

## Graduation

Michael now stood alone in the rear aisle, with Brandon's footsteps getting fainter, and listening closely, he heard sounds from multiple shoppers browsing for their week's food supply. These noises made the boy certain at least a half dozen feet separated him from them, and amidst the sounds of rustling corn chips and plastic bags full of produce, an anxiety rose inside the boy, unsure whether he should feel all eyes on him or none.

Up front, the burnout cashier held Brandon's card in hand while his eyes jumped from boy to photo until satisfied. The employee then turned around to unlock the cigarette display. Observing this from down the aisle, Michael snapped out of his stare and hustled for the side wall. Now before rows of chilled beers, he eased open a glass door to relieve two bottles from their place on the shelf and give them refuge inside an unzipped jacket.

Even muffled, the tap of glass made his heart skip and every step towards the door, he firmed his grip from within his coat pockets. He passed the calm, collected Brandon, sliding his money across the counter in exchange for the requested carton, and hoped in this moment to appear braver than he felt.

"Your friend looks ill," Jeremy said from the street. On the curb sat Michael and Brandon, two bottles of beer sitting between them.

"Nobody's talking to you," Brandon said, and rose to his full height. A cloud of smoke came from his mouth and Jeremy waved it away.

"Glad to see your apprentice is coming along," Jeremy said so Michael could hear. It echoed in the alleyway. A muffled groan leaked from behind the seated boy's hands cradling his head.

“He’s made of tough stuff,” Brandon asserted, and returning to Michael’s side, squatted to clap a hand on his shoulder. “It was his first drink, and he did it man size.” At the remark, Michael obliged with another sip.

“Is his initiation complete then, Brandon?” Jeremy said. A frown came on Brandon’s face when he looked at the other on his bike.

“He’s not like you, won’t turn sissy,” Brandon spat.

Another moment where no one spoke, but Jeremy rolled closer and Brandon moved as if to spring up.

“Get lost, Jeremy,” Michael said amidst the physical exchange. He hadn’t looked up from the pavement, but sat hunched, and after Brandon resumed his place beside him, Jeremy pedaled away.

“What was that about?” Michael asked when Jeremy left.

“Just being his sissy self,” Brandon responded.

When offered a cigarette, Michael took one to light and inhaled, struggling against the cough, but the tickle in his chest soon subsided and he cleared his throat.

“So how long’s it been?” Michael asked.

“Since what?”

“Since what made you like this.”

“Like what?”

After another intake with eyes watered and chest enflamed, Michael tried again.

“It just seems like Jeremy don’t like you. What’s his problem?”

“Problem’s he’s a sissy.”

“How come he doesn’t like us hanging out?” Michael asked.

A low grunt emitted from Brandon's throat.

"Is it because you were pals once?" Michael offered.

"Don't you go sissy on me," Brandon shoved the younger boy's head and Michael swatted it.

"No way to treat your friends," Michael said and stood up.

"You're not my friend, stupid." Brandon then stood.

"Even when you make me do the stealing?" Michael said.

"That's to make sure you a man," said Brandon going for another shove. Michael's defensive swat this time raked Brandon's face and in a fury the latter started swinging. Elbows tucked and head lowered, Michael winced at each strike until a final push made him fall. In the next moments where he rose and massaged his skinned elbow, nothing sounded but hoarse breathing from Brandon. Michael left without a word.

Jeremy never went so slow as today, but when he came close to the shop and chained his bike, the familiar thrill of bookshop smell raised his spirits. The sunlit corner, holding his red plush seat glowed in the dust filled air. Towering shelves invited a browse through used books, and taking a poet anthology, he settled into the chair to run his eyes over the page. At times he would even put a finger on them, as if to feel the words themselves.

"Catching up on those northeast writers?" Walker, the owner said. Since childhood, the boy frequented this place, on good days, bad days, and every sort of occasion that brings that desire into a youngster to massage his soul. It happened in small amounts, but Walker found it could solve whatever plagued him in time. A boy in such a state, Walker felt, must go undisturbed.

Term papers piled before Jeremy with herds of students filing between the tables, exiting the tutoring lounge in a bustle. He straightened the loose leaf sheets to stow and though throughout the room's shuffling he heard a murmur of voices from the front, his own name being sounded was what grabbed him, raising his eyes to see Michael following a pointed finger in his direction.

