

“Rusty Whitener writes with passion, insight, and power. He won our MOVIEGUIDE® Kairos Prize in 2009 with his script *Touched*, which he turned into a novel, *A Season of Miracles*, garnering two Christy Award nominations and winning a Book of the Year Gold Award from *ForeWord Reviews* magazine along the way before being picked up by Elevating Entertainment Motion Pictures, which is bringing this inspiring, family-friendly story to the screen. This sequel, *A Season of Mysteries*, is another worthy milestone that will no doubt bless, entertain, and enlighten.”

—**Ted Baehr**, founder and publisher of *Movieguide*,  
author, critic, educator, and media pundit

“I love this book! Whitener’s beautiful novel weaves together the trials and triumphs of teenagers wrestling with the ordinary, comical pressures of adolescence *and* the extraordinary spiritual forces assaulting their young faith. A perfect sequel to his award-winning first novel, *A Season of Mysteries* is both funny and moving. You’ll love it too!”

—**Nancy Stafford**, actress, speaker, and author of  
*The Wonder of His Love* and *Beauty by the Book*

“Rusty Whitener’s *A Season of Mysteries* is a fabulous sequel to *A Season of Miracles*, with a formidable mix of sentiment, inspiration, and intrigue. It brought back strong memories of teenage camaraderie and Boy Scout campfires.”

—**Dave Moody**, Grammy-nominated and  
Dove Award-winning artist, producer, filmmaker

“*A Season of Mysteries* is a multifaceted gem of a story—beautiful, intelligent, thoughtful and, at just the right times, laugh-out-loud hilarious. What I love most about it is that Rusty Whitener uses the voice and eyes and heart of a teenaged boy to examine that most important of questions, “What is Truth?” Not an easy task, but one that this author tackles skillfully and convincingly.”

—**Ann Tatlock**, Christy award-winning author of  
*Promises to Keep* and *Sweet Mercy*

“GRAND SLAM! Rusty Whitener is the Babe Ruth of intrigue, action, suspense, and hope in *A Season of Mysteries*. Brilliantly written, and as one character puts it, ‘a perilous quest, seeking both peace and truth.’ Play ball . . . if you dare!”

—**Jenny L. Cote**, award-winning author of *The Amazing Tales of Max and Liz*, and Epic Order of the Seven series

“At times haunting and often humorous, Rusty Whitener’s *A Season of Mysteries* sends us bounding down the teen lane of Troublesome Trail, where curiosity meets danger, faith sprouts among friends, and the girl is more than worth the chase.”

—**Ray Blackston**, author of *Flabbergasted*

*A Season of*  
***Mysteries***

RUSTY WHITENER

 Kregel  
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*A Season of Mysteries: A Novel*

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*To my brothers, Mike Whitener and Huck Whitener,  
and my mom, Mary Keller Boatwright Whitener,  
and my dad, James David Whitener Sr.  
If God allowed me to choose my brothers and parents  
before I came into this world, I would have chosen the  
four of you. I am incredibly blessed.*

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## PROLOGUE

I stepped out of the warmth and light of Draughon Library into the dark, still night. Winters in Alabama are frequently wet, but not often white. Tonight was different. A half inch or more of snow crunched under the soles of my boots.

Dr. David Woodruff's home was barely off campus, only two blocks from the library. I was glad I didn't need to drive. The snow and the night spoke to me. A peaceful benediction to a day too full, counseling students who lacked motivation and searching in the library for something I could not find. The books, though, ministered to me in ways a computer screen never will.

I have long sought solace in research, in dodging shadows and deceits, and isolating the illuminations that dispel such shadows. I believe in both; in the Dark and the Light. I am out of step with my time. Nowadays, learned folk acknowledge only Light. And its absence. Notions of the Dark are, to them, fine mythical allusions.

Except they're not.

I have looked for alternate explanations. I mean, other than the obvious ones that soar with angels and slouch with demons.

The research world, though, has turned in on itself. So much access and so little value. We forever mine fool's gold.

Maybe it's not just research. Maybe the whole world is self-destructing, drowning in inane surface revelations. Where are the enlightenments that truly enlighten? Authentic revelation is salvation. Surface revelation is dangerous. We once knew the difference.

My field is a discipline wherein spirits roam unmolested by

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scientific inquiry. Anything a writer imagines is possible. Of course, the same possibilities reign in the mind of a sovereign Creator. Whatever the Light breathes into being, is. Our notions of plausibility are beside the point.

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I'd been to Woodruff's place once before, a private affair with six or seven professors, most from the philosophy department, where Woodruff taught when he wasn't writing first-class poetry. We drank coffee and tea and playfully dueled over the either/or proposition.

Tonight, another man greeted me at the front door. "Come in, come in. Dr. Powell, the literature prof, right?"

"Is this still Woodruff's place?" A stupid thing for me to ask, since this gentleman obviously expected me. But I was anxious, preoccupied, and suddenly felt even more so.

"He's pulling Danish croissants from the oven," the man said warmly, shaking my hand. "I'm Dr. Throneberry."

I stepped inside. Woodruff's voice boomed from the recesses of his kitchen. "Welcome, Richard! Meet Jacob Throneberry."

"Yes, we've just met, thank you," I called out.

"Same with Jacob and myself," he answered. "Yesterday."

"I hope you'll call me Jake." Throneberry smiled and led the way from the front foyer toward the sound of Woodruff's voice.

"I smell those Danish things," I said as I stepped into my friend's postage-stamp kitchen.

"Croissants, aren't they?" Throneberry said.

"Their technical name is Danish melted pastries." Woodruff pulled a sheet of the toasted treats from the oven.

The fragrance was marvelous. "*My* technical name for them is good grub," I jested.

"They do smell like heaven," Throneberry concurred.

