

The Weight

I don't know why, in the early spring of 1986, in the mill town of Perry, MT, when I was in ninth grade, that I felt a weight in my chest and throat, that no tears, no laughter —nothing— would shake loose. I do know that I was stuck in my books, and subsequently lost out on opportunities with my dad or my brother to avoid becoming unequipped and defenseless, as a young man. It had not occurred to me, that there could be a price to pay sooner than later, for that ignorance.

The sun was veiled but oppressive, when I walked home from school that day. The same alley, thick with snow a few weeks before, was now a network of snow melt rivulets. The shadow of J.T. McElroy passed before me, as I looked up from the gravel that led to my house. A fifth year senior, with little future and no inclination, he had nothing but time on his hands. J.T. was bored and dangerous.

“Hey Flake Janagan, told you I'd find you.” He said. Reversing the first syllables in my first and last names, was the pinnacle of his intelligence. A kid like J.T., however, didn't worry about smarts. His skills lay in his fists. I'd dodged him earlier in the day, when he approached me and two other kids at lunch. Not for food or money, just for the fear in our eyes. Just for kicks. I had slinked away while he pounded on the other two. I felt bad

about it, and would pay for my guilt.

J.T., in dusty work boots with a steel-toe, possessed a sneer that had become his signature. It featured an old scar on his left cheek that deepened, with a humorless grin. The dark, lanky hair that shot from his head was finger-brushed deliberately to feature the scar. Something he no doubt practiced to effect before he struck us freshman. Taller, faster and agile, he had all the skills of a good athlete except good grades and respect. No use in running, I just hoped he'd be done quick so I could go home and ice up before my folks saw. Worse than a beating, was your parents attempting diplomatic efforts to cease fire. I wasn't a typical target of J.T.'s but I had been close more than once. I didn't want my parents, bless their best intentions, to put me on his regular 'to do' list.

Grabbing my shoulder, J.T. reared back with his right arm. I thought time had slowed, the way it did when you were in a scrap. That vinegar taste in your mouth and the flies in your stomach. But, just before J.T. launched his fist into my face, I heard a whistle from afar. We both looked toward the source of the call.

About twenty yards away, stood the solitary figure of senior Bix Tyree. Wearing the National Guard fatigues of his dad's dishonorable discharge from a decade ago, Bix was known to be as crazy as J.T. was dangerous.

Word around town was, he'd shot flaming arrows into a liquor store a while back. No one really knew. Bix was shorter than me, but he had a scrappy build and sandy hair that ran into his eyes. A pock-marked face held a wise-ass smile everywhere he went. We'd struck up a friendship over the depth of Harrison Ford's acting career, talk over the selling out of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons nerd fans, as well as frequent arguments about which villain actor had the better glare, William Smith or newcomer, Jeff Fahey. Bix was big into role-playing and was the strangest and most interesting person I knew. He was my only real friend.

Bix was dressed like a punk-kid version of Rambo, and holding, of all things, a recurve bow with an arrow nocked. He'd made the bow by hand and had it at all times. Still, he wasn't supposed to have it out in public, after the rumored liquor store fiasco.

He whistled again toward us.

"Hey Mongo-retard, why you always like freshman to pound on?" Bix said. He aimed at J.T.'s head, his hands on the bow calm and still.

"Why don't you put that thing down before you hurt yourself? I'm busy, this don't concern you, Tyree." J.T. said. His eyes squinted in an attempt to look annoyed, but under that, I saw his throat swallow. J.T. seemed to weigh the possibility of walking home with an arrow stuck in his chest. He

knew the stories about Bix, like anyone else.

“You sound like a bad guy from an old western, J.T., and I *hate* westerns.” Bix said. He loosed an arrow and I could feel the air move as it flew by J.T.’s head, and buried into a receding snow bank, a hundred yards away.

The color of J.T.’s face became more like the pale sky above us. He released the grip on my shoulder. “You’re a real nut job, Tyree.” J.T. turned away from me and began to plod away in the snow melt. “Piss off,” was his final goodbye.

