

A Mostly Magnificent Memoir

Bo Bennett, PhD

BookGist Summary

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by Bo Bennett, PhD

Genre: BIOGRAPHY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY / Personal Memoirs (BIO026000)

Key Takeaways

• Humor can make painful memories speakable, but it does not erase the harm behind them; the memoir uses comedy to revisit an unstable home shaped by alcoholism, verbal cruelty, and parental conflict.

• Children often adapt to dysfunction by inventing explanations, seeking attention, finding allies, or trying to control what they can. James's childhood schemes and stories are both comic and revealing examples.

• A person's credibility can be unfairly damaged by a reputation for lying: James's family dismisses his true report of an escaped monkey because he is known for making things up.

• Care and emotional support can come from unexpected people. When James's dog Christie is killed, a stranger's kindness helps him through the immediate shock and becomes a lifelong friendship.

• Success is not only getting what you want; it also matters how you treat people along the way. James's profitable baseball-card trading eventually makes him confront how often he exploited friends.

• Adolescent bravado and poor judgment can turn harmless-seeming pranks into genuine danger. The escalating "seek and destroy" missions and the river-rafting episodes show how quickly play can become life-threatening.

• Facing fear can prompt constructive change. A frightening encounter with a street bully leads James to study martial arts, where he learns not only self-defense but also avoidance and awareness.

• Friendships, family relationships, and ordinary shared moments become more precious when life is finite. The book's final speech turns the collection of comic memories into an expression of gratitude and farewell.

• The memoir's "mostly magnificent" view of life holds joy and grief together: painful losses remain real, but they need not define the whole story.

Who Should Read This Book

This memoir is well suited to readers who enjoy candid, irreverent coming-of-age stories that balance outrageous anecdotes with emotional honesty. Readers interested in complicated family dynamics, childhood friendships, adolescent misjudgments, and the long-term effects of growing up around addiction will find a personal account that is funny without pretending that its painful experiences were harmless. It may also resonate with anyone who has used humor to cope with loss, embarrassment, or difficult family memories. The book's episodic, joke-rich style will appeal to readers of comic memoirs, while its framing story gives the childhood vignettes a deeper arc of gratitude and farewell. Unlike a conventional self-help book, it offers no step-by-step program; its lessons emerge from James's experiences with honesty, empathy, responsibility, and the value of people who show up when needed. Readers looking for a uniformly solemn account of trauma may find the tone deliberately irreverent, but those who appreciate humor alongside genuine feeling will find its mixture of the ridiculous and the moving especially effective.

Chapter Summaries

A Note to the Reader and Prologue

Bo Bennett introduces the book as a genre-bending memoir based on childhood experiences, with events dramatized or fictionalized and names changed to protect people. The framing device opens in 2019, when James Murphy returns to his childhood home in Easton, Connecticut, with his wife, Sabrina, and their children. The visit helps him reconnect with the memories he is preparing to share in what he describes as the hardest speech of his life. The prologue establishes the contrast that shapes the memoir: a successful adult revisits a modest, emotionally complicated past. James's return is not simply nostalgic; it is preparation for a farewell and an opportunity to recognize how the people and places of childhood became part of his identity.

Toxic Scripts and The Pimp Affair

James remembers the nightly arguments between his parents, Fred and Delores, whose drinking, smoking, jealousy, and insults made home unpredictable. Their arguments followed repetitive “scripts,” including a recurring dispute about where Fred had been when James was born. The parents’ mutual hostility coexisted with dependence on one another, while their children learned to navigate the tension and choose sides. Even their moments of agreement often depended on joining forces against someone they disliked. A comic childhood misunderstanding captures the household’s uneven rules. After James calls his artistic older brother John a “pimp,” John threatens to tell their mother. James hides, then explains that he invented the word as a shortened version of “pimple.” Delores accepts his explanation and comforts him—but then punishes John. The episode’s slapstick ending does not soften the larger portrait of a home where adults’ reactions could be arbitrary and frightening.

