

MOVING FORWARD

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It was settled. The boys would pick a direction and walk straight. The matter began on the bus ride home from school. Travis, Carter, Dex, and Ethan were sitting as far back in the bus as they could get, which generally meant the middle since the older 7th and 8th graders got priority. The boys tingled with the excitement of Friday afternoon. Even though they would have to be back at school in exactly 64 hours at 7 o'clock Monday morning, the entirety of the weekend was ahead of them and their freedom seemed limitless. Adding to the feeling of jubilation was the bright, warm spring day, not to mention the sugar flowing through their veins due to Megan McNulty's birthday cupcakes that brought Social Studies to a premature end during 9th period. Ethan actually found the marking period's history topic, the Civil War, interesting, but no 11-year-old 6th grader could turn down 40 minutes of cupcakes and kickball outside.

But the shackles of school had now been lifted. Basking in complete liberation Travis, Carter, Dex, and Ethan had to figure out how to best spend it.

"Let's play Goldeneye at Travis and Carter's house," Dex suggested, twisting his slightly overweight frame around to peer at his friends occupying the three-seater behind him.

Travis and Carter liked the idea. Of course they liked the idea; the brothers had been addicted to Nintendo 64 since their parents bought it for them last Christmas. Goldeneye was such an obsession that Carter developed a twitch in the corner of his left eye from all the flashes the game produced on the screen. His mother somehow instinctively knew it was the video game's fault and hid the Nintendo in the vast recesses of her walk-in closet. As if the twitch were leprosy, Travis didn't associate with his brother until his spasm subsided and the game console was returned.

"Yeah!" said either Travis or Carter.

Ethan was not as enthusiastic. "Aw, we always do that and Travis and Carter always kill us. Let's do something else."

"Like what?" Dex challenged, his glasses sliding down his nose.

Ethan was about to respond, but the bus was arriving at a crucial part of the ride. The kids knew that special moment in the trip home was coming close. One of the cool 8th graders in the way back riled the crowd.

"Step on it Larry!" he yelled to the bus driver all the way up front.

The bus was coming to the tiny intersection of Old Village and New Village Road. The drop off route called for the yellow giant to make a tight right turn onto Old Village, where dodging the curb of the Village Pantry Deli was impossible. The chant began in the back and shot its way up to the front as mob mentality engulfed the rows.

"CURB! CURB! CURB!" the children demanded of their bus driver.

Larry always gave in to the peer--if you could call it that--pressure. Instead of easing into the turn, he accelerated, just like every other afternoon drive. The middle-schoolers readied themselves in anticipation. Travis and Carter thought Larry was so cool. He wasn't like their bus driver last year, Darrell, a dictator who would pull over and do routine checks to make sure everyone was wearing their burgundy colored seatbelt across their waists. No, Larry was fun, a popular leader who believed in democracy, letting the

majority rule. It was the American way.

They hit the curb with a jarring thud. The bus' shocks squealed, but that's about all they did. The kids in the back went flying at least a foot off their seats. Since they were in the middle, Ethan, Travis, and Carter only got a few inches of air. Dex got none because as soon as the chant began, he strapped in his seatbelt and waited quietly for impact by squinting through the bus' perpetually fogged plastic windows. After the giggles had subsided, Dex released the belt and returned back to his original position. Unfazed by the excitement, he pressed his question again.

"What do you want to do?" he directed toward Ethan.

Ethan wanted something different. Maybe it was the sugar rush or the familiar Friday routine, but Ethan had a craving for adventure. The question was how to find adventure in his perfect middle class suburb, especially in his quiet neighborhood. He didn't have an answer until the four got off at their stop.

"Let's just walk straight," Ethan finally replied.

"What?" Carter asked, needing further explaining.

"We pick a direction, keep walking, and see if anything happens," Ethan went on.

"Sounds pretty dumb," Dex said, trying to hide the fear that his mom probably wouldn't allow him to do that.

Ever optimistic, Ethan countered, "It'll be a quest into the unknown."

The word "quest" made Travis and Carter's ears perk up. Lewis and Clark went on quests, Johnny Quest went on quests, Mighty Max went on quests (he was so much better than lame Polly Pocket). Travis and Carter wanted to go on quests. They couldn't turn down an exploration. Who knows what they could find? Very quickly the voting polls shifted. It was three to one in favor of Ethan, and outnumbered, Dex was obliged to go along with the expedition. Not even pausing to drop their backpacks at home, the boys picked an arbitrary direction and took the first steps toward their awaiting adventure.

