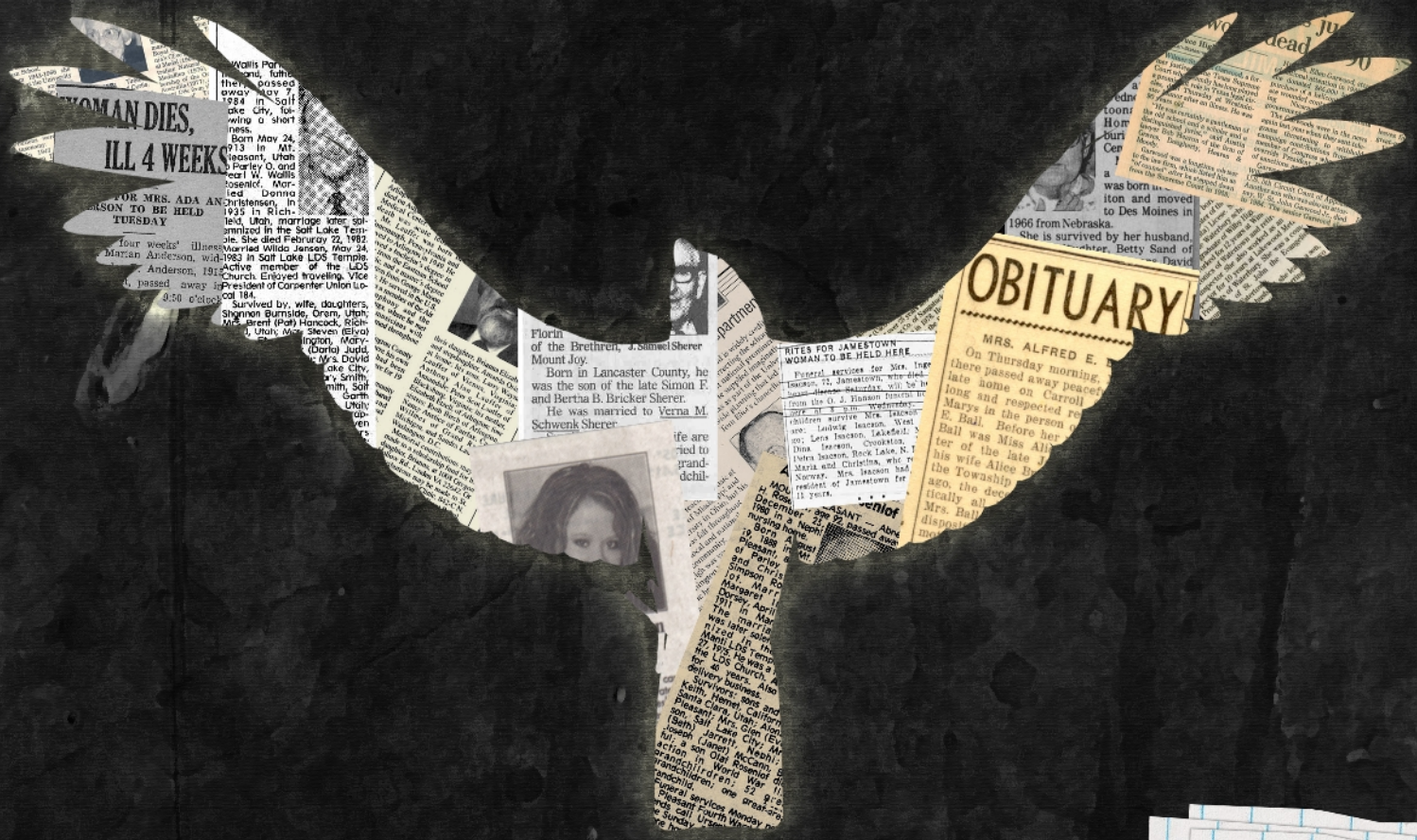


THE GRAVEROBBERS



note to future self:
Look into getting a
set of astronaut
diapers.

ERIC ETKIN

THE
GRAVEROBBERS

BY
ERIC ETKIN

Note to future self: Keep working on telekinetic powers.

1: New Year

I spent most of my summer vacation trying to lift things with my brain. My plan went something like this: 1) Spend all my free time intently staring at objects. 2) Furrow eyebrows together. 3) Glare like an unblinking zombie at a pen, Transformer, or Rubik's Cube until it launches into the air *purely with my mind*.

When I'd mastered this superpower by the end of the summer, I'd walk into the beginning school year with a newfound aura of confidence. Mystique. Girls would look at me in *that way*. Guys would respect me, despite my nerd hair and coke-bottle glasses. People would look approvingly and say, "Man, that Derek Brendon really got his act together!"

I'd sit in the *front* row in homeroom. Mr. Gates would call us up, one by one, to have us tell the rest of the class how we spent our summer vacations. It'd be my turn. Instead of drooping my head and not making eye contact with pretty much everyone, I'd stare them all in the face, grin, and fling their books into the air *purely with my mind*.

Then I'd show others my secret. But just my friends. I'd tell them that by staring long enough, by believing *strong* enough, they too could master my wickedly amazing superpowers. Sure, they wouldn't be as powerful as *me* (the undisputed master of telekinesis), but they'd be good enough to hold their own against any jocks, gangs, or Commies that came our way. We'd form a team. A super team. And we'd be the coolest kids in *all* of Glens Falls.

Yep. That was the plan.

Except it didn't work out that way. Instead, staring at pens and Transformers for long periods of time gave me a headache.

So that summer, I didn't get my superpowers. That *fall*, it was business as usual at school. I guess worse, because it meant I was now going into seventh grade -you know, the big kids' grade- and I wasn't sure how different it would be from sixth. Yeah, there were rumors: Like four hours of homework a night, *typed* term papers that had to be at *least* ten pages long, and teachers that flunked out of college professor school, taking their frustrations out on geeky, skinny, half-Jew seventh graders. Blech.

All my friends were still a year behind me. Sure, I knew that going in the first day, but it was painfully obvious by the end of the first week. We'd walk to school at 7:20, crowding the front steps until the doors opened at 8:05. Bells would ring and next thing you'd know, we'd be running off to our respective homerooms. *Ring*. Time to leave your friends. *Ring*.

