

A
NECESSARY
ACT

A Novel

By Tony Wirt

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*To my wife Erin –
No way this happens without you.*

1996

1

THE SOUND OF EXPOSED SKIN screeching across the hardwood cut Matt and David's conversation off mid-sentence. The boys snapped their heads to see Lake Mills High School's only special education student gingerly pick himself up off the floor.

"Jesus," David muttered from their daily perch in the bleachers. The gymnasium served as a holding area for the students after lunch, and the odor of that day's tuna casserole wafted in whenever somebody came through the doors.

As Noah Cooke attempted to corral the football he'd sacrificed his skin for, a voice boomed over the clamor of a couple hundred students.

"NICE CATCH, ED!"

David wasn't surprised to see Carl and Russ Blake across the gym, chortling with delight, considering they were the only ones in school who still called Noah "Special Ed".

For the most part, the other students accepted Noah and did what they could to make him feel like he belonged there. But a two-time freshman who spends his afternoons down in the elementary building alongside a dyslexic third grader and an 11-year-old with Down's syndrome was an easy target. His puppy-like combination of boundless energy, poor judgment and a longing for acceptance made him

Tony Wirt

easily manipulated – especially for cousins who'd been in a two-man race to be the biggest prick since birth.

Noah trotted the ball back across the gym. Carl snatched it from his hands, not bothering to hide the sick amusement he found in the red bursting forth from the kid's legs.

"HUT!" Carl shouted.

Noah took off across the gym with wild abandon. David and Matt watched as Carl heaved the ball in a massive arc over the heads of half the student body.

"What is he..." was all David got out before Noah went crashing to the floor again, sending another squeal of flesh through the gym in an effort to catch a ball obviously thrown well out of his reach.

David shot bolt upright. His gaze was locked on Noah, who got up much slower this time. Even from the bleachers he could see the angry red rash extending along his entire leg.

The second crash was enough to turn a few more heads, but more seemed to purposely ignore whatever scene was unfolding. Not surprising, considering the Blake Boys' reputation, nobody wanted to get them involved in their day.

The ball bounded into a group of girls sitting in the far corner, where one swatted it away.

Noah limped towards the ball and scooped it up.

"LET'S GO, ED!" Russ shouted, getting his considerable weight behind it. His face was a grimace of mean-spirited glee, while his cousin Carl now openly cackled.

Noah responded by breaking into a jog, which with the condition of his legs appeared more like an awkward skip.

David watched in disbelief as Noah returned the ball to Carl Blake. It was too much, and David stood up.

Before he could take a step down the bleachers, Matt's hand snagged his elbow. "Where are you going?"

"Somebody's got to do something," David glanced back at Matt, but made no move towards the gym floor. Part of him was relieved his friend stopped him, because it wasn't like the Blake Boys were going to accept someone telling them how to have fun without violence.

A Necessary Act

"Hold on." Matt nodded towards the floor.

Scott Alston had walked up and joined Carl and Russ. One hand was on Noah's shoulder as he spoke softly in his ear.

A river of ice ran down David's spine at the sight of Scott, and seeing a beaming smile cross Noah's face did nothing to stem the tide. He remained frozen in the bleachers when Noah handed the ball to Scott and sprinted off once again. The kid's floor-burned legs pumped as fast as they could go, all trace of a limp gone. Scott waited until he'd covered two-thirds of the gym before letting the ball fly. Seeing the ball's trajectory, it didn't take a trigonometry genius to know exactly where this was headed.

David opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

Noah never took his eyes off the ball as he rocketed across the gym. He blasted through a group of kids sitting under the basketball hoop and went flying into the concrete wall. The football slapped the wall at the same time as Noah's face.

He slid down like a cartoon character and landed in a crumpled heap on the floor.

The entire gym went eerily silent. David stood rooted in his spot, watching a pool of blood spread out from under Noah's head. A crowd formed near the wall, blocking David's view. He could feel the panic bloom in the gymnasium as the whispered murmurs from below steadily grew.

Somebody must have run off to alert the teachers, because seemingly the entire staff flooded in through the doors and shoved their way through the mass of students. Commands of "Give him room" floated up from the crowd.

