

HOW EDDIE CHANGED THE WORLD

ROBERT URELL

Mom called Eddie into the front room, which was normally reserved for company. When he stepped onto the thick green carpet that made his feet feel like he was walking on muffins, she was waiting for him on the couch with a large present wrapped in bright red paper on the green and white striped cushion. Mom picked up the package and patted the seat next to her. Eddie walked gingerly across the room and sat down.

“I wanted to be the first to give you a birthday present,” she said. Her speech was always so well modulated. Like a singer pitching the song to an audience, she never raised her voice, but her tone could cut or comfort. Her accent, an odd mixture of the Italian lilt of her mother-tongue and the crisp, nasal intonation of New England, made her seem exotic, as though she came from another world. Now she spoke softly, expectantly, and her hazel-colored eyes were oddly fragile, as though she feared Eddie wouldn’t like what she gave him.

Eddie sensed some importance attached to the gift, and his answer was equally subdued, “Thank you,” he muttered, staring at his hands.

Mom’s eyebrows lowered for just a second and then she smiled and gestured at him to open his gift. He pulled the box into his lap and began to do as he’d always done, finding the seam of the paper and carefully peeling the tape away. Mom made an impatient sound and ripped one corner of paper away.

“There!” She said. She’d always hated the deliberateness of his nature, saying that boys should be impulsive when they are young so that they wouldn’t regret not taking chances later in life.

“Mom! I like the paper!” Eddie said, turning and shielding the package from her with his back.

“Yes dear, I know. But I want to see what you think.”

“But you didn’t have to rip it.” Eddie pulled the last of the tape off, but

ROBERT URELL

quickly, and the edges of the paper were frayed in his haste. Slowly pulling back the paper, Eddie revealed his gift to himself. He liked to tease himself, to keep the feeling of anticipation alive as long as possible. When he saw what was behind the veil of wrapping paper, he couldn't help but frown. He looked at mom and she smiled at him, her eyes searching. Eddie pulled the last of the paper away and examined his gift.

It was a grand thing to give a child so young, a large, dark, leather-bound portfolio that held big sheets of rough paper by means of a metal clamp hidden in its spine. It smelled old and new, a musky whiff of ancient oiled leather and crisp, fresh paper and something else, something warm and alive, like puppy's breath, clean and vital and strangely intimate. He breathed in the scent and it curled up through his nose and warmed his middle. He closed his eyes and felt as though he should know it from somewhere. As though it were a part of him he'd never known was missing, but now that it was back, he felt complete.

"It belonged to your grandfather," mom told him, her voice somehow reluctant and eager at once. Eddie opened his eyes and listened, his face intent. Mom very rarely spoke of her father. "He was known as a great artist, you know. People said he had the true eye. He saw things others didn't."

"Thanks, Mom." Eddie said. He felt confused, but didn't want that to be taken as disappointment, so he forced his voice sound brighter than he felt and he smiled at her.

"Thank your father," she said, waving her hand airily, but Eddie could tell she was pleased. "He found it in the attic."

Eddie looked across the room, toward the den, where he could just see his dad's bare feet propped up on an ottoman. Eddie knew better than to speak to his dad when the news was on.

His mother cleared her throat and, when she had his attention, said, "I would like to be first in your book." Eddie stared at her as though she were joking. She made an impatient sound. "I would like it if you drew a picture of me."

"I don't even know what to do, Mom."

"Just try it, please? Oh! It's in your blood!" She pursed her lips and looked at him impatiently. "Do you know what your grandfather used to say?"

"Mom, you never talk about Grandpa," Eddie said. "How could I know what he used to say?"

"It was a rhetorical question, smarty. And I do not speak of him for good

HOW EDDIE CHANGED THE WORLD

reason. He was a bad man. But he was also wise,” she said, holding up her finger. She cocked her head and smiled. “Sometimes. He knew things. He used to say, ‘Art can change the world in ways war and politics can never aspire.’ What do you think of that?”

Eddie smirked and said, “I think he was crazy. Art doesn’t do anything, Mom. It just is.”

