

**WILLIAM AND THE
MAGIC GLASSES**

12/25/98



Chapter 1

FAMILY RITUALS

Will looked through the Sunday newspaper. “Family rituals are important,” proclaimed the article on the front page. “They are the glue that helps to bind together a family, providing a point of constancy throughout the many changes that a family endures over the years. This is especially true during the holidays.”

Being that it was Sunday as well as the first Sunday of Advent, there were definitely rituals in the Mancini household. Sleep a little bit late. Read the Sunday paper. Get dressed a little nicer than usual for church.

And then there were William’s rituals. Those little extra touches that added to a calm and relaxed Sunday morning before going to church.

For example, one of William’s most important rituals to torment Mom was the “Question the Clothes He Has Been Asked to Wear” ritual. “William, we tried these on in the store. You swore to me that you loved them. In fact, you said that you loved them more than any pair of pants that you had ever had on in your entire life. You said that you hoped to wear these pants the rest of your life, perhaps even to your wedding. You’ve worn them once. And now you say that you can’t wear them?”

Then there was the “Torture Dad by Reading Every Line of the Best Buy Advertisement While Everyone Else Was Already in the Car” ritual. “Just one minute, Dad. I just need to check out which televisions are on sale at Best Buy in case you should ever decide to get me one for Christmas since they’re on sale for only \$99 for a 13 inch TV and all.”

And of course, an old reliable, the “I Forgot to Tell You that My Asthma Medicine Was All Gone and Could We Stop at Giant to Refill the Prescription Before We Go to Church?” ritual. “Mom. You are always saying I need to take my asthma medicine. And here I am, minding my own business, just trying to be a responsible child, like you always say you want, and then you get made at me for just saying that we need to make a slight detour on the way to church?”

But no ritual was more effective in getting the attention of his parents than one of Will’s personal favorites, the “Glasses, What Glasses?” ritual.

Glasses. The dreaded glasses. It wasn’t that he hated wearing them, Will just could never quite remember to.

“William,” Dad tried not to get upset, since it was just before church. “Why is it that every time we ask you about your glasses, you act like it’s the very first time you ever heard of the subject? You’ve been wearing glasses for three years now, and every time seems like the first time. Now where are your glasses? We are late for church. We should have left five minutes ago.”

William pondered this impenetrable question for a few moments. “Let’s see...” he began. “I think I had them when I left for school on Friday. And then I had them when we were doing math. And I had them for a while when I was in lunch, and then I was having a hard time eating with them on so I took them off and I put them in with the sandwich that I decided not to eat because it had too much crust on it. And then I put the rest of the sandwich in my backpack. That’s IT. Now I remember. The glasses are in my backpack.”

This was better than William usually did. Usually, the glasses were not to be found. They were one of life’s great mysteries. Kind of like that *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* movie where Indy was looking for the cup during the whole movie.

Will reached down into his backpack. He noticed a reading log that he was supposed to fill out every night. *Oops, better get on that.* He dove down past a bag of potato chips. Past the list of spelling words from four weeks ago. Past his cello music. *Cello music? I don't even play the cello any more. I wonder where that came from?* Past a pen that had leaked in the backpack about a month ago. Past a sweatshirt that he had stuffed into the backpack one day when it was way too warm to wear a sweatshirt, but his Mom had made him wear one anyway. There it was! The sandwich crusts...and right where he left them, the glasses.

“See Dad. Just like Mom always says. A place for everything and everything in its place.”

“Never mind that. Just put them on.” William slapped the glasses on his head. “Everyone is waiting in the car. Let’s go.”

Chapter 2

A DAY AT CHURCH

Will squirmed around the pew in church. Will thought, *I've got to pace myself*. Since he entered fifth grade, he no longer got to go down to the Happening, but had to stay for the entire Church service. The whole hour. 60 minutes. 3600 seconds.

Before fifth grade, he only had to last for *half* the service. The Happening was this place where the little kids went and you watched videos—not the kind they got at Blockbuster, but they weren't all that bad—or drew pictures or other things. It was kind of a break—and in Will's mind, a well-needed one after the tension of sitting still for the first half of church.

But it was all different now. No Happening. The whole service. The whole shooting match. The whole enchilada. Will tried real hard to pay attention, but it was hard to sit still for the whole service. Especially during the services when there was special extra stuff going on like Baptisms or Communion or those people ringing bells or when there were special announcements or speakers.

One good thing about it being the first Sunday in Advent was that they had people from the audience light the Advent candles. Will remembered this

from last year. It was kind of like Amateur Night. It also had the benefit that it wasn't very time consuming like a baptism.

This week, they were having the Smalls family light the candle. Will was NOT a fan of the Smalls family. Never had been; never would be.

Wally Smalls always seemed to show up in William's class. And if William was NOT a fan of the Smalls family, he was definitely even less a fan of old Wally. Because Wally seemed to like more than anything to pick on Will.

Smalls was definitely not small. In fact, he was huge. He was the biggest kid in the 5th grade. Will figured he must be at least 5 and a half feet tall and probably weigh a hundred—maybe a hundred and twenty pounds. Will figured that he might even weigh more than his brother Joey. Smalls looked like that older brother “Buzz” in the movie *Home Alone*.

Every time he saw that Smalls kid, he made a comment about Will. “Hey Will...Nice pants...Did your Mommy pick them out?” “Hey Willy-Boy, that's a real nice haircut. Did you get your head caught in the lawnmower?” Or the one that got Will really mad...”Hey Mans-Weenie, were did you get those four eyes?”

The rest of the family was no great shakes in Will's mind either. The little sister, Sally Smalls, was 6 years old and just as mean as Wally. She was in Erin's class. Erin said that one time, Sally had written in a library book, which was to Erin a high crime and misdemeanor. Another time, Sally had taken somebody's milk at lunch and put a bug in it that she found on the floor. And another time, believe it or not, Sally took a fruit roll-up and stretched it real tight over another kid's face so that his entire face was covered with what looked like a second skin. Except it was green on account of it being a lime fruit roll-up. She said she did it because the kid was looking at her funny. Erin tried to never look funny at her.

The Mom was kind of strange looking, too. Mrs. Smalls had sort of a run-down look. Will figured that nobody could blame her for that what with having Wally and Sally for kids.

Will watched them all parade to the front, right up to where the Advent candle was sitting right there next to the Baptismal font. The first thing Will

wondered was how on earth this gang got to light the Advent candle. Will wondered who they must have paid off to get this assignment. Or maybe what secrets they knew about the minister that they traded in exchange for acting like big shots up by the Advent candle. It seemed like it would only be fair if God zapped them with a lightning bolt or at least made them trip on the way to the front.

Will wondered what would happen if they lit themselves on fire when they were lighting the Advent candles. And if they did, would they put it out with the water in the Baptismal font? And would people think that was not a holy thing to do since it was Baptism water? And where did they get that special water, anyway? And would there be some kind of reaction if holy water from church mixed in with that evil Smalls gang? Like in the Wizard of Oz when the wicked witch of the West melted into the ground?

