

Worms

Joshua Theodore Pickett III was, at 5, far too young for his name. It was a good name, he had been told – a name that had existed for at least a hundred years. Joshua Theodore Pickett III was not, however, too young to have an almost unhealthy obsession with dinosaurs, an obsession that he now indulged in behind his house in the lush prehistoric forest that was an unkempt corner of his back yard.

Joshua (as he was called when he was not in trouble) lay on his belly in the mown lawn, his hands in front of him, each controlling a different plastic dinosaur. One of the dinosaurs, the predominantly yellow one, was a three-horned plant eating type that Joshua knew to be called triceratops. The other – the predominantly pink one – was a bipedal meat eater known to the scientific world as Allosaurus, but that Joshua (who was naïve of such things) just called T-Rex anyway. As the creatures tromped amongst the wild clover and coltsfoot, Joshua supplied the soundtrack: thundering footsteps, wild roars, and crunching bites as the plastic teeth (or horns) of one of the pastel beasts dug into the plastic hide of the other. The Allosaurus was dominating this particular battle, now chewing happily on the neck of the triceratops. Joshua was lost completely in this world until an anachronism flew his way from the back porch.

“Joshua,” his mother said, “would you like to go over to Trevor's house to play for a while?”

Joshua dropped his beasts and pushed himself to his feet.

“Do I have to?” He asked, dropping his shoulders dramatically.

“I think it would be for the best. I have to run some errands. Now come on.” She beckoned him inside with a wave of her hand then just stood, holding the screen door open with her body. Joshua picked up his dinosaurs and walked past her, through her bubble of scent, and inhaled deeply. She smelled like fresh soap, airy and light, like the sheets that had been hung outside when the dryer had been broken. Under it all was a softer, sweeter smell that reminded Joshua of sweet tea in the summer – her perfume. Joshua stopped and turned to his mother as she closed and locked the back door.

“You smell pretty, Mommy,” he said, looking at the side of her head. He caught a glint of gold under her shoulder-length brown hair. He noticed then that she was wearing lipstick, red like his model firetruck, the black skirt he rarely saw her wear, and a polo shirt.

“Do you have to go to work, Mommy?” He asked, not really caring about the answer (for Joshua had begun to warm up to the idea of going to Trevor's house, where Trevor's mother always offered him strawberry ice cream and Trevor's father often played his guitar for them).

“No,” his mother said, briefly touching her earrings, “no, Mommy's just going to run some errands and then she'll pick you up, OK? Now, grab whatever toys you'd like to take to Trevor's and get in the car. Mommy's going to be late if we don't hurry.” She cocked her head and raised her eyebrows as though it would make things go faster.

“Just Mommy and Daddy Dinosaur!” Joshua exclaimed, holding up the two plastic monsters he still carried.

“Alright,” his mother said, shouldering a small black bag and grabbing her keys, “let's go.”

###

Joshua's mother stayed in the car until Trevor's mom (who Joshua had learned to call Mrs. Dunn) answered the door to their home. The two mothers waved to each other and Mrs. Dunn told Joshua that Trevor was in his room. Joshua thanked her and walked down the short hallway until he came to a white door marked with a poorly drawn (though to Joshua, expertly drawn) skull and

crossbones. He knocked, as he had been taught was polite, and the door was answered by an aryan looking boy slightly taller (though the same age) as Joshua. The boy grinned and stuck out a marker-stained hand.

“Josh!” (Only Joshua's friends called him this) “I'm so happy to see you!”

Joshua tucked the Allosaurus under his left arm and shook Trevor's hand.

“I'm pleased to see you, too, friend,” Joshua replied. They performed this routine almost every time they greeted each other, for it was what they believed men did, and Joshua and Trevor deeply wanted to be considered men like their fathers. When the handshake was over, Trevor turned and entered his room and Joshua followed, placing his dinosaurs down on the desk next to a partially completed model of an airplane. Specifically, he set them down next to the box of parts that Mr. Dunn (who was Trevor's father) had cut from the frames for Trevor so that Trevor would not have to handle a razor.

