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 adverse effect when seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or even come into proximity of. The world is a dangerous and horrible place. We should all lock ourselves 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 quickly wish them a happy birthday on your favorite social media platform. You'll even get the reminder if you're too inconvenienced by having to remember the date or if you're less than interested but want to appear friendly. We live in a world of trapdoor spiders waiting to pounce on unsuspecting innocents who dare only to feel the sun on their face and the wind in their hair.

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 walked further to my friend Kyle's house many times. What was the big deal, I figured? I guess they were afraid that some pervert would offer me some candy and didn't give me enough credit to choose not to get kidnapped over a five-cent root beer barrel.

When the fourth grade school year started, I was bursting with excitement. My parents gave me the option to take the bus or walk to school, and of course, I chose the latter. Kyle and Sergio, my best friends, lived on the route to school from my house, so we made plans to meet up at specific locations along the way. I was the furthest from school, so I would wait on Jefferson Street's corner 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 tremendous amount of property damage throughout the state. Many people lost their homes to mudslides and floods, and 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 Parish, a kid we all knew from school, got swept away when he got too close to the Eagle Creek banks. He was missing for several days when he was found in the woods three miles downstream. We didn't know him well, but all the kids in school followed the story closely and 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. Our adventures on the trip home were where we truly felt the glory of our newfound freedom. We felt like we could take on the world. Making believe we were any number of heroes out of our eclectic collection of comic books and favorite cartoons. Soldiers, rescue workers, pirates, superheroes, and just about any other highly rated occupation that comes from the minds of ten-year-old boys were the rule of the day. Yeah, those were great times. Sometimes we would 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, with no sidewalks. My mother was anxious about me walking down Wyatt, but there was no other route for me to take. It wasn't so bad most of the time, but you had to walk on the street on rainy days to not 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 asphalt shoulder, 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 waved good-bye to my mother. We had sidewalks on our street, so it was a leisurely stroll up to Wyatt. I would cross the road to wave to the older 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, I would cross back over and continue on my way. From there, I'd head down Wyatt 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. Then we'd 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 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 next. The time flew by 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 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. It 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 taking an extended detour on our way home.

Each day when I would get to my street and turn toward home, the older woman who lived on the corner would be there in the window waving to me and smiling. I felt terrible for her because she never seemed to have anyone 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 person's house, no matter how overgrown the yard or unmaintained the paint and roof, cause other peoples' homes to lose value. He tried to explain it, 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 holdout from another era. I always felt that the older architecture was much more interesting than the rest of the block's houses. 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, maybe throw a new coat of paint on the place, it would be one of the most impressive houses on the block. I had planned on asking her 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 wildfire. There had been a series of particularly heavy storms in the week's prior, and it seemed the whole city was dealing with the aftermath. Downed trees, broken windows, and shutters flooded basements and leaking roofs, and during all that chaos, a boy was missing. The roads were flooded in many areas, and the traffic in our small town was backed up for the first time. We had to change how 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 glad to let us continue to walk instead of trying to drive through the traffic all of these flooded streets were causing. After Tom's news, 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. They would call us heroes, and we would be the talk of the town. Of course, we could never 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, I found a small box purposefully placed outside of the older woman's house on my way to school. Looking up to the window, I waved to Greenleaf and Wyatt's ever-present smiling white-haired sentinel. 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. Opening the box as I walked, I slid 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 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 in Evergreen." When I showed Kyle, he laughed and said the old lady was senile. He made jokes about her wearing adult diapers and eating soft food. I suddenly felt the need to stick up for her and tore into Kyle about him being a wet brained moron and punched him in the arm. I felt protective of the woman who had always shown kindness to me from the safety of her window 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. Figuring she might be confined to her room or maybe she had some condition that prevented her from coming down, I headed home. Perhaps 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. It could be that 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. It was frightening at first, but once we were used to the sound, it just faded into the background, a constant chorus of white noise. My mother complained 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. It was a simple thing. When we left for school, I looked 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 window of the backseat and stared out as we drove up our street. I was shocked to see the older 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 downstairs."

"What woman?" my mother said, sounding annoyed.

"She's…" I cut myself off as I looked back out the window only to see the old house's closed door. "Never mind," I said as I fell back down into the seat, disappointed that my chance to ask her about the note was missed. She was probably waiting for me and didn't know this was our car. At least now I knew she wasn't bedridden or afraid to come outside. Once this rain stopped, I would 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.

My mother drove me to school for the whole week through the worst of the storm. Once it was over, the town got to work repairing downed trees and power lines, cleaning the mud and trash out of the gutters and off the sidewalks. It was a lot of work, but the town's spirits were lifted a day after the storm passed. The young boy who was missing was found miles downriver. He was cold, wet, and hungry, but he was alive. Rescue workers brought him back to his family, and the entire town breathed a sigh of relief. Tom Perish was back home where he belonged, and the sense of fear and isolation that the storm had created seemed to be fading.