Spring time in Montana, was a muddy and slushy place; ever changing. The loose gravel soil, plowed up all winter under the snow crust, collected in thick berms. The sky was often clouded, and the sunlight shone through gossamer clouds in a veil. The bright, cold and clear days of winter were long gone. Dripping ice clung to roofs once laden with three-foot snow accumulation, that now slid off without warning. The air carried the smell of new aspens, pregnant with their leaves in long caskins. Mosquitoes were still weeks away, but the water was collecting in low places, making stranded isles of swamp land on the edges of town.

Bix and I walked toward his single-wide, mobile home. We talked about our usual business: video games, the hope for future Star Wars movies and

the girls with which we had no chance. The weight in my chest and neck, the one that sometimes made it hard to breathe, dissolved a little, as we went.

My parents were busy working at the mill, and his dad never left the house. The Tyree home was at least twenty years old which meant in mobile home ages it was probably built before the Great Flood. The siding was originally painted white and now utterly faded. Green corrugated plastic hung low from the roof and over a more recent lean-to, where they kept their firewood out of the elements. A double-headed wood axe, leaned against the pile.

We walked into his home and brushed the snow clumps from our boots. His dad, almost completely enshrouded by the couch, was more of a fixture than a person. For as long as I knew Bix, his dad only ever grunted in reply to my greeting. Cigarette smoke made up the first three feet of atmosphere. Old dishes from a meal long since gone, choked the sink. Without acknowledging his surroundings, Bix swept us into his room and shut the door firmly behind. The familiar walls were covered in Iron Maiden posters, assorted pinups and his showpiece: a replica of a medieval English longsword.

Bix was a hardcore Dungeons & Dragons geek. The game must have

been tailor-made for his genetic make up. Somewhere inside him, role-playing milked an overdeveloped nerd gland. He pestered me weekly to play with him. He was like a drug dealer about it. Pleading with me just to roll up a character and try it out; my few attempts short-lived. I just could not get into the imaginary game. At five-foot-five and chubby, saddled with crippling asthma at an early age, I too seemed the perfect fit for the hobby. But for me, I treasured books. Though our pursuits were related, taking up the persona of a three-horned, bastard sword-wielding whatever, was not what I was about. Still, I understood that the immersion of the game was a powerful salve to the wounds of the real world, for Bix. In a town where kids like us had no future, you had two choices: find another world to run away to, or let the boredom drill into your skull.

After a few hours of watching TV, I called home. No one answered, which was not uncommon. I remember how lost in the shuffle I was at home. We were like a bazaar in a far away country; everyone coming and going and talking over each other. In those days, a horrible feeling began to eclipse my senses, that I was untethered and floating away. Away from my family's rules but also from their concern. I hung up the phone, sighed and gave Bix a thumbs up.

“Jake, I’ve got a plan. Here, see if this camo fits you.” He threw an old set

of Guard BDUs, like his own, toward me. I grabbed a Batman: Dark Knight comic from his recent stack and flipped through it, occasionally glancing at the camo pants, two sizes too small. Seeing my look of curiosity, Bix, seizing the stage, intoned in a deep voice, “Beneath this town, while everyone sleeps, is a network of tunnels unexplored by mankind.” I had no idea what the heck he was talking about. He held a solemn face as long as he could, then burst into laughter. “It’s the storm water system they put in a few years ago. You remember?” I didn’t. A fuzzy memory of heavy equipment around town was all that surfaced. “I know you’re not into D&D so, I’ll call it an adventure but you can call it a mission or whatever those spy books you read would say.” Bix explained. I just shook my head.

“You’re nuts, Bix. You wanna know what’s down there: hantavirus, dead mice and dead cats. Zombies, man, that’s how it starts.” Without looking up, I flipped through a Savage Sword of Conan comic. The black and white art was sumptuous.

Bix made ready, he hadn’t heard a word I said. Pulling a black, hooded long coat into place, he took the replica sword and solemnly placed it in a scabbard he’d made from leather scraps. The bow he slung around his back with a few arrows stuffed into a deep pocket of the coat. I looked again at the uniform uncomfortably. My frame had always kept me from being

much of an easy fit for costumes. Flashlights and snacks were stuffed into an old ruck sack. Once outfitted, Bix laid a 9 mm automatic pistol on the bed and pointed at it. He must have seen my eyes widen.

