

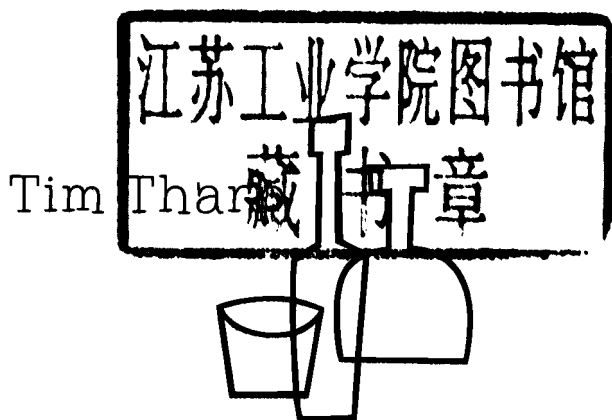
THE SPECTACULAR NOW



by tim tharp



THE
SPECTACULAR
NOW



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Chapter 1

So, it's a little before ten a.m. and I'm just starting to get a good buzz going. Theoretically, I should be in Algebra II, but in reality I'm cruising over to my beautiful fat girlfriend Cassidy's house. She ditched school to get her hair cut and needs a ride because her parents confiscated her car keys. Which I guess is a little ironic considering that they're punishing her for ditching school with me last week.

Anyway, I have this sweet February morning stretching out in front of me, and I'm like, Who needs algebra? So what if I'm supposed to be trying to boost the old grades up before I graduate in May? I'm not one of these kids who's had their college plans set in stone since they were about five. I don't even know when the application deadlines are. Besides, it's not like my education is some kind of priority with my parents. They quit keeping track of my future when they divorced, and that was back in the Precambrian Era. The way I figure it, the community college will always take me. And who says I need college anyway? What's the point?

Beauty's all around me right here. It's not in a textbook. It's not in an equation. I mean, take the sunlight—warm but not too brash. It's not like winter at all. Neither was January or December for that matter. It's amazing—we couldn't have had more than one cold week all winter. Listen, global warming's no lie. Take last summer. You want to talk about getting a beating from the heat. Last summer was a hardcore pugilist. I mean, burn-you-down-to-the-roots-of-your-hair hot. It's like Cassidy says—global warming's not for lightweights.

But with this February sun, see, the light's absolutely pure and makes the colors of the sky and the tree limbs and the bricks on these suburban houses so clean that just looking at them is like inhaling purified air. The colors flow into your lungs, into your bloodstream. You are the colors.

I prefer drinking my whisky mixed, so I pull into a convenience store for a big 7UP, and there's this kid standing out front by the pay phone. A very real-looking kid, probably only about six years old—just wearing a hoodie and jeans, his hair sticking out every which way. Not one of these styling little kids you see in their brand-name outfits and their TV show haircuts, like they're some kind of miniature cock daddy. Of course, they wouldn't know what to do with a girl if she came in a box with the instructions on the lid like Operation or Monopoly, but they have the act down.

Right away, I take to this kid, so I say, "Hey, dude, aren't you supposed to be in school or something?" and he's like, "Can I borrow a dollar?"

I go, "What do you need with a dollar, little man?"

And he's, "I'm going to buy a candy bar for breakfast."

Now that gets my attention. A candy bar for breakfast? My heart goes out to this kid. I offer to buy him a breakfast burrito, and he's okay with that as long as he gets his candy bar too. When we come back out, I look around to size up what kind of traffic the kid's going to have to negotiate in his travels. We live just south of Oklahoma City—technically it's a whole different city, but with the urban sprawl you can't tell where one leaves off and the other begins—so we have a lot of traffic zipping around here.

"Look," I tell him as he drips egg down the front of himself. "This is a pretty busy intersection. How about I give you a ride to wherever you're going so some big rig doesn't barrel down and flatten you like a squirrel."

He looks me over, sizing me up just like a squirrel might actually do right before deciding to scamper off into his lair. But I'm a trustworthy-looking guy. I have no style either—just a pair of reasonably old jeans, beat-up sneakers, and a green long-sleeve T-shirt that says *Ole!* on the front. My brown hair's too short to need much combing, and I have a little gap between my two front teeth, which gives me a friendly, good-hearted look, or so I'm told. The point is I'm a long way from scary.

So the kid takes a chance and hops into the passenger side of my Mitsubishi Lancer. I've had it for about a year—it's silver with a black interior, not new or anything but pretty awesome in a basic kind of way.

"My name's Sutter Keely," I say. "What's yours?"

"Walter," he says around a mouthful of burrito.

Walter. That's good. I've never known a little kid named Walter. It seems like an old man's name, but I guess you have to start somewhere.

"Now, Walter," I say, "the first thing I want you to know is you shouldn't really take rides from strangers."

"I know," he says. "Mrs. Peckinpough taught us all about that at Stranger Danger."

