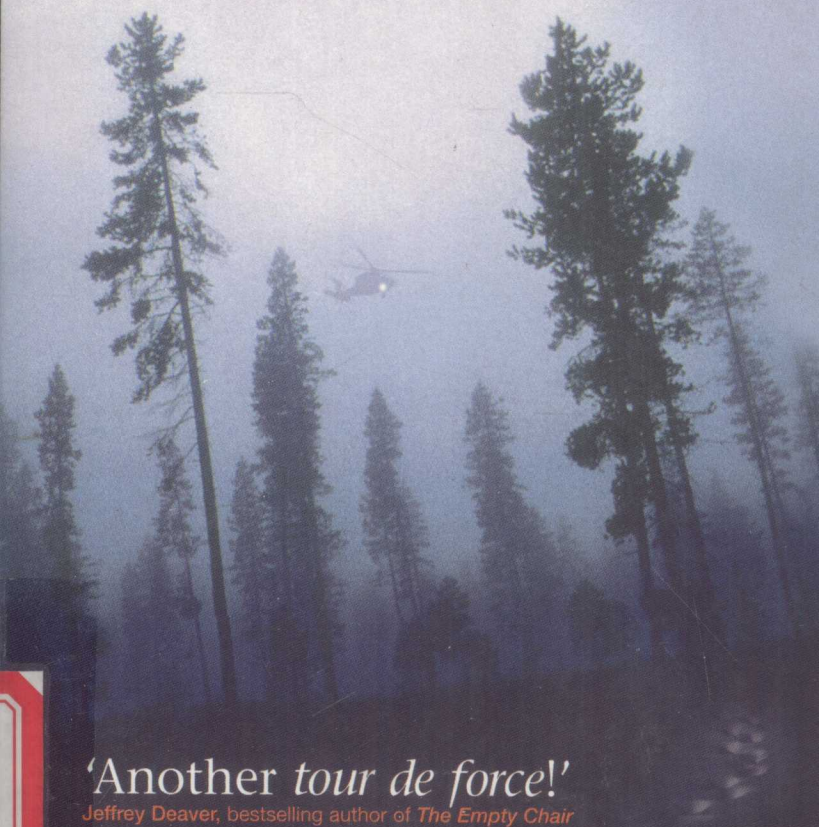




JOHN GILSTRAP

EVEN STEVEN



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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England

Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre,

Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads,

Albany, Auckland, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 5 Watkins Street,

Denver Ext 4, Johannesburg 2094, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published in the United States of America by Pocket Books 2000

Published in Great Britain by Michael Joseph 2000

Published in Penguin Books 2001

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Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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For Dad, with thanks for setting the bar so high.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, I married my best friend in the world. A day never dawns that I don't thank God for sending her my way, and the sun never sets without me wondering why she continues to put up with my antics and my dreams and my sixth-grade sense of humor. What I am, I owe to you, Joy. I love you.

In the years that I've been fortunate enough to write for my supper, my son, Chris, has grown from a little boy to a fine young man. The journey proceeds with impossible speed, and with each step he makes me prouder than any father has a right to be. Keep it up, kiddo. And thanks for making my world shine.

My job is one big what-if game. In writing *Even Steven*, I asked myself what I would do if I found myself facing prosecution for murder. Answer: I'd turn to John Bevis, the best defense attorney I know. A thousand thanks, John, for making my imaginary attorney sound as if she knows what she's talking about. For the record, whatever details are wrong are my fault, not John's. He's but one of a long line of teachers to find out that I'm not the most attentive student.

Thanks also to Dorothy Amarandos, for her help on the classical-music front. I wonder sometimes if she knows how many lives she makes more livable just by being who she is.

The book business can be treacherous, where friends can become predators without warning. I recently took my first turn in the shark tank, and I learned that an author is often only as strong as the people

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

who represent him. That being the case, words can't express my gratitude to my agents, Molly Friedrich and Matthew Snyder. Many thanks for the counsel, the critique, and the hand-holding.

Thanks also to Mary Beth Gibson (the best publicist *anywhere*), who works so hard and so effectively that I can't help but look pressed and prepared wherever I go. Truly, she's a godsend.

Finally, words can't express my gratitude to Tom Weldon and the rest of the team at Michael Joseph, whose loyalty and commitment never waver. You folks set the standard that others struggle to meet but never can.

BUNDLED TIGHTLY AGAINST the cold, the young couple lay on an outcropping over the Catoctin River, looking up at the cloudless sky, and wondering which of the countless millions of stars was truly the one that delivered wishes.

"You asleep?" Bobby whispered.

"Not yet." Susan's throat still sounded thick.