These were the kinds of deep theological questions that troubled Will in church.

Once the Advent candle lighting was over, Will drifted off for a few minutes. He perked up when they sang hymn Number 53, "What Child is This?" Some might think it was because he enjoyed the melody. Some might have thought that he enjoyed the organ playing that went along with the song. Some might have thought that Will enjoyed the voices around him.

But truth be told, Will liked hymn Number 53 because of a line he had noticed way back when he was only seven years old. William had noticed that the second verse went like this: "Why lies He in such mean estate, Where ox and 'a word that Will wasn't allowed to say that means donkey' are feeding?" Will was amazed that they would allow a word that means "donkey" into a church book. It wasn't the Bible, but it was a church book. Will figured somebody must have slipped up when they printed up the hymn book. He bet they got in trouble for not proofing their work.

After Hymn 53, Will faded out again for a while until the sermon. Will tried to pay attention to the sermon because first of all, he figured he might get something out of it. But more importantly, Mom and Dad asked questions when they had dinner on Sunday night about what Joey and William thought

about the sermon. It used to be in Happening days, William didn't have to worry about such things because he was usually pleasantly coloring while the sermon was going on upstairs. Joey was the only one who had to put up with the sermon inquisition. But now he did, too. And since Joey always seemed to have some sort of big shot comment, Will had to at least have something to throw into the conversation.

The minister said, "Today we will be reading from the first chapter of the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians." *Hmmm*, thought Will, again thinking deep theological thoughts. *I wonder how many letters old Paul wrote, and who these Corinthians were anyway?* He figured there were perhaps four of them, just like the Smalls. *Corey and Cara Corinthian, and their children Cabell and Caroline.* Thinking about it a little more, Will thought the Corinthian family must be pretty bad characters, not unlike his buddies the Smalls family, if a guy who wrote the Bible had to write them personal letters just to get them to behave.

Focus, Will. Remember: Tonight there will be questions about this!

"We can see and understand only a little about God now, as if we were peering at his reflection in a poor mirror; but someday, we are going to see him in his completeness, face to face," read the minister. "Now all I know is hazy and blurred, but then I will see everything clearly, just as clearly as God sees into my heart right now."

Oh, brother, thought Will. *What the heck is this about? Looking in mirrors? Not seeing things well?* Will look over at Joey, who seemed to be taking everything in. He probably had already figured out the whole thing and would have some sort of big shot comment at dinner.

Depressed about the whole thing, Will drifted off for a few minutes, but kept one ear tuned to the minister, hoping to pick up some hints for tonight's discussion. He decided that tonight he would go on the offensive, and try to beat Joey to the punch.

Chapter 3

THE GRAND INQUISITION

“William, come to dinner.”

William always heard his Mom the first time she called him to dinner, but he just didn’t consider it right to come on the first call. He didn’t want his Mom to get over-confident. He figured it was his duty, kind of like when the teacher gave you not such terrific grades during the first marking period in order to supposedly get you to “try harder.”

On top of that, he was in the middle of something important. Very important. Far more important than dinner. Every night, Will taped the WWF—he didn’t want to miss a match. He was in the middle of last night’s tape, and now was not the time to waste on something as frivolous as dinner.

Tonight, he was watching a match between Stone Cold Steve Austin and the Big Boss Man. The Big Boss Man was jumping off the things in the corner and landing right on Stone Cold Steve Austin’s head.

“William, come to dinner. Now.”

There was that voice again. And here he was just before the end of the match. *If I can just wait a few more minutes.*

“William. Now. Right now. If you aren’t up here by the count of three...”

“Count of Three” was the formal invitation that William was waiting for. Will didn’t respond to just any invitation. But a “Count of Three” invitation meant it was time to take action. Now he had a challenge. Make it upstairs from the basement, and into his seat before his Mom hit “three” and some sort of punishment was issued.

“One...”

Will bounded up the first set of stairs, taking two at a time. He hit the landing and turned for the next set.

“Two...”

Will hit the top of the stairs, burst through the basement door, and headed toward the kitchen table. He noticed that everyone was already seated. He slipped for a second on the wood floor in the hallway.

“Two and a half...”

Will got back up and launched himself toward his chair, landing with a thump.

“Is it time for dinner? Why didn’t you let me know?”

“Three. You just made it. And just for the record, I called you ten minutes ago.”

“Well. You see, I was watching the WWF and...”

This was the time of day in which Mom’s patience wore thin. “OK. Never mind. Will, why don’t you say grace tonight.”

“OK, Mom.” Will paused for dramatic emphasis. “Grace.”

Everyone waited for a few seconds. Will felt all heads turn toward him. “What are you waiting for, Will?” This time it was Dad’s turn to get a little frustrated. “Go ahead, say Grace.”

Will sometimes wondered whether anyone in his family had a sense of humor. “You said to say ‘Grace.’ So that’s what I said. ‘Grace.’ Don’t you get it?”

“Fine.” Will noted that Mom had moved beyond the thin patience phase into the getting sort of mad phase. “Erin, could you say grace tonight since William does not seem to want to cooperate?” She stretched out William’s name into about nine syllables.

“Yes, Mother.” *Oh, brother*, thought Will, *now we’ve got the Miss Erin Perfect thing going on here*. “I would be happy to.”

Erin launched into a slow and serious version of grace designed to put Mr. Older Brother to shame. “God is great, God is good, and we thank Him for our food. By His hands we all are fed. Give us, Lord, our daily bread.” She gave Will a dirty look. “Ahhhhhhhhhh-Mennnnnnnnn.”

Erin shifted gears quickly. “Dad, I hurt my finger today. It is really bothering me. I think it’s a fingernail or maybe a splinter.” She came over and showed Dad the finger, which unfortunately happened to be her middle finger. Dad felt Will and Joey raise an eyebrow.

“It looks OK, honey. Why don’t you sit down and eat?”

But Erin wasn’t one to miss the raised eyebrows from Joey and Will. “Oh, sorry Dad. I didn’t mean to flick you off.”

Joey and Will snickered. “That’s OK, Erin. Just sit down.”

The food started working its way around the table. Tonight was a good night for Will, food-wise. Barbecued chicken. Will could actually eat that. Corn. He’d let that pass. Rolls. Good stuff. And Orzo noodles, a personal favorite. Will put three big spoonfuls of Orzo noodles on the plate.

“Will, make sure your eyes aren’t bigger than your stomach. Save some for everyone else,” Mom warned.

Erin chimed in. “What do you mean his eyes aren’t bigger than his stomach? His stomach is much bigger. At least ten times as big. I don’t understand.” Erin had a tendency sometimes to take things a little too literally.

“It means that Will should only take as much as he can eat,” responded Dad.

“But his stomach is pretty big. And his eyes are pretty small. I don’t think his eyes can get much bigger.”

