

I took great pride in my comic books. More than a passion, as far as I was concerned, they were priceless. My collection numbered fifty-three issues. Shortly after we learned we would soon be moving from our rental house, Mom gave me startling news when she found me alone in my room.

“Jeffery, it's time you grow up. Your ‘funny books’ have to go.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, half-listening.

“Those comics are old. They're worthless. It's time to get rid of them.”

“What are you talking about?” I was beginning to grasp the significance of what she was saying.

“In another year you'll be a teenager. Your interests are changing, and the things you find entertaining today are different than when you were a little boy.”

“But I like them.”

“You stopped buying Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck comics years ago. I don't think you've looked at another Superman comic this past year. No one wants them anymore. Television always has new shows. You should get out more, anyway. Besides, your comic books take up too much space.” She left my room, making it clear this was the final word.

I hadn't been subjected to anything like this before. This ruling, this banishment of what could only be defined as personal treasures hit me hard.

Parting with my comics was a horrible prospect. I couldn't imagine life without them. They represented a personal time capsule, a history of my life. They were like friends that offered a refuge from the daily grind of boredom. Life without Dick Tracy, Archie, Jughead, G.I. Joe, and my superheroes stung worse than being sentenced to a diet of cooked carrots, cottage cheese, liver, and lima beans. Relegating my literary companions to the trash bin of faded memories, I foresaw my future: a shell of a soul, wandering aimlessly through back alleys, a lost vagrant searching for pages from a colorful past.

Desperate didn't begin to describe my agony. No sense in giving in without considering a way to avoid this literary catastrophe. Keeping these precious memories safely out of harm's way became my mission. Living in a rental house limited my options. Where could I hide them? I looked everywhere.

Lady Luck must have been perched on my shoulder when I spotted an air vent strapped to the ceiling in the basement. A movable access panel provided the perfect foil to store my stash. With careful timing and a sturdy chair, the windows to my past were now safe from the reach of parental authority.

Our next real home was a three-bedroom, two-story, with a full basement, a shared driveway, two-car garage, and room to play basketball. Sounded great, but I cringed when I saw the mature trees, convinced they could produce enough leaves to fill a dumpster.

Rick and I continued rooming together, as did Carolyn and Mary. The oldest sibling gets first choice when bunk beds are in the picture, a sleeping arrangement that took advantage of our limited space. I slept on top. What could I do? Following tradition is best, especially when it involves assuming one's honored and preferable entitlement.

Dad returned from a weekend National Guard outing and gave me his Army footlocker. Here was the holy grail of stencil-imprinted military furniture, a material possession I could show my friends and cherish as an official United States-issued artifact, a gem any boy would want.

“You’re growing up, Jeffery,” Dad said. “With age comes responsibility. Being responsible includes protecting your possessions.” He lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and placed it between his fingers. I watched the smoke stream out his nose.

“Don’t use the locker as a clothes-hamper, though,” he said, after glancing at the sneakers I’d removed, now breathing freely in the corner of my bedroom.

Unlike a new one, this footlocker had cracks, nicked and chipped edges, a loose hinge—markings that invited questions as to its travels, its secrets. I wondered if I could add to its history, its stories. Although I didn’t have many possessions, the locker also had safekeeping potential and reminded me that I hid my comic collection in the rental house a few weeks earlier. Retrieving these cherished volumes needed to be done without Mom finding out.

I bided my time until a suitable opportunity arose. Mom and Dad had a laundry list of errands that would fill an afternoon. When Saturday came, they took Rick and my sisters with them. I begged off with a feeble excuse: the need to study for a spelling test and watch a news show on television.

They piled into the family car, and within minutes I launched into my mission. With my dark brown hair flying in the breeze, I biked across the long bridge, and over the river that sliced through the center of town. This was a golden opportunity to take back my collection hidden in the rental house without my parents finding out I’d left.

My trip would be for naught if the house hadn’t been rented, or no one was home. As I approached the house, I spied an older van parked in the driveway. I skidded across the pavement, catching myself to avoid tumbling headfirst off my bike.

The house was simple, nondescript, and sat back from the surrounding homes. Anxious to complete this undertaking in record time, I raced past the thorny bushes lining the path to the front porch and rang the doorbell. Upon hearing the familiar sound of someone unbolting the door and removing the chain lock, I knew Lady Luck was with me. The new tenant, a middle-aged, slender man opened the door.

“Hi. Our family moved from this house several weeks ago,” I said, struggling to catch my breath. “I hid my comic books in the basement and wanted to get them and take them home.”

“You’re welcome to come in and look around.”

I happily accepted his invitation.

“I see you biked here. Did you move close by?”

“No, we moved to the other side of town.” Looking around, I felt disoriented since his furnishings replaced the previous layout in the living room and made it look so different from when we had lived here.