"That's good," I say. "You should keep that in mind in the future."

And he goes, "Yeah, but how do you know who's a stranger?"

That cracks me up. *How do you know who's a stranger?* That's a kid for you. He can't comprehend that people might be dangerous just because you haven't met them yet. He's probably got all sorts of sinister ideas about what a stranger is—a black, slouchy hat and raincoat, a scar on the cheek, long fingernails, shark teeth. But think about it—when you're six years old, you haven't met all that many people. It would be pretty mind-boggling to go around suspicious of ninety-nine percent of the populace.

I start to explain the stranger thing to him, but his attention span isn't all that long and he gets sidetracked watching me pour whisky into my big 7UP.

"What's that?" he asks.

I tell him it's Seagram's V.O., so then he wants to know why I'm pouring it in my drink.

I look at him and he has this authentic interest in his big, round eyes. He really wants to know. What am I going to do, lie to him?

So I go, "Well, I like it. It's smooth. It has kind of a smoky flavor. I used to drink the southern bourbons more—Jim Beam, Jack Daniel's—but if you're going for a nice, slow, all-day sort of buzz, those have a little too much bite. And to my way of thinking, people can smell them on your breath more. I tried Southern Comfort, but it's too sweet. No, it's the Canadian whiskies for me now. Although I've been known to mix a fine, fine martini too."

"What's a martinina?" he says, and I can see it's time to head off the questions before I end up spending the whole morning putting this kid through bartender school. I mean, he's a good kid, but my girlfriend is waiting on me and she's not the most patient person in the world.

"Look," I say, "I've got to be moving along, so where you headed?"

He finishes chewing the last of the burrito, swallows, and says, "Florida."

Now I can't give you mileage off the top of my head, but we're in Oklahoma, so Florida is a good five states away, at least. I explain that to him, and he tells me to just drop him off at the edge of town and he'll walk the rest of the way. He's serious.

"I'm running away from home," he says.

This kid is getting better all the time. Running away to Florida! I take a hit off my whisky and Seven and I can see it

just like he does—a giant orange sun dripping down into the bluest ocean you ever saw with palm trees genuflecting at its glory.

“Look,” I say, “Walter. May I be so bold as to ask why you’re running away?”

He stares into the dashboard. “’Cause my mom made my dad move away and now he’s in Florida.”

I’m like, “Aw shit. I can sympathize, little dude. Same thing happened to me when I was a kid too.”

“What’d you do?”

“I was pissed, I guess. My mom wouldn’t tell me where my dad moved to. I didn’t run away, but I think it was around that time that I set the tree in the backyard on fire. I’m not sure why. It was quite a sight, though.”

That stokes his enthusiasm. “Really, you set a whole tree on fire?”

“Don’t get any ideas,” I tell him. “You can get into some deep dookie for that kind of thing. You don’t want the firemen mad at you, do you?”

“No, I don’t want that.”

“So, about this running away deal—I can see your point. You’d get to visit your dad and you’d have adventures and shit. You could swim in the ocean. But to tell you the truth, I can’t recommend it. Florida’s too far. You try to walk and you’re not going to find a convenience store on every corner. Where are you going to get your food then?”

“I could hunt it.”

“Yeah, you could. Do you have a gun?”

“No.”

“A knife or a rod and reel maybe?”

“I have a baseball bat, but it’s at home.”

“There you go. You’re not prepared. We probably ought to go back and get your bat.”

"But my mom's home. She thinks I'm in school."

"That's all right. I'll talk to her. I'll explain the whole situation."

"You will?"

"Sure."

Chapter 2

Now, I should've been at my girlfriend's five minutes ago, but this time I have a legitimate reason for running late. How can Cassidy—Ms. Activist herself—hold it against me for intervening in this kid's situation? I'm practically doing social work here. I might even get Walter's mom to vouch for me.

Unfortunately, Walter doesn't remember exactly where he lives. He's never had to walk there from the convenience store before. All he knows is there's a scary black van with no wheels parked in the driveway of a house on the corner of his street, so up and down the residential section I go, looking for that van.

For a six-year-old, Walter's a pretty good conversationalist. He has a theory that Wolverine from X-Men is the same guy who picks up the garbage on his street. Also, there was a big, redheaded kid at his school named Clayton who made a hobby out of going around and stepping on other kids' feet. Then one day, he got tired of hearing the littler kids squeal, so he stomped down on the teacher's foot for a change. The last time Walter saw Clayton, Mrs. Peckinpaugh was dragging him down the hall by the wrist while he slid along on his butt like a dog wiping itself.

"Yeah," I say. "School's weird, all right. But just remember this—weird's good. Embrace the weird, dude. Enjoy it because it's never going away."

Just to illustrate my point, I tell the story about Jeremy Holtz and the fire extinguisher. I knew Jeremy pretty well in grade school, and he was all right, always quick with a one-liner.

