

## A Passenger

Little Paul lived on the edge of a military base, in a small development on a single street with five identical houses on each side. Indian expatriates in a hut guarded the entrance, which led to an island of grass at the back, bordered by brick and a roundabout; on the right, the tennis court where Paul's dad made him pitch until he blew out his arm; the playground where Paul saw his first pair of panties, on a girl in a skirt hanging upside down, and the swimming pool, where Paul's mother told him to be a good boy, before she left for good.

Three foot concrete walls separated each home, but the perimeter was closer to ten, and each backyard had a small one-room shed, with roofs only accessible by ladder. Paul, 11, kept cigarettes up there. While his parents fought, which was often, but before the yelling reached its inevitably violent climax, Paul would hop out his window and try to forget.

He would climb a large metal pipe attached to the pale-brown wall, to get up on the roof. The outside boundary stopped a field of wild overgrowth full of thorny weeds and dust; this was Paul's kingdom, and he sat straight-legged and smoked menthols.

He picked it up through a Filipino kid from school. The friend, older, said: "bite the filter" and "pull it out with with your teeth," and finally, coaching like a yoga instructor, "breathe in and hold."

Paul held the smoke until he saw sparks in his eyes, or was it the sky? He wasn't sure. His vision turned mustard, his legs buckled and he slid to the floor, separated for the first time from the confines of his body. He sat and simpered as it washed him.

A curious feeling, really, for up until that point he *was* his body, one piece, and now he was a brain and lungs and eyes and arms.

Suddenly, there was more, and his mind urged him along in ways he didn't yet understand.

One quiet day at sundown, Paul snuck through the window, battling a restlessness he could not contain. He obeyed a voice; "disobey," it said. He walked to the swimming pool and watched a black bird cut through blue sky, and between red-gold trails behind the clouds. He creaked past the gate, removed his shoes and rubbed his feet on the soft, fake grass, smelling chlorine around him.

The boy scanned left and right. He took it out and urinated into the pool; he heard a clang – a generator kicking to life. Startled, he quickly put it away, leaving a wet spot on the front of his shorts.

What now? He noticed one of the loose slats in the fence. He kicked it and it broke off with a satisfying crackle. He did it again. All the way around, 11 minutes of kicks and punches, until they were all laid out on the grass.

What now? He walked toward the circular plastic white picnic table near the diving board, where not so long ago, mother had placed towels and sunscreen and a Michael Crichton novel. He pulled the top off the base, holding it with both hands. He walked it to the edge. The boy twisted with his feet planted and released, the tabletop hit the water and floated to the middle. He stepped onto the diving board and pulled his shirt over his head, throwing it to the side. Little Paul pushed with his little legs and the board frowned. He sprung into the air, higher than he ever would when he was grown and old, and his fire was out.

He aimed with his feet, landing and cracking the table all at once. He stood, suspended on the water, free, for a tiny moment, from the weight of everything.

When it was enough, Paul left, shivering his way back home, leaving barefoot, with his shirt over his shoulder. He climbed back into his room. He drew a bath, not thinking about any one thing in particular, as boys are apt to do.

His ninja turtle action figures were still in the tub. He folded the shower curtain over the side and made a ravine, transferring bathwater in his cupped hands.

The fight began. Leonardo kicked Raphael in his middle, and Raphael flew, end over end, and slammed hard in the wall, before recovering and resetting with impressive agility.

Someone knocked on the front door. Paul paused for a moment but Raphael bounded back, leaping on water like it was made of trampolines. He jumped marvelously high, using all of his prowess, and flew at Leonardo headfirst. But Leonardo dodged and Raphael smashed into the other wall, making a powdery hole.

“Cowabunga dude,” Leonardo said. Paul heard footsteps; the familiar drag of his father's bad leg, and when he knocked on the bathroom door, Paul ignored him because Leonardo and Raphael were about to meet in midair, a true test of speed and strength, to finally settle the score between them.

The knocking got louder. The ninja turtles got closer, closer. They were a blink from touching sai to sword when Paul's father burst in, holding the boy's shoes in his hand.

He yelled an obscenity and the action figures fell into the ravine, and then onto the floor when father swept the shower curtain to the side.

The tall, muscular man stared down at the little naked boy, and his chest heaved.

He grabbed Paul by the arm and dragged him out, leaving the shoes and the toys behind. Paul's feet scraped and banged on the tile and then the carpet.

The man yelled. It sounded deep and horrible.

“What did I say,” he said. “Don’t leave the house. And now this? Now this? What next?”

Paul opened his mouth but couldn’t breathe or scream, so he did neither.

The man pulled the boy into his room and the boy tried to pull away, a fruitless game of tug o’ war. The man picked up the slippery boy and threw him on his ninja turtle comforter. Paul was scared, his father’s eyes vacant.

Paul’s father put his knee on the bed against the wall, shifting the weight so that young Paul, trying to claw away, rolled toward him. The boy pulled the blanket over himself, but his father tore it away, pinned him down with one hand and slapped his face with the other. Paul tried to separate this sensation from his body, but he couldn’t; he felt it all over, all at once.

Spittle flew from the angry man’s lips and his arm snapped like a metronome. The blows didn’t stop until they did.

When it was done, the man stood up and straightened his shirt and wiped his mouth, catching his breath.

Think about what you’ve done, he said.