"Wait'll you taste them."

"Throneberry here is—" Woodruff started.

"Please call me Jake," the man said to both of us.

"Jake is professor of clinical psychology at Marist College, in Canada." Woodruff set the desserts on the stovetop. "Please help

yourselves to the coffee. I have flavored creamers,” he said, sounding genuinely pleased with himself. He gestured toward a little wooden countertop tree on which hung mugs and cups of various shapes and colors, each emblazoned with college colors and symbols. “Pick your own.”

“I don’t see any Auburn or Tigers or some such,” I chided.

“I love our university,” Woodruff said with some seriousness. “I don’t need to prove that by raising a War Eagle mug to my lips every morning. I collect other schools. No other SEC schools, mind you. And by the way”—he turned to Throneberry—“how do you know?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“What it smells like?”

“Excuse me?”

“Heaven? How do you know?” he asked, straight-faced.

Throneberry appeared confused, unsure. A little worried.

“You don’t have to answer that,” I said. I’m always uncomfortable when others are teased and left dangling. “He’s toying with you; he thinks it’s funny to play with people’s minds.”

“Oh. I see.”

Woodruff didn’t appreciate my cutting in. “Now why did you rescue him, Richard? Here’s the sugar if you want it,” he said. “And the creams, take what you will, both of you. I wanted to see what he would say. And he was going to answer. Isn’t that true, Jake?”

“Well, I thought you were serious. You seemed so.”

“I was. I am. And never more serious than when I’m joking.” Woodruff piled the Danish treats onto a large platter and set them in the center of the little kitchen table. “We’ll eat and drink here,” he announced, sitting down with a brimming Notre Dame coffee mug. “And we’ll laugh and challenge and encourage our professorial spirits here.”

I sat, an Oklahoma Sooners mug in front of me. As did Throneberry, coddling a Stanford cup.

“How did you two meet?” I asked. “I think you said yesterday.”

“Jake wrote me,” Woodruff replied. “Said he liked my article in the *Journal*. You remember, on the prophetic breaking in on the propositional.”

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"I remember."

"Said he'd be coming through sometime this week. Could he stay at my place?"

"So here I am." Throneberry plucked a treat from the tray. He broke it into three pieces and set them on a napkin.

"So here he is," Woodruff echoed, laughing. "Eating treats in my kitchen!"

I laughed with him. "It's always good, in our vocation, to meet other believers." As soon as I said it, I realized I had made a great assumption. "I mean . . ."

"Oh yes," Throneberry said through a mouth of Danish. "I definitely do believe."

"I just assumed."

"Quite right," Woodruff chuckled. "They must be cool enough." He took a pastry for himself. "You seem to be making quick work of yours, Jake."

"Well, I will take it as my good fortune you're here," I said to Throneberry. "A professor of clinical psychology should have a great deal to say to me. A great deal to see in me. To explain."

"You're trying to be kind, I think." Throneberry looked at me. "But we psych profs are not psychics. Nor are we sorcerers."

"Yes, of course," I said, as much to myself as to him. I always tend to expect too much resolution in the here and now. My good friend Zack always tells me it's a wonderful trait—to be full of hope, of faith.

"Ah!" Woodruff expelled a good chunk of pastry into his hand, and then onto the table.

"Hot?" I asked the obvious.

"Piping!" He coughed, rising swiftly, shaking his head. "Sorry, fellows." He picked up the chewed dough with a paper towel and threw it in the wastebasket under his sink.

"Some of them must be hotter than others," Throneberry muttered.

"Must be," I mused. "You're all right?"

"I will be." Woodruff stuck his head under the spigot and flushed his mouth with cold water.

"You're sure?"

"It's okay." He grabbed another paper towel and wiped his hands

and mouth, sitting back down. "Talk to us, Richard. What's on your impressive mind?"

"Words."

"Words?" Throneberry cocked his head slightly.

"Words. Comments. Conversations. Dialogues stay with me," I said, feeling, oddly, as if I were confessing. "I am haunted by words. I can't get away from them."

"What sort of dialogues?" Throneberry asked. "Actual?"

"Yes. Actual words, real people. From my past."

"How far back?" Throneberry again.

"A long time. Nineteen seventy-six."

"Really?" Woodruff was fascinated. "How old are you?"

"Fifty-two."

"Ah yes," said my old friend. "It takes some balance to walk at the half-century mark and not feel out of sorts, out of time. Not young or old. But able to both remember and forecast; to apply. These dialogues are actual exchanges, you say? People you knew?"

"Yes. It was a remarkable time for me and my friends. Really unforgettable . . ." I stopped myself. "I mean . . . I don't mean . . . I just meant to say 'unforgettable' in the sense of remarkable, not actually, literally, unforgettable. Except that it is, for me, in a ridiculous literal way. The words spoken. I can't forget them."

"You've told me before," Woodruff interrupted, "that you have this very singular ability. It's like a tape. In your head."

"Yes, but that's very short-term memory. I do recall, word for word, daily conversations; but after a few days, that recollection leaves me."

"I'm confused," Throneberry broke in. "Do you mean to say that you remember word for word what people say to you? I mean, for several days?"

"Yes."

"I've heard such claims before," he said.

"And?" asked Woodruff.

"They're not true," he said evenly, staring at me. "I don't believe you."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"Don't you want to convince me of your gift?"

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"I don't consider it a gift. And I don't feel like convincing anyone of much of anything tonight."

I was staring back at Throneberry, but I could see Woodruff out the corner of my eye, watching and waiting to see what we'd say next.

"I don't mean to offend you," Throneberry said softly.

"I'm not offended. I wouldn't believe me either."

