

Tyler Brooks was eleven and lived in a small town. He didn't know he lived in a small town. How could he? With nothing to compare it to, visiting a friend, only a few blocks away, was an exotic location. For that matter, he didn't know he was poor either. The rusted out trailer in his front lawn, the piles of old tools, rusted into a single, useless, monstrosity, and the stacks of scrap metal, collected by his father to trade for money at the dump, was his everyday. His father, Steve, was issued neighborhood complaints on the regular and it wasn't until Tyler looked back did he realize those men in ties were not “friends” of his father's, but public officials threatening fines for an indecent lawn. But to Tyler, the flow of new geography only fueled his imagination; the ever-changing landscapes his yard provided only acted as new backgrounds for the stories he would tell. The G.I. Joes had captured April O'Neil and it was up to the Ninja Turtles to traverse the great desert to the soldiers' iron fortress. The desert being the large sand pit that was his backyard, unable to grow grass due to neglectful care, and the iron fortress being a custom build of old toolboxes, rusted nails, and scraps of aluminum siding.

None of the neighbors' yards looked like this, but Tyler didn't seem to notice. In fact, to his friends, his house was the most popular. Later in life, when he was struck with nostalgia, he was always surprised by how he was the lynch pin that kept his circle of friends together. If they hung out without him, everyone commented that it was odd and the very fact he wasn't there made the experience a story. And that was probably it. Tyler loved stories. He loved to listen and that's what drew his friends together. Tyler would listen to his friends talk and complain about any and everything. Stories ranged from the mundane to the intimate, from the detailed telling of having to mow the lawn to the riveting tales of abusive fathers and drug addicted mothers. Tyler didn't know it at the time, but he was absorbing all of it with an intense sense of empathy. Later it

would turn to apathy, a defense mechanism to process his own journey, but would, after thousands of dollars in therapy, come to fuel his creativity and restore his empathy for life.

But that was in retrospect.

At the moment, he was in the midst of a very hard decision. He sat upon his bed with sweat on his brow. Sweat from the tension, sure, but mostly from the heat. Florida summers were unforgiving, and with no air conditioning and just a rotating fan in the window, he and his friends were in a constant glaze of their own perspiration. Laid out in a row, Tyler's oldest action figures were on the chopping block, so to speak.

His best friend, Kyle, who lived at the end of the street, had established a summer tradition of sorts. They would each sacrifice an action figure to experience the force of Kyle's prized possession.

Kyle had a BB gun.

It was a Daisy, of course, and it cocked like a shot gun; along the barrel. In the pit of their stomachs they were both disappointed by its limit of one pump per shot, but neither one wanted to voice their concern and ruin the excitement they had built up. And they were excited.

Tyler eyed a one armed soldier in blue army garbs. The one arm had played in nicely to his current desert epic, but times were desperate and decisions needed to be made. He grabbed the unlucky soldier and ran outside.

When he reached the end of his driveway, he looked down the road, anxious to see Kyle. And there he was, still a five or six houses away with the Daisy slung over his shoulder. The strap was brown and was made of nice leather, handcrafted by Kyle's distant Aunt. It looked like it would last forever. Kyle liked tanned leather and especially like to chew on the little strings he

would replenish through his Aunt.

But he wasn't chewing a piece now. In stead, he was picking apart a pomegranate one seed at a time. Kyle was a typical kid in a lot of ways. He played sports and video games, liked the beach and surfing, and listened to whatever pop was on the radio. But every now and then he'd surprise you. Having the patience to eat a pomegranate, for instance.

“I had to take the dogs out before I left,” Kyle explained, unprovoked, as he neared. He was a little late, but Tyler never cared about that kind of thing. He went on, describing his Great Dane, “Kujo knocked the gate open and ran down the road! Took me forever to get him back in the fence.”

Chores were another mystery to Tyler. Having to take the pets out, making his bed, mowing the lawn. They never came up and if you looked at his home, it showed. The freedom, without anyone conscious of it, was in exchange for his poverty.

“I'm so glad we don't have any pets,” Tyler mumbled. “Missy stayed in?” Missy was a large female Boxer with a head too big for its body. They joked that she would fall forward when she was too tired to hold it up.

“Yeah,” Kyle answered. “I managed to close the gate before she could make it through.”

“You got one?” Tyler asked, changing the subject. There were bigger matters at hand. Tyler held up his blue soldier.

