You don’t see many children walking to school these days. Maybe it is because of the news media that seems to be laser focused on keeping us all locked behind closed and barred doors, scaring the living shit out of us on a 24 hour cycle. We’re afraid of each other, our food, our water our air. There doesn’t seem to be anything that does not hold some form of negative effect when seen, heard, smelled, tasted or even come into close proximity of. The world is a dangerous and horrible place so we should all just lock our selves in our comfortable, connected, technologically advanced homes and fill them with endless piles of useless and unneeded convenience items. Why would you walk outside and say hi to your neighbor when you can easily wish them happy birthday on your favorite social media platform. You’ll even get the reminder if your too inconvenienced by having to remember the date or if your less than interested but want to appear friendly. A whole world of trapdoor spiders just waiting to pounce on an unsuspecting innocent who dares only to feel the sun on their face and the wind in their hair.

When I was ten years old when my parents decided I was old enough to walk to school on my own. It was about time in my opinion. I knew the route and I had walked further going to my friend Kyle’s house many times. I couldn’t understand what the big deal was. I guess they were afraid that some pervert was gonna offer me some candy and they didn’t give me enough credit to choose not getting kidnapped over a five cent root beer barrel.

I was excited when the fourth grade school year started. My parents gave me the option to take the bus or walk to school and of course I chose the latter. My friends Kyle and Sergio were on the route to school from my house and we made plans to meet up at specific locations along the way. I was the furthest from school and so I would wait on the corner of Jefferson Street for Kyle. Once he was in toe we would walk to the corner of 4th avenue and meet up with Sergio, then as a trio we would finish the walk to school. It was going to be a great year, there was such a sense of freedom and a glimpse at the future, which would bring even more independence and responsibility bestowed upon us from our parents.

The hundred-year storm hit that winter, which caused a huge amount of property damage through out the state. A lot of people lost their homes to mud slides and floods and in total ten people lost their lives. The town we lived in, Sanders, was hit pretty hard that year. There were a few close calls but luckily no one died. Tom Perish, a kid we all knew from school got swept away when he got too close to the banks of Eagle Creek. He was missing for four days until he was found in the woods three miles down stream. We didn’t know him well but all the kids in school followed the story closely and we were all so relieved when he was found. That poor kid spent two nights in the woods during the worst storm we’ve seen in our lifetime, but he made it out. The rest of us learned to fear and respect that creek, it was almost a full month into summer before anyone started swimming in there again.

While the rest of the town complained and worried over the weather, Kyle, Sergio and I were happy as we could be. The walks to school were always full of fun and laughs, even with the confinement of our destination looming. The walks home, that was were we truly felt the glory of our new found freedom. We felt like we could take on the world. We made believe we were any number of heroes out of our eclectic collection of comic books and favorite cartoons. We were soldiers, rescue worker, pirates, superheroes and just about any other highly rated occupation that comes from the minds of a ten year old boy. Yeah those were great times. Sometimes we would all go to one another’s houses to play before dinner and homework. Since I was the furthest away it was rare that we would end up at my house, which I believe my mother was eternally grateful for. To this day I have never felt so happy, free and safe as I did those days, it was what I’ve heard people refer to as the salad days.

My walk to school took me up to the end of my street, Greenleaf, which was capped by a busy street, Wyatt Street, with no sidewalks that my mother was very worried about. It wasn’t so bad most of the time but on rainy days you had to walk on the street so as not to trudge through the ankle deep mud and runoff water. The rains were exceptionally harsh that year so most of the time I was walking in the six inches of shoulder that the that was asphalt, trying not to show up to school covered in mud. Every morning the routine was the same. Grab my lunch, backpack and raincoat, jump off the three steps from our porch to the walkway and unlatch the front yard gate with my elbow as I waived good-bye to my mother. We had sidewalks on our street so it was an easy stroll up to Wyatt Street. I would cross the street to the opposite side so that I could wave to the elderly woman who lived in the house at the end of our street. I didn’t know her name but she was always there in the mornings looking out her upstairs window. She would smile and wave back in a way that gave me a warm feeling inside. Once on Wyatt Street I would cross back over and continue on my way. I would then head down Wyatt Street until I reached the corner of Wyatt and Jefferson where most days I would find Kyle waiting for me. If he wasn’t there I would wait and he would eventually show up. We would then head down Jefferson until we met up with Sergio on 4th Street. Our entire trip took about forty minutes but it always felt much shorter. We all would clamor to tell each other everything that had happened the night before. We talk about the things we did, the T.V. shows we all watched, what happened and what we thought would happen. The time really flew as we talked and laughed our way to school each morning.

The walks home were much better. We would have all the built up energy from trying to sit still and be quiet all day in class and once we hit the sidewalk it all came out in a burst of frenzied half runs and wild shouts. Our parents soon became accustomed to having us come home from school a little late since we would inevitably find something that distracted us or a game that we just had to finish before going home. This was not very popular with any of our Moms since there was no way for them to know if we had gotten into trouble, needed help or were just taking an extended detour on our way home.