“So what are we going to do?” Asked Joshua. Trevor walked to a pile of markers and white paper by his bed (where he had apparently been working for a while) and sat cross-legged before them.

“I dunno,” he told Joshua, “I'm just making some comic books. Wanna make one, too?”

“Sure,” Joshua said, and he walked over and took a seat across from Trevor. He picked up a page that Trevor had just completed and tried to follow the story line. The figures, which were little more than fat stick figures, flew through the air and blew up buildings and cars in each panel, unaided (or unhindered, however you may look at it) by dialogue.

“So who is your comic about?” Joshua asked innocently.

“Well,” replied Trevor, “the one you're holding...lemme see,” he took the page from Joshua's hands and looked at it, “this one is about Really Big Man. He's really big and he can pick up really big things.”

“Oh, OK,” Joshua said, although he did not see that the hero of the sheet was any bigger than

the other characters, nor did he see the hero picking up anything really big.

“And this one,” Trevor continued, focusing his attention on coloring a large explosion on his current page, “is about his enemy, Mr. Evil Man. He is really evil and he likes to kill people and stuff.”

“Oh,” Joshua said.

“Do you want to make a comic with them?” Trevor asked, too engulfed in making proper flames to look up or offer a blank page.

“No, that's OK,” Joshua told him, “maybe I'll draw my own hero.”

“If you want to,” Trevor told him swapping out his orange marker for a red one, “here, have some paper.” He handed Joshua a few sheets of paper.

Joshua took the sheets, picked up a black marker and started thinking. He didn't want to make a super hero, everyone draws super heroes and he knew that.

“Hey, Trevor,” he said, “what do you think I should draw?”

“I think you should draw some comics about Really Big Man or about Mr. Evil Man. But if you don't want to, you don't have to.”

“I think I want to draw a comic about me.”

“Why do you want to do that? Will you have laser-vision?”

“No. I don't have laser-vision.”

“Will you have super strength?”

“No. I don't have super strength.”

“What are you going to have?”

“I'm going to have all the me-powers.”

“The what?”

“The me-powers. You know, the powers I have. Like...like...I can eat a whole lot of ice cream.”

Trevor looked at him blankly, his marker tip bleeding a small pool of red on the chest of his

latest sketch of Really Big Man.

“But,” Trevor said slowly, “why would I read it?”

“You don't have to read it,” Joshua said, starting to draw a sketch of himself.

“Then why draw it?”

“Because I can.”

“Fine.” Trevor looked down at his page and the dark dot of red on Really Big Man's chest, sighed, and crumpled up the paper.

“I'm tired of drawing. Do you want to get some ice cream?”

“In a little bit.” Joshua was too busy for ice cream. He wanted to get everything just right. He was going to write about his day. He was trying right now to remember all the little plants, the miniature trees and bushes, that he had played in with his dinosaurs. As he drew each one, sketched out the leaves and stalks, he sucked in and bit on his lower lip, a habit that left him not only with constantly bucked teeth, but also quite often with small purple depressions above his chin.

Trevor, who had left the room, now returned with a small bowl of strawberry ice cream.

“What was your mom going to do?” Trevor said between mouthfuls.

“Huh? Oh, I don't know. She had to do some errands.”

Trevor sat on his bed, hanging his legs over the side. The room was silent except for the clinking of his spoon against the bowl and the faint shuffling sound of Joshua's drawing.

“Hey Josh,” Trevor said before slurping some ice cream sludge from the bottom of his bowl.

“Yeah?”

“Wanna go play outside?”

“OK. I'm almost done.”

“Can I read it?”

“It doesn't have any words.”

“Then can I look at it?”

“OK.”

Joshua finished a few scribbles and then handed it to Trevor. Trevor set his bowl on his bed, jumped down and took the sheet. He stood looking it over until his face scrunched up in confusion and he gave it back.

“I don't get it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why did you draw a comic of you playing with your dinosaurs and then going to someone's house?”

“Because that's what happened today.”

“Oh. Is that my house?”

“Yes, stupid. Of course it is. See? That's your mom.” Joshua pointed at a figure standing in a door frame in front of a smaller figure.

