

“You’re Becoming a Man”

We had scheduled the trip to England for July, so for sunny June I worked at my grandma’s. I didn’t even notice the irony when she gave my little brother Paul four dollars, and me four-fifty: “You’re becoming a man,” she said, “so you get extra. You should be proud.” I always biked home standing, and sometimes treated myself to ice cream at Sammy’s on the way, hardly able to carry it.

A week before we left, my mother stopped me with my dripping cone to ask me how much I’d saved. When I offered up my faded blue bills and dull coins, she took them and the next day it had all magically transformed into pounds and pence. “Never waste a penny,” she advised. And it seemed like only one night before I flew over. Only Lawrence, my twelve-year-old brother celebrated my ninth birthday with me on the plane.

Lawrence had gotten a phone call from Matt. I longed to be Lawrence’s friend, but I knew that while we were there he’d have Matt, who was closer to his age than mine anyway. Almost shouting over the receiver, our cousin had announced that the small village resort we’d be staying at had a little bar-and-restaurant; and if you woke up at one a.m. you could sneak in; and the nights were always warm in English summers. Wouldn’t it be fun to get in the back door, so late, and eat sweets?

I had overheard this phone call and I knew Lawrence was figuring out how to stay awake.

My aunt and uncle met us at the airport in London on the third. Even indoors, it was so hot and my clothes chafed. Lawrence bought a pack of Pokémon cards so he and Matt could play together the moment we walked in the door; I didn’t – I only remembered my mother’s advice. Anyway, it was too early to be looking for souvenirs.

A month with our aunt and uncle. “I know you three are going to love it there,” said Aunt Mathilda, a Nepali woman, at the wheel (wrong side of the car, wrong side of the road). “They’ve got a swingset.” Doubts started to creep into my mind as we sped past the scenery. I had a swingset back home. Mum had sold me on a pool! I voiced my concerns aloud. “Well, you three will get along well.”

If only, I thought, and I even trusted to the hope that she was right (as adults usually are) and for the first week I did try to edge in whenever Lawrence and Matt were playing or talking. They even talked about girls sometimes, and were beginning to get armpit hair, as they showed me. I had none. Every day they went for a walk or to the store, and I followed them. But I was never welcome. Matt had friends, too, and they accepted Lawrence, but I was only nine, and that only for a few days.

Every night the pair talked into the late hours, poking themselves and holding ice cubes to stay alert. After midnight, a tiny matching of hands shown on Matt’s

glowing watch, they abruptly stood, checked to see if I was awake (I pretended to sleep). Shhing each other and whispering guffaws at their cleverness, they crept out in stockinged feet, down the street to where I never saw them go.

After the first week, I broke. I spent my first. I bought a pack of Pokémon cards at the store, and when they sat down to play, I pulled mine out of my pocket. Aha! But no—where had that come from? They each had a full deck, sixty cards, and my tiny offering was no good to play with them.

Then the water poured out of the floodgates. Totally rejected by my relations, I started to spend my hoard on whatever I thought would make the long wait bearable. We were there a month, and I bought chocolate bars, small souvenirs, magazines, and once, even, a pocket manual for Pokémon, which I couldn't understand, and it ended up in a garbage can on the street.

Every day I went down to the swingset, then. I sat, and sometimes I flew, pumping my legs and arms to get a new height in my excitement. I climbed the poles, I played tag with nobody; and other times I only plopped down on one of those hot black rubber seats and cried to see my mother again.

Another plane was coming to pick us up, me and Lawrence, in the last week before August. England, supposed to thrill us and keep us happy for the rest of the summer, would be behind us. As the days moved on, this weighed more and more on my mind. After all, I did have a swingset at home. Was I wasting my time—like I wasted my coins? Was I throwing my mother's advice out the window?

Four days before the end of our stay, I made a strong decision and I woke up early. I found Lawrence and Matt and said to them, "I'm coming with you tonight. To the secret place." This, with a smile on my face and my nose red. Matt shrugged and turned away, and Lawrence smirked, "Fine, if you can stay up that late. But you're sleeping every time we leave. You can just try." I decided I would hang out with them all day, even if their friends snubbed me, even if I had no fun at all. I wasn't going to miss my opportunity.

In my pocket I fondled, all day, my last coin, a twenty-five pence piece, my last twenty-five.

I didn't go to the swingset all that day. I even watched a whole Pokémon game, and didn't understand it, but I watched it. I tried not to talk at all. I was building my confidence.