"I have an English paper, and I won't pass unless it's good," Michael said. "They told me you were the only tutor with space."

"I am." Jeremy didn't look up at Michael.

"So can I sign your roster?" Michael said.

They entered the hallway and the faculty member shut the door behind them, taking her leave. The surroundings lay empty and barren.

"I thought you were too cool for school, Brandon Junior," Jeremy remarked.

Michael's face winced. "If you don't want to, just say so," he said, and looked down. "But you don't know as much as you think."

"Then tell me, what makes him such a hero to you?" Jeremy's arms folded.

"None of your business. Same as me asking why he's such a villain to you."

"He's going to wonder where you are when you stop meeting him," Jeremy said.

"I'll handle that. Just help me with my homework." Michael's tone rose by the end. After Jeremy gazed elsewhere a moment, turning back to the younger boy's stern look, he spoke:

"It's your responsibility to keep up."

Red sky turning dark blue ran between the clouds. It grew later in the day and Michael still walked home. Over the last hill he saw them smoking, scattered along the park bench in twilight. When from the hill they saw his silhouette, they rose and Michael pretended to take no notice, but when he livened his pace it signaled anxiety. He broke into a run, and the herd of boys trailing him did the same. In the final stretch to his house, Michael saw Brandon on the front porch, lit by the lamp. He rose, counting the pursuers, then walked across the lawn as Michael sped past. The gang slowed before this daunting figure in the light of the dusk, and after a hesitation, two made a move. With ferocity and accuracy, Brandon leveled them in seconds. The remaining three lunged inward after their fallen comrades, only until the glimmer of a blade from their adversary's pocket reflected in the light of a street lamp. Hands raised and they turned tail, leaving their friends to pick themselves up and trail after. A deep exhale, and after placing his knife out of sight once more, Brandon returned to the porch where Michael had stood watching.

"Told you to come home earlier," he said.

"I missed my bus," Michael said, fingering his keys in the darkness.

"What were you doing?" Brandon said.

"Got caught up with some friends is all," Michael returned. When the door was opened, he went inside and muttered a hasty "thanks" to Brandon as it closed, leaving him in the porch light.

One last student took leave, and the faculty woman closed the door for the day. Michael stood in the empty hallway with Jeremy, their first weeks of study showing a spark in the sophomore pupil that seemed long starved. But never one to pry, Jeremy had not

tried questioning Michael's reasons for attaching himself to a dropout like Brandon. However, questions about the older boys' former friendship never failed in springing out of the younger Michael.

"Why'd you start hating him?" he spurted one afternoon. They had left the grounds and trekked along the sidewalk. "Didn't he look out for you?" Michael watched that face. It revealed nothing he could decipher.

"He looks out for himself now," Jeremy said.

"Not true," Michael asserted.

"Lay down with dogs, and you get fleas, Michael," were Jeremy's next words.

"Better a dog that has your back!"

"Just wait," Jeremy started. "When a person shows their true colors, it's often at the worst possible time." Crossing an intersection, Jeremy entered the bookshop. Michael took a moment outside to read the sign before entering after.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Michael said after catching up to Jeremy among the aisles of literature. "Ever heard of the Fifth Street Squad?"

Jeremy glanced up from his book, not closing the cover, but inspecting any potential listeners nearby. Walker had been thumbing through a magazine and took no notice of the young boy's raised voice.

"Not smart to yell a gang name in public," Jeremy said, returning Michael's stern look.

"I used to never show my face in that neighborhood. And if they caught me with books..." Michael's voice threatened to tremble. "But Brandon started walking with me, and they don't try with him."

“So now he owns you, is that the deal?” Jeremy said. Not a word from Michael, nor a straight look in the eye.

“You read your books, and no one bothers you,” the young one said to the floor between them. “I seen people talk to you, I seen people look at you, they looking like, ‘he’s going to be somebody’, so they leave you alone. You don’t know how it is to be just another hard case, nobody thinking nothing of you.”

Examining the younger boy, waiting for his head to rise and give him a glare, Jeremy saw his hesitation and chose a phrase to respond with.

“Running the streets with Brandon won’t fix that.”

