

Bob's father arranged for the family to move into a rental property in a neighboring suburb as they eagerly waited for the completion of their new house. He assured them they'd only live there for about a month. Shortly after they settled into their temporary home, Bob was on his bed, absorbed in reading a comical scene featuring Betty and Jughead. Bob's mother came into his room.

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

"What do you mean?" he asked, half-listening.

"Those comics you're saving are old. They're worthless. You need to throw them away."

"What are you talking about?" He jumped off the bed and stood staring at her, struggling to come to grips with the gravity of her statement. He had always taken pride in his comic book collection. It exceeded forty issues and to him, they were priceless.

"Your interests are changing, Bob. Think how lightning bugs, cartoons, and playground equipment have become meaningless. Even the things you find entertaining today are different from when we first moved from Ohio last year."

"But they're my favorites. I like them. And they're still entertaining." He paced around his room, his world in shambles.

"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, you're eleven years old. There's a world out there you should explore, be a part of, including friends you haven't seen for over a year."

She turned and walked out after making it clear that Bob's life was about to change.

The idea of parting with his collection was horrible, as unnerving as anything he'd ever experienced. They represented a time capsule, a refuge from boredom.

Being deprived of Dick Tracy, Archie, Jughead, and his superheroes stung worse than being sentenced to a diet of cottage cheese and lima beans.

Bob couldn't begin to comprehend losing his literary companions to a garbage bin. He had no intention of surrendering without even trying to avoid this catastrophe. He knew he needed to hide them. But where? Being in a rental house limited his options. It didn't have an attic, and the owner kept the garage locked.

His search led to an air vent strapped to the ceiling in the basement. A movable access panel helped provide a secure place to conceal his comics. With careful timing and a sturdy chair, he hid the windows to his past.

A month after the family moved, his father returned from a National Guard outing and gave Bob his Army footlocker. He always wished he had one—the holy grail of stencil-imprinted military furniture. He was excited to show his friends this official United States-issued artifact, a gem any boy would cherish.

The footlocker had scratches, nicks and chipped edges—markings from its travels, its secrets. Could he add to its history, its stories? Bob wondered.

He fiddled with the latches, moved the upper compartment and replaced it several times. It was exciting to imagine what he could protect. As he sat there admiring his new treasure, the locker's safekeeping potential rang a bell. It reminded him he hid his comic collection in the rental house several weeks ago.

Saturday, two weeks later, his parents had a laundry list of errands that would fill the rest of the afternoon. They took his brother and sister, Tom and Susan, with them. Bob begged off with a typical excuse; he needed to study for next week's history test and watch a news show.

Seconds after they piled into the car, Bob grabbed his bike and launched into this journey, emboldened with the prospects this adventure held. He sped across the long bridge and over the river that sliced through the center of town, exhilarated from the wind against his face and his hair dancing in the breeze. Now was the hour to

retrieve his collection without his parents realizing he'd left. If no one was there, however, he knew his trip would be for naught.

As he approached his destination, his enthusiasm sprang alive when he spotted an old van in the driveway. The house had a simple, nondescript appearance, sitting on the corner and neighbored by vacant lots. Bob was glad he only lived there for a month after spotting the rusty gutters in need of a fresh coat of paint and a roof begging for new shingles.

Eager to complete this undertaking in record time, he hopped off his bike and raced past the thorny bushes lining the path to the front porch. He rang the doorbell, relieved to hear the familiar sound of someone unbolting the lock. The tenant, a middle-aged, slender man with dark eyes and ashen complexion, opened the door.

Struggling to catch his breath, Bob said, "Hi. My family moved from this house several months ago. I hid my comic books in the basement and wanted to take them home."

The man looked at Bob, then out to his bicycle. "Well, you're welcome to come in and get them."

Bob happily accepted his invitation.

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

"No, we live on the other side of town now." Bob felt disoriented since the man's furnishings replaced the arrangement Bob's family had in the living room and made it seem so different from when he live there.

"You had quite a trip. I'm surprised your parents let you ride a bike this far from home."

"Oh, they don't know I'm here," he said as he noticed piles of clothes in chairs and magazines and empty cigarette packs scattered on a table.

"Care for a soda or glass of water?" The man turned toward the kitchen, his hair fluttering in the fan's listless breeze.

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

“What’s your hurry?” the man said as he led Bob to the back of the house.

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

Dusty sunlight oozed out from between the blinds and dirty windows as he trailed the man to the stairway. The man flipped on a light switch and they proceeded down into the basement.

