

1

I was the first to witness the miracle, although, I wasn't entirely certain it was a miracle at the time. I was positive, however, I had witnessed something of remarkable beauty, something inexplicable and profound such as water running uphill, the sun rising in the west, or a tax-free America. All I see now, looking back, is my life being irreversibly changed; I've been placed upon a course not of my own choosing, advancing toward a fate mysterious beyond my grasp. But knowing Him has set my spirit free in a cosmos of power and love while my body remains captive in this world of violence and brutality.

My name is Tom Dowten. I'm six feet three inches tall, weigh two-hundred thirty pounds, have dazzling, red hair, and drive a D-9 Caterpillar at the San Diego County landfill in San Marcos. This is the place where all your treasures end up. You know, all the items that pass through your hands into your wastebaskets such as your empty boxes of Cheerios, your used Kotex, and your partially consumed Twinkies. They all end up here with me.

That's me up there riding herd on the filth of America with the sizzling noon hour sun winking and baking on my steel hard hat. That's me down there filling the enchanted canyons of Southern California with the Earth's discarded resources, so we may one day raise jaundiced crabgrass and a handful of scraggy trees where the small coastal deer and the mettlesome raccoon once lived and grew free.

Every day of my life, I've been filled with misgivings. But today my uncertainty torments me as I gather my thoughts to write this all down. For you see, I can report the events, I can divulge how I felt at the time, but the how or the why of it eludes me.

So, I guess the best place to begin is the afternoon prior to my first encounter with Manny Rodriguez, because I now realize, by then, my life had already done a celestial whoop-de-do, bypassing my early warning system.

I had barely crossed the threshold of our home, after work, when I heard my elder daughter shriek, "Tabi, stop it!" A baseball glove flew across my line of sight, thudding against the entryway wall, rattling the family pictures.

"Hey! What's going on?" I said. "Where's your mom?"

Betsy huddled behind the clothes hamper hiding her head with her

arms; her kid sister stood poised preparing to fire a softball at her.

"Tabitha! Stop it now!" I said.

My four-year-old daughter, her green eyes flaming, let up only moderately, her arm still cocked. Boasting my red hair, she is quick to laugh, quick to cry, and quick to be really pissed off. "Tabi, put the ball down. Put it down, sweetheart."

Tabitha pondered me, then pondered her sister, her lower lip vibrating.

"Put it down."

She dropped the ball and began to cry. I turned her about gently by the arm and said, "Come on, Tabi; go find your mom. I'm going to talk to Betsy."

My freckle-faced daughter threw off my hand and shuffled down the hall, dragging her feet on the tired, tan carpet before breaking into a run. Betsy uncovered her face, blinking her big, gray eyes.

"Now, why don't you tell me what's going on," I said.

Eight-year-old Betsy stood up, her long, black hair a tangle. A jumble of words spilled out of her mouth, underscored with verbalisms sounding like, "But she's always," and "Every time I ask her," and "But she's such a brat."

I got down on one knee, put my arm around her shoulders, and said, "Everything's all right, Betsy; everybody hates their brothers and sisters once in a while." Her face turned cold and stony while forcing her remark through clenched teeth: "Dad, you don't have a clue." Turning on her heel, she long-stepped in the direction of her room, her arms swinging stiffly.

I shrugged my shoulders, giving it no further thought. What I was thinking about was my wife Sandy. With her short, black hair, small athletic build, and smoke-gray eyes came intelligence, shrewd and engaging, with a tart wit, and a playful disposition that was the ideal counterpoint to my sober intensity.

But we hadn't been getting along very well as of late.

I stepped into the kitchen as Sandy poured frozen vegetables into a rose-pink microwave dish.

"Hi, honey, you just get home?" she said.

"Yeah, just a couple minutes ago. I came in the front door and was nearly decapitated by my baseball glove."

Sandy scrunched up her eyebrows and said, "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, Betsy and Tabitha were fighting, and by the time I came in, it had deteriorated into missile flinging. Little Tabi's getting quite an arm on her, you know. By the way, where were you when all of this was going on?"

Sandy shot me a look that by rights should have killed me. I watched

her body tighten and her eyes glaze over. Then the tidings erupted. "What in the world are you trying to say, Tom? You know, I haven't been home very long myself. You have a lot of nerve marching in here wondering what I've been doing while the kids were fighting. School was a disaster today, and when I picked Tabi up at the sitter's, I was informed she'd socked one of the other kids in the eye, and if she does it again, we'll have to find a new sitter. I've a million papers to grade tonight, and now my husband saunters in here while I'm fixing dinner, wondering where I was while the kids were fighting!"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry," I said, retreating, keeping my hands up in self-defense.

"All right, Tom, you're forgiven; I probably overreacted. I'm sorry, too; I should have waited to make sure you really *had* gone insane before lashing out."

I felt a grin rushing through me, settling eventually on my lips. Sandy gestured to me, and I closed the breach in an instant. We wound our arms about each other, but when I attempted to kiss her, she drew away and said, "Why don't you go and get cleaned up? Dinner won't be too long."

I tried to look in her eyes, but she looked away. So, I accepted her recommendation. But before vanishing down the hallway, I said, "By the way, what's for dinner?"

She seemed not to hear me as she sat down at the dining room table. Then she looked up and said, "Oh, I thought I told you. We're having fish sticks."

The shower was rejuvenating, so I lingered a little longer than normal and did some more thinking.

I realized what I had said to Sandy was a disservice, but her response was like being ambushed by a terrorist masquerading as my spouse. How could I possibly live with her as I had for ten years and not see she was coiled that tight? It was out of my range; I felt like Rip Van Winkle waking after five score years to find the world belligerent, freakish, and peopled by strangers.

I dried off, tugged my clothing on, and wandered into the kitchen in time to get Tabi positioned at the table.

"Daddy, I don't like fitch sticks." She had trouble pronouncing that one.

"I know, I know, sweetie. Mommy's awfully busy tonight; she has papers to correct, and she's had a very tough day."

"But she's had lots of days like that lately," Tabi said, "and now she wants to give us those yucky things."

"Oh, they're not that bad."

"That's 'cause you don't care *what* you eat, Daddy," my older daughter Betsy said as she crawled into the chair next to her sister. Betsy's straight, dark hair and calm bearing disguised a simmering intelligence. Her gray eyes, so like her mother's, reposed over a small nose sprinkled with a light mask of freckles.

I laughed, set my hand on Tabi's shoulder, and said, "It's all right, Tabi; I understand. Why don't you just eat the potatoes and the veggies?"

Tabi nodded her head, and I helped Sandy set the food on the table.

The air in the room was like a soggy woolen blanket. I sought to catch Sandy's eyes, but she kept them down or directed them away. At last I said, "Sandy, are you all right?"

"Yeah, sure, Tom, everything's fine."

But it was apparent, from the abrupt disobedience of her eyes, she wasn't telling the truth.