I Wasn’t Monkeying Around and James and the Beanstalk

James’s family has little reason to believe his report that he saw a monkey in a tree: he has a reputation for inventing stories, inherited in part from his father’s casual relationship with the truth. His mother humors him, and his father uses a map to explain why monkeys do not live nearby. Days later, local television reports that a monkey escaped from a neighboring zoo and was found in Easton. James enjoys the rare vindication, though his mother’s immediate response is to scold him for putting his feet on the kitchen table. The next story shows how imagination can be encouraged or manipulated. Fred tells James that lima beans are magic and will grow into a beanstalk reaching the clouds. He secretly replaces the plant with larger ones each night, until the stalk is so tall that James tells his classmates about it. When his teacher calls Delores with concerns about James’s stories, she reveals the trick. The episode illustrates how adults help shape children’s beliefs—and how a child’s creative claims can sometimes contain more truth than listeners assume.

Close Encounter of the Non-existent Kind and Party at the Murphy’s

Delores’s fascination with aliens, psychic powers, and paranormal mysteries fills James’s childhood with both wonder and fear. One night, she mistakes a light in the sky for an alien craft and drives recklessly after it, urging the aliens to take her while attempting to teach teenage Annie to drive. A police stop ends the supposed encounter with a ticket and a sobriety test. James remembers the incident as absurd, but also as an example of how his mother’s convictions could put the family in danger. The Murphy home’s spacious layout makes it an ideal party venue, and family gatherings unfold like chaotic sitcom episodes. At a Super Bowl party, relatives arrive early, guests misunderstand one another, a drunken fisherman’s story is repeatedly misinterpreted, and an impulsive kiss sparks a confrontation. Beneath the comedy of eccentric characters and escalating confusion lies a persistent sadness: Fred and Delores can perform the role of a happy couple for guests, then quickly

return to their mutual contempt once the door closes.

Not Quite “The Hood” and Fishin’ n’ Workin’

James grows up in a quiet Easton neighborhood where childhood disputes usually end in insults, awkward scuffles, or a truce. He repeatedly challenges Micky despite knowing that Micky is bigger and more willing to hit him; his attempts at fighting are ineffective until he recruits a cousin to win on his behalf. The embarrassing victory forces James to recognize that he cannot defend himself, while the fights with Steven show how adolescent bravado and immature diplomacy can make small disagreements feel momentous. James dislikes early-morning family fishing trips, but after elementary school he sees the freedom to stay home as a chance to earn money. His projects range from door-to-door key racks and sales-club products to a dubious Christmas-wreath fundraiser: he falsely claims the proceeds will help homeless people, spends the money, then feels guilty when he encounters a homeless woman. He also works in Fred’s machine shop and massages Delores for pay. The chapter traces his early drive for independence and profit while showing how work, salesmanship, and money become entangled with his family’s values.

Love Comes in Many Forms and Baseball Cards

James’s bond with his dog Christie is one of the most tender relationships in the memoir. Christie accompanies him through everyday childhood life and even appears in his homemade movies. When she runs after him and is hit by a car, a neighbor quickly drives them to a veterinarian. Christie dies, and the woman stays with James as he grieves. He reflects that people who dismiss a pet as “just a dog” overlook the real attachment and love that can exist between a person and an animal; the compassionate stranger remains his friend for decades. Baseball cards interest James less as a sport than as a way to make money. Through trades and games of chance, he builds a valuable collection, sometimes by taking advantage of friends who do not know their cards’ worth. When friends later take cards from his collection to recover what they feel he had unfairly won from them, James first feels betrayed, then recognizes the irony. Their actions make him face the fact that he had been exploiting people he cared about, and he withdraws from the trading business.

Perma-James and Makin’ Out

At twelve, James lets his fashionable older sister Annie persuade him to get a perm, believing a new look will make him the object of admiration. Instead, his classmates mock him and label him gay according to the crude, homophobic assumptions of the era. Girls include him in their conversations, but largely as an honorary girlfriend rather than a romantic prospect. The experience gives him friendships and some self-awareness, even as it makes clear how quickly peer groups use appearance and stereotypes to police belonging. James’s early dating experiences are awkward, earnest, and shaped by peer pressure. He begins dating eighth-grader Vivian after a chain of friends relays that she finds him cute, then feels

unprepared when she initiates their first kiss at a school dance. A later attempt to date his close friend Jen is similarly uncomfortable, partly because their friends push them into pairing off. When the relationships end, James worries that romance can damage friendship and becomes more cautious about crossing that boundary.

