

**Small
Things**

by

**Joe
DeRouen**

Small Things Press

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First Printing: December 2012

ISBN 978-0-615-73771-3

Cover by Renée Barratt, thecovercounts.com

Author photo by Jasmine Teramura

FIRST EDITION

Printed in the USA

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Small Things Press | www.SmallThingsPress.com

*For my wife Andee and my son Fletcher, without whom this book most likely
would still have been possible, but not nearly as rewarding*

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank everyone who contributed to helping make this novel happen, including Andee DeRouen, Bruce Diamond, Jason Warner, Jennifer Kuzbury, Anne Sturdivant Coppock, Jessica Rotich, LaDonna Elston Meredith, all the folks associated with NaNoWriMo, and my high school Junior English teacher, Mr. Snowden, who was the first person to encourage me and tell me I had talent.

Special thanks also go to Lisa Lauenberg, Tasha Derouen, Judy SoRelle, Pan Sticksel, Rebecca McFarland, Joe Reynolds, Phil and Melissa Rhoads, Jesse and Kristie Floyd, Zoom Beezie, Dave Doohan, Burgundy Wisrock-Eckert, Steven Jasiczek, Douglas Smith, Kristen Scissons, David and Shelley Darling, Paul and Ruth SoRelle, Melissa Jordan, Jane Barfield, and Vanessa Wages.

Small Things

Chapter 1

Summer, 1975

SOMEONE HAD been following him ever since he returned home. The hint of movement outside the window, just beyond his line of sight, or the sense that someone had quickly stepped behind a building or a tree mere seconds before he turned around; nothing concrete to prove his suspicions, but someone had been there, of that he was dead certain.

Even this morning, getting ready for his best friend's funeral, he'd felt a pair of eyes following him as he climbed into the back of his dad's station wagon. He hoped that whoever it was hadn't followed them to the church.

Lost in his thoughts, he could almost forget Tanner's death, if only for a moment. Breathing deeply, he forced himself to take stock of his surroundings.

Shawn Spencer sat with his parents inside the Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church of Carthage - a hot, stifling building that he had only visited a handful of times before. They occupied the third pew from the front, just behind Tanner's family. The air inside the church was stuffy and the seats were hard and uncomfortable, and Shawn tried desperately to tune out the droning voice of the priest whom Tanner's family had chosen to lead the service.

When he closed his eyes, he could still see Tanner dressed up in his Sunday best, his mouth molded into an unnatural smile and his skin a

color in death that it had never been in life. It just wasn't Tanner. And he hated those clothes they'd put him in. If he was going to have to spend eternity underground, couldn't they at least have picked out more comfortable clothes?

Tanner had drowned just three days ago. The two had been inseparable since the middle of fourth grade, and he couldn't quite grasp the thought of life without his best friend.

"Shawn," whispered his father, the word coming out in a choke, "we're pretty much done here, unless you want to go up and say goodbye one last time. I think it's about time to go to the cemetery for the burial."

Shawn's stomach clenched at his father's words, and he looked across the rows of wooden pews to the coffin where his best friend lay in his uncomfortable suit. A quiet murmuring chatter danced among the mourners, pleasantries exchanged about what a good boy Tanner had been, how the family had endured more than their share of tragedies over the years, and why it was perfectly understandable that Tanner's sister was having a hard time coping with her loss. Shawn just wanted them all to shut up. He needed this day to be over. More than anything, he desperately needed his friend back.

He snuck another glance toward the entrance to the church – nothing – then watched as the other mourners filed past the coffin, some pausing to say a prayer or to drop something in the casket, others rushing past without so much as a glance. Two of Tanner's cousins paid their respects, followed by a teacher from school, and finally a blonde-haired man in a trench coat. *A strange choice of dress for a hot summer morning*, thought Shawn, but then the procession began to slow, and he knew it was his turn.

And there it was again. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled, and the flash of something dark, something that shouldn't be there, opposite Tanner's coffin and across the hall, outside the heavy wooden

doors that hung open exposing the church to the rest of the world. He clenched his teeth and moved forward, ignoring his racing heart.

