

As the Dirt Gathers

Our socks slipped quicker on a freshly mopped floor. I learned that as a kid, trying to corner on hardwood as Shawn pursued. If my sock didn't catch the corner, it meant falling and him thumping me. Spoken now, the consequences seem innocuous - fraternal beatings are just part of childhood - but back then, while I was mid-pivot, eyes wide and heart racing and rounding the dining room table, not knowing was a rush.

Often I was running because I had called him some variation of fat. Nothing creative. *Fatty. Fat-ass. Fat-so. Lard-ass.* And so on.

But Shawn's problems in elementary school weren't limited to his weight. He never had many friends, and the ones he did have were bullied as well. Shawn was smart but oddly not good at anything. So throughout elementary school, Shawn would spend hours in our attic - sometimes with his friend Marshal, but often alone - painting small, fantastical war figurines. He would then, playing god, arrange them on a battlefield. They were part of a game called WarGround. The little figures were often orcs or daemons or wolves, but some of them were human-shaped and wore thick armor. Of all the figures, Shawn focused most on these marines. While he might paint an orc a single color, he used tiny brushes to detail the marines, bringing them as close to life as possible. Shawn rarely smiled growing up, but his figures made things easier for him. They delayed life. Or better yet, they let him abstain from a life that refused to slow down. But even if Shawn could relax in the evenings, I could tell he dreaded mornings. They woke him like a patient from surgery: foggy, subdued, and already aching from reality.

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One morning I watched Shawn at school. I couldn't hear the conversation between Zak Romelo and him, but it looked one-sided, with Zak saying more. Shawn's body was slouched, and his arms hung loose at his sides. Zak pointed at my brother's shoes, as their classmates watched. At some point, all of the kids, flanking Zak and looking at Shawn, were laughing. Shawn wasn't laughing.

After school that day we stopped at a hole-in-the-wall candy shop, Blazers, to spend a few daily dollars that our mom gave us for treats. I had developed a habit of under eating at lunch, so I could save room for a Blazers pickle on the walk home. They were massive and only really possible to finish if you had skipped a meal. This routine was just fine with Shawn, because mom would give us three dollars, and a pickle was only fifty cents. Shawn could then spend the rest on sour candies or a chocolate bar. That afternoon I remember grabbing the fattest pickle I saw in the jar and approaching the cashier. I was proud of being a regular and knowing the drill. Shawn carried the money, though, and he was still sorting through his options towards the back of the store. I turned to him, as a line started to grow behind me.

"Shawn, can you give me a dollar?"

He didn't hear me.

"Shawn!"

I saw his head turn briefly, then return to what he was doing. A few more kids queued into the back of the line.

"SHAWN!" I shouted.

The cashier, Blazers' sleepy owner, looked at the next kid in line, then back at me. I excused myself from the line, embarrassed that my pickle was sitting exposed on the checkout counter.

"Hey, fat-ass," I said as I approached my brother, who was standing in front of a rack of candy bars. "Give me -"

Shawn turned and swung. Immediately my head was throbbing. My left eye felt heavy and seemed to hold itself shut.

"What was that for!" I yelled.

Shawn said nothing and returned his attention to the candy bars. Too dumbfounded to react, I could only touch my eye gingerly and hobble out of the store.

I took a longer route home so I didn't have to walk with him. I tried not to cry but had to take deep breaths to hold back tears. It was always easier not to cry when no one was around, and I spent the second half of the walk considering how I might retaliate. Sometimes it felt like life was punishing Shawn enough, but at other times, particularly after a fight, I was sure he deserved worse.

I knew Shawn had beaten me home, because his dirty old shoes were sitting inside the back door. Mom tried to work from home when she could, and her shoes sat there too.

I heard his sobs before I saw him, fetal, with her consoling arms around him.

"What are *you* crying about, dipshit?" I blurted.

Mom glared at me, Shawn still nestled into her chest, and said, "Liam, go upstairs. Now."