"Would you, Richard"—Woodruff shuffled slightly in his chair—"mind sharing a few of the things, the *words*," he emphasized, "maybe even the sentences the three of us have thrown out this evening? It's up to you, my friend. Please don't feel any compulsion, one way or the other."

"Yes, please don't." Throneberry's tone was apologetic.

I surprised myself. My practice has always been to hide my strange ability. It's not something I'm proud of, or something I care for people to know. But for whatever reason, I felt both men should know and I should leave no doubt.

"Okay," I began. "At the door, Jake, you said, 'Come in, come in. Dr. Powell, the literature prof, right?' I said, 'Is this still Woodruff's place?'"

"That's right," said Throneberry.

"You said, 'He's pulling Danish croissants from the oven. I'm Dr. Throneberry.'"

"Then, what did you say?" Throneberry asked.

"No," I answered, "David spoke next. He said, 'Welcome, Richard. Meet Jacob Throneberry.'"

"Fascinating." Throneberry smiled.

"Remarkable!" Woodruff's eyes shone.

"I called back to David, 'Yes, we've just met, thank you.' And you said, 'Same with Jacob and myself. Yesterday.' Should I go on?"

"If you don't mind." Throneberry nodded. "Could you just go through our entire exchange of words from the moment we walked into the kitchen?"

"Oh, see here, Jake," said Woodruff, "he doesn't need to—"

"No, I don't mind," I said. "It feels . . . important."

I started reciting and they listened. I'm sure I didn't miss a word, including throwaway language like "I have flavored creamers" and

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colorful phrases like “we’ll laugh and challenge and encourage our professorial spirits here.”

The two of them listened and marveled throughout, as I suppose anyone might have if they’d heard me. I finished with “don’t feel any compulsion, one way or the other” and “yes, please don’t.”

After some seconds of registering awe, Throneberry spoke. “I wouldn’t have believed it.”

“He’s mentioned this to me before,” Woodruff said, almost as if I weren’t in the room, “but I didn’t take him seriously. And he didn’t press the issue. Didn’t want to convince me.”

“It’s not something I care to make people aware of,” I said simply. “But I thought you two should know tonight. Because of what I’m going to share with you.”

Woodruff’s awe turned to amusement. “You’ve already shared the most amazing thing I’ve heard in a long time. Maybe ever!”

“Yes, remarkable,” Throneberry concurred.

“You both understand, don’t you,” I said, “that it doesn’t always happen for me. Sometimes I can’t remember . . . it’s as if the tape in my head is not working. I can’t predict when it will work. Tonight it did. I felt it working as soon as you greeted me at the door, Jake.”

Thorneberry looked pleased.

“And in a few days, I will have forgotten these words, what we say tonight. Unless of course I write them down, as I am prone to do. I’ve journaled since I was in my teens.”

“You said”—Woodruff seemed to be thinking aloud—“you’ve been haunted by dialogues, by words that go back to 1976, I believe it was.”

“That’s right.”

“You were journaling then?” he asked.

“Not much.”

“But you’ve been recalling . . . words from that year,” Throneberry said. “And these words bother you.”

“Yes. Greatly. I can’t get away from them.”

“Perhaps you should stop trying,” said Woodruff.

“Why?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Yet. But go on. Tell us what you want.”

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"I want . . ." I began. "I suppose . . . I am trying, for lack of a better word, to un-recall these words. To undiscover these things."

"Don't you mean *forget*?" Throneberry said.

I shook my head. "I don't know. Maybe. But forgetting is too weak a word for what I want. I want the words to disappear not just from my mind, but from this . . ." I struggled with what I wanted. ". . . from this realm that we know, or suspect, is real."

"These were scary words, dialogues?" Woodruff said. "That you remember from 1976?"

"Some of them. But others are heroic. Beautiful. If I could pick and choose, I'd let the memories go and just revel in the wonder of that year." I felt tears coming. "If I could only undiscover the scary things that I saw and learned then. If I could undiscover the words that uncovered an evil . . . *reality*. Otherwise, I feel as if I'm in . . . a kind of permanent haunting."

"An intriguing goal." Throneberry nodded. "You want to 'undiscover' something."

"Yes," said Woodruff. "You said that word twice."

"Which word?" I asked.

"*Undiscover*," my colleague said. "Your own crafted word, I should think."

"Yes, I suppose." I sighed. "I don't know how else to describe what I think it is that I want."

"To put something back into hiding that came into your realization?" said Woodruff.

"Yes!" I said, louder. "Exactly."

"You are questing backwards."

"I . . . I don't know that I would put it that way, but yes . . . yes, I think that's it."

"And you're hoping Jake and I can tell you how that may be done. What do you think, Jake?"

I looked from Woodruff to the psychologist.

"There is no unlearning, no real undiscovering for human beings," he said.

That was not what I wanted to hear. "What about, then, just forgetting? Can I make myself do that?"

“That is a matter of opinion among psychologists,” Throneberry murmured. “But I believe it’s impossible to entirely forget. It’s as though we put some things away in the attic. We don’t see them, and since they’re out of sight, we don’t consider them. But they are still there.”

“If I don’t do something about this, I’m afraid I won’t be able to keep functioning.”

Throneberry leaned across the table, almost uncomfortably close to me. “You need to write.”

“Write?”

“Write everything down. Stop trying to forget it and just let the words come to you. Think of it as a literary catharsis.”

“It won’t be literary. I’m not a good writer.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Woodruff.

“Believe what you wish, I can’t write stories. I’ve tried. But I’m more a literary critic than anything.” I suspect I looked to these two men as if my nerves were leaving me.

“I just see words. I hear words,” I said again. “And I try to forget them.”

“Stop,” said Throneberry.

“What?”

“Trying to forget them. Stop. It can’t be done. And it’s unhealthy, to boot. Write it down.”

