

A young man in a dark suit, light blue shirt, and striped tie stands in the center, speaking to a large crowd. The crowd's hands are raised in the foreground, creating a sense of participation. The background is a bright, hazy light, possibly from a stage or large windows. The overall tone is warm and inspiring.

A Boyish GOD

PETER ALAN OLSSON

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Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.

12620 FM 1960, Suite A4-507

Houston, TX 77065

www.sbpra.com

ISBN: 978-1-62516-439-1

*To Pam Olsson, MD, the love of my life. Pam's
dedication to our profession and our patients is inspiring.
Her psychiatric healing skills are peerless.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the following people, who have been helpful readers, cogent critics, encouragers, editors, and excellent consultants, in ways and domains too numerous to list. Pam Olsson, Bob White, Roger Hansen, Dan Blore, Larry Messner, Josh Messner, Dolores Messner, Nick Belsky, Susan Peery, Bob Kelly, Jules Bohnn, Marty Grothe, Janice Law, Don Jansen, Pat Barth, Linda Bilodeau, Gary Boeger, Nathaniel Olsson, Andrew Olsson, Meg Ivison, Shannon Guyer, Bill Moore, Jeff Houpt, Giles Lewis, Althea Horner, Ernie Hebert, Coleman Stokes, C.F. Kendall, and attorney Steve Waldman, who provided valuable information about relevant Texas law.

Finally, I thank all my teachers of psychotherapy, most especially the men, women, children, adolescents, families, and couples who trusted me enough to share their joys, sorrows, secrets, fears, and anxieties. My patients helped me listen better, as I helped them to help themselves.

FOREWORD

Novellas have many ways of being born. This one found its genesis when, after reading my book *Malignant Pied Pipers of Our Time*, my office janitor asked me, “Hey, Doc. If you treated Reverend Jim Jones when he was twelve years old, could the 918 deaths at Jonestown have been prevented?”

“Maybe,” I replied.

Then this novella started unfolding. It is partly a memoir about my love of my work. The story is about the possibilities and profound difficulties in spotting false gods and changing destructive destinies. Unlike many melodramatic Hollywood movie scenarios, such changes occurring in psychotherapy are deceptively quiet and often muted. Psychotherapy involves many emotional experiences—anxiety, fear, fascination, wonder, boredom, humor and laughter, anger, sadness, and often pain. However, the more severe and ominous forms of pain, destruction, and even prevented deaths go unheralded. They are unnoticed because, existentially, they are like a suicide prevented—they never exist.

I hope that the character of Will Powers and his treatment can help thwart the evil of destructive cults by increasing awareness of the psychological dynamics behind the spawning of destructive leaders and their minions. In essence, be wary of all gurus!

The reader will recognize real places in Houston, but all characters in this novel are fictitious.

CHAPTER 1

A Boy Named Will

Will Powers's eyes can't be ignored. He is eager to "speechify," as he is fond of calling it. Powers stood behind a rickety podium and arched his four foot ten inch frame upward, stretching toward five feet through sheer force of will. His angry, walnut-colored eyes flashed as he ran his hand through his ebony hair during a cocky head toss. He summoned up what he calls his "fierce grin," then nodded at Jake in the front row.

Will once read that the Indians chose an animal for their spirit presence. He was certain his spirit presence was a raven—black, shiny, and scary, with a sharp beak that cuts and hurts. Jake, his best friend, was of a raven spirit, too. They were blood brothers. Will and Jake weren't afraid of anything when they were together. They would even kill if they had to.

Will's podium stood on a small stage at the far end of the old St. Thomas More School basketball gym, which served as a storage shed for athletic equipment, lawnmowers, a rarely used piano, and a jumble of folding chairs used only during the school's spring

picnic. The old gym was hidden from view of the main campus by the overshadowing, new, chrome-and-glass gym and auditorium.

The stale smell of cigarette smoke lingered from the teachers and staff who sneaked breaks in the abandoned gym. The fall day in Houston was smothering, with an eighty-eight degree, high humidity, sweaty-armpit atmosphere. A dusty Troop 66 Boy Scout flag and a drooping Sunday school banner stood near the podium like two old soldiers from a forgotten parade. The flags made Will feel more important, powerful, and official.

Will came to enjoy the smoky, humid atmosphere around the podium when he frequently sneaked in after school. He liked to practice his future preaching and sermons. In a few years, Will knew he would preach at the Astrodome or Reliant Stadium. He imagined the old gym as a grand auditorium filled with riveted listeners soaked in sweat from the power of his words. He wasn't like that sweet, weak-voiced Joel Osteen of the Lakewood Church on TV. Will's sermon would transfix and enrapture his imagined flock. Will and Jake knew those Lakewood Church people sat like an audience of frightened sheep. Will's powerful words would rip through the fetid air and strike people's hearts. Someday he would preach to a thousand people. They would get scared of Satan's power. The power of Lord Will Powers, preacher king of Houston.

