
The
VIEWFINDER

MICHAEL J. BOWEN

Anchors Publishing, Wilmington, North Carolina
© 2023 Michael J. Bowen
Bowen, Michael J., 1962
The Viewfinder: Michael's Story/ Michael J. Bowen
Original trade paperback ISBN-13: 9798985126419
ebook ISBN-13: 9798985126433
Original trade hardcover ISBN-13: 9798985126457
Library of Congress Control Number: 2021923669

This book is a memoir. The stories in this book reflect the author's recollection of events. The dialogue in the book has been re-created from memory. Some names, locations, and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of those depicted.

Book & cover design by James Slate
Edited by Jennifer Huston Schaeffer of White Dog Editorial Services.
Jacket author photograph by Kaitlin Bucci Photography

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, displayed, modified, or distributed by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the express prior written permission of the copyright holder, with the exception of brief quotations included in reviews.

For further information and permissions approval or to order copies of this book, go to www.anchorspublishing.com

Second Printing, 2023
Printed in the United States of America

Dedicated to Betty and “Bo” Bowen, whose house was welcoming to all. Who showed me and my brother that growing up without the best things in life was the best thing for us.



PREFACE

FOR THIRTY-FIVE YEARS, I told myself that no one would want to read a book about what happened to me, someone who is “imperfect” in every way. I didn’t see how my story would serve others and serve God. So, for many years, *The Viewfinder* remained nothing more than a verbal diary that I started recording as therapy in March 1986.

In 1991, I converted my recordings into a manuscript titled *Working Hard at Being Happy*. Frustrated with my inability to express my thoughts on paper, I tucked away my partially written manuscript with no plans to finish it. However, in early 2008, after losing my mom to cancer, I was inspired to finish the long-forgotten memoir as a tribute to my mother’s lifelong sacrifices for our family. A year later, it was complete. But as a “thinking introvert” who is always pensive and introspective, I concluded that my manuscript was unworthy of becoming a book. So, for a second time, I put my story away.

Fast-forward a decade later and this time, it was my dad whose health was declining. During a weekend visit with him at my childhood home in Washington

Park, North Carolina, I happened upon two items that made me rethink the dynamic of my memoir and would end up playing significant roles in my story: a stuffed lion that I found collecting dust in my bedroom closet and a ceramic mug that sat upon the mantel of the fireplace in my parents' kitchen. Staring at the dates painted on the mug (11-19-1985 to 2-21-1986) transported me back to February 21, 1986, where I sat in a wheelchair clutching a stuffed lion named Arnold, who represented courage. I vividly recalled the gamut of emotions I felt on that February day more than thirty years earlier. The harrowing events I experienced between November of 1985 and February of 1986 forever changed my life. Sitting there in the kitchen of my parents' house, I realized that my story was worth telling. But I wanted to tell it in the present tense so readers could experience, in actual time, what happened to me starting on that fateful day in November 1985 and how the Holy Spirit transformed my personality.

So, for a third time, I brought my manuscript out of retirement. But this time before I rewrote it, I asked God to give me the inspiration to write a book that would glorify him and also allow me to tell my unique story. Ultimately, the title of my book and the life lessons learned emerged during this rewrite. *The Viewfinder* recounts the trials, tribulations, and triumphs I experienced after suffering a spinal cord injury in a car accident at the age of twenty-three. This is my story.



CHAPTER 1

IT'S QUARTER AFTER SIX on the morning of November 19, 1985, and I'm at my girlfriend Sharon's apartment sitting on a barstool while she puts the finishing touches on my makeup. She and her roommates have teamed up to dress me for my role as a transvestite in Arnold Schwarzenegger's latest movie, *Raw Deal*. I step in front of the full-length mirror and laugh at my appearance. I'm not sure what a transvestite is supposed to look like, but Sharon has teased my shoulder-length, dirty-blond hair and applied a heavy coat of mascara to my eyelashes. I'm wearing black spandex leggings with a silver-studded belt, a matching choker and wristbands, and a skintight, sleeveless, black T-shirt that belongs to one of Sharon's girlfriends. An acid washed jean jacket tops off my outfit.

Dubbed "Hollywood East," the city of Wilmington has recently become home to Screen Gem Studios, and a burgeoning film industry is quickly taking root. Actors that come to the area draw little attention from residents, and the stars like it that way. Occasionally, recruiters from the production company De Laurentiis

Entertainment Group, visit the campus of UNC–Wilmington looking for students to be movie extras, and yesterday, I was in the right place at the right time.