But in junior high, around the time his brother got killed in Iraq, he started hanging out with the “bad element.” Not that I don’t hang out with the bad element every once in a while myself, but that’s just me—I hang out with everyone.

Jeremy changed, though. He got acne and started harassing teachers. One day after he let out a loud exaggerated fake yawn in history class, Mr. Cross told him he was only showing off his bad upbringing. That was too much for Jeremy. Without saying a word, he walked out of the class. About a minute later, he sauntered back in with a fire extinguisher, just blasting one direction and then the next, casual as could be. He was a walking blizzard-maker. Everyone in the back row took a hit along with most of the whole south side of the classroom. Mr. Cross made a charge for him, but Jeremy blasted him a good one, too, as if to say, “There you go, Mr. Cross. There’s some motherfucking bad upbringing for you.”

“Old Jeremy spared me, though,” I tell Walter. “You know why?”

He shakes his head.

“Because I embrace the weird.”

I don’t know how many streets we’ve driven up and down, but finally there it is—the scary black van with no wheels. It’s not that this is a run-down neighborhood or anything. It’s just that you can’t go too far on this side of town without coming across somebody’s fixer-upper sitting on blocks in the driveway. In fact, Walter’s house is a perfectly decent, little one-story suburban house with a perfectly decent Ford Explorer sitting out front.

I have to coax him to come up to the porch with me, and he looks a little scared as I ring the bell. There’s a pretty long wait, but finally his mom comes to the door with this expression on her face like she expects me to try to sell her a vacuum cleaner

or Mormonism. I'll say this for her, though—she's hot. She looks so young it's hard to even think of her as a MILE.

When she sees Walter, she opens the storm door and gives him the old "What are you doing out of school, young man" routine. He looks like he's about to bust out bawling, so I step up and go, "Pardon me, ma'am, but Walter's sort of upset. I found him at the convenience store, and he was talking about wanting to go to Florida."

Right then I notice her checking out my big 7UP. "Wait a minute," she says, squinting at me. "Have you been drinking?"

I glance down at the 7UP like it's some kind of co-conspirator that narced me out. "Uh, no. I haven't been drinking."

"Yes, you have too." She lets the storm door swing shut behind her and squares off right in front of me. "I can smell it on your breath. You've been drinking alcohol and driving my little boy around."

"That's not really the point." I'm backing off. "Let's keep the focus on Walter here."

"Don't come up here drinking and telling me what to do with my boy. Walter, get in the house."

He gazes up at me with a forlorn expression.

"Walter, now!"

So I'm, "Hey, you don't need to yell at him," and she's all, "I have a good mind to call the police."

I want to fire back something about how, if she had a good mind, her son wouldn't be trying to run away to Florida. But I know better. I haven't been in trouble with the police since the tree-burning incident and don't intend to let a mean, hot, twenty-five-year-old mother get me in any now.

Instead, I'm like, "Look at the time." I glance down at my wrist even though I'm not wearing a watch. "Wouldn't you know it? I'm late for Bible school."

She stands there watching me all the way to my car door, making it clear that she's ready to memorize my license tag number if I try to get smart. I can't let Walter down, though. It's just not in my nature.

"Your son's hurting," I say as I open the door. "He misses his dad."

She steps off the porch and twists her scowl a notch meaner.

I get in and start the car, but I can't drive off without rolling down the window and saying one last thing: "Hey, I'd watch Walter around the tree in your backyard if I was you."

Chapter 3

Okay, I am now officially late as hell to pick up Cassidy. Bad-boyfriend late. She's going to get that scrunched-up look on her face like she thinks I'm a spoiled toddler instead of her boyfriend. That's all right. I'm not one of these guys that cowers before his girlfriend's wrath. Sure she can hurl some serious, jagged quips when she gets mad, but I can deal with that. I welcome the challenge. It's like trying to dodge a fistful of razor-sharp kung fu throwing stars. Besides, she's worth it.

Cassidy is the best girlfriend ever. I've dated her for a full two months longer than anyone else. She's smart and witty and original and can chug a beer faster than most guys I know. On top of that, she is absolutely beautiful. I mean spanktacular. Talk about pure colors. She's high-definition. Scandinavian blond hair, eyes as blue as fiords, skin like vanilla ice cream or flower petals or sugar frosting—or really not like anything else but just her skin. It makes my hair ache. Of course, she does believe in astrology, but I don't even care about that. It's a girl thing. I think of it like she has constellations and fortunes whirling around inside her.

But what really sets Cassidy apart is that she's so damn beautifully fat. And believe me, I don't use the word *fat* in a negative way. The fashion magazine girls are dried-up skeletons next to her. She has immaculate proportions. It's like if you took Marilyn Monroe and pumped up her curves three sizes with an air hose. When I move my fingers along Cassidy's body, I feel like Admiral Byrd or Coronado, exploring uncharted territory.