“Someday you will find otherwise, I think. For now, I would like you to draw me. Won’t you do this small thing for me?” Something she wasn’t saying made Eddie nervous. The simple thing she was asking for seemed so frivolous compared to the intensity he sensed in her. She wanted something beyond what she told him. After a moment’s consideration, Eddie shrugged, then nodded, deciding to humor her. Whatever she thought was going to happen, he couldn’t see any harm in such a small thing.

Mom stood and offered him her hand and a whiff of her perfume, violets and musk, pulled him to his feet. She let him hold her hand while she led the way to her bedroom, a mysterious place where he was rarely allowed. A place of yellow and white striped wallpaper and the antique vanity where she sat every morning and brushed her long hair, passing an ancient camel-hair brush through it with slow, smooth strokes. One whole wall was a window that looked out into the backyard, and her favorite chair sat like a fat, overstuffed toadstool basking in the yellow light streaming in from outside. And there was her bed, a small, thin mattress in a plain pine frame with a pair of small, yellow and green teddy bears guarding a great pile of pillows artfully scattered at the head of the bed as though anyone could ever sleep there without first piling the excess cushions on the floor. It was a space more suited to an adolescent girl still dreaming of a glorious life to come than a disillusioned housewife past caring whatever the future might bring. Only later would it occur to him that his mother and father slept in separate rooms, and even then it was only in hindsight that he could see just how unmarried a married couple they were.

They stepped into her room and Mom released Eddie’s hand. He quelled a stab of disappointment. She rarely showed any kind of affection, and he savored those moments when she opened herself to him, even though they flitted by like butterflies, like leaves in the wind, here and then gone with nothing but warm feelings to remember them by.

Mom walked across the room. She spun and made a production of posing herself in her chair, her hands folded in her lap, her feet flat on the floor, and then

ROBERT URELL

looked expectantly at him. The sun peeked over her shoulder with the curiosity of early morning and the golden light made her glow. She was a beautiful then, auburn haired and slender, just past her twenties and still fresh, despite marriage and motherhood coming so early in life. Like any boy, Eddie was very much in love with his mother. She was the beginning and end for him, and no other woman in his life would ever escape her shadow.

Even though he'd never drawn a serious picture before, seeing mom like that, Eddie decided he would put it all on paper, just as it was. He grabbed a black pencil from among the many that rested in leather loops on the inside of his book, and he set the point against the first page and then looked at her again.

That's when he stopped, when his enthusiasm dispersed and he realized just where all this would lead. He'd scribble some babyish stick figure and mom would pretend to be excited and she'd show it to his father or tape it to the front of the refrigerator and, after a day or so, she would forget it. Later, during the next week, she'd look at it once or twice and maybe even smile at her little boy's picture. She'd keep it there, in its place of honor, until the edges curled and the tape came loose and then she would take it down and maybe even save it in a scrapbook but most likely it would go in a pile with all the other art projects he'd brought home from school. And eventually it would be like some ancient scroll buried in a tomb, lost and forgotten and hardly missed anyways. It wouldn't ever *mean* anything. Though he couldn't have explained it, he didn't even consciously understand it at all, Eddie did not want to draw a picture that would be so quickly dismissed and forgotten. Eddie wanted to draw something *true*.

But he didn't know how to begin. He had no skill for art, no training and no understanding of technique or anatomy or perspective. The process was an enigma. He stared at the sheet of paper and he frowned in concentration and he tried to *will* some image to appear on the paper like a dot-to-dot painting he could then just trace out. Eddie's frustration made him nauseous and angry, and he felt as though he was going to cry. He didn't know what to do, but he wanted so badly to please his mom, to make her smile. There had to be some way he could do this thing, but nothing came to mind and he found himself staring blankly at the empty page and wishing he were tucked away someplace where nobody could find him.

Finally, because he just didn't know what else to do, Eddie began to draw. And as he drew, he looked at mom and he tried to make his hands fashion something that at least approximated what he saw. And as the drawing inevitably became

HOW EDDIE CHANGED THE WORLD

something else, something sloppy and babyish, aimless scribbles and loops of gray on white, as un-artistic as he'd feared, he gave up trying at all and just let his hands do what they would do no matter what he wanted. He turned his attention to the windows and the world outside and he wished he could be anywhere but here. His options exhausted, humiliated by the scene he saw forthcoming when she saw what he'd made, Eddie felt himself grow angry with mom for forcing this upon him. It wasn't as though he'd asked for it, and he'd even tried to tell her he didn't know how. She did this, and his face felt hot with the shame of it.