However, the more Sharon and her roommates compliment my appearance, the more I start to think I'm going to make a huge fool of myself. On my way to the shoot at a downtown nightclub, I begin second-guessing myself and wonder if the fifty dollars I'm supposed to make today has caused me to have a lapse in judgment. It doesn't help that the combination of my outfit and the car I'm driving is generating double takes from other drivers.

The 1966 Volkswagen Beetle was a Christmas gift from my brother, Lee, a couple of years earlier. He transformed it into a "Baja Bug" by adding Baja fenders and removing the rear engine compartment. To add a touch of originality, the bug is painted canary yellow with a multicolored stripe that begins at the roof then makes its way down each door panel where it mutates into a lightning bolt. He also decked out the motor in chrome and ensured that the oversize camshaft and three-foot-long header pipe work in unison to belch out an idling sound that only a hot rod enthusiast can appreciate. At a stoplight, the sound of my approach startles an elderly couple in the car next to me. I make eye contact with the lady in the passenger seat, and I can tell by the perplexed expression on her face that she's trying to make sense of what she sees. I nod my head to acknowledge her gaze then shout out the open window, "Hey, how are ya?" This greeting only seems to confuse her more since the deep voice emanating from my mouth doesn't match my heavily made-up appearance. Disconcertedly, she taps her husband on the shoulder then points at me.

He obliges his wife's request and looks in my direction. As we make eye contact, I take my right hand off the steering wheel and give a slight wave. "Good morning," I holler over the roar of the engine. The light turns green, and just before they take off, I regain eye contact with the wife, wink at her, and smile as they pull away.

When I arrive at the nightclub, I ease my car into a parking space across the street. All the extras are congregating in front of the building. As I approach the crowd, I'm taken aback by the costumes some extras are wearing—or, more accurately, the lack thereof. I immediately notice two burly guys standing on the sidewalk dressed in leather jackets and chaps, steel-toed cowboy boots, and Stetson hats. At first, it looks as if they could mount a horse and ride off into the sunset at any moment—until I take a gander at their backsides. It appears that both men forgot to put on their blue jeans before strapping on their chaps. *What have I gotten myself into?* I wonder.

The group recruited for this scene is a smorgasbord of fashion. In front of the nightclub, I notice a gaggle of girls dressed to the nines. Deciding they look to be more my speed, I make my way over to them. "Good morning. How are you, ladies?" I say. The reception to my greeting is lukewarm, so I focus my attention on two girls who acknowledge my existence. Both are rocking leotards, leggings, leg warmers, jean jackets, and stilettos. Aside from the jackets and shoes, they look like they just stepped out of a Jane Fonda aerobics video.

As I strike up a conversation with the girls, the front doors to the nightclub open, and assistants escort us to the dance floor. The director walks on stage and

quiets the crowd of extras. Taking a few minutes to set the scene, he explains that Arnold Schwarzenegger will walk into the club and stop at the bar. As Arnold delivers his lines to the bartender, the music will stop, but the extras are supposed to continue dancing. While at the bar, Arnold will witness the bad guys push a few extras out of the way, then he'll sprint toward them in pursuit. Before the proverbial words *and action*, the director reiterates the importance of continuing to dance once the music stops.

We spend the next five hours working on what can't be more than a sixty-second scene. As he finds one problem after another with the scene, the director grows increasingly frustrated as the hours pass. He randomly removes extras who cannot maintain their rhythm once the music has stopped. The day ends with an announcement for the remaining extras to return the next morning to finish shooting the scene. I accept that my acting days are over and decide not to return.

Many of the extras retire to a makeshift dressing room to change, but I figure I came here in this ridiculous outfit, so what's the harm leaving in it. By the time I leave the nightclub, it's late afternoon and the sun is setting over the Cape Fear River. The walk to my car is chilly as the breeze coming off the river blows right through my thin tights. From Front Street, I turn left onto Orange, which intersects Third, a four-lane road separated by a wide median filled with large oak trees. Parked cars line the right side of Third Street, so in order to cross, I have to ease into the intersection to look for oncoming traffic. When I think the coast is clear, I step on the gas and start making my way through the intersection. I never see

the car that strikes my driver's side door. I wasn't wearing my seat belt—it wasn't required back then—so the impact of the crash catapults me into the passenger seat. The passenger door stops the momentum of my lower body, but my head and neck continue on the path of least resistance, shattering the passenger door window. The violent impact knocks me unconscious.

