

Gods Kind Hand (Chapter One)

Brad Bullah is the epitome of cool. As I sat on the steps leading to the kitchen door of my house, I contemplated why this was so, why God was so apparently indiscriminate in his gifts to mankind, why some kids got cool and some got athletic ability and some, like me, got zip, nothing. I absent-mindedly peeled paint from the weathered rail I leaned on, flicking the chips off the side of the steps into the grass, passing time, wasting air, as I waited for Brad to come.

He was everything I loved, and everything I hated. He commanded the block. His word was law. He spoke with attitude about everything. He bullied us, railed against our stupidity, and castigated our timidity. School was an inconvenient evil, and he took leave of it whenever he decided to, asking no one, fearing not for the consequences. I watched him sometimes. He just walked away from the campus, never looking back, never worrying whether one of the bolder teachers would come after him. They never did.

"Morrison, get down from there."

That's Brad. He's never said my first name, never uttered the word "Chuck," though I hoped he would one day, that he'd actually be my friend, that we'd be on a first name basis.

"Morrison, are you coming? I said get down. Come on. Are you dreaming or something?"

I leaped off the steps and caught up with Brad, who had already reached the edge of my lawn. We walked silently down the street until we reached the Highfill house. Highfill was the neighborhood grump, a real pain, always yelling at you when you cut through his lawn on the way to the street behind us.

"Now get over there and stuff these bottle rockets up the drain pipe before a car comes."

"But what if. . ."

"What if old man Highfill comes out? So what? You can outrun him; you're 12, he's 40. He's an old man. Now stop your whining and get with it. We'll be right over here."

I looked at the bottle rockets in my hand. Sammy Hahn, the neighborhood pyromaniac, had strapped ten bottle rockets together, rigged a common fuse, and packed gunpowder into the empty inkcap of a fountain pen to serve as a warhead.

"I don't know. . ."

"What are you, a sissy? GET OVER THERE," he whispered loudly, and I took off, stooped in front of the drain pipe, lit the fuse, lay it in the drain pipe, and turned to run.

Brad, Sammy, and the rest of the gang were gone.

I'm in my room where I've been confined after school each day for the last week. It seems the Hahn-bomb rattled the Highfill house so much that paintings fell off the walls. Highfill came storming out of the house, dressed only in boxer shorts, with a loaded rifle, only to find no one in sight. At least that's what Brad said from his vantage point behind the Murkowski's fence.

I thought I was home free. I thought I had made it. Until Jeffrey Pendering fingered me. That's right. He saw it on his way to ballet lessons. I'll kill him.

I really dislike Brad Bullah. Today, I looked out the window to see him playing basketball on *my* basketball court with Jay Murkowski, just flaunting the fact that nothing happened to him.

"Charles, you can go out now, but you'd better behave this time."

That'd be my mother. She's standing at my door in a flowered print cotton dress and bedroom shoes, hands on her hips, cigarette in her hand.

I brushed past her and ran through the door, letting the screen door slam behind me, where it rattled on its hinges in my wake. I'm really gonna let'm have it this time. I've had it with him.

"Hey, what's happening Brad? How 'bout that Hahn-bomb? Good wasn't it?"

"Morrison, you're a wuss. All that whining and then you went and got yourself grounded like that. Disgraceful." Jay laughed. Brad turned and took a clean shot at the net.

I looked down at my feet. Brad was 16, already six feet, a junior in high school. His Daddy drove a truck and was away from home for weeks at a time. His Momma worked all the time. Brad used to come swipe food from our refrigerator after school. I let him. After all, he was 16 and a heck of a lot bigger than me.

I liked the way he walked, like he didn't care what happened, and the way he wore his hair, long, with his bangs hanging down over his eyes. Made him look tough. My Dad carted me off to the barber every other Saturday, where I got a buzz cut. My Daddy said "ain't no son of mine gonna look like no hippie," and that settled it.

"Can I play?"