He didn't want to say goodbye, didn't even know how, but he knew he had to do it. Moving closer to the box of burnished wood, he noticed Tanner's sister putting something inside the coffin. He caught her eye and she blushed, her cheeks turning a shade of crimson to match her long, red hair and freckles, as she pushed a pair of tortoiseshell glasses further up the bridge of her nose.

"Hi Shawn," Jenny smiled shyly. "Mom said it was okay to put something in with Tanner. You can too, if you want."

"Like what?" Shawn asked, confused, his eyes darting between the girl and the doorway beyond the church. "What would he need, now that he's... well, you know..."

"Yeah, I do know," said Jenny, her emerald green eyes welling up with tears. "Sorry," she sniffled. "Well, Mom put in a poem, Grandma put in a bible, and Dad put in a few of Tanner's favorite comics. I put in his Galahad doll."

Action figure, he silently corrected her. Girls.

He studied the eight-inch plastic knight lying atop Tanner's cold body: The Mego figure's armor had a small split and was missing his helmet and visor, though at least he still had his sword and shield. That in itself was amazing considering how many adventures Tanner and Shawn had put their figures through over the years.

Shawn's Ivanhoe was in a similar state of disrepair, having long ago lost his weapons and both of his boots. Though they didn't really play with them anymore, both he and Tanner still had their figures proudly displayed on bookshelves in their rooms.

His eyes swept the rest of the offerings: there was the bible and the comics, along with some photos, Mrs. McGee's poem, a little silver cross, and an old mason jar of change. Shawn stared at the jar, thinking for a moment that it was the same one they had found earlier in the summer, but of course that couldn't be the case. He knew Tanner had

been saving money for a new bicycle, so maybe his parents had included the jar along with the rest of the offerings.

“Jenny, I don’t have anything to put with him,” Shawn apologized, firmly positioning his back to the door lest he be compelled to look again. And then he remembered the nickel.

Earlier in the summer, just two weeks before the start of summer vacation, Shawn and Tanner had finally managed to get into the old Spencer house on Randolph Street. The huge three-story spread, abandoned for years, had fueled their imagination for as long as he could remember. After all, it was Shawn’s birthright: Charles Spencer, the last known occupant of the house, had been Shawn’s great-great uncle. And that’s where they’d found the nickel.

“Well, I guess I do have something after all,” reasoned Shawn, reaching into his pocket. Bypassing his pocketknife and two pieces of Bazooka bubble gum, he pulled out an old Buffalo nickel. “Think this’ll do?”

“Couldn’t hurt,” Jenny smiled, adjusting her glasses. Taking the nickel from Shawn’s outstretched palm, she blanched as she noticed a wet stain of blood on the coin. “Hey, did you hurt yourself?”

Looking to his bleeding thumb, he thought he’d probably pricked it on the old pocketknife when digging around for the nickel. “My pocketknife. I guess I need to get rid of that thing,” he shrugged, sucking the blood from his finger. “Sorry about that.”

Answering his shrug with one of her own, Jenny returned the nickel before slowly walking away to rejoin her parents. “I’m not sure what he could buy with a nickel, though,” she called over her shoulder, giving Shawn a half-hearted wave.

“I’ll miss you, buddy,” said Shawn, flicking the coin into the air toward Tanner’s coffin. The coin landed on Galahad’s head, bounced once, rolled down the toy’s torso, and finally settled between his legs and the dead boy’s hand. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there,” he whispered,

turning away from the coffin to follow Jenny back into the world of the living.

Chapter 2

SHAWN HAD only been to one other funeral before this one, and that had been eight years ago. Today's events brought back a flash of memory; the sight of rosy-pink skin turned blue, and a body that should have been breathing...

He shook his head, pushing back the memory. Shawn wasn't looking forward to going to Tanner's house any more than he was the ceremony itself, but that's exactly where he found himself less than thirty minutes after they'd lowered his best friend into the ground. He'd seen no sign of his follower between the church and the house, so maybe it was his imagination after all.

