



# UNEASY PICKINGS

TALES FROM THE IN-BETWEEN

DAVID PATNEAUDE



### **About the Author**

David Patneaude began writing seriously (more or less) in the 1980s. His first novel, *Someone Was Watching*, was published to glowing reviews and went on to win young readers' awards in South Dakota and Utah. His books have been named to dozens of state lists and honored by the New York Public Library, the Society of School Librarians International, the Winnetka (Illinois) Public Library's "One Book, Two Villages" program, and the Washington State Public Library. When he's not in a coffee shop writing, or at a school or library or conference discussing writing, or on the trail thinking about writing, he's home in Woodinville, Washington, with his wife Judy, a junior high librarian.

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**UNEASY  
PICKINGS**

**TALES FROM THE IN-  
BETWEEN**

**By David Patneaude**

**Other Books by David Patneau**

*Someone Was Watching, Dark Starry Morning,  
The Last Man's Reward, Framed in Fire,  
Haunting at Home Plate, Colder Than Ice, Thin  
Wood Walls, Deadly Drive, A Piece of the Sky,  
Epitaph Road*

**Fantastic Cover Illustration by Jaime  
Patneau**

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## THE SPIRIT OF FRANKLIN LANDRY

Brosey sat across the kitchen table from Mrs. Caruso, patiently watching the steam rise from her tea, fog her glasses, and soften the deep lines in her face. She'd promised to tell him the story, and he was willing to wait. He needed to know why the old house next door, where he'd lived with his parents for the past three months, still gave him the creeps all day and kept him up late into the night.

She cleared her throat, took a sip, and set down the cup. "Nineteen-sixty-three, it was," she began. "In some ways, things were better then. But there were problems, too—big, chronic ones—polluting God's good air: prejudices of every kind, inequality between the races and sexes, lack of opportunity, poverty, disease. We were fighting a cold war and slowly slipping into a hot one, and the turbulent parts of the sixties—war protests, campus unrest, racial strife, assassinations, political upheaval, revolutionary music, even—were on the near horizon. Things were about to get ugly.

"So our society was heading for a ditch and not running all that smoothly to begin with. Not in this country, not in this state, not even up and down this street. For instance, more of our citizens were in the military then, and in this neighborhood, some dads were away, some moms were working, and some kids were

running wild.” She frowned. Her bony shoulders slipped a notch lower.

“We’d lived in this house nearly seven years when the old lady next door—Mrs. Bono—died. I say old lady, but she was no older than I am now. She wasn’t a day over eighty, practically a kid, come to think of it. Only the good die young, they say. Anyway, a few months later, Charles Landry and his son, Franklin, moved in. Franklin was twelve, about your age, I’d guess.”

Brosey nodded, eager for her to go on.

She did. “Quite the event in this neighborhood.”

“Why?” Brosey couldn’t picture new people moving in as a big deal.

“They weren’t like the rest of the folks around here,” she said. “They were colored.” Her eyes homed in on Brosey’s face.

“Colored?” he said.

“Black,” she said. “African-American.”

*Colored.* That was a new one. And an old one, apparently. “Huh,” Brosey said. He closed his eyes, trying to imagine this Seattle neighborhood—*his* Seattle neighborhood now—without its mixed bag of faces and colors. He and his family were white, but his mom and dad had decided to move here *because* it was a hodgepodge of different kinds of people. Like the real world, they said.

“The surprising thing, given the times and all, was that most folks didn’t care. Charles Landry was a smart, dignified man, but not standoffish. He was very friendly, in fact, and

his new neighbors—the majority of them, anyway—warmed right up to him. He worked nights as a chemist at a glass manufacturer. Franklin was a nice boy, small for his age but a hard, untiring worker. Took a job delivering newspapers not a month after they moved in. I can still see him struggling with that load of papers on Sunday mornings. In bad weather, his dad would be up helping him, and they'd race each other up the street." She smiled at the memory and then shook her head, the smile fading.