"But look at my eye!" I said. "He hit -"

“Go!” she begged.

When I sulked growing up, it always felt like there were twice as many stairs as usual. I remember that moment, though. By the last step I was breathing heavily and, had I not held still just then, breath muted, I would have missed the sad harmony of my family’s sobs.

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At the mall the next day, Shawn put on his new, bright red, high top Vans. The shoes had a white, horizontal squiggle that separated two patterns of red and white checkers. The laces were blinding. He strolled around the store, ignoring us. He found a bench in front of a mirror and looked at himself earnestly. I knew the look because I had done the same thing with new clothes. He was dreaming, imagining how his classmates would see him. He admired his feet from every possible angle, and then admired the broader image of himself, as if he’d been reborn. I recognized hope. No doubt Shawn could have spent the entire day in the store, him striding from mirror to mirror and us keeping ourselves occupied.

“Mom, can I get a pair, too?” I asked, tugging on her sleeve.

“You just got new shoes,” she said.

“Yeah, but I only wear those for basketball.”

“Didn’t you just get other shoes? Everyday shoes?”

“Yeah, but it was a while ago.”

“Not today. Maybe next time,” she said, returning her attention to my brother.

Shawn looked at me triumphantly, but said, “It’s okay, Liam, I’ll come with when you get to pick yours out.”

My friends didn't wear Vans, so I conceded and wandered over to the sock section, ready to leave.

As we crossed the parking lot, I dragged behind mom and Shawn. Shawn walked proudly, weaving to avoid puddles. His baggy cargo shorts stopped just below his knees. The back of his calves were pale and hairless and without definition. His legs looked stuffed into his new shoes.

"You can have shotgun, Liam," he said.

That was new. "Thanks," I muttered.

Other than soft humming, Shawn was quiet during the ride home. That was to be expected; he was enmeshed in his newness. What I didn't expect was my mom's elation. She looked overwhelmed with joy. Several times on the ride home, I noticed her glance at Shawn in the rear view mirror, then smile. She didn't acknowledge me once. And for the first time I was cognizant of parenthood rather than childhood. Without saying a word, she had offered a tip, one that took me years to accept: that parenting was constant triage, a moment by moment prioritization of the child most in need, even - and rightfully so - at the expense of equality, principles, or ideals.

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"Let's go, Liam!" Shawn yelled the next day, already dressed. I'd woken up late and was shuffling around shirtless and bleary-eyed.

Shawn and I walked to school, his Vans shining in the sunlight. He was wearing his cargo shorts again but had on his favorite polo shirt, the one that he didn't have to tug at all day.

“Why are your laces wrapped around your ankles?” I asked him.

“Cause they’re too long, and this is what you do with them.”

“*Who* does that with them?”

“Everybody.”

“Nobody does that.”

“Just hurry up, or I’m gonna’ leave you.”

“Why are you rushing?” I nagged. “And why’d you wake up so early?”

“I don’t know, I was just up.”

“Why are you rushing?” I asked again.

“Because I want to get there on time.”

“*You* want to get to *school* on time...? I thought you hated school.”

Shawn said nothing but held his pace.

“It’s ‘cause you want to see Zak and all them,” I said more softly.

Shawn ignored me and looked down again, confirming that his Vans hadn’t been scuffed.

We got to school early. I slumped on a bench and squinted out over the school’s dirt soccer field. Shawn headed for Zak and other classmates, who were huddled in the farthest corner of the field. Crossing the field, he took careful steps, trying not to upset the dirt. His gait had always been exceptionally lateral; there was never much forward momentum. His hips, under pressure from his heavy frame, see-sawed from side to side.

As Shawn approached the group, one of the boys noticed, and pointed at him, alerting the others. Shawn’s hands, which were holding the straps of his backpack, shot out

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to his sides as he addressed the group. His waddle quickened, like he was at the pool, wanting to run but not allowed.