The McGee house was filled with all the same people who had been at the church and the cemetery. They drifted in and out, new people inexplicably arriving to take the place of anyone who left. Shawn consoled his misery with another tiny ham and cheese sandwich from the huge buffet table in the dining room and tried to stay out of everyone's way.

The table was filled to the edge with all kinds of cheese and lunch meats, three baked hams, four pies, and just about every kind of casserole you could imagine. Shawn was contemplating a huge piece of cherry pie when someone tapped him on the shoulder.

Shawn whirled in panic, knocking over a glass of iced tea someone had carelessly left on the table into a half-eaten cherry pie. His eyes big and his heart racing, he blushed as he saw it was only Jenny.

“Hey Shawn,” she said, a cup of lemonade in one hand and the program from the funeral in the other. She still wore the depressing black dress she’d had on at the cemetery, but her long red hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Jenny smiled as she straightened her glasses. “Can we talk?”

“Umm, sure,” answered Shawn, doing his best to ignore the mess as the tea soaked into the fruit-filled pastry. “I guess so.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard by now that I’m totally nuts,” she forced a smile as she led Shawn from the dining room and out the door to the back porch.

“Well, yeah, I guess I have,” answered Shawn, sitting down on one of the lawn chairs that adorned the small deck. He forced himself to suck down a huge gulp of air and exhaled slowly. He didn’t like being out here, at the mercy of whoever had been following him.

“Well, I’m not. And I need your help. Did they tell you what happened?”

“At the lake, you mean?”

“Yes, dummy, at the lake. What did you think I meant?” She smiled, taking a seat beside him.

“Well, dad told me that Tanner drowned at the lake, and that you found him. There doesn’t seem to be much else to tell.”

“But that’s not what happened!” Jenny argued. “A monster got him, Shawn, a huge, black monster. And I know how that sounds, but it’s true. I didn’t even have time to say anything, or do anything, before it rose up out of the water and grabbed him. Then it shook him and growled at him, and it pulled him under.” Fresh tears glistened on her cheeks. “And then it killed him. It murdered my brother. And I need your help to find it.”

“Jenny! I can’t help you find it, because it doesn’t exist. There wasn’t any monster. Monsters don’t exist.” At least that’s what he’d always believed. “Tanner...”

“Tanner was murdered, Shawn!” Jenny sobbed, jumping out of her chair. “He was murdered. Don’t you get it? Don’t you want to find out what really happened?”

“Jenny, I’m sorry. I really am. Jesus, he was my best friend! But I just don’t believe...”

“You’re wrong,” she said, stifling her tears. “And I’m going to prove it.”

Chapter 3

SHAWN PUSHED the kickstand into place, sliding off his Schwinn at the lake that had stolen his best friend's life. He stood at the far end of the water, beside the little dam and spillway that kept the lake from flooding. A putrid stench wafted up from the water, filling his nostrils and causing his eyes to burn. The lake had turned. It was that time of year.

The smell stood out in contrast to the beauty of the stately oak trees that framed the other side of the lake and the sounds of nature all around him. The lake was beautiful and ugly at the same time. His senses worked against each other; smell causing the boy to hold his breath, while sight and hearing drew his attention to the placid waters and the birds calling to their brethren in the trees beyond.

His parents had seemed confused and a little concerned by his need to bike out to the lake alone just an hour after the memorial. From the moment he found out that Tanner had died, Shawn knew that he would eventually be driven to visit this place, the last place on Earth where Tanner's feet would ever tread. He wasn't sure if it was morbid curiosity or an attempt to find closure after the funeral, but he needed to see the spot where his best friend's life had ended, stalker be damned. Besides, he hadn't seen or sensed hide nor hair of whoever had been following him since the funeral. Whoever it was seemed to be gone, if he had ever existed in the first place.

Shawn and Tanner had spent many summers fishing in the very spot where Shawn now stood. He knew he could never again cast out a line or reel in a bluegill without seeing his friend's head bobbing under

the water, lungs filling with liquid, arms and legs floating lifelessly just beneath the surface.

