

What Happened Afterward

By Nick Anderson

From where Chubs was standing, Chris's bike was gleaming with the same brilliance as the water of the public pool that lay just beyond the chainlink fence it was propped up against. The frame shined like it had never met the pavement, the wheels a perfect circle, mirror to the divine ratio of the frame - it was everything a Huffy should be.

Chris hadn't even locked it up, again.

Chub's swimming trunks were drip drip dripping and making a large splotch on the concrete, growing steadily as he weighed his options. Chubs didn't have a bike. He could see Chris in line to go off the low dive, facing the opposite direction.

It was bulletproof logic, really. If Chris saw him on his bike, he could ride away on it. Chris wouldn't have a bike with which to chase him.

What Chubs had not counted on was Chris' older brother Matthew being able to drive, which is how it came to be that Chubs was smeared beneath the front right tire of Matthew's truck. Matthew was sent to jail for vehicular homicide and Chris returned to school in August just like everybody else.

Despite having inadvertently helped to kill a classmate, Chris was still well liked by his peers. He was amiable and smart, which reflected guilt like Teflon; after all, it was often said that all the intelligence in his family had been saved up for him, and everyone knew that Matthew was prone to solving problems in drastic and dangerous ways. This would not be his first visit in jail. So Chris felt virtually unaffected by the event, except for on the first day of school when his new teacher (who didn't know what had happened) fixed the seating chart so that Chubs was to sit right in front of Chris, the same position in which he had watched him get eaten up by the front tire, from where he had sat in the passenger seat. "Charlie? Charlie?" the teacher had called, until someone pointed out that he goes by Chubs and that he was dead.

And so Chubs died with the summer, his memory as unassertive as the leaves that now covered the school and the surrounding areas. They lay there thick and red for a while, but as people treaded over them on their way to here or there, they turned brown and beaten, and blew away in the wind.

Still, there was when Chubs visited Chris. It was usually in the afternoon or early in the morning when Chris had just woken up for school that he would show up. He would sit on the foot of Chris' bed, not making eye contact, just sort of mumbling in this dramatic, depressed sort of way.

"So what's going on at school?" Chubs asked. "After Jake got his cards taken away, what then? You never told me what happened."

Chris sighed, straightened his collar in the mirror. "He and his mom had to go see the principal to get them back. They told him he can't have them here because some

kids use them to gamble. And since some of them are rare and whatnot kids will get in fights and steal them. That's why he can't bring them."

"But he got them back?"

"Yeah, he got them back."

" . . . Do you like me?" Chub's head was hanging even lower than normal.

Chris scowled. "You stole my bike."

"You got it back."

"The handlebars were all bent up."

"I'm sorry."

Chris left, as he always did, mid-conversation and without saying goodbye. He couldn't be late and Chubs knew this, still even sitting directly in front of a clock Chubs seemed to ignore time completely and simply talk and talk and talk.

At school Chris was asked to talk to the counselor about what happened. She was a kindly older woman who spoke slowly and wore glasses. Around her office was a plush and vinyl museum of various visual aids, spelled out in bright block letters and primary colors. A dry erase board above her head had a long line drawn that said "COMFORTABLE" at one end and "UNCOMFORTABLE" at the other. Along it was arranged several small smiley face magnets. There was a clock on her desk, but she had turned it to face the wall.

Chris sat on what he imagined was the only couch in the school. It looked so out of place on the brownish blue carpet that had been beneath every desk he had sat at for the last several years. But then again everything in this office looked out of place and strange, including the woman and her slow, easy voice, while just outside the door he could hear the laughter of a hundred children lining up for recess. He was getting antsy. Sometimes he had to flex his palms and take deep breaths just to cope with how slow the rest of the world seemed to be moving.

The woman asked Chris questions about how he felt and whether he ever thought about Chubs. He said no, talking and smiling brightly with each answer. To be honest, he was thinking about him right then; the woman shared Chubs' affinity for neglecting Chris' agenda, opting instead to take the longest path from one end of a conversation to the other. Even as she opened the door for him, her "goodbye" lasted a decade.

Apparently satisfied with their talk, Chris never had to go back to her office, and took the rest of his recesses on the playground with his friends.

Meanwhile Chubs still wandered around Chris' bedroom, measuring the length of the floor from one wall to another, waiting for Chris to come home. When Chris opened the door he would shuffle quickly into a nonchalant pose, feigning the indifference that he saw in Chris.