“But they’re just words. Dialogues.”

“Sounds like a journal to me. You’ll have some opinions on these words you remember, I’m sure. Write those down, as well.”

“I feel like I’m losing it. I don’t trust myself.”

“A healthy, and likely admirable, place to be,” Woodruff said with sincerity. “But you can still listen to yourself. Listen to yourself remember. Few people do that, Richard. And memories surprise us so much; our first instinct is often to dismiss them.”

“I *want* to dismiss them,” I insisted.

“Why?”

“They trouble me.”

“Why?”

“I . . . I want to live a simple life,” I said, reminding myself of a

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favorite protagonist. “I sound like Bilbo Baggins. I sound like someone in a fairy tale.”

“Yes,” Woodruff said. “And the best fairy tales are true!” He said it loudly, as if my assertion were an affront. “They’re truer than most history texts, especially the rot that’s published today. They’re truer than many scientific journals.”

“How . . . why do you say that?” Throneberry asked.

“Scientific journals are limited to observable, recordable data. Or should be. Lately, there’s an ungodly imposition of interpretive truth on top of empirical data.”

“What do you mean, ‘interpretive truth’?”

“Telling us what to believe about what I call core truths. Justice, mercy, the future, grace, beauty. Not the domain of science. The good scientists know this. The best are always running around telling the others to quit announcing truth and get back to recording data.” He took a breath and looked me in the eye. “It’s *story* that gets at the heart of truth, Richard. Write down what you remember.”

“It won’t be a story. Not in the classic sense. It’s just what happened. I think it will be just words. And so much dialogue.”

“Maybe it’s a story, maybe it isn’t. But the more you write down, the less burdened you’ll feel. Just journal what you recall. Just remember.”

“All right.”

“And don’t let me hear you say ‘just words’ again,” Woodruff sniffed. “Words are greatly underrated in the chase to understand and ameliorate the human condition. Words are nearly everything.”

“You say that because you’re a poet.”

“I suppose so,” he agreed. “Still, at least one of the earliest Christian texts agrees with me. ‘In the beginning was the Word, and . . .’” He waited.

Dr. Throneberry finished the quote. “‘And the Word was with God. And the Word was God.’”

Woodruff grinned. “Very big stuff, this Word. You know, questioning backwards is not for the faint of heart.”

“Of course,” said Throneberry. “You must do it.”

“I have to,” I said, and both of them looked pleased. “It’s all one year.”

“What year, again?” Woodruff said.

“Nineteen seventy-six.”

“Interesting.” Woodruff nodded. “I read somewhere that all our years have different, uneven impacts on us. I think the writer said they have different weights.”

“Seventy-six hit me like a freight train.”

“Do tell.” Throneberry smiled oddly. “Write it all down.”

Woodruff pressed me. “You said you just want peace. But I suspect, knowing you, you also want the truth. That is a perilous quest, seeking both peace and truth.”

“I do want the truth.”

“Then be thankful. The truth is visiting you. In your memories of words and of, as you say, dialogues.”

I looked to Throneberry. “Do you think I could be . . . going insane?”

He didn’t answer right away. I was heartened that he took my question seriously, but I was glad to hear Woodruff say, “I think perhaps you’re going *sane*.”

We laughed, lightly. “I’m pretty sure that’s not a compliment,” I said.

“Oh, but it is!” Woodruff chortled. “We are all prone to suppress what is real and cling to what we prefer to be real. The suppression includes our memory of real events, and truth we discovered at some point in our past. Your mind—and I suspect your heart—is telling you to stop suppressing, start recalling, and write it down. That will ensure that you are going sane.”

“Maybe you’re just wacky, David,” I said.

“Oh, good show!” He laughed. “I’m no doubt wacky. I’m also God’s word to you right now. Cull your memory. Begin tonight, Richard. Write the words down.”

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So I begin.

I told them that my problem was recollection. But I believe my real problem is . . . that I *believe*.

Maybe *problem* is not the right word.

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What I did not share with the word enthusiast Woodruff or the oddly engaging psychologist Throneberry was the paradox of my 1976 memories. Alongside that year's unnerving recollections are wonderful moments of enlightenment that came to us. My close friends saw it all with me, so much so that I came to doubt illumination ever comes to us in isolation from others.

The "Fellowship of the Rock" is the name we adopted, we band of ballplayers who an unforgettable boy had pulled together and enabled to see things beyond ourselves, and beyond the game. My friends bore the revelations with me in 1971, when we triumphed on baseball fields and the larger field of saving faith. My friends again were conduits of God's truth and grace to me in 1976, a year of revelations of both triumphs and vulnerabilities, many of which I'm certain I have yet to fathom.

I once wanted to believe the Nihilists were right about reducing everything to individual perspective. That would allow me to blame the folly of my narrow perceptions. But my friends saw it too. Peachy and Donnie's dad would chastise me for even wanting to forget. Uncle Albert too. But they're gone now.

It was always my friends, and remains so. The point of origin is Rafer, who inaugurated the Fellowship. (Though I suppose it was the Friend of Sinners who actually started our Fellowship. And all true fellowships. And all things.)

When I was fifteen, I hung on to the broad end of a pendulum, swinging from innocence to danger, from laughter to tears and back again, only to discover that those two conditions are not wholly disparate, but subsets of the ultimate farce of both dancing and warring on a fallen planet.

I don't know what I mean, entirely. I do know there is a real war, a conflict that makes joy and innocence not ways of escape, but necessary weapons in the warfare.

I suspect the worst, and the best, about my 1976. That is, it was a microcosm, a small type, of planet Earth's real history.

