

Chapter 7 – T.U.L.I.P.

All God's Saints Wear Ralph Lauren

The Dutch are famous for their tulips and in seventh grade at Calvin Christian we learn about another tulip – T.U.L.I.P. the core doctrine of theology according to John Calvin and supposedly, a way of life around here. Unlike the flower it's named after, the five points don't exactly recall a spring day. They are more reminiscent of stark, 16th century woodcuts of souls burning.

Emerging from my heavy metal phase, I understand this worldview because hell and damnation are subjects that Calvin and Ronnie James Dio share in common. In Calvin's hell, however, there are no women with 40 double D breasts slithering between the legs of shirtless men wearing spandex and brandishing flying V guitars. In Calvin's hell – and every guilty child keeps this fact top of mind – there is no safety crew waiting off camera to control the pyrotechnics.

On the walls of Eleanor Roosevelt Elementary were crayon interpretations of the wolfman character from the cover of Ozzy Osbourne's 'Bark at the Moon', terrorizing someone's little sister. Needless to say, in the hallways of Calvin Christian, these sorts of things did not appear in classroom art projects. Instead, someone has taped up around the school and in the class rooms, construction paper cutouts of a red tulip with the acronym T.U.L.I.P. written in black marker down the green stem.

Now October has arrived and in Bible class, we are learning what T.U.L.I.P. actually means. Mrs. Meijerhoff, the bible teacher, is a short, efficient, Germanic woman. The kind of woman you might imagine giving drills in the Army or teaching nurses in Africa how to contain an epidemic. She announces zealously “TULIP is part of our heritage.” As the only shock of black frizz in a sea of blonde heads, it’s ‘their heritage’ not anything I own. Especially today, since I’ve taken a few punches on the playground.

“Just like the red and yellow flowers T-U-L-I-P is drawn from the very reason we all have been chosen by God.”

I have no idea what she meant by that analogy. “WTF,” as my friends from my old school like to say.

A student at the front of the class is asked to get up and pass out handouts –pink copy paper with a picture of the same semi-geometric TULIP that hangs in front of the class. “Either the Bible teacher can’t draw,” I think to myself, “or we’re supposed to know this isn’t about anything pretty.” Sitting in that sea-foam-blue classroom, my stomach gets a gnaw telling me that what comes next was going to be something like Confirmation only not even as fun and without a party at the Serbian Hall when the whole thing is over.

Mrs. Meijerhoff waits for all the pink sheets of paper to be handed out. She threatens that if the whispering doesn’t stop, we’ll have to go straight through lunch with today’s Bible

lesson. The class straightens up like prisoners in a reeducation camp. She writes the letters T-U-L-I-P on the board, expands her metal pointer and begins to make her point.

“Now, follow along on the handout...Shelly Weirs, stop fiddling inside your desk.”

She’s speaking in those long pauses, something she does when she feels particularly intense about something in the Bible lessons.

“Shut desks, zippered mouths, open minds.”

Mrs. Meijerhoff’s daughter is on the eighth grade girls basketball team. She’s a tall girl who makes the most graceful three-pointer you’ll ever see, her ponytail moving a perfect sine wave when she leaps and lands back on the court. Opposed to her offspring, Mrs. Meijerhoff is a female lawn gnome. I wonder how Mrs. Meijerhoff could have given birth to such a Valkrie?

"Kevin, put the comic book away or I'm taking it." Long pause again. She breathes a deep “are you ready for this?” breath.

"Now, here's what the letters in TULIP stands for:"

And she’s thrilled, about-to-ride-a-roller-coaster thrilled. She’s grinning like most people grin when they have a mouth full of s’mores but Calvinism, as I’m about to find out, is as

far away from melted chocolate and marshmallows as Chicago is from Geneva, Switzerland.

“T! T is for Total Depravity!” Mrs. Meijerhoff says it using the voice of an umpire, shouting ‘Play Ball!’

“Total De-prav (long pause and breathe out) -ity. Sin has affected every part of the human character, therefore we cannot find salvation on our own. We find Salvation only if God wills it. And he finds us through how? How?”

The class falls from quiet to absolutely silent. So quiet you can hear planes taking off at the airport ten miles away.

Bible class seems contradictory to actually being a Christian because to me, Bible teachers, Sunday school teachers and the self-righteous all act as if our brains come preloaded with this information.

"You should re-mem-ber this from laaast year. The Holy Spirit. God's will is realized through the Holy Spirit.”