Most days were the normal suckfest, book-marked by highlights such as my fly being open, getting whaled in the face with a dodgeball, or forgetting the combination to my locker. Every day was a new adventure in embarrassing crapitude. You could say I was absorbed in my geek-ridden world of self-pity. Some days more than others, but on the whole, it wasn't the best of first school-weeks.

That might be the reason I didn't notice the rusty Uhaul. It pulled in a few houses down the block on Monday and left as uneventfully as it showed up. A rusty Ryder truck appeared a few days later. I didn't notice that, either.

That is, I *wouldn't* have noticed, unless Todd mentioned it to me. By "mention," I mean a small rock thrown at my bedroom window. By "small" I mean something large and noisy. It was Friday night, a little after supper. I want to say *it was precisely 6:35 PM*, but honestly, I have no idea because I was buried in one of my GI Joe comics.

Crack.

Crack. Crack.

Snake Eyes and the rest of the Joe team could wait.

I slid the window open. The rocks scattered down the roof and tumbled back to the ground. The bitter fall air snerfed into my nose, and tangy smoke from the neighborhood furnaces made me want to sneeze. I squinted into the darkness and looked down. A flashlight waved up in my eyes.

"Hey! Whatcha doing?"

"Nothing. Reading... Why?"

"Somebody new moved in across from my grandma's house."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!" Todd waved the flashlight down the road, as if the pathetic ten-foot beam could make it to his target. "Right down *there*." He blasted the light back in my face. "So whatcha doing? Wanna spy?"

"I'll be down in a sec."

I broke out my special ops gear. *The* special ops gear: black shirt, camouflage pants, Swiss-army knife, fold-up binoculars, signal whistle, Band Aids, and cheesy crackers. I stuffed my gear into my deep army-pants pockets and flash-tied my shoelaces. With my pants crunching, clacking, and jingling, I bolted downstairs.

Mom stopped me before I made it out the door.

“Where are *you* going?”

“Outside. Todd’s outside.” I danced around, bouncing from one foot to the other and hoping not to look too excited. “We’re going over to his house.”

“Why are you dressed like that?”

“I dunno. We’re playing army. Ryan will probably be there too.”

“It’s dark outside and you’re wearing black. You’ll get hit by a car.”

“Not if I stay on the sidewalk.”

“You’re wearing a jacket.” Mom shuffled over to the closet in her fuzzy pink slippers and fumbled around. “A-ha.” A nylon jacket materialized and was shoved in my face. Crinkly. White. Bright. “There. Now people can see you. Be home by nine.”

I snatched the jacket and put my left arm in the sleeve, making a half-hearted attempt to look like I intended to wear it. As soon as Mom turned around, I dashed out the door, and ran around to the front of the house.

Todd waited with his beefy arms were crossed. “Took you long enough.”

“Why you gotta throw rocks at my window? Can’t you ring the door bell like everyone else?”

Todd’s head shook back and forth. He leaned in. “Secret mission,” he whispered. “Don’t wanna wake anybody.”

“It’s not even seven o’clock yet!”

“Shh! C’mon.”

Todd ran down the street towards his house, sneaking from tree to bush to garage and trying to keep his hefty body hidden. I walked a house-length or two behind him, doing my best to look like we weren’t associated. Besides, with my pockets rattling all over the place, I wasn’t very sneaky.

Todd pressed up against his neighbor’s weeping willow tree. The tendrils of leaves swept back and forth in a gentle breeze, sweeping the ground like leafy elephant trunks. I could tell he was waiting for me to creep up, so I hunched down and skulked the rest of the way over.

When I put my hands against my pockets to stop the rattling, the crinkle of the cracker wrapper crunched nice and loud. Todd looked down at me and his face perked up. “What do you got in there?”

“Binoculars. Band-aids. Stuff.”

“What’s the crunching noise?”

“Crackers.”

“Cheesy crackers?”

“Yep.”

“Are they the orange ones?”

I passed some over.

“Thankth.” Todd chewed the orange cheesiness for what seemed like forever, then pointed across the street. 98 Copper. Sure enough, boxes littered the driveway. The Ryder moving truck and a gold Pontiac were parked out front. Lights were clicked on all over the house, and there were no curtains barring the onslaught of my ultra-powerful 4X magnification folding binoculars. Operation: Neighbor-Skulk had officially begun.

“I think we could move in closer,” Todd said.

I didn’t disagree. *Could* we move in closer? You bet. Did I actually *want* to? Honestly, I was perfectly content underneath the willow tree. Closer? That’s what binoculars were for. Todd, however, had other plans. Not waiting for a response, he jogged across the street, diving behind a row of hedges. The pile of moving boxes was only a few feet away.

I shrugged and did the same. By the time I made it across the street, Todd was flat on his stomach, crawling across asphalt and gravel. I was *not* getting my hands dirty. Or gravelly. If there’s one thing I couldn’t stand, it was little pebbles and rocks sticking into my palms.

I let Todd do his thing and watched him shimmy up the newcomers’ driveway, staying as close to the boxes and hedges as possible. If it wasn’t for the faint glow of streetlight inching its way across the road, he would have been totally invisible. I was impressed.

Todd disappeared around the corner of their garage while I waited. Inside the newcomers’ house, I could hear the occasional slamming of doors and muffled voices I’d never heard before. Since the windows were shut, I couldn’t hear what was actually being said, but I imagined a conversation that went something like this:

“Special covert agents Derek Brendon and Todd Bradley are onto us.”

“Brendon and Bradley?! I told you we were in trouble.”

“Trouble? Todd Bradley is trained in over thirty ways to kill a man with just a sheet of loose-leaf paper. Agent Brendon has telekinetic mind powers. We’re in for more than just trouble my evil comrade!”

This little scenario went on in my head for awhile, like an adventure movie without all the lame talky-talky dialogue and stupid comedic sidekicks. At some point where I was imagining a

romantic subplot with a robotic Russian double agent and explosions the size of Mt. Rushmore, I realized Todd hadn't come back yet.

Note to future self: Look into getting a set of astronaut diapers.

2: Trapped

Thwack!