Zak noticed him. Shawn pointed to his own Vans, and then to Zak's. Shawn offered some sort of handshake to Zak, who ignored it. Instead, Zak kneeled down and touched Shawn's right shoe. I remember trying to block the sun with my hand. Shawn was again clutching the straps of his backpack. He looked down at Zak, who very slowly reached to the side, grabbed a handful of dirt, and dropped it onto Shawn's toe. He looked up at Shawn and in a circular motion rubbed the dirt into the bright red canvas of Shawn's shoe. Zak rose, and as the group was laughing, one of the other boys pushed Shawn, who stumbled backwards. The boy then kicked a cloud of dirt at him. Zak faced the other boys and stuck his hand out, mocking Shawn's gesture to him, and everyone but Shawn laughed.

I briefly felt my brother's confusion, not understanding what seemed so obvious to the other boys. Shawn's hands didn't leave his backpack, but his head dropped and his body wilted like a thirsty flower.

Staggering back across the soccer field, he didn't lift his head. On a gust of shame, he approached me. Even with his head down, I could tell he was crying.

"What happened?" I asked.

He faced me in the most innocent way. "Here," he mumbled.

I followed his hand towards his pocket. I noticed the fresh dirt on his shins and the patch of dirt that Zak had rubbed into his right shoe. The dirt looked so unnatural on the bright red canvas. Shawn withdrew his hand from his pocket and held it out.

"What did they say?" I asked.

“Take it,” he said, trying to halt his tears.

I put my hand under his, and he dropped three dollars into my palm.

I watched him walk away from the school towards home. Occasionally, he reached towards his eyes, wiped, and returned his hands to his straps.

I didn’t make it to school that day, either.

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At the hobby shop - after I had browsed through the basketball cards - I went to find the WarGround section.

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When I got home, I heard my brother’s sniffles. Wanting to hear the conversation before joining it, I took off my shoes and slid slowly towards their voices. Shawn had left a spoor of dry, jagged little dirt clumps that crumbled under my socks, making it harder to slide.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t home, baby,” mom was saying. Shawn must have just been sitting and sobbing, alone and waiting for mom. “What’s wrong? Why aren’t you at school?” she asked him.

“They said I got the wrong ones,” I heard him choke. He was trying to be tough, trying not to cry.

“What do you *mean* the wrong ones?” mom pleaded.

“They weren’t supposed to have checkers...” His confusion was devastating.

There was a pause, and I felt my mom’s helplessness.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” she whispered to him. “I’m so sorry.” She was crying as well, but more tenderly and distant, as if she was forced to watch all of this through a screen. How could she have known? How does any parent really know what the world is doing to their children?

I turned the corner and came into view. Shawn was curled against our mom’s torso. His red, checkered Vans, laces wrapped around his ankles, hung off the couch.

“Liam, what are you doing home?” mom asked, trying to take it in.

I didn’t answer but walked up to them.

“Here,” I said to Shawn.

Slowly, he withdrew his soggy, imprinted face from our mom’s chest, and I held out the only WarGround piece I could find for three dollars: a small shield that would slide into the hand of one of his fake, treasured marines.

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What I now realize is that he didn’t really need the shield. Shawn was the most courageous person I knew. Yesterday at the wake, another Marine - his First Sergeant - told me he’d never seen anyone act like Shawn on the battlefield. He said that no one was calmer than Shawn, no one more at peace amid such chaos. I can’t help but think that those evenings in our attic, playing WarGround alone, contributed to the man he was. Shawn and I never really talked about those brutal days in grade school, but the night before he left for his last tour, we recounted the cat and mouse chases on our hardwood floors. *You were faster*, he admitted, *but if your sock didn’t catch...* he shook his head, laughed heartily, and said, *that was it*. He was beaming. He was full of love.

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So today, as the dirt gathers on him, I want everyone to remember: it wasn't always easy, but Shawn enjoyed his life. He was a hero. He was my hero, anyway.