

The Dweeb

The Dweeb couldn't do anything right. I swear, if you gave this kid a Lego set with two pieces he'd find a way to muck it up. Here he was, holding up his model rocket that he somehow put together with a right angle in the middle of it.

"Nice try," I said to him. "But look at all the other kids' rockets. Does yours look like that?"

He scanned around the open field that was full of kids who had had no problem assembling their rockets. Realizing that his looked nothing like the others, he turned back to me, held it up again, and flattened out his mouth into a straight line. This was his signature gesture, his way of asking for help without using words. *This is all too much for me to handle*, he conveyed by contorting his mouth. If he had said something along these lines—or anything at all really—he would've been less of a dweeb. But he just stood there, without speaking.

His mother had suggested we find some activity we could do together. She had looked up some local group affiliated with the Boy Scouts where they build and launch model rockets. She had cut out an advertisement for the group from the local paper and put it at my place on the kitchen table. "How about this? This sounds like fun. You two could have some quality time together doing this," she said to me.

The ad had a picture of a moon and a father and a son riding a rocket like a horse as they flew upward. The expressions on their faces were ones of delirious happiness. The group was called *Space Explorers!* I suspected its true function had less to do with cultivating a passion for the cosmos than with operating a covert support group for star-crossed fathers who had dweebs for sons.

I had wanted him to try another sport. Baseball had not gone well. He never seemed to get it into his head that there was any sort of competition going on. The coach stuck him in the outfield, of course. These kids could never hit a ball past the pitcher's mound, so the outfielders were simply participating in an endurance contest to see how long they could stand upright. To be honest, I was somewhat relieved that he was put back there. I don't know if I could've watched had he been assigned to the infield. It's not that I expected him to be an all-star, but having played baseball in college, I expected him to at least be above average. Isn't that some fundamental law of genetics? The transfer of genes through generations? I suppose I eventually would've learned to accept average. But he wasn't average. I had to come down from the bleachers and yell at him from the sidelines whenever the inning changed to remind him to go to the dugout. I then had to endure the walk of shame back to the bleachers with the other parents looking on.

After his first game, when we were driving home, I said, "Pretty fun, right?" I don't know what I was expecting as a response. I guess I had to say something, and I knew I couldn't rely on him to say anything. He just nodded.

The last game before we took him off the team, he actually swung at a ball. I couldn't believe it. Every time he had gone up to bat he had let pitch after pitch sail by. The other team recognized him as a not-able-to-swing-even-if-his-life-depended-on-it kind of player and lofted pitches over the plate that appeared to just hover there, begging to be hit. I screamed my lungs out in the stands, yelling at him—"Swing!"—as all the other parents sat there in silence, not knowing what to make of him. I would've given anything to go up to bat and hit one of those pitches to prove to the other parents that there was no relation between him and me when it came to baseball. To make matters worse, whenever one of his teammates got a base hit, the entire

team would clap or give each other high fives—except for him, who remained seated on the bench, looking straight up at the sky.

The time he did swing though, everyone in the crowd cheered, even the parents from the opposing team who must've had the intuition that they were witnessing something extraordinary. I leapt up, not believing what I had just seen. He had connected with the ball too. Not much of a connection, but relatively speaking, he might as well have knocked it out of the park. The ball just sort of fell off his bat and took a few bounces and stopped a foot in front of him. He stood there, frozen. The crowd—again, the parents from the opposing team joined in as well—yelled at him, “Run!” But he just stood there. He tilted his head downward, and when it became clear what he was about to do, everyone went silent.

He knelt down and stared at the ball, inspecting it. Only other dweebs would know the reason why he did this. The other team had no idea how to react at first. It actually would've been a halfway decent sacrifice bunt if we had anyone on base, but without that, it was one of the more bizarre spectacles recorded in the annals of the San Fernando Valley little league. After a few moments of watching all this unfold, the catcher strolled over to the ball, picked it up as though he had all the time in the world (which he did) and tagged him out.

On the drive home, I asked him what had happened, why he had stopped and knelt like that.

“To see what I did,” spoke the Dweeb.