The aluminum backdoor smacked shut. I hadn't heard it swing open, but that sound only meant one thing: Someone had come outside. I stopped breathing. I looked toward the garage, squinting in the darkness to see if I could spot Invisible Todd anywhere. The garage door itself was open, and I was starting to suspect Todd had disappeared inside.

Resuming my normal bodily functions by taking quiet, shallow breaths, I peeked around the boxes and was surprised by a sudden flash. Whoever had come outside had clicked on the backdoor light. I crouched behind the boxes again and rubbed my eyes beneath my tennis-racket glasses. Bright spots were everywhere, bouncing around like annoying ping-pongs of blindness.

My vision cleared after I blinked a few times. I heard the scraping of footsteps across the gravel driveway. The sounds were moving away from me -towards the garage- so I stuck my head out from the box pile to get a better look.

The back of a tall man was facing my direction. The man lurched like something out of a zombie movie, though this was more likely from exhaustion than brainless undeath. A feeble attempt had been made to disguise his baldness with a comb-over, and sweaty scalp glinted in the light.

In his right hand were two white gloves, or rather, two formerly white gloves. Something dark covered part of them. As the man walked into the garage, he clicked on the light there too. Sure enough, Todd was cowering in the corner, his eyes wide. Busted.

But the man didn't see Todd. Instead, he lurched over to a metal trash can, pried open the lid, and tossed his gloves inside. Sealing the can shut with a whack of his fist, the man left the garage with no hint of detecting Todd at all- But not before pulling the loud and squeaky garage door shut.

Mr. Lurch shuffled back into his house. *Thwack!* The backdoor smacked shut again and the outside light turned off. I was alone in the darkness, save for Panicked Todd on the other side of the garage door.

There was no way I was going to open that squeaky door. Spy rule number one? *When sneaking around, don't make a lot of noise.* Pretty simple. If I opened that garage door, I might as well have lit a bunch of firecrackers on Mr. Lurch's doorstep. There had to be another way.

I tip-toed to the garage and cupped my hands over the door window. I saw Todd's face glaring at me from the other side of the glass. He stabbed his finger, pointing towards the back of the building. I fumbled around to the other side.

The back window was cracked open. I grabbed the frame and heaved, but it remained stuck in place and wasn't moving anywhere.

"C'mon, get me out of here!" Todd whispered.

“Hold on. The window isn’t budging.”

“Push harder!”

“I *did* push harder! It’s not moving and it’s painted shut.” The glass was scratched and dusty. I peered through as best I could. Near the front of the garage was a small side door on the left. The metal trash can was in front of it. Maybe the door was unlocked. “Go over to the side door.”

“OK.”

I could hear Todd stumbling around on the inside, knocking over garden equipment and who knows what else. Todd was *not* being very spy-like. After a few seconds, he made his way around to the side door and knocked softly. I turned the knob and pulled. The door gave a little, but didn’t open up.

Todd’s fingers appeared through the small crack. “Hey... it’s latched. There’s a padlock on the inside.”

I sighed. And I thought. Then I sighed again. There had to be a way to get Todd out without opening the noisy garage door. I moved around again to the front. I squinted through the dirty glass. Sure enough, there was a padlock on the side door.

I cleared my head. I thought of white paper and nothingness. I relaxed my body, closed my eyes, and focused on the padlock, imagining it in my head. There it was, resting against the side door and securely latched through its loop. Thinking about the keyhole, I clenched my jaw and ground my teeth. Veins nearly burst through my forehead.

Then I focused on just the padlock and willed it to open *purely with my mind*.

Nothing happened.

Stupid lock. Stupid no telekinetic powers. Stupid me. Todd stood on the other side of the glass, staring at me like I was a complete moron. Actually, that was putting it nicely, since even a

moron would have been smart enough to notice the backdoor light switching on again.

Unfortunately, I was so annoyed with my lack of super powers that it didn't dawn on me someone had come back outside. That is, until I turned around. Until I heard the-

Thwack!

I jumped. I felt my stomach drop through my butt. Mr. Lurch glared at me. He was illuminated by the backdoor light, glowing like a white fire and seeming taller, meaner, and a thousand times scarier than when I was safe behind the box pile. Three days of stubble sprouted from his face. Stains from I-don't-know-what covered his corduroy overalls.

A rag was in his hand, matted with something dark and sticky. Something blackish and red.

"What're you doing in my yard? Huh? You trying to steal somethin'?"

My armpits got squishy. "My... uh... friend got trapped in your garage." OK. Good so far... "We were playing catch and the ball bounced in there."

"You were playing catch. At night." Mr. Lurch stepped closer. *Too* closer. I could smell Doritos and chocolate milk on his breath. Another combination of less pleasant odors lurked close behind those. "You always wear breakin' and enterin' clothes when you're playing catch?" He pointed at my spy gear and shuffled over to the garage door. "Dumb kids. Your mom let you go out like that? Could be hit by a car or somethin', not that it's any of *my* business."

He heaved the squeaky garage door skyward. "Where you boys live?"

Todd tiptoed out. "At my grandma's. Across the street... until my dad picks me up at night."

I pointed towards my red house. "Down there."

"Neighbors, huh?" Mr. Lurch pried the garbage can back open and tossed his rag inside. He resealed it with another pound of his fist, then looked me and Todd up and down. "If this were the 60's, I woulda belted you both red." He wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Alright, get out of

here. I'm watching you go home. Next time, I'm calling the cops... if you're lucky." He pulled the garage door shut. Then locked it. "Go on. Get."

Todd and I walked out of there as fast as we could walk without looking scared. Not saying a word, Todd marched right to his back door.

"See you tomorrow."

"Yeah."

I kept moving down the sidewalk, feeling that nervous tingle that told me I did something wrong. My legs felt all rubbery, and I could hear my beating blood away in my ears. When I got home, I started to walk around back, but something stopped me. I hung around out front and looked down the street. Back at Mr. Lurch's house.

Sure enough, Mr. Lurch was standing at the edge of his yard, waiting for me to walk inside. But it wasn't Mr. Lurch that freaked me out - well, not totally. It was the one window on the third floor of their house. The tiny window that's used for the attic.

There was someone in the attic, a shadow fixed in place. Something was freaky about its head, like it was bigger than it should have been for its body. The shadow wasn't moving around boxes or straightening things out - It was just standing there while I looked at it. Standing there and staring back.