She smiles again. Little do I know that her wrecking ball of theology is about to obliterate every friendly, sunny Sunday school picture of Jesus I’ve ever held in my little mind. The cute 1st grade song ‘Jesus Loves Me’ is about to get some seriously creepy subtext.

Kevin and myself are the only two students who haven't grown up in the type of churches which advocate Mrs. Meijerhoff's complex and serious path to salvation. It all sounds like hitting a deep G note on a organ over and over. On Sundays Kevin and I are the type of church people who sit on the metal folding chairs of charismatic, school gym and converted grocery store churches. The kind of churches where the Holy Spirit causes you to get up dance then fall down, collapsing like you're having an epileptic fit. Our concept of the Holy Spirit is all about someone's 159-year-old grandmother falling out of a pew onto the floor.

"Mr. DeJong, Mr. Kevin Brown do you find something funny about the Holy Spirit?"

"No." I say, as I try to stop myself from thinking about old women falling down so you can see the tops of the stockings.

"Not really." Kevin can't contain his snicker. Because we associate the Holy Spirit with collapsing fits and shaking tambourines, Holy Ghost is a word we use when we're goofing around something we evoke as we throw tiny sunfish back in the water at Wolf Lake, yelling out like a black Baptist preacher. "You've got the Holy Ghost now fish!"

"Would you two like to share what you find so funny with the rest of the class?"

Snickers emitted from the rest of the class, two more diminishing 'nos' from us.

"OK then, let's continue." She raises her pitch.

"U! What is it? What is U? Our inability to chooooooose...choooooose our own salvation leads us to U. *The* cornerstone of the Reformed faith! Unconditional Election.

Unconditional Election, Un...con...dit...ion...al.' Fading like echo effect on a song by ELO.

Back from the echo to a slightly fevered pitch. "This doctrine teaches us God chooses some of us to be saved and some to be damned. Election and damnation are solely God's will and our election to be saved or not, OR TO NOT to be saved." She spins her pointing stick backwards in the air like a lasso and when she stops her short, stern and hard-pudge of a body takes a short jump backward from where she is standing and she exclaims, "were decided way before the world was even created!"

"Decided before the world was even created." She says it again, so it sinks in. In the minds of us seventh graders constantly thinking about whether or not to act on throbbing impulses to have sex or urges shoplift, the words 'before the world was even created' are a grand piano falling on the head of passing pedestrians. This rubs against every lesson of childhood behavioral modification we've ever learned, not to mention all that 'what a friend we have in Jesus' stuff.

And for me, a child from a recently born-again household who is being raised on health food and the fear of ending up in a lake of sulfur fire for eternity in a neighborhood where sin, like candy at the corner store, is two blocks in every direction with an increasingly petty mother, Unconditional Election hits me like falling bricks on top of that piano hitting my head.

“Eat your Cheerios because if you continue to throw them on the floor you'll make God angry and end up in hell for all eternity.”

“I found that Hustler under your bed! You may think defiling yourself in the night is a carnival now but wait 'til you die and you end up in a lake of sulfur fire.”

Suddenly questions arise as if just-discovered Dead Sea Scrolls rolled up in bottles were suddenly floating to the top of the salty Dead Sea and down the Little Calumet River. Hands go up all around me.

"So that means, if I have sex before marriage then really, it's not my decision, I'm just gonna have it?"

"Then what's the point of even trying to be saved?"

"How are we know who is going to be saved?"

Will my little sister be saved? My mom says she's bad." And with this question, Mrs.

Meijerhoff simply turns her back to a perplexed class and continues.

I look around the room for any chance of a snicker sputtering out from anyone, anyone at all. None. Some are confused, others are enraptured, a few sit smugly in their desks, a handful are visibly scared.

Everyone is about to be caught at the scene of the crime and they don't even know it.

"L!" The teacher spins on her heel. "L! Limited Atonement!" One more spin and she continues in a voice borrowed from a medicine show barker, "Limited Atonement teaches us Christ died for the sins of some..." She glances around the room "but not the sins of others."

Ms. Meijerhoff repeats her self. "Died for some, but not the sins of others."

Dread fills the air like hot haze from a pipe on busted steam heater. You can feel it, thick, dark, doomy. All Sunday School niceties fly out the window forever. Foreboding organs everywhere are playing something in G, only off key. Children of God or not, like the hot feeling of plaster drying over your hand, the terror of this notion sets in quickly. This Limited Atonement is worse than the lie of a permanent record universally obtainable by adults worldwide.

