

Outrage

by Graham Masterton

Wednesday, September 12, 8:34 a.m.

As usual, the school gateway was jammed with mothers awkwardly trying to manoeuvre their oversized SUVs in and out, so Lynn steered her Explorer over to the opposite side of the street and parked it with two wheels mounted on the grass.

'Remember it's your dance class today,' she told Kathy, turning around in her seat. 'That means no dawdling after school, okay?'

'I don't *feel* good,' Kathy protested, flopping in her seat.

'Nonsense. I've never seen you look healthier. Just because you have a math test.'

'I think I'm going to barf. I *know* I'm going to barf. I can feel all of those mashed-up pancakes in my tummy, and they don't *like* it down there.'

Lynn snapped her seat-belt buckle back into place. 'Okay, then & if you feel so bad, I'll just have to take you back home to bed and cancel your dance class.'

'Not my dance class! That's not till three-thirty! I'll be better by then!'

'No, I'll have to cancel it. You can't *jetée* with a tummy full of mutinous pancakes.'

'But I want to be an actress like you. Why do I have to learn math? You don't have to know math to be an actress, do you?'

'You don't think so? Supposing you're an actress and you make squillions and squillions of dollars like Julia Roberts and your agent takes three-and-a-quarter percent more than he's supposed to? How are you going to know?'

'Because *all* agents take more than they're supposed to. Agents are chiselers and shysters and they all work for Satan.'

'Oh for goodness' sake! Who told you that?'

'You did.'

'Come on,' said Lynn, unbuckling her seat-belt again. 'Let's get you into school before Ms Redmond gives you another demerit for being late.'

Kathy climbed out and tugged on her beret. She was a small girl for ten years old, with blonde braids and a pale, elfin face like her mother's. Her eyes were that same luminous green as her mother's, too, like pieces of bottle-glass found on the seashore. Her legs were so skinny that she kept having to pull up her long white socks.

'What do you want to do after your dance class? We could go to De Lunghi's for spaghetti if you like.'

'So long as Gene doesn't have to come with us!'

'I thought you *liked* Gene.'

'I don't like his nose. He looks like an anteater.'

'He does not. You're just being obnoxious.'

'He does too. Every time he has soup the end of his nose dips right into it.'

They crossed Franklin Avenue to the school gates. The Cedars private elementary school didn't look like a school: although it had no religious affiliations it shared the First Methodist Church building, with its tall square tower and its gray stone walls, and several of the classrooms, even though they were large and airy, had stained-glass windows, with scenes of Christ surrounded by little children.

'You won't forget to bring home your hockey kit, will you?' asked Lynn. But at that moment Kathy caught sight of her friend Terra, and waved, and jumped, and immediately skipped off. Terra's mother Sidne came up to Lynn and the two of them watched their daughters run through the school gates and into the yard, where thirty or forty other children were jumping and screaming and tearing around in circles.

'Some tummy-ache,' said Lynn.

'Oh, the math test,' smiled Sidne. 'Terra said she had leprosy.'

'Leprosy?'

'That's right. On the spur of the moment, it was the only illness she could think of. At least it shows she's reading her Bible.'

'They really kill you sometimes, don't they? I love Terra's braids.'

'Janie did them. I don't know how she has the patience.'

They walked back to Sidne's car together. 'Did you hear from George Lowenstein?' Lynn asked her.

'No, nothing. If you want to know the truth, I think he's looking for somebody younger.'

'But you'd be *perfect* as Corinne, you know you would!'

'I don't know, maybe. I used to wonder when I would have to stop playing wayward daughters and start to play harassed mothers, and maybe it's now. I think I'll go to Miska's and have a massage and a pedicure. And then I'll go to Freddie's and order a treble strawberry sundae with extra cream.'

'I'd join you, believe me, if we didn't have a read-through.'

Lynn said goodbye to Sidne and crossed the street. A short, crop-haired man with a neck like a stovepipe and a maroon polyester shirt was waiting beside her Explorer. His face was the same maroon as his shirt, and beaded with sweat.

'What the fuck do you call this?' he demanded.