Each day when I would get to my street and turn toward home the old woman who lived on the corner would be there in the window waving to me and smiling. I felt bad for her because she never seemed to have any one come to visit her. Even so she always gave me a warm smile and a wave, which I returned in kind. My dad would complain about her house saying it was an eyesore and was bringing the property values down for the rest of the neighborhood. That never made sense to me, how could one persons house, no matter how overgrown the yard or unmaintained the paint and roof, cause other peoples houses to loose value. He tried to explain it too me but my eyes would glaze over and my mind would wander until he shooed me away. I liked her old house. It was the only house in the neighborhood that had not been significantly changed since it was built. She was a hold out from another era. I always felt that the older architecture was much more interesting than the rest of the houses on the block. There were intricate carvings and embellishments on the wood surfaces, stained glass in some of the windows especially on the top floor and numerous peeked roofs that made me think of secret rooms hidden behind cleverly concealed doors in the attic. If she hired someone to cut back and clean up the yard and throw a new coat of paint on the place it would be one of the most impressive houses on the block. I had plans on asking the old woman if I could help her clean the place up this coming summer.

It was in mid November when the news of Tom Perish going missing spread through the town like wild fire. There had been a series of particularly heavy storms in the week’s prior and it seemed the whole town was dealing with the aftermath. Downed trees, broken windows and shutters, flooded basements and leaking roofs, and in the midst of all that chaos a boy was missing. The roads were flooded in many areas and the traffic in our small down was backed up for the first time ever. We had to change the way we walked to school to avoid a few streets that were flooded with knee-deep water. Our walks were extended by a good ten or more minutes but we didn’t mind, we were happier joking and laughing on our walks than we were to reach our destination. The rain wasn’t letting up but our parents were happy to let us continue to walk instead of trying to drive through the traffic all of these flooded streets were causing. After the news of Tom our parents began to talk about driving us every day, at least until the storms had passed.

We often daydreamed on our walks that we would be the ones to find the missing boy. We would be seen as heroes and would be the talk of the town. Of course we were never able to venture far enough off our beaten path to do any real searching. We played at being rescue workers finding the frightened youth in the woods. Each night huddled close to the television we waited for news of his rescue. After the first day of the search for the missing boy I found a small box purposefully placed outside of the old woman’s house on my way to school. Looking up to the window I waved to the ever-present smiling white haired sentinel of Greenleaf and Wyatt. She pointed to the box on the ground and I knew that she had placed it there for me. Waving and smiling back I grabbed the box and headed on my way to school. I opened the box as I walked, sliding the lid off revealing a piece of paper inside and a plastic ring with the symbol of the comic book character Green Lantern. I was not so interested in comic books but I did recognize the symbol on the ring. Written on the paper was a single sentence that, at first, made no sense to me. It read “look down river.” When I showed Kyle he laughed and said the old lady was senile and made jokes about here wearing adult diapers and eating soft food. I suddenly felt the need to stick up for her, I tore into Kyle about him being a wet brained moron and punched him in the arm. I was protective of the old woman who had always shown kindness from the safety of her window to me as I passed. Sure the note made no sense but she was a kind woman and she was trying to give me a gift. After a few more incredibly mature insults we proceeded on to school. I put the box with its contents intact in my pocket without giving it much more thought.

After school I saw the old woman in the window on my way home and as usual we waved to each other. I wanted to thank her for the ring and ask what the note meant but though I had seen her at the window, she didn’t come to the door when I knocked. I figured she might be confined to her room or maybe she had some condition that prevented her from coming down. I started to think that maybe she had mental problems. I had a great uncle who had mental problems after coming back from Korea and he wouldn’t step one foot out of his house. Maybe she was just scared to open up her house to a stranger, even a kid. I walked home wondering about the note and what she was trying to tell me.

My mother took me to school the next day. The rain was so heavy it looked like a river washing over my bedroom window. The steady rumble of the rain, pounding on the outside of the house, sounded like a broken T.V. turned up full blast. At first it was frightening but once we were used to the sound it just faded into the background, a constant chorus of white noise. My mother was complaining about the school not closing for the day and how the hell they expected our parents to drive us all to school in such a bad storm. I will never forget that morning, not because of the storm, or the fact that I didn’t get to walk or even the cool curse words my mother was saying about the school. It was a simple thing. When we left for school I was looking out the window of our car as the rain pelted the windows making it look like we were underwater. The world outside was distorted and blurry through the deluge of water streaming down the windows. I rested my forehead on the diver side window of the backseat and stared out as we drove up our street, and I was almost shocked to see the old woman, who I had never seen anywhere besides the upstairs bedroom window, standing in the open door to her house. “Oh my god!” I let out, and my mother was startled as I broke the silence.

“What is it, hunny? You nearly scared me to death.”

“That woman, she came down stairs.”

“What woman?” my mother said sounding annoyed.

“She’s…” I cut myself off as I looked back out the window only to see the closed door of the old house. “Never mind.” I said as I fell back down into the seat. I was disappointed that my chance to ask her about the note was missed because I had to drive to school. She was probably waiting for me and didn’t know this was our car. At least now I knew she wasn’t bed ridden or afraid to come outside. Once this rain stopped I was going to try again to ask her about the note. The rest of the way to school I sat in silence listening to my mom’s endless stream of grumbles about the weather and the traffic.