Dad tried again. “It doesn’t really mean that his eyes are bigger than his stomach. It just means that he shouldn’t take so much Orzo.”

“OK, but I don’t think you should say that his eyes are that big, then. Because they’re not. I think maybe his stomach is about 29 inches or maybe three feet, but his eyes are only maybe 1 inch. Or maybe 3 centimeters.” Erin

had been studying measuring in school. "I'm going to measure them." Erin got up to get a tape measure.

"Please sit down, Erin. You can measure them later."

Erin started to say, "But, Mom..." But she stopped short when she realized that she was getting "the glare" from Mom. The glare that meant business.

Mom decided to switch subjects. "You know, we were talking about something in a course I have been taking..."

Uh-oh, thought Will. *Could be trouble*. Will's Mom took two courses every five years in order to keep her teaching certification current. Will remembered the time Mom had taken a course in "Music of the Old South." For a couple of weeks, every time at dinner they had to talk about some crazy kind of music from a long time ago. He tried to remember what kind of course she was taking so that he could get a handle on where this conversation was going. *But on the plus side, if she talks about the course, maybe she'll forget about the sermon.*

"I would like to talk about the rules we have for our family," pronounced Mom.

What the heck kind of a course is this? I better watch my step here, thought Will.

"I am taking a course about the commitments that we all make and whether we actually keep those commitments."

Oh, brother. Why can't I get to take a course like this instead of long division.

"One of the things that we talked about in the course was the need to have family rules—and stick by them. Can any of you tell me what some of the rules might be for our family?"

Will thought for a minute about passing on this question—it was just too baffling. But Will was never one to pass up on a challenge.

"Let's see," said Will. Will puffed up very big, like he had suddenly had a very big point to make about the future of the family. "I think a very important family rule..." He paused for emphasis before proceeding. "Is that you shouldn't pee in your pants."

Mom gave him a hard look, trying to decide whether to be mad or not. Because that was the thing sometimes about Will. Sometimes when he was at his most sincere, he was also at his most outrageous. Mom decided to give

him the benefit of the doubt. "That's not really the kind of thing that I was looking for, although that is something that we try to discourage."

Will decided to give it another try. *If the specific stuff didn't work, maybe I should try something a little more general.*

"How about this?...I think a good rule for our family is that 'you should not be bad.'" *There. That's got to be right. Who could object to that?*

Mom didn't want to shut William off, but you could tell that she was getting a little bit frustrated. Erin decided to make a contribution to the conversation.

"I know. 'No big jobs in the downstairs bathroom.' That's what you always say. That's definitely Rule #1. I usually try to follow that rule, but not the boys, that I can tell you. Sometimes when I go into the bathroom after Joey has been in there, I think I am going to pass out."

"OK, Erin. That's enough. No bathroom talk at the dinner table."

"Now I get it." Erin was on a roll. "And that's Rule #2. 'No bathroom talk at the dinner table.' Also, I know Rule #3... 'No body noises at the dinner table.'"

"No, Erin. I meant..." Will could tell that Mom was fading on her original enthusiasm for sharing the details of her course with this crowd.

"And of course, there's Rule #4," continued Erin. "Don't use so much toilet paper that you clog the whole thing up." Erin cast an accusatory glance at William. William got the feeling that if she wasn't stopped, Erin might make up 15 or 20 rules just about the bathroom. Mom cut off the conversation by changing the subject.

"So what kinds of things are on your Christmas lists this year?"

If she wanted to steer the conversation away from Erin, Mom couldn't have picked a worse subject. Erin was a Christmas expert. She had been in the planning stage for months. She had been through the *American Girl* catalogue at least 1,345 times, carefully noting every possible dress and outfit and accessory for the "Bitty Baby."

"Well, here's what I want. I would like to have the stroller for the Bitty Baby, because I think Kate would like to roll around in the stroller." Kate was

the name of the Bitty Baby and in Erin's mind, every bit as much a member of the family as, for example, William, if not more so.

"I would also like to get the Autumn set. With the Autumn set you get a pink top and plaid leggings. And Bitty Baby gets to wear little yellow sneakers and a cute hat. And it comes with a book and the little bear gets to wear a little hat, too."

Mom turned to Joey, but Erin was not done yet.

"I would also like to get one of the big American Girls. At first I thought Felicity, but then I thought maybe Samantha. Or maybe Molly. But I really think I want the American Girl Today doll because she comes in a cute red dress with little boots and a lunch box..."

Joey put his head down on the table and started to snore. There was only so much American Girl stuff he could take. "Never mind, Joey. What are you hoping for?"

Joey thought for a moment. "I would like a paintball gun. And some paintballs. And some extra CO₂ cartridges. And a mask."

Mom didn't like this one bit. "Joey isn't there something else you would like? Christmas hardly seems the time to be giving paintball guns as presents."

"Mom, come on. Everybody has them. I'm the only one who doesn't. I'll be very careful."

Will thought that a paintball gun for Joey was a good idea because if Joey got one now, then maybe Will would be able to convince them to get him one in a couple of years. "Mom. I think a paintball gun for a Joey is a good idea. It would be a good way for Joey and me to play more together. In fact, Joey was saying the other day that if he got a paintball gun, then he would let me put on all of my catcher's equipment and some sweatshirts, and then we would go in the woods, except that he would give me a head-start. Will paused. "And then I would run ahead, and then he would hunt me down," Will concluded confidently.

"That's enough about paintball guns. Not one more word." Joey glared at William. "William, what would you like?"

“An excellent question, Mom. I just happen to have this list prepared that should be of some assistance in Christmas preparations. Let me start. Nike silk boxers. Nintendo 64 Worldwide Wrestling Federation game. A Supastar Gangsta CD. New basketball shoes. A glove controller for the Nintendo 64.” On and on the list went. When it came to Christmas, Will liked to be prepared.

Dad interrupted the Christmas gift list brainstorming. “OK, we get the idea. Will, why don’t you leave your list with us.”

“If you want, Dad, I can email it to you and Mom and to all the relatives.”

“Fine. But I think you should also take the Worldwide Wrestling Federation game off the list. It really doesn’t seem like it’s appropriate for Christmas. If you want to buy it with your own money, that’s OK. But I’m not sure that it’s appropriate for Christmas.”

Will hated it when they used the word “appropriate.” That was the word that they used when they had already decided something, but didn’t want to explain it. *Appropriate*. But before he could argue—the WWF game was what Will *really* wanted and where on earth was Will going to get enough money from his own to buy it?—Dad switched subjects on him.

“Now, I want to talk about the sermon at church yesterday. We didn’t have a chance to talk about it yesterday since we weren’t all here for dinner. Will, why don’t you go first.”

“You mean yesterday’s sermon?” Will panicked. *Yesterday’s sermon? Yesterday? As in not today, but yesterday?*

“Unless you were in church today on Monday, yes. Yesterday’s sermon.”