"So even if I try to be saved," leans over to Kevin ask me. "I might not be?"

I'm not sure but he almost seems to be asking this with a glaze of glee on his tongue.

"I. Kevin, do you want to read I in TULIP on the handout for the class?" asks this Death Angel of a teacher.

Behind me, Anke-Marie Sluiter whispers, not quite below her breath, "Kevin should read I for 'I smell.'" Anke Marie is an exceptionally bitchy, not-quite-beautiful-but-better-than-ugly girl with blonde full bodied hair (all seventh grade girls in this school have blonde hair but hers is a thicker grade) who I've realized, in my short time at this school, is largely responsible for starting campaigns of cruelty and choosing the target of the junior high crusades.

Kevin was prime for her random attack cruise missiles. He had two Akita dogs, didn't shower as regularly as pre-teen boy should and sometimes, the rank, damp smell of their dogs' fur would transfer to his clothes.

"I guess, it says here that I is 'Irresistible Grace.'" Kevin says with a not-paying-attention-and-called-on gulp.

"It's good smelly can read," Anke Marie says in another loud whisper.

When we sing “Onward Christian Soldiers” at chapel, a Chaucerish drawing of Anke Marie in armor always appears in my mind. Kevin calls her the bitter nun. “I bet she’s frigid,” he’d say.

Kevin sits there, silent. Kevin and I spend a small percentage of our idle time lighting things on fire by the side of the railroad tracks, pretending we’re hobos warming our hands, so we know a thing or two about what damnation in eternal fire might be like. Hell feels like melted plastic searing your skin. Not for a quick moment, but forever.

“What do you, Kevin, or anyone else thinks that means?” says Ms. Meijerhoff. He’s not as freaked out about grace and sulfur fire as I am and responds with shrugs and dunnos that say “This is stupid.” I am incredibly envious of anyone with his natural agnosticism.

Ms. Meijerhoff clasps her hands together in a “Oh, that’s wonderful,” grip. “Irresistible Grace means that when God wants you to be saved, it doesn't matter what you do or think, you can't resist God's grace. You will be saved. If you are predestined for Heaven you cannot, I repeat, cannot resist God's grace.”

I imagine someone in a shopping mall freaking out as the feeling of Irresistible Grace takes over. Maybe it’s softer. That craving for a hot pretzel? Must be the call to salvation. For me, I associate the idea of something being irresistible with food. I wonder if the call for salvation tastes like roast beef and gravy or custard.

Mrs. Meijerhoff looks at us as if we should all be elated.

I'm certain that everyone wearing Ralph Lauren polo shirts, like Anke Marie, feels elated about all this. They know they're chosen.

From the back corner of the room, a chubby girl with big plastic rimmed glasses enthusiastically shoots up her hand. I recognize her as the only seventh grade soloist in the school choir, Karen DeVries. Karen talking voice the same alto pitch as the one she sang with only more anxious and shrill.

"Irresistible grace?" A theater balcony wide bracey smile comes over her face. "Does that mean, does that mean that's why I had that feeling of being lifted up when I was born again?"

'Jeez.' I think. 'Jeeesus. She sounds like this makes you the kid picked to play the Grand Prize Game on Bozo's Circus.'

At revivals I've been attending lately with my mother, there are always some people pulled out of the congregation to the front of the audience with passion in their hearts, tears in their eyes and sometimes even a harrowing story, hands raised and ready to be saved. And here I sit, unswayed, certain that not an ounce of irresistible grace had even entered my blood stream.

I know Karen DeVries' mother is evangelical. I can sense Karen's Christian-and-I'm-constantly-joyous-voice makes even Ms. Meijerhoff, stepped in old Protestantism, a bit nervous.

The last letter in TULIP, P, stands for Perseverance of the Saints. "The saints, those that God choose in the blackness before time, will always be under his protection until they are brought to heaven." She says this in a reassuring voice.

When I get home after school, everything is Catholic so I imagine faces from ceramic statues, scapulas and gold medallions – St. Francis, St. Barbara, St. Jude – all marching up a cloud escalator into the bluest of blue skies.

"Once a Saint always a saint," Ms. Meijerhoff cheers, swinging her arm like we we're all part of a massive, metaphysical football team.

I think to myself, "It's like what the Latin Kings say when ex-members pass through Latin King turf in the neighborhood next to mine and don't represent: Once a King always a King."