"But things didn't go on good for long. Down the block lived the Cutters. Mr. Cutter—*Sergeant* Cutter—was serving in Korea, Mrs. was waitressing nights, and their two boys—Lane and Eddie—were having their way with life."

Mrs. Caruso stopped, glowering into her cup, and Brosey glanced at the stove, where the steaming teakettle gave one last meager whistle before going mute. The only sound was the tick of raindrops against the window.

"They were older than Franklin—fourteen and fifteen—and bigger," Mrs. Caruso said, "and mean as neglected dogs. Maybe a month after the Landrys moved in, I saw them chase down Franklin right in front of this house. They dumped his newspapers in the street and started pounding on him. By the time I got outside, they'd bloodied his nose and ripped his clothes." She shook her head slowly and squinted her eyes.

“Back then an adult’s words meant something. I was still a youngish adult at the time, but I lit into those two. They just looked at me, sneers on their faces and hate in their eyes. Then they walked away, slow, swaggering, all giggles and threats.

“I told Mr. Caruso—my husband—about it that night. ‘Boys will be boys,’ he said. ‘Let ‘em fight their own battles.’ I didn’t talk to him for a long while after that. He slept on the couch.”

Brosey leaned closer to Mrs. Caruso, waiting for her to go on. He didn’t know Franklin Landry, but he felt like he did.

“I went to their mom first thing the next morning. Got her out of bed, I did, and she wasn’t happy about it. Tried closing the door on me. But I jammed my foot in the gap and yelled so she’d have to listen. She opened it back up.

“‘They don’t belong here,’ she said before I could really speak my mind. ‘That boy got what he deserved. Now get out!’ She grabbed the door and shoved it so hard I had to move. It would’ve broken my foot. I went home angry, but thinking I’d done what I could. I should’ve done more. I should’ve gone to the police. But at the time I didn’t think they would do anything.”

Brosey leaned even closer.

“For the next week, I didn’t see or hear anything. The glass-half-full side of me actually thought the Cutter boys had decided to let him be. But one evening my paper didn’t come, and my other side—the half-empty one—began gnawing at me, and I got a raw feeling in my chest. I was standing on the front porch,

wondering what to do, when I heard shouts, and down the street they came, like a fox and two rabid hounds.

“Franklin had shed his papers. He was flying. The Cutters were a wide-bodied pair, and they were struggling to stay with him, huffing and puffing and scowling. Franklin looked confident, like he knew he had them beaten. But I headed for the street just in case. I thought I could get in their way, threaten them, something. Franklin whipped by, flashing me a grin. He cut into his driveway and headed for the house. I stepped in front of the Cutters, but it was like I wasn’t there. Lane—the older one—went right through me—knocked me on my rear—and Eddie didn’t even slow down to look.

“Franklin had already made it to the porch, and he turned and glared at them before slamming the door behind him. Safe, apparently.”

“He wasn’t?”

“He must’ve thought they’d never chase him into his house, because he didn’t lock the door. But they tried the knob and gave each other a look—a real dark look—and charged in.

“Franklin’s dad wasn’t home—his car was gone—so I knew I had to do something. I’d gotten up off my fanny and was about to head inside to raise some hell when the upstairs window flew open and Franklin leaped out onto the little roof that covers your porch and front room. The Cutters were pushing and shoving and grabbing to be the first to go out the window after him.

“In an instant they’d spilled out onto the roof, while I stood there, trying to breathe past the lump in my throat. Franklin had moved close to the edge by then, but the Cutters came toward him just a step or two before they stopped, chicken-hearted. They couldn’t bully gravity or the slickness of the shingles. ‘Get off the roof, you hoodlums!’ I yelled at them, finding my voice, but I might as well have been whispering from the moon.

“Lane glanced at this shiny, gold-colored watch he always wore—I’m sure he’d stolen it from someone—and cast a dumb, hate-filled grin in Franklin’s direction. ‘We got all day, boy,’ he growled.