Bending low to the ground, Shawn scooped up a handful of rocks. One by one, he threw them into the lake, watching as they broke the surface to disappear below. Was that how it had been with Tanner?

He still didn't understand why Tanner had drowned. They'd been fishing together countless times over the years, and his friend had proven to be both surefooted and a skilled fisherman. They both knew the lake was filled with sinkholes and had been warned countless times not to swim near the dam, so why on earth would Tanner have ventured out into the water? The lake was filled with catfish, bluegill, bass, and croppy, and he'd never caught anything that weighed more than about fifteen pounds at the most, so there was just no way that a fish could have pulled him under.

None of this made any sense, and he supposed that he'd never really know exactly what had happened at the lake that day, why his friend had been taken from him before they were even out of high school. He almost wished he could make himself believe in monsters. At least then he'd have something to blame. Shawn shook his head at his own foolishness and let the last stone fall from his fingers. It was time to go home.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. Shawn spent time reading and watching television, trying to relax. Still no sign of whoever had been following him, and he'd all but managed to put it out of his mind. He flipped through some of the comics his Grandfather had bought him at the airport, but couldn't get into them, nor could he interest himself in the old "Ma and Pa Kettle" movie that was running on channel 11.

Shawn stared at himself in the mirror and wished not for the first time that he had been at the lake with Tanner and Jenny. He studied his light blue eyes, hating himself. He and Tanner had been blood brothers; they had vowed to always protect each other and, when it re-

ally mattered, he'd failed. Tanner was gone, and it had happened while he was over a thousand miles away.

Wiping away tears, Shawn turned from the mirror and flopped down on the bed, thinking of the last day he had spent with the best friend he'd ever had.

* * *

"Come on Shawn... it's a tradition!" said Tanner, holding out his hand. Tanner was shorter than Shawn by at least three inches, but what he lacked in size he made up in both girth and bravado. Where Shawn was tall and lean, Tanner was short and pudgy, with dark unkempt hair that caused his freckles to stand out by contrast. Tanner may not have been the strongest or most athletic kid in school, but he'd never met a dare he wouldn't take or a kid he wouldn't dare, and he intended to see that Shawn followed in his footsteps.

Shawn and Tanner sat at a picnic table in the Carthage Jaycee Park, picking at the remains of the hot dogs they had bought at the Taste Freez just half an hour earlier. There were a few younger kids playing on the slides and merry-go-round, and a girl they recognized as being a few grades behind them sitting on a swing across from the picnic area, but mostly the park was deserted. It was almost two in the afternoon on the fifth day of summer vacation, just two days before Shawn would leave for Texas, and most of their classmates were off playing baseball or swimming at the public pool across the street.

Shawn eyed the knife nervously, knowing what was coming next. Every year since they had become blood brothers, they had started out the summer by renewing their pact. Tanner always said that this would keep the bond strong, but he suspected that the boy just enjoyed watching him squirm.

"We're already blood brothers. Do we really have to do this again?"

"Hey, I've already cut myself," Tanner held up a bloody thumb. "You don't want me to bleed to death, do you?"

"No, I guess we wouldn't want that," Shawn sighed.

Quickly snatching the knife from Tanner, not giving himself time to think about it, he pricked the pad of his thumb. “Ouch!” A droplet of blood rose to the surface of the skin, like a ruby shining brightly in the hot summer sun.

“Blood brothers for another year,” Tanner announced triumphantly, pressing his thumb to Shawn’s. They held their thumbs together for a few seconds to let the blood mingle and then pulled back, Tanner sucking his thumb to stop the bleeding, Shawn wrapping his in the napkin from his hot dog.

“So what now, brother of mine?” Shawn wondered aloud. Wiping the knife on his napkin before passing it back to Tanner, he added, “Maybe we should finally take Jenny to the pool and just get it over with?”

“But what fun is that?” asked Tanner, “I have a better idea. Let’s finally do it. Let’s break into the old house.”