Punk-Ass Bitches and The Danger Zone

A confrontation outside a Bridgeport restaurant brings James and his friends face-to-face with a provocative boy and the larger group backing him. The encounter ends when Liz's mother arrives, and James's friend Eric punches the instigator before everyone escapes. Shaken by how vulnerable he felt, James signs up for karate the next day. Over five years of training, he gains practical confidence while learning that self-defense also means avoiding conflict and dangerous settings. The danger at home is more serious. James describes how alcohol changes his parents' behavior and defines the "danger zone" as the point when both become especially volatile. In 1988, he arrives home to find Delores chasing Fred with a kitchen knife. James tackles his mother and secures the weapon while trying to understand what happened; Fred says Delores attacked him and he struck her. Police and Delores's sister help resolve the immediate crisis. James credits Annie's steady emotional support with helping him endure the family's worst episodes.

I Kicked Their Imaginary Asses and Seek and Destroy Missions

Though martial arts give James more confidence, he remains anxious about bullies. After accidentally injuring his own eye while struggling with his car door, he invents a story in which he defeats four muggers. The tale spreads through school, grows more elaborate, and earns him admiration and protection from bullies. James later recognizes that the invented victory solved a short-term social problem by creating a long-term lie he had to maintain. The episode contrasts the relief of feeling powerful with the cost of deceiving friends. James and his friends also create elaborate pranks they call "seek and destroy missions." Their stunts include placing a realistic baby doll in a car seat on a car roof, using shared garage-door codes and television remotes, staging fake roadside scenes, and connecting strangers' phone calls through invented operator departments. Most episodes are treated as comic adventures, but some end with frightened residents, angry adults, or police attention. The group's biggest scheme—spreading and lighting gasoline while driving toward a pond—results in police intervention and juvenile consequences. James learns that pranks can escalate beyond the group's intentions and that careful planning does not make a dangerous idea safe.

Wet-n-Wild and Junior Prom

After heavy rain, James and his friends raft the swollen Mill River on flimsy pool floats, wearing costumes but no safety equipment. When Jeff's raft pops, he becomes the reluctant scout and warns the others about a submerged tree across the current. David is pulled under, then reappears downstream, prompting celebration and relief. Years later, David disappears

while scuba diving alone in Aruba. The boys' habit of taking risks—and their efforts to imagine a less painful explanation for David's fate—give the rafting story a sorrowful echo. At junior prom, James notices that his girlfriend Janice is withdrawing from him, then sees her making out with his friend Jake at the post-prom party. He breaks down outside, but still drives Janice home the next morning in silence; her brief "Sorry" becomes their final exchange. James turns the humiliation into a story that can help other people put their own heartbreak in perspective. The chapter's humor does not deny the hurt: it shows how a painful memory can eventually become part of a shared, compassionate story.

Conclusion and Epilogue

In the 2019 frame story, James gives a farewell speech at a gathering of family and friends. He recounts the life he built after leaving home: graduating from college, meeting Sabrina, marrying her in the same ballroom, raising two children, and creating a career around businesses, writing, learning, and teaching. Facing a terminal diagnosis, he tells the guests that their presence and their roles in his life matter more than any single achievement. The speech brings together the book's comedy, grief, gratitude, and affection for the people who made up his life. The closing surprise is a familiar friend in a rugby shirt, playfully suggesting that an unlikely theory about someone's fate might be true after all. The epilogue states that James died peacefully on his forty-eighth birthday, surrounded by his wife and children, after choosing to say goodbye while still alive. Rather than treating a life's ending as proof that the whole life is tragic, the book ends by affirming that joy, connection, and a meaningful goodbye can coexist with loss.

Notable Quotes

> *"“The love you take is equal to the love you make.”"*

> *"“I just didn't need or want them under the same roof.”"*

> *"“My friends helped me to realize that I was the real crook.”"*

> *"“Imagination can be so much more exciting than reality.”"*

> *"“People are constantly coming in and out of our lives.”"*

> *"“You are much more than just characters in my life story; you are my life story.”"*

> *"“They say that all lives ultimately end in tragedy. James disagrees.”"*

Full Summary

The author presents his childhood as “fictionalized truth”: real memories shaped for comic effect, with names changed to protect people’s identities. The frame is a visit in October 2019, when James Murphy, now in his late forties, returns to his childhood home in Easton, Connecticut, for the first time in more than twenty years. His wife, Sabrina, and their teenage children wait beside him at the top of its neglected driveway. James admits that if he can face the visit, Sabrina can too, but beneath the joke is a serious purpose: reconnecting with the place where his memories began, so he can speak about them.