Note to future self: Invent soul-protecting goggles.

3: Tagalong

“There was some weird stuff in there.”

It was Saturday afternoon at Sagamore park. The day after. Todd and I sat in line behind home base, waiting for our turn to punt the kickball. Kickball. For some reason, it was *the* sport of elementary school, yet by seventh grade, it was dropped from gym class entirely. Too bad no one ever hears about Olympic kickball players. That would’ve been me.

“Weird stuff?” I looked at Todd. His eyes were glazed over like he was trying to recall the exact layout of the garage. “Like what?”

“I dunno. Boxes. Plastic bottles filled with stuff. It smelled like dead things and science class.”

“Science class?”

“Yeah. Like chemicals or something.”

I thought about why Mr. Lurch would have a science class in his garage. Then I thought about those dark and sticky rags. And those not-so-white gloves.

“You guys playing or talking?” Ryan shouted from the pitcher’s mound. He had the kickball palmed and ready to roll.

Todd and I stopped conspiring about the grizzly new neighbor and scooted up the line. Todd got behind home base and stamped his feet. “Alright! C’mon Ryan, pitch me something straight!”

Ryan did no such thing. I always wondered why guys asked Ryan for a pitching style, because he never did favors. The ball spiraled off his hand, seemingly in a straight motion. When Todd’s foot made contact, however, the ball rocketed out of bounds far to the left.

“Aw, what the?!” Todd kicked the ground and dirt-dust clouded around home base. “Why you gotta give me a spinner? Straight, I said. Straight!”

“Ha!” Ryan smiled, flashing a big toothy grin. “It was straight. See? I’ll do another one just like it!”

Predictably, the pitch was still curved. And the next. Two more red-rocket fouls.

Ryan clucked and pointed at Todd. “I don’t think Todd’s eyes are straight! That’s why the ball keeps going over *there*! Maybe we should just move the whole game over to the left 50 feet! Then Todd could keep it in-bounds!”

Todd huffed. I could see him thinking about wind speed and gravitational mumbo-jumbo in his head. Sometimes Todd went into robot mode, focusing on absolutely nothing but the task at hand. Some people would call that determination, but if you knew Todd like I did, you’d just think it was freaky.

Robot Todd stared directly ahead, backing up far behind home plate, readying for a running kick. I don’t think he was looking *at* Ryan, so much as he was looking *through* him. I was

reasonably certain Todd not only planned on kicking the ball straight past the outfield, but he also intended on taking Ryan along with it.

Ryan grinned and wound up. He spun. He hopped. He pitched. Curved.

Todd met the spinning ball on the plate, his foot slamming into the rubber and launching the ball to the heavens. Slightly to the left. Then a little more to the left. Then *really* to the left. The ball went further than I'd ever seen a kickball go before - *Out* of the ball field... and over the fence. It vanished into the overgrowth of thorn bushes, grass, and prickles clustered around the old train tracks.

A chorus of groans could be heard all over the field. No one really blamed Todd. It was part of the danger, allure, and mystery that is kickball. Sometimes the ball just didn't go where it was supposed to. That was part of the excitement. Besides, it was Todd's ball - Only one person had any reason to be upset.

The teams broke up and wandered off. Some of the other guys found their way to the swings for a shoe flinging contest. Most of the others went home for lunch or a few rounds with their Atari. Todd, Ryan, and I had other plans - Operation: Ball Retrieval.

Operation: Ball Retrieval started the way most of our crazy plans did: Big. Some people might think that our big plans were often the result of daydreaming or a lack of attention to reality. Pre-teen ideas fueled by too many cartoons and a healthy supply of Koolaid and Oreos. I, however, submit that those ideas were often well-planned but just poorly executed. OBR was no exception.

The three of us climbed the fence - A trio of kickball warriors, determined to bring back our misplaced trophy. Carefully, we descended into the thick jungle of prickles and thorns lurking on

the other side. Kids lost things over the fence all the time - frisbees, tennis balls, you name it - but no one was nuts enough to go after anything. Until now.

“Hey! I see it!” Ryan pointed ahead. Throwing his arms up to protect his face, he chugged along into the brush.

Todd and I followed, wading through the waist-high weeds, inching closer and closer to the train tracks. The old tracks were rusty and infested with an unpleasant variety of evil plants, discarded beer bottles, and other assorted industrial trash.

I felt the scraping of thorns against my exposed skin. The accompanying burning sensation on my hands and neck clued me into the bleeding scratches we were all collecting the further we pushed forward. About halfway to the tracks, Ryan couldn’t move any further.

“There’s too many prickles and crap growing in here.” Ryan waded his way back through the overgrowth.

“Speaking of crap, what was up with your pitches?” Todd crossed his arms and sucked in his gut.

“They were fair.”

“Fairly *crappy*.” Todd glared at Ryan, looking like he was trying to get him to admit something. Todd had a tendency to take kickball even more seriously than I did. “Crap. Crap. Crap. You pitched like that on purpose.”

A different guy might have started a fight. Any of the others at the park would have lost their temper. Not Ryan. Ryan was cooler than a game show host and twice as slick. He smiled instead, his teeth gleaming like he had just handed Todd both showcases and a sack full of cash. “Well, yeah. That’s the point, stupid. It’s no fun if somebody *else* wins.”

Todd stared for a second. His eyebrows returned to their normal position. His arms uncrossed. “You can’t win *all* the time.” He stuck his hand out to Ryan and hauled him out from the thick of the brush. “We’re doing this all wrong. We need to *slash* our way through.”

Todd foraged for some sticks or at least something stick-like. He eventually settled on an old slab of picket fence, which in his eyes looked like a better sword than He-Man, Conan, or Kharnom Ulwrecker’s weapons put together. He whirled his wooden weapon around a few times for effect and plunged into the brush.

Stomping and furiously whacking anything in his path, Todd unleashed a fury of battle-cries against our chlorophyll-filled adversary: “*By the power of Greyskull!*” “*Crom, count the dead!*” “*My blade is my honor!*” So on and so forth.

The effect was impressive. Swinging wooden stick swords and shouting slogans from Dragonquest books seemed to be a better fit for Todd than sneaking around at night and getting trapped in some creepy neighbor’s garage. Still, the pricklers, weeds, and vines proved more than a match for his mighty blade. Covered with sweat and decapitated branches, he finally pulled back.

