



HOPSCOTCH

Steve Cushman

Livingston Press

The University of West Alabama





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ISBN 13: 978-1-60489-178-2 trade paper
ISBN 13: 978-1-60489-177-5 hardcover
ISBN:1-60489-177-7 hardcover
ISBN:1-60489-178-5 trade paper
Library of Congress Control Number: 20177937094
Printed on acid-free paper.
Printed in the United States of America,
Publishers Graphics
Hardcover binding by: Heckman Bindery

Typesetting and page layout: Joe Taylor
Proofreading: Joe Taylor, Jacob Glover, Tricia Taylor, Ci Ci Denson, Shelby Parrish
Cover design and layout: Randa Simpson, Callie Murphy, Allie Tittle
Cover photo: Steve Cushman
Author photo: Jan Hensley

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank the following for help along the way. Of course, Julie and Trevor, because it always starts with you two! Thanks to Debra Coble, Dena Harris, Roger Hart, and Chris Laney who read early drafts and offered valuable feedback. Thanks to Tina Firesheets, Miriam Herin, and Tim Swink for graciously including me in the “four.” To Michael Gaspeny, Lee Zacharias, and Mr. O for inviting me into their home on Madison Avenue. And to Joe Taylor at Livingston for taking a chance on this novel, and finally to Liza Fleissig and Ginger Harris-Dontzin who continued to believe in this book long after most people would have given up. Thank you, thank you!

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Surely you know the rest: any resemblance
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first edition
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Dr Boles

The first one appeared in the middle of December, on a cool, blue-skied day. It wasn't in a park, on a neighborhood sidewalk, or an elementary school playground as you might expect. It was on the sidewalk leading to the entrance of Alfred Stone Memorial Hospital in Greensboro, North Carolina.

The first person to notice it that morning was an orthopedic surgeon named Dr. Jeffrey Boles. He was talking on his cell phone, asking the OR if his patient was prepped and ready for their total hip replacement, when he looked down and saw it there on the sidewalk.

He stopped. He couldn't quite figure out how, or why, such a thing would be here. But still he found himself smiling as he walked into the hospital to start another busy day.

CEO

The second person to see it was Ralph Davis, the hospital's CEO. He was walking up the sidewalk with Walter Winslow, a member of the hospital's board of trustees. They'd just come from a meeting and the hospital's numbers were down. They needed more patients if they were going to make a profit this year. And for Ralph's job to be secure, the hospital needed to make a profit.

When Davis spotted the drawing on the sidewalk, he smiled for a moment and looked over at Winslow, who wrinkled his nose and shook his head as if he'd encountered something foul-smelling.





“What’s that doing here?” Winslow asked, pointing at the sidewalk.

“I don’t know,” Davis said.

“Well get rid of it.”

Davis pulled his cell phone from his pocket and called Jerry Sloan, the manager of the hospital’s housekeeping department.

“Sloan, it’s Ralph Davis.”

“Yes, sir. What can I do for you?”

“There’s some graffiti on the sidewalk by the visitor’s entrance.”

“I’ll send someone right away.”

Davis hung up without saying goodbye.

Emily

Emily Andrews was eight and small for her age. She had thin blond hair that blended in with the hospital bed sheets. She was in room 302, an IV in each of her arms, and was day-dreaming about cats. Emily had never had a cat but her best friend, Holly Everhart, did. Holly’s cats were both white and the only way you could tell them apart was Peanut’s tail was shorter than Luna’s. Peanut had been hit by a truck when he was a kitten.

Emily remembered playing with the cats back before she got sick. She remembered a lot of things from before she got sick—how she could ride her bike or jump on her trampoline for hours, but she no longer had a trampoline. She’d come home from one of her doctor’s appointments and it was gone, as if it had never existed. It was, like most things, something that could hurt her.





The missing trampoline and the trips to the hospital weren't the only differences in her life. Her parents were no longer nice to each other. Emily barely saw them hug or even hold hands anymore. The way her parents treated each other was one of the worst things, Emily thought, about being sick.

She tried to think about silly Peanut again. He loved to chase a piece of yarn and jump up on your belly when you were watching TV and eating popcorn and least expecting it. But she stopped thinking about Peanut because her parents were talking to each other in that voice they used. Short sentences. Whispers. While they weren't pointing fingers at each other, they might as well be.

"I can't," her mother said.

"We don't have a choice," his father said.

"Mom, Dad," Emily called. She knew it would stop them from fighting. They came to her bedside and each took one of her small, bruised hands.

"You okay, Em?" her mother asked.

"Fine," she said. "Let's go for a walk."

Her parents stood on opposite sides of Emily as she walked the halls of the pediatric unit. She liked to see the other kid patients, even if they looked as bad as she did: the yellow masks with the white string around their ears, the bald heads and yellow eyes. The chunky boy with the scar on the right side of his head. This had become her version of childhood and seeing other kids like her made her feel less alone.