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## CHAPTER 1

The campfire was the centerpiece—not just of the camp but of our camaraderie. It was the epicenter. After days spent exploring woods and trails and lakes and streams, at night we explored out loud our confessions and aspirations, our hopes-against-hope that the world might accommodate our visions. The teenage heart is melancholy; we were beginning to recognize the hard realities imposed by a fallen world, a world that had not changed for our parents before us, and did not seem likely to change for us.

But a Scout campfire is a good place to hope for the unlikely.

We always made our fire bigger than necessary. It is a rare teenage boy who does not approve of excess in all things.

I liked the big fire. My imagination burned red, yellow, white, blue, and black with the coals and flames. There was something both exhilarating and unsettling about chucking sticks and logs into a wood hell.

Boy Scout Troop 44 loved campouts and making much ado about fire and wood. *Campout* is an odd compound word. Who camps *in*? Ours was a tiny troop of nine Scouts, ranging in age from eleven to seventeen. Five of us had a long history together. Zack, Donnie, Duffey, Batman, and I had played together on the Robins, a Little League team that won the 1971 Silas city championship against great odds over the heavily favored Hawks. That year, and that baseball season, was forever imprinted on our souls, not just because of the title, but more so for the impression made on our souls by a remarkable boy named Rafer. Maybe it's hard for others to believe that Little

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Leaguers can carry a season with them for the rest of their lives. But that was the case with us.

One of the guys in our troop, Red, had played for the Hawks in 1971. Though my fellow Robins and I still held that season's miracle in our hearts, we wanted to consider Red our troopmate now. But he had to go along with our intentions, and up to now I felt he considered us more like accomplices than comrades. Maybe he didn't know the difference. Or maybe he did. Maybe he preferred being just one of several Boy Scouts on a roster to being in close camaraderie. He was suspicious of communities that accepted rather than excepted. I believe we're all like that, unless a miracle liberates us from our self-absorption.

Our Scoutmaster, in name, was Donnie's dad, Pastor White. But he was a busy man, and much of the time our adult leadership rotated among three other men. My dad and Zack's dad were assistant Scoutmasters. The third man was Mr. Forrester, who was never made an official assistant Scoutmaster, but seemed to be the man most likely to come out with us on any given campout. Forrester was Rafer's dad, and the changes for good that came over him in 1971, and stayed with him even after his boy died, were a big part of the whole package of miracles that came to many of us that year.

It made sense that he would end up hanging out with us Scouts. We all liked him and he was in church whenever the doors opened. He jumped all over the opportunity when Pastor White asked him if he could help out with the troop.

"You don't mind camping out some, then?" the pastor had asked.

"That's about what most folks would say I do all the time. I just camp out in my trailer."

Pastor White and Zack had reached out to Mr. Forrester and Rafer during that miracle year five summers before, and they were the human instruments God used to usher Mr. Forrester into a new birth, a new life. He still lived alone in the same old trailer he'd shared with Rafer. Some people, even those in our church who should have known better, said he was crazy. He wasn't. And as much time as we Scouts spent with him, we would have known. He *was* different. But if different means crazy, we're all certifiable.

On this particular campout, Mr. Forrester had turned in an hour

## Rusty Whitener

or so before us boys, leaving us to chart our own course through the evening.

Tonight, Batman was telling a ghost story. The rest of us, including Zack's dog, Sawdust, were clustered around the fire. Sawdust slept. We listened to the legend of a Confederate soldier who'd lost his arm in a battle "right about in these here parts."

Batman was the shortstop on the Robins. In 1976, he couldn't catch up to a high school fastball, but he could tell a story like nobody's business. He loved dramatic tales and had found a comfortable niche in the high school drama club. Now he was regaling us with a sinister tale of lamentation for a lost limb.

"He disappeared. The guys in his platoon kinda gave him up for . . . dead." He let the word *dead* hang in the Alabama evening.

"The sergeant was a short guy with a burnt-out face." Batman understood the value of details in a campfire ghost story. "He had wiry hair that kinda grew in every kinda direction."

Batman liked the slang compound word *kinda*; he kinda used it in nearly every sentence, sometimes kinda twice. He used it mostly when he was worried or excited—or when he wanted to make others worried or excited. Like here, recounting a fearsome legend.

"He figured the poor fellow run off, and found some place to just kinda die."

Willie Rowe, an eleven-year-old new to our troop, interrupted. "One of our goats did that. Couple years back. Went off and found a place to die and that was all she wrote." Willie was not yet a Tenderfoot, which placed him squarely in our hierarchy as consummate wood gatherer.

"Thank you for sharing that with us," seventeen-year-old Red said. Sarcasm runs like a wild steed on the adolescent range. And Red never found, nor looked for, reins. Especially with Willie, whose presence in the troop Red found unsettling. Willie was black.

"But this is a man"—Batman recovered the stage—"just like you and me's, men." Which of course we weren't, but the moniker fit us out here by the fire with our fellow "man wannabes." "And this guy hadn't gone off to die. No, he'd gone off to kinda look for something. Whaddya think that was, ya'll?"

## *A Season of Mysteries*

“Food,” Donnie suggested.

Duffey agreed. “Yeah, I heard them Rebels was always having to scrounge for something to eat.”

“Absolutely!” Donnie used a word he fashioned. “Food!”

“Not food, ya’ll,” said Batman. “Think of what he’d kinda want.”

“Food,” Duffey said. Duffey was big for seventeen; he’d been big for all his years. He was a wrestling champ at Silas High and the catcher on our baseball team, just as he had been our catcher that charmed Little League season.

Stevie spit a stream of water he’d sipped from his canteen. “He’s not thinking about food, you guys. He’s thinking about living and dying and junk.” Stevie was fourteen, a year younger than me. He was black too, a fact that hadn’t seemed to concern Red until Willie arrived. Red was a scorekeeper, and he was wrongly, sadly, threatened by growing numbers.