“I... must... withdraw. There’s too many thorns and stuff.” Todd’s arms were scratched, and his knuckles bled.

The three of us stared down the brush. Most guys would have given up. Most guys would have gone home and conned their parents into getting them a new kickball. Not us. Not by a long shot. This was now personal.

Pushing through the brush sort-of worked. Slashing through sort-of worked. All we needed was a way to protect ourselves from the evil pricklers while whacking them to kingdom come. Inspired by Todd’s swordly showmanship, I had an idea.

“Armor. You need armor.”

“Yeah!” Not surprisingly, Todd liked the idea.

Ryan wasn’t as convinced. “Except where are we going to get it?”

There was a lot of trash back there. Bottles, candy-wrappers, a rusted bike or two. But other bits of junk looked useful: Discarded construction siding. Wires. Buckets.

After some scrounging, we came up with enough pieces of yellowed plastic, rotted shirts, and scrap aluminum to build our suit. Tying a number of different pieces together, we had managed to forge ourselves a fancy piece of fashionable patchwork-trash.

Unfortunately, I was the only one small enough to fit in it. As much as I liked my armor idea, I’d be first to admit I would’ve preferred seeing that idea on someone else. Specifically, Todd. Walking around through prickly bushes while wearing a suit made from decade-old trash was *not* my idea of a good time.

Ryan pushed a bucket helmet onto my head. I could feel dirt, cobwebs, and rotted leaves pressing against my matted hair. Something small crawled down the back of my neck. I was convinced a colony of spiders now had a home inside my shirt... Mom was going to kill me.

“How’s that?” Ryan yelled through the bucket.

“I can hear you fine.”

Ryan kept yelling. “All set!” He knocked three times on the top of the bucket.

I rotated the bucket around so I could see better through the eye holes. They weren’t level. I was convinced Ryan cut the holes that way on purpose.

Todd bent the last wire strap in place on my aluminum breastplate and looked me square in the eye. Then the other eye. “How’s he going to see straight?”

“There’s holes there.” Ryan pointed at my lopsided peepers. “He can see out of that.”

“I don’t know. It looks cool, but he’s going to fall over or something.”

“That’s why we tied these straps on back here.” Ryan walked behind and pulled on the wires.

I nearly fell backwards. “We’ll hold onto him while he marches forward.”

March? They’d be lucky if I could shuffle.

Ryan nudged me. “C’mon, muppet! Time to bring those pricklers to justice!”

Todd kneeled and handed me his stick sword. “Sir Derek, knight of the Tin Legions, champion of rightness and ladies fair. Defender of the fates. Crusader of the lost kickball. Go forth and return our team to glory!”

I inched into the thorns. My right arm chopped side to side, slicing and dicing the weeds and pricklers in my path. My shoulder ached as I hacked and slashed. Green, brown, and yellow plant pieces flew through the air, forming an unholy salad of weed whackings on the ground.

True to their word, Todd and Ryan held me up. I tripped, slipped, and stumbled, but I didn’t fall. They stood behind me, holding onto my armor wires and pushing me forward like a blade-whirling puppet.

Sweat and spit dripped out of the bucket. I closed my eyes and slashed, focusing on nothing but keeping my sword arm swinging back and forth, back and forth. At some point, my sword bounced off something rubber. I opened my eyes and stopped, taking my helmet off. Todd and Ryan were littered with diced pricklers and vines.

“Are you done yet?” Todd poked an eye open and squinted at me.

I took a look at my work. The kickball was as good as ours. I handed Todd our wooden sword, dropped to my hands and knees, and dug the kickball out of the brush.

“Awesome!” Todd took his ball back and inspected it for holes.

I stood up. Just then, I saw something black fluttering out of the corner of my eye. Behind Todd and Ryan, I saw two small eyes staring at us from atop the park fence. The eyes glinted in the fading sunlight. My neck-hairs stood up. I wiped off my dirty glasses to get a better look.

It was a crow. I guess that wasn't too weird, really, except for the fact that I'd seen crows before, and crows generally didn't care too much about people. But this one was different. It stared at us for awhile longer, then fluttered up into a nearby tree.

Perched on the gnarly branches, the crow tilted its head from side to side and watched us some more. Todd was still mesmerized by his kickball, turning it over in his hands and checking it for punctures. He wouldn't have noticed if *Bigfoot* was perched on the tree either. I tapped him on the back of the head and stabbed my finger in the direction of our feathered watcher. "Hey! Check it out."

Todd and Ryan followed my pointing finger back towards the park. Ryan picked up a rock.

I grabbed his arm. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not gonna *hit* it." Ryan tried to pull his arm away, but I held on tight. "I was just gonna scare it."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

I had zero intention of letting Ryan hurl a rock at, towards, or near an animal. *Not* cool. I slapped the rock out of his hand. "C'mon, that's boring. Let's see what it does."

"Well what do you *think* it's doing?" Ryan asked.

"Eyeing us up for a snack," Todd said.

I thought about that for a second, but I didn't recall ever seeing a bloodthirsty crow chasing after anyone, except in bad horror movies. "Snack? But crows only eat dead stuff."

Todd shrugged. “Maybe he’s waiting for one of us to get hit by the train.”

The crow didn’t look bloodthirsty enough. “I don’t think so.”

“Maybe he wants to suck out our souls, then. In Dragonquest 4, there was this witch that could turn into a crow. She infiltrated Kharnom’s ice fortress in order to steal his *barbarian essence*.”

I doubted we had any essence worth stealing. I didn’t want to ruin Todd’s brainstorm, though.

“Now, I’m not saying *all* crows suck out your soul,” Todd continued, “but there’s gotta be one that comes along every so often.” He covered his eyes. “We should be careful. Don’t make eye contact with it.”

Too late.

We climbed back over the park fence. Ryan was first over, vaulting the fence in two steps and racing off towards home. He was followed by a slower Todd and a much-slower me, still partially clad in my trash-armor. After getting pieces of wire, plastic, and aluminum caught on the chain-links, I suspected knights probably hadn’t climbed a lot of fences back in the Middle Ages. Halfway down the other side, I got stuck.