Kyle reached in his pocket, careful not to make a mess of the pomegranate, and pulled out his own action figure. It had all its limbs, but was beat up and warn down. It was black and dressed like a military ninja.

“Awesome,” Tyler smiled. “Want to go to the ruins? I want to stop at the gas station and

grab a Suicide?”

“Yeah, I want some Mountain Dew.”

They continued down the road and turned onto Large River Rd, one of four major streets that tied the town together. The street was suburban, mostly, with two gas stations and a small plaza. The plaza was limited to a laundry mat, a pizza place, and an adult gaming lounge, one of many that were invading the area.

As they walked to the gas station they found a large Palm Tree seed and began kicking it down the sidewalk. They didn't know it was a seed, they just kicked as they walked. It passed the time and seem to encourage conversation.

“My dad walked in his sleep again,” Kyle said. “He was screaming and woke the whole house.”

“Wow,” Tyler replied. He cocked back his leg and really nailed the seed. It flew several cement tiles down the sidewalk.

“I was scared as shit.” Kyle continued. He liked to cuss. Tyler didn't mind it, but was careful when he chose to do it. Kyle went on. “I ran into my parents bedroom and saw my dad on the floor. There was blood everywhere!”

“What happened?!” Tyler asked, absorbed.

“He had tried to pick up the T.V. in his sleep and dropped it on his foot! Mom patched it up, but only after I got to see all the blood.”

Kyle's mom was a nurse, so it wasn't a big deal. In fact, their whole family seemed familiar with blood and bandages. His mom had patched Kyle up a few times, as he was slightly accident prone.

Once, Kyle and Tyler were playing behind the nearby Walmart. “Nearby” being a forty-five minute walk, but still close enough for regularly occurring adventures. On one such adventure, they were climbing on large stacks of cardboard behind the complex. They were whacking things with sticks, as adventures often consisted of, and Tyler hit a particularly loose wire that was meant to compress the large piles. The wire sprang free and whipped through the air. It plunged deep into Kyle's arm, a whole three inches.

Kyle didn't scream, something Tyler would remember for years to come, but he only stared at it stuck in his arm. He calmly pulled it out and mentioned he could feel it rub against the bone. He then, equally as calm, said they should go home and, forty-five minutes later, they were home. His mom calmly cleaned and wrapped it and Kyle was playing again a half hour later.

So they were used to that kind of thing.

Kyle kicked the seed. It caught air and hit the edge of a low, chain-linked, fence. The seed flipped over the fence and landed in a stranger's back yard. Lost forever. Not much of a loss, for they had reached the gas station. They went inside.

The cashier was helping a customer and barely acknowledged the two kids, surprising considering one was seemingly armed. Both the customer and employee had thin mustaches. They were unusually pale and even looked a little sick. They were healthy, by local standards, but on a larger scale were too skinny and too weathered for their age.

Tyler wasn't listening, but he did overhear the customer lean forward and whisper.

“White power,” he said.

The cashier nodded and the customer left.

To Tyler, at the time, it didn't mean a thing. Years later, it would disgust him.

The pair grabbed their fountain drinks, the largest cups of course, at no extra cost, and paid with what little money they had. They stepped outside and were about to leave when a girl on a bike rolled up. A tomboy, she had short cropped hair, was unnaturally tan, and always had dirty hands.

Tyler was in love with her.

“Hey Alex,” Kyle greeted, somehow unaffected by her burgeoning pheromones. “We're going to the ruins to shoot some stuff. Want to come?”

“Hell yes,” she replied, her voice raspy. “You guys walking?” she asked and got off her bike. It was obviously new.

“Is that a Huffy?” Kyle asked in-between eating another pomegranate seed and taking a sip of his soda. Tyler, realizing he hadn't said a word, was astounded by Kyle's grace. How did he do that? How did he know the right questions to ask...know the right things to say? Tyler was baffled and remained silent.

“Yeah, early birthday present,” she replied and began walking her bike with the boys.

Tyler mustered up the courage and asked, “How old are you going to be?”

“12,” she answered. “Hi, by the way.”

An older woman...with dirty hands. The birth of Tyler's future, repeating, interest.

“Hey,” he greeted, feeling slightly more confident.

The party of three continued down Large River Road while discussing their summers. None of them missed school, but Alex had to take a summer class, which began in two weeks. She didn't seem embarrassed, like Tyler would have been. She owned it. He, on the other hand,

didn't like to stand out. He was an observer. Kept his head low. Liked his freedom and didn't want the attention to take that away...but, suddenly, he wanted to stand out. He felt crowded, but didn't let it show.