“Oh,” I said—my usual filler of a response whenever he muttered some nonsense. He talked infrequently enough that it always came as a shock to hear his voice. When he did talk, it was in these terse, elusive fragments that meant nothing. The more I thought about what he said, the more strength it took to refrain from finding a cliff and driving off it.

He didn't offer any additional explanation of why he turned the game of baseball into a piece of performance art. He just sat there and pulled down the bill of his baseball cap, shielding his eyes from me. If somebody had asked me what fatherhood would be like before he had been born, I would've described an idyllic scene of a father and son playing catch. It never would've occurred to me that the reality was going to entail driving home with a kid trying to hide under his hat.

Back at home, my wife and I were in the kitchen, discussing what we should do. I sat at the table, my head in my hands, she leaning against the cabinets. We agreed we couldn't make him play again. Not after that. She was initially open to the possibility of him trying another sport.

"How about basketball?" she suggested to me.

I lifted my head and peered down the hallway. He was in his room with the door closed, out of earshot. "Are you kidding? The kid's a runt. No, we need a sport where he would at least have a fighting chance."

"Soccer?"

"Nah, too global."

"Track?"

"Have you ever seen him run once? We need to think creatively here."

I mulled it over for a bit. An image of him wearing those ridiculous looking goggles that people wear when they play squash popped into my mind. The fashion choices of the sport suggested to me that squash players would be accepting of those who don't fit in elsewhere. I explained my idea.

"Squash? Isn't that an old-man's sport?" my wife asked.

“Doesn’t he kind of remind you of an old man? An old man trapped in an underdeveloped child’s body?”

“No. Is that how you think of him?”

“Not exactly.”

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I spent weeks searching for a squash youth league. I phoned up all the community centers within a 50-mile radius but nothing.

“You mean a squash league for children?” a woman said back to me over the phone, making sure she had heard me correctly.

“That’s exactly what I mean,” I confirmed.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” she said.

This was more or less how all the conversations went. I considered taking it upon myself to form a league but that came mostly out of spite toward these people who hadn’t taken my inquiry seriously. If they had known the full story of why I was calling, they would’ve been more understanding. Around this time was when my wife came across the ad for *Space Explorers!* As I sat at the kitchen table and looked at it, I pictured him trying to ride a rocket. His glasses would fly off, his overgrown blond hair would be blown back, his cheeks that still had baby fat in them would be smushed, exposing the lime-green braces that lined his teeth.

Why had we put braces on him already? Wasn’t he still on his baby teeth? Had he somehow outwitted them into putting braces on him prematurely to intensify his status as a dweeb, knowing full well that he’ll just have to have braces again when his adult teeth come in? I had no recollection of ever discussing the possibility of braces. He just appeared with them on his teeth one day. And why had he chosen lime-green for his braces? Out all the possible colors.

While I dwelled on this, my wife stood next to me and put her hand on my shoulder. She must've sensed my inner turmoil. Then again, maybe she didn't, because she pressed on with her idea, explaining to me that *Space Explorers!* would be a good father-and-son activity.

Looking back at the ad with those ecstatic expressions of the father and son on the rocket, I wondered if she had any clue about the type of people who'd be in this group. I took a deep breath in before speaking. "Don't you think this is exactly the type of thing we should be avoiding with him?"

"What do you mean?"

"This will make things worse—not better."

She stared in a way that forced me to explain myself. I had always thought we had an unspoken agreement in regard to our kid, one that was best left unsaid. I glanced down the hallway. As usual he had his door closed and was in his room alone. I stood up and turned toward her, holding the ad for *Space Explorers!* as I thought about whether it was possible to express what I wanted to without saying it directly.

"Aren't you worried about what he is becoming? It's beginning to seem like this isn't just a phase. Don't you see that he might actually be turning into..." I trailed off, recognizing that I was on the verge of saying it. I averted my eyes because I couldn't bear to look at her. "Doesn't he kind of remind you of the kid in school that other kids made fun of? You know, sort of like a dweeb?"

The surprise of hearing the odd combination of sounds that make up that word leave my lips made me wonder if some threshold had just been crossed from which we could never return.

My wife folded her arms in front of her and said, “What does that word even mean?” She appeared irritated and disappointed with me, but my utterance did not unsettle her as I had feared.