“Todd!” I twisted my body back and forth, trying to shake loose whatever snagged me.

“*Todd!*”

“Hold on!” I heard Todd running back over, his heavy feet pounding the grass and dirt. “What happened?”

“I’m caught.”

Todd sprang into action, gripping the fabric straps on the back of my armor and pulling. When that didn’t work, he started twisting my whole body back and forth.

I felt around the front of the fence. My fingers hit a rusty bit of wire poking out of my breastplate that had caught in the links. “No, it’s here! It’s around the front!”

Todd didn’t listen. He braced his feet against the fence post, wiggled his fingers underneath my armor straps, and heaved. A metal screeching (followed by a louder clanking) popped me out of my armor. We toppled backward. I kissed the ground on my back and felt my lungs pony up their air. Todd smacked the dirt a couple feet away.

All I could see were black spots. I think one of those spots might have been that crow, but I was in too much pain to care. Next to me, Todd groaned. The two of us lay on the crabgrass, nursing our wounds in the setting sun. I wondered if life could get any worse.

“*You* two are a major piece of work.”

Oh no. The voice was familiar. Too familiar. My heart suddenly doubled its pace. I rolled my head in Todd’s direction. Yep. Sara Bradley. Todd’s sister stood over him, hands perched on her hips. Her hair tumbled in shiny black curls from her perfect head as she bent over to gawk at us. My face turned red.

“Grandma sent me over here to see what you’re up to.” Sara’s eyes narrowed like she had caught two thieves red-handed. “Whatcha guys been doing?”

Two *nothings* came out at the same time.

“Nothing, huh? That’s funny.” Sara smirked, the top corner of her right eyebrow raising slightly. “*Ryan* said the same thing when I saw *him* a few minutes ago.” Sara reached for Todd’s hand. She helped him up, then grabbed the kickball.

“What do *you* care?” Todd said.

“I don’t.” Sara dribbled the kickball a couple times then threw it back to Todd. Spinning around on her heel, she marched back towards Copper Street. “Dinner’s in fifteen minutes, Poindexter.”

“What are we having?”

“Spaghetti. And it’s gonna be cold if you don’t get moving.”

“Aww, jeez. Spaghetti?! Again?”

Todd and I tagged after Sara. My heart hurt a little. I deliberately tried to stay a step or two behind so I could watch her. Todd was too busy to notice, swiping Weedslayer at every dandelion, weed, or low-hanging maple leaf that crept near the sidewalk.

“Derek said I could eat over at his house. His mom’s making steak.”

“Steak?” Sara glanced over her shoulder at me. “You’re vegetarian, aren’t you?”

Wow. She remembered. My face flushed again.

Sara suddenly stopped and turned around. I almost ran into her. “Todd, you should check with Grandma first...” Sara’s voice trailed off and I felt a touch of disappointment as I realized she wasn’t looking *at* me, so much as she was looking *past* me.

Todd lightly punched Sara’s shoulder to get her attention. “What’re you staring at?”

Sara’s lip went up in a sneer at her brother and then just as quickly turned to a grin. “Looks like you guys got a new friend.”

Todd and I turned around to see what she was talking about. The crow was following us home.

Note to future self: Always finish the argument.

4: Feeding

“Supper’s almost ready.” Mom was scraping carrots with her potato peeler over the kitchen sink. “There’s some rice and vegetables for you.”

“Cool.” Sure enough, the house smelled like steak. I tried not to barf. “Do we have any extra rags and junk?”

“Why?”

“Building a fort. We need padding.”

“Padding?” Mom stopped skinning carrots and turned around. “Where *is* this fort?”

“Outside, and I can’t say, exactly. It’s a secret.”

She glared at me for a second longer than I would have liked, probably trying to gauge my level of mischief. “The bottom right drawer of the sink. Don’t take too many of them.”

“Thanks!” I snagged as many rags as I could (without *looking* like I was snagging as many rags as I could) and jetted for the door. “I’ll be back in a second. It’s ok if Todd eats over, right?”

I heard something similar to “*I suppose,*” as the back door slammed shut behind me. Good enough. I held the wad of rags to my chest and fumbled with the porch door. When I got outside, the crow was waiting in the backyard.

This should have surprised me, regardless of the fact that the crow had followed us all the way home from the shirt factory. By that point, though, I was convinced I was a Master of Beasts. Pied Piper of the wild. At some point, I figured I’d be able to expand my talents over bears and kangaroos, but for now, a single crow would do.

The crow tilted its head back and forth a few more times and hopped towards me. It stopped about a triple-jump away and fluttered its wings. “*Caw! Caw! Caw!*”

“I don’t speak Crow.”

“*Caw!*”

“No, really. I don’t.” ... Yet.

“*Caw!*”

I arranged the rags into a small nest next to the garage. I stared at it for a few moments along with my feathered friend. After a minute or two, I decided it would be more crow-like to put the rags *inside* something. I rummaged under the porch and came up with an old milk crate. Tipping the crate opening to face the crow, I stuffed the rags inside. Looked good to me.

“*Caw!*”

I jumped. That one came from behind me. Todd tip-toed into the yard and made a few more bad crow calls.

“That sounded terrible.”

“Made you jump, didn’t it?” Todd smirked. “You can hear that crow all the way down at my house.”

I looked at his hands to see if he had his part of the deal. “Did you bring it?”

“My grandma didn’t have any corn feed. She didn’t have any canned corn, either. It was hard getting this stuff without Sara asking questions.” Todd held up a sandwich bag. “All we had was corn flakes.” Todd shook the bag. “How do we know crows even *like* corn?”

“Because farmers have scarecrows.”

“So?”

“And farmers grow corn. That’s what farmers do. They use the scarecrow to keep the crows away from the corn. Otherwise the farmers wouldn’t bother. So crows like corn, otherwise *they* wouldn’t bother either.” I snatched the corn flakes out of Todd’s hand.

The corn flakes were not so much flakes as they were ground-up crumbs. These were the type of crumbs you usually find at the bottom of the bag, the type that makes the milk get all powdery. I didn’t care though. There was corn in corn flakes - lots of it, according to the box label- so this seemed just as good as regular bird feed. Maybe better.

“They’re not frosted, are they?”