They approached a road and made a turn. They switched from the sidewalk to walking in the middle of the street. There was never traffic and if there was, the car could easily go around.

The sun painted the sky blue and the cicadas sang loud as, in the distance, the road danced in the heat. Along the way was a large ditch, deep and wide with only a little water in it. Less than a foot deep, it was black with mud and tadpoles.

They followed the ditch to the end of the road, which opened to a large plot of land. The grass grew out of control around random, cement, foundations to a house that was barely finished from long before they were born. It was safe for the most part, save for a few rusted re-bars sprouting from the foundation like weeds.

The ditch ran into the field and turned sharp around the property, acting as a moat surrounding the back side of the field. Essentially enclosing in the would-be home. Just over the moat was a wall of bamboo trees, made of small circular thickets that rose high and crisscrossed into a canopy.

They didn't discuss the plan. They instinctively knew. Alex laid down her bike while Kyle and Tyler placed their drinks on the ground. Kyle took one last seed from the pomegranate and then carefully placed on top of his cup, keeping off the ground. The three approached the house and each grabbed a cinder-block from a large pile and placed them in a row on the far end of the field, nearest the bamboo. Tyler and Kyle pulled the action figures from their pockets and stood them up on the blocks.

Tyler stood at the blocks and walked just over ten paces, setting a tone of serious competition. Kyle shot first. He pulled out a plastic box filled with copper BBs and filled the gun. He cocked, raised, and fired.

Pop!

It wasn't loud, but felt satisfying.

The BB flew and struck the cinder-block, creating a tiny plume of dust.

“Damn,” Kyle said, to himself more than the others.

He handed it to Tyler. They were quiet. This was serious business.

Tyler took aim and fired.

Pop!

He missed and handed the rifle to Alex.

Like poetry, she flowed. She cocked the barrel and the click of it rhymed. She raised the gun and fired. Tyler's soldier flew off the block and into the air. To Tyler, it rose in slow motion. Spinning, it's limbs flailed. It disappeared in the tall grass.

Tyler was too impressed to react, but Kyle and Alex cheered in unison and, after a moment, he joined them in their celebration.

The shooting lasted for another hour and a half. The sun let up and began to fall. The sky began to turn orange and give way to the moon's patrol into night.

“I've got to get home for dinner,” Alex explained getting on her bike. “I've got family in town and we're cooking a huge meal.”

“It was fun hanging out,” Tyler said, maybe a hair too quickly.

“Thanks guys,” she said and rode off.



Tyler and Kyle began walking back home, leaving their empty cups on the pavement. They were quiet. Kyle was still eating his pomegranate. Tyler noticed the juice from the fruit had stained Kyle's shirt pretty bad. It was red down his neck and chest. He wondered why Kyle didn't seem to care. He wondered how he could still be eating that thing. He stared at the ditch as they walked and for some reason, it was like he saw it for the first time. This moat. He stopped and let Kyle walk ahead.

“You think I could jump the ditch?” Tyler asked. He didn't even know why he did, but the words fell out of his mouth. Almost by mistake. His stomach sank.

Kyle turned around and joined him next to the ditch.

“I don't know,” Kyle said and ate another seed. “It's pretty wide. The walls are steep, too. If you don't make it, you'll fall in.”

Tyler stared at the ditch and Kyle stared at him. He'd never seen the ditch before. He barely remembered it was there. He had been on this road a million times, not literally, he was aware, but a lot and he'd never really noticed it.

Suddenly, he felt trapped by the moat that surrounded the field and ran down the road. It no longer felt like protection.

Tyler backed up.

He never did anything like this. He was content with watching his friends. They were the ones who got hurt. They got hit with wires and had moms who were nurses. They got new bikes and rode them up hills. They got new BB guns. He would never jump.

Tyler took off and sprinted. He was lengthy and wasn't what you'd call athletic. With his elbows crooked and his knees high, he looked like a marionette dashing across a stage.

He reached the edge and leaped into the air.

He soared.

Kyle cheered and Tyler fell short. His feet dug into the wall, his knees banged against the edge, and he slammed flat onto the ground. He should have grabbed at the grass, but the impact was jarring and left him too dazed to react. The force launched him back, his knees acting as a catapult, and he was thrown down into the filthy water below.

Tyler ached. He was drenched. His clothes were filthy. His shirt was stained.

And in that moment, he couldn't get the mud covered grin off his face.