“Ahhhhhhhh...Let’s see.” Will paused for an inspiration. “Well, it was about mirrors. I definitely remember that. Mirrors. Reflections. And I heard once that if you broke a mirror, you would have bad luck. Kind of like walking under a ladder. Except worse. Or seeing a black cat. Now that’s really bad luck. Or the number 13. Yes. That’s not very lucky either.” Will ran out of steam. “Yes, sir. Mirrors. That’s what the sermon was about.”

Joey wondered sometimes where William got this stuff. “I think it was about how when you look in a mirror, you can’t always see things clearly. And

that's how it is sometimes with things we can't always figure out. Like bad things happening to people."

"You got all that from a mirror? All the mirrors I've ever seen have been perfectly clear. What a crazy answer, Joey. Mom, who's right? Me or Joey?"

"Joey's got the right idea, Will. If it's hard to understand about the mirror, think about your glasses for a second. People wear their glasses to see clearly, right?"

"Yes. I think so," replied Will.

"Well, I think it means that we never know all there is to know about life and other people very clearly. We think we know, but we really don't. Remember when the minister said things sometimes are 'hazy and blurred?'"

"Uh-Huh."

"It means that no one really knows what other people are thinking and feeling or what they've been through or what they are worried about. We just like to think we know. Like a person who needs glasses. Everything is blurry but they won't admit it."

"OK."

Dad knew a lead-in when he heard it. "Speaking of glasses, Will, if you are going to go to the Herndon basketball game, you need to wear your glasses."

Glasses! Glasses! Glasses! Not the darn glasses again. Will struggled to think where on earth they might be. *Let's see...*

Will tried to think back to the last time he had them on. *I had them when I went to school this morning because Mrs. Smith asked me to put them on. So I definitely had them sometime today in school because I don't remember not having them and being in trouble. And then I had them out during recess, because they fell off while we were playing tag. And then I left them on the ground for a while because I didn't want to go back and have someone tag me and then be IT. And then somebody found them and turned them into the office and they announced on the television that someone had found some glasses and did anybody know whose they were. And then Daniel said, "Will aren't those your glasses?" and I said, "Oh yeah, maybe they are." And then I said Mrs. Smith, "Can I go down to the office?" And she said, "I am sure you are capable of going down to the office." And then I said "MAY I go*

down to the office?” and then she said OK and then I went down and they gave them to me and I shoved them in my pocket. That’s it!

“Got ‘em right here in my pocket. Haven’t been out of my sight all day. I’ll wear them at the basketball game, I promise.” He tucked them into the pocket of his jacket.

“If you are going to go with me,” said Dad, “you need to finish up quickly. We’ve got to be there in 10 minutes.”

Once Dad got an idea, there was no stopping him. Will gobbled down a couple of pieces of chicken, 4 grains of rice, and 7 peas, and 3 huge pieces of bread, and announced he was done. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 4

A SURPRISE ENDING FOR HERNDON

Dad pulled into the parking lot at Herndon High School. On the way over, he and Joey had had their usual “Battle of the Radio Stations.” The game was always the same, but Will enjoyed the action anyway.

Here’s how it worked. Dad put on one of those “classic” rock stations that played music from about a hundred years ago. Joey let the music play for about 3 seconds. Then Joey always said...“Daaaaaaddddd” in that long drawn way, implying that the music that Dad chose could not have been more out of date.

Joey then employed a rapid-fire technique that went through at least 37 stations in the course of about 15 seconds or so, desperately trying to find something appropriate. He finally settled on a “song” that consisted of a loud bass beat, some chanting, and every once in a while beeps that apparently indicated that some sort of obscenity had been covered over.

“Do we have to listen to ‘Gang Staaaaa’ music?” Dad had his own drawn out phrase during this little game, and it was on the word “gangsta.” It didn’t matter what the music was, if it was recorded in the last five years, Dad referred to it as “gangsta” music.

Dad pulled the car into a space, among a lot of people from Joey's school. Will noticed kind of a strange glow on Dad's face, like he was planning some huge surprise. And then, before he knew it, it happened. Will didn't think his father could move that quickly. Joey's movements kind of turned into slow motion, while Dad's speeded up into warp speed.

Dad rolled down the windows, switched the radio station to WMZQ-country, and turned the music up full blast. Glenn Campbell's rendition of "Rhinstone Cowboy" echoed through the parking lot. All eyes turned to see who the doofus was who was playing such pathetically un-hip music. Joey got out of the car quickly and tried to disappear as quickly as he could.

"Don't ever forget, Will, the one amazing power that parents of teenagers hold. The one power that cannot be overcome. The one power that can bring a "gangsta" listening eighth grader to his knees in a split second. *The power to embarrass.*"

Although this was all pretty funny, Will could tell that unless he figured out a way to harness this amazing power, it might one day be turned in his direction. And Will was not a guy who liked to do anything that his friends might laugh at. "OK, Dad."

They went into the gym together, but Dad knew that was the last he would see of Will for most of the game. As soon as they went into the gym, Will spotted Daniel Chevalier. William yelled, "See you, Dad," and off they went.

William and Daniel had basically grown up together, as had the rest of the Mancini and Chevalier gang. Daniel was the fourth of six boys. William and Daniel's birthdays were only two days apart, and they might just as well have been real brothers. In fact, given how much time he spent at the Chevalier house, William sometimes thought he was.

When Daniel turned four, he decided that he was going to learn to ride a two wheeler without training wheels. So he went to the top of the hill in front of the Chevalier's, started running, and launched himself onto the bike. And down he went after a few feet with a crash. So he did it again. And again. And again. And again. Until finally, after a number of near-death experiences (Daniel, like William, had used up his nine lives when he was only six months

old), he succeeded in zooming down the hill, barely in control, able to stop only by crashing into a tree in front of the Mancini's house.

Which meant that William needed to learn to ride a bike. Immediately. Right then. Without another wasted moment. That day. Because if Daniel did it, William needed to as well. And after an equally painful learning experience, Will, too, had learned. That same day. No training wheels. No parents. Just William and Daniel, in this case with Daniel the teacher and William the student. By the end of the day, they were zooming down the hill on their little bikes like something that had been launched from a cannon.

And that's the way they had always been. When one did something, the other was sure to follow. When they fought, they fought like brothers. But for the most part, they just had fun.

At basketball games, in contrast to football games, William and Daniel actually liked to watch the games. During football games, they often had no idea of even what the score was. They usually met up with Tyler and Jason and Brett and some other kids and just wandered around. Sometimes they went from parent to parent trying to get money to go to the concession stand—because they were “starving”—and then bought candy bars or something similar to avoid starvation. Or they tried to step on catsup packages to squirt other kids they knew. Or they convinced some parent to get them bottles of water because they were “sooooo thirsty,” and then proceeded to spray each other with the water bottles.

But basketball games were different. Sure they still hit the concession stand. But they usually then went into the stands and actually watched the game. William and Daniel and Tyler and Brett had already decided that they were going to all go to UNC on basketball scholarships. So they took every opportunity to study the game.