Todd looked insulted. “No.”

“Good. I don’t think that would be good for him.” I poured a big handful of flakes and tossed them on the ground next to the milk crate. I scattered a few more in the crow’s direction, in case he didn’t get the hint.

Todd watched the flakes hit the ground. “What are we going to call him?”

“The crow?” I watched the crow watch us back. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Looks like a Bilbo to me.”

I tried to imagine being an intimidating bird with a name like Bilbo. “Bilbo the Crow? I don’t know...”

“How about Bilbocrow?”

“That’s just stupid.”

“Froshnock?”

“Are you serious? Tell me you’re not serious.”

“Sure. Why not?”

The crow pecked at the ground. Maybe corn flakes were the right way to go, after all. “C’mon, let’s go eat.”

My brother was a turd. I realize that’s a bold statement to make, but let me clarify this by saying that I didn’t think he was a turd just because he was older. No, this level of turdiness had been brewing for a loooooong time.

It started when I was born and reached its peak when he split my chin open at the age of 10. If you asked *him*, he’d say he was doing a magic trick. If you asked *me*, I’d say not only was he a bad magician, but he was also a lousy physicist: There’s no *way* you can yank out a rug from under someone and they’ll remain on their feet. I don’t care how many times he practiced it with dishes and a tablecloth.

Yeah, so my brother was something of a jerk. If the scar on my chin wasn’t enough to remind me, there was also the constant fawning over his reflection while I was waiting to take a leak. Brandon’s commitment to all things Brandon knew no bounds.

At dinner that night, this commitment lent itself to the table conversation. Brandon kept going on and *on* about his band and their upcoming gig at some school dance. How, or more importantly, *why* they got this gig was a brain boggler suitable for Einstein.

Brandon didn't stop. "Yeah, we think synths are the next big wave." *On...* "I kept telling Jason about it last year, but he thought that *1984* thing was a fluke." *And on...* "But they're all over that new *Starship* album." *And on...* "So Jason and I figured why *not* get a guy on keys, you know? Girls dig it."

My parents just sat at the table, nodding and interjecting words like *uh huh*, *right*, and *yeah*, *that makes sense*. I could tell Todd was about as interested in this one-sided conversation as I was. The obvious clues were there, including mashed potato sculptures and organized platoons of peas.

At some point during Brandon's stupid band-talk, Todd and I decided to make a game out of the whole boring thing. Soon we were cawing every time Brandon said something that would be a good name for the crow.

Blah blah: "*Stitch*"

Caw!

Blah blah: "*Edge*"

Caw!

Blah blah: "*Solo*"

Caw!

Blah blah: "*Slash*"

Caw! Caw! Caw! Todd and I giggled. We had a winner.

By that point, Brandon was onto us. He stopped talking and glared. I swear I could see his pupils get smaller. He stewed for a few minutes, waiting for a window of opportunity I knew was inevitable. When Dad got up to go to the bathroom and Mom went out to the kitchen, Brandon took his moment.

“Why are *you* even over here?” Brandon leaned across the table and pointed at Todd, hissing just above a whisper. “How come half of our suppers have to be spent with somebody that’s not even in this family?”

“Todd’s here because I invited him, *that’s* why.”

“You invite him all the time.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Sure there is.” Brandon stabbed at his steak. “Why’s Todd have to eat over *here* all the time and not the other way around? This isn’t a charity house. *You* could go over *there*. It’d be nice to get some peace and quiet...”

Todd’s face flushed red. He stared at his plate. I noticed his right eyelid started to twitch.

The toilet flushed. Dad emerged from the bathroom. Mom came back into the dining room with a plate. “Anyone want some rolls?”

Now, I was not a confrontational guy. When given time to sort things out, it was usually my preference to wait for people to calm down. Still, there was something about Brandon that made his pinhead remarks necessary to respond to. In my own eloquent and well-thought manner...

“Shut up, buttwad!”

“*You* shut up!” Brandon slammed his palm down on the table. “I’m not dealing with this. I got a lot on my mind right now.”

“Yeah, like yourself.”

“Whatever, dipstick. You and Tubby got it easy. You ever wonder why the kids in school don’t make fun of you guys? It’s because of *me*. No one would mess with my brother because they know *me*.”

Silence. Everyone looked at everyone else, except Todd, who continued staring at his plate while the veins nearly burst through his forehead.

Finally, Dad spoke. I knew it was coming. “Brandon, go to your room.”

“Why? He’s the one that started it.”

“So *you* finish it.” Dad pushed back from the table like he was about to stand up. Maybe he would, maybe he wouldn’t, but the effect was the same. He meant business. “Not another word. Go to your room, or you’ll be sitting home the night of that dance.”

Brandon got up, slamming the chair legs against the floor. He threw his napkin onto his plate and stomped upstairs.

Dad went back to eating, taking two or three bites before returning his attention to us. I could tell he was trying to look calm, but then my dad was always good at *looking* calm. I tried to think of something to say in my defense, but I figured calling my brother a wad of butts pretty much forfeited my case.

“As for you guys,” Dad mumbled between chews, “Brandon owes you an apology. But next time, keep those bird calls outside. And if I hear you using that word ‘buttwad’ again, you’ll be spending a week in your room.” He stabbed another piece of steak with his fork and waved it at me to illustrate his point. “This is a dinner table, not Wild Kingdom.”

Note to future self: Always run a background check on the new kid.

5: Stranger

“Slash is missing.”

Ryan glanced up from his lunch tray, French fries sticking out of his mouth. No one else at the cafeteria table seemed to care. “Thlash? Whooth that?”

“The crow.”

Ryan swallowed his food. “You named the crow Slash? You didn’t tell me *that* part. What kind of stupid name is Slash?”

“I like it,” Todd piped in. “It sounds tough and means he’ll be respected.”

Ryan grabbed another handful of fries. “Respected by who?”

“Everybody, because names are important. All the Netherwild in the Dragonquest books have names. It’s what sets them apart from regular animals. Kharnom names *all* his wild pets.”

“Good for Kharnom.” Ryan took a final swig of milk and crushed the carton on his forehead.

“So where is he?”

“Slash was there Saturday before dinner.” I went back over the last two days in my head.

“Sunday morning, he wasn’t.”