“So am I.” Duffey nodded. “Food.”

Zack smiled at me. “Richard’s not saying anything.”

“I’m listening. That’s what I do.”

“Yeah right,” Duffey scoffed. “You talk up a storm when it comes on you to talk, buddy.”

“No, no. I try to listen a lot.” God knows why it mattered to me at age fifteen that seventeen-year-old Francis Duffey considered me deliberative. Teens are so sure that no one but their closest friends really understand them. When even they mischaracterize us, we start to think maybe we’re better off fashioning ourselves into someone else. A ridiculous quest.

“People talk too much,” I said and immediately regretted it.

“Listen to him!” Christopher chastised, chucking another log onto our hellish inferno. Christopher was Batman’s best audience because he scared easy, and Batman liked scary, dramatic tales. Funny how people who scare easy like being scared. Or they think they do, anyway.

“Oh, everybody talks too much but you, right?” Duffey joshed. “Zack’s the one that keeps his mouth shut lots.” Duffey gave me his serious look, which to me was always quite the comic look. “But you know we’re pals, Richie.”

"I know you need my notes in Tylasky's class."

A chorus of laughs and "gotchas" descended on Duffey, who didn't mind in the least, grinning with all of us. He gestured an imaginary stake into his heart and said, "Crush it to da max," his pet phrase for recognizing his notion of an excellent jibe or act.

"Okay, okay, okay, guys, listen up," Batman pleaded.

Three okays did the trick, pulling our train of kid banter back onto his track.

Batman seemed to lean into his next words, and we probably leaned a little back toward him, listening. "He's walkin' around on these grounds right here, draggin' his soul around, up and down Troublesome Trail."

He actually said "draggin' his soul around, up and down Troublesome Trail," which struck me as a powerful image, even poetic. Some people remember images or events. I've learned that some tend to remember emotions and sentiments. Zack Ross is that way. That's a mixed blessing, or a mixed curse, however you're inclined to consider it. I remember words. Spoken or read, or even those I've written. Batman said, "draggin' his soul around, up and down Troublesome Trail." I catalogued it verbatim.

He mentioned the trail again, but reversed the words, for effect. "The Trail Troublesome . . ."

Everybody but Zack and me interrupted at that point, sounding off with some remark about that storied trail, an actual worn path here at Camp Sequoyah. Red, Christopher, and Duffey agreed it was surely haunted, and Donnie challenged their theology.

"Well, maybe it ain't *haunted*," Duffey said. "But it's strange stuff happening there, for some time. Mysterious."

"And he's looking for"—Batman paused for ghost story effect—"his arm, ya'll."

We all sounded off, agreeing and insisting we knew he was looking for that, when of course we didn't. A guy losing his limb is not so horrific if the guy's not real. Stories can scare us. Reality can undo us. Or save us.

Batman's voice was a plaintive tone now, a song in search of melody. "Where's my right arm?" Then a higher pitch. "Where's my right

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arm?” He made the question sound pregnant with premonition. The man was reaching for . . . what? Not just an arm.

Batman’s eyes looked like they grew, right in front of us. “I have to . . . I got to find it.”

He had us.

Even Zack, who was senior patrol leader, an incredible, genuine guy who commanded respect without saying a word, was frozen with interest, looking at Batman.

The moment and the night held. At that age, you’re readier to believe, or at least pretend to believe. Good things and bad.

Then Batman said, “I know I kinda got to find my arm.”

It was the “kinda” that punctured the moment. Stevie said softly, “I guess you *kinda* do,” and we all roared.

The first seconds after his spell broke, Batman was ticked. “Ya’ll are just . . . can’t take it, can you?”

“Is that the end?” Zack asked.

“Yeah, is it over?” Christopher said.

“It is for you guys.” Batman snorted, miffed.

“That was a great story!” Willie said with genuine appreciation.

“Naw, it wasn’t.” Batman kicked at the ground.

“Yeah it was,” Willie insisted. “Man alive so dy-no-mite cool.”

“I wish I had somebody’s arm to gnaw on right now,” Duffey said.

“Gross!” Stevie and Donnie chided him.

“I’m hungry, ya’ll.”

“I got an apple if you want it,” said Zack.

“I ain’t *that* hungry,” Duffey said.

Donnie guffawed. “You just said something about eating somebody’s arm!”

“That’s one of them speech figurin’s,” Duffey said.

“Figure of speech,” I said.

“Yeah, one of them,” he said.

“He got the concept right.” I smiled at Zack.

“I got some Jiffy Pop,” Willie offered.

“Well, break it out, fella,” Duffey said, “and I’ll see you get promoted.”

“Will you walk with me to my tent?”

Red started to say something snide to Willie, but Duffey stopped him with a look. To Willie he said, "I never leave a campfire unattended—"

"But there's all sorts of fellows here . . ." said Willie.

". . . because a campfire unattended is a calamity waiting to happen."

"I don't want to cause no calamities," Willie said, standing up and taking a few steps before stopping. "I can't see my tent. A guy's gotta be able to see, ya'll."

"Take my flashlight," Zack offered.

"Really?" Willie looked like Zack had just given him the keys to the kingdom.

"It's just a flashlight, son," Red said. "It's not a treasure map."

"But it's Zack's!" said Willie. "He's the senior patrol leader."

"We'll salute him while we eat your Jiffy Pop," Duffey rumbled. "Hop to it."

Willie disappeared, flashlight in hand, mumbling, "Jiffy Pop hop to it . . . Jiffy Hop pop to it." In about fifteen seconds, he stepped back into the glow of the fire.

"That was quick work," Duffey said. "But where's the popcorn?"

"It's kinda dark," Willie said.

"You got a flashlight, ain'tcha?" Red said.