I myself have a difficult time figuring out how the following people fit into a configuration of saints: Anke Marie Sluiter, the bitchy girl behind me, or her friend I had a crush on in the back of the room because her butt looked so good in designer jeans

without embroidery on the pocket, or the eighth graders who reamed my head into the back of the stairwell a few days ago then opened my locker and replaced chicken salad sandwich on wheat with dog shit on Wonder Bread.

Reading the classics at Eleanor Roosevelt haven't prepared me for this revelation about the character of the saints.

Bible class is one of the most restless periods of the day. Usually make-up, something from a .25 cent vending machine or some sort distraction is confiscated between jumping from the Old Testament lesson in the first half to the New Testament in the second half. I don't know if it's the ominous material or overcast day that makes our usually inattentive minds sit silent and solemn, like grandparents in church.

"Now, I realize that this might all hard for you to comprehend," Ms. Meijerhoff says. "I know at some point, you've probably thought about asking Jesus into your heart." She's wearing the best compassion face her German Olympic coach exterior can pull off.

"Some of you young people might be wondering, 'Isn't baptism enough?' or 'What about works versus grace'" Don't worry, these are common questions people ask in the first stages of adolescence."

Another hand shoots up. It's Brian Oosternman, who, on the first day of homeroom, asked if everything in junior high went down on your permanent record. "So, so does this

mean that if you are baptized, you're *not* automatically saved?" His wide eyes tell me he's been under the impression that he'd be going going to heaven.

"That's part of it," Ms. Meijerhoff says, giving one of those 'yes but' smiles that adults use to leave cliffhangers in children's intellectual stomachs.

"Take out our Bibles," she says. "We always look to God's book for proof that TULIP is not something that the father of our faith, John Calvin, just made up out of nowhere."

And I think to myself that it's no wonder Mrs. Meijerhoff leads the school in celebrating Reformation Day every Halloween (they fall on the same day).

She writes the book, chapter and verse on the board so fast I can't turn quickly enough to the correct page.

"For the next five weeks, each week, we will focus on a different letter," she tells us. This is more time than we dedicated to the book of Genesis.

I've learned that the year before I came to Calvin Christian, my classmates were required to memorize the names of all the Old Testament and New Testament books. "Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy..." I have never had to memorize them but I find it helps when I sing them along in my head, to the tune of Lou Reed's 'Satellite of Love.'

So why am I here in this school, the Dutch Afro? Irresistible Grace? Only an invisible, non-communicative God and Kevin, who really wants nothing to do with Him, care about me while I'm between these walls and amidst these people.

I've had the question answered for me before. I am meant to be here, because, according to another one of the junior high school teachers, in his Unconditional Election, 'God has given me had the opportunity to learn to be from other Black people in the world.'

Most dark-skinned people, he told the class, are chosen for Damnation because they were descendents of Ham, who was ostracized from the tribe of Judah for laughing at his father Noah when he was drunk and rolling around naked in his tent. I guess every once in a while God came around to saving a few. So thankfully, I can still learn a work ethic and not spend my days sitting lazily smoking pot and having sex in the middle of the day, waiting for the welfare check to come.

"I want everyone to go home," Mrs. Meijerhoff goes on, "and read the Bible verses marked on the pink sheet, then come back tomorrow. We're going to examine each letter – T-U-L-I-P – a different one each day and what each letter, each amazing concept, means for our faith," She's clutching her hands with joy again and smiling as if she has just given each student in the entire sixth grade bible class – instead of the inevitability of our eternal damnation or salvation – a new puppy,

Outside the grey sky has become engorged with clouds. Drizzle flits through the air and my ear catches a distant thunder. Rain is good. I'm not going to get beat up this recess because we can't go out. Kevin waits for me outside Meierhoff's door, an up-to-something look on his face.

"Hey, gotta show you this," he whispers.

He quickly pulls me into boys bathroom and flashes open his three-ring binder. My eyes expand in disbelief. The Xmen comic where Jean Grey, the Phoenix died. "How can you afford this, man? That shit is listed like \$58 in the comic collector's guide!" I exclaim. Kevin then tells me, that no he can't afford it.

