

God s Kind Hand (Chapter 1: My Friend, Brad Bullah)

"Morrison, you're a wuss."

"Am not"

"Are so. You're a Momma's boy too. Why don't you just run home to Momma, chicken?"

This was how most my conversations with Brad Bullah went. It was always Morrison, never Chuck, as if he didn't know my first name, as if to say it would somehow make us too familiar.

"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? What da ya think? You can outrun him, you're 14, he's 40. He's an old man. Now stop your whining and get with it. We'll be right 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 Murkawski'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 Murkawski, 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 the chain 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. He'd. . .

"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, Morrison. 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.

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.

God s Kind Hand (Chapter 2: My Conversion)

All of a sudden, without warning, my parents became religious. I don't know if it was the deterioration of my life under the tutelage of Brad Bullah, or their own attempt to rescue their marriage, but just after I started eighth grade we started attending Hillside Presbyterian Church. My reputation suffered.

Brad said that he would have protested, that he would have refused to go. I considered this, and was about to take his advice, until something happened that changed my life: Susan Simms began attending services. Susan was the college girlfriend of Jay Murkowski's brother, Sam. She became the focus of much of my attention during church services.

Brad said Sam Murkowski was an idiot, that the only thing worse than being a wuss was being a stupid wuss. That made me feel better. And yet, Sam had Susan, and I couldn't understand that.

During church I spent most of my time casting long and longing looks in Susan's direction. Let me be frank: Susan was tall, blonde, and shapely, and wore revealing dresses that guaranteed looks. I couldn't help myself. If Susan sat on the right side of the church, most of the men leaned to the right; if on the left, to the left. We were all captivated. On occasion my mother would jab her elbow in my Dad's side to break his focus as well. In all practical respects, Susan *became* the sermon during those church services. Brad said at least there was some good reason for me to be in church, what with Susan Simms being there.

At this point my knowledge of women was quite limited. After all, unlike most of my friends, I had no sister. What I knew of the other sex was deduced from bits of information gleaned from other guys (a not so trustworthy source), ads from Redbook and Good Housekeeping (which my mother assiduously removed as soon as possible), and my roaming imagination.

Come early August it was time once again for Hillside's annual revival week. Now I had not been through this process before, but it seemed daunting: church services *every* night for the entire week? But I was offered no choice about it:

"Boy, get your good pants on. We're going to church tonight and you're gonna be there with us.

"But Dad, I wanna watch the Smothers Brothers on TV.

"Those commies? They're making a mockery of this country. No way. You're coming with us."

So, you see, I had no choice. I went.

My disposition toward the service soon changed. As Dad pulled our Olds into the gravel lot beside the church, I caught a glimpse of Susan Simms entering the door of the church. I figured if Susan could be at church, I could.

After taking our seats and singing a couple of hymns, Rev. Whitt introduced our revival speaker, Rev. George Belew, a traveling evangelist with the Southeastern Presbyterian Evangelistic Front. I realized as soon as he began to speak that Rev. Belew was nothing like our mild-mannered pastor. Whereas Rev. Whitt almost apologized for those portions of scripture which were particularly nasty (he'd even substitute the word "chest" for "breast"), Rev. Belew was loud, emotional, and unapologetic. After 10 minutes into what became a one and one-half hour

sermon, I was perspiring heavily, suffering severe guilt every time I looked at Susan Simms, and clenching the pencil I was holding (to take notes with) to the point at which it was about to break.

That's when it happened. Susan Simms just stood up at her pew. From my vantage point, I could see that her eyes were red, that she had been crying. At Rev. Belew's insistence ("Come on down, sister"), she moved down the pew past Mr. and Mrs. Harvey to the aisle and began heading to the front where she stopped and conferred out of earshot with Rev. Belew.

That's when I found myself walking down the aisle toward Rev. Belew as well. I guess just seeing Susan made me want to go up there with her, to share the moment, or whatever. I don't even remember getting up and was clueless about what I was going to do when I got up there. I could feel the eyes on me as I walked. Then, about a yard from Susan, John Lewis, a deacon in the church, jumped up from his seat on the front row and pulled me into the choir room that was off to the side. That's when I started wondering what it was I had done.

