them with unseeing eyes.

Luther, taking advantage of this dreadful distraction, grabbed Pug's hand and pulled her forward into a dead run. "Run as fast as you can, Pug." He hollered needlessly as she pumped her legs faster than she had ever run before or since. They didn't know if Podunk watched them go or even if he

shouted anything after them. They were hell-bent on getting away, and wouldn't have heard anything.

Not stopping until they neared the creekbed behind Pug's house, they slowed down to catch their breath. "Don't worry, Pug. Let's not talk about this now," was all Luther could trust himself to say. Pug could merely nod, not trusting her voice.

"I'll figure something out", he said as he waved goodbye and moved on while Pug made her way across the creek on the rocks she knew so well.

"Wash your face," she said in parting.

Climbing up the rocky bank, Pug could see through her minds eye the fat man's surprised look as he went over the edge of the bank, his red mouth open in a silent wet "O", his eyes bulging. It was a sight that would haunt her for many years.

As she entered the back door, Pug was surprised to discover that she was just in time for supper. She was sure it must have been hours later than suppertime, but no, Mamie just glanced up and motioned her toward the sink where she washed her hands before joining the family at the table.

San Marino smirked at her with a raised eyebrow, "What's up, Pug? You look like you've seen the ghost of Claudia MacCaffrey".

"Alan", warned Ike.

"Well, she looks ..." and left it hanging with another glance from Ike. Vendetta picked up the subject. "I saw you and Luther headed down to the shell pile this afternoon. I thought that was off limits?"

Pug retaliated with, "What would you know about off limits?"

Mamie threw down her napkin. "Can we for once have a supper without all the bickering? Alan, stop teasing Pug. She's getting too old for the kind of teasing you do with her now. And Elaine, nobody likes a snitch".

Thank you Mom, Pug muttered under her breath, and

tried to dig into her food with the gusto they were accustomed to seeing from her. She glanced at her mother with disguised admiration, and not a little bit of wonder at why she all of a sudden was sticking up for her. But with a mental shrug, she thanked her lucky stars and let go the thought that maybe she'd have to pay in some way for this act of kindness. Trying desperately not to think or imagine any of the events of the last couple hours, dinner passed with no more haranguing. Pug was left to feel gratitude for the safety of life with Ike and Mamie, San Marino, and even Vendetta, who had lived up to her name yet again.

Chapter 2

Two weeks later, Luther waited outside the library while Pug ran in to return more of San Marino's books. Letting the door slam she made her way to the counter as faces lifted to see who was being so rude. Pug shrugged her shoulders apologetically to the room at large and placed the books on the counter where the elderly librarian smiled indulgently at her. Making her way back to the front door she glanced into the study room at several bent heads pouring over books at the large oak table. With a small jolt she recognized Christie MacCaffrey seated with her mother who was idly thumbing through a magazine. Christie had several books stacked and opened in front of her, but her eyes were staring straight outward at Pug, who felt a chill down her back as she involuntarily slowed

down. Unable to break the stare she was returning to Christie, Pug raised a hand in a tentative greeting and then lowered her gaze as she reached the door and hurriedly exited. Whether or not Christie returned her half-hearted greeting she never knew.

"What took you so long?" barked an impatient Luther.

"You are not going to believe who I just saw. Christie MacCaffrey. And damn, she gave me a slimy case of the creeps. Staring and glowering at me like I was out to get her. She was sitting at the study table with her mom."

Luther muttered merely, "Oh." Then, "Come on, I've got something to show you. Let's go over to the park and the tennis courts."

The city park was a smallish affair, but the city authorities managed to cram a lot into several acres. It was actually quite nice as small city parks go. For a town with a modest population, the park boasted a softball diamond with 6 tiers of bench seats, 2 well-lighted tennis courts, a swimming pool, and lots of grassy areas for strolling or picnicking at the tables interspersed among the giant oak trees. Luther and Pug headed for the bright lights of the deserted tennis courts where Luther withdrew a crumpled newspaper clipping from his pocket, saying,

"Whaddaya think?" as he shoved it at her. "It was in this morning's paper. Dad read it to me 'cause he knows I've been down to the tracks."