Will grasped the podium tightly, extended his head toward the ceiling, and jutted his chin forward and up as he prepared to speak. His jugular veins bulged like small, blue ropes under his flushed skin. He introduced himself to his imagined, rapt, and sweaty audience, and then winked at Jake in the front row. Will's voice was deep and affected. His dark eyes flashed. He felt so alive his skin

tingled. It felt like electricity shooting up his spine to spark his words. He gripped the lectern with white knuckles. If he was prevented from preaching, he would have to kill someone!

“My name is William I. Powers. The ‘I’ in the middle means Isaac, some guy in the Bible’s Old Testament. I never tell anyone about that name, because I hate it. I guess my mother thought it sounded important, but it sounds stupid, like my mother. I want to say important things to you right now. I’m twelve years old, but you’d better listen to me or I can hurt you. Kids don’t get to talk much, especially at St. Thomas More School. Adults don’t listen to kids much anyway, at any time or anywhere, especially when we say stuff that bothers them. Then they start telling, not teaching or listening. Grown-ups always feel they have to be in charge. They like to tell kids what to do. Grown-ups are stupid. Hey! You in the back row! Quiet! Now! I go to this school, but I hate it. It’s a Catholic school, and most of the teachers are nuns and priests. They really like to boss kids around, because they don’t have kids of their own. I don’t think they even have sex. I could be a good priest. I could be a better teacher than any of those nuns and priests at my school. Most of all, I’d tell the truth about death and being dead. We people are just animals. When we’re dead, we’re gone into dirt. There is no heaven or hell. My dad and I spend a lot of time at libraries and reading books. He and his men friends in the Last Saturday Night Club are the only grown-ups I like. They’re the only smart men I know. My dad is their leader. My dad says that if they can find a smart woman, she can be a part of the club. Maybe I won’t hate you if you’re smart and listen to me—I mean really listen! I think listening is real hard to learn, because no grown-ups do

it very well. They're too busy thinking up the next thing they'll tell us. Right, Jake?"

Jake nodded and grinned in the front row. A door creaked open at the far end of the gym. Will scooted out the back door and jumped on his bike.

CHAPTER 2

Helpers

Dr. Tom Tolman's office phone buzzed. Yanked from his reverie on the doorstep of a nap, he unhappily remembered that he agreed to cover the phone for his secretary during her lunch break. A nap would have been nice. Answering the phone robotically, Tom heard the voice of Sister Andrea Albright from St. Thomas More School.

Sister Andrea had Tom's vote for sainthood. They worked together on community mental health projects in both her parish and the Houston community for many years. They wrote articles together on destructive, exploitive cults. She referred many good patients to him, which meant people who really wanted help. They were willing to look at their own responsibility to change their attitudes and behavior. More importantly, they were responsible about paying their bills.

Sister Andrea jokingly called those things "Tolman's Laws of Good Patienthood." When a patient couldn't afford his services but really needed therapy, Sister Andrea found church funds to help pay

for it. She didn't want Tom writing prescriptions for drugs to answer a patient's problem, and he liked that. She was pretty and a good, perceptive soul.

"Sister Andrea, how's business?" he asked.

"Tom, I'm concerned about a twelve-year-old boy," she replied. "I hope you'll agree to give him psychotherapy. He has superior intelligence, talent, and unusual charisma. His anger is palpable, and he seems obsessed with *death*."

"Andrea, this is a bad day. After the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon yesterday, I'm blown away. I just learned my ex-wife Joan died at the World Trade Center. I've been seriously considering retirement for the first time in my professional life."

"I'm sorry to hear about Joan," said Sister Andrea, "but you can't retire yet. I won't let God let you. After 9/11, we need you even more. This boy needs you more than most. Let's meet, so I can tell you more about him."

"Okay, I'll talk. Your place or mine?"

"Mine, so you must behave yourself."

They agreed to meet at six o'clock the following day.

* * * * *

The front of St. Thomas More Church was an expanse of stained glass with a scene of dozens of children surrounding the kindly image of the storytelling savior. Jesus held the children in rapt attention, and their faces shone with smiles.

Tom enjoyed seeing the church. Attractive shrubs and multicolored flowerbeds graced the entryway to the sanctuary, which faced the main street. The rear of the building was plain brick. Beyond

the parking lot were playgrounds, the new gym, and baseball and soccer fields. A grassy field formed the front yard for the chancery of the Catholic diocese. Late-afternoon sun reflected gold off the windows. Sister Andrea's office was in a private corner of the chancery.

