

## Chapter 1: “My Brother, Simon” By Rafael Alan



*So, what had HAPPENED was...*

There I was, cruising around on my trusty two-wheeler on 10<sup>th</sup> Street, feeling a bit lonely because I didn't know a soul in the new neighborhood.

I pedaled around the block. I stood up on the pedals of my brand-new purple 20-inch two-wheeler with the raised handlebars and pumped my legs faster so I could get up to a nice cruising speed. I sat back down on my seat and looked around at the yet unfamiliar neighborhood. Then, out of nowhere, I glanced behind me, and what did I see? A parade of kids on bikes trailed behind me like I was some kind of bike-riding Pied Piper. Talk about an unexpected entourage! I was nine years old at the time, and some of the boys behind me looked older – perhaps 12, 13, or 14.

My heart started doing the Macarena in my chest as I heard them hollering stuff like, “*Catch him! Get him! Stop him!*” Geez, the pressure! Suddenly, I was pedaling like my life depended on it, which, let's be real, kind of felt like it did at that moment.

As the chorus of voices got louder behind me, I realized I might not outrun them. So, in a stroke of genius - or maybe sheer panic - I whipped my bike around, off the sidewalk

onto the street, and I sped up. I started dodging through all of these other kid riders and high-tailed it back to the safety of my driveway.

*“Simon! Simon! Simon!”* I was practically screaming for my big bro, who stumbled out of the house with magic shaving cream still clinging to his face like a fuzzy white beard. The scent that wafted from him wasn’t exactly roses and sunshine; it was more like rotten eggs. I had to fight the urge to pinch my nose shut, but the sound of bike tires screeching behind me snapped me out of my daze. The memory of why I had called out for Simon flooded back in an instant. I needed help and fast. As much as I wanted to chuckle at his comical appearance, there was no time for laughter when a gang of pedal-pushing rascals was hot on my trail.

I spilled the whole saga to him, *“I don’t know what’s happening! These guys are chasing me!”* I frantically motioned toward the group of kids on bikes as they were circling like vultures in the street in front of our driveway.

And Simon, being the hero he was, stepped up to sort things out. Turns out, the ringleader of this two-wheeling circus was James, some big shot among the neighborhood kids.

*“Rock (my big brother’s nickname), what are you doing here? Is this your little brother?”* James asked, and just like that, the tension de-escalated as he explained they were just goofing off.

Well, isn’t that a plot twist? Here I was, thinking I was in the Tour de Fear; turned out it was just a neighborhood joyride gone a tad overboard.

So, I stood there, feeling like a fish out of water among this mob of neighborhood kids, still catching my breath from the impromptu bike chase. Simon reassured me, *“These guys are alright. You can trust them. I know them and their older brothers; they’re cool.”*

*“Trust them? Easier said than done, Simon,”* I thought.

But Simon nudged me forward, urging me to give peace a chance. So, with a healthy dose of skepticism, I tentatively approached the group, eyeing them like they were a pack of wild animals that might pounce at any moment.

One of the older boys stepped forward, labeling me as *“Rock’s little brother.”* James then started doling out introductions, connecting me with each kid in the group.

James gestured toward his comrades, rattling off names like he was leading roll call in Bike School, *“This is Charlie, my younger brother – he’s your age. This is Larry. This is Johnny, Larry’s younger brother. He’s your age, too. Edward, Johnathan...these guys are all your age. So, let’s roll.”*

In this sudden turn of events, I was not just Rafael, the new kid on the block, but Little Rock and a welcomed member of the neighborhood.

It was like a light bulb moment as I realized these guys weren't a bunch of bullies on bikes; they were just kids, like me, looking for a bit of fun and friendship in this big old world.

Simon's approach, his calm demeanor, and his familiarity with the group bridged the gap between us and them. He could've come out guns blazing, ready to defend his little brother's honor, but instead, he chose understanding over aggression. He was the repairer of the breach, the glue that started our lifelong friendships.

And just like that, what could've been a showdown on two wheels turned into a scene straight out of a buddy movie. Thanks to Simon and the older brothers in the group, we weren't a bunch of mindless kids riding around the block; we became a crew, a team... glued by friendship and a shared love for the open road. Who knew a little bike ride could lead to making lifelong pals? We were no longer a random group of kids on bikes. We became known in the neighborhood as the "***Bicycle tramps***"!

I was a vulnerable nine-year-old, facing a gang of older kids on bikes, feeling like I was about to become their prey. But then, like a knight in stinky shaving cream armor, my brother Simon swooped in to save the day.

Now, you might think, why risk a perfectly smooth face for the sake of a little brother's bike-related drama? For those who don't know how magic shaving cream works, it burns the hair off the face. It can be dangerous if you keep it on for too long. That being said, the fact remains that Simon put his own skin in danger to save his little brother. That's the thing about heroes - they don't always wear capes or play for the big leagues. Sometimes, they're just regular people like Simon, stepping up when it matters most.

Simon's act of bravery didn't simply save me from a potential beatdown; it kickstarted a lifelong bond with those very kids who were chasing me. As I mentioned, we were no longer just a bunch of neighborhood kids; we were a gang in the best sense of the word, cruising the streets on our bikes, playing football, shooting hoops, and exploring the tricky terrain of growing up, together.

Years flew by, but our friendships have stood the test of time. We have been there for each other through thick and thin, from weddings to funerals, from becoming each other's kids' godfathers to sharing life's triumphs and tribulations for over 50 years.

Simon wasn't a superhero in the Hollywood sense. He didn't have a flashy costume or a million-dollar endorsement deal. But in my eyes, he was a genuine hero - a beacon of kindness, understanding, and leadership, guiding those of us around him through the ups and downs of life.

As I look back on those early years, I'm reminded that heroism isn't about fame or fortune; it's about answering the call when it comes, empathizing with others, and leading by example. It's about being there for your friends, your family, and your community despite the potential risks. Thanks to Simon, I learned those lessons early on – lessons I'll carry with me for the rest of my days.