As they passed the nurses' station there were two small Christmas trees on the counter, each with acorn-sized gold balls hanging from the branches. And there were stockings and red and green lights hung from the edge of the counter. Emily had been to the hospital a few times before and she





had to admit the lights and the stockings made her feel a little better, reminding her Christmas was less than two weeks away.

There was also a miniature Christmas tree on the bedside table in her hospital room and every couple days Emily would find a new treat under the tree. Perhaps a piece of chocolate or some beads for her ever-growing collection of bracelets. This tree was one of the first things she turned to when she woke up each morning.

Emily and her parents passed the game room where there was a full-sized Christmas tree. It had been decorated before she was admitted. It was at least six feet tall, but nowhere near as tall as the huge tree in the hospital lobby.

And while the trees made her smile, they also made her miss her own tree at home. Each year, Emily and her parents would spend the weekend after Thanksgiving choosing and decorating the family tree. It would start on Saturday morning when they drove three hours to a farm in the mountains to find the perfect tree. Her dad would chop it down while her mother paid, and then they would load the tree into the back of his truck. They always stopped at the Denny's, in Boone, for lunch and bought big cups of hot chocolate for the drive home. A drive filled with Christmas music and laughter and her mother singing way out of tune.

They'd make it home by late afternoon and set the Christmas tree up in the corner of the living room. After a big breakfast, the next morning, they would decorate the tree.

Emily had been admitted to the hospital on the day after Thanksgiving, so they hadn't made the trip yet this year. As soon as she got out, her dad said, they'd head up there and buy a tree. But Emily had her doubts she'd ever





get out of this hospital, that they would ever make that drive as a family again.

John

John Deaver, the first-shift janitor assigned to the hospital's sidewalks, had spent most of the day with his head down as he cleaned, not looking up, a skill he'd acquired during his time in prison. He was emptying a garbage can by the ED entrance when he got the call on his walkie-talkie. It was his boss, Jerry Sloan.

"John, I need you to go around to the front of the hospital. There's some sort of grafitti on the sidewalk and Mr. Davis wants it removed ASAP."

"Got it." John slid the walkie-talkie back onto his belt and headed to the front of the hospital. He knew he was lucky to have this job. Most people wouldn't hire a convicted felon.

John expected to see some profanity spray-painted on the sidewalk, but he laughed when he saw someone had drawn, with ordinary sidewalk chalk, a hopscotch board in colors of yellow, red, green and blue. By box number 1 was a simple message written in pink: *TRY IT*.

He hadn't seen a hopscotch board in years. The flicker of a memory came to him: Shanna jumping from square to square, her hair in braids. Her feet scuffing the ground. Her sing-song voice.

He called his boss. "Mr. Sloan, the only thing I see is a hopscotch board."

"Hopscotch?" Sloan asked.

"You know, the game with the numbered boxes and you





have to hop from one square to the next without falling over." Was it possible, John wondered, his boss didn't know what hopscotch was?

"Just clean it up," Sloan said.

"Yes, sir. I will."

After collecting the power sprayer from the supply room, John walked back around to the hospital entrance. He wondered who would draw this hopscotch board here. A patient? A visitor? He didn't have a clue.

Before turning the sprayer on, he stepped into the first box. He had hopped as far as box number 5 when he heard a couple doctors talking and walking toward him, so he stepped off the board. Don't screw this job up, John, he told himself. He turned the sprayer on and in less than a minute the board was gone.

Stan

Stan Gordan stared up at the ceiling of room 207, frustrated again. This was no way to live. He'd lost both legs below the knees after a landmine blast in Iraq. He shouldn't have stepped on the landmine. He was ten feet away when he saw his buddy JD heading straight for the blinking red dot beside a rock.

Stan ran at JD with everything he had and pushed him out of the way. All he remembered after that was white-hot heat, a flash, then the swish of a helicopter blade and the medic, a fat Hispanic boy named Jo-Jo, telling him everything was going to be okay.

That was three years ago and the reason he was in this hospital bed smack dab in the middle of North Carolina





was because he'd gotten drunk and fallen out of his wheelchair, breaking his right forearm and a couple ribs, along with lacerating his spleen. They had admitted him for a couple days to make sure the bleeding had stopped.

Stan was embarrassed about the fall, about the drinking. He knew he spent too much time feeling sorry for himself, drinking, and playing on-line poker. He'd won a Purple Heart for his bravery and sacrifice in that far-away country, but every time he looked down at his legs, which ended in stumps below the knees, he felt as if his life was over, that the best parts were behind him now.

Stan's brother, Jay, told him he needed to get himself together. He needed to get a job, something to do everyday, then he would start to feel better. Jay even offered him a job at the insurance company he managed, but Stan didn't think he could stomach pushing paper for the rest of his life.