The principal, Mr. Donald, walked into the gym and made his way over to a trio of teachers kneeling over their student. He exchanged a few quick words with Mr. Roderick, who turned to the crowd with his hands up.

"OK, EVERYBODY BACK IN THE CAFETERIA," He bellowed. "ALL STUDENTS RETURN TO THE CAFETERIA. NOW PEOPLE, LET'S GO."

Tony Wirt

The request had little effect. Like David, most kids were riveted where they stood. Eventually, enough teachers were on hand to herd the students through the two sets of doors and back into the lunchroom.

"I can't believe that sick fuck," David muttered. He stared at the far side of the gym, where Carl and Russ Blake were nowhere to be found. Scott still stood there, staring at where Noah was just starting to regain consciousness. "He ran him right into the fucking wall."

Matt's voice filtered up towards him. "You think?"

David turned away from the scene below. By this point, the school nurse had arrived and was holding a gym towel to Noah's face.

"That ball was halfway up the wall," David said. "No way he misses a throw that bad. He ran him right into the wall."

If Matt responded, David didn't hear it as memories cascaded through his head and poured over the dam he'd built years ago to keep them at bay. He turned back towards the floor, where Scott was turning to leave. His eyes caught sight of David and he paused, a half-cocked smile crossing his face as he continued towards the far door.

The look lit a fire of fear in David's gut.

"Somebody has to do something," David said as Matt made his way down the bleachers. "He can't keep getting away with this shit."

ROW AFTER ROW OF GIANT, razor-sharp teeth. The kind that pierced, held, and devoured whatever found its way into their path. Apex-level predator teeth.

Scott wanted to look away, but couldn't. The teeth had a hold of him, almost as if they picked up the sunlight from the lone window in a way that washed out the rest of the office. Not that there was anything else worth looking at. Principal James Donald had collected a decisively small number of personal effects for someone who had inhabited the same workspace for 16 years. The shelves behind his desk contained books, procedural binders and a tacky gold

A Necessary Act

frame with a few family pictures. There was a group shot of the Donald clan, flanked by woefully out-of-date pictures of his two children.

But mounted to the wall beside the desk, a 51-inch muskie dominated the room. Its maw was perpetually agape, with dagger-like teeth greeting anyone who walked through the door. The neon green jerkbait used to land it dangled from its bottom jaw, treble hooks and all.

Scott knew he needed to pay attention—to play his part—but he kept stealing glances at the great muskie’s teeth as he sat in one of the two chairs across from Principal Donald’s desk.

The teeth fascinated him. They reminded him of his own trophies back in the fort.

“Scott, are you listening to me?” Principal Donald snapped.

“Yes, sir. Sorry,” he replied, pulled back from his thoughts and into another boring conversation. But he was ready. “Just thinking about what happened with Noah. I mean, I know he just tripped, but I can’t help but think that it was my fault.”

Principal Donald eyed him suspiciously. Probably expected more defiance on this one; more *you don’t want me to call my dad*.

Scott had used that tactic before, certainly, but that was when he was younger. His impulses had landed him in the principal’s office plenty during elementary school—before he learned control. Now he didn’t need his Holy Roller of a stepfather bringing his righteous indignation raining down on the principal’s desk. He could talk his way out of this with half his brain tied behind his back.

“How so?”

Scott gave his principal a look that betrayed nothing of what was going on behind it.

“I mean, you know how he is. Running around like crazy all the time. We were playing catch and Noah kept trying to intercept the ball, you know, trying to get in the game.”

“Uh-huh...”

Tony Wirt

"Well, he kept knocking it away and Russ was starting to get pretty pissed—I mean mad. Sorry." Scott said. "So he chucks it all across the gym and makes Noah run after it. Just to get him away from us, I guess. Well, he picks it up and brings it to me. And I figure if I throw him one maybe he'll leave us alone.

"I tell him to go out for a pass and he takes off like a wildman. Before I can even say anything he is already halfway across the gym, so I just try and throw it as far as I can. Noah kept running and goes right through this group of people sitting kinda by the basket. First I thought he dove, but I think he tripped up on somebody's leg or something because he went flying into the wall. I just stood there waiting for him to get up, but he just laid there.