“Today’s Monday.”

“Right.” I nodded. “He wasn’t there this morning, either. I don’t think he used the box I set out for him, but all the corn flakes were eaten.”

“He’s gone. Flew the coop. Poof.” Ryan got up, dumped his garbage and came back to the table. He turned his chair around and sat, propping his arms up on the back of the seat. It looked like he pondered the Slash situation for a few seconds before getting bored. His attention focused on the other end of the cafeteria.

I turned around. Ryan wasn’t the only one staring. The noise in the lunchroom had become noticeably softer. Somebody-was-going-to-start-a-fight softer. Except I couldn’t see anyone leaping at anyone else. Nobody started cheering, and no teachers ran in to pull students apart. What was the big deal?

“Hellooooo?” I waved my hand in front of Ryan’s face. “What’s going on? What’s everyone looking at?”

“Some new kid.” Ryan pointed towards the front of the cafeteria.

By the door was some kind of committee. I could make out the vice principal, one of the secretaries, a teacher, and some other adult in a suit. Behind them, past the clipboards, ties, and pens, I could see something like a black nest poking its way above the group. After a second, the vice principal shifted to the side.

The black nest wasn’t a nest, it was *hair*. Some sort of over-sprayed, over-teased, nearly-solidified gigantic mass of *hair*. The person wearing this tangle of hair weeds shifted her mascaraed eyes back and forth, scanning the contents of the cafeteria. She frowned, and I noticed

the black lipstick she wore was smeared on crooked. Granted, I was no makeup expert, but it didn't take much to notice those things.

She wasn't pretty, as far as middle school girls go. Even so, I could respect someone who wasn't easy on the eyes, being that sort of sort myself. She made up for her lack of beauty with flash, and it was the first time I'd ever seen anyone dressed that way. It was creepy, different, and even dangerous. Sure, I'd seen pictures of MTV singers like that - Brandon had them all over his bedroom wall - but I'd never seen someone my age done up like that, much less at school.

She turned around, but I lost interest. Something more important caught my eye: Sara was seated in the same direction. Since everyone in the cafeteria was paying attention to the new kid, it was the perfect opportunity for an extended stare at my favorite girl. Sara's hair was pulled back in a perfect ponytail, and she was wearing her green sweater. Sara made green look like pure gold. Her hand was holding place in one of her magazines while she eyed the new kid.

Eventually, the girl left the cafeteria, followed by her doting committee of school faculty. A bunch of snickers and laughter could be heard throughout the lunchroom. Ryan and Todd erupted in a fit of giggles, and Ryan teased out his short hair into as close an approximation of the black nest as he could manage.

"What a ditz," Ryan choked out between laughs. "She couldn't even get that lipstick on straight!"

"Yeah," said Todd. "She's a total freakizoid. And flat as a board."

I didn't share the exact same views, but I wasn't going to tell them that. After all, *everybody's* the new kid at some point. And honestly, we were the *last* guys who should have made fun of the way somebody looked.

But I kept that to myself. In the meantime, I was happily concerned with Sara Bradley. I was determined to make the most of her green sweater (and the way she filled it) as possible. The strange thing was, she didn't turn her attention back to her magazine. Sara's head remained swiveled in the direction of the cafeteria door. Her eyes were clearly locked outside the cafeteria and down the hall.

Even though everyone had moved on to something else, Sara was still staring at the new girl.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear *what*? The TV's too loud! Your reception *sucks*."

I swore I heard cawing outside.

Once again, Snake Eyes and the rest of the Joe team would have to wait. I fished around for some corn flakes while Todd fiddled with the TV antenna. I could hear him cursing our lack of cable in the living room while the bad reception buzzed from the speaker like an electronic waterfall. But at that moment, TV wasn't on my mind. I found some corn flakes and went back outside with the box.

The screen door slammed shut behind me. The cawing came from our backyard, loud and sharp. Maybe it was the way the houses were packed together in our suburban neighborhood, but the cawing echoed all over the place. Even above the mid-afternoon traffic, there was no mistaking the location of those caws.

Slash was waiting for me by the garden. I knew it was Slash because he hopped *towards* me rather than away. He stopped about five feet from me. It was clear he wasn't coming any closer.

"Where've *you* been?"

"*Caw.*"

I shook the box of corn flakes and pulled the top open. The crackling wrapper seemed to get Slash excited. He fluttered his shiny black wings, hopping in place like he wanted to come closer but didn't dare.

I sprinkled a few flakes on the ground and stepped back. Slash hopped forward, maintaining our five-foot, boy-bird invisible wall. He pecked at the ground and snatched the cereal. I stepped back another few feet, scattering a new helping of corn flakes on the ground. Slash inched ahead and pecked those up too.

I was about to consider leading him towards my porch when a gold Pontiac that was driving past our house slowed down. The bumper on the back fender had faded stickers advertising the virtues of the *Storytown* amusement park and the NRA. Not a combination of stickers I was used to seeing together.

I thought maybe somebody was going to ask for directions, but the car just crawled along the road at a walking pace. The afternoon sun reflected off the glass, so it was impossible for me to get a look inside. All I could clearly see was a shadow, and the shadow was looking in my direction.

Todd headed home shortly after GI Joe was over. Usually, he stayed through for dinner, but after my doofus brother's comments Saturday night, Todd made no attempt to stick around. I mentioned that Slash had come back. We checked outside after the show, but our crow was nowhere. Todd left disappointed.

At dinner that night, things were quiet. Brandon kept his mouth shut for most of the time. I figured it was because he didn't want to take any risks cheesing Dad off. So we all ate our dinner

in relative silence. I hung around the table as long as I could because end-of-dinner meant the beginning of homework.

But my butt started to hurt. I needed to stand up. I sighed, knowing homework was now just minutes away and wandered into the kitchen to rinse my dishes. While the water hissed, I heard tapping on the back door. It was soft at first, then louder and more persistent. Everyone I knew always used the doorbell. The only people who knocked were the ones who didn't know where the doorbell was.

I shut the water off and clicked on the porch light. A shadow appeared, highlighted by the halo of light on the other side of the backdoor. The shadow was roughly the same height as me, but the head was much, *much* bigger. It was a head with an enormous nest of hair.