Chris would just roll his eyes.

"What do you do all day?" Chubs asked one afternoon.

"I go to school, what do you think?"

"Naw, I just never noticed before, how long it all takes."

"That's probably cause you don't do anything all day." Chris sighed as he retrieved several pencils out of the small pocket of his backpack. He hoped Chubs would

leave soon, he had so much homework to do. It agitated him to hear Chubs drone on and on about having nothing to fill his time. "Don't you have someplace else to go?" Chris asked. "Where are you when you're not here?"

Chubs stretched and sighed. "Don't really like it there. Everyone's alot older than me . . . its all weird an' . . . So what did Joey say to Jake's trade? Is he going to do it?"

"Chubs!" Chris shouted, griping the side of his desk in frustration. "Go away! I have things to do!" Chris attempted to catch his breath, closing his eyes temporarily, but when he opened them again Chubs was gone.

Henceforth, Chris was less hesitant to yell at Chubs. Every time he did, Chubs would leave. It became routine. If he showed up at inopportune times, what was he supposed to do? Deliver an exposition on what he had done all day, when he would just be asked about it again by his mother at dinner? There is so much to do in a day without repeating it to everyone you meet.

For instance, there was the raking of leaves into great piles in the yard. Though the trees were all but bare and the streets were clean, leaves still congregated on the thick meshy grass of Chris' front lawn. So long separated from their host Chris was amazed at the color they still preserved - yellow, orange, dark red. Deeply interwoven with the grass, they resisted the scratch of the rake.

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October had just begun, and Chris' mother was preparing to pull out her surplus of Halloween decorations, which included a large orange sack with a Jack O'lantern face on it. When filled with crumpled newspaper the bag resembled a giant, ghoulish pumpkin. The kids in the neighborhood would come over in the days before Halloween and ask if they could help fill it up - This invariably lead to Chris' mom putting on the spooky sounds tape and baking cookies while the children crumpled a week's worth of papers and tossed them into an ominous orange half-full skull. She had never understood their proclivity for what she considered thrilless manual labor, but it was a task she would gladly trade cookies for.

This year was a bit different though, and not just because Matthew was in jail again. Chris typically talked to all the neighbor kids and determined a day they could come over to help, but she had barely seen her son's friends in the last month or so. Chris had been spending lots of time in his room, which he had attributed to a larger work load from his teacher this year. Still the demand did not seem as hard on the other kids, and then there was the talking. Chris didn't have a phone in his room yet (luckily, his mother thought, he was not yet at the age where a private line was any sort of novelty) yet she could hear him talking. To someone? To himself? His words were muddled and unclear. Perhaps he was just working out a math problem to himself, was the workload really that much harder this year? Was Chris struggling with school? She tapped her nails on the kitchen counter, looking dissonantly at a cookie tray.

Chris' mom knocked on her son's door, then opened it a peak in a manner she always felt was invasive, but at the same time convinced herself was both constructive

and permissible. She surmised this might just allow her to catch a glimpse of some sort of secret her son did not want her to see, that would be shoved in a dresser door or under a mattress before he opened up himself. As usual, it proved futile, and she felt guilty. Instead, she found Chris sitting neatly at his desk.

“Have you been wearing shoes in your room?” she asked, perturbed by the dark shoeprints on Chris’ floor that lead from one end of the room to the other, then gathered at the foot of the bed. Chris shook his head, apparently incognizant of the wear.

“I was just wondering when everyone was coming over to fill the pumpkin . . .” she stated hesitantly. “I know there’s still three weeks, I just haven’t seen Mark or Erin around, and I was just wondering, is everything alright? Are you having trouble with your homework?”

Chris looked confused. Of course not, he contended, producing several A papers from his backpack to serve as examples. Many of them were marked as being handed in early. Unconvinced, Chris’ mother probed deeper.

“What about just at school, are you getting along ok?” she stroked her son’s head. “Are other kids being mean to you or . . .” she approached the subject carefully, “are they . . . blaming you?”

“For what?” Chris asked, spinning his head quickly to the foot of his bed. He was panting just slightly.

“You know it wasn’t your fault right? And that Matthew, and you talked to the conseilour and she said you were fine I just want to make sure, honey . . . Are you ok?” Chris’ mom smiled sympathetically, narrowing her eyes as if the action might produce X-ray results that would show the inside of her son. Chris laughed, and hugged his mom. Fine, he said.

