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The Great Lego Wall

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The Great Lego Wall

Thirteen minutes had passed since the store manager had unlocked the front door. I had arranged the coins in my change bin, matched my car watch to my cell phone watch, and ordered the bills in my wallet. Had I been a smoker I probably might have had a cigarette, rather than sit in a cold car watching parents struggling to contain their kids as they rambunctiously jumped to the store entrance.

How old would he be now?

I try and do some quick mental-math. We were twenty-two the last time we saw each other, and that had been five years ago. Was he five? I began to pull out my cell phone to check the math but hesitated. I have a weird mental thing about phones now. I can blame that one on her as well.

I hadn't recognized the number on caller ID and I should have gone back to cooking dinner, but I got one of those six sense feelings; not the seeing dead bodies one but when you know something important is going to happen. I guess it's more like a Spidey sense, then.

Anyway, I answered the phone and she asked me my name. I told her and then asked who she was. When she found out I didn't remember her, it sounded like she was about to cry. During her sobbing she said two simple words: cowboy boots. I couldn't tell if she was happy I remembered her then, or more sad that I only remembered her from the boots. Boots said she overheard from a friend I was living in Richmond and that she was going to be there in two weeks to spend the holidays with some family. She then said there was someone she wanted me to meet.

When I was younger I remember asking my dad what he was thinking when I was born. He said it was like being alone at a New Year's Eve party...but you were happy. That might have been true to him, but the first thing that came to my mind were a couple obscenities and a blasphemy. Boots must have had a Spidey sense, too, because she told me not to worry, she didn't want child support. She just asked if I wanted to see him.

Does that make him a bastard? If he is, it's entirely her fault. She knew I would regret it in the morning. Boots was like a predator: a hunting lion; and I was her prey: a drunk horny gazelle.

Those cowboy boots! Good God! I should be blaming them. How much does it cost to get your tubes tightened?

He would be six.

I get out of the car, locking it behind me, and walk through a cluster of minivans. It occurs to me that everything in the toy store might be picked over. Everything he would want is now wrapped and ribboned, waiting underneath a tree. I push the thought aside and hurry through the dirty snow.

As the automatic doors open, I feel a twinge of nervous excitement: ten feet in front of me is the new X-Box. Thoughts of Boots and our son are soon replaced with thoughts of playing video games all weekend long, like back in high school and college. Wireless controllers? Oh hell yeah.

I want to run but opt for a brisk walk, almost knocking over a light-saber display. Some little kid is already there playing some World War II game. I pretend to read the warranty information but watch him play from the corner of my eye. All the excitement I had mere seconds ago turns to anger. The kid is horrible. I check to see if he has down-syndrome.

Nope. I don't think he understands what a button is. His little brain can't grasp the difficult concept of using two joysticks to move.

I stand around for a bit, hoping his mom will show up or he'll go run to the bathroom.

"Look! It's Santa!"

The kid doesn't even move...he's stupid and deaf. Maybe if I tell him there is no Santa he'll run off and cry. But what if he's Jewish? Screw it.

I pick up one of the boxes and cradle it under my arm. I don't need to play one to know I want it. Plus, I don't think I can stomach watching this kid anymore. My son's not going to be anything like him. I remember that he's the only reason I am here, and I still have to get him something.

My first gift to my son. I better make it special because it might be his last. Maybe I should get him an X-Box 360. He'd be the envy of all his friends. What would Boots think about that? It's weird to think of her as a mother. I'm sure she wouldn't mind; she'd probably just roll her eyes.

No, she'd sit down and watch him play it and take it away from him after five minutes. She'd justify it by quoting some liberal senator, saying video games are immoral and will turn him into some Hitler youth.

I'm thinking these things but the truth is I think it would be pretty pathetic if I was playing the same video games as my son. I'd be like those guys at the bar, hitting on girls half their age in an effort to hold onto their youth. Or the mom that wears the same clothes as her daughter, even though her husband still doesn't notice her.

To some people that might be comforting: knowing your son was doing the same thing you were. And I guess if it was something like looking at the same star from a different place that would be nice. But killing the same aliens? Just thinking about it makes me feel old.

Legos, that's what I'll get him. Who the hell doesn't like Legos? I start walking towards the back of the store. I'm not really sure if that's where they are, but I feel lucky. A fluster of pink overwhelms me as I walk through the Barbie section. Thousands of fake plastic eyes follow me as I try to get through the aisle as fast as I can. It makes me thankful that Boots had a son and not a daughter; I don't think I'd be able to stay in this aisle more than fifteen seconds.

