

MELONHEAD

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Prologue

The first thing Sidney T. Mellon, Junior, noticed when he walked into the large room with all the leather furniture and the polished wood smell was the big brown mole next to the judge's nose. There was a hair growing out of it.

"Sit down, young man," the judge said in a voice that measured each word as though it were an ounce of gold. "You take that one." He pointed to one of the two huge armchairs in front of his massive desk.

Sidney did as he was told, then watched the judge, who was pinch-faced and looked like a turtle, lower himself into the other chair, pull it closer, and smile.

Sidney smiled back. The judge's expression became serious. Sidney's smile faded.

"How are you today, Sidney?" the judge asked.

"I'm fine, thank you," Sidney responded, his voice taking on the tone and cadence of the judge's. "How are you today?"

"I'm fine, too," the judge said. "Do you know why you're here?"

Sidney turned to look at his mother, an intense, pretty, dark-haired woman with a slightly dazed expression. He looked to the other side of the room, at his father, who was blond, blue-eyed, lean, and fastidious of dress. Sidney didn't come close to resembling either one of them. With his short-cropped red hair atop his alarmingly large head and almost perfectly round face, he didn't come remotely close to resembling anybody he'd ever seen. Both his parents were smiling. They both had their lawyers with them.

"I asked you here because your feelings are important," the judge continued. "Do you understand that your mother and father are divorced and that they're not going to live together anymore?"

Sidney nodded. His mother and father hadn't lived together since last year. Before that they'd screamed at each other a lot, and a lot of it was about him, or so he thought, and he'd heard all of it. Then his father had moved out. No one had bothered to tell him why, and he was afraid to ask because he truly believed that it was his fault.

"Do you understand that your mother and father both want to take care of you and that we're here to decide where you'll live?"

He looked at his mother's hopeful smile and teary eyes, then at his father's kidlike grin.

"Would you like to live with just one of them, Sidney, or do you like sharing your time with both of them the way you do now?" The judge's expression was tinged with sympathy. He thought the size of the boy's head most unfortunate.

It took Sidney only a moment to process the question and its implications. He was being asked to choose between his parents or go on the way he was, split in half. But how could he choose between them? He couldn't bear the thought of hurting either of them, and surely that was what he'd do if he chose one over the other. His stomach erupted as hot juices of anxiety and panic swept through his small body. His chest pounded with terror. The drawbridge went up. The watertight doors slammed shut. He fixed his stare on the judge's mole, knowing that the judge saw him doing it. He didn't care. There wasn't any place else he could look. Then he saw the mole coming closer and closer as the judge leaned in toward him. Man, that was a long hair coming out of that mole.

"You look like a smart young fellow," the judge said in a

whisper that smelled of dust. "Plenty of brains in there, I'll bet."

Sidney pulled back with a jerk. More than anything in the world he hated it when people made reference to his head. He just hated it.

"So, which one will it be, your mother or your father? What do you want, Sidney?"

What Sidney wanted was to reach out and grab hold of that hair coming out of that mole and pull on it as hard as he could. He was six years old.

The Fat of the Land

"Hey, Melonhead!" It was his stepbrother, William Devers, calling him. "Mom wants you in the house for dinner right now, Melonhead."

Sidney was sitting on a branch of the gnarled old fig tree, which was his secret place, hidden from view. He peered carefully from behind the trunk and saw his stepbrother searching for him from the back porch, his mouth slackly open, wonder permanently stamped into his otherwise vacant expression. Sidney had been in the midst of contemplating the fate of mankind, a regular pastime. What with all the bombs and biological weapons and the way people treated each other, such matters were much on his mind.

Overpopulation was his main topic of interest on this pleasant evening in August in Seattle, Washington. He thought it more than a little likely that one day soon there would be too many people on the pint-size planet that supported them all and, as a consequence, it would weigh too much and go flying out of orbit. Earth would shoot into space like a balloon losing its air in a hot rush. Swoooooosh! They'd all be gone. He showed no sign of hearing his stepbrother's grating voice. He never showed his stepbrother anything.

William was two years older and a foot taller, and he'd called Sidney Melonhead from the moment they'd first met.

"William Devers," Sidney's mother, Meredith, had said on that occasion, "this is your new stepbrother, Sidney Mellon."

What chance did he stand with an introduction like that? Born with the head and the name to go with it. There was no escape. A nasty cosmic joke and he was the punch line.

Why his mother ever married William's father, Richard Devers, Sidney would never understand. He certainly wasn't consulted. She didn't even tell him about it beforehand. He was with his father in Los Angeles when it happened. When he returned to Seattle to spend his apportioned time with his mother, there stood his new stepfather. Before that moment he didn't know the man existed.