'What the fuck do I call what?' Lynn didn't want to show that she was the slightest bit afraid of him.

'What, you're blind? Where's your goddamned guide-dog? You parked on the goddamned grass for Christ's sake.'

'Well, I'm sorry, but there was no parking-space anyplace else.'

'Oh - and you think that's some kind of excuse? If there was no parking-space anyplace else you should of gone around the block again until there *was*. You're all the same, you women. You think you can *do* whatever you damn-well like and *say* whatever you damn-well like and *park* wherever you damn-well like and you don't give squat for nobody else.'

Lynn opened the Explorer's door and climbed into the driver's seat, but the man clung onto the door to prevent her from closing it. 'Listen, lady, I don't even have to take care of this piece of grass, but I do, because it's outside of my house and I'm proud of my house, and then somebody like you comes along and drives their goddamned vehicle all over it. How would you like it if I came around to your house and drove my goddamned vehicle all over *your* goddamned grass?'

'I think you'd better take your hands off my door,' said Lynn.

'And what if I don't?'

'I'll call for the school security guard, that's what.' All the same, her heart was thumping wildly. The man had a large maroon wart on the left side of his nose and she couldn't stop looking at it and she was convinced that he *knew* she was looking at it.

He turned his head around for a moment as if he were looking for somebody, and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. Then he turned back to Lynn and said, 'Okay. I'll tell you what *I'm* going to do. I'm going to curse you for this. I'm going to wish on you the shittiest day that you ever experienced in your entire life.'

He took his hands off the door and Lynn immediately slammed it and locked it. He stood beside the Explorer, not saying anything more, but he lifted his finger and pointed it at her as if to say, *you mark my words, lady, you're going to remember this day for ever.*

Wednesday, September 12, 8:43 a.m.

Ann Redmond looked out of the window of her study and frowned. A group of children had gathered around the bench on the far side of the schoolyard, ten or twelve of them at least, and she was experienced enough in grade-school crowd patterns to see at once that they were *huddling*.

Huddling was what children did when there was something exciting to look at and they didn't want the teachers to see what it was. As far as Ms Redmond was concerned, they might just as well have raised a placard announcing WE ARE BEING NAUGHTY. She took off her half-glasses, marched out of her study, and went out onto the front steps where Lilian Bushmeyer, the physical education teacher, was sitting on the wall and supervising the schoolyard by reading a dog-eared copy of *The Bridges of Madison County*.

'Over there, Ms Bushmeyer,' she said, curtly nodding her head. Lilian Bushmeyer shaded her eyes and peered across the asphalt. After a while she shook her head and said, 'I don't see anything.'

'Conspiratorial body-language,' said Ms Redmond, impatiently. 'Go and see what they're up to.'

Lilian Bushmeyer reluctantly put down her book and plodded across in her Birkenstocks to see what all the fuss was about. As she came closer, she could hear the children giggling and squealing, and then suddenly there was a flustered '*shh! Shh! It's Bush Baby! Put it away!*' Some of the children broke away from the huddle, leaving a small knot of girls right in the middle. Lilian Bushmeyer walked right up to them and held out her hand.

'What?' asked Jade Peller. She was just turned eleven, and she was taller and more mature than most of the girls in the sixth grade. She had long black hair, a thin pale face, and she always dressed in black, with silver bangles around her wrists. Her father was Oliver Peller, who had written music for Wes Craven and John Carpenter.

'Whatever it is, give it to me,' said Lilian Bushmeyer.

'It's nothing.'

'Well it's obviously a very interesting nothing. Hand it over.'

'It's only a stupid *game*, Ms Bushmeyer,' complained Helen Fairfax. She was plump and pink-cheeked but she had a mass of curly blonde hair and it was obvious that once she had lost her puppy-fat she was going to grow up as stunning as her mother Juliana. Her father Greg was one of Hollywood's most talked-about independent producers and had recently bankrolled the stalker-movie *Breather*.

Lilian Bushmeyer waited patiently, with her hand still held out. Maybe she hadn't yet developed Ms Redmond's radar for subversive crowd formations, but she knew how to deal with the spoiled children of minor celebrities. You had to act resolutely unimpressed, which Lilian Bushmeyer genuinely was.

