

The Trials

by Jedediah Berry

By the age of eleven, he knew the name of every man and woman executed during the Salem witch trials of 1692. In reenactments of the pressing to death of Giles Corey, Walter's friends stacked pillows onto his chest while he defied his inquisitors.

"Your plea?" his friends asked.

Walter clenched his teeth and hissed, "More weight."

And up went another pillow.

Walter's mother drove him to his father's house one Friday afternoon and never came back. His father marked the days of her absence on the calendar. "Damn bitch," he said with the seventh red slash.

Walter thought his father had misspoken. "You mean *witch*," he said.

"That's right," his father said, and poured Walter a glass of grapefruit juice.

Walter's new room had been dedicated to his father's model airplane hobby, and a few were still hanging from the ceiling when Walter moved in. One night he took a plane down and sneaked onto the roof, started the miniature gas motor, and let it fly. Glowing insect-green in the moonlight, it buzzed over neighboring houses and disappeared into the trees.

His father sat him at the kitchen table the next day and asked, "What happened to my Spitfire?"

Walter felt the weight on his chest and said nothing. His father gave up and hid the other planes in the cellar.

School started, and Walter made friends with Laura and Linda, the Marsh twins, who rode the same bus. They read him stories about their pets and told him what his dreams meant. Walter began to understand the secret language the twins had invented. A bad thing was *haggis*. Anything uncertain was *squirreled up*.

He came home one day with dirt in his hair and his nose bleeding onto his shirt. His father started cleaning him up and Walter said he wanted his mother. "It's good to separate your wants from your needs," his father told him.

On the playground, Walter saw Laura and Linda surrounded by a group of boys and girls. The twins were hugging each other and crying. Reggie, the boy who had given Walter the bloody nose, bounced a red kickball in his hand. Walter stood beside him.

"Hey, third twin," Reggie said. "You want to play dodge ball? Hop in with your sisters."

The girls stopped crying when they saw Walter. Laura said his name, but Walter took the kickball from Reggie and hurled it into Laura's side so hard she fell over.

"She can't breathe!" Linda screamed, petting her sister's hair. Laura had asthma, Walter knew. She called it *the little breaths*. The nurse sent the twins home early, and Walter sat with Reggie on the bus ride home.

The Halloween field trip was to the Salem Museum of Witchcraft. A life-sized diorama depicted a wax figure in gray puritan garb. He brandished his walking stick and asked, "Guilty or not guilty?"

At the puritan's feet, a man writhed under a pile of stones. "More weight," he said, and from the tiny speakers came the sound of bones cracking.

The tour guide said, "It took mean old Giles Corey two days to die."

"Three," Walter said, and the other kids looked at him.

Walter's father introduced him to his new girlfriend, Angie. "She's a math teacher in Springfield," he said. "You want to tell her what you got on your last math test?"

Angie moved in a few weeks later. She found the box of model planes, and while Walter's father was away one weekend, she and Walter took them to a field at the edge of town. None of the engines would start, but she laughed when he told her what happened to the green Spitfire.

After she and Walter's father got into a fight one morning, Angie came into the living room and sat next to Walter. She lit a cigarette and said, "You watch too much television. And you look like your mother." She moved out later that day.

Walter's father gave him twelve months torn from the calendar, rolled up and tied like a diploma. Every day was marked off in red ink.

Walter tried out for a part in the school's presentation of *The Crucible* and got the lead. A man from the newspaper came during a

rehearsal and took pictures. Walter appeared as John Proctor on the front page the next day, hand clenched as he spoke to the court. In the caption, his name was misspelled.

On opening night, Walter's father got a seat near the front and whispered to the other parents, "That's my son, star of the show." But he couldn't take his eyes off the boy in the role of Giles Corey, whose young face was etched with the wrinkles of an eighty-year-old man. As the boy groaned under the weight of the press, Walter's father crushed his program in his fist.

"They'll never break him," he said, speaking so loudly that a woman in the next row shushed him and glared.