Oddly the bike aisle is after the Barbie one. It's comforting being in a more masculine aisle. That's probably why they put it after the Barbie aisle, to make boys feel lucky they aren't girls.

I pass a massive blue bike with big mountain tires. It reminds me of my old Schwinn bicycle. In elementary school I would ride to school on it. During recess I'd wheel around the playground attempting to impress girls with my simple tricks. Then there was that time I tried to hit the kid with the ponytail.

I wonder if he's still on training wheels. He's six so I doubt it. I should have been there when he first rode without them. I should have been there to encourage him, to film him and show it to his friends when he was a teenager. I don't know what he looks like, but in my mind I can see the pride in his face and a big smile with only a few teeth. Maybe I would run alongside him, yelling fatherly advice into his ear.

I pull the bike out. The handlebars feel small in my hand. I try to sit on it but my knees won't fit. I don't think I've been on a bike since the accident in sixth grade. It had been early in the school year, one of those summer days that was borderline autumn. On my way back from school I had spotted a construction site. There were no workmen in sight and the piles of wood begged to be used.

I fashioned a ramp out of spare lumber. It wasn't too tall, but high enough to boost my ego. I circled the site one time, hoping to get enough speed to make the jump worthwhile. My mom had always insisted that I wear a helmet but as soon as she was out of eye sight I always took it off and hung it on the bike handles. As I rushed towards the ramp, the helmet bobbed against my arm. Ten feet away from the ramp, the helmet strap broke loose, and I watched the helmet drop between the bike wheels.

The bump was instantaneous; my back wheel hit the helmet, catapulting me and my bike forward. At the same time the bike had just hit the ramp. The bike and I flipped forward, slamming the handlebar into my side. Then I must have fallen off the ramp because when I woke up I was in the dirt before it. My arm was limp and I felt like there was a hole in my side. I don't know how long I laid

there but eventually some lady walking her dog had found me. Turns out I had broken my arm and almost ruptured my kidney. I haven't been on a bike since that day; I've even avoided exercise bikes.

The bike seems so small and fragile. I roll it back into its place and continue to where I hope the Legos are located. Some kid drives past me in a Power Wheel Humvee. That's one thing I'll never get my son. I hate to generalize but only spoiled little brats get Power Wheels when they're younger. It's the same group of kids whose parents don't love them.

The Power Wheel runs into a big pink bike. A young woman, whom I guess is the mother, runs over. She pulls out her son, scolds him, then looks around and notices I am watching. It's very satisfying watching her drag her kid away, embarrassed as hell. At least she didn't buy the thing for him.

I start to wonder if she could even afford it. She looked fairly young, not teenage mom young, but around my age. I probably shouldn't have judged her kid like that. He could have been my kid; I'd hate to have some asshole think my kid was a little brat and a bad driver. He'll be a good driver, though.

Up ahead are the Legos. Now I know how Odysseus felt when he finally saw Ithaca. Well, not really. The Legos take up an entire aisle and go up fairly high; it's a great wall of toys. They reach up so high that I wonder if a little kid would survive if there was a Lego avalanche. As much as I wanted to get out of this store, I was now transfixed.

Legos are so much better now! Back in the day all they had were the block bits and the little yellow guys. Now they have Star Wars Legos, Ancient Greek Legos, Harry Potter Legos...they even have Lego dinosaurs. Boots' kid is going to love these. He's probably too young to know about Star Wars, and I only have a vague idea of who Harry Potter is. I used to be obsessed with dinosaurs when I was his age, so genetically he's going to like them, too. Ancient Greece sounds pretty lame, but he might as well get some history while he's young. Plus, I secretly want to build the Troy Lego set.

"Aren't you a little too old to be buying Legos?"

I turn and see a middle-aged woman with a bemused yet kind face. Had I not found out four days ago that I had a son, I may have been tempted to flirt with her.

"Actually, they're for my son", I say, "for Christmas."

"Oh, I'm sorry", she states, "I didn't mean anything bad by it. How old is your son?"

She seems pleasant, but there was something in the way she asked me how old he was that seemed somewhat...judgmental.

"Six. I think."

She gives a hearty laugh and tells me I sound like her husband. I bet she is a soccer mom.

"Do you have any kids?" I ask.

"Four boys", the soccer mom replies, and even though I didn't ask, she tells me their ages, "Fifteen, eleven, ten and seven."

"So do your sons have a preference when it comes to Legos?"

"Well, Tom and Walker love the Harry Potter movies so much, so I know they would like them. And little Hank is crazy about dinosaurs," she tells me.