At last, Jade produced a crown-shaped piece of paper from behind her back, and handed it over. It was nothing more than one of those fortune-telling devices, with the paper folded into triangles, and a fortune written on each of them. Except that the fortunes on this device were much stronger than the usual 'you will be lucky in love' or 'you will be rich and famous' or 'you will go to jail.'

One of them read 'you will suck Mr Lomaxs cock'. Another said, 'you will lose both your legs in an auto accident.' A third predicted, 'you will get pregnant at 13.'

'Like Helen said, it's only a game,' Jade protested, as Lilian Bushmeyer opened each triangle in turn. The last prediction was 'you will die before your next birthday.'

When she had finished, Lilian Bushmeyer looked at the children one after the other. It was obvious that three or four of them were really embarrassed and ashamed, and it seemed that the boys went pinker than the girls.

'Do you want me to show this to Ms Redmond?' she asked.

'Sure,' said Jade. 'Might give her a thrill.'

'No!' gasped David Ritter. 'She'll *kill* us. I know my mom will kill me. My stepmom will kill me, too.'

Lilian Bushmeyer said, 'I know that you probably didn't mean any real harm. But you know what this is, it's tasteless, and there's little enough taste left in this world without you young people making things worse. Supposing one of you *did* lose your legs, or *did* get pregnant, or *did* get sexually abused? How would you feel then?'

'I'd feel like my fortune-telling really works,' grinned Jade.

'So which one did *you* pick?' Lilian Bushmeyer asked her.

'Die before my next birthday!'

'And do you want that to happen, just to prove you right?'

'I don't care. Like, what's death? It's only like not being born.'

Wednesday, September 12, 9:03 a.m.

Ms Redmond stood up in assembly and the sun shone on her glasses so that she looked as if she were blind.

'As usual, October brings our first great event of the year & the all-school camp-out. This year we will all be going to Silverwood Lake in the beautiful San Bernardino Mountains. Over the weekend, students and parents will get to know one another by camp-fire singing and storytelling, pot-luck dinners, hiking, swimming and picnics. This is a wonderful way for new families to join the Cedars community.'

'At the end of October, will be holding our first fund-raising event, which this year is going to be a Latin Fiesta.'

'*Arriba! Arriba!*' called out Tony Perlman, the geography teacher, and then looked deeply embarrassed.

Wednesday, September 12, 9: 06 a.m.

A tractor-trailer had jack-knifed right across the off-ramp from the Hollywood Freeway, causing a southbound tail-back of glittering cars as far as Ventura Boulevard. Frank shifted the Buick into neutral and pressed down the parking-brake.

'I'm going to be *late*,' Danny protested.

'Sorry, champ, there's nothing I can do. I'm going to be late, too, and I have a script meeting.'

'I'm *paint* monitor, I'm supposed to put out the paints.'

'Don't worry, I'll tell your teacher what happened.'

Danny frowned furiously out of the window, as if the traffic could be willed to get moving just by glaring at it. But they had to sit and wait for over twenty minutes while Highway patrolmen stood around in their mirror sunglasses and chatted to each other and yawned, and drivers climbed out of their automobiles to use their cellphones and stretch their legs, and one woman even took a folding chair out of the back of her station wagon and sat reading the paper as if she were sitting in her own back yard.

'I bet Susan Capelli is putting out the paints,' said Danny, as if he were suffering the greatest personal tragedy since Hamlet.

'You can do it next time, can't you?'

'You have to be *reliable*, when you're a monitor.'

Frank shook his head and said nothing. Danny always amused him because he was so serious about everything. He may have been a tufty-haired eight-year-old kid with freckles and a snubby nose and scabs on his knees, but he had the mind of a 48-year-old man. He said he wanted to be a real-estate developer when he grew up, building low-cost housing in some of Hollywood's most expensive enclaves, so that poor people and rich people could learn to get along. Like, for an eight-year-old, how serious was *that*?

'Is it Ms Pulaski I have to talk to?' Frank asked him.

