

## LIES AND SECRETS

Dad arranged for the family to stay in a rental house in the suburbs before we could move into our new home. It had that “featured in a magazine look,” the kind specializing in demolishing. I hoped it would be a brief stay. However, while relaxing on my bed one afternoon, reading a scene in Archie’s and Jughead’s world, Mom came into my room to hang clothes in the closet I shared with Rick.

Half-listening, I mumbled, “What do you mean?”

“Your comics are wearing out. They’re old, wrinkled, worthless. I want you to get rid of them.”

That’s when I realized what she meant. “What are you talking about? I already cut my collection to my favorite ones, to fewer than forty, Mom.”

“You’re almost twelve, Tommy. Think how lightning bugs, cartoons, and playground equipment have become meaningless.”

“But they’re my favorites.” I sprang from my bed—my world was suddenly on the verge of imploding.

“You stopped buying Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck comics years ago. You haven’t bought a Superman comic since who knows when. Television has new shows. Besides, there’s a world out there you should explore—be a part of—including friends eager to see you. It’s ridiculous for you to keep those old comic books. Before we move, you’ll have to get rid of them.”

She walked out of the room, making it clear that my life had reached a turning point. And not for the better.

I walked around my room, then wandered outside, not knowing what to do. Those comics represented fun times, familiarity, and a sense of security. I couldn’t imagine my literary collection going from priceless to worthless, my future: a shell of a soul, wandering through back alleys, rummaging through people’s trash, a lost vagrant searching for pages from a colorful past.

I didn't want to surrender without trying to avoid this catastrophe. But what choice did I have? Hide them? Living in a rental limited the possibilities; the owner kept the garage locked, and my parent's bedroom contained the one access to the attic. After dismissing places that could conceal a few in unopened boxes, I explored the basement, about to give up when a long vent grabbed my attention. It was next to the ceiling with a movable access panel. Along with a sturdy box, this made a secure place for hiding my collection. Mom would think I threw them out.

Months after moving to our new home, Dad returned from a National Guard outing and blessed me with his Army footlocker. I always wished I owned one, the holy grail of stencil-imprinted military furniture, something I could show my friends—an official United States-issued artifact, a gem any boy would cherish.

“You're growing up, son. With age comes added responsibility, which includes protecting your possessions. This locker has witnessed its share of stories,” Dad said, looking down—as if breaking up with a longtime friend. In some ways, he was.

The footlocker contained scratches, nicks, and chipped edges—markings from its travels, its secrets. I ran my fingers over the top, fiddled with the tarnished latches, moved the upper compartment, and confidently replaced it. It got me wondering if I owned something that needed protection. My old comic book, the ones in the rental house! The footlocker entered my life for a reason; I envisioned my collection as once again a ready source of fond memories.

A few weeks later, Mom and Dad's sights were on tackling a laundry list of errands, enough to fill Saturday afternoon. After a late start, they took Rick and Annie with them. I begged off with a feeble excuse: studying for a spelling test and watching a news show.

A golden opportunity had opened its beautiful arms to the reward awaiting me—retrieving my collection without Mom and Dad realizing my mission. Seconds after they piled into the car, I embarked on this literary expedition, biking across the long bridge over the Great Miami River that sliced through town, taking in the exhilaration from the wind pushing against my face, my hair dancing in the breeze.

As I closed in on my destination, I realized that it was possible no one lived there or was home. Upon approaching this rundown two-story neighbored by vacant lots—I sprang alive after sighting an old van in the driveway. The house still displayed siding in need of paint, empty

flower boxes, and a roof screaming for new shingles. It made me glad we only lived there for two months.

I hopped off my bike and raced past the overgrown, thorny bushes lining the path to the front steps. Struggling to catch my breath, I rang the doorbell—several times—relieved when I heard someone unbolting the lock. A middle-aged, slender man with dark sunken eyes and a fishlike, pale complexion cracked open the door and peered out.

“My family moved from this house a few months ago. I hid, well, sort of concealed my comic books and wanted to take them home.”

He stood gazing at me at first, his hair a mess. “I just got up from a nap, maybe later,” he said.

“They’re in the basement, and it’ll take me less than a minute.”

He peered out—his eyes fell on my bicycle. “Okay. Come on in.”

With my spirits on fire, I happily accepted his invitation. He opened the door to a familiar sound—as if someone was struggling with opening a rusted-out metal gate.

“I see you biked here. Did you move close?” He closed the door and turned, walking further into the house.

“No, we live on the other side of town now.”

“I’m surprised your parents let you ride a bike this far from home.”

“Oh, they don’t know I’m here.”

He didn’t say anything as I followed him toward the kitchen. I caught a glimpse of his living room, making me feel disoriented since his furniture arrangement appeared so different from when we lived there: everything veiled in clutter, clothes wadded into balls in chairs, and magazines and cigarette packs scattered on a table.