A week after Tom was found, our parents finally let us walk to school again. I was so happy. Getting dropped off by my Mom, or even worse, my Dad and his rickety old truck was causing a severe dent in my social standing. Our morning adventures had changed from pretending we were rescue workers looking for the missing kid to other childhood fantasies. Our little town was finally getting back in order.

I never really thought much about Tom until one day he passed by our table in the lunchroom and spied the green plastic ring the woman had given me.

"I had one of those," Tom said, looking over my right shoulder.

"One of what?" I said, looking up at him.

"That ring, I lost it in the river, I guess."

"Here, you can have it, someone gave it to me, and I'm not really into it."

"Thanks!" he gushed as he slipped the ring on.

We became friends after that. It was odd to me that once Tom came back, he seemed not to connect with any of the friends he had before the incident. Tom began to walk home with Kyle, Sergio, and me and quickly inserted himself into our daily routine. Some of his other friends wanted to reconnect with him, but it seemed he wanted to distance himself from everything he knew from before the incident. Things change quickly when you're young, and it wouldn't have been the first time a young boy cast off his friends for new ones. We didn't think anything of it. Tom was a pretty cool kid. Things went back to normal, and our walks to and from school were filled with our wild imaginings and heroic adventures.

On the weekends, we would all get together for sleepovers at Kyle's, Sergio's, or my house. Tom never offered to stay at his. He said his stepfather was kind of an ass and wouldn't let anyone come over. When winter break started, we were all excited. We had plans to do all sorts of things over the holiday; the four of us were inseparable.

Tom always wanted to go and play by the river, which seemed strange to me. You would think that his experience would make him terrified of the place, but instead, it seemed to draw him to it. We asked him all sorts of questions about how it happened. He slipped, he told us, from the bank while he was trying to put a raft made of sticks into the quickly flowing water. With the rain we were having, the river was much higher than usual, and he wanted to see how long his makeshift boat would last in the raging current. When his foot slipped, his whole leg went into the water. The river's current was so strong that it pulled him right off the bank. Having hit his head on a stray piece of debris, he didn't remember any part of his journey downriver. Alone and scared, he woke up on the river banks in a forest he was not familiar with. He tried to walk out of the woods but was lost for days before rescue crews found him. It was a harrowing tale, and the rest of us stayed clear of the riverbank, but not Tom. He seemed to feel he was invincible like the river had tried to take him but failed, and now he had some power over it.

We were not as interested in playing by the river, and that stood to drive a wedge between Tom and the rest of us. On one particular occasion, Tom got rather angry and forceful when we refused to head to the river on a Friday after school. I couldn't understand why he was so upset over it. We had all had our ideas vetoed by the group at one time or another. Tom stormed off towards the river, and the rest of us just stared, unable to understand what had made him so angry. As the rest of us walked home, we started talking about whether we wanted Tom to be part of the group anymore. He had been acting strangely for days, and after this outburst, we just wanted things to go back to the way they used to be.

That weekend Tom's house burned down. We wondered why Tom hadn't joined us for the walk to school, but we had no idea it was for such a horrible reason. Once we got to school, the principal made an announcement about Tom and his family. The house had burned Saturday night, and there were no survivors. I couldn't believe it. We had just seen him on Friday. It was horrible, first the incident with Tom at the river and now this. Those of us that knew Tom were let out of school early. Our group walked home in silence. I guess everyone was thinking the same thing. We had told him we didn't want to go to the river on Friday, and he stormed off angry. Maybe that had something to do with this horrible accident. If we had gone to the river with him, would he still be alive now, walking home like any other day? I waved good-bye without a word to Sergio and then Kyle and finished the walk to my house.

When I turned the corner onto my street, I felt compelled to look up. In the window of the house on the corner was the friendly old lady looking down at me. I hadn't seen her in a while, and I was getting worried that maybe she had died. There were never any cars parked at the house, and I always worried that she would die one day and nobody would know. Waving and giving a smile, I headed down my street towards home. The day was as gloomy as my mood. I climbed the four concrete steps up to my porch, drops of rain starting to appear on the dry steps as I went.

I was distracted at dinner, and I went up to my room early. Turning my back to my parents' shocked faces after telling them that I had homework to do, I went to my room and shut the door. Something was nagging at my mind, and I could not shake it. I was feeling responsible somehow for what happened to Tom and his family. I was sure that Tom had started the fire and was almost as sure that it was because we refused to go to the river with him that Friday after school. What I could not figure out was why. Why would he care so much, and why was he obsessed with the river. He should have felt a healthy dose of respect for that river since it almost killed him, but he seemed to toy with it as if the experience had proven to him that he was invincible.