He pulled his bride of five years even closer and kissed the top of her head. "Happy anniversary."

Susan snuggled in, burying her face in his jacket.

The calendar had lied. After such a brutal winter, he liked to think that April would have brought warmer temperatures. Out here in the mountains, though, where West Virginia reached closest to God, the air still smelled of February. He'd never been so ready for spring.

This wasn't at all how he'd planned it. The spot was perfect, yes; and the night beautiful, but he'd hoped the sadness would have dulled by now. There had to be a way to make the pain go away. There *had* to be. If he were a better husband, he'd know what it was. Susan's thick brown hair—invisible in the darkness—felt warm and soft against his hand as he gently massaged lazy circles on her scalp. She liked it when he did that.

"We'll just try again," he whispered, hoping she didn't hear the tremor in his voice. "And again, if we have to. And again and again and again."

Susan just burrowed her head deeper. Her anguish felt like razor blades in Bobby's gut. He pursed his lips and stared at the sky, desperately trying to hide the little hitch in his breathing. His role required strength. If she sensed that dimples had formed in his armor of optimism, he wasn't sure how either of them would hold up.

They'd come so *close* last time; they'd let themselves believe. As much as he craved children, Bobby wasn't sure he could handle the cycle of hope and disaster anymore. He wasn't sure that anyone could. His tear tracks turned cold quickly in the night air.

It had been a week since the doctor had pronounced Susan's internal plumbing to be healthy and normal, and this was to be their weekend of healing. The tears were all a part of it, he supposed, as was the pain, but he worried about the anger. Sometimes when he was alone—only when he was alone—he raged about the injustice of it all, cursing God and Susan and himself for denying them the one blessing that would make their marriage whole. The anger ate at him sometimes, and on nights like these, as his best friend succumbed to wave after wave of grief, he wanted to hurt something just to exorcise the rage.

Time was the answer. He knew this, both from experience and from the advice of others, but it was the one element in the world that he could not manufacture.

Time heals all wounds. What a crock.

The river ran fast and loud just below them, swollen by melting snows. Every now and then, a few drops would rain down on them from an errant eddy that had slapped against the vertical face of their rock ledge. The thunderous noise of the water filled the void of the night, bringing to Bobby a momentary glimpse of the peace he'd hoped they'd find out here. What is it about water, he wondered, that settles the soul?

On a different night, he might never have heard the rustling in the bushes that bordered their secluded outcropping. It was a tentative sound, too random to be the wind, but bigger than a coon or a possum. Out in these parts, there was only one reasonable thought when you heard a sound like that.

"Oh, my God, it's a bear," Susan breathed, speaking their common fear. And it stood between them and their campsite.

Bobby was way ahead of her. Rolling quietly to his side, and then onto his feet, he rose slowly.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm gonna scare him off," he said.

"You're gonna piss him off. Just be still."

Bobby had never actually encountered a bear in the woods, but the common wisdom agreed that they had no real interest in people. As long as they didn't feel cornered, and their cubs weren't in jeopardy, they'd much rather run away from a noisy human than face him down.

"Go on!" Bobby shouted at the top of his voice, waving his arms. "Get out of here! I see you there in the bushes! Get out! Run away!"

Susan pulled at his pant leg. "Bobby!"

As the rustling stopped, Bobby turned in the cold moonlight and flashed a grin. "See?"

Then it charged. Squealing like a frightened pig, the beast bolted out of the trees, coming straight toward Bobby at first, then breaking off to the right, across the rocks toward the river.

Only it wasn't a bear.

"Oh my God!" Susan yelled. "It's a little boy!"

And he was scared to death. Screaming, he ran in a blind panic toward the edge of the rocks, and the roiling waters below.

"No!" Bobby shouted, and took off after him. "No! Don't! Come back!" But the kid moved like a water bug, darting with amazing speed but no visible effort, turning at the last possible instant away from the water, and back toward the woods, screaming the whole way.

"I didn't mean it!" Bobby called. "Stop! Really! I didn't mean it!" His words only seemed to make the boy move faster.

Finally, an old-growth oak tree ended the footrace. The boy looked over his shoulder long enough to see if Bobby was closing in on him, and he slammed into it; a glancing blow on his shoulder that might have killed him if he'd hit it head-on, but instead sent him ricocheting into a sapling, then onto the hard ground.

Bobby closed the distance in eight strides.

At first the little boy just sat there, stunned, and then the pain kicked in and he started to cry—a wailing sound that went beyond pain, combining fear and anger and frustration. He simply gave himself up to

it, rolling over onto his tummy and sobbing into the leaves on the ground.