"Still kinda . . . my tent's a far piece over there."

"Get outta here," Red snapped. "Maybe you should transfer to the Special Troop."

Zack stepped up close to Red, getting in his face really, but speaking low. I couldn't hear it, but I'm sure it had to do with Red's Special Troop reference.

The Special Troop was a group of mentally challenged kids in the county next to ours. We saw them often at camp, and they had their own supervised schedule of activities. Sometimes at camp they would join in the events of the larger Scout population.

"I'll go with you," Batman encouraged Willie. "I told the story."

"Good idea," Duffey said. "I'll see you both get promoted."

Batman looked around. "Where's Tall King?"

Tall King was a long, hefty walking stick I had dubbed "Talkien" only to have the guys pare my fine literary allusion down to a

## *A Season of Mysteries*

gaunt adjective and hackneyed noun. (Though I suspect the author himself would have chuckled at my friends' characterizing him as tall and Aragorn-like.) We brought Tolkien on every campout, and never hiked without one of us wielding it.

"Holler if you're swinging at anything, and we'll come running," Duffey said as Zack placed Tolkien into Batman's hands. With that, the two boys disappeared into the dark.

I heard Willie ask Batman if Duffey was in charge of promoting Scouts, and Batman answer that Duffey was in charge of eating Scouts.

When Willie reappeared with the Jiffy Pop pan in hand, he was excited, talking a mile a minute. "Did ya'll know Batman's dad talks to airplanes?" He thrust his arms straight out to his sides, palms open and facing downward, like the wings of a sleek jet. The flashlight clattered to the earth and the Jiffy Pop package skittered across the ground toward the edge of the campfire, where Duffey quickly rescued it and placed it gingerly onto a hot log in the fire.

"Easy there, youngster," Duffey cautioned, but Willie was caught up in the moment and didn't seem to notice.

"When I do this," Willie said, raising his left hand straight overhead, "I'm telling the plane . . ."

"The pilot," Batman interjected.

"I'm telling the pilot, 'I see you.' When I do this"—he raised his right hand straight overhead—"I'm telling the pilot, 'I hear you.'"

"And when I do this"—Duffey put an imaginary cup to his lips—"I'm telling my little friend we're gonna need some cocoa to go with this popcorn."

"Duffey!" Donnie chastised. "It's his!"

"We're sharing, ain't we?" Duffey smiled big at Willie.

"I'll go get it," Willie said happily.

He took a few steps in the general direction of his tent, but stopped. Batman said, "I'm coming," and they trudged off together toward Willie's tent full of goodies.

Duffey used a short thick stick to maneuver the Jiffy Pop pan on the hot log.

"All right now, a lot of that's Willie's, right?" Donnie pressed Duffey.

“Oh sure, sure.” Duffey called into the night behind him. “We’re splitting it, ain’t we, Willie?”

“Sure,” his sweet voice called back. “I can’t eat all that anyway.”

“So, I’m really helping you out.”

“Sure.” Willie’s next words made him sound slightly confused. “But we don’t have to eat it all.”

“Can’t save Jiffy Pop,” Duffey gave expert culinary advice. “It goes stale as Halloween candy the day after.”

Christopher was impressed. “You don’t save Halloween candy? You eat it all that night?”

“I always did. But it’s been a while.” Duffey looked forlorn, like he was recalling battle campaigns of yore. “I got gypped out of my last two years. I was so big, people thought I was older and they wouldn’t give me much.”

“My heart bleeds for you,” Zack said drily.

“Our senior patrol leader is a hard man,” said Duffey.

Donnie said, “Just make sure Willie gets a good bit of his popcorn.”

Duffey poked the popcorn pan a couple of times. “What are you, his agent? You talk like I got no self-control.”

“We are talking about food here,” Christopher teased.

“Ya’ll don’t reckon this fire’s too hot for this stuff, do ya?” Duffey ignored Christopher. “Hard to tell how to cook this thing here on an open fire.”

“Have you asked anyone to the banquet yet?” Zack asked me. The banquet was our school baseball team’s year-end celebration. Zack and Duffey were starters, Donnie and I warmed the bench. On rare occasions, I would pitch, but my repertoire included a fastball that was not fast and a curve without much break.

“You mean a girl?”

“No, he means a hound dog,” Christopher said.

“You told me you liked that one girl,” Zack prompted.

“Can I take Sawdust?” Duffey said. “Me and him’s getting very close, ain’t we, buddy?” He rubbed the sleeping dog’s head. Sawdust lazied awake and then dozed back off when Duffey took his hand away.

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“You need to get a date too.” Zack broke a small stick in half and tossed it at Duffey. It bounced off him and into the fire. “So do you.” He threw the other half at Donnie, who batted it away with his hand. “It can’t just be me and Rebecca and all ya’ll.”

“I thought Rebecca liked us,” Donnie said.

“She does; that’s not it and you know it,” said Zack. “But think how much fun it’ll be if ya’ll bring someone. Might even lead to other dates and stuff. Imagine that.”

“Lemme just focus on getting one date,” Duffey said, “before we imagine me getting two or three or six. I ain’t had one, ya’ll.”

I tried to encourage Duffey. “I haven’t dated yet either.”

“You’re fifteen! I’m a lot older. And I got no special friend.”

After pretending to agree that his two additional years certainly changed everything, I wondered aloud, “Special friend?”

“That’s what my mom calls it,” Duffey said. “She keeps asking me why I don’t have a special friend. She means a girlfriend.”

“My mom says that too.” Zack smiled. “She adds ‘little.’ She introduces Rebecca to people as my ‘special little friend.’ I thought it sounded funny, but Rebecca likes it. You said you liked that one girl,” he said to me.

“Julie Prevette.” I liked saying it aloud.