'You don't have to. I can tell her myself.'

Another five minutes passed, but then a huge green-and-silver tow-truck came grinding up the hard shoulder, and after a further ten minutes of gesticulating between the police and the tow-truck guys, the tractor-trailer was finally chained up and dragged clear of the off-ramp.

'*Stupid* truck,' said Danny, venomously, as they drove past it and down the off-ramp.

'It was an accident, Danny, that's all. Accidents happen.'

'Not if people were more reliable.'

Traffic was slow all the way along Hollywood Boulevard, and Danny gave a theatrical groan at every red signal, but eventually they reached La Brea and turned right toward Franklin Avenue.

Frank said, 'Remind me what time you finish school today. You don't have drama rehearsals, do you?'

'That's tomorrow.' Danny had been picked to play Abraham Lincoln in the school play *Heroes And Heroines Of America*. He had been bitterly disappointed that he hadn't been given the part of John Wilkes Booth, since John Wilkes Booth got to fire a gun and jump off the stage.

Frank parked the car outside the school and Danny scrambled out. 'See you later, champ. Have a good day.'

Danny ran toward the school gates, swinging his X-Men satchel like a propeller. Frank turned around to check the back seat and saw that - in his hurry - Danny had left his sandwiches behind. Danny suffered from a nut allergy, so he always had to take a home-prepared lunch.

Frank climbed out of the car and shouted, 'Danny! Hey, Danny! You forgot your - ' and held up his Tupperware box.

Danny skidded to a stop, hesitated, and then began to run back. As he did so, Frank saw a white van turn into the school gates, and stop by Mr Lomax's little glass booth.

Wednesday, September 12, 9:32 a.m.

Kathy had changed into her field-hockey kit and now she joined the shuffling, giggling line at the changing-room door. Eventually Ms Bushmeyer appeared, wearing her cerise-and-white tracksuit, with her whistle around her neck on a lanyard.

'All right, girls, an orderly line, please! No pushing and shoving!'

'Amanda pulled my braids!'

'I did not! I was nowhere near you!'

They left the church building by the side entrance, still arguing. Kathy and Terra walked on either side of Lilian Bushmeyer. They liked talking to Ms Bushmeyer because she was always telling them that she dreamed about a handsome man with thick black hair and shining white teeth. He would come striding in through the school gates one morning, walk straight into assembly, and lift her clean off her feet, in front of everybody. Then he would fly her off to a Caribbean island, where they would lie on the dazzling-white sands all day and drink cocktails out of half-coconuts.

'Did you ever have a boyfriend, Ms Bushmeyer?'

'Of course I did. His name was Clark.'

'You mean like Superman?'

Lilian Bushmeyer pushed her frizzy hair into her sweatband. 'Not exactly, Kathy. He sold carpets.'

They were nearly halfway across the parking-lot on their way to the playing-fields when they saw the white van, too.

Wednesday, September 12, 9:34 a.m.

It was an ordinary white panel van. It had to stop because the school gates were always locked after 9:00 am, for the sake of security. There were too many students at The Cedars whose parents may not have been Hollywood A-list but who were certainly wealthy and well-known and who could have been potential targets for kidnap.

The van driver tooted his horn and Mr Lomax came out of his booth. Mr Lomax was very tall and loopy like a basketball player and he wore a beige uniform and a peaked cap. Lilian Bushmeyer couldn't stop herself from thinking about the 'Mr Lomax' prediction in Jade Peller's fortune-teller, and - to her own embarrassment - found herself blushing. She turned to the chattering crocodile behind her and called out, 'Come along, girls, we don't have all day!'

Mr Lomax opened the gates and the van drove into the parking-lot toward them. Lilian Bushmeyer noticed how slowly it was being driven, as if she were watching it in a dream.

'Keep well out of the way, girls!'

The van was almost alongside them now. Lilian Bushmeyer looked at the driver and for some reason he was smiling at her, really smiling, as if today was the happiest day in his whole life. He was unshaved and he was wearing a black woolly hat. There was a woman sitting next to him, wearing dark glasses, but she wasn't smiling at all.

Wednesday, September 12, 9:35 a.m.