She left dubious but unable to find another loose corner of Chris’ actions at which to pry. He seemed fine, he really did. That’s what worried her. The minute she shut the door she could hear him mumbling again, and pacing.

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After the initial discovery that he did not stick around if he was threatened, Chris had yelled often at Chubs and he had disappeared each time. Leaves of absence had become longer. But each time Chubs returned he seemed a bit different. Different *how* Chris was unable to put his finger on. One day Chris had come in to find Chubs going through the things on his desk.

“What are you doing?” Chris asked angrily. He had never seen Chubs touch his things before, move them.

“Just seeing what you’ve got around here.”

Chubs had said this and looked right into Chris’ eyes, the first time ever. They conveyed the howling of a vacuum, absorbing everything, even light.

“Chubs I’m really busy.” Chris insisted angrily.

“Yeah, you most certainly appear to be. It seems like you’re sweatin’ every time I see you now. I thought you didn’t have to work so hard at school on account of you

being so smart.”

“I don’t, now leave.” Chris could feel his heart racing again.

Chubs, looking a bit preoccupied anyway, left as requested.

He was gone for almost an entire week after that. The next time he appeared Chris was almost shocked, but soon assumed the same rhetorical jib.

“Oh, look who’s back,” he scowled. “What’s the matter, you -”

“If you don’t want me here, why do I keep coming back?” Chubs stated.

“ . . . Are you asking me?” Chris asked. Chubs laughed this off, walking his fingers through a deck of trading cards.

“You make alot less noise there.” Chubs teased. “You’re quiet and your face looks all saggy like you’re sleeping.”

Chris’ heart rate was rising again, but being an intelligent young man it was hard for the frustration to supersede curiosity.

“Me *where*?” Chris asked, “You mean where you are when you’re not here?” Chubs nodded without looking up. “Yeah,” he said nonchalantly, feeding off of Chris’ curiosity.

“I thought you didn’t like it up there.” Chris riposted.

“I met some people. Smart ones. They showed me *the* pool.”

The way Chubs had said *the* - the details were just too surreptitious, Chris could tell, and Chubs hung them over his head like a lamb chop to a hungry dog. All it took was that hungry look and Chubs divulged.

“There’s this pool.”

“Like the one here?” Chris asked.

“No, absolutely not. Well, sort of. It’s tile and concrete, like the one here, and there’s lifeguard chairs, but no one’s ever sitting in them. And the water is all black.” Chub’s eyes intensified. “And everyone’s in it. You, everyone from school, our teachers . . . thousands and thousands of people, for miles. You’re all just standing in it, kind of floating. It looks like it would be really shallow, but when I looked down in it I couldn’t see the bottom. It doesn’t say how deep it is but it has to be *really* deep and . . . I can see stuff moving deep down in it. Giant things.” Chubs shuttered a little bit. “One day I was just sitting there, watching it - trying to see what’s in there, you know. You can make out shapes if you stare at it long enough. Anyway, I see this really long line. Looks like an eel, only, Chris, it’s *so* long. The pool is so big I can’t see the other side, but measuring by people it had to be like a hundred feet long. Anyway I watch it all day waiting for it to swim but it doesn’t. Then I start to notice smaller lines surrounding it, like a wrinkled sheet or something . . . and all of a sudden the lines open and shut, and I realize it was an *eye*. An *eye* Chris. It open and shut and then sank so fast, like a million feet . . .”

Chris was breathing heavily. Something about the story felt so true to him, like whether or not this place actually exisited, at least the way Chubs described it, had no effect on whether it was real or not. “What other things do you see in the pool?” Chris asked.

Chubs leaned in.

"I started sitting closer. At first I was afraid, because I couldn't see what was in there, how deep it went . . ." Chub's eyes opened wide like someone had shut off the lights. "But the more I looked into it the more I felt like it was alright and the less afraid of it I felt. There's fish in it. Lots of them. And people too, and objects. Lots of stuff I've never seen before. But that's not all. I can't describe it really . . . there's . . . things in it. Things that don't have names or even shapes."

"How can you see it if it doesn't have a shape?" Chris asked.

"Well, its not like seeing it with your eyes, I guess. I just look and think and then suddenly, I *see* it. Like a magic eye book where its just a bunch of lines and color but if you concentrate you can see dolphins and clowns and stuff."

"So, there's things in there that can't be described at all? But what *are* they? Explain it better."