"When I realized he was really hurt, not just lying there, I went to go get somebody, but by then I saw the teachers. People were all crowded around him and stuff. Kinda freaking out. I mean, I didn't know what to do."

It wasn't what happened, but Scott knew he'd buy it. Noah Cooke *was* completely hyperactive and always going at 100 mph. Nobody would be surprised when he had an accident, which is what made him a perfect plaything.

He could still see the blood pooling on the floor and the excitement welled up inside him. His eyes drifted back to the muskie. The teeth.

"So you were just playing catch and he went tearing off," Principal Donald said, much more a statement than a question.

"Well, yeah. I mean, like I said, we weren't really playing catch with him," Scott replied. "I just wanted to get him away from us. It's my fault. I should have just told Russ to let him be. Is he OK? I mean, is he going to be all right? I tried to ask Mr. Roderick after it happened, but he just kept pushing us all towards the cafeteria."

"I don't know," Mr. Donald said. The tone of his voice told Scott he'd already won. "The paramedics took him down to the clinic, but they thought they might have to take him down to Mason City to get some tests because he was out when he hit the ground."

A Necessary Act

"Man, that's scary," Scott said. "Hope he's OK."

"Yeah, me too," Principal Donald said. He gave Scott one last stern look before dismissing him, probably to assure him he hadn't pulled one over on him.

It was all Scott could do not to laugh.

2

DAVID JERKED AWAKE, his bed damp with sweat. He sat up, gasping with the panicked breath of a drowning victim. It took a few moments before he felt the relief of cool air in his lungs. He glanced over at his bedside clock, which shone a red 3:48 into his otherwise black bedroom. He wiped his brow with his sheet and gently lay back on his pillow. It was still moist, so he turned it over.

He lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. It had been years since he'd had a nightmare like that, and he hoped this wasn't the start of another round.

When he was younger, he'd routinely wake up screaming in the middle of the night. His mother would run in and hold him while he cried himself back to sleep. At first, she would ask him about the dreams, even begging him to tell her so she could understand what terrified him so badly.

But he couldn't. How can a kid explain howls of torture, the smell of burning—some sensations so intense they followed him out of his dreams and into his bedroom?

It got bad enough that Cathy Rowe eventually took her son to their doctor, who promised her that the nightmares weren't anything to worry about. The doctor assured her many children suffer from nightmares, especially when dealing with the loss of a parent. He recommended grief counseling, but with money tight it wasn't an option. Besides, David knew that wasn't it.

A Necessary Act

Eventually, David learned to hide his fear. He knew it worried his mother, and as he got older he didn't mention anything when the dreams returned every now and then—usually during periods of high stress.

David did his best to forget the dream as he attempted to get back to sleep. Unfortunately, the only other topic in his head was what had probably prompted it: Noah's 'accident'.

By 5 a.m., it was clear that David wouldn't get any more sleep that night. He got out of bed and shuffled over to his desk. He had a page of algebra problems due the following day, but had planned on knocking them out in study hall. David cracked open his notebook and grabbed a pencil from the Minnesota Twins coffee mug on his desk, willing to think about anything other than the smell of burning and that god-awful yowling.

MATT CARLTON DROPPED HIS BOOKS at his usual spot in the LMHS cafeteria. With actual classroom space limited in a small-town high school, the lunchroom was used for study halls six periods a day. Between his two study hall periods and lunch, Matt spent almost three hours a day in the same spot, holding down a bench in the southeast corner.

He pulled his algebra notebook out. He and David had Algebra III together, so they often worked on their problems during second-hour study hall. He glanced up and saw his best friend—his only friend, if he was being honest—walking over to their regular spot.

When Matt moved to Lake Mills during eighth grade, he felt like an extra, kind of like one of those background kids in a high school drama where all the teens are played by 25-year-olds. Not that it was surprising. By that point of their lives, most teenagers in a small-town school had already settled in with a group of friends and weren't taking any more applications, thank you for asking.