The deep, confident voice of dad's favorite news anchor, Luke Phillips, wafted in from the den. Eddie latched onto that and tried to ignore the occasional impatient sounds mom made as she waited for him to finish. *"Police have yet to find any clue to her whereabouts and lead detectives say the longer Tabitha Haines remains missing, the worse the probable outcome."*

Eddie looked down at the paper, and was amazed to see the details of a face emerging from under his pencil. Somehow, here was the shaded hollow of a softly rounded cheek, there was the delicate curve of a chin. From out of the chaos he'd wrought before, order appeared as if placed there by some miracle. Even as he watched, more detail emerged, his pencil still scratching across the page as though by itself. Features he'd known from birth, a face that had imprinted itself upon his brain as an infant. It began to look like mom.

Eddie's breath caught and his eyes widened. The pencil moved faster and faster, gaining confidence as he watched, it became a blur and it seemed the image constructed itself from the gray lines.

It's in your blood! she'd said, and he'd scoffed at the idea, but nothing in his life had prepared him for this. He had no choice but to believe. Pride surged with Eddie's pulse. He was an artist! He thought about paying more attention, of getting it just right. He tried to stop the pencil for a moment, to get a better look at what he was doing, but it was like trying to move someone else's hand from the inside. He couldn't stop it. He had no control over the pencil, it ignored his commands, went about its business, independent. At first Eddie didn't know enough to fear this new thing. Maybe, he thought, this is how it is with artists. Maybe talent was nothing less magical and mysterious than what was happening before him. But as the picture gained clarity and his hand showed no sign of returning to his control, Eddie began to fear.

"In other news, NFL Hall of Famer, Ritchie Hall stands accused of abducting and sexually assaulting a twelve year old boy from New York's

ROBERT URELL

Central Park. Hall declined to comment, but the District Attorney's Office released a statement saying the case against the three-time All Pro linebacker was, quote, 'very strong'."

The picture was going terribly wrong. Though it still resembled his mother in the most obvious ways, it also seemed he'd drawn the face of a stranger. Where Eddie had an image of mom in his head, a sweet woman with a strangely wistful smile, the woman on the paper had mom's features but her face seemed so wretched and unhappy, terrible, evil. This woman despised her husband, resented her son. She wished she could run away, could take herself back and forget all the responsibility of a life she'd never wanted, all the regrets piled up higher and higher each day. This woman knew about hate, would kill to escape the confines of marriage and motherhood. She was desperate to be free, though she really didn't know what 'free' meant anymore. She thought of herself as a slave, chained to a man and a boy she hardly knew. This woman was not like his mother at all.

"And now for a look at a tragic story just breaking in Topeka, Kansas. Two different tornadoes struck a church on the outskirts of the city during morning services. No word on casualties, but estimates put the death toll at over a hundred, and authorities there fear the worst."

The drawing finished itself so quickly, while Eddie tried to regain control of his hand, that he didn't have a moment to think. Suddenly the pencil stopped, and a cramp curled his hand in upon itself like a salted slug. Eddie's eyes teared up from the pain, and it was several seconds before he could open them and look at the drawing. His mother didn't move from her chair or ask him what was wrong. She sat, staring into space, her mouth set in a prim line as though he'd done something disgusting in public and she was ignoring it in the hope that it would go away by itself.

Eddie stared at what he'd made and a sick certainty washed away his burgeoning doubt before it could form enough power to allow him any illusions. Whatever he'd thought of mom before, whatever love and devotion he had for her, what was there on the paper was somehow truer, more accurate. This was his mother as she really was. He could see it behind her face, like something hiding under a paper mask. The face in the sketch was the monster hiding in his mother. She wouldn't like it if she knew what he'd seen.

"Mom?" he said.

"Yes?"

HOW EDDIE CHANGED THE WORLD

“Would you hate me if I didn’t show you my picture?”

“Oh, Eddie! I could never hate you! Why would you ask that?” Mom’s eyes grew just a bit defensive and strangely fearful.

“I’d just like to keep this to myself,” he said. “I won’t show it to anyone else.”