"No way Morrison. You think I wanna play with a sissy? Go back inside. Beat it."

That's me. Chuck Morrison. Commonly known as wuss, Momma's boy, sissy. My Momma calls me Charles. My Daddy calls me "boy." No one calls me Chuck.

Anyway, the next day I was out riding my bike on the street when the chain came off. I walked it over to my front walk, put the kickstand on, and sat down to try and put it back on.

It's the Sixties, 1965 to be exact. The developers of our neighborhood weren't fond of landscaping. There was not a single tree in the front yard and it was hot as. . . well, you know. You know the way they built suburbs then: chop down the trees, flatten out the land, and throw up a bunch of cookie-cutter houses. Mine was a gray one story, with a carport, like the house next door, and next door, and next door. Pretty dull.

But my bike was a purple 5-speed, a Spyder from Sears, the one I picked out of the mail order catalog. I got it last Christmas. I thought it was pretty cool until I saw the bikes Sammy and Jay got, the kind with the banana seats and high handlebars and metallic paint – just like motorcycles. Beside theirs, mine looked like. . . well, looked like a bike owned by a wuss. Figures.

As I sat there getting more and more frustrated, and more and more greasy, all I could think was how my Dad was going to kill me if I broke the bike. He'd be real angry.

"Morrison, what have you done now?"

Oh no. Not Brad. Not him again. This is embarrassing. He stood over me. I figured he'd come to gloat over my inadequacy.

"I'm OK. I can handle it."

"Move over. You don't know what you're doing. I can fix this."

I slid over on the concrete. Brad sat down and began to work on the chain. I watched him, determination in his face, sweat dripping down the side of his cheek. For once there was nobody else around, just me and Brad.

"Hey, you've been crying, haven't you?"

"No way. I got something in my eye."

"Doesn't look like it to me. Looks like crying to me."

"Well, it's not, so just shut up."

"OK, OK."

I watched him maneuver the chain back into position, spin the wheel, and rub his hands on the grass to clean the grease off.

"My Dad said he'd beat the tar outa me if I tore up the bike. Thanks. Thanks a lot."

"Your Dad's a jerk."

"Is not."

"Is so. If my old man laid a hand on me, I'd take care of him. Listen to me, Chuck. If your Dad comes after you, you come and get me, OK? I'll fix him. My Dad *never* lays a hand on me. Not anymore.

Wait a minute. Did he say "Chuck?" Does this mean we're real friends now?

Brad got a motorcycle, a red Kawasaki. During dinner, I heard it -- it sounds like a mad bee in a beer can when it gets wound up. He's taking each of the guys in the neighborhood for a ride on the back, around the block.

"What in the world is that Dora? That Brad Bullah on that motorcycle? That guy'll never make anything of himself. A real juvenile delinquent.

Listen boy – you better stay away from that guy. He'll just get you into trouble. You listening to me?"

"Uh-huh," I said, through a mouthful of green beans.

"Dora, get the boy some more chopped steak. He's skin and bones. You need to put some meat on him. No boy of mine's gonna be a wimp."

"Dad, can I have a motorcycle when I'm sixteen?"

"What? Are you crazy? You'll get yourself killed. And if I catch Brad Bullah over here on that bike I'll wrap it around him and you, you hear?"

After dinner, I ran down the street and joined the group assembled in front of Brad's house. When he pulls up and lets Sammy off, I jump on to take my turn. He winds down Fernwood, takes a left on Cornwallis, and opens the throttle. I feel the wind, the freedom. I'm thinking about all the places Brad and I could go, all over town, all over the country even. Yeah, just Brad Bullah and me riding down the freeway, not a care in the world.

"Hey Brad, this is cool!"

"What?"

I said this is cool!"

"WHAT?"

"I said your Momma's got a face like a bulldog."

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU!"

Brad pulled to a stop, too soon, and let me off.

"Thanks Brad."

Brad grunted and looked over at me. "Morrison, *never* forget that YOU are a wuss."

I just smiled.