"I know, I didn't understand at first either. I was lying on my stomach with my head leaned over the side, but I could still only see so much, you know. The more I saw the more I felt like there was a whole lot more that I was missing, like this whole time I'd only seen one little piece of a giant puzzle. Actually, the opposite. The more I look at it the more I feel like I'm a little puzzle piece, sitting on a shelf. But -"

Chris' mom gave a quick knock on his door, then opened it slightly. "Have you been wearing shoes in your room?" she asked. Chris looked around and Chubs was gone.

The next time Chubs appeared, Chris was in his front yard feverishly raking leaves. From the window Chris could see Chubs pacing around his room in a distant, distracted sort of way.

"Still so many leaves!" Chubs said as Chris entered. "Even more than the last time I was here I think!"

"Have you seen more in the pool?" Chris asked without hesitation, pulling up a chair. Chubs nodded and rubbed his palms together.

"So where were we? I was looking over the edge was I?" Chubs cleared his throat. "From the edge I could only see enough to be more confused. I talked to those people I met, remember? They told me I shouldn't be spending so much time at the water's edge. You know there's some people up there that won't even go near it? They say that there's a reason I can't see everything. But you know, that's easy for them to say. They're old and they probably think they know everything so what's the point in learning more, right? Plus this isn't the type of learning everyone's always trying to get us to do, all the facts and figures and who-discovered-America-s. This is the type of things they don't want you to know about because they want it all for themselves or because they don't see how important it is. Either way, it didn't stop me."

"What'd you do?" Chris asked, mesmerized.

"I touched it. I went right up to the water and I touched it. At first I just stuck my hand in, real fast -" Chubs demonstrated this with a rapid dunking motion - "and just got my hand wet. I thought it might hurt or stain me because of it being black, but it didn't do a darn thing."

"Did you understand after you touched it?"

"No, not right away. I wasn't expecting to really. I just wanted to get closer."

Chubs smiled smugly. "I knew I shouldn't have, or rather that I wasn't wanted to, but this was too much Chris. I lowered myself in real easy and just paddled in place for a bit. I didn't want anything in there to see me or catch me so I took it slow and got out every few minutes. I could still see stuff down in there, and it wasn't paying me any mind. If anything it all made room for me, like I was a part of it, same as everything else in there."

Chris was amazed that Chubs had found the courage to pull such a gutsy stunt. He had been too afraid to even go off the lowdive.

"So I sat and soaked in there for a while. I felt right at home. So I decided to take it to the next level, and stuck my face in."

"Could you see?" Chris asked. Chubs laughed.

"Could I *see*? Chris, I had never seen before this. See, looking into the pool, everthing was blackish-blue and colored funny by the water, but underneath the surface, it was COLOR! Color like I'd never seen before. Colors I couldn't think of names for next to ones I can't get enough of. Some of them, I could stare at and see every shade that it was made of! They danced around me like I was the beauty queen on top of the biggest float in the parade. Even the *shadows* were in color Chris! It was all so loud and, noisy, none of it made any sense to me but I was so delighted just to see it and be there and everything that I kept swimming deeper and deeper. I forgot completely that I was underwater. Suddenly my lungs choked me and I realized I had been under for who knows how long - I looked up and around but everything was so bright that I couldn't see where the surface was. My lungs gave me one big stab in the chest and I inhaled about a gallon of that black water. And when I did," Chubs shivered visibly, "*everything* in the entire pool, in all creation, lined themselves right up and marched single file into my head. The colors bent and folded and spelled out the whole world in some heavenly language of thoughts and shapes . . . and I realized that I didn't have to breathe at all. I just floated there, calm and steady as a ticking clock, just taking in this play that was being put on before me. It was beautiful Chris. I mean, it *still* is - everywhere I look now, ever since - I see the whole world from backstage. I *understand*. Does that make sense Chris?"

"Does it ever." Chris confessed, looking dreamily off into the distance. "I knew there was something like that, I did. Things get so confusing you know, and I knew that out there there was some way to know, to make sense of it. It's what I want more than anything right now Chubs. Can you explain it to me?"

Chubs shook his head. "I don't think so." he lamented, "Like I said, even staring at the pool for weeks I couldn't grasp it. Even under the surface it was all gibberish in my head. It wasn't til I drank it that everything clicked like it did."

Chris was undeterred. "This water then - if I, like, give you a glass - can you bring me some back?"

"Hmm," Chubs considered, "I don't really know. I could try though . . ."