On this particular night, William stocked up at the concession stand and bought a soda, two Slim Jims, a bag of potato chips, a Twix bar, and Milky Way. It was then that they ran into the evil Smalls.

"Hey little Willy boy. What are you eating? Give me some." Smalls towered over Daniel and William. He reached into Will's hand and yanked out a Twix bar.

"Little Willy. What do you think about my new hat?"

Smalls had on one of those Nike hats that Will thought usually looked pretty cool on people. Except on Smalls. Smalls' head was so big that the hat looked like a little piece of yarn stretched over a beach ball. Will toyed with the idea of saying this, but then remembered that one time Smalls got mad at a guy and took him in the bathroom and shoved his head in the toilet and then flushed. Will didn't like that idea.

"Fabulous, Smalls. That hat is fabulous." Fabulous was a word that his Dad had started to use to describe everything. Will figured he might just as well use it with Smalls.

"You better think it's fabulous. Because it is."

"Yeah, Smalls. It really is a very nice looking hat," Daniel chimed in, just to make sure that he stayed on the good side of Smalls.

"Willy boy. I've been thinking that I would like a soda. Do you have any money? Give me 50 cents."

For a minute Will thought about not giving him the 50 cents. But then Will remembered that in 3rd grade, he heard that a kid had refused to give Smalls money for ice cream. They said that Smalls took the kid's sneakers and threw them in the dumpster. Right there on the playground. And of course the teacher hadn't done anything. Will handed over the 50 cents.

"See you in church, Willy," Smalls smirked.

For a minute, William and Daniel considered ganging up on this big lug. But they decided against this course of action. For one thing, they would get in trouble with their parents. Secondly, if they started a fight, they probably would get thrown out of the basketball game. But most importantly, if they punched him, he would punch them back. And he weighed as much as both of them put together.

Instead, they headed into the game. By the time they got into the stands, the game had just started. William looked up at the scoreboard. Herndon was already losing 8–0.

This was going to be a tough game for Herndon. They were big underdogs to South Lakes. They had played once earlier in the season, and Herndon had lost by 25.

William saw Dad up in the stands with Mr. Chevalier on the other side of the gym. Dad spotted William at about the same time. William noticed that Dad was doing something strange with his hands, making little circles with his fingers and putting them over his eyes.

“Hey Daniel,” yelled Will above the noise of the crowd. “Look at my Dad over there. What do you think he’s doing?”

Daniel looked over. “I don’t know. Maybe pretending he’s a raccoon?”

“Why would my Dad pretend he’s a raccoon?”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand why parents do a lot of the things they do.” Will thought back to the episode with WMZQ in the car and figured Daniel might be right.

After another few South Lakes baskets, matched by only a couple from Herndon, the score had widened to 14–4. Herndon called timeout.

“Hey Will. Look at your Dad. He’s doing it again.”

Once again, Will watched his father make careful circles with his fingers and put them up to his eyes. Now Mr. Chevalier was doing it, too. “I just don’t get it.”

“Maybe they’re pretending that they have binoculars,” contributed Daniel.

“How come?”

“Hey William, how should I know? I’m just trying to come up with ideas.”

“Sorry Daniel. Maybe he’ll give us another clue. Let’s not worry about it.”

As the first quarter wound down, Herndon staged a small comeback, but the score at the end of the quarter was a dismal 22–10 in favor of South Lakes.

“Will, look over. They’re at it again.”

This time, Mr. Chevalier and Dad were standing up. How embarrassing. They both pretended that they were reaching into their pocket, pulling some-

thing out, making little circles with their fingers, and then putting them over their eyes.

"They look like they're making glasses," Will realized. "But why would they be doing that?"

"Hey, Will. Aren't you supposed to be wearing your glasses at the game?"

"That just might be it." Will reached into his pocket and pulled out the glasses and held them out. Mr. Chevalier and Dad started clapping and sat down. "I guess after all that, I better put them on."

Will's glasses looked like bifocals. The idea was to keep him from going cross-eyed. Will thought that was one of his Mom's big fears was having Will grow up, and become a big success, and maybe become President of the United States someday. Then she was worried that he would go on national television to make some big announcement, and he would be cross-eyed. That wouldn't be good.

They blew the whistle to start the second quarter. Will looked at the clock and it read 7:58. Will thought about this business about becoming the first cross-eyed President and put the glasses on.

Suddenly, everything looked like it was in some kind of super-sharp focus. This wasn't what usually happened when he put the glasses on. Then, just as inexplicably, everything came to a stop. The noise of the game faded away. The colors were so bright that he thought they would explode. Then just as suddenly, everything faded into the background until the only thing that was still in focus was the scoreboard. The time on the scoreboard read 0:00. Underneath the place where it said "Home" was the number 79 and underneath "Visitor" it read 77. Will started to feel dizzy and ripped the glasses off.

"What...I saw...I think..." Will couldn't seem to think straight. Finally he blurted out, "The Scoreboard. Look at the Scoreboard."

They both looked up. The scoreboard clock read 7:58. The score was Visitors—22, Herndon—10.

"What, Will? What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Daniel. I just....Nothing."

Will figured maybe his glasses were dirty. No, they looked clean. Or maybe he needed to do his asthma medicine. No, he did that just before he came to the game. Or maybe the soda, two Slim Jims, potato chips and the Milky Way were reacting in some sort of strange soup in his stomach. That couldn't be; that was all good healthy food. Or maybe it was the Orzo at dinner where his eyes were bigger than his stomach. That must be it.

"I think I just had something that didn't agree with me for dinner. I just felt a little dizzy for a minute. But I'm OK now."

They settled back to watch the game. Herndon basically held its own during the second quarter, but nothing more. At the end of the first half, they were still losing 44-32.

At half time, Will decided he needed a few more refreshments in case his dizziness had been caused by an acute lack of food. But he thought that he better take it easy, and so he only got a piece of pizza, a Surge, and one more Slim Jim. He and Daniel met up with Tyler and Brett, and they decided to sit together for the second half.

The second half started out much differently than the first half. Herndon played ferocious defense, challenging every pass and preventing South Lakes from getting good shots. On the other end of the court, Herndon suddenly came alive, and started putting in bucket after bucket.

The crowd screamed its approval. Not only was Herndon making a game of this thing, but actually seemed to have a chance to win.

With one minute left, Herndon was actually leading, 76-75. South Lakes came down the court, carefully working the clock. 50 seconds left. Herndon tried to play tight defense, but didn't want to risk fouling anyone on South Lakes. 30 seconds left. South Lakes moved the ball around the perimeter, trying to draw Herndon out of their zone. 15 seconds left.

William, Daniel, Tyler and Brett started chanting 10-9-8...with the rest of the crowd. With 5 seconds left, the South Lakes guard faked a shot, got the inside man from Herndon to come out to cover him, leaving his man behind, and then passed inside for an uncontested lay-up. South Lakes was up, 77-76. Only 2 seconds left. Herndon called timeout.