“I tried to think of what to do next, but I was frozen with helplessness—afraid to leave my spot and afraid to stay. Franklin took another step, to within inches of the gutter, and suddenly I realized he had a plan. And my heart about froze when I figured out what it was. That apple tree in your yard was a lot smaller then, and its main branches were a lot farther from the house—close to ten feet, I’d say. But Franklin didn’t lack for confidence; he’d decided he could make it.

“Lane hadn’t figured out anything. He held up his arm and flashed his watch at Franklin. ‘All the time in the world, Frankie,’ he said.

“‘*Franklin* to you, moron,’ Franklin said. He planted his foot and jumped.” Mrs. Caruso squeezed her eyes shut, as if forcing the memory away. Brosey waited, breathless.

“He almost made it. He grabbed a branch—a nice, stout one. But he couldn’t hold on. His feet flew up and he twisted around and lost his grip. He fell headfirst and landed in a heap. I ran over to him. I didn’t see any blood, but his neck was bent unnaturally. He wasn’t breathing. I didn’t know what to do except touch his wrist, feel for a pulse. I felt one, but it was weak and fading fast.”

This wasn’t what Brosey wanted to hear. It wasn’t. He felt like the Cutters had driven him to take that leap.

“I looked up at the roof,” she said. “Empty, and there was no sign of the Cutters when I ran inside to call for help. They must’ve snuck out the back door.

“The ambulance came in a hurry. It didn’t matter. The attendants picked up Franklin gently, as if he were still alive, and put him in the back. Then they turned off their flashing lights and drove away. I called Charles at work and told him. Hardest thing—by far—I ever did in my life.”

Brosey tried to imagine his own parents getting that call. He decided it would break them, as sure as Franklin Landry’s neck. “What did he do?”

“He took it real calm. On the phone, he said, ‘Thank you, Margaret,’ but before the line went dead I heard a sob. I couldn’t get the phone down fast enough.

“The Cutters went to trial, if you could call it that. They were considered juveniles—children—so the court gave them children’s

sentences. The only reason they got any time in detention at all was that Charles wouldn't let up on the prosecutor. And I testified. I told the court that they'd chased and beaten Franklin before, and that they'd gone after him again, but this time right into his house and onto the roof."

Brosey's throat felt dry, but he didn't want to leave the table to get a drink.

"The judge sent them away, but they were home in six months, strutting down the street and skipping school and bragging to any kid stupid enough to listen. It made everyone in the neighborhood sick, especially Charles.

"After their dad got home from overseas, we figured maybe they wouldn't cause more trouble. But little things started happening: Charles would find his car egged, his tires flattened, his mailbox smashed in. Everyone knew who was doing it, but nobody could catch them in the act, and their parents wouldn't lift a finger to help."

Mrs. Caruso took a long swallow of tea. It was no longer steaming. "Charles came out one day and found a noose hanging from the apple tree. He went to the police, but hate crime laws didn't exist back then, and most people were still just giving lip service to civil rights. The police talked to the Cutters, but they denied everything.

"Months went by, and then one night we woke up to the sound of sirens. My husband and I ran outside, and there was Charles, standing on his front lawn in the light from a burning cross.

"The fire department put out the fire, and the neighbors hauled off the debris. By morning

you could barely tell anything had happened. We figured Charles would move, but he wouldn't be run off. He wouldn't leave." She paused for a moment, staring at her cup, giving Brosey a chance to breathe.

"He should have."

Mrs. Caruso was a good storyteller, but if she'd had a fast-forward button, Brosey would have pressed it. He wanted to skip all the buildup, all the edge-of-your-seat stuff, and get to the final scene.

"For most of the next year the Cutters were getting in trouble," she continued, and Brosey forced himself to be patient. "But the things they were doing—vandalism and shoplifting and fighting—never added up to enough to get them locked up for long.

