3/98 Very early deleted prologue from Acts of Malice

Prologue

Although I was only six at the time, I remember everything about him. He smelled like a pipe and he always brought home a piece of hard orange candy for me. During dinner, I would suck on it at the table while the maid moved around us. When people came to have supper with us they always told me I was so well-behaved and smiled at me. I would smile back because you had to play the game by their rules whenever they were looking. That's what he told me. He told me to get good at it.

The house was much too big for us. Mother was never around, and we only kept a few lights on after dark. In the middle of the night when I woke up screaming in my dark bedroom he came running, his hair sticking up all over and his feet bare. He never got mad at me for waking him up because he knew I had bad dreams.

Then he would sit on the edge of my bed and talk to me about people. He would talk on and on until my eyes closed and I sank down into sleep, comforted by the rumbling of his voice. I remember so many things he said: that people always try to get you and you have to get them first; that people don't care about you, so you have to protect yourself; that people are stupid and thank God we are smart. That following the rules got you nowhere fast. That you had to bend the rules to beat the game.

Things like that.

Sometimes he took me fishing. We pretended to be all alone in the world. I believe he loved me. I believe I made him happy sometimes.

I had a pony and a tutor and a chauffeur to take me to

school. Most of the kids didn't like me because we were rich. He said ignore them, but I never could. I wanted to hurt them like they hurt me, and sometimes I did get back at them in some little way.

He said a lot of things, and mostly I heard them. I only wouldn't listen when he talked about his own father and how he hung himself from a tree and left him to grow up alone. Some things are too hard to hear.

Then one day on a hot afternoon without any breeze, the Sheriff came to see him. They went into the study to argue. I remember the Sheriff's voice coming through the door at me, so loud and mad.

When the Sheriff left, slamming the front door, I rushed into the study.

All I could see was his dark hair, because he had buried his face in his hands. I put my arm around him. I told him, "He's stupid. Don't listen to him."

He lifted his head. His eyes were terrible, red and staring. "Go outside and play," he said, pushing me away. I wouldn't leave. I went over in the corner and sat there quiet as a cat because I didn't want to go play.

He let me stay. He put his face back in his hands and I held myself so still my muscles shivered from the effort.

But he noticed me anyway. "I'm going to have to leave you, Bean," he said finally. "I don't have a choice about it." He wouldn't look at me. He stared at something I couldn't see located somewhere in the middle of the room between the desk and the doorway. Maybe remembering the Sheriff.

I didn't answer, because I didn't understand. Leave me? Did he mean until dinner?

"Bean." I edged in closer until I stood next to him. He wore

a white shirt and tie, as usual, his collar very stiff. His gold watch ticked. I hated that noise. I had never heard it before. It had never been quiet enough for me to hear that.

"They're taking my money," he told me. "And I'm going away. You won't see me anymore."

"No," I said. "I don't want them to take all the money. I don't want you to leave me. If they come to get you, we'll get out all the guns and shoot them."

"There's a bunch of them," he said. "Too many to fight."

I had never heard him say such a thing. I said, "We're smarter than they are! How can they win?"

"Jesus, I never thought they'd figure it out." He wasn't even looking at me. He talked to that invisible thing in the middle of the room.

I hit him on the shoulder to bring him back to me. He looked at me, surprised, rubbing it. Then he took hold of my arms and looked in my eyes.

"Listen," he said. "Don't forget this. Are you listening?" He squeezed harder. "Don't you let them beat you. Take care of number one. Do whatever you have to do to win. I'm sorry. It's going to be hard for you. I wanted better for you. I wanted to make it easy. I wanted - " Then his mouth just hung open, as if he'd forgotten what else to say.

"Go out and play," he said.

I remember I refused again. This time, he took me by the arm very gently and led me to the front door.

"Get on out there," he said, giving me a push. "I have to be alone."

I did not have a choice. I went out onto the lawn and looked for my ball. Above the ridge, a sun no bigger than a tangerine was setting through the big tree. Birds flew by, maybe geese,

honking. I was hungry, and I wanted to be called in for a meal. I lay down on the grass where I could watch the tree, tossing my ball in the air, smelling the grass so deeply it went all through my body, until I was a green thing like the grass, until I forgot the staring of his red eyes.

I kept my eyes fixed on that tree until it was nothing but a black thing against a black sky. The crickets started up along the river. Light leaked away, and the cool crept in.

Then I heard the shot.