“Herndon always finds some way to lose these games,” said Brett. “They get close, but they always come up short.”

After the timeout, Herndon passed the ball up to Hunter Smith at half court. William and Daniel knew Hunter because he used to live in their neighborhood and once had run over Joey Mancini on his bike. Hunter turned and released the ball and a split second later, the clock clicked to 0:00. The ball sailed through the air. Swish. William, Daniel, Tyler and Brett screamed along with everyone else and ran out onto the court. They did this after each game. They didn't know why, but they thought it was good practice for when they would all be playing together on scholarship at UNC.

In all the excitement, Will took a final look up at the scoreboard. Home—79, Visitors—77. He suddenly felt strange all over again.

And that was when William decided once and for all that he HAD to start wearing those glasses more often.

Chapter 5

SPECIAL VISION

William didn't tell anyone what he had seen at the game, but he knew it was something special. And over the next few weeks, William DID wear the glasses more than usual.

He kept trying to find dramatic times to put them on so that they would do their magic again.

One time they were having a math test and William forgot to study. It was long division, which William hated. William figured that that was why God had invented calculators.

During the test, his mind went blank. All of a sudden, he didn't think that he could add one plus one, never mind divide 7634 by 34. He looked at the paper, but didn't have the faintest idea where to start.

Then he thought about the glasses. He reached into his pocket and slowly took them out with a flourish. He cleaned them off on the edge of his shirt and put them on. He looked down at the paper, hoping to see the answers to the problems all clearly outlined and miraculously saw...the same piece of paper, with all problems and no answers.

Another time he was watching a TV show. It was a mystery about a guy who was killed and nobody could figure it out. And they thought that a good guy did it, but you knew that he really hadn't because they kept showing these memories of the real guy who had done it. But they never showed his face, so you didn't know who it was. And just as it was getting to the exciting part, Mom said that they had to go in the car to the Giant. Will had a sudden inspiration—the glasses! He dug them out from underneath the cushion of the chair, put them on...and saw the same McDonalds commercial that he had seen a thousand times.

He also thought about using the glasses to find out what he was going to get for Christmas. Will thought that if he turned the Christmas lights on, and sat in the chair by the fireplace, and stared at the tree for long enough with his glasses on, that all of a sudden—"Voila"—he would see what he was getting for Christmas. But no dice.

Will even tried using the glasses to see if he could predict when he might run into Smalls. Will's line of thinking went like this. If he imagined Smalls' ugly face, and then looked around the school, Will thought he might be able to predict where he was going to be and could then steer clear of him. But it didn't work. He put the glasses on and saw Smalls, but not sometime in the future. Right there. Right then. And Smalls took his lunch money and used it to buy an extra piece of pizza that day.

But the closest William came to getting the glasses to work was on a Friday night at Tyler's birthday party.

Tyler had invited a big gang of 12 boys over to his house for his birthday. They were going to hang around for a while at Tyler's house and play Nintendo and drink soda. Then they were going to see the movie, "Waterboy," starring Adam Sandler on the very first day it was in the movie theatre. Then they were going to sleep over.

Well, not really "sleep over," because they planned to do very little sleeping. This was for 3 main reasons.

First, by the time it came to “sleep” at any of these so-called sleepover parties, everyone was so loaded with sugar and caffeine from the soda that nobody could hardly even sit still, never mind lie down and fall asleep.

Secondly, it was a well know fact that whenever two or more eleven year old boys are gathered, the cumulative IQ of the group goes down by 50% each time another boy is added, but the energy present doubles. This meant that by the time you got to 12 boys in one place, the group had the collective intelligence of a moderately sized squirrel, but the collective energy of a small nuclear weapon. Which was not exactly conducive to listening to the carefully articulated arguments about the need to go to sleep no later than 12:30.

But the main reason why it was so hard for anyone to get to sleep was because whenever anyone went to sleep, those who were still awake wrote on their faces with magic markers. Not just a little bit. A lot. It wasn't unusual for some poor kid who went to bed early to wind up with a face completely colored in. In fact, at Tyler's party, Jason's face was so green when he woke up that he looked like a leprechaun.

But that wasn't when Will thought the glasses were going to work. Will's “Close Encounter of the Eyeglass Kind” came when they went to see the movie.

They had to take two cars because there were so many kids. When they were leaving, they also had to get a small refrigerator out of Mr. Martin's car. And so it was kind of crazy what with everyone getting into the cars and all. And then when they got to the movie, there were so many people there trying to see “Waterboy,” that it was sold out and they couldn't see it.

But that wasn't the half of it. Because when Mrs. Martin counted heads to go back home, she came up one short.

“Who's missing? Somebody's missing? Did someone go into the men's room? Is somebody still in the lobby of the movie theatre?”

Daniel nonchalantly solved the puzzle. “Jason's not here.”

“What do you mean Jason's not here?” yelled Mrs. Martin. “Whose car was he in on the way out here?”

“Not mine.” “Not mine.” Nine more “not mines” completed the tally.

"I think," said Daniel, pausing for emphasis, "That he must be... 'Home Alone.'"

"Wow," repeated the group. "Home Alone."

Needless to say, Mr. and Mrs. Martin quickly loaded everyone back into the cars and zoomed back to the Martin's. When they got there, the front door was open. But Jason was not there.

William was really worried about Jason. Suppose some sort of ax-murderer had broken into the house while they were at the movie and gotten Jason. William had seen that on TV one time. William thought the time had come to *really* use the glasses. Suppose Jason was hurt. Or suppose some kind of bad guy had him. It suddenly occurred to Will that maybe this was the kind of thing that would make the glasses do their thing again. Maybe the score at the basketball game was just a warm up in case somebody was really in trouble sometime. He said, "Wait just one minute. I think I can find Jason." He grabbed his glasses and put them on, kind of like the reverse of Clark Kent into Superman. "Let me just look around. I think with my magic glasses I can find him."

Will felt a little dizzy. He looked around and everything swirled around him. Just like before, everything came to a stop. The noise of the rest of the gang faded away. But there was no Jason. Instead, he just threw up. It turned out that it wasn't anything with the glasses. It was just that he had had one too many Surges before the movie.

Now it turned out that what really happened was that Jason had gone into the bathroom right before everyone left. When he came out, he went through the house, but no one was there. He went to Ian's house, but no one was there. He went to his own house, but no one was there. Finally, he went to the Selestay's house. No one was there except Brett's grandmother, so he decided to stay with her until someone came home. Eventually, the Martins and everyone else caught up with him, and the sleep over was on again. William got to stay even though he had thrown up because everyone agreed it was just because he had too many Surges. Everything seemed back to normal.

But it really wasn't. The word was out. William Mancini thought he had "magic glasses."

