

Everybody knew the boy with the green, rusty old bike. He took the same path every day to school, wore the same raggedy hand-me down clothes, and always had his old bike by his side.

Today was no different. Except that he wore a baseball cap low over his eyes, and instead of pedaling up the hill like he always did, he walked beside the bike, pulling it close to his side. Anybody who cared would have noticed these differences. They would have noticed that the bike wobbled violently from a flat front tire, but nobody did, and the boy with the green bike walked alone.

The boy trudged up the hill, entertaining himself with a few loose pebbles that crossed his path. He watched each piece of gravel skip out of his reach and then kept walking.

'Almost home.' He told himself. 'I am almost home.' Home was such a hollow word now. Once he had thought of it with joy and hope. The idea of home was what kept him going despite everything.

And now...

"Hey! Wait up!" The boy glanced over his shoulder toward the source of the voice. Upon recognition, he turned quickly and picked up his pace. The bike wobbled violently, the pedal hitting his knee and causing him to stumble. Despite his best attempt to speed walk away, a pair of footsteps caught up to him. A hand grabbed at his wrist, pulling him back.

"Hey!" The voice said again. "Didn't you hear me?"

The boy stared down at the shoes of his friend. They were clean compared to his own mud-covered feet.

"I didn't hear you. Sorry." The boy muttered, then he walked away with his bike.

His friend, persistent as always, walked next to him. As they climbed the hill, his friend pestered him with questions.

"Why did you leave without me?"

"I have to get home early, and you're too slow."

His friend pouted. "Am not!" And to prove his point, he sped up past his friend until he was at the front of the bike.

The boy rolled his eyes and said "Whatever" and kept walking.

His friend eyed him. "Why won't you look at me?"

"Cause I don't want to." He snapped back.

"Are you going to tell me what happened back at school?"

The boy gritted his teeth. "Why do you care?"

"Because you're my friend!" His friend cried. He was growing more and more aggravated by his friend's behavior, and in a moment of anger he shouted, "Why won't you just tell me? I'm your freaking friend! Why can't you trust me? And why are you wearing that stupid baseball cap?" With that, he grabbed the cap off of the boy's head. He regretted what he did the moment it happened, and what he saw made him drop the hat to the gravel.

They stopped at the top of the hill, the clouds rolling in overhead, the distant clap of thunder could be heard.

The boy turned his head away from his friend. He did not want to see the look of pity he knew was in his friend's eyes.

His friend was pitying him, but he was also angry. Angry that he had allowed his best friend to be hurt, angry that his friend was too scared to tell him- HIM!- what had happened. He couldn't find the words to say to his friend, so he instead bent down and grabbed the cap off the ground. He gave it a couple of hard shakes to get the bits of gravel and dirt the had clung on off. He extended his hand to his friend. He knew his friend enough to look away as his friend snatched the cap and put it back on. They continued down the street.

"They...they didn't just go for the bike, did they?" The friend asked quietly, glancing worriedly at the boy.

The boy shook his head slowly. Then he looked up at the sky for a moment, almost thoughtful. "It's going to rain soon." He said. "You should get going."

"At least let me walk with you to your house." His friend said.

The boy wanted to say yes. More than anything he wanted a friend, but he knew better, and instead he shook his head and replied, "You need to get home before it rains."

His friend shook his head stubbornly. "No, I want to make sure you get home safe."

"You won't be much help if it rains."

"I'll live."

"Liar."