“Relax, it’s a pellet gun and there’s no ammo anyway.” He said. I held the gun in my hand, the weight made it feel legitimate. My family owned few guns and my brother said I wasn’t allowed to touch them, ever. It wasn’t that the gun made me feel dangerous, but in that moment I felt trusted with something important. An idea new to me then, that maybe I was ready for more responsibility. I decided that I’d do whatever I could to prove, even if just to my lonely friend, that I was worthy of it. It was the first time I felt that I might be able to lift the weight in my chest, just a little. Snatching up the camo uniform, I thrust my legs into the pants and sucked in a huge breath to button them.

Stuffing half-cold corndogs down our throats, we set out for the far side of town. The night was cool and a little breezy. I heard the song of a whip-poor-will call out, and wondered at the sad tune. We passed few cars in a town of a thousand people. It was nearly ten o’clock, and after 8 p.m. most days, this town was either in a tavern or in bed.

On the borderland of town, Gygax Road jutted to a dead end. A hundred yards from our destination, the last lights of a vehicle swept past, our eyes

caught the driver-side door that read, *Prairie County Sheriff*. If we were lucky, we'd be talking to Deputy Gaff who was aloof and weird, but sometimes made little origami and left them lying around. If we were not, we'd get Deputy Deckard, a hard ass and impossible to out run. As the unknown officer slowed and began to park, his lights lit up suddenly, and he sped away. We blew our breath out simultaneously and Bix even more than me.

Running the rest of the way, we found the open discharge spilling into a forested area. The concrete portal was over six feet wide and utterly black, so that it pulled at the edges of your vision, making it harder to see. We would have to walk on the raised edge to keep our feet out of the three inches of chocolate drain water, streaming through. Bix looked at me with a flashlight held under his chin. Angelic in visage, were it not for his crooked grin and wide eyes.

“Do you enter the Tomb of Horrors, young adventurer, or journey back to the inn?” He said.

“Gimme the other flashlight and let's try not to get bitten by a porcupine or something.” I replied.

Dropping the role-play schtick and lowering the flashlight, he lectured me. “Stuck. You get stuck by their quills. Porcupines don't bite, genius.”

“Whatever,” I replied, jerking the fake pistol from my belt, “let’s do this.” Bix smiled wide at my eagerness and led the way inside. The going was slow, and several times I looked behind to find us still able to see the fading light of the discharge entrance. Finally, we took a turn and the tunnel went gradually upward and leveled off. It was surprisingly clean for a storm water sewer. I guess I had anticipated animal feces and a dead cat or two, but there had been nothing but dirt and the drain water running between our splayed feet as we crab walked onward. Bix crept low in a prowl, gripping the hilt of his sword replica, the bow nearly scraping the ceiling. His voice echoed off the walls.

“We’ll find plunder or Valhalla!” He cried.

“Can we not talk about the after-life?” I asked. He laughed and crept forward.

Another thirty minutes, maybe an hour passed by. Bix still lively the whole time. Time was hard to grasp, as the darkness folded around our flashlights and the rush of water intensified. I tried to imagine what a worker would have to do to maintain these pipes. Anything to keep my mind from thinking about how we would get back out, or what we’d do if we got lost.

I got tired of walking with my legs like that. Bix also lost some steam,

and shouted less as he walked, no longer crouched like a wild man.

“Hey man, let’s grab a snack, huh?” I offered.

“Provisions, good idea.” He said. Bix pulled the sack off of me and I saw his breathing took some effort, his nose flared and sweat poured from his face. Even I wasn’t working that hard.

“You okay, Bix?” I asked.

“Never told you, but. . .I’m not a big fan of tight spaces. I guess I didn’t think it would feel like this, but. . .we’ve been in here awhile now.” He said, breathing in deep gasps. We crouched and scarfed Ranch-flavored Corn Nuts and a packet of Sugar Babies.