"Mom wants you now, Melonhead! Mom means it."

That was another thing. He hated it when William called his mother "Mom." She wasn't his mother. She was Sidney's mother. He didn't call William's father "Dad." He'd die first.

"Mom says to wash your face and hands, Melonhead! Mom says if you don't hurry she's going to get mad."

Sidney speculated about what his life might be like if William were strapped to a rocket and shot into orbit like a communications satellite, where he would spin around in the sky for seven years, then crash back to Earth, a fireball that exploded as it landed in the Pacific Ocean, then sank to the bottom. Sidney didn't like to think bad thoughts about people, but sometimes he couldn't help himself. He was at his best in a positive environment, one that was calm and without conflict. But that world didn't exist. Not when he had to spend equal time with both parents, which was what the judge had decided when Sidney wouldn't make a decision. He grinned. The rocket idea wasn't half bad. After his stepbrother went inside, Sidney climbed down from his tree. Then he went

inside because he knew he had to.

At the table he took his napkin from its ring, which he'd made at the day camp he went to with his stepbrother whenever he was in Seattle in the summer. No one asked him. He was just sent. He turned his attention to the kitchen, waiting for his mother to appear. William was telling his father about his latest athletic triumph. William was a swimmer, a canoeist, a water-skier, a baseball player, and an all-around popular camper. Sidney was, at twelve, still short and pencil thin, and his head was still round and much too large for his body. His otherwise pleasant visage carried a hopeful expression and was naturally flushed. His red hair stood straight up in a long crew cut. The full effect of all this was that his head did indeed look very much like a melon. A cantaloupe was what usually came to mind.

He tried to focus on what his stepfather and stepbrother were saying. He could hear their voices, but it was like listening to music without words. And, anyway, he wasn't really there. That was another problem. He was almost never where he was. He spent very little time in the here and now. He daydreamed. His mind wandered. He usually didn't know what he was going to say until he heard himself say it, which was often the cause of great difficulty. He could defend almost nothing he did because he had no idea why he'd done it.

"Sidney!"

He realized that his stepfather had been calling his name and was waiting for a response.

"Sidney!"

"What?" he said too loudly.

"I'm talking to you," Devers said, giving Sidney the beady eye.

"I'm busy," Sidney heard himself say. I'm in for it now, he thought.

"Busy?" Devers could barely believe he was being challenged.

"I'm thinking," Sidney said. "My brain is presently occupied."

"You're a rude boy, Sidney. You have no manners. How many times have I told you to pay attention at the dinner table? You could take lessons from your brother."

"He's not my brother," Sidney said. Too late to take it back.

William smiled and held up his hands like he was holding a big ball and mouthed, "Melonhead."

"You're the only one in this family who doesn't try to get along," Devers said, his voice on the verge of being nasty. "I've tried. Your brother has tried. Your mother has tried."

"Tried what?" Meredith asked as she carried a platter of pork chops into the room.

"All of us have done our best to get along with your son, who doesn't seem to be the least bit interested in getting along with the rest of us," Devers said. "It's a personal insult."

Her face clouded over with unhappiness. It was an old story. "Sidney means to get along, don't you, dear?" She gave her son that look, the one that pleaded with him to cooperate with whatever was going on. "You do try, don't you?"

Sidney felt himself being sucked into the middle of something he wanted no part of. It was like being hooked to a tractor beam and pulled into the Death Star. He looked at his mother and nodded his head, then stared at his plate. Somebody please save me, he thought.

"It just takes Sidney a little longer," his mother said.

"He hasn't made an inch of progress in three years," Devers retorted. "He doesn't put himself out for anybody. He's selfish and secretive. He refuses to participate. He won't accept help."

"That's not altogether true," his mother said.

"And all you do is defend him." Devers's voice cut through

the quickly gathering tension. "He's going to have a sorry life if somebody doesn't straighten him out." Devers served the pork chops, placing the one with the most fat on Sidney's plate. The potatoes and vegetables were passed. Everybody bowed their heads to say grace. Sidney flicked an angry glance at Devers, who caught him doing it.

"Bless this food which we are about to receive,"

Devers said, eyeing Sidney harshly, "and make us ever mindful of the needs of others. Amen."

Sidney looked around the table as the others dug in; then, as inconspicuously as he could, he cut the fat off his pork chop and pushed it over behind his potatoes.

"Don't hide it, boy, eat it," Devers said. "A growing boy needs some fat in his diet."

"Not really," his mother said. "Not too much of it, anyway."