Mom leaned forward and tried to take a look at the page. Eddie hopped to his feet and backed away with the sketch pressed against his stomach. He looked into her eyes and tried to make her understand but she leaned back, her lips pursed and her face slightly flushed in anger.

“Give it to me, Eddie,” she said.

Eddie shook his head and stared at the floor. He couldn’t stand the intensity of her glare. Her eyes were like heat lamps, he felt so hot and uncomfortable.

“Eddie!” Mom snapped. “Now!”

Eddie couldn’t help himself. Her voice was like a crack of thunder, the Word of God. He obeyed so quickly he didn’t have time to wonder at the fact that he seemed to have no will against her.

Mom snatched the book from his hands and turned it around to see what he’d drawn. Eddie watched the blood leave her face, the bright rosy blooms of her cheeks snuffed in an instant. Her hands began to shake so badly he thought she was having a seizure. Mom only stared at the picture for a few seconds, but her breath came in labored gasps. When she held it out for him to take it back, there was sweat beaded on her brow as though she’d run a mile. Eddie held the sketchbook between them and backed away until the backs of his legs bumped against the edge of her bed and he sat down, never having taken his eyes off of her.

Mom regarded him for a moment, as though she debated her options, and then made a decision. She smiled, but it didn’t touch her eyes, and somehow Eddie knew she would leave that night, after the rest of the house was asleep. She’d take a small suitcase, the green one in the hall closet. She would abandon him because he’d seen her truly, and she knew what he’d seen.

“Just like your grandfather, Eddie. You should be proud.” She smiled and patted her hair as though it were ever out of place and then she stood up and walked away. She said something over her shoulder about taking a drive and that he and Father should order a pizza for dinner. She walked away and the last thing Eddie saw of his mom was her back as she hurried from the room and out of his life.

The next morning, Eddie wasn’t surprised when Father came into the kitchen and fixed breakfast for just the two of them. They ate in silence and went about their separate days without either of them acknowledging how very easily they’d let

ROBERT URELL

her escape their happy home, and Eddie certainly never told Father the truth behind his mom's departure. Nor did he mention the despair in her eyes the last time she'd ever looked at him, the son who knew she hated him.

And so Eddie and his father lived alone. Mom's bedroom door was locked and neither spoke of her leaving. Eddie put his book away, for a time, vowed a boy's oath to give up drawing forever, but life quickly grew stale and lifeless. He'd found something unexpected in his newly discovered talent, and everything else seemed so surreal without it.

Eddie's fingers itched for the smooth feel of a pencil between them, the images that nearly burst his skull coming to life with each subtle shading, each line and curve *creating* pictures of things only he could see. And that was also a problem, something he couldn't escape. No matter who he looked at, he saw all the secret hatreds and pettiness in them where it lurked behind their eyes. Somehow that one drawing he'd made of mom had uncorked something inside him that refused to go back into its bottle. Now, he couldn't ignore the things that people thought and did. They hounded him, driving themselves like spikes in his brain until nowhere he turned was safe from the prying vices of everyone around him. He saw sin and corruption everywhere, and for him there was no escape but solitude.

At first he bore it well, it served as punishment, in his mind, for having driven his mother way. But as the visions wore on without relief, they became a wedge between Eddie and everyone else. His eyes became piercing, his stares too intent to bear. One by one, his family and friends shunned him, uncomfortably aware of the changes he'd undergone. Eddie became first an outcast, then a hermit. He became snappish and withdrawn, subject to strange fits of rage, and equally troubling bouts of deep withdrawal and depression. He hibernated in his room, even took his meals there. He longed to disappear, to be forgotten, and only rarely emerged to snatch something from the refrigerator before bolting back to the safety of his room where he could pretend no one would remember he was there.

Eddie became someone else, someone impossible to understand, and Eddie's father, Martin, decided one day that it was his responsibility to do something about it.

Martin entered Eddie's bedroom without knocking. Eddie stared at him warily. "Eddie...how are you?" Martin asked. He was a blocky man, so opposite from

HOW EDDIE CHANGED THE WORLD

the willowy beauty of his wife that they'd struck a kind of yin/yang chord with their friends. Where Katharine had been petite and rounded and soft, Martin was a series of squares stacked up from the floor like a half-finished granite sculpture. His hair was prematurely gray, his face taut and unlined. His eyes were soft, liquid brown, the one feature that made his linear symmetry human.