Lilian Bushmeyer felt a strange compression in her ears, but she didn't hear anything. The van exploded only ten feet away, blowing off her legs and arms and sending her torso flying through the high stained-glass window of the Zeigler Memorial Library, where nine students were just beginning a class in creative writing. Six of them were killed instantly and the other three had the flesh stripped from their faces by flying glass, including Jade Peller and Helen Fairfax, who had been sitting with their heads close together, giggling.

Kathy was so close to the blast that she was liquefied from the knees up, and sprayed against the wall. Terra was ripped into thirty feet of stringy rags, and all of the rest of the field-hockey team were so violently torn apart that it looked as if they had been attacked by wild animals - blood, hands, heads, school-bags, hockey-sticks, parts of elbows, shoes, intestines, feet.

The van itself was blown into a wild sculptural question-mark of twisted paneling. An orange fireball rolled out of it, and up into the blue morning sky, and the bang echoed and re-echoed from the canyons like a frightening shout.

Wednesday, September 12, 9:35 a.m.

Even though the van had blown up nearly two hundred feet away, the force of the blast was so powerful that Frank had been hurled against the passenger door of a parked Toyota, denting it into the shape of his body. Danny was thrown face-first onto the sidewalk. The Cedars had completely disappeared behind a huge cloud of black smoke and dust, and leaves had been stripped from the yucca trees all the way along the street, and sent whirling up into the air.

Now, through the fog, fragments of metal began to rain down all around them, clanging and tinkling like a chorus of badly-tuned bells. Nuts, bolts, a windshield wiper, a length of exhaust pipe. Frank was hit on the shoulder by a tire-iron, and then by a stinging shower of ball-bearings. He tossed aside Danny's sandwich-box, grabbed hold of his arm and hoisted him onto his feet. Danny's nose and knees were scratched but apart from that he seemed to be unhurt.

'Are you okay?' Frank shouted, still deafened.

'My back hurts.'

'What?'

'My back hurts.'

Frank turned him around and around but he couldn't see any sign of injury. No blood, no rips in his jacket. 'Come on,' he said, 'let's get out of here.' He took hold of Danny's hand and pulled him along the street as fast as he could run, until they reached their car. He wrenched open the door, bundled Danny into the back seat, and then seized his cellphone.

'Emergency? You're going to have to send everything you've got - fire, police, ambulance, everything. A bomb's gone off at The Cedars school on Franklin Avenue. That's right. No, no. It's a bomb for sure. People have been killed, I've seen them. Children. I don't know how many.'

'Can you give me your name, sir?'

'Frank. Frank Bell. I was just taking my son to school and bang. There were children killed. They're lying all over the parking-lot. It's just terrible.'

'Okay, sir, please try to stay calm. Are you at a safe distance from the school now?'

'Yes, yes I am, I think. Me and my son.'

'Stay well away until the emergency services arrive. There could be a secondary device. Warn others to stay away, too.'

'A secondary device? You mean *another* bomb?'

'Just stay well away, sir, but make yourself known to the police when they reach you.'

'Got you, yes.'

Danny was white. 'Was that a bomb? Was that really a bomb?'

Frank nodded. He was shaking so much that he could hardly speak. 'How do you feel now? Does your back still hurt?'

Danny grimaced and nodded. 'My knees are bleeding.'

Frank reached into the glove-box and found him a Kleenex. He looked back toward The Cedars and saw a thick cloud of gray dust rolling out of the school parking-lot and across the street. People were staggering out of it with their hands held out in front of them, like zombies.

'Listen,' he said, 'I have to go back to help. You stay here and call mommy. Tell her what's happened, tell her we're both okay.'

Danny said, 'You have blood on your face.'

'What?' He touched his forehead and it felt wet. He pulled down his sun-visor to look at himself in the mirror. There was a small cut just below his hairline and the blood was sliding down toward his nose. He tugged out another Kleenex and dabbed at it, staring at himself while he did so. Apart from that single minor injury, he looked completely normal. Thin-faced, pale, bespectacled. How could he look so normal, when he had just witnessed a bomb going off, and all those children killed?