Turns out the room for Kevin's math class is being painted and his class has been using one of the eighth grade rooms. "And since we've been behaving so well," Kevin grins. "No assigned seating when we get there! And don't worry about us getting in trouble, it was sitting on top of a Hustler, in the plastic. So I copped it and made sure the edge of the dirty magazine was kind of – you know – slipping out of the desk," Kevin says, nodding in self-amazement as he sucks back dribbling mucus into his nose. Kevin's perpetual allergies did not help his outcast position. "I figured the teacher'd see it, take it, call the kid's parents and he'd think the teacher took his XMen comic. I mean, you ain't supposed to have comics in school any way. And anyway, he'll be too embarrassed to ask after his parents get called for him havin' a Hustler in his desk."

On the bus ride home, Kevin tells me he doesn't intend to keep this for his personal collection. "This is somethin' for both of us, pirate booty, a reward for what we go through at that shitbag school and all the misery we'll have to endure from preppies for the next couple of years." He's going to sell it to a collector's shop so we can both use the money "To do things. Like if we go to 63rd Street Beach and need to buy beer." We rub our wrists together like we're making a blood pact. It's our new thing.

"Total depravity, dude," I say, giving the two fingers up sign of the Devil that Motley Crüe likes to make in their videos.

On the playground the next day, rumblings reach us. A comic book has been stolen out of a desk, a comic book worth hundreds of dollars. Whispers say it's one of the 8th grade bullies who even the toughest of the bullies stay away from. "The kid who use to go to the special school n' got kicked outta there," someone tells us.

After school, I walk through the eighth grade hallway toward the bus. As I pass the room where the Total Depravity was committed, I notice a boy, slouched over in his desk, arms crossed, scowling at a piece of paper and a pencil. His hands are usually part of the 'nigger piles' of fists raining on Kevin and me at recess so I walk out the door, smiling.

If you can't have Irresistible Grace or Unconditional Election, a dollop of beautiful luck makes a good second.

How Unconditional Election Choose Me (move around)

Church is different for me than most of the saints at Calvin Christian School. Church isn't an hour of hymns and a sermon then get up and leave, it's an all day Sunday affair for us. Mom gets me up at 7:30 a.m., even if I'm exhausted from my new Saturday job delivering eggs or I'm sleeping over at Jeff and Tony's or at Gina's and we've stayed up all night channel surfing for horror movies, something that's disappearing as everyone but my house gets cable TV.

Jeff says when he's reached 1 a.m. and feels betrayed by a night of no horror movies. "Uncle Jerry used to say Cablevision can go fuck themselves," Jeff says. "He said that until he got that weird show he puts on with his friend. Now he says 'it's a boon to Democracy.'"

After the TV is off, Jeff and his brother Tony argue over whether boon is a racist word for black people. Tony says it is. Jeff says it isn't and means something like the California Gold Rush but smaller. All I want is to get enough sleep to make it to church alert enough to continue my project of reading the entire Bible as a strategy for getting through the sermon. It doesn't matter where I am, except if I'm visiting my father, mom will show up and say "time to go to church!" as if that idea excites me too and I haven't been going to church five days a week at Calvin Christian.

Every Church Day starts the same. I wake to the smell of singed metal in the air and sometimes the whiff of methane wafting from the garbage dumps and roll out of bed. Sunday smells in the neighborhood are particularly rancid. I've also learned my lessons about protest or faking sick (my mother has finally seen 'ET' and learned the thermometer on the bedside lamp trick). Even with enough sleep, I'm alert for ten minutes then begin to fall asleep in the shower again. My physical body seems to know it's going to be sitting in church pews for two-and-a-half hours and it's never happy.

Sunday is the only day mom makes breakfast. Every Sunday, without fail, we go through our scrambled egg routine. She announces that she's making scrambled eggs and before a yolk can be broken, I beg her away from making scrambled eggs. Her eggs are nothing like family-style diner eggs. They're dry and brown and she forgets to use cheese, specifically Parmesan cheese from a can. That's how the day starts, with that little tug of war and with French toast or pancakes.

I don't share my mother's enthusiasm for Church Day, the name everyone in the neighborhood who isn't Catholic has for Sunday. Still I look forward to seeing Nelson when we pick him up every Sunday, along with his mother and little sister Naomi.

Nelson lives in the neighborhood right next to ours, a neighborhood with no specific name, a vast tangle of numbered streets crossing avenues lettered from A to Q, a terrain everyone calls just East Chicago. A year older than me, he came to Eleanor Roosevelt the year before I left. His mother moved from the West Side neighborhood of Hermosa, near

our church, because she couldn't afford to buy a house there and as she would repeat every Sunday, "you wouldn't believe what them 12 and 13 year old boys are getting into around that neighborhood."