Eddie stared up from the floor at his father with his mother's hard eyes and said, "I'm fine. You didn't knock." Martin couldn't help but notice how his son's voice seemed like a growl, how his eyes were hard and defensive, how much like his mom he'd become. He'd never thought, when the boy was born, how much he'd hate the similarities Eddie shared with Katharine. There was an impenetrable hardness to the both of them, a bright steel wall between them and the world that Martin couldn't and wouldn't breach.

Martin became angry. "You've become a bear to live with, Eddie." He shifted uncomfortably. "You need to get out of this room. I thought you'd like to bring your sketchbook into the living room and—"

"You want me to draw you."

"Yeah. I think I'd like that."

Eddie shook his head, "Mom didn't like it very much."

Martin's face hardened, "I'm not your mother. Bring your things."

Martin made his way into the living room. He sat in his favorite chair, a huge brown leather recliner Eddie had always remembered being in that exact spot, next to the bookcase, in line with the television. The living room held nothing of mom's taste. Where the rest of the house was indisputably hers, the softer touch of a woman had never violated this space, which was all dark hardwood bookshelves and ancient burnt orange carpeting. Mom had left this one place for Father as a token gesture to his masculinity. Accordingly, dad had honored the unwritten compact and mainly kept himself in his den, when he wasn't at work. Even in her absence, he didn't violate her space.

Martin settled in and watched Eddie trudge into the room, his sketchbook held in front of his chest, arms hugging it tight against him. "How should I pose?" Martin asked. He became nervous, now that the moment was upon him. He was a man who avoided cameras, eschewed attention of any kind, when he could. Sitting for a portrait was not a natural act for him.

Eddie shrugged, but took pity on his father. "Lean back, dad. Just get comfortable." Eddie turned on the television. "Just watch some TV and you won't even notice I'm here."

ROBERT URELL

Martin nodded, and pretended to relax and watch the evening news. He regretted the idea, now that it was in action.

“Searchers made a grisly discovery while combing the woods around the Haines home early Monday morning. Torn and bloodied clothing that Tabitha Haines’s mother identified as the pajamas Tabitha wore on the night of her disappearance.”

Eddie hardly looked at him before putting his pencil to the page. Martin couldn’t help but be amused. He’d taken a look at the ‘portrait’ Eddie said he’d done of his mom the day she’d left. It was just a bunch of squiggly lines, not a proper drawing at all. Martin remembered that his wife had come from a long line of artists and sculptors, and it hadn’t surprised him that she’d tried to fill Eddie’s head with some nonsense of the talent being inherited. If it was genetic, Martin thought, it had certainly passed his son by.

But, then again, maybe there was something to it after all, because the longer he’d stared at Eddie’s picture, the more uneasy he’d felt. At some point it stopped being a mess of gray lines on white paper and more like a maze, and then something more organized, a map of some kind. Martin had found himself leaning forward and a sudden vertigo struck him, as though he were in danger of falling into the picture, like something within it waited for him.

And that was it exactly. He didn’t understand it on a conscious level, but something in the back of his brain warned him that all was not as it should be. And Martin suddenly realized what it was: Though the mass of gray lines looked nothing like any person at all, and certainly not like his wife, he couldn’t help feeling like she was on the other side of the page, staring out from the paper as if it were actually a window into wherever she’d gone. He could feel her hating him more than he’d ever suspected.

In fact, perhaps he should just stop this whole thing. Tell the boy to draw flowers or horses or something. Being a supportive father was one thing, but there was something not quite right behind Eddie’s eyes, something that seemed to pierce a person right to the bone. Something like his father-in-law, a man Martin had only met briefly, then avoided until his death.

“Maybe this isn’t such a good idea, Eddie,” Martin said.

“Right,” Eddie said. The boy was quick to close his book, as if in relief. He stood and left the room without another word, like a man fleeing a fire.

Martin watched the boy go and put the experience down as a lesson learned. He

HOW EDDIE CHANGED THE WORLD

tried to watch the news for a bit, but something troubled him. He turned the episode over in his mind, but couldn't quite place it.