'Call mommy, okay?' he said, handing Danny his cellphone. 'She's going to see this on TV, and I want her to know that we're safe.'

Wednesday, September 12, 9:41 a.m.

Frank jogged back toward the school. The dust was settling now and gradually the outline of the church building was reappearing. It looked from the street as if the entire front of the library had been demolished, as well as half of the front portico, and every single window was broken. Teachers and children were emerging from the side entrance, most of them bloodied and smothered in dust, all of them walking in a strange hypnotized shuffle, like hermits let out of a cave. Some of them were screaming a high, monotonous scream.

Several people were already sitting on the sidewalk, their faces scorched, their clothing ripped, their eyes staring in shock. A middle-aged woman came limping toward him, holding up her left arm. She wore a brown floral dress and her ginger hair was sticking up in the air as if she had been electrocuted. She had no left hand, only a stump with a white bone sticking out. 'I'm all right,' she reassured him, as she approached. 'Don't worry about me. See to the children.'

'Here, sit down,' he told her, and eased her onto the grass with her back against the wheel of a parked car. He yanked off his red-and-yellow necktie and twisted it around her forearm, knotting it tight. 'Just stay here, ma'am, you're going to be okay. The paramedics will be here in a couple of minutes.'

'It doesn't hurt, you know,' she said, looking at her wrist and turning it this way and that, as if it were quite a novelty. 'It doesn't hurt in the slightest.'

The wrought-iron school gates were still standing but they had been strangely twisted, as if he was looking at them through rippling water. Beside the gates, Mr Lomax's security booth was leaning at an angle, and all the glass had been blown out of the windows. Mr Lomax himself was sitting on his revolving chair, his beige uniform in black tatters, like crow's feathers. There was a large black lump in front of his left eye, and as Frank came cautiously closer, he realized that it was the head of a claw-hammer. The shaft of the hammer had penetrated Mr Lomax's eye-socket and it was only the hammer-head that had prevented it from going clean through his skull and out the other side.

Frank stood by the security booth, breathless, swimmy-headed, feeling completely helpless. Teachers and children were still milling around outside the side entrance, and he desperately wanted to do something to help them, but he couldn't think what. As for the children lying in the parking-lot, blasted to bloody pieces, they were beyond anything but burial, and prayers.

'Oh shit,' he said. 'Oh shit.' He turned away and his eyes were suddenly crowded with tears.

A girl appeared, close beside him. Her cropped brunette hair was ashen with dust, and her jeans and her buttermilk-colored blouse was finely spattered with blood. She was wearing only one sandal.

'Are you okay?' she asked him. She reached out and gently touched his shoulder as if she were trying to make sure that he was real.

'What?' he said, frowning at her. He was still half-deaf.

She leaned closer, holding his shoulder more firmly. 'Are you okay?' she asked him. 'You're not hurt, are you?' She had a husky voice, like a heavy smoker.

'I have this ringing in my ears. But otherwise - no, I'm fine.'

'It was a bomb,' she said.

'I know. But I don't know what to do. I called 911 but they said I had to keep away.' He cleared his throat and wiped his eyes with his fingers, leaving wet gray smears down his cheeks. 'Something about a - secondary something. Device, bomb.'

'You didn't have a child here, did you?' she asked him.

'My son, he goes here. But we were held up in traffic. Otherwise - Jesus. But all those other kids. Oh God. All those other kids.'

'I've lost somebody,' the girl told him. She said it in such a flat tone of voice that he blinked and focused on her more closely. Her irises were rinsed-out blue, almost colorless, and he had the strangest feeling that he had seen her before. More than that - that he actually *knew* her.

'I'm so sorry. Not your child, I hope?'

'No & not a child. Somebody closer than that.'

He looked around. He could hear sirens whooping and scribbling toward them in the warm morning air. 'Listen, why don't you sit down?' he suggested.

'I'm okay. I just wanted to make sure that *you* were okay.'

'Sure, I'm okay.'

Around the devastated school an unnatural quiet had descended. Only the yucca leaves, rustling down. Only the dust settling. The children had stopped screaming and even though some of them were sobbing, they were very muted, as if they were afraid to make too much noise.

