

# **CROSSROADS** **and Other Tales**

**Gregory Bernard Banks**

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# CROSSROADS

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**T**he gun dangled from Jacob's fingertips as he stood over the body. A dark pool of crimson seeped from beneath it and spread across the path. The surrounding woods were lit dimly by the light of the failing moon. The humid breeze whispered through the leaves, and crickets sang to one another from all around. A dog's howl echoed in the distance.

Jacob stood at the Crossroads, the only spot in the entire park where the north-south and east-west nature trails met. It was said by some that the path you chose when you reached the Crossroads affected the rest of your life. Until now, Jacob had thought these were old wives' tales.

He shivered, despite the oppressive heat which clung to his body like a latex skin. He felt dirty. He wanted to run away from this horrible scene and drown himself in the cleansing spray of a shower. But he realized no amount of water could ever wash away the filth of what he'd done.

He searched the umbral recesses of the forest, his flesh prickling as if the eyes of guilt were upon him. Kneeling next to the body, he felt the face with the back of his hand. The skin was soft, as if untouched by the hands of time. He snatched his hand away. The person he'd shot was old—a man with leathery skin and stubby cheeks. He'd lain in the underbrush for hours until Mr. Stevenson finally came around the bend.

Jacob had known the old man would come here. He always went for a walk each night around midnight. He had kept up the ritual after his wife died eight years ago. Jacob knew Mr. Stevenson well. He once loved him and his wife like grandparents.

Jacob's mother had moved into the apartment complex when he was a toddler. She was the widowed mother of a young child, and she was frightened and alone. Mrs. Stevenson had met his mother soon after they arrived, and immediately

she and her husband began helping her out anyway they could. The Stevensons started caring for little Jacob while his mom worked. Mr. Stevenson was retired, and spent his days playing with the boy. The couple didn't have kids of their own, so Jacob became the grandson they'd always wanted.

Jacob loved them just as much as they loved him, and spent many nights with them even when his mother was at home. He grew much closer to them in many ways, and he found it increasingly strange and uncomfortable to be around his mother.

One day, Mrs. Stevenson grew ill, and Mr. Stevenson had to care for her. For a while, he tried to look after Jacob too, but it eventually became too great a strain on him. As the months went by, Jacob was often left to fend for himself. Then one day Mrs. Stevenson died.

Her death hurt him deeply. He'd lost the woman that in many ways had been more of a mother to him than his natural one. He reached out to Mr. Stevenson for support and comfort, but found that the man had changed.

After his wife's death, Mr. Stevenson became a recluse. He pushed everyone away, including the seven-year who just couldn't understand why. So Jacob started hanging out on the playground, watching the older boys shoot hoops. That's how he met Shawn.

Shawn lived on the other side of the apartment complex, and liked to hang out in the courtyard with his friends. He was four years older than Jacob, and when the two met, Jacob immediately found himself looking up to Shawn like a big brother. The eleven-year old drank and smoked, and seemed to know everything about life. Jacob thought he was the coolest guy he'd ever met.

Shawn taught him the ways of the streets. He showed Jacob how to survive on his wits—how to beg, borrow, or steal whatever he wanted. As Jacob grew older, Shawn introduced him to harsher things. They spent many nights getting high together while Shawn told him that young black men like them had no chance in the world. Jacob became even more distant from his mother, and spurned all her attempts to spend time with him. He and Shawn grew closer over the years. Then earlier that morning, his friend had told him it was time for him to prove he was a man.

"It's up to you to go out and take what you want!" Shawn said. "Here." He reached inside his shirt and pulled out a semi-automatic. He handed it to Jacob, and showed him how to use it.

"I don't know, Shawn. It just doesn't feel right."

"Man, haven't you heard nothing I've been telling you! The world don't give a damn about you, or me, or anybody! Especially not two poor little Black kids like us! They don't *give* you respect out there! You gotta *take* it from them!"

Jacob thought about his mother. While he knew she had sacrificed a lot to keep him fed and clothed, he still resented her for not making more time for him when he was younger. He thought of the bitterness he felt for never having the chance to know his father. He considered everyone who had let him down in his life, and his grip tightened on the weapon.

Nobody cares he thought. Nobody but Shawn.

"Look, I know the first time is gonna be hard. My first time came when I was fifteen too. But it gets easier afterward. Just go find some lowlife S.O.B. that deserves to die, walk up to him, and pow!" Shawn put his finger to Jacob's temple and mimed pulling the trigger.

Jacob got high with Shawn before leaving the apartment. He stumbled through the streets in a chemical haze for hours while he sorted out things in his mind. He spotted Mr. Stevenson coming out of a store and he paused.