Tom relaxed in Sister Andrea's simple waiting room. The chairs and sofa were comfortable, and the magazines were up to date. *Time*, *The New Yorker*, *The Economist*, and *The New York Times Book Review* provided depth beyond *Reader's Digest*, and there were several Catholic magazines, including *Faith & Family*, *Catholic Forester*, and *US Catholic*.

Sister Andrea's office door burst open, and an eleven- or twelve-year-old boy flashed a tight smile as he walked quickly past Tom and out of the waiting room. He moved gracefully, like a cat, and had piercing, dark eyes and jet-black hair. Tom glanced out the window and saw the boy speed off on a battered, old bicycle. Sister Andrea appeared at her door with a fretful expression.

"Come in, Tom. That was Will Powers who breezed past you. I hoped to introduce him to you, but he said, 'Not today and maybe never.'"

Tom settled into one of Sister Andrea's comfortable chairs. Even wearing a habit, she was an attractive woman. On occasions when she was serious, concerned, and creatively engaging a clinical problem, she looked particularly beautiful.

What a waste, he thought. *She'll never experience the tangible, erotic, special love of a man.*

She broke his reverie.

"As you know, Tom, I've seen many troubled and depressed kids.

I rarely overreact. I'm the opposite of hysterical. This one, though, really troubles me. I'm afraid for him. For a twelve year old, Will has intelligence and unique gifts of charisma and leadership, but he also has the potential to be cruel, hurtful, and even evil."

Tom said, "There's nothing wrong with charisma, Andrea. Will certainly has an intense smile. Actually, it's appealing."

"One of the nuns found Will conducting a funeral for a dead bird in the corner of the schoolyard during recess. Ten spellbound kids sat around as Will preached and buried the bird."

"Some people would see that as cute, even touching," said Tom.

Sister Andrea pressed further.

"Sister Mary Agnes quietly observed the funeral at first. Then Will's sermon took on a loud, angry, hateful tone. He told the kids they'd die someday like the bird, and their parents couldn't protect them. Will said they would turn to dirt when they died. He smiled when several kids cried. A spunky eleven-year-old girl, Penny Paulsen, told Will to stop being hateful and evil. Will jabbed Penny in the face with a pencil. He almost punctured her eye. It bled. When Sister Mary Agnes interrupted the proceeding, Will jabbed at her with the pencil and kicked her, saying he was better at funerals than any priest. He gave Agnes a nasty look before walking off. Agnes took Penny to the nurse's office. She said most of the younger kids were frightened of him except gutsy Penny Paulsen, yet, many kids still follow him around at recess periods. Like Will has some power over them."

Tom asked, "Have you talked to Will?"

"I've spent several hours with him. Will claimed Sister Mary Agnes was menacing him. Tom, he has read an incredible amount

about theology, philosophy, and spiritualism. His favorite topics are death, life after death, and socialism. He talks a lot about what he calls socialist heaven. Will says Satanists, animals, and Communists might make it there, but never Catholics, Protestants, or Jews. If I merely listen, he rambles on and on. If I interrupt, he becomes irritated and arrogant. When I confronted him about the incident Sister Mary Agnes observed, he told me to go drink communion wine and abruptly left my office. I've tried calling his parents, but apparently no one's home during the day or early evening. Tom, I'm worried about him. Will you take his case?"

How could he turn Andrea down? But Tom sensed the therapy would be one of those *challenging ones*, but he always had strong rescue fantasies about needy kids. Besides, he liked and admired Sister Andrea.

"You know I can't turn down one of my best referral sources," he said, "even if I plan to retire soon. Let's discuss the parameters and boundaries of treatment, and I'll get started, assuming he'll see me."

Tom learned the hard way over the years that a case like Will's required special planning and anticipation of trouble in the boundaries of treatment. At the age of twelve, Will wasn't a true adolescent or a typical child-therapy case.

After a lengthy discussion, Tom and Sister Andrea agreed that he would schedule two therapy hours for Will each week. The sessions would occur in her office, where Tom occasionally saw consultations regarding children or their parents at St. Thomas More. When family or couples sessions could be arranged, Sister Andrea took over duties.

Sister Andrea learned that half of Will's tuition was paid by his

maternal grandparents, Harry and Monica Marshall. The other half came from the scholarship fund of St. Thomas More Church. Will's parents, Jed and Mary Powers, had agreed to participate in Saturday cleanup activities at the church kitchen as their contribution to the school, but their attendance remained at the bare minimum.

Will's maternal grandparents were retired but remained faithful members and contributors to St. Thomas More Church. Will's parents weren't members. As usual with patients paid for by the church, Tom would be paid \$75 per hour instead of his usual \$150. The treatment plan would be summarized in a letter to Will's parents.

A preliminary letter from Tom and Andrea was sent to Jed and Mary Powers to schedule a meeting with them, wherein they would discuss the situation and their treatment recommendations for Will.

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