“But if it keeps me alive in the meantime,” said Michael and passed Jeremy for the door. It swung shut and the store stood silent.

Once Brandon put out his cigarette beneath the sole of his shoe, Michael did the same around the red brick corner. He witnessed the old man walking past the stoop Brandon inhabited and made ready to approach. After a breath and cracking of knuckles, he began down the sidewalk towards the corner. Once before him, the old man halted.

“Got a dollar for the bus?” Michael asked. Watching him pat his pockets, Michael swallowed and the man fingered out a black leather wallet, revealing only a twenty.

“Sorry young man,” he said and folded the wallet closed. His attempted step forward stopped short under Brandon’s grip on his shoulder.

“Then we’ll take whatever you got,” he said from behind. His eyes never leaving the old man’s, Michael saw them wince at Brandon’s blade against his back. Even when reaching into his pocket and raising his wallet for Brandon to take, the glare maintained,

unblinking. Brandon plucked out the twenty, ditching the wallet and scooting past. He tapped the entranced Michael on the shoulder.

“Mothers must be proud,” said the old man watching them dart away. Only after they had disappeared around the corner did Michael breathe again.

“Geezer didn’t have much on him, did he?” Brandon held the bill between his fingers and stuffed it into a pocket. “We could have gotten more if you came earlier. Where you been?”

Over by the pond, Michael plucked rocks from the shore. He skipped a flat stone across the water. Silver moonlight broke into ripples.

“Hanging with friends,” he answered, not noticing Brandon’s look from behind.

“Who?” Brandon barked.

“Friends,” Michael said again. Underneath the lamplight, he stooped to collect more rocks.

“Having study parties with professor Jeremy?” Brandon said. A slight sucking noise left Michael’s mouth and he shook his head, fumbling with the rocks in his hand.

“Going sissy like him gets you killed, Michael,” Brandon said and watched his young friend turn away to hurl more stones outward.

“What makes him a sissy?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” Brandon said.

“I mean, he isn’t tough, like you, but...why’s he hate you so much?”



Brandon raised a leg from the dirt to rest along the seat of the bench he lounged on. Just out of the lamplight, only a slight reflected orange glow gave his face away. "You don't hang with him, why do you care?" he said with narrow eyes.

"Just so I know how to not be like him. How's that?" he said, back still turned. Both boys watched the arc of the next pebble he chucked.

"I'll tell you then," Brandon said and fished out a cigarette. "When you get a girl tripping all over herself for you, don't blow your nose and walk away. Any man does that, got to be a sissy."

"So it's a girl you guys are fighting over." Michael said at the shore, silver light shining on his curly hair.

"Who says we're fighting *over* somebody? I just don't go for no sissies!" In the following silence, Brandon saw Michael unmoving and grew anxious. He got up. "You been talking to Jeremy?"

A quick step sideways and Michael faced the approaching older boy, his outline vivid against the back lighting of the street lamp.

"No way. I don't go for no sissies either, Brandon!" Michael began to back pedal when the other didn't slow down, hugging the edge of the pond.

"That fool can't protect you, only I can. Remember that," Brandon said with smoke filled breath. Backing into the light of the lamp, they both quit moving and Michael kept his hands raised in front of himself. "You want to go back to before? Them 5<sup>th</sup> street dopes all on you?" A harsh, abrupt shove punctuated the last word.

Michael nearly toppled from the whiplash and raising his eyes, a high squawk released from his throat and he charged, head first into Brandon's gut. The two plummeted

to the dirt. Dust rose under the light while limbs thrashed, Michael's fists rapidly swinging. A second more and he was overturned, now shielding his face from the retaliating blows of Brandon, raining down with authority. Rising off his trembling victim, Brandon eyed the ground for his dropped cigarette and when he found it, kicked it into Michael's face with accompanying dust. Face down, a red drip fell from Michael's nose and he sniffed, placing a finger in the cast shadow of his head. He stood up, wiping the residue on his jeans, then walked, leaving Brandon alone in the light.

Holding the book to his face didn't distract from the swollen cheek. As Jeremy worked with the other students at his table, he could feel the bruises on Michael pulsing from the corner of his eye. It gave a sound feeling when tutoring ended and all arose to exit. Never making eye contact, Michael gave his paper along with the others and took leave in the herd.