Sometime later, I hear a voice. “Michael . . . Michael, can you hear me? It's Dr. Hatcher. You've been in a wreck. Try not to move. An ambulance is on the way.”

Dr. Hatcher is one of my professors at UNC–Wilmington. I'm disoriented and not conscious enough to understand why I hear his voice. *Why is he calling my name?* I think. A loud car horn blares and snaps me out of the fog I'm in. I try to open my eyes but quickly feel excruciating pain, which forces me to close them.

In a moment of clarity, I realize that I've been in a car accident. I cry out, but only a whimper comes out of my mouth. My first thought is that I'm pinned in the car or perhaps underneath it. Panicked, I again scream for help, but it comes out as a raspy whisper. Although I hear Dr. Hatcher telling me it's going to be okay, the quaver in his voice tells me otherwise. Tears well up in my eyes and flow down my cheeks, mixing with blood from the cuts on my face. This cocktail of warm blood, salty tears, and slivers of glass slowly drips down the outer crevice of my nose and into my mouth.

Desperate to know my predicament, I painfully open one eye enough to see. To my relief, I discover that I'm not pinned in the car or underneath it—I'm slouched down in the passenger seat with my arms by my sides. However, my relief quickly

turns to panic when I try to move an arm and then a leg. They remain motionless as if some invisible force is holding them down. At that moment, I realize I'm paralyzed from the neck down, and this reality is more than my conscious mind can cope with.

As the sounds of Dr. Hatcher's voice, the chatter of onlookers, and the busy traffic fade away, I feel myself drifting out of consciousness or perhaps dying. At first, I try to fight it, like a small child attempting to ward off sleep, but the feeling is too intense. It's as if a powerful force is taking control of my mind and placing it in a deep sleep to protect me from my harsh reality.

In this state of unconsciousness, I visit happier times in my life and mischievous moments of my childhood. I relive regretful memories and the impact they had on me and my family. Photos flash in front of my eyes and trigger these memories. Although I'm unconscious, the 3D images feel so real and are so full of depth and vibrant colors that it's like looking through a View-Master. I see an image and immediately relive the experience it depicts. *But why?* I wonder. *Is it my body's way of dissociating itself from an emotional trauma? Sounds logical. Am I dying and this is my life flashing before my eyes? Or does what I'm experiencing hold a deeper meaning? Perhaps the images of my past are being purposefully placed on the reel of this viewfinder not only to comfort me but to teach me some life lessons. That's it! God is holding a divine intervention just for me. . . . What an egotistical thought!*

In the first image I see, I'm maybe four or five years old. I'm standing in front of the bathroom mirror, and Daddy is behind me combing my hair to one side. With a liberal amount of VO5 hair gel on his hands, he works to tame my many

cowlicks. He seemed to enjoy this Sunday morning ritual, but I hated it. We would look at each other in the mirror and I'd roll my eyes at Daddy while he smiled back at me. When he finally finished working the gel onto each strain of hair, my head was as greasy as a quart of Pennzoil.

I grew up in the tiny town of Washington Park, North Carolina, which is nestled on the Pamlico River and has a population of around five hundred. On Sunday mornings, most houses in Washington Park were bustling with families getting ready for church, and the Bowen home was no exception. My parents, my older brother, Lee, and I lived in a small ranch-style house with three bedrooms and one bathroom. That image of my dad grooming my hair before church triggered another memory for me: this one of me and Lee sitting beside my grandmother in her self-reserved church pew. Gramma, as we affectionally called her, was a pillar at First Christian Church. She was also an active member of the Christian Women's Fellowship, a devout group of women who formed the backbone of the church in the 1950s and '60s. They organized bazaars and collected trading stamps and used clothing to provide for those less fortunate. When racial tensions were high in the community, these willful women pushed our minister, Dr. Alexander, to endorse a Christian attitude toward racial integration, and he listened. For years, he preached from his pulpit that racial bigotry and intolerance had no place in the Christian faith.