Bobby just stood there. He had no idea what to do. He stooped down and hesitantly reached out a comforting hand. "Hey, kid, settle down, okay? I didn't mean any harm."

"Here, let me in." Susan shouldered Bobby out of the way and scooped the boy into her arms. He fought at first, but then he looked into Susan's face, and he liked whatever he saw. He seemed to meld with her, clamping down hard with his arms and legs, his face burrowed into her shoulder.

Susan shot a look to Bobby, but he didn't know what to say. The boy looked tiny—maybe three years old—and he was filthy. Dirt caked his hair and his ears; his skin was crusty with it. He wore only a pair of footy pajamas, with little red choo-choo trains stenciled on the flannel. The toes on his left foot protruded through the tattered cloth.

"What do you think?" Bobby whispered.

"I don't know. He's so small. And he's freezing. You should feel him tremble."

Bobby looked around, hoping to see a terrified parent somewhere, but all he saw were woods and sky and water.

"Hey, little guy, what's your name?"

The sound of Bobby's voice made the boy cringe and pull himself even tighter against Susan.

"He's going to break my back," she grunted.

Bobby stripped off his down jacket and wrapped it around the boy's shoulders. "Here you go, tiger. Let's get you warm." To Susan, Bobby added, "Let's get back to camp."

During the walk back, Susan tried to talk to the boy, asking him his name, and how old he was, but all he'd do was cry and hang on.

"This is bad, Bobby," she said softly. "What's he doing out here without clothes in this kind of cold?"

Bobby shrugged. "Maybe he wandered away from his campsite." What else could it be?

"But how did he get so dirty? I mean, look at him. This isn't just a little dirt. This is weeks of dirt. Months, maybe, and even then, he'd have to live in a garden."

She had a point. There's dirt, and then there's *dirt*. This kid looked as if he'd been rolled in mud.

In two minutes, they were back at their campsite, such as it was. Primitive was the name of the game here. Their Explorer was parked a good mile away, at the bottom of the trail. What little they had in the way of creature comforts they'd packed in on their backs. The campfire, built for aesthetics and warmth rather than cooking, had burned down to a pile of shimmering red embers.

"I'll build this back up," Bobby said, peeling off from the others.

Susan went straight to their igloo-like dome tent, and the warmth of the sleeping bags inside. She stooped to her haunches outside the little doorway and tried to pry the boy's hands from around her neck, and his feet from around her waist. He grunted and instantly reattached himself.

"No, no, sweetie, you're okay now. You're safe. We'll make sure you get back home, okay?"

No, it wasn't okay. It wasn't okay at all. He remained glued to her, and the more she tried to pry him away, the more desperate he became to hang on.

"Why don't you sit with him for a while inside, Sue?" Bobby suggested, drawn back to the tent by the noise. "Wrap him up in a sleeping bag and just hold him until he settles down. He must be scared to death."

"Then what?"

Bobby's eyebrows twisted. "I don't know. I guess we hike out with him in the morning and take him to the ranger station. They'll decide what to do with him from there." Bobby stayed in the doorway for a moment, watching the two of them settle into a sleeping bag. "Tell you what," he proposed after they were lying down. "Why don't I make some hot chocolate? If nothing else, maybe it will loosen his tongue a bit."

At the sound of the phrase *hot chocolate* the kid's eyes lit up, but as soon as Bobby shifted his gaze to meet them, the boy quickly looked away and remelted with Sue.

Having put the cooking equipment away hours ago, Bobby had to reassemble it all from scratch. The camp stove was a single-burner job,

fueled with white gas, and it took all of about three minutes to put it together, the satisfying blue flame telling him that he'd done it correctly. He poured water from his canteen into an aluminum pot, put it on the burner, and set about the business of resuscitating the campfire. He carefully stacked what remained of the kindling they'd collected in the daylight and knelt low, so that his elbows were on the ground, and his face nearly touched the dirt. From there he blew on the embers, a thin stream of air that made them flare orange before finally blossoming into a satisfying yellow flame.

He added larger pieces of wood, and within minutes, it burned freely, the flames reaching a good foot above the pile of sticks.

This whole thing had him spooked. Why in the world would a toddler be wandering around the woods in his pajamas? If he'd indeed been separated from his parents, where were the teams of rangers and police that should be out here looking for him? Where were the helicopters and the dogs? A sense of foreboding prickled his skin and he found himself obsessed with the notion that someone was watching him.

A loud snap drew his attention up ahead and to the right, toward the darkness that lay beyond the illuminated circle cast by the campfire. What was that? Most likely, just his imagination.