“Come in and have a soda or a glass of water.”

“No thanks. I’d better stick with getting this done as soon as possible.”

“What’s your hurry?”

“I want to return home before my parents return from shopping—you know, errands and stuff.”

He nodded, looked in a mirror hanging in the hall, brushed his hair with his fingers, then proceeded down the narrow corridor toward the basement stairway, past the sunlight creeping

out from the blinds. He flipped on a light switch. I trailed him as we descended to the lower level.

After biking in broad daylight, I strained to get my bearings. The cool dampness and the dead air still held a familiar, musty odor. The man followed me as I wandered past boxes, a workbench, tools, and a freezer. Then I spotted the vent. Neither of us could reach it.

“You’ll need a chair or ladder.” The dim light conveyed an unusual effect on his face, accentuating his ashen complexion, his heavy eyebrows inching together into one. “I have a short one. It’s upstairs.”

That seemed promising... almost rehearsed. His pace quickened as he walked across the concrete floor, footsteps echoing like a disappearing drumbeat.

I shouldn’t have told him my parents didn’t know I came here. No one did—except this man. As he started up the wooden steps, a deep creaking sound filled the air. Mom and Dad had warned me about strangers. And here I was.

“My brother can’t wait for me to get them.”

I tried speaking louder as he reached the top of the stairs.

“I told him I’d bring them back. He loves comic books.”

Didn’t he hear me?

The lights went out.

I started to scream.

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

As I stood there, sounds became magnified: the slow drips from the utility sink, footsteps from floorboards creaking over my head, even the brushing of my hand as I pushed my fingers back and forth on my forehead. With my mind grinding to a halt, I could hear everything except the goose bumps rising across my back.

I looked around at the lack of windows, the bare concrete walls—my mind fighting the idea that they were closing in on me. That he might shut the basement door. That a horrifying creature was going to grab me. I wiped at the dampness on my lips and took a few steps; my thoughts were on charging upstairs before anyone slammed the door shut.

Too late. The man appeared in the doorway.

The dismal lighting revealed a strange contraction protruding from his front. I stepped backward as he lumbered down the steps. When he reached the bottom, he came straight toward me, the darkness concealing his face.

“I can’t remember where I stored the two-step, but this short ladder is better than a folding chair, heavier, though.”

He opened it below the vent. I hesitated before placing my foot on the ladder, my every thought still locked on him. Now I understood why a blank expression—accompanied by stone silence—can be dreadfully discomfoting. After two steps, I reached up, my glances still shifting between the vent and this man. I pushed it open and felt around for a collection that pleased me for so long—had suddenly lost its allure.

They weren’t there. Nothing. Just the sounds of the slow drip of a leaky faucet. And a boy and a grown man—a stranger—in a basement.

I backed down, muttering something meaningless about the missing comics. As he folded the ladder, I turned and hurried toward the stairs, walking faster, taking longer steps. I began climbing, envisioning hands reaching out from under the dark steps, grabbing my ankles. I rushed down what now seemed like a dreadfully long hallway and threw open the door, then the screen door, flinching when it banged shut. Thanking him for his troubles never entered my mind. I grabbed my bike and pedaled away as fast as possible, stealing a look over my shoulder. For what? I didn’t know.

I didn’t care.

Pain seared through my legs by the time I reached the river. I walked my bicycle on the sidewalk spanning the bridge, occasionally peeking at traffic. Or at anyone behind me. Halfway across, I peered out at the water—at nothing, really.

I felt all alone. I raised my hand to shield my eyes and peered into the flowing water, into the deep, shifting ripples. A branch came into view. I watched it float along until it seemed to speed up, then hide in the distance. It continued sinking as if being sucked into the pale horizon. My eyes burned as I surveyed the late afternoon sun.

What happened to the comic books? Were they discovered because they blocked the air in the vent? Why did he ask me those questions? Did Mom hear me hide them? Did she throw them out before we moved? I couldn’t ask her. Where were they?

No one was home. The day was ending with what began with such high expectations. Clutching the handrail tighter with each step, I retreated up the stairs. When I reached the doorway to my room, my eyes locked on the footlocker. I stood looking at it. Suddenly, I had an overwhelming urge to scrutinize its nicks, scratches, chipped edges—imperfections. Secrets.

I opened the footlocker, lifted the upper compartment, and peered inside. For what—I didn't know. I replaced the compartment and flipped the latches closed tightly. Today must remain a secret. I couldn't tell Mom. No one should ever find out. I wish I hadn't even gone looking for those comics. I sat on the locker and watched as shadows closed in on housetops, light from the streetlamp straining through tight gaps in the trees.

It was so quiet. Why hadn't Mom and Dad returned by now? When would they come home? And Rick. And Annie.