During this particular flashback, as I sat next to Gramma in church, Dr. Alexander called for the members of the congregation to bow their heads for the benediction. I watched as my grandmother closed her bright blue eyes and grabbed my hand as well

as my brother's. After the brief prayer, she continued whispering to herself. When she finished, I asked, "Gramma, why did you grab my hand?"

"Because I wanted you to feel the love of Jesus," she said.

Still lying helpless in my Baja Bug, this memory of my grandmother fades as consciousness resurfaces. Waking from the memory of my grandmother, I mutter a prayer to God, pleading for him to please take me away from here.

As Dr. Hatcher continues to reassure me that an ambulance is on the way, I wonder, *What are the chances that one of my professors would be here comforting me at this vulnerable moment in my life?* Dr. Hatcher and I befriended each other a year earlier when he found out I was on the university's tennis team. An avid player himself, he occasionally talked to me about tennis after class.

In another moment of lucidity, I remember what I'm wearing. I panic, thinking that the paramedics will treat me differently if they think I'm a transvestite. But again, a sense of calm pervades as I fall unconscious. The viewfinder reveals two images of me during my childhood that assure me I can withstand any embarrassment, even that resulting from my current attire.

In one image, I'm standing on the side of the street in front of our house. I appear to be around six years old. The image is so lifelike that it seems like I could reach out my hand, grab this little boy, and pull him away from the road to keep him from embarrassing himself. I see myself frantically trying to get my belt unbuckled while holding a football tucked underneath my arm.

It was late fall, and I'd been playing football by myself in the front yard. I was

dressed in the Washington Redskins football uniform Mama had ordered for me from the Sears catalog. At this stage in my life, I had developed quite a strange habit. Whenever I heard a car coming down our street, I would dash to the side of the road, quickly pull down my pants, and eagerly await the passing car. As the car approached, I would sing my made-up song: “Ring daddy ring daddy ring-ring-ring, what-a-ya know, pull down your pants, pee on the car!”

On this particular day, my neighbor Mrs. Buckman was the lucky loser at the wheel when I attempted to spray her car. But as hard as I tried to pee on her car, I just didn’t have the power in my stream. She immediately pulled over, got out of the car, and yelled my name. I quickly dropped the football and pulled up my pants as I ran into the house. The knock on the kitchen door came just as I made it to my bedroom. I could hear the muffled conversation between my mom and Mrs. Buckman. A few minutes later, my mom called me into the kitchen, where I received a spanking and the proverbial words of warning: “Michael Jarvis Bowen, there is a direct relationship between your head and your heinie. When your head causes you to do things you shouldn’t do, your heinie is going to pay the price.”

When I was growing up, my parents believed spankings were a necessary deterrent against doing the wrong thing, and they were to a certain extent. However, sometimes the promise of pleasure outweighed the risk of a spanking. For me, the forbidden fruit was the banana bike of my brother’s friend Charlie.

The next image the viewfinder reveals is me looking out the screen door of the kitchen, staring at the familiar faces of John, Tommy, and Charlie who also

live in Washington Park. Me and Lee were part of a close-knit group of eleven neighborhood kids, known as the Park Boys, who shared similar interests such as riding bicycles.

John, Tommy, and Charlie were closer in age to Lee, who is three and a half years older than me, so I always felt special getting to hang out with them. One night, shortly after my seventh birthday, they invited me to go for a bike ride after dinner. To my surprise, Charlie even offered to let me ride his bike. For weeks, I'd been admiring his gold metal flake bike with its leopard skin seat and high sissy bar. But whenever I asked if I could ride it, the answer was always no. So when he offered to let me ride his bike, I was ecstatic. But as soon as I walked to the end of the driveway and mounted the bike, Tommy grabbed me by the shirt and said, while trying his best to keep a straight face, "If you're gonna ride Charlie's bike, you gotta ride it naked." Eager to get on the road, I stripped down to my birthday suit without hesitation.

Charlie and John were laughing, so I started laughing too, even though I didn't know what we were laughing about. While I knew it was wrong to pull down my pants and pee on cars, I didn't see the harm in riding around the block naked, especially if I was riding Charlie's bike. So I hopped on that banana bike and away I went, naked as a jaybird with my entourage in tow. Charlie, who was riding Lee's bike, kept reminding me not to sit down on his seat. The seat was too high for me anyway, so I pedaled standing up as a feeling of euphoria washed over me. Now and then, I looked over my shoulder at the three of them, and their

cheers of encouragement put an even bigger smile on my face.