“Pro football player, Ritchie Hall attended arraignment by cell phone today. Judge Lars Ulrich granted the special dispensation to Hall because, quote, “I saw Hall demolish a last second drive by the Eagles all by himself. He is a man of honor and I see no reason to inconvenience him with these petty formalities.”

“Hall could not be reached for comment.”

Martin made his way back to Eddie's room as quietly as possible. He listened at the door and heard soft sobs from within. He turned the knob as slowly as possible and inched the door open until he could see Eddie sitting Indian style on the floor with the sketchbook open in his lap.

Martin took in the scene with a glance, then his eyes locked on the exposed drawing. His mouth hung open, his breath caught in his chest. This was no mess of random lines, no picture drawn by a child. This was a perfect sketch, a masterpiece of graphite on paper. A flawless likeness of Martin, only twisted and distorted beyond recognition.

The man in the sketch looked like an illustration of a damned soul, something from Dante's Inferno. It was a picture of him, there wasn't any doubt, but by some trick of the light, the portrait seemed to display everything about him he hated most.

Here he was paying a homeless girl named Jennifer twenty dollars for a blowjob behind the dumpster at the Safeway in Camas. Here he was, the corporate snitch, selling his co-workers out for the barest chance at a promotion. Here he was waiting for Eddie in the high school parking lot, yearning to touch the young girls he saw gathered in clumps, their bare bellies flat and tanned and smooth, their small breasts straining the thin fabric that hid them. Here he was, seeing within him, all at once, everything he feared and dreaded about himself, all the urges and disgusting thoughts he locked away in himself. Here they were, in a picture his son had drawn of him.

Martin felt something break inside. Knowing these things were in him, that he was capable of even thinking those thoughts, feeling those emotions, that was bad enough. Having them broadcast for the world to see, having them cemented in reality on paper, that was just too much. He couldn't stand the look on Eddie's face..

Martin closed his mouth and tried to think of what to say to his son, what could make it right, could take it back. He wanted to speak soft words about the

ROBERT URELL

difference between thinking bad thoughts and acting on them, as he surely never had or ever could. Most of all, he wanted his son back, he wanted this sharp-eyed freak, who saw things he couldn't, out of his house.

He meant to say something reasonable, reassuring. Instead rage turned his words harsh and final, "I should have burned that book when I found it. Should have set it on fire! *Bastard!* You stupid little bastard!"

Eddie shook his head and started to say something. Martin ran out of the room, out of the house, into the street, down the block. Martin kept running until he couldn't breathe and his legs felt rubbery. He found himself on a busy street, but he couldn't tell which one in the dark. He didn't remember getting there.

The cars flew by recklessly in the dark, the wind from their passage blew cold air through Martin's thinning hair. He walked along the curb for a while and then he stepped down into the gutter. He kept his back to the oncoming traffic, his hands in his pants pocket, his head down. He began to feel comfortable with the rushing metal so close to where he walked. He edged closer to the white line. He crowded the road so closely that he could feel the warm exhaust from the cars. Still he feared them less than the look on Eddie's face and the things the boy knew about what he hated of himself the most. *How could he know?* It didn't matter. He knew. Maybe he always did, but that didn't matter either. He knew now and Martin could never face his son again. The things he'd always thought he'd teach the boy, but never had, were the things that stood between them now. There was no going home.

Martin waited for the last moment, when it would be too late for him or the driver to avoid collision, then he stepped out in front of a heavy pickup truck going nearly twice the posted limit. He tried to smile just before the thick steel grill punched him into the air like a huge balloon. He had some thought that it would be nice if he were smiling when Eddie saw him in his casket. Maybe that would make up for it all.

He didn't live long enough to come back down to earth.

Eddie was sent to live with his Uncle Thad, who was his dad's half-brother, and Eddie's only living relative besides his absent mother. Thad was a short, slender man with bad teeth. He smelled like pork-fried rice and he never wore the same pair of socks more than once. He said there was no getting them clean after having been on a person's feet. Thad wasn't a nice man, and Eddie could see things in him that turned his stomach, but only in an impersonal way, and not as strongly

as what he'd seen in his parents.

Eddie moved in to Thad's dingy one bedroom apartment in National City—Thad called it 'Nasty City' because of all the hookers and crackheads that hung out around the Navy base—and made a home for himself on the living room couch that smelled like spilt beer and rotten food and had sticky stains all over it so that he had to cover it with a blanket before he sat on it. He watched cartoons on the TV, when they were on, but otherwise spent most of the day staring out the window and trying not to think about pencils and paper.