It also didn't help that the only thing Matt was exceptional at was being average. Team sports didn't hold

Tony Wirt

much interest for him, and he didn't have much aptitude for music or the arts. On the other side of the spectrum, he wasn't smart enough to be a nerd, not awkward enough to be a dork and too normal to be an outcast. Not that he wanted to be any of those, but at least it would have put him on the radar. Small town circles are hard to crack, but nerds can at least hang out with other nerds.

Luckily, Matt found a kindred spirit in David Rowe. Like Matt, David was fairly unremarkable and had no real circle of friends he clung too. However, by virtue of spending his entire life in Lake Mills, David was a known commodity, enabling him to intermingle with the various cliques and students in town.

By the start of freshman year, Matt and David had become close friends, forming their own two-man group. David gave Matt just enough local cred that he could go from actively ignored to simply unnoticed, which was a much more important step than it sounded. By the time the two were sophomores, nobody thought of Matt as the "new kid" anymore.

Matt had just opened his notebook when David plopped down in his customary spot across from him.

"What's up man?" David said, more as a greeting than an actual question.

"Not much. Just getting ready to plow through some hard-core math. I've started on the first couple, so if you want to take five through ten we can switch."

"Already got 'em." David rubbed his eyes.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, I did 'em last night. Here." David flipped his spiral bound notebook open to the page he filled out at his desk early that morning and tossed it across the table.

"Nice." Matt started copying down the answers. "What got into you?"

"Couldn't sleep so I figured I would be productive," David replied.

"Works for me."

Matt was halfway through transcribing the sixth set of x 's, y 's and z 's when he noticed David blankly following his

A Necessary Act

scribbling. He looked like a zombie.

"You all right?" Matt asked.

David snapped back out of the fog. "Yeah, just tired."

"Bummer." Matt went back to copying David's last four algebra problems.

The two kept silent as Matt finished up his forgery. Just as he was putting the final touches on his paper (mostly erasing a few things and writing them again to make it look like he had worked them out on his own), David spoke.

"I think we should talk to Mr. Donald."

Matt wanted to be confused, but he knew what his friend was talking about.

"You mean about the thing with Noah?"

"Yeah."

"Why?" Matt asked. "I mean, what's to tell, really?"

"That he smashed him right into the wall."

"Maybe, but how are you going to get Mr. Donald to believe that? Scott will just say it was an accident."

David didn't say anything to that. The two sat in silence as Matt finished writing.

"You know he's a psycho, right?" David finally said.

"What?"

"The guy is a psycho, and he keeps getting away with all this shit."

"Yeah, he can be a real dick," Matt said, closing up his notebook and wishing this conversation over. "But whattya gonna do, eh?"

David had no response.

NOAH COOKE ENDED UP with a broken nose, two missing teeth, and a concussion, which kept him in the hospital overnight. He then spent another week at home recuperating.

Without any real friends to miss him, life at school quickly moved on. The incident that dominated that Tuesday afternoon was replaced by the more pressing news of a lowly freshman asking out (and being abruptly shot down by) a senior football cheerleader. Then Mr. Holdan

Tony Wirt

went an entire class with his fly down. By the time Ryan and Chelsea broke up after school on Friday, Noah and his injuries had been pretty much forgotten.

David sat alone in the school's spacious library, a stack of old magazines in front of him, and tabbed through a dog-eared copy of the *Newsweek*. The tiny type blurred together. David rubbed his eyes and put his face in his hands. He couldn't continue like this much longer. He needed sleep. It was starting to affect his schoolwork, and he was already way behind on this social studies paper.

As he flipped through the magazine scanning for an article about some central Asian republic, a different headline jumped out at him.

A REAL-LIFE HANNIBAL THE CANNIBAL?

David paused. He had seen the movie *Silence of the Lambs* a few years back and had been fascinated with Anthony Hopkins' creepy portrayal of the serial killer Hannibal Lecter. Walking home from Matt's house after seeing it on video had been one of the most terrifying walks of his life. He was sure a psychotic killer was waiting in every bush to jump out and eat his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti.

The article had been published just after the arrest of Milwaukee serial killer Jeffery Dahmer, which had come right in the middle of *Silence of the Lambs'* theater run.

David knew the basics of Dahmer's story, mostly because he had recently been killed in prison and the news re-hashed all its old coverage of him. He killed 17 people, although at the time this article was written he had only confessed to 11. What tied him in with Hannibal Lecter was their shared propensity to eat their victims.