In 1978, the Murphy home ran on a nightly script of drinking, smoking, and mutual accusation. James’s mother, Delores, in her robe and curlers, berated his father, Fred, who sat at the kitchen table with whiskey and soda, a cigarette, and food caught in his mustache. Five-year-old James sometimes entered in his bright red footed pajamas and begged them to stop fighting. Delores would then bring up the story of his birth: she insisted Fred had been in a bar, drinking and chasing women, while Fred claimed he had been celebrating the birth of their son, who shared his birthday. Fred could win James’s sympathy with a wink, a joke, or a ten-dollar bill. Their arguments repeated so often that they seemed like badly written computer code, fueled by jealousy, infidelity, intoxication, and hatred. Delores announced that she and Fred were getting divorced several times a year, and James supported her because he wanted both parents, just not under the same roof. They never separated. Their children, finances, Catholic upbringing, and deep codependence kept them together. Even their moments of cheerful companionship often came from uniting against someone they disliked.

Delores’s profanity toward Fred stood in sharp contrast to her punishment of her children for even mild swearing. When James’s older brother, John, threatened to tell their mother that five-year-old James had called him a pimp, James hid in a hallway cabinet, terrified. Delores found him in a calmer mood and asked where he had learned the word. James explained that he had made it up as a shortened form of “pimple,” which reassured her that he knew nothing about the sex trade. She hugged him, then slapped John. The comic justice of the moment sits alongside the fear that made James hide in the first place.

James inherited an appetite for stories—and, he jokes, some of his father’s unreliable relationship with the truth. That reputation made it hard for anyone to believe him when he reported seeing a large black monkey in a tree near their wooded property. His mother humored him with questions, while his family grew increasingly concerned that his tale was imaginary. Fred even used a map to show him that monkeys lived far away. Then the local news reported that Mitch, a monkey escaped from Beardsley Park Zoo in Bridgeport, had been found in neighboring Easton. James basked in his first experience of vindication, grinning with his feet on the kitchen table. Delores smacked him and ordered him to put them down.

Some of James's inventions were less accidental. In second grade, he claimed a plastic ring made him invisible when nobody was looking; later he told classmates his father had invented a time machine seized by the government, and that his sister played drums for the Go-Go's. But his stories could also grow from facts interpreted through a child's imagination. Fred, an inventor who spent summers gardening and fishing, planted vegetables in raised beds and encouraged James's love of lima beans. When James imagined climbing a bean plant into the clouds, Fred told him their seeds were magic and promised they would reach the sky—and that they would find gold there. Each morning, James discovered a taller plant in a large pot. Fred had been secretly replacing it as it grew, until it stood fifteen feet high and James excitedly described his coming adventure at school. His teacher called Delores to discuss the boy's increasingly convincing fantasy. Delores explained that Fred was responsible, and that he had thrown out his back replacing the small plant with larger ones. The teacher then asked whether there had also been a monkey in the backyard.

Delores herself had a powerful taste for the fantastical. She read books about unexplained mysteries and watched shows about aliens, monsters, Bigfoot, and psychic powers with James. The family's trip to see Close Encounters of the Third Kind left the five-year-old frightened enough to sleep with the lights on. One spring evening, returning from a roller-skating rink with fourteen-year-old Annie and James, Delores saw a light in the sky and declared it an alien ship healing sick people over a hospital. She drove recklessly after it, shouting for the aliens to take her, while telling her children she might not come back. James crouched on the floor crying; Annie begged her mother to slow down and received an impromptu lesson in how to drive the car. The distraction allowed the "spaceship" to escape. Soon the three sat in silence on the roadside as a police officer handed Delores a ticket. She remained convinced she knew what she had seen; the officer, unimpressed, had also given her a field sobriety test.

The Murphy house seemed built for parties: a long driveway, a spacious deck, a pool table, a large-screen television, and even a basement roller rink with colored lights and a jukebox. Annie hosted elaborate parties, and James spotted an easy business opportunity. He set up a table at the top of the driveway and charged admission, though Annie and her friends had paid for the drinks and rented the space with no admission charge. The larger family gatherings involved still more alcohol, relatives James barely recognized, and confusion that could turn the room into a sitcom—except the parents' real contempt for each other was never a joke.