But he heard it again. Whatever it was—*whoever* it was—was approaching cautiously. Bobby closed his hand around a club-sized piece of firewood and stood casually, keeping it hidden as best he could behind his leg as he moved to the edge of the light circle.

"Bobby?" Susan asked from inside the tent. "Is something wrong?"

"Shh. I don't know. Be quiet for a second."

There it was again, only this time a rustle of leaves preceded the snap, and again the movement stopped, as if someone were attempting a stealthy approach and getting frustrated.

"Hello?" Bobby yelled. His words seemed five times louder in the silence of the night. "Who's out there?"

SAMUEL CRINGED AT the sound of the breaking stick and froze without waiting for Jacob's hand signal. He knew he'd screwed up again, and he knew that Jacob would have one of *those looks* on his face. He hated those looks. Samuel Stanns wasn't nearly the idiot that his brother thought he was.

Okay, so he'd let the boy get away. That was a big mistake, but to hear Jacob piss and moan about it, you'd think he'd done it on purpose. He never screwed up on purpose, and if he knew how to stop screwing up by accident, then he'd do it, wouldn't he? Of course he would.

Hell, it was dark out here. How are you supposed to avoid stepping on a stick? It was just hunky-dory terrific that Jacob was able to do it, but not everyone was as good at stuff as Jacob was. Samuel tried his best, and as his mama used to tell him, trying was sometimes the best you could hope for. His mama had understood that, and so did Jacob most of the time, even though his daddy . . . Well, what his daddy thought didn't matter much anymore.

Didn't matter at all right now because Jacob was pissed, and when that happened, the whole world had better start paying attention. Ever since they were kids, Jacob'd had a temper, and everybody who knew him knew to stay away from it.

"Are you listening to me or what?"

Jacob's harsh whisper broke whatever spell had locked up Samuel's mind and brought him back to the present. He nodded yes—that he

was listening—because he knew it was the right answer, but Jacob still repeated himself.

"You just stay here," he commanded. "Don't go anywhere and don't say anything. I'll take care of this."

Samuel nodded, but then Jacob got mad again anyway.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes." Samuel was never very good at whispering, so the best he could do was sort of a soft regular voice. "But you said not to say anything, so I thought I wasn't supposed—"

"Shut up, Samuel."

Susan poked her head through the door flap. "What's going on, Bobby?"

He didn't even look as he waved her back inside. To the woods, he said, "Howdy. You scared me. What can I do for you?"

"Well," a new voice said, its gravelly tone sounding twice as loud as her husband's, "I'm hoping you can help me find my son."

At the sound of the voice, the boy bolted upright in his sleeping bag and made a keening sound as he scrambled to Susan for protection. His eyes bore the look of a frightened pup, pleading and helpless as he pulled with hands and feet to drag Susan back into the tent and embrace her. She tried to quiet him down, but it was useless. The boy was utterly terrified.

Outside, Bobby recognized the boy's cries for what they were, and he caught the flash of contempt in their newest visitor's eyes.

"I'm Tom Stipton," Jacob said, extending his hand. "I see you found him. Quite a handful, isn't he?"

"I'll thank you to keep your distance," Bobby said, retreating a step and tightening his grip on the club. At six-two if he was an inch, the stranger looked like someone who'd been in his share of fights, and he moved with the confidence of the one who usually prevailed. Bobby's mind raced with possible bluffs, but with the kid making so much noise, he wasn't sure what he could do. "How did you lose him?"

The visitor seemed amused, as if he knew that his lies were transparent but decided to humor Bobby anyway. "Oh, the wife and me was drivin' down the road when we broke down. I fiddled with the engine for a while, and when I looked up, dear little Samuel was gone."

The words sat wrong with Bobby. "Dear little Samuel" had a troubling ring of sarcasm, and the delivery wasn't right. This guy should have been ecstatic to be reunited with his son. Instead, he seemed angry.

Bobby needed to do something. None of this added up, and he'd be goddamned if he was just—

The gun came from nowhere, materializing in the visitor's hand as it swung up at arm's length to point at Bobby's chest. It moved so fast that he never really saw the weapon, but the motion could only mean one thing. The odd smirk never left the man's face.

Bobby reacted without thinking, ducking to his left even as he swung his club. He connected with the back of the man's hand just as the weapon fired, the explosion deafening him momentarily as he rolled to his side and struggled to find his feet. He waited for the agonizing impact of a bullet, but instead saw the stranger on his hands and knees, brushing through the leaves on the shadow-strewn ground.

The gun! I must have knocked it out of his hands.

Bobby charged, with his club raised high over his head, but the stranger saw him coming and drove a fist deep into Bobby's belly, knocking the air out of his lungs. Gasping for a breath, Bobby never even saw the vicious backhand that buckled his knees.