“Oh. Is that your mom?” Trevor pointed at a figure next to an image of Joshua.

“Of course!”

“What are those on her head? Hula-hoops?”

“No, stupid, those are her earrings.”

“OK. Cool. I'm bored. Let's go outside.” Trevor dropped the page and left the room, calling back “come on, slowpoke!”

Joshua looked only briefly at the page lying face down on the beige carpet before dropping the now capped marker and following Trevor to his backyard.

When Joshua stepped outside the back door, Trevor was busy attempting to climb to the roof of his dog, Rusty's house. He had backed up about five feet, and took a running start before leaping up and trying to catch the peak of the shingled roof with his hands. Trevor only barely missed (being just

slightly too short to make the jump) and slid down the roof a little ways before falling flat on his backside next to the red wooden structure.

“Are you okay?” Joshua asked, walking over and extending a hand to help Trevor to his feet.

“Yeah, I'm OK. I just wish I was taller. I bet you can see forever on that dog house.” Trevor brushed himself off and walked over to his mother's flower garden, where a shiny silver trowel was stuck, green handle straight up, in the soft earth. He dropped to his knees and began digging in the dirt.

“I'm gonna look for worms,” he declared.

Joshua went over to him, found a twig on the ground, and crouched to prod at the moist soil. The smell reminded him of fresh rain, only the sky was clear, the sun beaming. The warmth felt good on the back of his neck, and it seemed to warm him to the core, the blood near his exposed skin bringing heat to everywhere else in his body.

“Look! I found one!”

Trevor reached into the hole he had been digging and pulled out a big, fat earthworm that was nearly as long as his arm. He held it out to Joshua, who took it in his cupped hands.

The worm was heavier than it appeared to be, and Joshua – who had held many worms in his short life – was almost surprised by it. He stroked the critter with an extended forefinger, wiping bits of dark soil and mucus from its body.

“Isn't it cool?” Trevor asked, more rhetorically than anything.

“Yeah,” Joshua answered, “I wish we could keep it as a pet.”

“Why? Worms are cool, but I wouldn't want them around all the time. Half the fun is finding them.”

“But what's the point of looking for them all the time? You don't get to have fun with them unless you spend all the time going to look for them. I'd rather just have one I could play with whenever I wanted.”

“That's what you think. I like looking for them. It means that they're more special.”

Trevor took the worm from Joshua carefully, lifting it from its middle and cradling it paternally in his palms. He placed it in the bottom of the hole he had dug and then covered it slowly, solemnly up with dirt until the soil looked more or less undisturbed. He and Joshua continued to dig holes, finding worms and holding them briefly before returning them to the soil until Joshua's mother came back.

#

As Joshua climbed into the passenger seat of his mother's Volvo coupe, laying his dinosaurs on his lap before buckling his seat belt.

“Here sweetie,” his mother said, handing him a white cup, “I picked you up a soda. I hope you didn't have any while you were here.”

“No, ma'am,” he said, taking the cup from her and taking a sip. Vanilla cola.

“Did you have a good time?” She asked him.

“Yes. We dug for worms and made some comics.” He sipped his soda slowly, holding the cup with both hands.

Joshua's mother drove carefully, not even sparing a glance at him. She smelled different now to Joshua. She smelled like copper, like Joshua's Folger's coffee tin full of pennies and nickels. Her perfume was even more faint than before.

“I think I'm going to make pork chops for dinner. Would you prefer broccoli or asparagus with it?”

Joshua had no preference (as, like most young boys, he tended to avoid the greener foods in life) and he merely shrugged and nursed his soda.

“I think your father will probably want asparagus. He's going to be hungry when he gets home. You know how hard he works at the office.” She sighed deeply. “We both know how hard he works.”

Joshua was nearly finished with his soda. He sucked the last bit from the bottom of the cup

with a loud slurp. He shook the cup, rattling the ice.

“We're almost home, sweetie,” his mother said, “be sure you don't leave the cup in the car, okay?”

“Okay.”