Instead, he spent a couple hours a day staring out the window of the house he shared with Jay, watching the rest of the world walk on by. He watched the young mothers push their baby-filled strollers down the street, the retirees walk their small dogs, and the men and women joggers. The mailman, a tall thin guy with a mustache, dropped the mail off between 2 and 2:30 every day. He watched these people take their legs for granted and it made him angry.

He sat up in the hospital bed, transferred to his wheelchair. He rolled the three feet to the window and looked out at the naked trees and spotted the same red-tailed hawk he'd seen for the last two days, flying around the perimeter of the hospital as if on lookout. Stan turned to the sidewalk where a man in a white lab coat, a doctor perhaps, but not one Stan recognized, was hopping from leg to leg on what looked like a hopscotch board.





Stan turned away to the TV, looking for a sitcom with canned laughter, some show that would take his mind off yet another thing he would never be able to do again.

Mary

Mary Jones stood beside the hospital bed in room 403, where her husband, Walter, was sleeping. He had pneumonia. She hated to see him like this. He was old now, 84, but he'd always been so active, a high school basketball coach. But now he looked as if he could slip away from her at any minute.

Mary had enjoyed the drive to the hospital because she could pretend for a little while, at least, that she was not on her way to stand beside her dying husband, but heading to her bridge club, to the grocery store, or even the mall to buy her grandchildren Christmas presents.

Mary wished she could shake Walter awake and make him go for a walk with her. But every time he moved he went into an ugly coughing fit. Maybe tomorrow, she thought, maybe.

She remembered the long walks they would take in the early years of their courtship. He always held her hand and made her feel protected, leaning into her shoulder, the two of them running to a lake in the middle of the summer, fully clothed, and jumping in. The shock of the cool water. The laughter.

Mary wiped the tears from her eyes. Where did all that go? Where did he go?

While she knew it wasn't his fault, she was still angry he was here, that they were here, in a hospital and that she





had become a stranger to him. She hated how he treated other people, even strangers, nicer than he treated her. She was not ready for this. It was not fair. This whole damn thing was not fair.

“Walter,” she said. “Walter.” When he didn’t respond, she squeezed his forearm to rouse him but all he did was cough once and moan slightly.

“Wake up,” she said, leaning forward so their faces were only inches apart. “It’s always about you, isn’t it? Basketball and your precious teams and now this. For once in your life, can’t it be about somebody other than you? Don’t you dare leave me like this.”

Mary began to shake. She told herself to calm down. And for the hundredth time, she told herself it wasn’t his fault. She walked to the window and lifted it a couple inches to get some fresh air. Outside, on the sidewalk below her, Mary spotted a teenage girl with short black hair, hopping. It seemed an odd thing to see at a hospital, so Mary blinked twice and looked harder, only then realizing the girl was jumping on what looked like a hopscotch board. A teenage boy walked up and took the girl’s hand and together they disappeared into the hospital.

The memory that came to Mary was so raw and full of joy she had to sit down in the chair beside the bed. It was Christmas break, 1951, over sixty years ago. They were college seniors. She was at the Woman’s College of Greensboro while he was at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. He’d gone there on a basketball scholarship and he’d done well his first two years, but a knee injury in the 2nd half of a game against NC State had ended his playing days. She remembered him telling her this in one of the long rambling letters he sent her once a week. He said now that he couldn’t play he would like





to coach basketball, teach others about this thing that had always mattered so much to him. He'd said he wanted to give other kids the joy and pleasure of a basketball court and teammates he'd been lucky enough to have.

It was two days before Christmas, cold but not freezing, and they both wore jackets and corduroys, gloves and hats, as they walked around the neighborhood. She had still not bought him anything for Christmas and was trying to decide if she ought to get him a new sweater or some cologne, maybe a journal for writing notes or letters to her.

The houses they passed were decorated with Christmas lights, and while it was mid-day, they could see lit trees through windows. They could hear Christmas music. Mary felt warm and comfortable with Walter beside her. The neighborhood was only two miles from the Woman's College where both of their fathers were professors.

They turned a corner, and there by the Hughes' big white house, someone had drawn a hopscotch board with pink sidewalk chalk.

"Let's play," Walter said.

"I don't know," she said. Her mother had told them to be back in ten minutes for lunch.

He smiled at her, then walked over and picked up one of the blue stones in the brown grass. "I'll go first," he said, tossing the stone, hopping forward, making it to three until he fell over into the grass. Because he was grabbing his knee, she'd thought he might actually be hurt, so she ran to his side, tried to help him up, but he pulled her down on top of him.

They laughed and he kissed her there on the grass. He pulled something from his pocket, a small black box. "I was going to wait until Christmas, but this seems like too good a chance to let pass by." He held the box out to