As I headed down our street, I saw John's mom sweeping the sidewalk in front of her house. John called out, "Hey, Mom, look at Michael!" Somewhat startled to hear her son's voice, Mrs. Robinson looked up, waved, then smiled, and continued to sweep.

"Oh my God!" Tommy shouted. "She didn't even notice!"

Although Mrs. Robinson didn't realize I was streaking, Mrs. Buckman across the street sure did!

The first phone call to my house came in around six thirty. "Hi, Betty. It's Melanie. I . . . uh . . . wanted to let you know that Michael just passed by our house riding a bicycle without a stitch of clothing on."

I turned onto Spruce Street and went by the Fulcher house. No sooner had Mama hung up with Mrs. Buckman when the phone rang again. "Hello, Betty. It's Naomi Fulcher. Your youngest one—"

"I know," my mom interrupted her with a laugh. "He's naked again. I just got a call from Melanie, who saw him go by her house. I'm going to go get him now."

I was in the home stretch and had just made it back around the block to Fairview Avenue when I saw Mama standing at the end of our driveway with her hands planted firmly on her hips. Like most children, I wanted to impress my mom since I was riding a "big boy" bike. So I sat my rear end on the crossbar of the bike—much to Charlie's chagrin—let go of the handlebars and jubilantly whooped, "Look, Mama, no hands!"

“And no clothes either,” my mom retorted. “Get off that bicycle and get in this house *now!*”

The sound of a distant siren pulls me back to reality. Although the glass in my eyes causes tremendous pain, I open one eye to see my body still languishing in the passenger seat. I clear my head and briefly smile, thankful to be lying in this mangled car fully dressed and not stark naked. Although I’m no longer frantic about the outfit I’m wearing, I feel compelled to explain to Dr. Hatcher why I’m dressed this way. I try to take a deep breath but stop short when I feel a piercing pain in my rib cage.

Persevering through the pain, I mumble to my professor through gritted teeth, “Dr. Hatcher, this is a costume. I was an extra in a movie downtown.” I don’t know if he can hear or understand me, but he continues to tell me that help is on the way.

My parents are going to be so disappointed when they hear I’ve been in an accident. I caused them so much anguish growing up. Peeing on cars and riding naked around the block was just the tip of the iceberg. With my eyes closed, I see image after image of my impish past through the lens of the viewfinder.

In one image, I’m sitting in the truck of J. T. Harris, a close family friend, after running away from home at age five. Actually, I pedaled away on my red Radio Flyer tricycle. Tired of trekking up and down Fairview Avenue, I asked Mama if I could ride around the block. But she said, “Absolutely not!” I didn’t really want to ride around the block. I just wanted to spread my wings and venture up to Clover Farm Country Store, which was several blocks away, so I did.

Clover Farm was near the park, and in order to get there, you had to cross River Road, a busy two-lane highway. When I arrived at the store, I parked my tricycle out front, went inside, and grabbed a Dr. Pepper and a pack of Sugar Babies. At the checkout counter, I stood on my tippy-toes and put my drink, candy, and a quarter on the counter. But Mrs. Daisy, the store manager, informed me that I was ten cents short. When I told her that was all the money I had, she smiled and put my drink and candy in a small brown paper bag.

Once outside, I could hear dirt bikes revving their engines behind the store, so I followed the noise until I saw two guys riding up and down large mounds of sawdust and making huge rooster tails. A little further away, several kids were standing on the railroad tracks picking up rocks and seeing who could throw them the farthest. It looked like fun, and I was good at throwing rocks.

To get to the railroad tracks, you had to travel a short distance down Brick Kiln Road. As I pedaled toward the tracks, the feelings of independence, adventure, and mischief were all wrapped up in one big ear-to-ear grin. I had just reached the tracks when J. T. Harris stopped, backed up, got out of his truck, and asked, “Michael, son, pray tell, what are you doin’ near these train tracks?”

“I’m gonna throw some rocks,” I answered rather excitedly.

“Let’s put your tricycle in the back of my truck and go talk to your daddy first,” he suggested.

“No!” I stubbornly replied. “I’m gonna stay and throw some rocks with my friends.”

“Son, I’m takin’ you home, so go get in the truck,” Mr. Harris ordered.