#

Joshua Theodore Pickett III was in his room, laying on his floor and leading his plastic army men into battle against an enemy only he could see. His mother was downstairs cooking, the smell of pork chops creeping up the stairs and under the door into his room, snaking tendrils into his nostrils. Joshua heard the front door of his house open. His father was home. His heart jumped slightly with excitement. He dropped his toys and ran downstairs.

He was halfway down the carpeted staircase when his father, who was hanging his coat up on the hooks near the door directly in front of the foot of the stairs, noticed him and a smile opened under his drooping eyes. Joshua ran up to him and threw his arms around his father's leg.

“Hey champ,” his father said softly, “is your mother home?”

“Yes sir, she's cooking.”

Joshua's father picked him up and carried him into the kitchen. He walked over to Joshua's mother (who was standing at the kitchen island heaping food from pans onto plates) said “thank you so much, dear” and kissed her on the cheek. He paused after kissing her, his lips just inches from her face. He let Joshua slide down his leg and onto the ground. Joshua walked over to the sink and climbed up on his mother's step stool and started to wash his hands. In the background, he heard his parents talking.

“Did you go somewhere today, June?”

“Yeah, I had to go and drop off some dry cleaning, so I took Joshua to the Dunn's house for a play date.”

“Dry cleaning, huh? Did you take my greatcoat?”

“Oh, shoot. I forgot it honey. I can take it tomorrow; the cleaners is still open on Sunday.”

“I can take it. That's alright.”

Joshua had finished washing his hands (and he had done a far better job than most little boys his age) and walked into the living room and sat at the table. His mother followed him shortly thereafter and placed his plate and her plate on the table. His father entered with his own plate and a glass of water. He took his place at the head of the table (where Joshua was taught that the man of the house should always sit).

“So, champ, did you have a good day at the Dunn's? How's Trevor?” He took a forkful of potatoes and shoveled them into his mouth.

“It was fun,” Joshua said, “we dug for worms. I found a bunch of them. Trevor said it was stupid to have worms for pets. I think it would be fun.” Joshua prodded his pork chop with his knife.

“A worm would be a boring pet, kid. Sure, they're fun to look at or to hold, but you can't walk them or really pet them. They don't sit in your lap or wag their little tails when they're happy to see you.” He reached over and started to cut up Joshua's pork chop.

“Trevor said that digging for them was all the fun.”

“He may be right, kid. Think about how much fun you had digging for them.” He finished cutting up the meat and then went back to his own plate, pushing around the asparagus. “Can I tell you a secret? I hate asparagus.” He gave Joshua knowing wink and a grin and glanced at Joshua's mother, who had been eating slowly and quietly since sitting down.

“June, did you get to say hi to the Dunns?”

Joshua's mother stopped eating and took a sip of water.

“I only briefly waved. I didn't want to take too long.”

“Oh, I see. The dry cleaners closed early today, huh?”

Joshua was stacking up his asparagus stalks like little logs on his plate. He didn't like the smell or taste of asparagus but he liked pretending with them. They were fun to play with.

Joshua's mother took a deep sigh. "Richard," she said now, setting down her fork and picking up a paper towel from beside her plate, "there's something we need to talk about after dinner." She dabbed her lips and then set the paper towel back down and shook a stray strand of hair from her face.

Joshua's father paused for a moment, his fork piercing a piece of meat on his plate. His grin faded only slightly. "I know," he said softly.

Joshua (who had been listening intently, for that is what little boys do at the dinner table) said, with an air of worry "is it about me? Did I do something wrong?"

Joshua's dad smiled slightly and took a drink of water. Joshua's mother bit on her lips briefly and then said "no, sweetie, it's not about you. It's about something else."

"Okay," Joshua said, let down that he was to be kept out of a conversation. He smiled suddenly, speared a piece of meat and said to nobody in particular "look, I'm a T-Rex!" and shoved it into his mouth, gnawing at it and making small roars and growls.

"Eat quietly, champ," his father told him, taking another sip of water, "mealtime is a special time." He looked up at Joshua's mother, who had stopped eating and was in the middle of a deep sigh. "Mealtime is a time for family."