“Oh man!” Red sneered. “She’s way out of your league.”

Duffey, Zack, and Donnie vehemently disagreed, but I thought Red had a point.

“She is pretty and talented and nice and a year older than me,” I sighed. “I don’t think I have a snowball’s chance in that fire to get her to go out with me.”

“I guess you don’t,” Zack agreed, “if you think like that.”

I was suddenly worried. “Ya’ll promise me you won’t tell anybody I like her.”

“I promise,” Zack said, and Red mumbled “what it is” which is as close to a promise as I’d likely get from him.

“She’s that actress girl, right?” Donnie said. “Man, she’s good at it, too. I bet Batman could talk to her for you. He does that drama stuff with her and all those theater people.”

“Promise?” I stared at Donnie.

“I won’t tell anybody,” he promised.

“Uh,” Zack jumped in. “I wouldn’t let Batman approach her. He’s a good guy, but it always works better if you talk to her directly. Girls like that, when you talk to them. I know it’s weird, but they like it when people talk to them.”

He said it so straight, I couldn’t tell if he was being funny or if he was acknowledging a very real difference between guys and girls. Some of us guys really do like it when people *don’t* talk to us. Or at least we think we like that.

“Duffey,” I said. “Promise?”

“Promise what?”

“You won’t tell anybody I like her.”

“You like who?” He was serious.

Sharing who likes whom was so far off his radar I needn’t have asked. “So, who are you going to ask to the banquet?”

“Somebody’ll show up,” he said. “Just in time.” Things did seem to happen for him that way. He poked the Jiffy Pop pan slightly, pushing it into a different spot on the fire. “Can’t rightly shake this thing like I’m supposed to even if—”

*Boom!*

The Jiffy Pop popped in one grand explosion, sending most of us to the ground, reflexively seeking shelter from the blast. Duffey and Zack fell backward off their log seats. A very small hail of unpopped kernels descended on us like tiny nuts falling from trees.

“Ya’ll reckon I should have shaken it up?” Duffey drawled.

We erupted in comments, glad to be alive.

“That was *so* loud!”

“It’s the magic treat . . .”

“Got another one we can put on there?”

“You and Zack both went over at the same time!”

“Where’re they at, boys?”

We had nearly stopped laughing—our safety valve from the shock of the sudden Jiffy Explosion—when the sight of Mr. Forrester with a sizable camping hatchet in one hand and his other hand holding up the trousers he’d thrown on as he stumbled out of his tent kicked off a new round of guffaws.

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“Duffey’s popcorn exploded,” Christopher said, making things clear as mud for the man.

“I’m right sorry to hear ’bout that.” Mr. Forrester sounded entirely sympathetic. “Yeow!” He hopped then, in his bare feet. “Stepped on a coal or something that popped outta the fire, I did.”

That touched off a round of wordplays from the guys on the multiple uses of the word *pop*.

Satisfied that we were all no closer to bodily injury than we’d been when he’d called it a day an hour before, Mr. Forrester hobbled back to his tent.

“Don’t stay up all night,” he called back. “Less’n a course ya want to.”

Enforcing rules was not Mr. Forrester’s primary gift. Nor secondary. Willie and Batman reappeared from the direction of all our tents.

“Where’s the hot chocolate?” Duffey said.

“Did ya’ll see that?” Batman asked, his face ashen.

“See it?” Stevie said. “We were in it!”

“No.”

Something about the way Batman said “no” made us all shut up and listen. “I mean . . . over where we were at. By Willie’s tent.” He stopped talking. And he looked legitimately scared.

“That old man that’s kinda looking for his arm?” Duffey cracked.

The guys laughed, but the look on Batman’s face sobered us in a hurry.

“What is it?” Zack asked.

“Two of ’em,” he said. “Little flying things. In the air.”

“Where?” said Zack. “When?”

“Just now,” Batman said. “I mean, just then. They’re gone now. It was just that second. When whatever exploded over here . . . what was that?”

“Duffey’s Jiffy Pop went airborne!” Christopher squealed.

“Sorry about that,” Duffey said to Willie.

“Flying things?” said Zack.

“I guess so.” Batman looked lost for a description. “Ya’ll didn’t see them?”

“Does this mean I don’t get no hot chocolate?” Duffey said.

“You talkin’ about stuff in the air?” Red asked. “You saw something flying in the air?”

“Not really flying,” Batman answered carefully. “Just sittin’ there. Hoverin’ there.”

“Don’t you ever give up?” Christopher said. “He’s pulling our leg again, ya’ll. And he’s pretty good at it.”

“This is no joke,” Batman said, stone-faced. “I know you guys saw it.”

“What about you?” Stevie said to Willie. “You must’ve seen what he saw.”

“I was in my tent looking for the hot—” Willie put his hands in his pockets. “I’m sorry, Duffey. I forgot it when he called me out of there.”

“No problem.” Duffey wasn’t worried. About anything. “Go on back and get it.”

Willie turned, but Batman stopped him. “Don’t go back over there!”

“Come on, Batman.” Red scowled. “Drop it. It’s a nice act, but it’s not flying. Let it go.”

It was obvious that most everyone thought Batman was fashioning another campfire story and adopting an actor’s scared demeanor to pull off the tale.

Batman said, uneasily, “Okay . . . okay, yeah. This isn’t flying. It’s not flying.” He just sat down on the log next to Zack, looking at the fire. Willie walked back toward his tent, apparently not afraid to go alone now.

Donnie and Christopher put more wood on the fire, and Zack said to Batman, “They were in the air? You said hovering.”

“Red is right,” Batman mumbled. “We can drop it. It was nothing.”

Only he didn’t look like he believed it was nothing. He looked like he *wanted* to believe it was nothing.