A puzzled look passed over Shawn’s face, almost as if he had woken from a trance. Shaking his head to clear the cobwebs, he said, “You know, I actually had a dream about the house last night...”

“An omen if there ever was one!”

“We’re going to get in trouble,” argued Shawn, half-heartedly.

“C’mon,” said Tanner, swallowing the last of his hot dog, “You know you want to do it. You’ve wanted to as long as I can remember. C’mon, I dare you.”

Shawn smiled and spun his yo-yo down to the ground, then jerked the string, sending it climbing back up again to land in his hand. Tanner’s dares were famous in their small mid-western farming town, and had resulted in more than one of their classmates ending up with broken arms, lost bicycles, or furious parents.

But Shawn just couldn’t say no to Tanner. Besides, the older boy was right: Shawn had wanted to go inside the old, abandoned house ever since he was told that the previous owner had been his great-

grandfather's brother. Charles Spencer had apparently disappeared without a word to anyone over 25 years ago, leaving the house abandoned.

Why no one had ever claimed the house or at least the land it was on was a mystery to Shawn. His father had said there was some sort of dispute about the ownership, and that the taxes had been paid far in advance, and as far as anyone knew the man – probably long dead now – still legally owned the property.

“Well?” asked Tanner, getting up from the picnic table to retrieve his bike. “It’s either this or teach my sister to swim, which isn’t exactly on my top ten list of things I want to do this summer. So how about it? Jenny can wait until later for the swimming lessons.”

Shawn thought about the old house that had brought so much mystery and speculation into their lives, and decided it was time to finally find out what Great-Great-Uncle Charles had left behind.

“I’m in,” he said tentatively. What harm could it do? Rising from the table, he joined Tanner beside their bicycles. “It’s now or never, I guess, so let’s go!”

* * *

A knock on his bedroom door pulled Shawn back to reality. He rolled off the bed to his feet just as his mother appeared in the doorway.

“You’ve been in here for hours,” smiled Ellen Spencer, her blonde hair and blue eyes a reflection of Shawn’s own. Dressed in a long red and white checkered flannel nightgown, she held out a steaming mug of hot cocoa to her son. “Dad and I are getting ready to turn in and wanted to make sure you’re okay, and I made this for you to help you sleep.”

“I’m okay,” Shawn said, taking the offered cup from his mother as she leaned in to give him a kiss on the cheek. “I was just thinking about Tanner.”

“It’ll get better in time. Say, do you want to go back to Arkansas and spend the rest of your summer with your Grandparents? They’d love to have you back. They were really sad about Tanner, you know, and about you having to come back early.”

“No, Mom,” answered Shawn, thinking of Jenny and her frantic pleas for help. He’d help her, alright, just not in the way that she imagined. “I miss them too, but there’s always next year. I’d rather just stay home. Besides, I promised someone I’d teach them how to swim.”

Chapter 4

SHAWN AWOKE with a start, knocking the empty cocoa mug off the nightstand. He jumped as the cup shattered against the floor, then spun around to look out the window, coming face-to-face with a pair of glowing red eyes. He blinked once, and it was gone. There was nothing there save the stars. Had he been dreaming?

Samson, however, had sensed something as well. The old tom stood staring at the window from his spot at the foot of Shawn's bed, his hackles raised and a low throaty growl coming from deep inside his chest. The stalker was real after all. He shook his head violently, not daring to believe it was true.

Pale moonlight filtered around the old weeping willow outside of his window and in through the curtains, illuminating the little clock he kept beside his bed: it was almost five in the morning. Willing his heart to stop beating jackhammers against his chest, Shawn reached out to click on his lamp. It had to be a dream. Stretching to pet the orange and white tabby, Shawn picked up the cat he'd had since he was seven years old and stroked his short coat of orange and white fur.

"Shawn," yelled a voice from the hallway, "Shawn, are you okay? I heard a noise." His father, hair tousled and in his pajamas, stood in the doorway.

"Sorry, Dad," Shawn apologized, setting Samson down on the ground. "I had a bad dream, I guess. Don't worry, I'll clean up the mug."