He continued reading the lurid descriptions of what went on in Dahmer's apartment, partially fascinated that such a movie-esque bad guy could exist anywhere but the silver screen. As he turned the page, a sidebar in a faded red box caught his eye.

A Necessary Act

What Makes a Serial Killer?

He immediately abandoned the Dahmer story to read the small supplement. His jaw dropped as he read through the list of characteristics serial killers share. He read through the small box repeatedly, recognizing more and more of the traits each time.

It was everything he knew about Scott Alston.

The bell rang to end the period, jerking David out of his thoughts. He abandoned the stack of magazines he'd fished out of the back room and ran up to the counter with the *Newsweek* in hand.

The librarian stared at him with thinly veiled disapproval as she checked out the magazine. The perm in her short, grey, hair made the tiny curls look perpetually wet, and she had a trio of frown lines etched on each side of her mouth.

"You're going to be late," she said.

"Yeah, I know," David replied. When she found the stack of magazines he'd left out on the table she'd throw a fit. He would definitely hear about it next time.

She stamped and filed the card away, handing the magazine back to David. He snatched it from her hands and darted towards the door.

"No running!" she called after him, but he was already out into the hallway.

David was late to his next class, but it wasn't the tardy slip that bothered him. That *Newsweek* article had been a lightning bolt to the brain, and he couldn't concentrate on anything else. He just kept going down the list, mentally checking off every box.

AS SOON AS THE BELL RANG in his last class, Matt swung by his locker to get his bag and headed down the hall to find David. His friend had already grabbed his backpack and was walking over to meet him.

"What's up?" Matt called out.

"Not much. Ready to roll?"

Tony Wirt

The herd of students gradually grew as more grey lockers shut and kids flocked down the hallway. Matt and David joined the flow and headed down the steps towards the front doors. Since they both lived on the south end of town, they always walked home together.

The sun shone brightly overhead, a last gasp of summer before the days shortened. The trees lining the street were still green, although that would change in a few weeks. A steady stream of cars passed by, and Matt could see some younger kids walking about a block ahead of them.

"So I found this article..." David said as they walked away from the afterschool exodus.

"Um, OK?" Matt responded. "What about?"

"Well, it was about Jeffery Dahmer,"

"You mean the dude that ate people?" Matt said. "What about him?"

"Well, the article had a thing in it about the signs of a serial killer, you know, like before they start killing."

"Yeah?" Matt had no idea where he was going with this.

"They fit Scott Alston to a freaking 'T'."

Matt stopped. Ever since that thing with Noah Cooke happened, David had been on a weird jag about Scott Alston. Not that Matt liked him or anything. He'd heard some crazy stories about how he was in elementary school. That sometimes he'd refuse to talk for entire days. He'd follow people around, just staring at them. He'd carry dead bugs in his pocket.

Creepy stuff, but he'd never seen Scott do anything like that anymore. Kids can be weird, but they grow out of it.

"You think Scott's a serial killer?"

"Read this," David said, digging a magazine out of his backpack. He folded it open to a page in the middle and thrust it into Matt's chest. "The red box."

Matt took the magazine. In the middle of a story about Jeffery Dahmer was a sidebar box that listed 14 personality traits that serial killers supposedly share.

A Necessary Act

What Makes a Serial Killer?

1. Over 90 percent of serial killers are male.
2. They tend to be intelligent, with IQ's in the "bright normal" range.
3. They do poorly in school, have trouble holding down jobs, and often work as unskilled laborers.
4. They tend to come from markedly unstable families.
5. As children, they are abandoned by their fathers and raised by domineering mothers.
6. Their families often have criminal, psychiatric and alcoholic histories.
7. They hate their fathers and mothers.
8. They are commonly abused as children – psychologically, physically and sexually. Often the abuse is by a family member
9. Many serial killers spend time in institutions as children and have records of early psychiatric problems.
10. They have high rates of suicide attempts.
11. From an early age, many are intensely interested in voyeurism, fetishism, and sadomasochistic pornography.
12. More than 60 percent of serial killers wet their beds beyond the age of 12.
13. Many serial killers are fascinated with fire starting.
14. They are involved with sadistic activity or tormenting small creatures.