"Then one night Charles told us he'd gotten some threatening phone calls, and he was sure it was the Cutters. They said they were going to kill him if he didn't move out by the next day. A ridiculous demand.

"The police talked to the Cutters, who played dumb, and when nothing happened by the end of the week, everybody kind of let down their guard.

"That Saturday we invited Charles and some other neighbors over for a barbecue. He seemed kind of distant, as if he had a lot on his mind. He went home early. It was the last time we saw him."

Brosey's heart stalled. Something in him regretted asking Mrs. Caruso to tell this story.

But he took a deep breath and waited for her to go on.

“The next afternoon a policeman came to our door, asking if we’d seen Charles. He hadn’t been to church, he wasn’t home, and he wasn’t just out for a walk; his car was gone. His minister and lots of people in his congregation, people who knew what had been going on, were concerned, and I got nervous right off. Sunday was Charles’s day to be home. After church, he was always home. Nowhere else.

“That evening the police found his car, driven into the woods off a little-used road. They found blood on the back seat, and Lane Cutter’s gold watch—its band broken—on the back floorboard. Before dark they’d taken the Cutters to jail—they’d been sitting home all innocent-like—and searched their house and yard. They found a bloody baseball bat tucked away in a corner of the garage along with Charles’s car keys.

“We were standing out in front of their house with the rest of the neighbors when the police brought the Cutters out, when they carried out that awful bat.”

She drained her cup, swallowed hard. “The Cutters did some stupid things when they killed Charles, but the stupidest was waiting. By then, Lane was nineteen, Eddie was eighteen. They weren’t juveniles anymore. They got tried as adults and convicted of second-degree murder—they wouldn’t ever tell where they’d put the body—but second-degree was enough to put them in prison.

“None of us neighbors thought the sentence was long enough at the time. But the Cutters didn’t do any better in prison than they’d done in the real world. Lane died in a fight less than a year after they went in. A year after that, Eddie was shot dead in a prison break. So I guess you could say they got life—or death—sentences.

“Some nice people moved into Charles’s house after everything was settled. They got to be good friends of ours, but I never felt comfortable visiting them. The house never seemed quite right.”

Brosey got to his feet without looking up. He’d gotten his story. “I better go.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have told you, Brosey.”

“I’m glad you did,” he managed.

His house felt different when he walked in—just as creepy, but not as puzzling. Mrs. Caruso had undressed the old place, and now he could see its warts. As he hurried up the stairs he thought about Franklin racing up those same steps, the Cutters on his tail.

Brosey went to his bedroom and unlatched the window. He tried raising it, unsuccessfully. He’d tried raising it before, but who-knew-how-many coats of paint always held it fast. What would Franklin have done if the window hadn’t opened all those years ago? Crashed through it? Stood and fought?

Stood and fought, Brosey decided. What would have happened then? How would the story have ended?

He took off his shoe and repeatedly hammered the bottom of the window’s wood

frame. He lifted again; the window rose with a raspy screech. A cold blast of wind pushed through the opening, plastering his shirt to his skin, slamming the bedroom door shut. He shivered.

The tree had grown, sending its branches toward the house. Just an easy jump away now, a step. But still, he wouldn't do it. The roof was too steep, too slick, and the tree looked scary—gnarled, brittle, bare of leaves and fruit. This was a tree that had once shrugged off a kid and let him drop to his death, a tree whose branches once dangled a hangman's noose.

He forced the window back down, lowered the shade, and hurried downstairs.

The following Saturday Brosey and his parents cut down the tree. Inside its misshapen trunk was a core of rot. His dad hired a guy to bulldoze out the stump and haul away the useless wood. That night the house seemed lighter, warmer, and Brosey slept peacefully for the first time in three months.

The next day he and his parents drove over Stevens Pass. On a quiet hill behind his uncle's mountain cabin, they found a perfect ten-foot silver fir. That evening they planted it where the apple tree had lurked for so long, then leaned on their shovels and admired it in the fading October light. A good replacement: green and fragrant and new. And innocent.