“You scared the beejesus out of us,” breathed Henry Spencer, sucking in air as he reached out to touch his son’s shoulder. “I was halfway down the hall before I was even awake. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Positive, Dad,” Shawn lied. “I don’t even remember what the dream was about.”

“Okay, then. I’m going back to bed. And don’t worry about the cup. You can clean it up in the morning.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” asked his mother, gliding into the room to give him a hug. “I’ll clean that up right now.”

“Don’t worry about it, Mom, I can handle it,” said Shawn, embarrassed. “I made the mess, I’ll clean it up.”

“All right, honey,” she answered, concern still in her eyes. “You can sleep late tomorrow, if you want. I know you’ve had a rough day.”

“I’m okay, Mom. Just a bad dream, that’s all. Once I get back to bed I’ll be fine.”

He watched as his mother left the room, closing the door behind her. He felt like a little kid again, being comforted by his mother after waking up screaming from the nightmares he’d suffered on and off for a year half his lifetime ago.

But this hadn’t been a nightmare, no matter what he wanted to believe. He was almost positive of that. Something – a rustling, scratching, creaking sound – had come from the window, waking him in an instant. And he’d seen those eyes, like a vampire from one of those old movies that Tanner had loved so much.

It was probably just a squirrel or something, he tried to tell himself. Or maybe, as his father always used to joke when Shawn was little and thought he’d heard noises under the bed, it was just the early bird trying to get the jump on the worms.

Sighing, he knelt down to pick up the shattered pieces of the mug. He’d been thinking about his and Tanner’s sojourn into the old Spen-

cer house before he fell asleep, so maybe he'd just given himself an old-fashioned case of the creeps. Or maybe, regardless of what his gut was telling him, it really had been a dream after all.

Shards of the mug in hand, Shawn walked lightly through the hallway, past the living room and into the kitchen where he flicked on the wall switch over the breakfast nook. Light flooded the room and Shawn spied Samson just a few feet behind him. The big house cat slunk to the corner of the room and hunkered down in front of his food bowl, mewling plaintively. Stepping over the cat, he found the trashcan under the sink and dumped the sharp remains of the mug into the trash before filling Samson's bowl with fresh Friskies.

Shawn looked at the clock that hung on the wall above the telephone. It was just a few minutes past five now, and the faint light of the morning was starting to seep in through the curtained window. Making his way to the refrigerator, he poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher his mother always kept chilled in the icebox. That's the only way you can stand to drink Carthage water, thought Shawn: ice cold. And even then, once a year or so, the lake turned and forced everyone to boil the now-brownish water before drinking or using it for cooking.

Thinking about the lake brought the image of Tanner in his church clothes unbidden to mind again, lying there not looking anything at all like the boy he'd known. Shaking his head, Shawn tried but failed to dispel the image from his thoughts.

Everyone said that he had slipped and hit his head before drowning, but Tanner had been an excellent swimmer as well as sure on his feet. What had so distracted him that he hadn't paid attention to where he was walking? And, damn it, why hadn't they taught Jenny to swim so she could have at least tried to save him?

But he didn't blame Jenny for not saving Tanner. She had wanted to learn to swim, but they kept putting it off, always having more important things to do. If anything, it was their fault that they hadn't done

the deed before he left for Texas. It was too late to save Tanner, but he could at least keep his promise to teach his best friend's sister how to swim.

In three quick gulps Shawn downed his water. Clicking off the kitchen light, he carefully craned his neck to peer out through the window above the sink. Nothing. It had to have been a dream, Shawn repeated to himself as he walked back to his bedroom, leaving Samson to his breakfast.

* * *

And outside, something watched. Hiding behind the old willow tree, the thing spied Shawn reentering his bedroom, turning out the light, and clambering back into bed. It watched as the fifteen-year-old boy glanced out the window, his eyes briefly settling on its own before moving on. Finally, the boy pulled the covers up to his chin, rolled over, and lay still.

There would be other chances, the creature knew. It would have time. And, besides, there was always the girl...

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