It was a week later that everything took an even more disturbing turn. Kyle and I were playing Street Fighter at the 7/11 up the street from his house when we overheard Sandra Parish, Tom's sister, crying and talking to one of her friends. She had been away at college when the entire thing with Tom going missing and his eventual return had occurred. According to her, her parents never told her that Tom was back. She got back into town two days ago, and it was the first she had heard of the fire and Tom's rescue. She knew that the river had taken Tom during the rains, but for some reason, her parents didn't mention him being found. That was strange. I remember feeling so bad for her. She came back home and found that her brother was back and no one told her. On top of that, her parents, Tom, and her home were now gone.

I couldn't shake this strange feeling about the events since Tom had been rescued. Rescued was a liberal term for it. Apparently, Tom just walked out of the forest one day and flagged down a car passing by. The area he was in was the type of place a person could get lost in, but there were many roads around, and it seemed like it took him a long time before he found one of them. When he was brought home, his parents were very thankful and praised the rescue workers immensely, but after the first night, they didn't seem to interact with the public at all. Reporters and police, looking to ask follow-up questions, could never find the family at home. Tom answered questions and made statements, but his parents never seemed to be around when anyone came to the house. I checked all of the newspapers and looked everywhere I could find, but I couldn't find any mention of anyone talking with Tom's parents after the night he returned.

I talked to all of his teachers, and the story was the same. Tom was distracted when he came back. He didn't engage in the lessons and had little interest in interacting with his friends. They said that it was probably just the trauma of his experience and that they figured that given time, he would be his old self again. Then it hit me. Kyle, Sergio, and I never really knew Tom before he went missing. He never seemed strange to us because we didn't know him. We had no basis for comparison. His other friends told me that he was weird when he came back, and they wondered why he started hanging out with us and ditched them. I couldn't put my finger on why he would decide to hang out with us instead of his original friends. There was only one connection that I could think of, and it sent a shiver up my spine when I thought of it. The ring, the one the old woman had given me, and the note, "Look in Evergreen." I don't know why I didn't think of it at the time, but that was precisely where they found Tom. In the wood outside of a small town called Evergreen.

That night I went into my dad's study before bed. He could tell something was bothering me because I never came into the study to talk with him like that. My dad was a history professor, so his study was filled with tons of boring books and old junk that smelled like dust and mildew. I thought it was the last place I wanted to be at that age. It reminded me of school. It wasn't until later that I grew to appreciate history and my father's collection.

"Dad?" I asked meekly.

"Yeah." He said, turning in his chair, which squeaked as it moved.

"You know the old lady that lives at the end of the street? What's her name?"

"What do you mean, Carl, what lady?"

"At the end of the street. You know, on the corner of Wyatt and Greenleaf, the way I walk to school." I tried to explain the best I could.

"That old house? No one has lived there in a long time Carl." He had a concerned look on his face.

"Yeah, an old lady lives there. I see her all the time. She waves at me from the upstairs window." I was getting a bit upset now.

My father looked at me with what I can only describe as shock. "The window in the center of the second floor? How could…"

"Yeah."

"No one lives there Carl, the people who lived there died when you were very young. The house never sold. They… It's been empty since then."

"But I've seen someone there. Maybe she broke into the house and is living there. I know I saw her. A bunch of times, she always smiles and waves to me."

"Stay away from that house, Carl. It could be a transient who is squatting there. I will call the police tomorrow and have them check it out. For now, stay away." His voice was shaking just slightly, and there was a strange look in his eye that I had never seen before. He looked scared.

The next morning was cold, and I could see my breath thickly floating away as I walked up the street on my way to school. I was still feeling odd about the conversation that I had with my dad the night before. He seemed to be holding something back. He was gone before I woke up, so I didn't get a chance to talk to him about it. We never spoke of it again, and it was that day that my father went out and put our house up for sale. Our family moved to Crawford, the next town over, a week after, and I never really had a chance to dig deeper into the subject. With the sudden move and new school, our lives got a bit hectic for a few weeks, and once things settled down, I had lost interest. Well, I wouldn't say I lost interest so much as I realized I just didn't want to know. My father knew, and he up and moved us out of town, which was enough for me to let it lie. There was one thing, though, that I will never forget. It's been years, and I can see it as if it were yesterday. That morning as I walked to school, I saw something. I was young, so I don't know if it was just my imagination working overtime after my eerie conversation with my dad or what. But As I turned right on the corner on Greenleaf heading down Wyatt, I took a quick look over my shoulder at the old house on the corner. There in the upstairs window, the one I had looked into so many times before, the one I had told my dad about which caused his forehead to crease in fear, was the woman I had seen all those times before, the same as always, she was waving, but this time there was something else. Beside her was a young boy, waving just the same. I can't say for sure because when I saw them, I ran and didn't look back, but the boy in the window, who was waving in unison with the old woman, had a striking resemblance, which made my knees weak as I ran. That ridged pale figure in the window looked just like Tom Parish.