

2303 words

COLLECTIONS

A smile crept across Bob's face as he was laying on his bed, fully clothed, his sneakers parked on the floor. He turned the pages, quietly content in his world of imagination. He took great pride in his comic books. More than a passion, as far as he was concerned, they were priceless. At last count, his collection numbered over fifty issues, more than what any of his friends had. It was shortly after he learned the family would be moving from their rental house when his Mom spotted him and entered his room.

"Bob, it's time you grow up. Your 'funny books' have to go."

"What do you mean?" he said, looking up at her, half-listening.

"Even from here, I can see those comics are old. They're wearing out. They're worthless. It's time you got rid of them."

"What are you talking about?" After grasping the significance of her threat, Bob jumped off his bed and stared at her. He stood there, trying to come to grips with the seriousness of her words. He had always taken pride in his comic book collection. To him, they were priceless.

"Your interests are changing, Bob. Think how lightening bugs, cartoons, and playground equipment have become insignificant. You're twelve now. Even the things you find entertaining today are different from when you were little."

"But I like them, and they're still entertaining." Bob paced around the room, convinced his world was in shambles.

"You stopped buying comics years ago. You haven't bought a Superman comic since who knows when. Television has new shows. You have friends you haven't seen since we moved here. There's a world out there you need to explore, to be a part of. Besides, I don't want Carolyn and Rick taking up this habit—being glued to comic books all the time."

Bob's young siblings hadn't started school yet, but it was obvious to Bob their interests had prompted his mother to be so determined. She turned and left his room, making it clear this was the final word.

Bob hadn't been subjected to anything like this before. This unexpected decree, this banishment of what could only be defined as personal treasures hit him hard. Parting with his comics was a horrible prospect. This personal time capsule provided a refuge from boredom. Life without these friends and his superheroes was unimaginable.

But he wasn't about to give in without taking steps to avoid this catastrophe. His goal was obvious; keeping these precious memories safely out of harm's way. But living in a rental house

limited his options. Where could he hide them? He looked everywhere. The house didn't have an attic, and the owner kept the garage locked.

The next day he spotted an air vent strapped to the ceiling in the basement. A movable access panel provided a safe place to conceal his collection. With careful timing and a sturdy chair, he was confident the windows to his past were now safe from parental authority.

The following Saturday, Dad drove the family past the house his parents purchased, a three-bedroom Dutch Colonial with full basement, a shared driveway, two-car garage, and a roomy backyard. Lots of pluses, but Bob cringed when he saw the mature trees. They looked huge—large enough to produce enough leaves to fill a moving van.

Several weeks after they moved to their new home, Dad returned from a National Guard outing and gave Bob his Army footlocker. Bob always wished he had one and now here it was—the holy grail of stencil-imprinted military furniture. He couldn't wait to show it to his friends, an official United States-issued artifact. It was a gem any boy would want. Still, he wondered why his dad was doing this?

“Hold on, Dad. Did you find out I'm dying from some horrible disease, or worse, I have to repeat the sixth grade?” he jested, bursting with excitement.

Following a well-deserved eye roll, Dad said, “You're growing up, son. With age comes added responsibility, which includes protecting your possessions.” He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply before placing it between his fingers, the smoke streaming from his nose before slowly disappearing.

“Don't use the locker as a clothes-hamper, though,” Dad said, after spotting the sneakers Bob had removed, now breathing freely in his bedroom.

“Me?”

“Word has it the unusual aroma upstairs has your name on it.”

The footlocker had scratches, nicked and chipped edges—markings from its travels, its secrets. Bob wondered if he could add to its history, its stories. As he fiddled with the latches and moved the upper compartment and replaced it several times, he thought of the locker's safekeeping potential. It reminded him that he hid his comic books in the rental house several weeks earlier. However, he knew retrieving them would need to be done without his mother finding out since he was supposed to have gotten rid of them.

Bob bided his time until a suitable opening arose. Two weeks later, his mother and father had a list of errands that would fill their afternoon. When the time came, they took Bob's brother and sister with them. Bob begged off with one of his feeble excuses: the need to study for a spelling test and watch a news show.

When Rick, Carolyn, and Bob's parents piled into the family car, within minutes Bob launched into this highly anticipated mission. This was the perfect opportunity to take back his collection without his parents finding out he'd left. He could feel the wind against his face, his dark brown hair flying in the breeze as he biked across the long bridge and over the river slicing through the center of town.

If the house hadn't been rented or no one was home, however, his trip would be for naught. Upon approaching his destination, he spied an old van sitting in the driveway. The house had a simple, nondescript appearance and sat on the corner, neighbored by vacant lots. Seeing it again—rusty gutters, in need of a fresh coat of paint, a roof begging for new shingles, and the weed infested yard—made him glad he no longer lived there. Anxious to complete this undertaking in record time, he raced past the thorny bushes lining the path to the front porch and rang the doorbell. He could feel the relief and anticipation when he heard the familiar sound of someone unbolting the door.

The tenant, a middle-aged, slender man with dark eyes and ashen complexion opened the door. Without hesitation and struggling to catch his breath, Bob said, "Hi. Our family moved from this house a couple of months ago. I hid my comic books in the basement and wanted to get them and take them home."

The man looked at him, then out to his bicycle. "Well, come in and look around."

Bob walked inside, happily accepting his invitation.

"I see you biked here. Did you move close by?"