At one family Super Bowl party in 1982, the misunderstandings accumulated over the course of the evening. Elderly relatives arrived early, greeting James as though they knew him intimately and comforting him over the death of a man named Henry. James had to ask his mother who Henry was—and who the aunt consoling him was. The Scamanicis, a family notorious for kissing everyone on the lips, arrived and enthusiastically kissed their hosts and

other guests. Later, Magooch, a perpetually drunk man whose speech was hard to understand, told a story that listeners misinterpreted as a threat to beat up Don. Fred clarified that Magooch had actually been describing a large bluefish nearly knocking him off his boat. At the same party, Don, the revered fishing expert, accidentally ran his foot up Delores's leg while trying to flirt with Sylvia. As the night drew to a close, Eric, one of three teenage boys who idolized Fred and were welcome at the gatherings, mistook Mrs. Scamanici's customary kisses for special interest. He kissed her passionately; she slapped him, her husband grabbed Eric, and the room erupted into arguments. By the end, the misunderstandings had been sorted out and Fred and Delores stood together to say goodbye to the guests. Once the door closed, they dropped the happy-couple act and moved away from each other.

Easton was hardly "the hood." On Sturbridge Road, neighborhood disputes were more likely to end in a handshake than a serious fight, and the toughest local resident was seventy-year-old Mr. Risdick, who walked barefoot over his pebbled driveway to collect the mail. Still, James regularly clashed with two boys nearby. Steven was a year younger, and their arguments often began with elaborate insults about each other's parents, then dissolved when the insults grew too ridiculous to continue. One day, though, Steven attacked after James mocked his father's appearance and imagined him in a naked conga line. James dodged Steven's wild swings until he pushed him down; when Steven walked off calling James's mother "Mrs. Saggyboobs," James tried to deliver a tough-guy line and produced a muddle about messing with his fist and paying the price. Steven advised him to quit while ahead, and James did.

Micky, a bigger boy a grade above James, was less forgiving. The two often faced off with an almost ceremonial exchange of questions about whether they really wanted to fight, then usually called a truce and went to look at Micky's father's Playboy magazines. When a fight did happen, James's tactics were consistently ineffective: a trip that barely unbalanced Micky, body blows that seemed to tickle him, and then a right hook that put James on the ground. James still picked fights with Micky several times a year. Eventually, he bribed his older cousin Russ to beat Micky up for him, a victory that cost him an unopened box of Wacky Packages and left him confronting an uncomfortable truth: he could not defend himself.

Fishing with his parents was not the treasured father-son outing other children might have enjoyed. In a fifth-grade essay about changing the world, James said he would begin by ending family fishing trips: he hated waking at dawn during summer vacation, killing fish, baking in the sun, and being trapped on a boat with his parents amid dead fish and cigarette smoke. Once he finished elementary school, he could stay home alone, and his first ambition was to earn money. He wanted things, had seen his father's finances swing between plenty and scarcity, and had learned that money mattered to his parents because payday was one of the few occasions they seemed happy together.

At ten, too young for a regular job, James took on household work and started small businesses. He raked a football-field-sized lawn for twenty dollars by duct-taping a rake to his motorized dirt bike; the technique removed a few leaves, which he considered money's worth. He also earned ten dollars an hour rubbing Delores's head and scratching her back, negotiating for more time in a mock accent. In Fred's machine shop, James operated injection-molding machines for excellent piecework pay, enduring the fumes and the risks of burns and pinched fingers by listening to motivational tapes. Inspired by sales gurus, he made wooden key racks and sold them door-to-door, then sold overpriced holiday products for the Olympic Sales Club until he had earned enough points for walkie-talkies. Later, he made crude white-painted pine wreaths and falsely told buyers the proceeds would go to the homeless. He spent the hundreds of dollars on himself, then, seeing a homeless woman in Bridgeport, felt ashamed and offered to buy her dinner. She warned him that the restaurant was government-owned and its food contained mind-control chips. James retreated, frightened; his charitable impulse had met an unexpected obstacle.

Christie, James's second family dog, was his constant companion and even a willing performer in the movies he filmed. One autumn day in 1984, James left for a friend's house, making sure Christie stayed inside. Fred later let her out, and she ran after James. A neighbor soon told him that a dog lay in the road and might be Christie. James raced back to find her badly hurt, breathing but motionless. A middle-aged woman stopped, helped him lift Christie into her minivan, and drove them to a nearby veterinarian. As they waited, the stranger put an arm around James and treated him with the tenderness he needed. The vet came out to say Christie had died. James finally released the tears he had been holding back and embraced the woman, who comforted him in return. Christie was not "just a dog" to him; she was his best friend, and losing her still hurt decades later. The woman's kindness would grow into a lifelong friendship.