“What if we head back the way we came?” I suggested.

“Nah, we’ll come across one of those manhole covers. . .soon enough. Get out that way.” He traded words for precious air.

“Sounds good, man. Hey, at least we’re not watching Jeopardy with your dad, right?” I said. Bix chuckled and nodded. We finished the rations. I tightened the ruck sack back down and swung it across my back, offering my hand to Bix. His right hand, shaky and pale, reached for mine, and I pulled him to his feet. His weight came too quickly to me and I staggered back against the wall, bracing with my hand that held the flashlight. The light struck the wall and the lens coupling popped off, the batteries spilled

out, rolling away in the water. “Aw shit!” I yelled. Bix steadied me, keeping his flashlight aimed at our feet, trying to collect the remnants. No use, the cheap camping light was destroyed.

“Smooth move, Ex-Lax.” Bix said.

“Hey, did you bring a backup light?” I asked him.

“That *was* the backup light, my friend.” Bix said.

The darkness felt closer now, instinctively we huddled around the single thread of light.

“Let’s get the hell out of here.” I said. Bix nodded and we moved on. The blackness of the tunnel behind gave us an invisible push to our steps. Another fifty yards later, we came upon a large catch basin. It was about ten feet across and filled to the brim with the same water we’d been trudging through for the last couple hours. Beyond the far edge, we spotted a rebar ladder built into the tunnel wall that led to a manhole cover; our escape. There was just one problem.

“How’re we getting across that?” I wondered aloud.

“Well, it’s a dexterity check. You just have to make it or swim it.” Bix said, grinning widely again.

“Hey this isn’t a game, Bix, I don’t want to go swimming in dog vomit or cat crap and who-knows-what-else to get out of here.” I said.

“You may have to. Look, we’re in a pickle, but it’s what we have to do. It should be plenty deep.” He said.

“I have a bad feeling about this.” I said.

“You’ll be fine, Han Solo, relax.” Bix said.

Bix passed his flashlight, his bow and arrows and his sword to me, and pointed at the roof above the pit of water. “Keep your light up there so we can see the whole way across.” He said. I did my best to make the light envelope the area. Standing to the side, I had to squish myself against the wall to allow room for Bix to leap across. Moving behind me a few paces, Bix crouched into a ready stance. I held all of his D&D gear and felt like an idiot. His eyes met mine one more time.

“Do you want to live forever?” Bix quipped. Before I could answer, he ran, feet stomping into the drain water and pulled his body in an arc as he leapt across the span. His body seemed to hang weightless as he hurled through space. His left foot caught the smooth floor of the far side and my hopes elevated. His right foot, however, smashed into the front edge of the basin, knocking his shoe off. Without the security of his other leg, the one planted on the ground slipped in the bilge and he lurched, beginning to fall into the basin. Bix reached out in a reflexive grasp for something to hold onto. Twisting his torso, his hands flailed. The head on his hair stood out

straight and his eyes were wide. Even then, the typical smirk was still on his face; his baptism imminent. He didn't see how close the concrete was behind him. A dull thump, his head caved into the wall and the lights went out of his eyes. I felt horror wash over me as I screamed, "BIX!"

His body pancaked the basin surface and floated for a moment before he began to sink. I dropped the ruck sack, flashlight and all his stupid weapons on the tunnel floor. Without a thought, I jumped into the brown wash. I felt the pistol fall out of my belt and sink. My skin tingled at the briskness of the water but my mind barely noticed. It felt oily, too. I scooped my arm around his back and pulled him to me. A poor swimmer myself, the only fortune was the short distance to the edge. I held onto the edge with one hand, Bix's collar in the other. The panic of the moment set off my asthma. My throat began to spasm and tighten. Being heavier than Bix, it was a struggle just to get myself over the edge and my anxiety increased. My breathing became gulps for air. It didn't look like I'd be able to hoist myself out, much less my friend. I felt the weight again, the one that never really left. It was in my chest like a stone.