Chapter 6

AN AMAZING DEVELOPMENT

Everybody at the party had promised not to tell anybody about Will's comment about his "magic glasses." They all just figured it was a crazy thing that he said before he got sick all over the place. Will was worried that people would think he was some kind of a crazy kid if he thought he had "magic glasses." Maybe they would even make him go down and talk to the counselor. *Oh brother, that's the last thing I need.*

And the more he thought about it, the more it seemed like maybe nothing strange had happened at the basketball game anyway. I mean, it wasn't like some great miracle or anything. It wasn't like the Red Sea parted or a dead guy got up and walked away or anything. People predicted scores of basketball and football games all the time. Maybe he was just lucky. It hadn't happened before or since. It was crazy to think that the glasses had anything to do with it. *Enough with the magic glasses already.*

Once Will realized this, it was actually kind of a relief. The past few weeks he always thought something unusual would happen again with his glasses. So he always tried to wear them or have them with him. His Mom and Dad were actually amazed.

“William seems to be showing much more responsibility for his glasses,” his Dad had said at dinner. “It seems like he’s always wearing them now.” Mom agreed.

But Will figured it was about time to go back to normal. *Magic glasses. What a crazy idea. I must have been out of my mind.*

It was much easier back when he didn’t even worry about wearing the glasses. No strain. He decided to go back to the days when sometimes his glasses might turn up in his backpack, maybe on the floor, maybe in his jacket, maybe even over at the Chevaliers. No strain. And even better, nobody at school had said anything about the whole glasses episode. Everyone had forgotten. Nobody made fun of him and thought he was a nut.

On top of all this, earlier in the day—Christmas Eve—they got presents in the mail from his Aunts and Uncles. But instead of shirts or pajamas or pants, the present turned out to be a check. A check for \$50—to buy whatever *he* wanted for Christmas. \$50. Will got his Mom to cash the check that day, and got his Mom to get the bank to give him a \$50 bill. Will had never had a \$50 bill before. To make things even better, it was one of those new ones, with all the secret things on it to keep counterfeiters from making more.

On the day after Christmas, Will was going to go to Best Buy and get the Worldwide Wrestling Federation game for the Nintendo. All of a sudden, out of the blue, the \$50 he needed to buy the WWF game had appeared. *And who said miracles didn’t happen on Christmas*, thought Will. Will patted his pocket where the magical \$50 bill was safe in hiding. Yes, life was good. No worries about glasses. No worries about kids making fun of him. Tomorrow, presents galore from Santa and his parents. And now, financial security. At least until he bought the Worldwide Wrestling Federation game.

Will was on top of the world as he went into the church. Not even seeing Smalls could burst his bubble. As usual, Smalls was lurking in the shadows for some poor kid to pick on. *Oh well*, thought Will. *I don’t care. Let him dish out whatever he wants. Tonight is Christmas Eve.*

Will walked by the people who had the big red “GREETER” badges on who said hello to everyone as they came in. They had to say “hello” to every-

one. That was their job, to say hello to people whether they liked them or not. Will thought he would take a page out of their book as he walked by the dreaded Smalls.

“Hello Smalls,” said Will as he walked by.

Smalls seemed taken aback for a split second, but recovered his core nastiness quickly. “Hey Willameena. Come over here a second.”

Will dutifully obeyed. “What do you want, Smalls?”

“I just want you to know that I know about your magic glasses. And I haven’t figured out how I will use the information, but mark my words, I will. Somewhere, sometime, when you least expect it, I’ll get you. And you’ll be the laughing stock of the school.”

Will staggered back and felt like he had been hit in the stomach. The bubble was burst. One thing that bugged Will a lot was when people made fun of him. And now he had Smalls to worry about for the entire vacation. He wandered into the church and sat down with the rest of his family in the pew.

Will thought, *Why does a kid like that even bother to come to church? He doesn’t have any friends. He’s just a big loser. Why is he so mad? Nobody likes him. I hate that guy. He’s not going to get me. I’m going to get him first. Before I leave this service, I’m going to think of a way to make things completely different between me and Smalls. This time, I’m going to strike first.*

“Will, are you all right?” his Dad whispered. “You seem like you’re mad. It’s Christmas Eve. Enjoy the service. Relax.”

“OK,” said Will, but his mind was still churning.

The service started off with a Christmas Pageant. The way they did the Christmas pageant at William’s church was that anybody could come as anybody in the Christmas story. Then at different points in the pageant, all the Mary’s came up and all the Joseph’s and all the angels and all the shepherds, until just about every kid was up in the front.

They started out by singing “Away in a Manger.” Will hoped that someday, somebody would figure out what was the right note on which to start “Away in a Manger.” Sometimes they started it so high that no one could actually hear the notes, and you could hear dogs howling all around the neigh-

borhood of the church. On the other hand, if you started it too low, by the time you got down to “The Little Lord Jesus Lay Down His Sweet Head,” you were down to notes so low that it sounded like a lot of people groaning. While they were singing, all of the Mary’s and Joseph’s were supposed to go up to the front. Erin had brought a blue towel with her just for the occasion, and now she put it over her head. She went up to the front clutching Kate the Bitty Baby, who was also wrapped in a matching blue towel. Will imagined an announcer like in one of those Broadway plays saying, *Tonight, the part of the Baby Jesus will be played by Kate the Bitty Baby.*

Before William knew it there were 16 Mary’s, all holding dolls and looking proud and confident, accompanied by 12 Joseph’s, looking like they had no idea where they were or why they were there.

The next song was “First Noel,” which was the cue for the animals and shepherds to go forward. There were six kids dressed as lambs. The Thompson Twins came forward dressed as a camel—with two humps. Two kids had horse heads on. There was even one lion. Will was not sure where a lion would have come from in Bethlehem, but he figured the whole thing was none of his business. *Maybe it has something to do with that lions lying down with lambs business the minister talks about sometimes. The kid probably doesn't want to be a lion anyway, only his mother had made him because she thought it would look cute.* Most of the shepherds had bathrobe costumes, where they wore their bathrobes, and then put a towel on their head and wrapped a rope around the towel. *They all look like that guy Yassir Arafat on TV.* One kid had on an old Ninja Turtle bathrobe. *Fabulous outfit,* thought Will.

After the parade of animals and shepherds, the congregation sang “Angels We Have Heard on High” and all the kids who dressed as angels—mostly girls—came up. One kid poked a lamb in the eye with his angel wing, and a small scuffle broke out. But peace was restored quickly.

Finally, the organ lady started to play “We Three Kings of Orient Are” and a bunch of kids wearing Burger King crowns came forward. They were all carrying jars that looked like perfume containers, except for one kid who looked like he had a coffee can wrapped up in Santa Claus paper. Will always liked

the “We Three Kings” song because of the words that his Dad had taught him that they used to sing when they were little... “Trying to smoke a rubber cigar. It was loaded and exploded...” The song ended and everyone clapped.

“Thank you, boys and girls,” said the minister. You can now go back to your seats. There was a flurry of activity as the Mary’s, Joseph’s, animals, shepherds, angels, and wise men all tried to figure out where there seats were. Eventually, things calmed down.