I could believe it. Nelson is like a manager-in-training for the next level of trouble, stuff we're afraid to do down here.

I think Church Day is my mother's favorite day because our church, Spirit and Truth is an inner city mission of the Christian Reformed Church and when she's there she can be with other Dutch people. Mostly, they're younger graduate students from the University of Chicago who went to the college she dropped out of, Calvin College, but there are three people her age as well as one older couple who, I catch from listening in on a conversation, give a lot of money to Spirit and Truth. The woman seems to remind her of my grandmother, her mother, who died before I knew much about her.

After church, when she stands in a circle, fiddling with the edge of her Styrofoam cup of coffee in her hand as she talks to these people, that's the most boring part of the morning for me; far more excruciating than the theological pin pricks of the sermon. They sit and talk about Dutch people they know and I don't. I want to say People who all have last names starting with Van-this-and-that and Vander-such-and-such. People so far from my world of Polish -skis, Serbian last names, Spanish last names and the heavy O'vowels of Italian last names.

Grocery store cashiers always ring up my mother then turn to ask if they can help me. Most of the time, I don't read anything into it because most kids in the neighborhood go to the store for their parents, to buy a carton of milk or a pack of cigarettes. Other times, I remember that in the eyes of people who don't know us, we aren't family because our skin doesn't show family. At Spirit and Truth Fellowship where black, Puerto Rican, and Dutch mingle in fellowship she can feel motherly and I can develop healthy amorous yearnings for brown skinned adolescent women. This was not exactly the symbiosis she had in mind bringing me to Sprit and Truth but it was a purpose that served Nelson and me.

Since joining the church, Nelson's mother has become super-shiny happy on the outside, just like my mom. She smiles, sings, and kisses his little sister Naomi when she puts her in a car seat between Nelson and me.

"Mom," Nelson asks every Sunday "How come we have to travel so far to go to church?" He asks before we've even reached the expressway on ramp fifteen minutes from his house, and ten times more before we've even made the interchange from the first expressway to the second.

"Because this is the Church where God has led us," his mother says, matter of factly.

My mother sings an "Amen," slightly rocking the steering wheel back and forth to get whatever effect that's supposed to get but not enough to move the car side-to-side. Shiny

is nice but I could do without the corniness. In general, this is my major problem with Jesus and church and all that stuff, Corny. We're not allowed to listen to any sort of music besides Christian rock at school and from what I gather, Jesus really likes Zeppelin and he isn't telling any of his followers or he has really suck-ass taste in music. (Sorry for swearing so close to your name, Jesus.)

As matter of fact, Jesus seems to makes people corny like John Travolta makes girls swoon. He'd do a better job getting people to be down with him if his followers wore cool leather vests like Mr. Torricelli.

The one perk we get out of Church Day is doughnuts. My heath food-loving mother never buys them otherwise. Today, Nelson's mother has brought them. Only these are all chocolate glazed and from the Mexican bakery, not quite my favorite. Doughnuts should only be purchased at white people stores.

We're driving down the on ramp to the Dan Ryan expressway and mom is figuring out how to merge into a river of traffic made of trucks going 70 miles an hour. "Why can't we find a church in our neighborhood?" Nelson asks again.

"Because honey, in our neighborhood, there are only Catholic Churches or churches full of old people."

"What about The Lighthouse?"

"It's not really *for* people like us."

The Lighthouse is out on State Line Road, but it sits on the part of State Line we're not supposed to ride our bikes to, and it does outreach to gang members, drug addicts and prostitutes. The neighborhood it's in is really no different than the neighborhood where Spirit and Truth sits.

My mom and Nelson's mom have both become Sunday school teachers. So on the drive they discuss their lesson plans, talk about sick elderly women in sad voices, new babies in cooing voices and new inspirational song books in technical terms.

Nelson and I pass notes in the back seat because we're planning something covert. We've gotten to know the neighborhood pretty well since vacation Bible school. Nelson has relatives there. During the afternoon potluck we plan to explore the lagoons in Humboldt Park or spy on gang bangers hanging on the stoop selling weed. We'll try to talk to girls from the neighborhood but they'll never like us because we're from somewhere else and just not as tough.

Nelson's sister, Naomi, reaches into the sky from her baby chair yelling "Too big! Too big!" for no reason as we approach downtown Chicago and the interchange for the highway going Northwest to Wisconsin and places where people only speak Spanish.