"No, we moved to the other side of town." Bob was feeling disoriented since this man's furnishings replaced the previous layout in the living room and made it look so different from when he had lived there.

"That's quite a long haul you had. I'm surprised your parents would let you ride a bike this far from home."

"Oh, they don't know I'm here," Bob said, looking around, taking in the meager possessions: unopened boxes, dirty clothes piled in the corner, magazines scattered on a table.

"Would you like a soda or glass of water?" The man turned toward the kitchen.

"No, I'd better stick with getting this done as soon as possible."

"What's your hurry?" he said as he led Bob to the back of the house. Dusty sunlight peeked in from between the blinds as Bob followed him to the stairway.

"My family went out shopping, and I want to get back home before they return," Bob said as they went down into the lower level.

Once in the basement, the man flipped on a light switch. Although the lighting had always been weak, after the ride in broad daylight, Bob strained to get his bearings, recalling how the dead air still had a musty odor. The man followed Bob as he wandered through the dimly lit surroundings as he assessed the area: boxes, tools, a workbench, a freezer—then he spotted the vent.

Neither of them could reach it.

“You’ll need a chair or ladder,” the man said. Bob thought it strange how some things just jump out at you, like how the shadows cast on the man’s pale face conveyed such a weird effect.

“I have a short one in the kitchen.” He turned and walked toward the stairs.

As he quickened his pace across the concrete floor, his footsteps echoed like a disappearing drumbeat, while Bob’s thoughts plunged from retrieving his comics to the present situation. No one knew he was here except this man. He wondered why he had been so quick to tell him his parents weren’t at home—that they didn’t know he had come here. The man turned to go up the steps. Bob was about to be alone in a stranger’s basement.

The lights went out.

“Sorry,” the man shouted as the lights came back on. “It’s a habit, turning off the lights when I leave the basement.”

As he continued up the stairway, Bob recalled years ago when his dad warned him about getting into a car with strangers.

“My brother can’t wait for me to bring them home,” Bob said, speaking louder as the man ascended the stairs.

Absent a response, Bob called out, “I told him I’d bring them back.”

Bob wondered if the man heard him. This time he shouted, “He loves comic books.”

Was the man ignoring him?

He felt prickly goosebumps rising on his arm—a sick feeling gnawing in the pit of his stomach. He could hear a slow dripping, utility sink faucet, footsteps from floorboards creaking above—sounds he’d never paid any attention to before. It was as if his senses had come to life.

He looked around the room, taking in nothing but a cold basement covered by a two-story house, feeling the bare concrete walls slowly closing in. He feared the basement door would slam shut. A horrifying creature would grab him.

That he shouldn’t be here.

Wiping at the dampness forming on his lips, he took a step toward the stairway. Suddenly, the man appeared at the top of the steps, something protruding from his front. Bob couldn't move, his feet rooted. He stood motionless, unable to think as the man slowly walked down.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, he walked toward Bob.

“I don't know where I put the two-step, but this short ladder is better than a chair, and it's longer anyway.”

He placed it below the vent. Bob looked at him several seconds before beginning his ascent. As he climbed, his eyes shifted between the vent and this man. Bob suddenly realized how a blank expression, accompanied by a dead silence, felt so discomfoting. He reached up and pushed the vent door open, shivering at the muffled screech. He felt around for the comics—a collection that had lost its allure.

They weren't there.

He backed down. Other than Bob muttering something about the comics being gone, the man didn't say anything. As the man folded the ladder, Bob walked to the stairs and began climbing, quickening his pace, envisioning hands reaching out from under the dark steps and grabbing his ankles.

He rushed to the front of the house, threw open the screen door, flinching when he heard it snap shut. He jumped on his bike and pedaled away as fast as he could, occasionally stealing a glance over his shoulder. For what, he wasn't sure. Thanking the man for his troubles had vanished on the basement floor.

His thoughts were racing with questions. What happened to the comic books? Did they block the air vent and were discovered? Had his mom heard him place them in the vent? Did she throw them out before the family moved? Where were they? He couldn't ask her.

Pain was searing through his legs by the time he reached the river. Out of breath, he walked the bike over the sidewalk spanning the bridge, taking an occasional glimpse at traffic—or for anyone behind him.

Feeling tired and confused, Bob stopped midway across and looked out at the late afternoon sun. Staring out at nothing, he could feel his eyes burn. He raised his hand, shaded his eyes, and peered down at the deep, flowing water. A branch came into view, and he became spellbound as it slowly float along, until it seemed to speed up, disappearing into the distance, into the shifting ripples.

He returned home empty-handed, disappointed to find no one there. He didn't feel right about anything. The comic books were out of his life, an unexpected and depressing ending to what had begun with such high hopes.

He slowly retreated upstairs. With each step, he clutched the handrail tighter. Once inside his room, his eyes fell on the footlocker. He walked over, stared at it, and focused on the imperfections, the scratches, the chipped edges. It had a small crack near the bottom, halfway across the front—surprised he hadn't noticed it before.

He opened the footlocker, then flipped the latches closed, as if locking something deep inside where no one would look. He sat on it, convinced that what happened today was his little secret and he couldn't tell anyone. He watched the shadows closing in on housetops, the sun slowly disappearing, the light from the streetlamp filtering through the leaves as he waited for Mom and Dad to come home. And Carolyn. And Rick.