It was only a few short minutes before they were unfamiliar with their surroundings. After all, this was the golden age of sleepovers, Gameboys, and comic books, the precursor to the driver's license, when a kid could hop in his mom's car without knowing where he was and arrive at his friend's house magically 10 minutes later. The boys were just outside the neighborhood, but beyond their streets decorated with the continuity of cookie-cutter homes was uncharted territory.

They continued to walk their straight line. If an object, like a house, was in their way, they walked around it until they could get right back on course. The boys were silent for a while; the only noise generated from the group was the buzzing of Carter's black, wooden, authentic 1950's super duper cool Duncan Imperial yo-yo spinning about its axel inches above the ground on its twine rope. Carter finally spoke up, watching his dad's favorite yo-yo from his childhood "sleep" at the end of the string.

"I'm pissed I didn't get my laser today."

Danny Schoebel had told Carter months ago that he designed laser guns like the one in Goldeneye in his basement. Of course Carter was interested in getting his hands on one. He thought of how many girls he could get if he snuck it into school. He might even be able to get a girlfriend like Ethan. He paid Danny 15 bucks, three weeks of his allowance, and Danny went into the darkness of his basement to start designing one for Carter. Each week it wasn't ready, and Danny kept asking for a few more dollars to replace some missing parts. Carter reluctantly paid, but went to sleep each night dreaming of the day Danny would give

him his laser and he would show it off to the world. Today was supposed to be that day, but something had gone wrong with the alignment of the mirrors Danny explained.

“You’re an idiot,” Travis stated.

“We told you a million times that Danny is full of crap,” Ethan explained.

“But he knows so much about lasers...” Carter shot back, defending himself and his engineering genius whom he would ride into unbridled popularity.

“He makes it up,” Dex joined in.

“How do you know?”

“Because when I hear him talk to you about it he never mentions the hydromic barometer component of the nozzle, which is the most important part of the gun,” Dex went on.

“Wow! How do you know all that!?!” Carter ejaculated in awe.

“I don’t. I made it up. Just like he does.”

Ethan and Travis laughed at Carter’s gullibility.

“Screw you guys. He doesn’t make it up. You’ll see when I have my laser.”

“Ok Carter. Do us a favor and just stick with the yo-yo tricks for now,” Travis advised him.

The boys continued walking the line, but were now distracted by the dexterity of Carter’s hands with the yo-yo. He could sleep it, walk the dog, rock the cradle, and even knew how to fashion the string to look like the Confederate flag or Eiffel tower. By the time he was finished with his extensive repertoire, the adventurers once again became aware of their surroundings and were shocked to find that they were standing on the lawn of Grover Secondary. Of all the directions to pick, the brave explorers picked the one that led them right back to their school.

“Aw this sucks,” Dex whined. But it was still better than the stress of being at home, even if Dex’s home life had improved recently. His mom had finally moved forward, working up the courage to kick his alcoholic, abusive father out of the house when he pushed Dex down the stairs in a fit of rage for being too chubby and unathletic. His father always dreamed of having a son that was good at sports like his old man and couldn’t reconcile himself with what fate had given him. Having his dad out of the picture made Dex much happier, despite the fact that his lonely mother had become clingy and paranoid about something happening to her precious only-son. She suffocated Dex with love, but was also very strict to ensure his safety, making life at home difficult.

Dex tried one more time, “Can we please go to Travis and Carter’s?”

“No way! We haven’t really gone anywhere new yet,” Ethan protested.

Ethan took a few steps forward and Dex groaned as Travis and Carter followed like lemmings. Their path brought them right next to the turf where the field hockey team was practicing. There she was again, the goddess of 9th period, Megan McNulty, stretching before the team’s scrimmage. Dex looked on at her prostrate body and legs reaching to the sky with absolute adoration. He strained through his glasses to focus on her skirt’s bottom fringe, which was up by her waist because of the nature of the stretch. Disappointedly,

he noticed the shorts stitched to the inside of the skirt. The uniform designers thought of everything.

She was so pretty and always nice to him. Mrs. Fryling had decided to randomly pair students in Social Studies for their presentations on the War of 1812. Dex sat in his chair, and as if his prayers were answered by God, Mrs. Fryling read off the list, “Dexter Chaplee and...Megan McNulty.” Ever since he went to her house and watched her stain the fake letters he wrote for the project with tea to make the paper look like it was from the 19th century, he would lie on his bed in his room and think about taking her on picnics and heroically saving her from Stormtroopers invading the classroom.

Megan looked up during her stretch and noticed the group walking by. Excitedly she jumped to her feet and ran over to say hello.