He wanted to go to the old man and confess everything he'd done and planned to do. *Maybe he could help him clear his head*, he reasoned. But just as he decided to approach him, the old man saw him standing nearby and quickly hurried away.

Jacob's anger blazed anew. *To hell with him and everybody else then!* he swore to himself. He watched Mr. Stevenson go, remembering that the man had no other living family. He also recalled that most people in the apartment complex now disliked and pitied him. An idea formed in his mind.

No one's gonna miss that old fool, Jacob told himself.

He walked to the city park and staked out a hiding place in the bushes near the Crossroads. *He'll have to come through here sooner or later*, he thought. He laid there for hours, watching the people stroll by. Both the young and old passed,

most of them smiling as if they didn't have a care in the world. Jacob absently caressed the bulge beneath his shirt while he waited. The sun eventually set, painting the sky a brilliant orange-red—the afterglow of a steamy day. But nightfall brought little relief from the heat.

As the night wore on, the number of people passing by dwindled. Jacob grew anxious. Midnight passed, and he began to doubt whether Mr. Stevenson would show up.

Finally, the old man appeared. Jacob's heart raced when he saw him approaching from the south. He waited until the old man reached the Crossroads, then leapt out of the bushes. He stood before him and fired at point-blank range without saying a word. One...two...three gunshots shattered the calm of the forest. He watched in stunned horror as the frail body spun in slow motion and tumbled to the ground.

Mr. Stevenson lay sprawled on the path like a marionette suddenly ripped from its strings. Tears welled up in Jacob's eyes. He peered in the direction of his victim, but there wasn't enough light to see by. He knelt and ran his fingers over the contours of the face. The cheeks were round and smooth, unblemished by the passage of time. The hair was soft and thick like the down of a pillow. The nose and mouth were small, childlike. Although he couldn't see the face, it was obviously that of a toddler's.

“Oh God, what have I done?”

“You've killed me.”

Jacob scraped his hands and knees on the gravelly path as he scrambled away. The head of his victim turned, a shaky hand reaching toward him.

“Why have you done this to me, Jacob?” The voice was gentle and melodious like that of a young angel.

“H-how do you know my name? Who are you?”

“Don't you know?”

“I thought you were Mr. Stevenson, but—”

“I am him, BOY!” the voice rumbled with a power that rocked the nearby leaves.

Jacob tried to tear himself away from the shadowy face, but he felt as if invisible fingers were clamped on either side of his head, forcing him to stare at this demon.

“No. You can't be him! Mr. Stevenson is an old man. You're only a child!”

“Look more closely.” The gloom seemed to lift for just a moment, and Jacob saw the child’s face clearly. Big dewdrop eyes glared at him in the darkness, shining like smoldering jewels in the moonlight. He realized he’d seen them before.

They were the same eyes he’d seen once in a photograph Mrs. Stevenson had shown him when he was six years old. She had invited him over to look at an old photo album with her, and they’d flipped through the book for hours. He’d snuggled next to her in her sickbed while she told him a myriad of stories, each related to a pictured memory.

One photo was from their wedding day. In it, Mr. Stevenson was dressed in a black tuxedo, and Mrs. Stevenson wore a beautiful white gown with a long, flowing train. The happy couple danced beneath a spotlight, happiness glinting in their eyes. Mrs. Stevenson also showed him a picture of a boy posing with his dad on a Sunday outing. He sat proudly on his father’s lap, and he had a gap in his smile where he’d knocked out a tooth after falling off his bike. His dewdrop eyes sparkled in the daylight. The boy was Mr. Stevenson.

“Oh God, it *is* you. But—”

“I know that all you see when you look at me is a bitter old man. But inside I feel vibrant and young. I may not show it anymore, but I still treasure every morning I wake up to enjoy.”

“Mr. Stevenson...I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I only wanted—”

“Wanted what, boy? Respect? Love?”

“I don’t know!” Jacob screamed. He fought to hold back the tears welling up inside. “I don’t know what I want anymore.”

“Well whatever it is, you won’t find it on this path.” Slowly the face changed. The round head grew oblong, and the mop of thick, curly brown hair thinned and grayed. The dewdrop eyes sagged with pain and age, and tears rolled down the sallow cheeks. The youthful boy was replaced by a withered old man who now looked far older than his 72 years.

“I know it’s been hard,” Mr. Stevenson said. “But this isn’t the way to cope. You’re destroying yourself. Right now you feel like you’ll live forever. But inside, your fury is eating away your soul slowly, methodically, like termites gnawing away at the woodwork. You may feel strong now, but one day it’s going to all come crashing down. Then it’ll be too late.”