“That’s quite a long haul you had. I’m surprised your mom and dad would let you ride a bike this far from home.”

“Oh, they don’t know I’m here,” I said, looking around, focusing on his meager possessions: unopened boxes, a mound of dirty clothes in the corner, magazines scattered on a table.

“Would you like a soda or a glass of water?” he said, turning toward the kitchen entrance and looking back at me.

“No, I’d better stick with my plan to get this done as soon as possible.”

“What’s your hurry?” he continued, as he led me toward the basement door.

“My family went out shopping, and I want to get back home before they return.”

Faded sunlight peaked out from between the blinds as I followed him down into the lower level.

At the base of the stairs, the man flipped on a light switch. Although the lighting had always been weak, after the ride in broad daylight through town, I strained to get my bearings. He followed me as I wandered around the dimly lit basement. I assessed the area: boxes, an assortment of tools, a workbench, a freezer— until I spotted the vent.

I couldn't reach it, nor could he.

"You'll need a chair or ladder," the man said, softly. His complexion was pale, the shadows cast on his face conveying a weird effect.

"I have a short one that should work." He turned toward the stairs.

As he walked away, it occurred to me I was alone in a stranger's house, in his basement. No one knew I was here except this man. His footsteps echoed against the bare walls as he moved across the concrete floor. Why had I been so quick to tell him my parents were not at home, or that they didn't know I'd come here? He turned to go up the steps.

The lights went out.

Total darkness.

I started to scream but terror seized me before I could make a sound.

The lights came back on.

"Sorry," the man shouted. "It's a habit—turning off the lights when I leave the basement."

I recalled Mom and Dad saying something about not getting into a car with strangers.

"My brother can't wait for me to bring them home," I said, speaking louder as he ascended the stairs. Absent a response, I called out, "I told him I'd bring them back—he loves comic books."

Nothing.

Had he heard me? Ignored me?

I felt a wave of prickly goosebumps on my arm. I rubbed them but they were quickly turning into a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. The silence was so eerie, broken by footsteps from floorboards creaking above, the dripping from a utility sink faucet I'd never paid any attention to before—it was as if my senses came to life in the quiet surrounding me.

I scanned the room: colorless, bare walls of concrete that I could feel closing in on me—covered by a two-story house and a small lone window in the back. I feared the basement door would slam shut, a horrifying creature would grab me—that I shouldn't be here.

I wiped at the dampness forming on my lips. I took a step toward the stairs. The man appeared, slowly hobbling down the steps with something protruding from his front. I couldn't move, my feet rooted. I stood motionless, unable to form a thought.

After reaching the bottom of the stairs, he walked toward me.

"I couldn't find the two-step, but this short ladder is better than a chair, and it's longer, anyway."

He placed it below the concealed opening. I looked at him several seconds before beginning my ascent. As I climbed, I glanced back between the vent and this man. Now I knew why a blank expression, accompanied by a dead silence, is so discomfiting. I reached up and pushed the vent door open, shivering at the muffled screech that resembled an old, rusty faucet. I felt around for the collection that, by this time, had lost its allure.

The comics were gone.

I backed down. Other than my uttering something about the comics not being there, he didn't say anything. As he folded the ladder, I inched toward the stairs, quickening my pace, and

began climbing, envisioning a hand reaching out from under the dark steps and grabbing my ankle.

I rushed to the front door and threw open the screen door. I flinched when I heard it snap shut. I pedaled away as fast as I could, with an occasional glance over my shoulder—for what, I wasn't sure. Thanking him for his troubles had vanished on the basement floor.

What happened? Had Mom heard me place the comics in the vent and thrown them out before we moved? Did they block the air vent and were discovered?

Where were the comic books? I couldn't ask Mom. Pain was searing through my legs by the time I reached the bridge. Out of breath, I walked my bike over the sidewalk that spanned the bridge. I took an occasional glimpse at traffic or for anyone behind me.

I stopped midway across the river. I felt so confused. I looked out at the late afternoon sun, raising my hand to shade my eyes. I peered down at the deep, flowing water, the shifting ripples.

Disappointment should have overcome me when I returned home empty-handed, but instead, I didn't feel right about anything. The comic books were out of my life, an unexpected ending that began with such high hopes.

No one was home. I slowly retreated upstairs. With each step, I clutched the handrail tighter. Once inside my bedroom, my eyes fell on the footlocker. I kept staring at it. I walked over and saw a rough indentation on its side that I hadn't noticed before. It was like it had been hit hard with something. I sat on it. I was sure there must be a rational explanation for the afternoon's events. I didn't feel like moving from my room, from the footlocker. I watched the sun dipping below the tops of houses, slowly disappearing as I waited for Mom and Dad to come home. And Carolyn. And Rick. And Mary.