"OK," Matt said after he finished reading the list. By this time, the boys had reached the park a few blocks south of the school. It was a square block of towering oak trees, interspersed with a merry-go-round, slide, a pair of large picnic shelters and a large playset surrounded by sand in the center. The boys meandered toward a bank of swings on the east end.

"You think Scott has some of these?"

"Some?" David said, sounding somewhat incredulous. "He's got ALL of them."

Matt could see Scott Alston matching a few spots on the list. Aside from the obvious demographics of being a white male, Matt had heard a few rumors about Scott's biological father, and after hearing a few fire and brimstone sermons on Sunday morning, it was no stretch whatsoever to imagine his stepdad, Pastor Alston, as a strict disciplinarian.

Tony Wirt

"Look at this," David sat down on a weatherbeaten metal bench. "He's male - obviously. He doesn't do well in school, but he gets through because he knows how to work the teachers and they are afraid of his stepdad, right?"

Matt had to admit David had a point there. Scott always seemed about to fail, but he would somehow get through in the end. Even so, anyone would be hard pressed to call him dumb. David was right—Scott was definitely smart enough to work the system.

"OK"

"You've heard about his parents, right?" David asked. "His real dad was a hard-core druggie and supposedly his mom was one too before they moved out here. Then his dad died in jail when Scott was just a baby, so that is 4-5-6 on there. And you KNOW what Pastor Alston is like. That guy is insane, and I guarantee he knocked both Scott and his mom around when he was young."

Matt just listened as David continued to rattle off his theory. Made some sense, but there were still some holes. Matt leaned back and scanned the park. A fair number of kids walked along Lake Street on the far side, but other than a pair of kids playing on top of the picnic tables in one of the shelters, they were alone.

"OK, but what about the rest of it?" Matt asked. "Suicide, porno, bedwetting?"

"Dude, he wet his bed until he was like thirteen."

Matt raised an eyebrow. He'd admit that there were a few coincidences on the list, but now it seemed like his friend was just making stuff up.

"What are you talking about?" Matt asked.

"When I was a kid I had to go out to his place a couple times to get babysat," David said. "He had to wear these diapers to bed then."

"What?" Matt asked.

"Yeah," David exclaimed, beginning to get worked up. "His closet was full of them. Diapers for older kids. They were called Underjams or something. There were boxes of those things in his closet. Like a ton."

Matt's brow knitted in disbelief.

A Necessary Act

"Seriously?"

"Hand to God," David swore. "And his mom treated him like a baby. She would cut his food all up and give him whatever he wanted so he wouldn't throw a fit. And his room was all clowns and stuff. Seriously. Even then it was like she thought he was four or something. It was insane."

As Matt listened to David describe it, he had to admit some of it fit, but it was hard not to pass his friend's ideas off as paranoid ramblings.

Serial killer? That was movie stuff.

"All right," Matt said. "But what about the last stuff? Killing animals, fires."

David's eyes shifted to whatever was beyond his shoulder, staring into the trees. It took a minute for him to respond.

"Yeah," David said quietly.

"What do you mean, 'yeah'?"

The question hung for what seemed an eternity. Matt could tell David was thinking long and hard about something, but didn't know what to say about it. He let the silence hang for a minute.

"What?" Matt asked.

"He did it," David responded in a small voice. Quiet. Almost inaudible.

"What?" Matt asked again, watching his friend sit there, his gaze shifting to the ground.

Before Matt could ask again, David told him the story he hadn't told anyone in the seven years since it happened.

3

“SCOTTY HONEY, HE’S HERE!” Karen Alston called into the backyard with a shrill, sing-song voice that grated David in a way he could almost taste.

“He’s out behind the shed, Davey,” Scott’s mom said.

He hated being called Davey.

“You two have fun now.”

David drifted out into the backyard, in no hurry to locate Scott Alston. The only reason he was here was because his mom had a stupid job interview, and this was going to suck.

Even early on, the students of Lake Mills Elementary could tell there was something off about Scott. He had no friends, and David Rowe wasn’t looking to be the first.