“You’re almost too big for the chair,” her mother smiles, “that’s right.”

"She is too big," Nelson mumbles disgruntled.

His mother ignores his tiny demurring and turns to me, “How is your new school Jonah?”

“Actually, it sucks.” I give my mother an icy stare. Nelson’s insolence provides a wall of security for my own pissy outburst.

“He likes it. He's adjusting,” My mother says dismissively.

Nelson starts in “,He gets his ass kicked...”

Nelson’s mother feigns alarm, "Such language on a Sunday!"

Nelson peeps out a ‘But he does.’

My mother takes on a detached psychologist’s voice. “I’m sure you’ve had some adjustment in your own junior high, Nelson. It’s adjustment time.”

Nelson is a seether and a soak-up-er. When he's angry, he absorbs the injustice of others around him. It makes him swell up with gasoline.

"No, I'm cool," he says, gazing out the window. "I'm cool, I'm cool."

The last few, "I'm cools" are taking Nelson somewhere else. I'm not sure if I should follow him to that grotto.

Suddenly, I see the emotional world becomes different places for different people, for the first time in my life, on a simple drive to church. For some it's a cave for others, a field of wildflowers, for Nelson it's a drainage tunnel.

At Eleanor Roosevelt, the person who beats you up because you have brown skin or because your mother came to school to yell at you in Spanish can become your best friend the next week. At Calvin Christian to be bucked out of the corral means you are forever an outsider.

Teachers at Calvin Christian basically tell me, 'you're lucky to get out alive from the land of the rest of the Black people.' "Who knows, your real family could be picking crops in a field for \$2 an hour," another teacher offers. To them Mexicans, blacks and Puerto Ricans are all alike. Everyone who is dark-skinned is destined to live under the viaduct, on the other side of the head shop in Calumet City. For the people at Calvin Christian, not only is my neighborhood largely Mexican and in the City of Chicago, Union members actually lived there. If there was one thing worse than a nigger to the Dutch Reformed crowd, it was a Union member.

Back in the neighborhood, we live with our grudges, sticking together when push comes to shove comes to knuckle sandwich, because it's a necessity. "Besides," as Emily Baer's father, the Quaker and Union Representative tells my father, "By this time, my guys don't mind having a few Mexicans in the Union. It just boosts their case with the Lakefront Liberals whenever they have their picture in the paper protesting or negotiating over some minutia in a contract."

To me, my parents have always been just my parents not adopted parents. But this constant emphasis on divisions has made me slowly realize something as of late: one day I'll be forced to make choices between my worlds.

For instance, I am much more popular with the girls at Spirit and Truth than with the girls at my own junior high. But on the other hand, at Calvin Christian, I'm constantly teased about having a black girlfriend hidden somewhere in the deepest ghettos of the city. After a while, the taunts start to crawl under my skin.

First time I threw punches one kid pushed it too far saying I have, "A black girlfriend with cockroaches in her pussy like all black girls have." Kevin punched that kid in the face. No amount of lecturing about fire and brimstone can stop a body going through puberty from chucking firebombs of filthy words or from just being plain awful. No quantity of soothing adult 'words are only words' can stop me from wondering if I should just 'stick to my own kind' or have faith in people and bring girls like Anke Marie's

friend to the dance. No matter how outside the circle of persecutors I sit, the fact is, I still feel the same way about pretty blonde girls in tight jeans with feathered hair during the week as I do about Sol Flores' curls and caramel skin on Sunday.

OK, I like Sol Flores way better because she can rollerskate backwards and she knows the words to "The Show" by Doug E. Fresh and she can jack her body for real. Besides Kevin, no one else sees Sol Flores the same way as they see the girls in Ralph Lauren, feathered hair flowing over turned-up collars. Kevin understands better than anyone else that, after the 3:30 bell rings, not being able to jack or house your body means certain social death in the world Nelson, Kevin and I live in.

Therefore, over Unconditional Election or Irresistible Grace, Kevin and I choose to jack our bodies and head for salvation driving around in friend's Monte Carlos blasting house music, the Get Fresh Crew, sometimes Rush but certainly Motley Crüe. We find redemption sneaking out behind the church to break empty beer bottles, to do nighttime fishing, to bask in the seclusion of Wolf Lake, and to French kiss older girls – 15 years old and sometimes 16 – who have twenty-two year old boyfriends in the Latin Kings.