Thad tried to talk to him, but Eddie couldn't bring himself to care that his uncle was lonely. He tried to keep quiet, hoping Thad would get bored with trying to be friendly and leave him alone, but Thad got tired of Eddie's silence instead. One night while they ate pizza in front of the television, Thad said, "You can talk about it, you know."

Eddie kept his eyes on the news and tried to think of something to say.

"You miss your mom, right?"

Eddie shrank into the couch and pressed his lips together.

"You're gonna have to talk some time, kid." Thad's voice showed his irritation and he leaned forward, trying to catch Eddie's eye. "I'm thinkin' a 'thank you' might be a nice way to start, ya think?"

"You don't want to talk to me, Uncle Thad. You don't want to like me."

"Knock it off with the drama. Gawd, you must've spent too much time with your mommy, cause your dad would've beat that out've you a long time ago." Thad shook his head and sat back, giving up again. Eddie sat there for a second, the anger boiling in him. He wasn't really mad at Thad, though. He was mad at his parents and his grandfather and himself. He was angry at the thing inside him that showed him that part of people they could hide from everyone else. And he was angry that he wouldn't ever get to be normal again. But Thad was right there next to him, and Thad deserved what he got.

Eddie turned and looked straight into Thad's eyes and said, "You dated my mom for three days, when she was new to your high school and didn't know you like the other girls who always turned you down. You tried to screw her in the back of your dad's green station wagon and when she said no you tried to force her. She kicked you in the throat while you were trying to pull her panties off and she ran away. So you went home and cried in the bathroom and then you jerked off with shaving cream. My dad beat the piss out of you when he found out, and you've always wanted to kill him for that, even though you deserved it and you know it.

ROBERT URELL

And you were glad when my dad died because you needed the money my trust fund gave you because you owe a man who says he's going to cut off your balls and feed them to you."

Thad's face paled. His jaw dropped and he made hollow strangling noises as though he were an empty plaster shell. Eddie crooked his eyebrow and said. "Is that enough talking, Uncle Thad? Would you like to hear what I know about you and Great Aunt Sherry?"

Thad popped off the couch like he was spring-loaded. He backed away from Eddie, his eyes wide and his hands in front of him as if he could ward off Eddie's words. Eddie turned back to the TV. Thad retreated down the hall to his bedroom and, from the sound of it, piled furniture in front of the door. Eddie settled back into the couch, but he didn't feel any better, just more alone than ever.

The evening news came on at six, just after a crappy Pokemon knockoff Eddie couldn't quite understand. Eddie reached for the remote to turn the TV off, but a comfortably familiar voice began speaking and the nostalgia made him pause. It was Luke Phillips, dad's favorite anchor because, as dad would say, "He's always smiling! It's like a sitcom the way that guy can grin away and he's talking about these horrible things that's going on in the world!"

And dad was right, Phillips's smile never left his face as, one after another, he delivered the news of murders and accidents and all the other inevitable day-to-day events that ripped apart families and communities and individuals. He smiled through an entire hour as he detailed death and tragedy interspersed with the weather—"It is now being confirmed there were no survivors in the tragic incident in Topeka. The death-toll stands at one-hundred and thirty seven."—and sports—"Reports are coming in that Ritchie Hall is dead, this evening. The cause of death is not being released as yet, but considering Hall's recent legal troubles, suicide cannot be ruled out." It seemed so blatant, so inappropriate, and Eddie couldn't help wondering what it would be like, knowing he was going to die, only to wind up as another lead-in story turned punch-line on the nightly news.

And it went on and on. One after another, an endless parade of anonymous atrocities served up to faceless viewers, and millions of people drank it in until they choked. It never, ever stopped pouring from the screen like a runaway hose nobody knew how to shut off. Worse still were the things the people on TV *didn't* say, the horrible things their monsters told Eddie about them. The secrets of murder and

HOW EDDIE CHANGED THE WORLD

rage and jealousy that poured even from the glass eye of a camera lens, made Eddie finally positive he had no way to escape what he saw in others. The only thing he couldn't see was how to come to terms with it.