Mr. Lewis sat me down in a straightback chair and kneeled on the floor in front of me. He was sweating profusely as he began to talk and his hands, which were on my knees, were shaking.

"Charles, you know why you're here, don't you?"

"Um. . . well. . ."

"That's right. You need to get right with God and so here you are." Mr. Lewis paused, as if he was unsure what to say next.

"Well, sir, I think. . ."

"Now, no need to explain Charles. Just bow your head and repeat the sinner's prayer after me."

Holy cow. This is serious. What have I done? Somehow, I made it through the prayer, though I can't remember it, and Mr. Lewis gave me a Bible, shook my hand, and ushered me back to my seat.

After church, several folks came up and shook my hand and congratulated me, as if I had won a contest or something. Many other folks avoided me. On the way home, neither my Dad nor Mom said anything to me about what happened. I'm not sure what happened.

All I know is that two things changed: My Dad stopped cursing around me and now called on me to say the blessing at all family meals and gatherings. And Susan Simms started wearing a bra.

God s Kind Hand (Chapter 3: Cold Hard Steel)

That night was like cold hard steel.

Jimmy Murkowski and I lounged on the hood of my Dad's Ford Fairlane station wagon, looking at the stars, or something, feeling the cold metal of the hood through my shirt.

"So, I'm sorry about your Dad."

"I know. Thanks"

Lame, but what could he say? Jimmy Murkowski had been my best friend since moving here in 4th grade. Every night Jimmy and I walked around our neighborhood, got a Pepsi at the neighborhood store, tried to meet girls (generally unsuccessfully). Jimmy was loyal, always available, always a friend. In fact, he was my only friend.

Inside it was funeral food and sober-faced people, some of whom I swear walked in right off the street just to get a free meal. I had condolence fatigue. I could only mumble thanks, acknowledge them, and move on. I had had enough of teary-eyed, weeping people. I longed for something normal.

"I heard Donna Payne broke up with Brad Bullah."

"What? You're kidding? She's free?"

"Yeah, she's all yours Chuck."

Mine, all mine. I mean, Diane Payne was the best looking chick in the neighborhood. About time she ditched an idiot like Brad Bullah.

"I don't know. . ."

"Well, maybe it'll be just the thing to put your mind on Chuck, what with your Dad dying and all."

"Yeah."

Wait a minute. I feel like a heel. I mean, I'm evil. Here I am thinking about a girl on the day after my Dad died. What's the matter with me?

"Man, I think I need a little time. I mean, I don't know what to do. It's not like my Dad ever died before. I mean, what do you do?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I guess you gotta be sad, stay inside, remain sober, and generally have a terrible time, right?"

"Cut it out. You know what I mean."

Honestly, I didn't know what to do. I was concerned about my Mom, but mostly I just wanted my own life not to be upset too much. Yeah, normal. I just wanted things to be normal.

I looked up at the sky. It was a blanket of stars. Dad, you up there? At 15, life is existential, immediate. I couldn't get much farther than that wordless query.

Flipping over on my stomach, I looked through the front windshield and into the car. Boxes and boxes of parts filled the back of the wagon. What would we do with all those parts? My Dad fixed washers and dryers and dishwashers. I couldn't. I wasn't inclined mechanically. No, I wasn't inclined, period. What am I going to do?

I saw him in the hospital two weeks before he died, all hooked up to machines and tubes. He said Chuck take care of Mom, be a good boy, take care of your Mom. . . and he grabbed my hand only it didn't feel like his hand. It was weak. It was pale.

Take care of Mom? Be good? I don't know what to do.

That's what I mean. Death is like cold hard steel. Not a lot of answers here, just the cold hard fact of life ending.

Well, Jimmy and I got up and walked. We walked the block. We walked to the store. We got a big Pepsi, and we drank it all, and we walked some more. We stopped outside Donna Payne's house. I stared at her window a long, long time. Then I went home. I just went home, home to linoleum floors and shag carpet, my mother's weary face and dark dress, the people gone, the

house cold. I played Joni Mitchell, cold hard steel, oh I wish I had a river I could skate away on. I played I love you, my old man, my old man, played I am on a lonely road and I am traveling, traveling, traveling, and all I want, all I want is my old man, my old man.

All I want is my old man.