“Hey Ethan,” Megan said.

“Hey Meg, what’s up?” Ethan asked.

“You come to watch me practice?” she ventured.

“Nah, me and the guys are on an adventure.”

“An adventure? You’re so silly. Come watch me play. It’s my birthday.”

“Sorry, I can’t. And you never come to my basketball practices anyway.”

“Oh fine. I’ll call you tonight. I gotta get back. See ya!” she gave Ethan a quick peck on the cheek and started running back over to the field. Over her shoulder as she ran she shouted “Hey Dex!” and waved cheerily.

Dex barely whimpered out “Hey Megan,” but by the time he replied she was already back with the team.

“Come on, let’s go!” Ethan motioned the crew back to the mission.

“No, it’s getting late, let’s walk back,” Dex moaned.

“Dude, it’s like 4 o’clock right now,” Travis argued.

Ethan was glad to hear Travis argue on his side. He was getting a little annoyed with Dex, who kept putting a downer on the trip. He generally liked Dex, but not when he went into one of his moods. A Friday afternoon is no time to be in a funk; it’s supposed to be a time of joy and celebration.

“It’s not a big deal if you don’t want to come, Dex. It’s pretty easy to find our way home, I mean, just walk straight,” Ethan said, attempting both to give his friend a pressure-free escape clause and rid himself of a killjoy.

“We’ve been walking for an hour. I don’t want to walk an hour back by myself.”

“Then you’ll just have to come with us, and stop fucking complaining,” Travis sighed.

The gravity of the F-word silenced the boys. Travis always had a tendency to be a bit extreme.

With that, the four moved on and in no time entered the forest that bordered school grounds. The forest that was such a familiar backdrop for the boys, its trees peacefully watching them play kickball this afternoon during 9th period, now took on a magical new light. Or so Ethan tricked himself to believe. It became Robin

Hood's Sherwood, or the Old Forest of Lord of the Rings, or Calvin and Hobbes' backyard. Passing a large white obelisk in the woods invigorated his imagination, even if it was only a rather plain marker abandoned by a landscape surveyor many years ago. It was a sign. Ethan just knew they would find something amazing. Travis and Carter seemed to be too caught up in bickering with one another to notice the beauty or grandeur of the surroundings.

"He said I'll have the laser by next week for sure this time," Carter informed Travis.

"Carter, stop paying him money. You're so stupid," Travis said.

"Oh yeah, well your momma is stupid."

"Carter, we have the same mom."

"Uhh," Carter faltered, looking for an escape, "I meant Dex's momma is stupid."

Ethan chuckled. Carter noticed, and built off the approval.

"Dex's momma is so stupid it took her 2 hours to watch 60 minutes!" Carter continued.

"Ooooh real good one," Dex attempted to defend himself. Picking up on his irritation, Travis joined in.

"Your momma's so stupid she tripped over a cordless phone!"

"Your momma is so ugly they didn't give her a costume when she tried out for Star Wars!" Carter chimed.

"You're so funny," Dex tried again.

"Your mama is so ugly even Rice Krispies won't talk to her!" Travis added.

Ethan didn't join but certainly enjoyed listening and laughing. Dex's face burned as he watched Ethan revel at his own expense. It especially hurt since his mom was so sick. But the boys wouldn't have known since no one ever went over to Dex's house to play.

"Your momma is so fat she eats Wheat Thicks," Carter continued relentlessly.

This one hit home for Dex. "Quit it," he said. But Carter kept going.

"Your momma is so fat she puts on her lipstick with a paint-roller."

"Stop," Dex warned.

"Your momma's so fat she goes to a restaurant, looks at the menu and says 'okay!'"

"Its not funny," Dex raised his voice. Carter was on a roll.

"Your momma's so fat she irons her pants on the driveway"

"CARTER SHUT UP," Dex screamed.

"Your momma is so fat she had to go to Sea World to get baptized!"

"STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT," Dex exploded, his face turning red.

“Your momm-”

“Guys!” Ethan cut Carter off, “can we please try to find something cool instead of standing around saying dumb yo mamma jokes?” Carter stopped, and the boys continued to look for something remarkable, Dex fuming internally all the way.

It took a while but they found it at the end of the road. Their straight line had led them to a rather large river too wide for the boys to cross to continue the journey. Dejectedly, Ethan turned to follow the path home, but saw something out of the corner of his eye. A huge tree, resting in between the river and a fast running stream on a raised embankment, housed the largest bird’s nest any of the boys had ever seen.

“Whoaaa,” Carter exhaled, his neck craning toward the branch as he methodically threw his yo-yo down to sleep.