Along the chain link fences Jeremy walked, book in hand. He sat on the bench, paying no mind to the figure at the other end. Dressed in low slung jeans and a faded T-shirt sat Brandon. Jeremy gazed over the top of his volume of poetry and across the street, eyeing the bookstore on the other side. Folks coming out of those glass doors fondled their new purchases.

"Isn't that your spot?" Brandon finally said to Jeremy. At the invite, the latter folded shut his book and nestled it into his bag.

"I remember you and Jen always dragging me here," Brandon said. "Always did make her smile."

"On my way over, I saw you at this bus stop and figured there's only one place you'd be going."

“Our favorite stop,” Brandon said. “Went right from the book store to her house. Like it was built for us.” The young man eased his weight forward, not yet looking at Jeremy and resting his elbows on his knees.

“I don’t blame you,” Jeremy started, eyes forward as well. “Girl always knew just what to say, make a guy feel like a hero again.”

“Even when he ain’t” Brandon said.

“You’re only human.”

“Not any more. Just a ghost.”

An attempted noise gave way in Jeremy’s throat as he cleared it to speak. “You know we would have followed you anywhere, Brandon. You were our leader,” he sputtered. “Weren’t scared of anything.”

“Didn’t change that she liked you better,” Brandon said. “You had the potential. We all knew you were going places. I was just keeping the seat warm, and I didn’t mind. Even though I knew how you felt about her. I didn’t mind making it last as long as I could.”

At this, Jeremy began shaking his head. “You fool. I’m not playing tag team with a dropout. Even after the sentence was passed, she stuck by you. She knew that losing your father would cause a rip...”

“Don’t go sissy on me now, Jeremy,” Brandon said and looked to the approaching bus. It hissed at the light two blocks down. “Some folks just don’t have the luck of the draw. Wind up with bad people, bad places, bad choices,” Brandon said.

“You’re not him,” Jeremy offered.

“Life isn’t a book, Jay. There’s no happy ending for a story without a happy beginning.” Brandon stood when the bus arrived. He sniffed, then chuckled. “Bastard

violated his parole...how stupid can you get?" And the doors folded open. "Let's hope Jen's door opens this easy."

"Good luck Brandon," said Jeremy and watched his friend sealed inside.

Green grass freshly cut, the smell filled the serene atmosphere in bulk. After the doorbell faded, a few soft steps to the front introduced a young lady who answered with surprise, though not shock.

"Lucky for you, my dad's not here, Jennifer said to Brandon.

"Can I come in?" he said.

"No," she said, eyebrows horizontal, beneath a stern forehead. He raised a leg up to the brick laid front porch, but hadn't committed to moving forward once the order was barked. His eyes dug into hers, and she stared in return. "I heard you've been making trouble and I don't need that," she said.

"Not why I'm here."

"But it's what you bring."

"You once said you'd never turn me away. No matter how I acted, you would always care."

The girl closed her eyes and pulled the door halfway shut.

"I'm not here to hold you to that," Brandon said, placing a hand to stop its swing.

"I just got past this, Brandon. It's over. You and Jeremy are gone now."

"But he's not past you," Brandon said.

A tug of war raged with the door, shaking it a second until Jennifer cupped her mouth to muffle the soft whimper leaking out.

“How dare you...?” came out low and cracked. “...When you know how he sees me.”

“He never meant those things. The boy just can’t handle himself,” Brandon said.

“So...!” she rose. “So I’m just the weak willed whore, waiting to be passed to him when he’s ready?”

“He loves you, Jen,” Brandon said, searching for eye contact. “And I want to do at least one thing right.”

“Is this about that little pigeon of yours I’ve seen him with? Afraid he’s going to do what you can’t? Make a person see their own worth?” Now that the girl raised her eyes, she saw Brandon’s looking away. “You lost me, and you lost Jeremy. We were all we had, and now we’re just ghosts to each other, because of you. But you can’t handle being alone, can you, sissy!” She hardly finished the final word before Brandon’s palm met her cheek and she collapsed inside, slamming the door in his wide eyed face.