"But I know they would all like that X-things more than anything," she adds, motioning to the box under my arm.

"Are you getting that for your six year-old?" she inquires.

"The X-Box? Of course not." I say, doing a quick chuckle before lying "It's for my nephew. He's fifteen."

She looks relieved, as if buying a six year old an X-Box is the worst thing in the world. I feel stupid about claiming to have a nephew so I switch the topic back to Legos.

“So you think a six year old will like dinosaur Legos?”

“Oh, definitely. But if you get him one with more buildings it will help his motor skills.”

I want to make a joke and say he won't be driving for another ten years, but I don't think she'll get it. And I want to hear more about motor skills.

“Really?”

“They did a study in the eighties and children who played with Legos. On average, they did seventeen percent better on the math section in the SATs.”

Even though it sounds like she's gossiping, I become intrigued.

“What else can you do to improve these motor skills?”

The soccer mom goes into a lecture, and I start to think this isn't the first time she has been asked about this. She starts talking about the importance of building blocks and then randomly asks me if “We played Beethoven when he was asleep?”

I have no clue what music Boots played when he was sleeping and since the soccer mom already knows I have no clue how old he is, I tell her we played him Mozart instead.

She ponders this for a few seconds before confessing she doesn't know if playing Mozart is the same. I must have looked concerned because she started to laugh.

“Don't worry. I'm sure your wife knows what she's doing.”

My wife? Ha!

“She should feel very fortunate, having a husband who helps with the Christmas shopping.” she tells me.

“I do what I can.” I reply.

“Well, I should probably find Hank before he breaks something. It was nice talking to you. Have fun with your son.”

“Have a nice holiday.”

Soccer mom walks away and I am left standing next to a giant wall of Legos, wondering what the hell I am getting myself into. The X-Box feels heavy, so I set it on the ground next to me. I stare at the wall and debate between dinosaurs and Ancient Greece. I hadn't been there his entire life, why should I start caring about how he'll do on the SAT.

I grab the Ancient Greece Lego set and start for the exit. At the end of the wall I remember my X-Box. I return to get it and find it difficult to carry both the packages. Finally, I manage to wrestle both of them under my arm. Halfway down the aisle I feel them starting to slip. With time running out, I use my other hand to secure the X-Box as the Legos crash to the floor.

I freeze; hoping the great wall of Legos doesn't come crashing down upon me. If there is a security camera on me, I am sure I look like an idiot: a bumbling 27-year-old, frozen and alone in the middle of a toy store. Alone. My father's words echoed in my ear.

“It's like being alone at a New Year's Eve party...but you're happy.” I remain hunched over the Lego set and watch a father and son walk past the aisle. They did not notice me, but I watch them. They are only in my vision for a mere second; but it's enough.

The father had his arm draped around his son. Both were laughing at some inside joke. They both were wearing thick boots and the father had a scarf wrapped around his neck. The boy had a large baseball cap over his head. It must have been his fathers because it was far too large for a boy that age; you could barely see his red hair. Tucked underneath the father's other arm was one of those cheap plastic sleds.

They had probably woken up early. The father had cooked a big breakfast as his son watched the morning cartoons. Maybe they had a snowball fight before deciding that sledding was in the works for the day. The wife stayed inside and sipped coffee, watching her husband and son from the window.

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The old wooden sleds in the garage would not do, so the father told the son they would buy new ones. The first store they had gone to didn't have any sleds, for lots of fathers and sons were doing the same thing today. Finally they had come here. The father laughed as his son ran forward, pointing to the sled he desired. He grabbed the sled and put his arm around his son. They walked through the store, passing a man deciding between a videogame for himself and a present for a kid he had never known, never cared for, never loved. The father gladly pays at the check-out counter. The son runs through the dirty snow to the car. They drive to the nearest golf course and sled until dinner. They come home cheerful, yet tired. The whole family eats dinner. And the next day, they do it again.

One day, I might be able to have that. But I will never have that with Boot's kid. I leave the two boxes next to the Great Wall of Legos and head toward the front of the store, stopping in an aisle to grab two items. I see the dumb kid playing X-Box, his eyes still fastened to the TV. I bend down to his level and say, "Know when to stop." I'm surprised when he breaks his gaze and looks at me. His brows crease with confusion, yet when I look into his eyes, I think he understands.

I pay for the two items and walk back out into the cold. In my left hand, I guide a massive blue mountain bike through the wet, dying snow. My right hand holds a plastic bag; the helmet inside it bobs against my leg.

Dawson West, '07