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, we should all just 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 easily wish them 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 your 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 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 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 several days when 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 several 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 were where we truly felt the glory of our newfound 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 workers, pirates, superheroes and just about any other highly rated occupation that comes from the minds of ten year old boys. 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. My mother was very worried 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 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 of 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. 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 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. From there 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’d talk about the things we did, the T.V. shows we all watched, what happened and what we thought would happen next. 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 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 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 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 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 , maybe 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 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 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. 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.

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 towns spirits were lifted a day after the storm passed. The young boy who was missing was found miles down river. 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 sense of fear and isolation that the storm had created seemed to be fading.

It was a week after Tom was found that 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 serious 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 old woman at the end of the street gave 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 excitedly 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 I 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 are 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 break; the four of us were inseparable.

Tom always wanted to go and play buy 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 then the river was much higher than it normally is 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 rivers current was so strong that it pulled him right off the bank and into the water. Having hit his head on a stray piece of debris, he didn’t remember any part of his journey down the river. Alone and scared, he woke up on the banks of the river in a forest he was not familiar with. He tried to walk out of the forest 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. We 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 we walked home we started talking about weather we wanted Tom to be part of the group anymore. He had been acting strange for days and after this outburst we just wanted things to go back to the way they were.

That weekend Tom’s house burned down. We were wondering 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 principle 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. There in the window of the house on the corner was the friendly old lady looking down at me. I hadn’t seen her in awhile and I was getting worried that maybe she had died. There were never any cars parked at the house and I always worried that one day she would die and no body would know. Waving and giving a smile I headed down my street towards home. The day was as gloomy as my mood as I climbed the three concrete steps up to my porch, drops of rain starting to appear on the dry cement as I went.

I was distracted at dinner and I went up to my room early. Turning my back to the shocked faces of my parents 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 just could not shake it. I felt responsible somehow for what happened to Tom and his family. I was certain 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 so 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 Perish, 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 of 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 definitely strange, I remember feeling so bad for her. To come back home and find that, her brother was back and no one told you and that, her parents, Tom and her home were gone.

I just 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 definitely 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 Parish’s 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 was 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 strange 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. The ring, the one the old woman had given me, and the note, “look down river”. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it at the time but that was exactly where they found Tom.

That night I went into my dad’s study before bed. He could tell something was really 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. At that age I thought it was the last place I wanted to be, it reminded me of school. It wasn’t until later that I grew to appreciate history and the collection that my father had.

“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 just 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 the put our house up for sale. We 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 really lost interest so much as 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 that had 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.