Autumn passed and winter arrived and Brosey grew to like the house. The old feelings he'd had mostly faded away. Or maybe he just got used to them.

Spring came. He saw plants sprout and blossom, watched as bright-green needles—soft as blades of grass—burst out on branches of the new tree.

One afternoon as he was getting home from school, he saw a car cruising slowly down the street in his direction. He noticed the Oregon license plate. The driver could be lost—the street wasn't a direct route to anywhere. Brosey walked to the curb. Maybe he could help.

The car stopped. He crouched and waited as the window powered smoothly down.

“Do you live in this house, son?” the driver asked. The voice was deep, young, but Brosey was looking at an old black man, high forehead framed by white hair. His eyes shone bright and brown and friendly above a warm smile. Two little kids, a boy and a girl—twins, Brosey guessed, six or seven years old—sat in booster seats in the back.

“This one?” Brosey said, jerking his thumb in the direction of his house.

“Yes.”

“Yeah, I—and my parents—live there.”

The old man turned off the car's engine and stared past Brosey at the house.

“Can we get out, Grandpa?” the little girl asked.

“Are you looking for someone?” Brosey said. “My name's Brosey—Ambrose, officially, but who wants to be called *Ambrose*?—Kessler. My parents are Douglas and Ellen. Are you looking for us?”

“No, Brosey,” the man said, getting out of the car. “I just wanted to see the old neighborhood—the house.”

“Did you know somebody here?” Brosey asked.

The man closed his door and walked around the car, gazing at the house. “My brother,” he said finally. “My brother and his son lived in this house.”

Brosey stared at the man as he opened the back door and helped his grandkids out of the car. “Charles Landry,” Brosey murmured. “Franklin.”

The man’s white eyebrows rose. “You’ve heard the names.”

“Mrs. Caruso told me about them.”

“Mrs. Caruso.” His eyes drifted toward the house next door.

“You want to see the house—inside—Mr., uh, Landry?”

“Would you mind?” he said. “That would be most generous of you.” They moved toward the house, the old man gently guiding the kids across the lawn. But not for long. They broke loose, headed for the fir, and began chasing each other around it. “You got rid of the apple tree?”

Brosey nodded. “Not long ago.”

“Good,” the man said. “I never did like that noxious weed.” He stopped at the replacement tree, fingering its young, moss green needles, looking it up and down. “I could fall in love with this puppy, though.”

The kids had switched gears. They’d found one of Brosey’s soccer balls and were kicking it

back and forth across the lawn. Brosey reached in his pocket. “Looks like they have some energy to burn off,” he said, handing over his house key. “They can stay out here with me if they want. You go in and look around.”

“Thanks,” Mr. Landry said. “Don’t let ‘em wear you out.”

“Take your time,” Brosey said.

“You children mind Mr. Kessler here, okay?” Mr. Landry said. “I’ll be right out.”

The twins glanced at Brosey and went back to their game. Brosey smiled. *Mr. Kessler*. He didn’t remember being called *Mr. Kessler* before, even by little kids.

He watched them for a while and then let his eyes wander to the house. A curtain moved in his upstairs window. Mr. Landry’s face appeared. He stood looking out for a long time before turning in Brosey’s direction.

Feeling like an intruder, he pulled his eyes away. He turned back to the kids, but his mind stayed on Mr. Landry.

A few minutes later he came out, smiling. He handed Brosey the key. “Thanks, Brosey,” he said.

“Was it...okay?” Brosey asked.

“It was fine. Good old feelings. Good new feelings. Very comfortable.” He offered Brosey his hand. “I appreciate it very much,” he said.

Brosey shook his hand, impressed but not surprised at the old man’s strength. He was seized by the look in his eye—intensely sad despite the smile. “No problem,” Brosey said, wanting to say more, but Mr. Landry was

heading for the car, grandkids on his heels like ducklings.