Wednesday, September 12, 9:44 a.m.

A police car slewed to a halt in front of the school, quickly followed by another, and another. Then two fire trucks came up the street, their lights flashing and their horns blaring like enraged elephants. Next, an ambulance, and two more squad cars, and another ambulance, and another fire truck, and three TV vans. In the space of a few minutes, Franklin Avenue was crowded with emergency vehicles and police and firemen running out hoses.

A police officer with a gingery sweeping-brush moustache came up to Frank and said, 'Did you witness this, sir?'

'I was taking my boy to school & we were late.'

'But you saw what happened?'

'There was a white panel van & it just exploded. I came back to help but I didn't know what to do.'

'Okay, listen. Right now we have to get this situation under control, but we'll need to speak to you later. Give me your name and address and telephone number and somebody will be in touch with you later today.'

Frank reached into his billfold and took out his business card. 'This young lady saw what happened, too.'

The police officer looked around him, left, then right, and then he shrugged in bafflement. Frank turned, and was just in time to see the girl disappearing around the corner of Gardner Street.

'She & er. She left. She's probably even more shocked as I am.'

'That's okay, sir. Now, if you can leave the area and let the emergency people get on with what they have to do.'

'Of course, yes. Absolutely.'

Frank took one more look across at the school. Paramedics were already stepping through the litter of the fallen children, kneeling down now and again to check if any of them were still alive. The clock in the church steeple chimed the three-quarter hour. Usually this provoked a flutter of California quail, but this time there were none. They had all been frightened far away by the bomb-blast.

Frank walked back to his car and climbed in. Danny was still sitting in the back seat, although he was looking very pale. Delayed shock, thought Frank. *He* was suffering from shock, too, to the point where he found it difficult to make his lips speak any sense.

'Danny? Did you manage to talk to mom?'

Danny didn't answer but simply stared at him. He had the strangest expression on his face, as if he were smiling at a private joke.

'Danny? Are you feeling okay?'

Still Danny didn't answer. Frank twisted round in his seat and said, 'Come on, champ. I'll take you home and you can go to bed for the rest of the day.'

Danny continued to stare at him. Frank said, 'Danny? Quit fooling around, Danny, this is too damn serious.'

He climbed out of the car again and opened Danny's door. He reached out for Danny's shoulder and as he did so Danny fell sideways onto the seat. The back of his blazer was soaked dark with blood.

Oh God, no. Oh God not Danny. Frank lifted Danny up and cupped his face in both hands. He was still warm. But his eyes were unfocused and his mouth was hanging open and he wasn't breathing.

Frank felt as if his heart had dropped ten thousand feet. He scooped his hands under Danny's legs and lifted him awkwardly out of the car. There was blood everywhere, all over his shorts, all over his thighs, even on his sneakers.

'Paramedic!' he screamed, running back along the sidewalk with Danny lolling in his arms.
'For Christ's sake get me a paramedic!'

Wednesday, September 12, 6:47 p.m.

At the hospital, the young medical examiner came out to the waiting area where he and Margot were sitting beside a parched yucca and a black youth with an interminable sniff. The medical examiner was soft-spoken, evasive, with hairy hands that crawled around his knees like two tame tarantulas.

'I've examined Danny and I've discovered what happened. An ordinary woodworking nail penetrated his middle back between his fifth and his sixth ribs. It was traveling at considerable velocity, almost as fast as a bullet. If it had gone right through him, back to front, his chances of survival would have been very much higher. But, unfortunately, it struck his sternum, his breast-bone, and was deflected back into his abdomen. It entered his liver at an oblique angle, causing considerable trauma.'

Margot covered her mouth with her hand, although her eyes filled up with tears.

Frank said, 'I want you to be honest with me, doctor.'

'Of course.'

'If I had realized that Danny was so badly injured & I mean, if I had taken him to the hospital immediately he was injured & do you think they could have saved him?'

The medical examiner glanced uneasily at Margot, and then turned back to Frank.

'In my opinion, yes. But that's only my opinion.'

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