At six o'clock, by Matt's watch—ours we had never updated to English time—Uncle Steve called us in for supper as he did every day. Aunt Mathilda brought two or three pots out of the kitchen, set them on coasters with pictures of cows, and we sat and we ate, forgoing the prayer. Except for me—I prayed in my heart, asking God, "Please make me stay awake. Please ignore if I close my eyes."

Matt was bouncing a little rubber ball. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four—“Stop it!” said his mum suddenly. “Don’t bounce the ball at the table.” I only knew that I desperately wanted him to bounce it the fifth time, a sensation I’d never had before, but he tossed it toward the window and that missing fifth beat pounded through my head for the next hours.

Finally it was our bedtime: three hours before midnight. Matt and Lawrence slipped into their sleeping bags as they did every night in the back room and I crawled into mine, with my socks still on, an insurance against sleep. And I managed to stay awake.

At last midnight came and went. Matt raised himself. So did Lawrence. “Still up, spud?” I was.

We tiptoed out of the room over to our shoes, and the villa had a screen door at the back, which we slid open just enough to sidle through silently. Then the three of us were out on the street, and I got a thrill, which Lawrence surely felt the first time he did it. Or maybe not – he was so much older. The road was completely empty, and it being a commune resort, small cabins and villas crowded the sides.

At the end of one street we finally came to the central bar-and-restaurant, a low building with big windows and walls that stretched a long way in every direction, and which was closed nightly after midnight. Normally people would guard against our entering, saying, “You children aren’t old enough,” and stuff like that—but the door was open. As Matt said, some janitor or other left it unlocked every night. We stole in, and kicked off our shoes at the entrance. I felt a rush go up through my spine.

I stood there in the open back door in my pyjamas, a warm breath escaping me, and noticed that the other two wore day clothes. A big plastic rack stared at us from the dark, window-lit interior, sporting rows and rows of mugs and Styrofoam cups. Matt and Lawrence marched right on past, so I took the cue and ignored the monolithic monster.

In the next room, the wide cafeteria, to which we padded on soft feet, somebody had laid out all the tables for next morning. The older boys both sat at a table with only two chairs, laughing to themselves, and talking, again, about girls. I shifted nervously under my cap; I was sweating out of nerves. Was this the thrill I had expected? Was this the sense of belonging?

“So what do we do?” I asked, actually lost as to the point.

“Whatever we want to,” replied Matt, and Lawrence snickered, and I felt all of a sudden like they were two dragons sitting on a mound of treasure and talking to the hobbit waiting expectantly.

When they were tired of sitting and talking and I was tired of standing and listening, Lawrence interrupted my yawn to say, “Let’s steal something from the

storeroom." Matt nodded, and they pushed back their chairs. I walked with them, then, behind the small counter, behind the little door, down a narrow hallway, into the darkest and tiniest room I had yet seen. I made out the shelves and packages.

Now my knees really shook. I didn't know if I had to use the bathroom. Suddenly a throaty voice that was Matt's sneezed, "Take the chips," and a hand shot out that was Lawrence's, and a bag moved through the air, and disappeared. And another. "You can take one if you want," Matt threatened.

But standing, staring, I couldn't.

So we stalked back, and they sat, and they played Pokémon, and they munched on chips.

I noticed a machine in the corner, and the letters on it said COFFEE, HOT CHOCOLATE, TEA. Well! Leaving my companions suddenly, I paid it a visit, the coin in my pyjamas pocket quite warm. And crossing the room, Lawrence's words fell on deaf ears: "Where are you going, spud? Don't let the monsters get you," which warning, if it had been heard, might have stopped me there.

HOT CHOCOLATE: 25 PENCE.

The small coin that would redeem the night, no, redeem all of England and all the troubles and worries it had caused me, quickly flew from my pocket into my hand, and from there hovered, looking for the slot, until it disappeared into a blackness more deep than every other room I'd seen that evening.

And I waited.

Finally, the thing whirred, made a sloshing noise, emitted steam from every orifice, and poured my cup of hot chocolate. Ahh, yes! At home I was never allowed such sugary stuff, but here, now, a cup of boiling hot chocolate—maybe with some cream—maybe some marshmallows in the cup—

Wait, in the cup?

OH NO!! THE CUP!

I bolted it!! I ran! I tripped over chairs! Matt choked with laughter! Lawrence snickered at me!

I! Entered! The! Other! Room!

I grabbed the mug from the towering rack—

I booked it to the machine—

—and I watched the last sputtering, the final drops, of my hot chocolate, run down the drain, and away from me, forever.

My last twenty-five pence.