As Brosey watched him usher the twins into the back seat, he thought suddenly of Mrs. Caruso. She shouldn't be left out of this. He turned and hurried to her front porch and rang her doorbell. He knocked, just to make sure.

She was there in an instant, her eyes alight with welcome. "Come on in, Brosey," she said. "Got time for something to drink?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "Someone came," he said. "To the house. Someone came to our house."

"Yes?" she said. "Who, Brosey? Who was it?" Brosey looked over his shoulder again, and her gaze shifted past him, to the street, the car at the curb, the man slipping into the driver's seat. "Who is it?"

"Charles Landry's brother came. That's his car."

"Charles Landry's brother?" Grabbing Brosey's elbow, she moved onto the porch. "Hurry, Brosey," she said, turning him toward the street, clinging to his arm as she guided him down the stairs. "*Hurry.*"

They reached the sidewalk. Mr. Landry sat behind the wheel, still studying the house. His head turned at their approach. Mrs. Caruso steered Brosey along a few more feet and stopped.

Mr. Landry's door opened. He got out, eyes on Mrs. Caruso, hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. The back door opened,

and the kids slipped out of their booster seats and joined their grandfather.

He came closer, holding out his hand. "Margaret," he said. "I didn't expect—wasn't prepared—to see you here."

She stood still for a full minute, staring at his face, while silence fell and he dropped his hand and everyone waited. Finally, she reached up and touched his cheek, running her fingers softly over his skin. Brosey pictured Thomas, doubting, probing Jesus's wound. Then Mrs. Caruso's hands went around Mr. Landry's back, and they hugged, swaying, eyes closed and leaking tears.

"We thought you—" she began, before looking down at the two young faces.

"Things aren't always what they seem, Margaret," Mr. Landry said. "Things aren't always what they seem."

Brosey stared at them. He wanted to ask what was going on but knew he couldn't. His mind raced, searching for things that might not be what they seemed.

"I'm telling Grandma," the little girl blurted out.

Her grandfather laughed, low and long. "I don't think your grandma would mind, Angela," he said, stepping back and picking her up in one arm. He draped his other arm around the boy's shoulders. "This is Mrs. Caruso, children—an old friend. Margaret, these are my grandchildren, Angela and James."

The girl—Angela—squirmed down and stepped forward, shadowed by her brother

James. Mrs. Caruso bent down and put an arm around each of them, pulling them close. "Beautiful," she said. "Beautiful children."

"A Godsend to me, Margaret." He put his big hands on their shoulders. "We must go now."

"But where are you?" Mrs. Caruso squinted at his license plate. "Oregon?"

"I know your address," he said. "I'll write to you. As soon as we've both had time to think about this."

Mr. Landry and the children got into the car. He started the engine, accelerated, left Brosey and Mrs. Caruso staring after his blinking taillight as the car rounded the corner and disappeared.

Brosey waited for Mrs. Caruso to say something. Her eyes were wide open, but he had a feeling that she wasn't seeing this empty, tree-lined street.

"He'll write," she said finally, still staring off at nothing, speaking to no one in particular.

"He said he would." Brosey's voice was a bare whisper, but it got her attention. She took his arm, and they walked wordlessly back to her door.

"You have baseball now, Brosey," she said at last, studying her watch.

Baseball could wait. "You were friends with this Mr. Landry, too?" Brosey said. "With your neighbor's brother?" Somehow he knew it wasn't the right question, exactly, but he was afraid to ask it any other way.

“Charles Landry *didn't have* a brother,” Mrs. Caruso whispered, as if someone nearby might overhear.

Brosey looked at Mrs. Caruso, searching her eyes, hoping for an explanation, waiting.

What he got was a smile, and a silvery, mysterious sparkle in those eyes. And eventually, kind of, an answer. “Things aren’t always what they seem,” she said. “Not what they seem at all.

“Sometimes they’re better.”

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