Mr. Harris was ruffling the feathers of my independence, and I didn’t like it. So with lightning speed, I picked up a rock and flung it at him. And also with lightning speed, I was in his truck, bawling my eyes out. He drove me home and explained to my mom where he’d found me. By this time, she was frantic. She’d already called the neighbors and Daddy, who was on his way home from work.

I knew I was going to get a spanking—maybe even a whipping! You might wonder, *What’s the difference?* Well, in the Bowen household, a spanking involved the use of a bare hand; a whipping required the use of a switch. Much to my surprise, I didn’t receive either. Instead, my parents sat me down and explained the dangers of going near the railroad tracks. It was one of the few times I ever saw Mama and Daddy cry.

In another image that passes through the lens of the viewfinder, I am seven years old and have a water hose in one hand and the screen door to the kitchen in the other. I had just finished pedaling up and down Bank Street with Bill Batchelor, my friend who lived behind us. We’d been dodging imaginary firebombs and machine-gun blasts as we rode our bikes into a barricade of leaves. When I returned home, I noticed that these death-defying acts had made for a dirty bicycle. Unsatisfied with the job the garage rags were doing to clean my bike, I decided our new electric toothbrush would be just the thing to restore the metallic blue shine on my bike. As I was finishing up, Aunt Bessy saw what I was up to when she came to the kitchen door to call me in for lunch.

“Child, what are you doin’. Give me that toothbrush!” she demanded, her voice full of disgust. She yanked the toothbrush from my hand, and then with her other hand, she jerked me up on my feet and gave me two swift smacks across my rear. “I should call your daddy right now and tell him what you’ve done. Don’t you touch that toothbrush again, you hear me?”

Unbeknownst to me, Aunt Bessy wasn’t my aunt. She was a stocky, proud Black woman, who looked after Lee and me sometimes during the summer months while our parents were at work. Aunt Bessy treated my brother and me like we were her children and administered an equal amount of affection or tough love as needed. She had Mama and Daddy’s blessing to discipline us for inappropriate behavior, but immediately following the slaps across my fanny, I gave her a piece of my mind. However, before I could get two words out of my mouth, she gave me another swat across my bottom and went back inside the house, electric toothbrush in hand.

As the initial pain from the spanking wore off, I reasoned that I shouldn’t get a spanking just for cleaning my bicycle, so I decided I was going to teach Aunt Bessy a lesson. I looked down and noticed the water hose on the ground next to my bike. Glancing through the screen door, I could see Aunt Bessy putting lunch on the kitchen table. I stealthily grabbed the water hose and slowly opened the door, then I took aim, squeezed the nozzle, and bull’s-eye—I squirted Aunt Bessy squarely in the back! When the water hit her in the derriere, she let out a high-pitched squeal, and my bologna sandwich and potato chips went flying through the air. Aunt Bessy ran out of the kitchen to escape my revenge, but I continued

to let her have it until she was no longer in range. Once she was out of sight, I dropped the water hose and ran behind the house to hide, but I could hear her screaming my name.

“Michael Bowen, you are a devil child! The devil is in you! You wait ’til your daddy gets home!” she roared.

Maybe Aunt Bessy was right. Perhaps the devil was in me. As a kid, all I did was get in trouble and cause my parents grief. In Sunday school, they taught us to obey our parents because it pleased God. But it didn’t matter that I attended Sunday school, Bible school, or church because I wasn’t applying any of the lessons I learned. If obeying your parents pleased God, seeing me steal ice-cream sandwiches from the school cafeteria surely displeased him.

In the next image I click in the viewfinder, I’m standing in the lunch line holding a plastic tray full of food. My friends, Rusty and Kyle are a few places behind me, jockeying to get a view of my first heist. I’m excited but nervous. A day earlier, during sixth grade recess, I overheard a few boys bragging about how easy it was to steal ice-cream sandwiches from the cafeteria. “You just grab the ice-cream sandwich, slip it under your tray with one hand, and give your lunch ticket to the cashier with the other,” one of them said.

As I neared the freezer bin, I noticed a cafeteria staff member bringing out a fresh box of ice-cream sandwiches. She opened the box but left it on top of the freezer. As I approached the bin, she removed the empty box and walked away with it. So I reached up, grabbed the fresh box, and placed it into the freezer. After

making sure the coast was clear, I reached into the bin, nonchalantly grabbed a milk, then quickly retrieved an ice-cream sandwich and placed it underneath my tray. Finally, I turned and gave my lunch ticket to the cashier. She looked at my tray, then at me, paused, and said, “Young man, do you owe me any more money?”