James's interest in baseball cards had little to do with baseball and everything to do with their potential value. In the 1980s, a thirty-five-cent pack could contain a prized rookie card, and trading, flipping, and gambling for cards offered a child a chance to make money. At school, James watched classmates wager cards by throwing them at a target card, then asked one boy where he could get cards of his own. He traded an unopened Def Leppard cassette—bought to impress girls, though he preferred Wham—for a thick stack from David. James built that modest beginning into a collection worth more than ten thousand dollars by high school, winning cards through flips, pool, Monopoly, and card games.

He also took advantage of friends who did not know the value of inherited cards, sometimes trading them for a tenth of what they were worth. He felt some guilt, but not enough to give fair trades or forgive gambling debts. One night, David woke Jeff and Peter and led them to James's baseball-card closet, taking cards he believed the others had lost to James. He offered them some cards to keep quiet. When the missing cards were discovered, the boys

confessed and returned them. James felt betrayed, but eventually understood the irony: they saw themselves as taking back cards from a crook. He boxed up the collection and quit trading, recognizing that ripping people off was a kind of theft even when no one simply walked away with the cards.

At twelve, James also made a fashion choice that seemed to defy every rule of small-town boyhood: he got a perm. Annie persuaded him that a “body wave” would make him look like a fox. At the salon, surrounded by curlers and watched by Annie’s friends, he emerged with curls and a resemblance, she said, to George Michael. The next day, classmates teased him and labeled him gay. In the era’s narrow-minded schoolyard logic, almost any trait could earn that insult. Girls adopted James as an honorary girlfriend, confiding in him about their boyfriends rather than inviting him into romantic life. As his hair grew straighter, his reputation did too, although the episode left him with friendships that could be both genuinely warm and painfully one-sided.

In seventh grade, James turned to older girls, partly because his classmates had put him in the friend zone. Vivian, an eighth-grader with brown hair and dimples, let her interest reach him through a chain of friends; by the time the message arrived, it had inflated into the claim that she wanted to “bone” him. Their flirtation included whispering “Cheese and Rice” in art class to provoke their strict teacher, Mrs. Cioppa. When a friend asked if they were going out, James nervously asked Vivian, she agreed, and he announced the relationship as if he knew what came next.

His peers said a couple had to make out to make the relationship real. At a school dance, Vivian finally initiated their first kiss as the cafeteria lights came up. James was so nervous and dry-mouthed that he abruptly ended the five-second kiss and fled without a proper goodbye. Vivian broke up with him the next day. A year later, his friend Jennifer agreed to kiss him during a movie night, largely because their friends Keith and Cait wanted them to become a second couple. James felt awkward and uncomfortable, like he was kissing a cousin. Jennifer ended things the following day, and the friendship took years to recover. Afterward, James avoided dating female friends, fearing that romance would cost him the friendship—and suspected they might have reached the same conclusion about him.

By the time James reached eighth grade, years of losing fights to Micky and winning only by technicalities against Steven had convinced him he was no fighter. That confidence was tested on the last day of summer vacation, when James and his friends celebrated at a Bridgeport restaurant, in a town they associated with gangs. After dinner, they wandered into a dim, empty strip mall. A short, familiar troublemaker approached, insulted them, and challenged the three boys to fight him. As he pushed them, his larger group began moving closer. Liz’s mother arrived just in time to get the group into her car. Eric stayed behind long enough to punch the bully, who fell through a shop window, then leaped into the car as the

others ran toward them. The friends cheered, but James sat shaken, painfully aware of how vulnerable he had felt. The next day he joined a karate dojo, where five years of training taught him not only self-defense but how to avoid fights and dangerous situations in the first place.

At home, the danger was more familiar and harder to escape. Fred and Delores fought almost nightly, and when their drinking pushed them both into what James called the “danger zone,” their meanness became especially volatile. Delores might drink throughout the day, sometimes prompting Fred to start early; Fred, usually cheerful at first, could turn vicious after drinking too much. In 1988, James came home to find his mother chasing his father through the house with a large kitchen knife. Fred yelled for help as he ran past, and James tackled Delores, pinning her arms and securing the knife. He asked whether she would stop trying to kill Fred if he let her go. She said no. Fred called the police, and Delores’s sister took her for the night. James also recognized the support that helped him withstand such episodes: his older sister Annie had comforted him since childhood and remained a friend as he grew up. She had stayed strong for him, and he was deeply grateful.