Scott was a freak.

Sometimes in the middle of class, he would just get up from his desk and go do something. It didn’t matter what they were supposed to be doing, or even if the teacher was in the middle of a sentence, he’d just wander over to the window. Maybe look through the books. Some teachers stopped to steer him back to his seat, some just let him go.

Sometimes he wouldn’t talk.

To anybody.

For hours.

One time, Miss Sorenson asked Scott a question and he went into one of his silent spells. She repeated it and got

A Necessary Act

nothing. Scott just looked up at her with this tiny little smirk. Usually when he pulled this she just ignored him, moved on to somebody else, but something must have gotten to her that time because she lost it.

The rest of the class sat in silence as she started yelling at him, fingers clenched white around the front of his desk. David, his spot just two rows away, had been terrified at the sight of his teacher, red-faced and screaming. Shortly after it started, the classroom door flew open and another teacher ran in to pull Miss Sorenson away.

Throughout the whole ordeal, Scott's expression never changed. Just blank eyes and the tiniest smile, which he kept as he was led from the room.

Never said a word.

On the playground, sometimes Scott would just follow people around, watching from a short distance. Naturally, this sort of odd behavior couldn't be tolerated by some of the older kids.

One time, David saw a group of sixth graders hold Scott down and take turns punching him in the shoulder. He never fought back. The next day at recess, Scott went right back to the same group of older kids and asked them to hit him again. Surprising everyone (including the guys that had beat him the day before) he was denied. As they walked away, Scott followed, begging them to hit him some more. Whether they were afraid it was some sort of entrapment or just creeped out by the request, all Scott got was a half-hearted shove and a mumbled "freak". They wanted nothing to do with Scott Alston. Nobody did.

Sometimes kids just knew.

David hoped if he walked slow enough maybe Scott would be gone by the time he got there.

No such luck. Scott emerged from behind the shed, and David froze.

In contrast to all the memories swirling through David's head, Scott broke the silence first.

"Hey. Come here, will ya?"

It sounded so normal, not freakish at all. Just a kid with a friend over. David had no idea how to react, so he just stared.

Tony Wirt

Who was the freak now?

"I gotta go get some more wood, come on," Scott said.

"Huh?"

"There's a bunch of wood over on the side of the garage. Let's go."

He followed Scott over towards the family's newly built two-car garage alongside the house. A stack of old plywood leaned up against it on the far side. Scott counted out three pieces and motioned for David to take the opposite side. Clueless as to what he was getting into, David grabbed the other end and walked backwards as Scott guided the way.

David carried in silence as they crossed the lawn and maneuvered behind the shed. The treeline started less than ten feet from the back end of the old, white storage building, and a small opening in the foliage indicated the start of a path into the woods.

"We're gonna have to hold them up-and-down on the path," Scott said. "It's way too narrow."

They tilted the wood upright as David backed onto the dirt trail and into the trees. Scott went a little fast as he guided them back, but David kept up without falling on his backside. About 50 yards in, Scott stopped and set his end down.

"Put it down here for now," he said.

David set his end down and turned around for the first time. The beginnings of a primitive lean-to stood in a small clearing along the path. A ten-foot long rectangle of plywood had already been nailed to a pair of trees to make the back wall, and branches had been laid out to show the footprint of the foundation.

David finally found his voice.

"What are you building?"

"A fort," Scott said. "We've got all this extra wood from the garage and my dad said I could have it. I figure these can be the side walls, but I'm going to have to get another big one for the roof. I'm gonna cover the roof with a tarp, then put a bunch of branches and leaves on top of it so the rain doesn't get in."

Like any ten-year-old boy, David was intrigued. Maybe

A Necessary Act

this wouldn't be so bad after all.

The two hauled wood and worked on Scott's design the rest of the morning. David remained wary of his co-builder, but with every piece they carried back his trepidation lessened. They managed to get most of the wood back to the fort—including the piece for the roof, which was both awkward and heavy—before they heard Scott's mother calling them to lunch.

Scott carried on about his plans over peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with the crusts cut off—David couldn't remember the last time someone had done that for him, but whatever—and chocolate milk. Mrs. Alston had originally brought white milk, but Scott demanded chocolate before the cups were even on the table.