“No ma’am,” I responded with as much confidence as I could muster.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes ma’am,” I replied.

“Okay, go have a seat,” she said, shaking her head as I turned toward the tables.

As I walked away, I felt something brushing against my pant leg. I glanced down and saw that the ice-cream sandwich I intended to steal had four more attached to it! Panic-stricken, I briskly walked to my seat while trying to gather the tangled string of evidence into my hand. But while corralling the ice-cream sandwiches, my carton of milk toppled off my tray, which drew the attention and laughter of several students. So I quickly picked up my milk and rushed to my seat with the ice-cream sandwiches still bouncing off my leg.

After sitting down, I nervously looked behind me at the cashier. She was taking someone else’s lunch ticket, so I thought maybe she hadn’t seen what I’d done. Perhaps I had a little too much food on my tray and that was why she’d asked me if I owed more money. Nevertheless, I thought it would be a good idea to get rid of the evidence, so I gave the four extra ice-cream sandwiches away and started eating the one I’d intended to steal. While I scarfed down my dessert, I continued to glance over my shoulder at the cashier. I had about half of the ice-cream

sandwich crammed into my mouth when I felt a tap on my shoulder. Looking up, I saw Mrs. Jackson, the cafeteria manager, and the cashier standing behind me.

“Mrs. Howard, is this the young man who stole the ice-cream sandwiches?” Mrs. Jackson asked.

“Yes, he’s the one,” Mrs. Howard responded confidently.

“Aren’t you Bo Bowen’s son?” Mrs. Jackson asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” I muttered, gagging on the mouthful of evidence I’d just swallowed.

“Doesn’t your daddy work over at the ABC Store?” she inquired, looking around the lunch table at the other saucer-eyed students.

“Yes ma’am,” I acknowledged, nodding my head.

Mrs. Jackson squatted down and leaned in so her face was right next to my ear. Loud enough for the students at my table to hear, she said, “You finish the ice-cream sandwich you have crammed into your mouth, but I’ll be givin’ your daddy a call today.”

Mrs. Jackson stood up, turned around, and walked away from the table. The boys sitting near me just stared, waiting for me to say something. I nervously giggled at my mishap, but I knew Daddy was going to kill me.

Bewildered, Rusty asked, “Why did you steal *five* ice-cream sandwiches?”

“I only meant to steal one!” I answered.

One boy at the table had the answer to my debacle. He explained that the cafeteria workers leave the fresh box of ice-cream sandwiches on top of the freezer

until they can pull them apart. Then they place them in the bin.

As the guys at the table laughed at me, I tried to play it cool and laughed along with them, even though I was on the verge of tears. When lunch was over, I rushed to the bathroom. Unable to hold in the tears any longer, I started crying. I glanced into the mirror at my reflection, and for the first time in my life, I felt ashamed. I had disappointed my mother and father yet again.

I spent the rest of the school day worried about what I was going to say to my parents. When three thirty finally arrived, I raced out of school and jumped on my bike. All the way home, I anxiously weighed my options: 1) don't go home at all, just run away; 2) wreck my bicycle and hope Mama and Daddy feel so bad about my injuries that they ignore my thievery; 3) maybe, just maybe, Mrs. Jackson will forget to call my father. He only worked a few miles away from the school, so surely if she'd called him at work, he would've immediately left and come to the school.

As I pedaled into the driveway, I noticed Daddy wasn't home from work yet, so I took that as a positive sign. Getting off my bike, I told myself to play it cool. I walked into the house as I did every day, calmly made my way to my bedroom, and tossed my book bag on the floor. In passing, Mama asked how my day was. I told her it was fine. Then I headed to the refrigerator for some milk and grabbed a few cookies from the pantry. As I sat down at the kitchen table to eat my snack, Mama came into the kitchen.

“What are you doin’?” she asked in a perplexed tone of voice.

“Just havin’ some milk and cookies,” I replied.

“How could you *possibly* be hungry after eating all those ice-cream sandwiches you stole at lunch today?” she snapped. I instantly felt light-headed and sick to my stomach. “Put the milk and cookies down, go to your room, and stay there until your daddy gets home!”

I tried to explain what had happened, but my mom had no interest in my account of the incident.