Swaying in the breeze, overhead canopy shadows decorated the stone table. Shrubbery and foliage everywhere would sway in the winds of Hilltop Park, but Jeremy’s eyes kept with the pages he read. Lips cycled through every word, and raising his head with eyelids down for a moment, he would continue reciting the material in his hands, until a hesitation prompted another look downward. Over the sound of a strong breeze, the boy heard footsteps crunching in the grass. At the edge of the cement platform she stood, fingering the long brown hair behind her ear in the gust.

“It’s an odd sensation...,” Jennifer began. “...to come to a place expecting someone, yet terrified of their being there. You don’t know how to react to seeing them.”

Jeremy's eyes opened, but he did not break his stare on the valley below. A mile outside the city, Hilltop Park overlooked the low buildings and busy streets from a serene, unmolested mountain peak.

"Did you know I would be here?" he asked.

"You're not the only one who takes time to sort things out, Jeremy."

He lowered his head to look at her. "We always called this 'The Table of Truth' didn't we?" he said. "Anything you said while sitting here had to be the truth, so help you God."

"Always the perfect place for talking without Brandon," she added.

With a slight shuffle, she hoisted herself atop the table alongside him. "Most valuable of all..." she said after settling. "The table keeps you honest with yourself."

Jeremy folded shut the book. "That is certainly the case," he said, looking at her point blank. Her hair whipped in his face when the wind awoke again. He leaned back.

"I don't want to be ghosts anymore," she said to him. "Brandon chose his path, and I'm not following him. Neither should you."

"I'm not."

"When he dumped me, I didn't get more than three sentences, but it was still more than I got from you."

"Not that it took long to get past me," Jeremy spat. "Had to be at least a half dozen fellas in as many months."

"Why should you care? You were no friend at all," she retorted.

"No friend. Just a silver medal for a desperate tramp." And a silence fell. She got off the table. A wind whistled through and she raised her arms overhead, stretching in the sunlight. Jeremy caught her concave belly peeking from underneath her shirt.

“No matter how much you want to be ‘the one for whom time stopped,’ I won’t say, little boy, that I couldn’t have used your support, in however small a way.” She lowered her arms as the wind died. “I don’t know what would have happened Jay, but I’m sure it would have been better than this.” Without further words, she let his mind turn.

“You’re not on the table,” he finally said.

The girl released the stare, and watching her stride to her car, Jeremy re-opened his book while she drove down the hillside.

Walker lifted his eyes from the magazine on the counter when Brandon’s footfalls started bumping in, yielding to the surrounding silence. Eyebrow raised and neck craned, the shop owner studied the youngster perusing the store, reading spines here and there, tilting volumes and inspecting covers. After a moment of making acquaintance with the surroundings, Walker addressed him.

“Can I help you?” he glared without blinking at the boy. Unaffected, Brandon crossed into a nearby section of biographies. Walker followed, stiff and alert.

“Looking for a biography?” he asked. In the boy’s hand was a book about Mark Twain.

“You know he never finished school,” Walker mentioned.

There was no sign of response from the young man. He opened to a page and placed a finger on it, moving across the lines.

“Even traveled the world,” Walker still eyed the boy, awaiting some return. When nothing came, he continued. “And never had to steal or cheat anyone to do it.” And Brandon

looked up. A blunt sucking noise came from his teeth and he turned away from the man, shaking his head. A few steps away, he plucked another book from the adjoining shelf.

Spending the rest of the youngster's visit behind the counter, Walker kept eyes peeled, even when ringing up his other clientele. At the sight of Brandon finally heading his way with a purchase, he readied the register, entered the sale and slid the book, titled "Alexander the Great" to its new owner. Seeing walker scrunch his face at the cover, Brandon answered the question in the elder's eyes.

"Because I like his name," he said.

Long, lanky shadows crawled up the sidewalk, bobbing with the steps of Jeremy and Michael as they crossed the cement bridge. It grew late in the day but Michael still buzzed.

"My history teacher gave back that paper we worked on. Then told me about that junior college downtown," he said to Jeremy. The older boy offered a smile and a cock of the head.

"Not bad for two months of study," Jeremy said.

"He told me to keep it up for the next two years, and I might even get me a scholarship." Michael skipped on ahead at those last words.

"Let's hope you can," Jeremy offered. "Because I won't be around to help you." Although said with a light heart, it brought an unexpected weight upon the two.

"Big senior, graduating this year," Michael said, still in front.

"Would have been Brandon's year too," Jeremy continued.