“Why weren’t you there for me? I came to you, and you

sent me away!”

“I know. I was hurting too, Jacob—more than you could ever know. I’d known Ellen for 58 years! There’s no way you could even begin to understand what it felt like to suddenly be without her.”

Jacob looked at the old man. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize—”

“No, I’m sorry. I turned you away to protect you from my sadness. I didn’t want you to see my pain. I was consumed by my bitterness, and I was afraid you would be too. But we could’ve helped each other through it all, if I’d only given you a chance.”

Jacob crawled over to him and laid his head on his chest. He cried, and Mr. Stevenson lifted a weak hand and stroked his hair. The man’s shallow breaths rattled in his throat. His heartbeat was slow, and Jacob looked up and saw that the front of his shirt was soaked in blood. He realized that he had to get help *now*. He leapt up and started to scream as he ran up the path.

“Jacob.”

He spun and hurried back to the old man. he crouched beside him and held his hand.

“I’m going to get help, Mr. Stevenson. Just lie still, and I promise I’ll be right back.”

“No Jacob, it’s too late.”

“It’s not! It can’t be!”

“It is for me, but not for you. What are you gonna do about Shawn?”

“To hell with him! I shouldn’t have listened to him. But right now I have to get help.”

Jacob stood and raced down the path heading north. As he rounded a bend, he heard a voice calling his name.

“Jacob! Where are you?”

“Mom?” Jacob said, peering into the darkness ahead. “What are you doing out here?”

“Looking for you,” she said as she approached. “I was worried about you. I have to tell you something—”

“Not now, Mom! You have to help me. Someone’s been shot!”

“What? How? Who are you talking ab—”

“Just follow me!” he yelled as he sprinted back the way he’d come. His mother followed.

Jacob returned to the spot where he'd left Mr. Stevenson. He stopped and swept the area with his gaze, but there was no sign of him anywhere. He thrashed through the underbrush calling his name, fear burning in his chest like acid.

His mother watched in confusion while Jacob stumbled around in a frenzy. Finally, he returned to the path and collapsed to his knees, panic-stricken and exhausted.

"Who were you looking for?" his mother asked as she kneeled beside him.

"Mr. Stevenson," he sobbed. "I shot him."

"Honey, are you all right?"

"No I'm not! I did something horrible! I shot him. I just jumped out of the bushes and pulled the trigger. I was so angry...so confused...I just didn't think."

His mother threw her arms around him and held him close.

"Everything's going to be okay, Honey. Mr. Stevenson isn't here, and you didn't shoot him. It was all in your head."

"No! It was real!"

"It's okay Jacob. You can tell me everything later. Now let me take you home—"

"We can't go! We have to find him!"

"But he's not here."

"He has to be. And anyway, how would you know? You weren't here! You're never here!"

"Jacob, I'm sorry. I know you must hate me, but—"

"No, Mom. I don't hate you..." Jacob held his mother's hands. "But I needed you so many times, and you weren't there."

"I know honey. I needed you too..."

Jacob and his mother stared at one another. Although nothing was said, much passed between them. A faint smile touched their lips.

"I guess we've got a lot to deal with, Kiddo."

"Yeah, I guess." Jacob suddenly looked around. "But we have to find Mr. Stevenson!" He tried to stand, but his mother pulled him back down.

"No, Jacob."

"Why not? We have to help him!"

"Mr. Stevenson died a few hours ago."

"What are you talking about?" Jacob screamed. "He was

lying right here just minutes ago!”

“Jacob, Mr. Stevenson was rushed to the clinic late yesterday evening with severe chest pains. He died of a heart attack soon after.”

“That’s not true! I saw him lying here! I touched him—”

“It’s true, Honey. I swear to you it’s true. Mrs. Byers from across the hall called and told me as soon as I got home from work. She was on duty in the clinic when they brought him in. She was there when he died.”

Jacob stared in disbelief at the ground. Where a pool of blood should’ve been congealing in the middle of the path, the gravel looked dry and dusty in the faint light of dawn. He felt numb, as if everything was happening in a dream.

“I don’t understand...”

“I know. Come on, Honey, let’s go home and sort it all out.”

Jacob stood, allowing his mother to lead him away. He stumbled along behind her, oblivious to everything around him.

Just before rounding a curve, Jacob glanced over his shoulder. A young man and woman stood at the Crossroads, silhouetted in a beam of light. They looked at him and waved. The man wore a black tuxedo, and the woman shone in a white dress with flowing train.

Jacob smiled.