Spending two hours in my room waiting for my father might as well have been two hours in solitary confinement. My room was a place to sleep, and this was torture! I had no television, no phone, and no radio, only a bed and a set of 1966 *World Book* encyclopedias. To me, two hours of this should’ve been punishment enough.

Daddy walked through the door around six thirty. I could hear Mama talking to him in the kitchen, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying. A few minutes later, Daddy called from the hallway, “Michael, come have a seat in the living room.”

When the two of them walked into the living room, Mama sat down across from me. Daddy, however, stood in the middle of the room with his hands on his hips and stared right at me. I met his gaze but only for a second before hanging my head.

Daddy got right to the point saying, “Son, why did you steal those ice-cream sandwiches today?”

“Because my friends dared me to,” I mumbled nervously, but that was a lie. I’d stolen the ice-cream sandwiches to see if I could get away with it. Even so, I

was telling the truth when I said that I thought stealing them made me look cool in front of my friends.

Daddy looked at me and calmly said, “If you need to steal things to impress your friends, then you need new friends. Genuine friends don’t encourage you to do the wrong thing. Son, look at me and listen carefully. Now that you’ve stolen something, adults around you may not trust you anymore. People who steal from others also lie to others and cheat others. It hurts my heart to know your mother and I have raised a son who people cannot trust. Some people may think that because I’m your father, I’m not trustworthy either.”

Daddy didn’t have to raise his voice to get his point across. His soft-spoken words were gut-wrenching and shook me to the core. I was a thief, a liar, and a cheat. I wept uncontrollably as both of them continued to explain how disappointed they were in me. My parents told me to take a walk around the block and pull myself together while they decided on an appropriate punishment for my actions. As I walked, I thought about what my parents had said and what Gramma would think of my actions. As a God-fearing woman, my grandmother had no tolerance for those who stole from others. If she knew her grandson was a thief, she would’ve reminded me of the commandment, “You shall not steal.” Gramma had no tolerance for those who commit besetting sins.

When I returned from my walk and learned my punishment, I realized Daddy believed stealing was a serious offense. To pay back the cafeteria for the five ice-cream sandwiches I’d stolen, I worked there in the mornings before school and during recess

for a week. On Friday afternoon, Daddy and I walked into the cafeteria where I paid Mrs. Jackson fifty cents for the ice-cream sandwiches and apologized for my actions. After that, I never stole another ice-cream sandwich—or anything—ever again.

Daddy was right about the impact my actions had on my reputation. As the news of my theft spread around school, several of my favorite teachers told me how disappointed they were in me, and they hoped I could repair my good name. Although Daddy never stopped loving me, he stopped liking me for a while after that incident.

The sound of Dr. Hatcher's voice penetrates my subconscious and stops the images I see. "Michael, the paramedics are here. You're going to be okay," he assures.

Moments later, I hear another voice. "Hey, Mr. Bowen, we're EMTs here to help you."

Before they can say another word, I feel the need to explain my attire to them. "I'm not a transvestite. I was in a Schwarzenegger movie!" There's no reply to my statement, so I continue, "I'm a tennis player at—"

"What's your name?" a paramedic asks.

"Michael," I respond.

"Michael, my name is Alex. This is Kaleb. We're here to help you, but it's important that you try not to move."

Once more, I attempt to open my eyes, but the pain is excruciating. "I can't open my eyes. There's glass in my eyes!" I sputter as a mixture of blood and saliva spew out of my mouth.

The paramedics say nothing and begin assessing my injuries. As they throw medical jargon back and forth, I'm relieved to know that I'm in excellent hands.

The next thing I remember is the bumpy ride to the hospital jarring me awake. I have no memory of being removed from my car and put into the ambulance. On the way to the hospital, Alex asks if there's someone he can contact to let them know I've been in a car accident. I tell him to call my roommate. I complain again to the paramedic that I have broken glass in my eyes. Alex tells me to keep my eyes closed. That's easy for him to say, but I can't. I have to see what's going on around me. I fight through the pain to open one eye and see that my forehead is secured with first aid tape. I also feel a brace around my neck. Kaleb seems to be getting every bit of horsepower out of the rig's engine, and the quick stops and starts are causing equipment to clang around me. As I listen to these sounds, I cannot believe what's happening. *Why did I agree to dress up in this stupid outfit and stand around all day for nothing? I just want to turn back time.*