“Tonight’s reading is from the second chapter of Luke,” the minister began. “The passage recounts the familiar Christmas story.”

“There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone over them. They were terribly afraid, but the angel said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David’s town your Savior was born—Christ the Lord! And this is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

“Suddenly a great army of heaven’s angels appeared with the angel, singing praises to God: ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased.’

“When the angels went away from them back into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us.’

“So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and saw the baby lying in the manger. When the shepherds saw him, they told them what the angel had said about the child. And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said.”

The minister paused before beginning the sermon. Will squirmed a bit and looked over at his Mom. She was mouthing a word, but not saying it because she didn’t want to make a noise. After she did it four times, Will realized that she was saying “glasses.” *OK, OK. As if I don’t have enough to worry about with Smalls. I’ll put the glasses on.*

Will got as far as pulling the glasses out of his pocket, but then he was distracted because the minister was talking again.

“And all who heard it were amazed,” he repeated.

“We’ve all heard the Christmas story so many times that sometimes I worry that we’ve lost the ability to be amazed. ‘And all who heard it were amazed,’ Luke tells us.

“It’s hard to be amazed these days. Incredible technological things that used to amaze us—computers and computer games—have become commonplace. It wasn’t so long ago that we were all amazed by color televisions. And the idea that you could watch movies in your own house, anytime you wanted, why that was an amazing idea. The idea that you could walk around with a little box and get phone calls—no matter where you were—was an amazing idea.”

The minister pulled a Christmas card out of his pocket, opened it, and it began playing Jingle Bells. “I’m told that there is more computing power in this one Christmas card than existed in the entire world 50 years ago. And yet I don’t think we find this card ‘amazing’ any more. Maybe mildly interesting. Maybe mildly humorous. But certainly not ‘amazing.’”

“So in a world in which the amazing has become commonplace—and is even taken for granted—how do we continue to be amazed? We are confronted every day with things that used to be incredible—and we yawn. How are we to continue to be amazed when the Christmas season seems like it is shoved down our throat beginning at Halloween and when things seem to get more and more hectic each year? How are we to be amazed when we see countless examples, all around us and amplified by the media, of people doing awful things to each other and to themselves?” He paused for a drink of water.

Amen, brother, thought William, thinking about Smalls.

“And all who heard it were amazed.’ How on earth can we be ‘amazed’ by the story of the birth of a baby more than 2000 years ago? I think the key to restoring our sense of amazement begins with this simple story of Christmas. A few weeks ago, at the beginning of Advent, we read from Corinthians. We read, ‘Now all I know is hazy and blurred, but then I will see everything clearly, just as clearly as God sees into my heart right now.’ None of can see

each other very clearly. Or see ourselves clearly. We certainly don't understand God very clearly. Everything is kind of murky, like looking into a very dim mirror. Or like a person with poor eyesight trying to see without glasses. We look hard. We squint our eyes. We try to see. But we can't see clearly.

"And that's what Christmas is like. It's like a picture that we can't quite get in focus. It bounces around among all the conflicting messages we see and hear. Things get blurry as we become convinced that we need more and more and more stuff.

"But every once in a while, we get quick glimpses of the miracle of Christmas and the promise of the manger. Unexpected kindnesses that people show us. We see people with fatal diseases or crippling handicaps tapping into stores of courage that they never knew they had. If we take the time, we get quick glimpses into what people are really like. And in those fleeting moments, we get an idea of what it would be like to see if things weren't so blurry and so hazy. We can see how our lives and those of others have meaning. And we are amazed."

Will looked down at the glasses in his hand and slowly put them on. The minister repeated, "And we are ama..."

Suddenly, everything looked like it was again in some kind of super-sharp focus. Everything came to a stop. The voice of the minister faded away. The colors were so bright that he thought they would explode. Then just as suddenly, everything faded into the background until the only one thing was in focus.

Smalls.

Will stared at Smalls and tried to focus. He saw Smalls waiting in a long line with a bunch of other people, and they seemed to be in a church, not Trinity but some other church. There were lots of tables set up, with food packed high on them. There must have been a thousand cans of tuna fish on one table. There were aisles between the tables, and people were going up and down the aisles with wagons.

Sally and Mrs. Smalls and Smalls himself were going up and down the aisles with a wagon. Mrs. Smalls picked up a couple of cans of tuna from one

table, and then some Hamburger Helper from another table. Back and forth they went, with Mrs. Smalls and Sally loading food into the wagon and Smalls just looking down and shuffling along.

When the wagon was mostly filled, they went into another room with lots and lots of bread and rolls and pies and cakes. The lady behind the table said, "You can take one of each. Merry Christmas." A kid came from the back of the church with a big garbage bag that looked like it had presents in it. He said, "162." That was the number on the side of the boxes in the wagon. "6 year old girl and 11 year old boy." Mrs. Smalls said "Thank You" and "Merry Christmas" and loaded the bag into the wagon.

Will watched closely as they walked out the door, Sally and Mrs. Smalls pulling the wagon and Smalls shuffling behind. He looked like a far different character than the big jerk who tormented Will at school. He looked up in William's direction and William was amazed to see the look on his face. Smalls looked terrified.

"...zed," the minister continued. "Merry Christmas."

As the ushers came forward to take the collection plate, William sat there, stunned. He thought about all the gifts that he would receive over the next few days. He thought about all of the food that there would be, even though he personally didn't think he would eat much of it. He thought about the grandparents and cousins and all the friends he would see over the holidays. He thought about how mean and nasty Smalls was and thought about why he was the way he was. And he thought about whether there was anything that he could do about it.

Will reached into the "friendship" folder that usually had an attendance roster, name badges and some offering envelopes in it. While everybody else was looking at the bells playing, Will took out one of the envelopes. He quickly reached into his pocket, pulled out the fifty and shoved it in the envelope. He wrote on the envelope, "For Wally Smalls, Merry Christmas from a friend." When the collection plate came by, Will put the envelope, face down, in the collection plate.

“What did you put in there, William?” William was known for filling out the cards “Desires a call from minister,” with fake names and his phone number and putting those in the collection plate and then seeing if anybody called later in the week.

“Just my pledge envelope Mom.”

Mom looked at William closely, expecting that something else was up. But she said nothing.

William never told anyone what he did that night or what he had seen with his glasses. And he never again saw anything other than what he was supposed to see with his glasses. Over the years, Smalls continued to be in his classes from time to time. And he continued to be a pain. But William thought he could see a change—a tiny one, he had to admit—in Smalls. A little bit less of an edge. And he thought he saw a little bit of humanity creep in from time to time.

But William never forgot what he had seen in church that Christmas Eve, how clear it was and how different Smalls looked from what he expected, trailing behind the wagon and shuffling his feet, and the look of terror that was in his face for those few seconds. He thought about how astonishing it was that he had just handed over the fifty, without thinking twice. He thought about the simple and strange story of some shepherds and some animals and a baby in a manger.

And he was amazed.