"What are you two going to do without me?" Michael said and shot a smile at the other behind him.



Suppressing the chuckle that grew inside him, Jeremy gave a light shove to Michael's head. "Don't go sissy on me now," he said.

Streetlights blinked awake, and the buzz hummed down the street before them. Evening insects swarmed at the bulbs overhead, and the boys kept on beneath the shafts of light.

"One time, when I was seven..." Michael started. Jeremy turned his head at the sudden story. "My dad...he didn't say a whole lot of good things to me, but one time when I was getting beat up at school, and I didn't want to go back, he said something to me. Something I didn't understand."

"What did he say?" Jeremy asked.

"He said 'Michael, even if we feel sorry for the horse with the broken leg, ain't nothing gonna stop us from shootin' it'"

Still walking behind, Jeremy's face revealed a few attempts at solving the riddle, but ultimately he remained silent.

"At the time, I just ignored him, which is what I always did when I wanted him to go away, but now I've figured what he meant."

"What did he mean?" Jeremy asked.

"He meant to tell me that I can't wait for someone else's pity to come rescue me. At least, that's what I decided it means."

"Not an unwise proverb," Jeremy concluded.

"Helped so far." Michael showed his face once more to Jeremy and they rounded to corner onto his street.

Jeremy remembered falling to his side before feeling the sting in his temple. The asphalt bumping him sideways, slightly damp from evening moisture came on before the cold liquid dripped across his face and when he tried raising a hand to dab it, he found his shoulders unresponsive. A weight held them in place, and each time he budged, the weight budged back. One eye soon closed when the liquid entered it. It stung, but the remaining eye caught a sideways glance at the skirmish a few feet over.

Elbows and fists were heaving up and down while a pitiful creature amidst the squabble twitched and turned, thrashing it's legs and flailing about. Once the attackers stood up, a few remained to deliver a series of final kicks to the battered boy. They stepped carefully around the broken glass that lay near Jeremy's head, remnants of the bottle used to knock him down. He could smell the beer leaking down his face, and sniffed harder to determine if any blood were mixed in. A sample was slurped into his nose and he coughed. One boy remaining by the quivering Michael pulled from his pocket a sharp metallic object that reflected the lamplight and Jeremy closed both eyes, yelling over the sound of Michael's squeal.

A three month period of ghosts drifting further away, more silent than the grave, the grave of a sixteen year old boy. A four day stretch in a hospital, with lacerations that should have been treated sooner, 'the boy' they said 'fighting as best he could' until his heart gave out. Lethal harm intended or not, the drunken stupor ended in life imprisonment. They were off the streets, but Jeremy found himself, for the very first time, on the streets. Approaching the bicycle rack, he lowered a hand into his pocket when he spied an unfamiliar person strolling by. He caressed the switchblade between his fingers until the

other passed and watched him return to his cell phone. Jeremy's bike came unlocked and he pedaled away from the campus. Weaving around pedestrians, traveling only crowded streets and populated routes, he arrived at the bookshop.

When that banner with golden letters and glossy finish got nailed over the door, Jeremy tried each time since then to ignore its message while walking underneath. These final weeks began a decrease in customers, but interior walls covered with closeout sale prices made the fear too real; those and heaps of old paperbacks nestled in a center display. He pawed through the rubble and raised a poetry collection out of the bin. Stiff yellow pages opened up and printed type ran across them.

Over the empty store's evening silence, Walker's voice bellowed. "Here to collect? Even with the good ones all gone?"

Jeremy raised his head. "I'll read anything with words on it Walker. You know that."

When he'd paid, gotten change, and watched the register shut, he turned for the entrance. Each floorboard creaking beneath his steps rang through the aisles. Once bountiful shelves held erect while he went between, shafts of late day light pouring from side windows. A cool draft met him opening the door and when turning to walker, the older man saw in those young eyes some desire for closure.

"So ends my childhood," was blurted but did not satisfy. "Just when I was getting ready to work here."

"You're better off," Walker said and opened the broom closet. "After graduation, there's no stopping a kid like you." The voice became softer once he'd begun digging for his supplies. "Upwards and onwards, even at my age, son." And bringing the mop and bucket to the floor, Walker got cleaning and watched Jeremy ease the door to a close.