"Eat everything, waste nothing," Devers said. "It's all food."

"I won't," Sidney heard himself say. "I won't eat fat."

His stepfather was on him so suddenly he had no time to move. He heard his mother gasp, felt a powerful grip on his neck, and saw the fork with the fat on it moving toward his mouth. He tried to turn his head away but couldn't. He felt the tines of the fork stabbing at his lips.

"Eat your food, boy," his stepfather hissed. "Eat your food."

He felt the sharp press of fingers squeezing his nose closed so that he'd be forced to open his mouth to breathe. He resisted as long as he could, his eyes riveted on his mother, who watched like a stunned animal, horror and helplessness combined in her expression. Then he finally had to gulp in air. With it came the large glob of fat.

"Swallow it, boy. Swallow it or you'll answer to me later."

Sidney felt himself gagging. The grip on his neck tightened. He felt the slimy mass of fat in his mouth. He made retching sounds, certain that he was going to throw up. He reached for

his napkin.

"Don't spit it out," his stepfather said. "And it's no use throwing up. You'll just have to eat another piece."

Sidney couldn't bear the taste of it. The texture was repulsive. He couldn't bear the thought of what it was and where it had come from. Most of all he couldn't bear what his stepfather was doing to him, forcing him to submit against his will. The pain he felt in his neck was now acute. Tears welled in his eyes and he fought to keep them back so he wouldn't have to cry in front of them. He would show no weakness. Devers squeezed harder. He swallowed the fat.

"Good," Devers said, letting go. "Now for another one."

Sidney slid off his chair, evading his stepfather's clutches, and ran from the room.

"Come back here, boy!" Devers shouted as he reached out to grab him.

"Richard!" The single word from his mother's lips, and the fury with which she yelled it, were enough to stop Sidney's stepfather from going after him. She tried to form the words, to shape what she'd say next to express her outrage, but there were no words, just anger, and fear. She wanted to curse the man. She wanted to take her son and leave. But she had no place to go and no money to support them and no skills that would provide her with a decent job. She was afraid and she hated herself for it. She knew that with her outburst she'd brought Sidney and herself nothing but more grief.

The Topic of Conversation

Even with his door closed and his head under the pillows, even with his fingers in his ears, Sidney could hear the booming of their voices. Even with his eyes clamped shut, he could see them in their bedroom, his mother doing her best to find courage, his stepfathers venom too much for her from the start.

"How can you be so cruel?"

"He has to learn how to be a man!"

"What kind of man?"

"He has to be toughened up or he'll amount to nothing!"

"He's just a boy!"

"What happens now is what matters later!"

"It's always Sidney! It's never William! I've never heard you say a harsh word to him!"

"I had my say with William when he was younger. I don't have to say anything now."

"Sidney's shy. He's different."

"I'll say he's different. With that head he's a freak."

"How dare you say that!"

"He's Melonhead and he'll always be Melonhead and he'd better get used to it. He's going to have a hard time. He's

going to have to fight."

"He can't help his head."

"His head's not going to help him."

"He has other qualities. He's very smart."

"His teachers say he's lazy."

"He's sensitive."

"He's soft. He's spoiled. You agreed when we got married that I'd be a father to your son and you'd be a mother to mine."

"I've kept my end of it."

"And I haven't?"

"I didn't say that. Why do you always have to be so hard about everything?"

"You can't keep babying him."

"You can't keep bullying him."

"What choice do I have? It's in his blood, Meredith. He has bad blood. His father's blood."

"He's got my blood, too."

"It's the blood of failure. Passed from father to son. It has to be dealt with before it's too late. He barely gets by in school. He's antisocial and defiant of authority."

"He gets distracted."

"He stays in his room and reads and daydreams. If something isn't done, he'll end up like that bum you married down there in Los Angeles. Do you want your son turning out like that?"

"Leave him alone. Leave my son alone."

"Or what? You'll take him and run? Where will you go, Meredith? Who will have you? Your mother? I don't think the old witch would let you in her house. She can't stand you. You can't support yourself. Nobody will hire you. You can't do anything. Without me, you and your precious son would starve."

"How can you say that? What's wrong with you?"

Then Sidney heard the muffled scream when she was hit. It cut into him like a dagger, right down to the hilt.

"The next time you raise your voice to me when I'm teaching your son a lesson," he heard Devers say, "remember how that felt. Next time keep your mouth shut."

Sidney wanted to save his mother. He wanted to kill the man who was hurting her. His rage was boundless and so was his fear. He was ashamed of himself because all he could do was hide his face in his hands and cry.