"I know, honey, I'm going back to get the Qwik mix," she said with a smile. Scott's rather abrupt order didn't seem to faze his mom, which set David back. Had he taken that tone with his mother, the odds of him getting a scoop of cocoa in his milk would be nil. Maybe Scott's mom was more laid back.

Mrs. Alston popped in a few times with offers of more food, milk or maybe cookies for desert. After they had wolfed through everything she put in front of them, they headed straight back to the build.

The afternoon was a blur. Scott had a vision of what he wanted, and David did what he could to make it happen. He had always loved building things, so he didn't really mind Scott taking the foreman role. It was like playing with life-sized Legos.

They had erected both side walls and cleared the brush between them by the time David's mom arrived to pick him up.

"DAVEY... YOUR MOMMY'S HERE HONEY!!" Mrs. Alston's piercing voice echoed down the path.

To his surprise, he was not ready to leave. Scott had been friendly, talkative and, well, normal—nothing like he was at school. David couldn't help but think that if he acted like this with his classmates, maybe people wouldn't think he was such a freak.

Tony Wirt

"Are you coming back?" Scott asked.

"I dunno," David replied. "Maybe if my mom has another job interview."

"But I gotta get this finished up." Scott's voice suddenly had a note of panic in it. "Does she have an interview tomorrow?"

David glanced back down the path, then back at Scott. He could see Scott's facial expression changing. His eyes grew wide, boring into him. For a second David thought he was going to have some sort of tantrum.

The ground he'd been on had shifted again, and the unease he'd felt upon his arrival crept back.

"Come on kiddo, let's roll!" This time it was David's mom, and he used it as an ejection seat before things got awkward. He'd liked this Scott, and didn't want to see him disappear.

"All right, well, gotta go," David said, turning back down the path before Scott could say any more. "See you later."

Scott didn't respond. He just stared at David as he trotted down the path towards the backyard. The second he was out of sight, Scott whipped the hammer he'd been holding into the front wall of the fort, leaving a dent the size of a quarter in the plywood.

WHEN DAVID EMERGED from behind the shed, both moms were waiting for him.

"Hey buddy," Cathy Rowe said.

"Hey." David still had the sweat from a hard day's work on his brow and he was a little out of breath. He turned towards Mrs. Alston. "Scott's still back there."

"You boys really put in a big day, huh?" she replied.

"Yeah," David said. "It's pretty good."

"What's that?" Cathy asked.

"The fort," He answered with the enthusiasm of a ten-year-old explaining something to an adult. "We've got like two walls up and the base is mostly around. But the roof isn't up, but we can't do that til the walls are ready. We're

A Necessary Act

probably going to need to saw off the big branch by the second wall to get them up though. It's really big."

"Wow, sounds like you guys had a good time," Cathy said.

"Yeah, it was cool,"

"Well, it's time to get moving. Dinner's in the car."

"OK," said David, taking off towards the driveway.

"Hey," Cathy called out after her son. "You forget to say something?"

"Thank you," David said to the general area Scott's mom was standing in.

"You're very welcome, Davey," Karen sang. "Come back anytime."

"Seriously, thank you," Cathy said, turning back towards Mrs. Alston. "This was a life-saver."

"Well I'm glad it worked out. And I hope the interview went well."

"It did," Cathy said. "I actually have a pretty good feeling about this one. It's down to me and one other guy they are going to interview tomorrow then they are going to make a decision by Thursday."

"Well good luck, I'll be praying for you."

Cathy Rowe nodded politely. "Thank you. And thanks again for watching David."

"No problem at all. It's so nice for Scotty to have someone to play with. And they got along so well. Just like peas in a pod. I could just see them being best friends."

AGAINST WHAT AT ONE TIME seemed the collective will of the Universe, Cathy got the job. For the first time since Paul's death, there was a breath of optimism in the house. More importantly, there would be a living wage deposited into the bank each month.

With a full-time job a good forty minutes away, Cathy had to find someone to watch David on a more permanent basis. Luckily, school would be starting soon and the neighbors had a son in middle school that was willing to entertain David until she got home just