Pug took the clipping from him and headed to the side of the tennis court where she sat on a bench under the lights and smoothed the paper out on her leg. The article read:

GRISLY FIND IN RAIL YARD

Children playing in the deserted rail cars in the repair yard of the SF&A railroad came across a particularly gruesome find yesterday evening. In an abandoned boxcar they discovered the badly deteriorated remains of what appeared

to be a large male human. Police commented that the dryness of the area accounted for the fact that the corpse had not totally disintegrated, as it was estimated that death had occurred some weeks earlier. A search of the clothing produced no identification, but police are withholding other evidence gathered at the scene. Authorities, both community and railroad, are asking that anyone with knowledge of this incident to please step forward. The identities of the children are being withheld, and parents are asked to keep their children from the scene. The deceased has not been identified. The investigation continues.

Pug read through the article several times while Luther fidgeted in front of her, shifting back and forth on his feet impatiently. He finally snatched the paper from her, and demanded, "Well?"

"Well what?"

"The so-called evidence. What do you suppose it is? "

"I don't know Luther. What do you think it is?"

"It has to be my mother's ring and locket. He had them in his meaty fist when he went over the cliff. I thought for sure he'd drop them on the way down."

"You're assuming it has to be Oshgosh? Ike says the tracks are loaded with bums." Pug countered.

"Get serious. Why would the police be making such a big deal of it if they thought it was just some sorry-ass bum who laid down and died in a boxcar?" Asked an exasperated Luther.

"But Podunk had the jewelry, not Oshgosh." This from Pug as a light sweat developed on her forehead despite the evening chill.

Luther replied, "Don't you remember? Podunk held them up for Oshgosh to see, and he must have snatched them out of Podunk's hand."

"I don't think so, Luther. We would have seen that."

"Oh really? As scared as we were that day, I don't trust my eyes or my memory. I think the police are holding the ring and locket and it's a matter of time before they trace them back to me. What I didn't tell you was that the ring had an inscription on the inside. 'For Hannah, love always, Neal'. Now how many people are there in this town named Neal and Hannah? Pug, what'll we do? I'm scared."

"Think maybe we ought to go to your dad?"

"How could I explain how that poor dead slob ended up with my mom's jewelry? And how did Oshgosh end up in that boxcar? Podunk sure didn't move him by himself, and if he did get help to move him, he would have discovered the jewelry in his hand. I don't know. I just don't know what to think, or what to do. You gotta help me Pug. I'll do whatever you think is right. Provided I think it makes sense."

This was a familiar scenario with them. He had relied on her several times to get them out of jams, thinking, mistakenly, that she was less excitable, and again mistakenly, that she was more methodical at untangling the messes they found themselves in. But this time, Pug had to admit she felt completely over her head and at a loss as to what action they should be taking. As had often been the case, when all else failed and she couldn't conjure up the magic, Pug found it best to cut her losses and 'fess up to parents or whatever authorities were involved. But Luther seemed wholeheartedly against this, and wouldn't listen to this line of reasoning. He did admit, however, that they could use a grown up perspective. Pug immediately thought of Alan, and made the suggestion to Luther.

"San Marino?" he asked.

"Why not?" she answered. "He's always bragging about college stunts. And I trust him to keep his mouth shut. Besides, I have a little leverage...that business of him and Ruthie Cameron in the park last week."

It happened last Saturday evening about 7:30. Luther

and Pug had been to a movie and were hurriedly cutting through the park to get home before dark. As they neared the softball field they heard giggling and slowed down to determine where it was coming from. Pug saw shadows moving under the bleachers, and motioned to Luther to keep quiet. They silently stole up to the back side of the bleachers and peeked around to the open end where they could clearly see Alan sitting with his pants down around his ankles and Ruthie sitting on his lap making tiny whimpering sounds.

Alan saw them and frantically, but silently, motioned them to go away, which they did. Ruthie seemed not to notice them, and continued riding Alan's lap like a circus pony. Luther and Pug retreated to the far side of the ball field where they collapsed in laughter in the tall outfield grass.