Carter’s eternal practice had made the string grow weak. All the friction from hours of spinning about the axel had worn away at the twine until it was paper-thin. This, quite literally, was the last straw. The yo-yo snapped from its leash, still spinning furiously, and hit the ground running. Unluckily for Carter, it ran right into the rapid stream which shot it off way down the forest where it emptied into the river and would become irretrievable.

“Shit!” he cried, watching the sentimentally invaluable object fly off.

“Dad is going to kill you,” Travis stated, half-worried, half-grinning.

“Help me get it!” Carter ordered, running into the distance to cut it off before it got to the river. Travis followed him, knowing that every time Carter got in trouble with mom and dad, he was somehow punished also.

The brothers were off trying to retrieve their father’s treasure, but Ethan still salivated to get a better look at the nest. It was only about 11 feet high. If Dex hoisted him up fireman-style, he could probably pull himself over the branch and look inside at the eggs.

“Dex, help me up,” Ethan said with passion, his eyes alive now that his idea was culminating into something.

“No,” Dex said.

“Come on man. There could be some huge eggs up there,” Ethan urged.

“No,” Dex repeated.

“Why not?” Ethan asked, getting irritated.

“Because I don’t want to,” Dex explained.

What the hell, Ethan thought. What the hell was his problem? They finally might have found something totally cool and Dex was being a whiny wuss. Ethan had been on his side the whole day. He stopped Carter’s momma jokes. He gave Dex a chance not to come along. Was it such a big deal that Dex couldn’t play video games at Travis and Carter’s house? Ethan was frustrated and wanted to punish Dex for methodically killing his buzz the whole afternoon. He knew just how to push Dex’s buttons.

“Your mother,” he started, slowly and deliberately, making eye contact with Dex, “is...a...filthy...fat...

whore.”

“FUCK YOU,” Dex snapped, running at him and tackling him underneath the base of the tree.

Dex couldn't control his anger. He let out everything he'd pent up. His disgrace with his body. His disgrace for never pleasing his father. His envy of Ethan. Everything. He overpowered Ethan with his weight, his leverage, his intensity. Dex picked up a rock slightly larger than the size of his hand. Finding a hole in between Ethan's flailing arms, he struck a blow to his forehead with its dull side. He struck again. And again. And again. He lost count of how many times he struck Ethan, unable to see his friend's pleading eyes hidden behind the flood of tears that washed his own vision away. All he could do was feel, feel the thud of Ethan's skull against the rock and the vibrations ringing up his arm and into his body. He didn't know when he stopped, but when he did, he knew Ethan was gone. It was so quick that Ethan never had a chance to even scream. Dex panicked, put the rock down and rolled the body off the embankment into the river.

“TRAVIS! CARTER!” he screamed to the forest, “HELP, HELP!”

The urgency registered in Travis and Carter's ears, who had just started walking back, dejected that the yo-yo was lost forever. They sprinted to Dex.

“What is it?” Travis asked in a hurry.

“Ethan, he fell from the tree,” Dex blurted in gasps.

“Where is he?”

“He hit his head and fell in the river.”

“Oh my God.”

Travis perilously dove from the embankment trying to be a hero. But the fantasy was over; he was only an 11-year-old boy. He swam to the floor and struggled to pick Ethan up, but the dead weight was too much. Carter and Dex watched intently. Travis rose to the surface alone.

“Call 911,” he said.

The medics and the police arrived, extracting Ethan's lifeless body from the water. The police asked what happened. Dex explained that he helped Ethan up the tree to see the bird's nest, but the weight of his backpack made him lose balance. He fell from the tree, hit the rock with his head, and rolled into the river unconscious.

An officer gave the boys a ride back home after Ethan was taken away.

Dex walked up to his house and opened the front door with his copy of the house key. A woman's voice faintly called from the down the hall.

“Dexter?” she inquired.

Dex went through the hall and stopped at the open master bedroom doors.

“Hey Mom.”

Dex's mom laid in bed, still in pajamas and bed sheets that hadn't been made in weeks. Her gaunt,

emaciated frame lightly pushed the sheets up and down with each breath. Only a few months ago, Travis and Carter's fat jokes were relevant. The cancer that started in her breast had spread throughout her body. Her skin was the color of Ethan's corpse when they removed him from the water after hours of being submerged. She chose to live the rest of her short time at home so she could get to see her son each day when he came home from school. Dex feared coming home each afternoon to reality, wondering when he would walk to the master bedroom and find his mother dead and a car with a stranger waiting to take him to live with his father whom he could never impress.