Eddie sat through an hour of the national broadcast, a half hour from the local affiliate. He sat dazed through four hours of programming he didn't really see, then another half hour of national news, three hours of late shows, five hours of infomercials and reruns. Evil after evil, petty and malicious, insensible and outrageous, one after another after another until he couldn't help wonder why nobody *did* anything. Then it came to him: They saw but they didn't see. Lost in the flood coming from their televisions, nobody put together the horror they felt and the deeds they knew needed doing. To them it was just another form of entertainment, a pre-show for primetime. It just wasn't real to them.

There was something there, just in the back of Eddie's head. Something he wasn't seeing or thinking. He felt the germ of an idea taking shape as his eyes and ears took in huge doses of death and evil and hypocrisy. Someone had to do something. Something should be done.

"In other news, three local area banks have begun accepting donations on behalf of the Haines family. A family spokesman said the missing girl's parents are truly grateful and would like to especially thank local detectives for their determined efforts in the ongoing investigation. If you are interested in sending money or condolences, the address is...." A picture of the grieving parents standing on the front stoop of their small gray house gave Eddie all the nudge he needed. There was something the news wasn't saying about the Haines family. Eddie had an exclusive story on his hands.

"In a bizarre twist, the Tabitha Haines disappearance has resolved itself. Tabitha's father, Peter Haines, has surrendered to police after a four-hour standoff. He was immediately shuttled to a local area hospital for treatment of self-inflicted wounds. Though Haines was never a suspect in the disappearance of his daughter, it's now being released that he has confessed to raping and killing the fourteen year old girl."

Police refuse to comment on Mr. Haines's condition, but a spokesperson for the hospital says that Mr. Haines apparently castrated himself with a pair of sewing scissors. He is listed in serious condition."

Eddie looked up from the thick stacks of envelopes and new portraits to be

ROBERT URELL

mailed out. The news anchor was different, Luke Phillips had recently resigned to devote himself to his new career as a Buddhist neophyte. He'd read a statement on his last broadcast saying that he needed to spend the rest of his life atoning for crimes he had committed during his tour of duty as a sniper in the Vietnam Conflict.

Eddie made a note of the new anchor's name and kink, Russ Mathews, homosexual. He looked at the stack of portraits and wondered how they would be taken, what their recipients would think when they arrived. They included a contractor and the county inspector he'd bribed to certify a church in Kansas 'tornado resistant', and a mother so incensed and inflamed with greed and shame that she would rather take legal action against a city police department than admit she'd known from the start her son was a dangerous, uncontrollable pedophile. There was a Pope, a President and his entire Cabinet, several CEOs and accountants, corrupt police officers, blind judges, a couple of vindictive college football referees and a man from an infomercial named Chuck Berkowitz who sold informational packets for a real-estate buying system he knew had a better than 90% chance of bankrupting anyone who followed the plan.

Eddie sighed, weary, and then went back to work, stuffing each portrait into its envelope, licking stamps and copying addresses in his sloppy unsophisticated hand. He looked at how far he'd come, and how much further he had to go, and he smiled just a little, and the shadows under his eyes seemed to fade a bit, his back straightened just slightly. For the first time in a long time, Eddie felt something like happiness, and it didn't bother him so much what his gift had cost him, not in the face of the good he could do because of it.

Eddie liked the work he was doing, and his life seemed better than he'd ever imagined it could be after his mom had gone away. Things were looking up for him, he had no complaints. Only, he wished Uncle Tad's decomposing body in the bedroom didn't smell so bad. Why the man had to kill himself inside the apartment was beyond Eddie, but the boy was thankful that at least he'd had the decency to use pills instead of something messy. Besides, Eddie figured, it gave him the opportunity to work uninterrupted for a while. Nobody bothered him while he drew since he'd shown Tad his portrait. He was all alone. That is, until the rent came due, and by then he might have gotten enough done that he could rest for a while. That would be nice, he thought. He picked up his latest piece, the portrait of one of his old schoolteachers, a woman who hated children and had once dated a man just for

HOW EDDIE CHANGED THE WORLD

his money and the things he could give her. If anyone deserved a reckoning, it was her, Eddie thought. With all the corruption he saw all around him, it was a good thing there was someone to set things straight again.