I looked at her, knitting my brow. “You know what it means,” I said.

“Not being good at sports is not some judgment on him as a person, as you seem to think it is. I’m more worried about you than about him,” she said, taking a step forward and backing me into a chair that I sat down on. She continued: “Anyone who thinks of their own child as a *dweeb*—I can’t believe you even said that—has something seriously wrong with them.”

I just stared up at her, feeling betrayed for having opened up and for her not honoring what I thought was our secret pact, our shared sense of disappointment in him. She had even emphasized the word, which had only made me come off that much more ridiculous. But as I sat there and thought about what she said, it became clear to me that her frustration must’ve originated from her own insecurities about how her son had turned out.

“He just needs to break out of his shell,” she said. “He’ll make some more friends as soon as he does.” As she walked out of the room, down the hallway, she turned back and said, “Plus, you’re not exactly the social butterfly you used to be. Maybe you’ll actually make a friend or two yourself in this group.” She then went into the bedroom and closed the door.

In the end, she won the argument. I knew I had let my guard down by referring to him as a *dweeb*. All she had to do was play it safe and go on the defensive at that point to bring home the win. She had done more than that though, executing a brilliant play when she feigned not knowing what the word meant. That was game over for me. How is someone supposed to explain the characteristics of a *dweeb*? Everyone knows one when they see one. So then I looked like a

monster by stating the obvious, even though she admitted that he's bad at sports and doesn't have friends. Those are the first warning signs that somebody has a dweeb on their hands.

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I drove him to the next meeting of *Space Explorers!* We met in an open field where all the grass had turned brown from the drought. The area was flat for miles all around, making the dome of the sky more prominent as the landscape appeared to recede. Even the mountains circling in the distance looked diminished by the horizon. The plan was to assemble the model rockets and then all launch them at the same time. One look at the dozen or so fathers who were gathered in the field with their sons, and I knew this was going to be a regrettable experience for me and probably even for him. *Behold, these will be your people, this is who you are fated to become*, I imagined speaking this to him as though I were a fortune-teller reading some foreboding prophecy. The fathers dressed all the same: cargo shorts with tucked-in polo shirts and socks that went at least halfway up their shins. One of them, who I assumed was the group leader, had a space helmet on. I pointed him out.

“You see that guy? Pretend this is a game like baseball—no, like squash, and you win if you can avoid talking to that guy.”

He grabbed the box containing his rocket that we had picked up on the drive over. We walked toward the group, to the opposite end from where the man with the space helmet was standing. It was no use though. We had been spotted. The man opened the visor on his helmet as we made our way over to the group. I thought at first that he waved at us, but he actually saluted as he walked up.

“Greetings earthlings,” he said.

Jesus Christ, I thought.

“I am captain Chuck and this is my space cadet Scottie,” he said in a Martian voice and motioned to his kid who smiled and saluted.

I wanted to explain to him that it didn’t make sense to speak in a Martian voice while wearing the helmet of an astronaut. Luckily, I stopped myself from entering into more of a conversation than I had to.

“Hi. I’m Shawn. This is—” I paused. My wife and I had decided it would be best if we stopped speaking for him in order to try to get him to speak on his own more. When he didn’t say anything, Chuck squatted down so that he was face to face with him. I felt helpless as I watched. An urge rose up within me to pick him up and run back to the car and drive off, leaving Chuck still crouching down. There was still a chance to save him from this.

“I see we have a brave space explorer here. What is your name?”

He stared straight into Chuck’s eyes.

“Sorry, he’s a little shy,” I said, trying to get Chuck to back off.

“Ah, well there’s nothing like a rocket launch to get earthlings to open up and become friends,” he said, standing back upright. “We can save the introductions for after. Lift off is in T-30 minutes. Great to have you both on board!”

He made a sound with his mouth that was supposed to imitate a rocket blasting off. He and his son then mimed steering what they must’ve thought of as a spaceship as they turned around and went back to their spot. *Jesus Fucking Christ*, I thought.

I heard a voice behind me say, “I win.” I turned around and looked down. It was the Dweeb.