Ruthie Cameron was a bit of a ditz, and ran the town's medical clinic. Ruthie was married to Butch Cameron, ex-high school football hero turned ob/gyn doctor, and worked as his receptionist during his afternoon office hours. Pug wondered, out loud, how Alan came to be mixed up with her. Well, anyway, she thought having this particular bit of juicy knowledge about Alan might pressure him to keep mum about their problem, should Luther agree to confide in him.

Luther finally agreed that they needed advice from someone uninvolved, and they made plans to get Alan alone as soon as possible. The opportunity came the following night. Luther and Pug were sitting on the front porch after dinner. He had come by in time for the lemon pie he loved and that he knew Mamie had made that afternoon. Alan came ambling out, letting the screen door slam, prompting Ike to holler at them. He was in the living room watching a rerun of the 'Honeymooners', for about the fifth time.

Luther let Alan sprawl out on the porch steps before saying, "San Marino, how about taking Pug and me for a ride in your pickup?"

Alan chuckled, loving the name Luther had given him. "OK.

Why not? I'll get my keys. You kids go ahead and pile in."

Pug slid over to the middle of the bench seat of Alan's made-over, bright yellow '52 Chevie pickup, straddling the gear shift rod that rose from the floor. Luther scrunched up against the door and lowered the window. Alan returned with the keys, got in and noisily started the engine. Leaving the front driveway in a thick, smelly haze of exhaust, they bounced down the long gravel road to the smooth blacktop that took them the 2.25 miles into town.

Luther spoke up, "Why don't we head over to the park and see if there's a ballgame," knowing full well that there wasn't, but it would be quiet there and hopefully he could get the words out that he planned to say.

"Nope," said Alan, "no ballgame," as we turned the corner toward the deserted field.

Luther sat up a little straighter in his seat by the door and said, "San Marino, would you just pull over here by the bleachers. Pug and I got something to say."

Alan looked over at them out of the corner of his eyes, but said nothing as he pulled to the curb and shut off the engine before he asked, "What's up?" He paused a moment in the ensuing silence, then continued. "Is this about me and Ruthie last Saturday?" he asked with an impish grin.

Luther answered, "Sorta. But you know, San Marino, you can trust us. Me and Pug would never say anything to anybody about that. So you know we can keep a secret."

"Hell. You two probably got more secrets than Father O'Brien over at St. Sebastians". Said Alan.

"Go on," Pug prompted Luther.

"Well, see, me and Pug, we need some advice. We got ourselves in a bit of a jam, and we were thinking maybe you could help us figure out what we ought to do."

Alan replied, "Well, I'll do my best to help you out if I can. I hope you don't need any money though, 'cause I'm kinda tapped out at the moment."

"No", said Luther. "This here has something to do with that corpse they found yesterday over in the rail yard. You see me and Pug, I think we know who that dead guy is. We met up with him and a guy named Podunk over the ridge down by the tracks by the button factory a few weeks ago," he rattled."and they scared the bejeezus outta us - they grabbed at us and took some stuff from us and now we think maybe that stuff is what the cops are calling 'evidence' they found on the dead guy who's name by the way is Oshgosh. He stumbled and fell over the cliff with our stuff in his hand, and I guess it killed him, but we don't know how he came to be in a boxcar." Luther gushed, then paused to gulp some air.

Alan, at the end of this recital, just sat there with his mouth open, looking incredulously from one to the other. Luther continued, "You see, the stuff he took was some of my Mom's jewelry and I just know the cops will be at our door any day now 'cause it was engraved with her and my Dad's names. We were supposed to go back and meet them the next day with some money to get the jewelry back, but that was before Oshgosh took his dive and we just took off running and never looked back."

Luther stopped now, having told all he was going to tell. Alan was slowly shaking his head.

"Holy shit," was his only comment. Then he sat silently, still looking back and forth at us.

Alan remained sitting so still and silent for so long, Luther and Pug both began to squirm. And just as Pug was about to open her mouth, Alan turned back to face them, having been staring out the window since Luther ended his confession.

"OK kids. Are you sure you've told me everything? Nothing else to add?" asked Alan.

Pug waited for Luther to tell him how and where they had come into possession of the jewelry to begin with, but Luther said nothing, so Pug figured it couldn't matter how they had the ring and locket. After all, his mother was dead, and it's not like they stole it from her. I mean, not really, she thought.

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