Even after learning karate, James still felt insecure around bullies. When an older student mocked his seventh-grade perm, James simply admitted it and waited, leaving the bully awkwardly at a loss for what to say. But intimidation and threats persisted. One night, walking to his car after visiting an arcade, James imagined four thugs cornering him and demanding his wallet. In reality, no one followed him: he had accidentally hit his own eye on the car door while struggling to open it. Yet the injury gave him the seed of a story. He invented a dramatic fight in which martial arts carried him through three attackers and sent the fourth running, then added a cool farewell before driving away. His friends celebrated the tale, which quickly grew more extravagant as it spread around school. The fiction made him seem formidable and stopped the bullying, but keeping the lie alive became increasingly difficult as he grew older. He wondered whether better social skills might have let him avoid both the harassment and the deception.

That same adolescent appetite for thrills drove James and his friends to organize “seek and destroy missions” in sleepy Easton, where the police blotter might report a suspicious deer. They fastened a doll in a car seat to the roof of Keith’s father’s Audi, alarming two elderly men outside the country store. When a police report came over their scanner, the boys removed the evidence and disappeared. Other stunts played with technology: they used factory-default garage-door controls to open neighbors’ garages, and, from a backyard, changed a family’s television from The Goonies to a Playboy channel. The father caught them, and the boys fled, with Peter crashing into a stop sign. They also connected strangers through three-way calls, pretending to be operators and inventing absurd departments to keep confused callers on the line. Some of their schemes were less funny to the people involved. A dummy made to look like a child struck by a car was stolen by older teenagers, while attempts to frighten motorists

with dental floss or an “invisible” rope mostly angered them. Dressed as a drunken Santa, their friend Matt was nevertheless welcomed into house after house, though the hosts were eager to see him leave.

The missions escalated beyond harmless pranks. After James discovered that gasoline on his wet driveway made him slide like a surfer, he tried it on a lit path, then planned with friends to set fire to the pond by the middle school. Their preparations seemed meticulous, but David and Chris joined in and pushed the idea further, proposing that gasoline be poured from a moving truck and ignited along the route. James and Jeff eventually stayed behind, though they had given the group a gas can. They listened on the scanner as police reported a black Toyota truck leaving flames through residential streets, then announced that they had caught the boys. The teenagers accepted a deal requiring community service and a juvenile record lasting three years. James, Peter, and Chris spent the summer coaching little league, where James, who knew little about baseball, led stretching exercises and learned to juggle. He understood that their “innocent” gags had gradually become crimes. They would hold no more missions.

Other outings were just as reckless. After heavy rain, James and his friends tackled the swollen Mill River on flimsy pool rafts, wearing costumes but no helmets or life jackets. Jeff’s raft popped immediately, leaving him to scout from the bank. He spotted a huge fallen tree across the river and shouted for the others to get out. Most made it to shore, but David’s raft was sucked beneath the tree. The boys feared he had drowned until he reappeared around the bend, upright and apparently unharmed. After graduation, David moved to Aruba to become a scuba instructor and disappeared while diving alone. His body was never found. To comfort themselves, his friends imagined he had gone into hiding under an unlikely new name.

At junior prom, James faced a different kind of hurt. He noticed Janice, his sophomore girlfriend, withdrawing from him, then saw her making out with his friend Jake at the post-prom party. He cried outside, returned to watch them, and still had to drive Janice home the next morning. They barely spoke during the ride; at her house, she offered a curt apology. James’s heartbreak later became a story friends could invoke to make other disappointments seem survivable.

In 2019, decades later, James stood before friends and family at a dinner in the ballroom where he and Sabrina had married. After college, he had built a life with Sabrina, raised two children, and started businesses, writing and teaching because he wanted to. Now, with doctors giving him weeks or perhaps months, he thanked everyone for the role they had played in his life, calling them more than characters in his story: they were his life story. Annie and John struggled to say goodbye; old rivals Micky and Steven shared a final joking scowl with him; and the woman who had comforted him after Christie’s death blew him a kiss. Then

James spotted a guest in a rugby shirt: David, he imagined, returned after all. James died peacefully at home on his forty-eighth birthday, February 16, 2020, with Sabrina and their children beside him. He had asked for no funeral, having already given his loved ones the chance to say goodbye while he was alive. Though his going-away party included tears, laughter and companionship outweighed the sadness. They say every life ends in tragedy. James disagreed.

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