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We had opened the box and set to work on building the rocket when I noticed the dad next to me wearing a hat of the local high school baseball team. I tried making eye contact with him in the hopes of striking up a conversation. When he kept looking away, I nodded at him several times until he finally acknowledged me. His name was Ryan, and it turned out that his older son played for the team. I couldn't help but feel a little jealous of him.

“Does your younger son play baseball too?” I asked.

“Of course. I coach his little league team. How about your son?”

I looked over at him. He was using one of the rocket casings as a telescope, peering at me. “He's played a little.”

Ryan and I then dove into the nitty-gritty of debates surrounding the sport. He had to pause every so often to help his son with the rocket, but we still managed to cover many of the pivotal topics: the frequent use of replay, the pressure to speed the game up, the difficulties of attracting a younger audience, the ever-increasing agility and strength of the players. When we got to batting averages, the conversation really went to the next level. I couldn't believe my luck. I didn't think any of these guys would be able to talk baseball.

That's when I felt a tug on my pant leg.

“Not now, Dwee—” I wasn't thinking but caught myself in time. “I mean, what is it?” I saw that he had put together his rocket at a right angle.

Turning back to Ryan, I said, “Excuse me for a moment.” I rolled my eyes while smiling to indicate that I'd be back to talk more baseball as soon as I could.

I took the pieces of the rocket apart to start over. It only took me a minute or two to put it together. “There. Straight as an arrow,” I said.

Chuck circled through the crowd and announced: “T-15 minutes until lift off.”

I picked up one of the engine cartridges that came with the rocket. The label read *D12-5 single-stage engine*, and in large print around the circumference, an imperative: *Shoot for the Moon!* It didn't appear all that different from a shotgun cartridge. I looked down at him. "I better do this part too."

The engine didn't specify which end was which, but both ends appeared more or less the same. I put it into the rocket, attached the igniter plug, and placed it on the launch pad. "All set," I said.

I checked to see if he had registered any of what I had just done. He looked at the rocket, then up at me, then back at the rocket, then at up me again. He stretched his mouth out, but it wasn't in his usual expression. This time he dropped his lower lip revealing those lime-green wires across his teeth, and lowered his eyelids halfway down. I didn't understand what he was doing, but it occurred to me that he might be happy.

"Are you smiling?"

Stretching his mouth out even more, he nodded.

"Oh, well..." I said, unsure what to say to. "Very good."

He shook my pant leg out of excitement.

This was the only time I'd get to talk about baseball, so I bent down and said, "Listen, I'm going to go back over to Ryan. Try to make some friends, okay?"

He just looked at the rocket.

Ryan and I picked up right where we left off without missing a beat. It had been so long since conversation felt this effortless. His knowledge of batting averages was particularly impressive. I wondered if he spent his evenings in an armchair with his eyes closed, constructing memory palaces of these numbers for all the major hitters. I made a mental note to try this out for

myself. The incredible thing was that he didn't just know about players in the major leagues. He spoke about all these upcoming players and how their unique talents will change how the game is played. It was as though he were a baseball prophet, granting me a glimpse into one his visions. As for the history of baseball, all I'll say is that he's lost track of how many times he's watched Ken Burns's nine-part miniseries on the sport.

"We should really hang out sometime," I said, louder than I had intended.

"Sure, here's my card," he said, handing it to me. "Most weekends I'm at the fields."

The self-assurance he had in not specifying which fields and in trusting that I knew the ones he meant already made me feel like I was one of his confidantes. I had no idea which fields he was referring to, but I didn't dare ask. I happened to spot the Dweeb out of the corner of my eye. He hadn't moved the whole time. He was sitting there, still staring at the rocket.

Chuck walked over to me. He lifted the visor of the space helmet and said, "T-3 minutes to lift off. Better get to your station first lieutenant Shawn. Your first cadet will need your assistance."

I headed over but turned back to Ryan and held up his card to indicate to him that he wouldn't have to wait long before I got in touch with him. I even started thinking that I could give him a ring as soon as I got home this evening. "See you at the fields," I called out to him. He gave me a knowing nod.

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"T-30, T-29, T-28..."

At one minute to go, everyone had begun counting down.

"You know what to do? Just push that button when everyone yells *lift off*," I told him.

"T-20, T-19, T-18..."