It was then that I remembered J.T., with his fist poised to knock my teeth out. Bix had been there, and was able to do something about the situation. He had cared enough about my problem and acted upon an

impulse that didn't want to see me hammered into pieces. Here we were, tables turned and that question hanging of whether I was ready to do something bigger; whether I was capable or not.

A small pit of bile grew in my stomach. I resolved to make my fat ass get out of that hole and get my friend some help. Releasing Bix for a second, I used both hands on the edge and pushed up with a great cry. My hips out of the water and laying on the tunnel floor, I whirled around and caught Bix under the arm with my foot and reeled him toward me. Sitting then, I squared myself and hoisted him to my chest under both armpits. There was blood packed with silt, in his hair, on the back of his head. Then, my lungs started to wheeze, the sound of my weakness since I was a little kid. Soon, I wouldn't be able to do anything else but try to breathe. I laid Bix on the rounded floor and kept his head above the stream pouring into the basin. The weight advanced from my chest and spread into my neck. I felt rushing blood in my ears that became a low buzzing sound.

Ascending the rebar ladder, rust bit into my hands and I pushed with all I had, to breach the seal of the manhole cover. Once freed, I slid the cover off more easily than I expected. Night air, cool and damp fell upon me and I breathed more easily. As I peered out, like some kind of urban groundhog, I surveyed the area. The familiar homes and cars found on Aquila Way, put

us nearly a mile from where our journey began. A better part of town, it had its own strangeness; stories about a bishop who was an obsessive and a former Guard captain who kept a hawk for a pet.

Just then, a pair of truck headlights pulled up and stopped. I heard a voice, call out. “Looks like a sewer rat just come up!” Marc Williams, a guy with no original thoughts of his own, stepped down from the driver side of the pickup. Shorter and heavier than myself, he wore a backward trucker hat with a deep sweat stain. My relief, at the prospect of help, gushed forth. But, when I saw, emerging from the passenger side of the aged F-150, those familiar dusty, steel-toed boots, my hope arrested. J.T. McElroy, hopped out onto the ground and walked toward me.

“Well, my luck has just changed, Marc. You caught the fly that flew away, earlier. Hello, Flake.” J.T. said. The street light deepened the scar as he stood over me and sneered into my face. Chew spit, flew from his mouth and onto my hands. The weight pressed down to my feet with such force, now, that I was sure I’d become just a stain on the ground.

I didn’t have time for his high-noon, showdown bullshit. Neither did Bix. Heaving the rest of my body out of the portal, I stood as tall as I could, and faced him.

“J.T., go get Sheriff Bryant. Now! Bix is at the bottom of the tunnel and

he's hurt bad. I can't get him out." I shouted the words more than anything. J.T. stood still, his breath in my face misted in the cool air, it smelled of wintergreen tobacco and alcohol. Marc broke the impasse.

"Hey, I can see him down there." Marc said. J.T.'s eyes followed Marc's and the bloodied hair of Bix stood out against the flashlight I had forgotten.

"I outta let him rot down there. The town would probably thank me." J.T. said. His eyes steadied on me, again. I couldn't hold my posture any longer and dropped to hands on knees, breathing my only focus. The buzzing in my ears, the blood rushing and the weight all coalesced at once.

"J.T., come on man, let's just get outta here." Marc pressed. I heard the words as if from a distance. I dropped to one knee.

"Marc, go get the Sheriff on the CB. You owe me, Flake." J.T. said as he brushed by me, descending the ladder. The weight rippled through my hands and passed beyond my fingers, dissipating as I lay there, trying just to get air in and out.

I didn't see Bix again, after that night. Something about a long recovery and special care he would require. Bix's dad moved with him and my brother threw away their new address. I tried and tried to track down where

they'd gone, but no one seemed to know or care.

Running into J.T., however, was a regular occurrence, but he never bothered me again. While other kids got the worst of him, when I was around anyway, he would just look my way and say, "You owe me, Flake. Don't forget it." I think he liked the idea of someone owing him something. My guess is, there never was another soul on earth who was indebted to J.T. McElroy, for anything.

He never forgot it and neither did I.