His consciousness wavered, and he tasted dirt in his mouth. It made a foul, muddy mixture with the blood that leaked from a gash inside his cheek. The whole world spun at a weird, tilted angle, and as he attempted to find the ground and grab on to it, he knew with absolute clarity that if he passed out now, he'd die.

He tried standing once, fell back again, his hand landing in the fire, triggering a yelp of pain. The singed fingers helped him to focus, though, and as his vision cleared, he saw the stranger back in the leaves, trying to find his pistol.

Jesus, the pistol.

The fuzziness in his head evaporated. This man was going to kill him. Him and Susan. And the boy. He had to stop him. But how?

With a rush of clarity, he remembered the pot of water simmering on the small stove. It was his only chance. Scrambling to his feet, he

staggered toward the dim blue flame and snatched the boiling pot from the burner, the metal handle burning the folds of his knuckles.

At that instant, the stranger made an odd, growling sound as he triumphantly snatched his gun from the leaves.

Bobby never even slowed down. Charging full tilt, he slung the scalding water in an awkward underhand softball pitch, catching the intruder squarely in the face. Jacob howled and clawed at his scalded eyes, but Bobby kept coming, catching him full in the throat with his shoulder, and sending him sprawling backward into the dirt.

"Samuell!" Jacob yelled. "Goddammit, Samuel, help me!"

Bobby hit the ground hard and instantly scrambled back to his feet. He needed the gun. He needed this man to die. But the weapon was still clutched in the stranger's hand. He kicked out wildly with his boot, targeting Jacob's head but mostly hitting the arms he used to shield himself.

"Samuell!"

Bobby went for the gun. He grabbed the weapon by its barrel and pulled. It fired. Bobby yelled and fell to the ground, certain that he'd been hit, but surprised by how little it hurt. His right forearm felt as if it had been set on fire by the muzzle flash, but as he glanced at the damage, he was shocked to see that he'd come away with the gun.

"Motherfucker!" the killer roared. Still blinded from his burns, Jacob turned onto his belly and thrust his hand out to close with crushing force around Bobby's ankle. "I'll kill you. I swear to God, I'll kill you. Samuel!"

Terrified, Bobby tried to kick himself free from the man's grasp, but there was no getting away. He sighted down the barrel of the big pistol at the top of Jacob's head.

He'll kill you. He'll kill Susan . . .

But his finger wouldn't work on the trigger.

Then the scalded eyes found him. The man looked straight at him. Even through the blisters, the coldness of his eyes chilled the night air.

"I'll fucking kill you!" he yelled, and he lunged forward.

The pistol bucked in Bobby's hand, blinding him with a brilliant white flash, and then it bucked again. He couldn't even see what he was doing anymore, but he had to kill this monster.

• • •

Susan shrieked at the sound of the gunshots, and so did the boy. They desperately hung on to each other inside the tent as she tried to make some sense of it all; to figure out what she should do.

If Bobby was dead, then so was she. And the boy, most likely.

The fight had raged outside for an hour, it seemed, and as she tried to piece together all that had happened, all she heard now was quiet. After so much noise, the quiet was most terrifying of all.

Samuel felt the tears coming, and he fought to stop them. Only pussies cried. He'd heard Jacob say that a thousand times.

He'd said not to move, dammit! And he'd said not to say a word, so when he started calling for help, that was really, really confusing. How could Samuel know that Jacob wouldn't get mad all over again? Besides, Jacob never liked it when Samuel got into the middle of his fights. He said that he could handle himself, and that his little brother only fucked things up when he tried to help.

But from where Samuel stood, it sure looked as if Jacob needed some; the way he just lay there, not moving. It reminded him of the way other people lay frozen on the ground when Jacob was through with them. He couldn't be dead, could he?

No, Jacob was too tough to die. He might get beat up real bad sometimes, but he'd never die. He promised. He'd always be there for Samuel, no matter what. He said that all the time.

But he sure wasn't moving.

Samuel started to cry, in spite of himself. He always cried when he was scared, and right now he was more frightened than he'd ever been. At least since he was a little boy.

But Jacob would be okay. He promised.

Samuel had to suck on his hand—that place between his thumb and his forefinger (because everybody knows that only pussies sucked their thumbs)—to keep his crying quiet enough that no one would hear.

"Come on, Jacob," he whined in as near a whisper as he knew how. "Come on and get up. Please get up, Jacob . . ."

Bobby couldn't take his eyes off the man on the ground. He just watched, numb, as the blood leaked out of him, forming little rivulets in