I had never seen him so concentrated. He looked at the rocket with such intensity that it appeared that his life depended on it.

“10, 9, 8...”

Chuck began waving his hands in the air the way a baseball player does to get the crowd riled up.

“Get ready,” I said.

“3, 2, 1!”

“We have lift off,” Chuck yelled out in a higher than expected pitch that made me wonder if his voice had cracked. He lowered his helmet’s visor and looked straight up.

The ignition sounds—a brief whistle followed by a whoosh—had started going off around the 3-second mark, either from over-eager fingers or from kids wanting to claim that they were the first to launch. He held firm though, following the countdown to a *T*.

For some fatuous father-and-son group, I had to admit that watching all the rockets lift off was surprisingly affecting. I had expected inane shouts of *Wow!* and *Gee-wiz!* Instead everyone looked up at the sky of rockets in silence and awe. He appeared especially captivated by the sight—his eyes wide open and full of wonder. The rockets kept ascending. Having never launched model rockets, I had no idea they could reach such heights. I shielded the late afternoon sun to track our rocket as it pressed on upward.

Our rocket, behind the rest of the pack, looked like it was speeding up and that it might even close the distance. Yet what appeared at first as a burst of acceleration was actually the beginning of the rocket’s disintegration. It fell to pieces mid-flight. The largest section, the front end, flew off over the edge of the grass field into a wide area with overgrown brush. I looked

down into the box that the rocket came in. There was the parachute that I had forgotten to attach that at least would've saved that one piece.

"Watch for falling debris," said Chuck in a matter-of-fact tone, suggesting that this was a routine event for him.

My kid was shaking. Whatever was going on inside him threatened to overwhelm him. He didn't so much as blink as bits of plastic rained down on us. He kept his eyes open and head tilted up. The other rockets had deployed their parachutes and were gliding back down to earth. The other kids were running, trying to stay under their rockets to catch them. Chuck didn't have to move at all. He reached out his arm as his rocket floated into his open hand.

When I turned back, he had already taken off running toward where the piece of rocket had been flung. I tried to catch up to him, but he was too quick. I reached the brush and followed his lead, helping him search through it. Whenever I moved my arms to hold the dried-out weeds out of the way to look for whatever remained of the rocket, the shoots of other wild plants rushed in to take their place and obscure my vision. As I stepped forward into the brush, it pushed back with a force that prevented me from making much headway into it. Stalks and leaves of nettles lashed at my legs as I struggled by them.

My son was a ways off now, having charged past the endless series of thickets. I could still hear him though, and I could tell from the sounds of his brisk movements through the brush that he continued to search frantically. I couldn't get a clear view of anything as I looked for the piece. The undergrowth was too thick. It could be right in front of me, and it would've been impossible to spot. After a while of attempting to search, I lifted my head up and scanned around to see how little ground we had covered and how much there was remaining. We'd never find it.

I went back out to the clearing. Most of the fathers and sons had packed up their rockets and had made their way back to their cars. Ryan was nowhere to be seen. Chuck walked over to me, still wearing his space helmet, and we stood there together in the clearing in silence.

The first signs of evening were already visible in the sky. The angle of light had lowered. The ends of the brush were aglow. I couldn't see exactly where he was. The stalks came up above my shoulders. But then I saw some of them swaying from side to side, far back from where he had first gone in.

“Anthony, Anthony!” I cried out.

He didn't respond. The movement in the brush advanced until it was straight ahead from where Chuck and I were standing. The sun must've hit the lenses of his glasses at some incident angle as a flare shot out. Two thickets parted, and I saw Anthony, looking wild, primal even, less like my son than some feral animal we had stumbled upon by mistake. I felt like I was on a safari in some distant land, with Chuck as my guide. I shouted again, but he made no sign that he heard or saw me. A wave of terror came over me at how changed he appeared. I recoiled from the sight of him. His mouth was open, and the light reflected off his braces, turning them red, making his teeth appear like blood was dripping off them. His hair almost hid his brown eyes that blazed auburn in the light and that darted left and right as they searched. A couple of more steps toward us, and he would've emerged out into the clearing. He turned, instead, back into the brush and, with the thickets closing behind him, disappeared from view.