Once on the lower level Bob noticed how the dead air still had a musty odor. The lighting there had always been weak, and after his bike ride in broad daylight, he strained to get his bearings. The man followed Bob as he wandered around the dimly lit surroundings, assessing 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 as the dim light and shadows conveyed a weird effect on his face, casting it in a dull shade of pale.

“I have a short one upstairs.” The man turned and started toward the stairs. He quickened his pace as he walked across the concrete floor, his footsteps echoing like a fading drumbeat.

Bob’s mind plunged from retrieving his comics to what was happening. No one knew he was here except this man and why did he tell him that his parents didn’t know he came here?

As the man turned to walk up the stairway, Bob realized he was going to be alone in this man’s basement. His thoughts retreated to an earlier situation when his mother and father had warned him about getting into a car with strangers.

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

Absent a response, Bob called out, “I told him I’d bring them back,” speaking louder as the man continued climbing the stairs.

Didn’t he hear me? Bob thought. “He loves comic books,” he shouted. Bob’s thoughts raced from a feeling of not being heard, to one of being ignored.

The lights went out. In the sudden darkness that surrounded him, Bob started to scream.

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

Bob sensed prickly goosebumps rising on his arm—a gnawing in the pit of his stomach. As he stood there, sounds he hadn’t paid any attention to before became magnified: footsteps from floorboards creaking above, the slow dripping of the utility sink faucet, the brushing of his fingers as he rubbed his hand across his forehead.

He scanned this room of bare concrete walls encased below a two-story house and felt as if they were closing in on him. He feared the door would close, a horrifying creature would grab him—that he shouldn’t be down there.

Bob wiped at the dampness on his lips then took a few steps, his mind racing with the thought of charging up the stairs before anyone slammed the door shut.

The man appeared at the top of the stairway. Something protruded in front of him. Bob stood motionless, his feet rooted, unable to think as the man slowly came down the stairs.

When he reached the bottom, he walked toward Bob. “I’m not sure where I put the two-step, but this short ladder is better than a chair and it’s longer.”

He placed it below the vent. Bob looked at him for a moment before beginning his ascent. As he climbed, he shifted between glancing at the vent and this man. Now he understood why a blank expression, accompanied by dead silence, can be so discomfoting. Bob pushed the door open, shivering at the muffled screech. He reached around for the comics—a collection that had pleased him so much throughout the years had lost its allure in a matter of minutes.

They weren’t there.

In a fleeting moment of confusion, Bob backed down, senselessly muttering about the comic books being gone. The man said nothing. As the man folded the ladder, Bob turned and hurried toward the stairs. He began climbing, grabbing at the

handrail for speed. As he quickened his pace, he envisioned hands reaching out from under the dark steps, gripping his ankles.

He rushed to the front of the house and threw open the screen door, flinching at the loud snap when it sprang shut behind him. Thanking the man for his troubles had vanished on the basement floor. He grabbed his bike and pedaled away as fast as possible, stealing a glance over his shoulder at each intersection—for what, he didn't know.

Pain seared through his legs when he reached the river. Out of breath, he walked his bicycle over the sidewalk that spanned the bridge, taking an occasional glimpse at traffic—or for anyone behind him. Tired and confused, he stopped halfway across and stared out... at nothing.

His mind raced with questions. What happened to the comic books? Were they discovered because they blocked the air? Had his mother heard him place them in the vent? Did she throw them out before they moved? Where were they? He couldn't ask her.

His eyes burned from surveying the last of the afternoon sun as it continued sinking below the horizon. He raised his hand for shade, then peered into the flowing water, into the deep, shifting ripples. A branch came into view. He became spellbound as it floated along until it seemed to speed up before disappearing into the distance.

Returning home empty-handed, he was disappointed to find no one there. But he didn't feel right about anything. The comic books were out of his life, an unexpected ending to what had begun with such high expectations.

As he retreated upstairs, he clutched the handrail tighter with each step. Once inside his room, he looked at the footlocker. As if captivated, he stood there staring at it before walking over, his eyes drawn to its nicks, scratches, chipped edges—small imperfections that gave it character—yet said so much. A slight crack almost hidden near the bottom and going halfway across the front caught his eye, a defect that must have escaped his earlier observations.

He opened the footlocker and looked in, then flipped the latches closed tightly, as if locking something inside, deep inside. Coated with the day's events, he wished he hadn't even gone. What happened today was a secret he couldn't tell anyone. He sat on the locker and watched the shadows closing in on housetops, the sun disappearing, the light from the streetlamp filtering through the leaves as he waited for his mom and dad to come home. And Tommy. And Susie.