"Oh, I really want you to. This means a whole lot to me Chubs, there's been alot of things bothering me lately and it would just mean the world."

Chubs smiled his dopey grin. "We'd really be friends after that, wouldn't we?"

"Yes Chubs," Chris conceded, "Yeah, we really would. Can you do that for me?"

“Of course, whatever it takes, I’ll bring it back for you. A whole big cup of it.”

Chris made sure that his mother was free from the hallway, and snuck into the kitchen, retrieving a large glass tumbler. “Here,” he said, sticking it firmly in Chub’s pudgy hand, “My mom really likes this one, so even if you can’t keep the water in it make sure you bring this back.”

“Got it!” Chubs said happily. Chris checked the hallway once again for his mother, and when he shut his door again Chubs and the glass were gone.

It was early morning of the next day when Chris realized that he had never told Chubs when to return. Would he wait a week again? Would he get distracted beside the pool? Chris tapped his pencil nervously on his desk, watching the clock slide slowly into the afternoon. His heart pounded faster than normal. Leaving as soon as the bell would allow him Chris ran through the streets until finally he was crossing his own leaf-laden yard. There in his window, behind the curtains, he could see Chubs pacing.

Chris slammed the door behind him. “Did you?” he puffed, too exhausted to finish his statement. Chubs just smiled, pointing to a tall glass of black liquid sitting on his desk. Chris was too enthralled by it to yell at Chubs for spilling some around where it sat. The liquid made a kalidoscopic fractal of color where it had dried on the desk.

“Did good, didn’t I?” Chubs beamed.

Chris nodded, lifting the glass. Grasping it with both hands he brought it to eye level. Chubs had been right - even in its tiny chalice there was a depth to it Chris could not explain - it was as if the glass were 8 feet deep. Inside he saw things moving in rhythm, looking up at him, perhaps waiting for him to join in.

Quickly, as to block the gut reaction to drinking something so strange a color, Chris tipped the glass back and let the entire cup flow down his open throat. There was more to drink than he had anticipated, the water seemed to just keep pouring and pouring, so long that Chris felt he might need to take a breath. Then suddenly he didn’t feel like breathing was necessary anymore. Chris felt the gush end and swallowed hard - opening his eyes. They had already been open, but now he felt them *really* open, as if up to this point he had been staring at the world through a semi-translucent eyelid like an alligator. Chris looked at Chubs. He looked at his hands. He began to tremble.

“Do you see it?” Chubs asked enthusiastically. “Do you see now what I was talking about?”

On the walls all around Chris was written a novel, of sorts - he read it instantaneously in one glance, from the beginning to the very last page where the words overlapped and became the beginning again. Chris could hear Chubs speaking.

“Chris? Are you ok?”

Chris kneeled and slithered backwards until he met a pile of drity laundry stacked in a corner. He looked up at Chubs, his eyes so wide it was hard to tell their color.

“Chubs . . .” Chris muttered in disbelief.

“Oh, I knew it! You have your answers now don’t you?”

“How do you,” Chris mumbled, as he found himself almost unable to speak simply out of the awareness of it, “How can you stand it?”

“Stand what?” Chubs asked. “I don’t see how it affects me really.”

Chris appeared to be riding multiple lines of thought simultaneously. Rubbing his hands vigorously, licking his lips, Chris sough the stable ground with both palms to ease the nausea.

“Well, now that that’s over, whataya say we play cards like I always wanted? We can split your deck in half.” Chubs shuffled a stack of plastic-coated cards from Chris’ desk, cut them in half, and sat down in front of Chris on the floor.

“Well, I’ll let you shuffle them again if you want, so some of the better cards are at the top.”

Chris sat motionless except for the rhythmic bob of his head.

“What are you doing Chris?” Chubs howled. “Why are you messing with me? I thought we were finally going to be friends now!”

Chris opened his mouth and gummed the air, ineffectively searching for a sensible string of vowels and consonants.

“So that’s how it is, is it, that all this was you needing something and me having it. Suppose the only reason I got to come here at all was because you knew I had it all along and now that you’ve got it you’re not even going to talk to me. You know Chris it wasn’t my fault, how everything happened, and you shouldn’t hate me so specifically for it. No one has control of anything and you should know that now.”

Chubs left.

Inside his room Chris could hear the chatter of approaching children, talking of who they would be for Halloween and what houses they would be visiting for optimum candy collection. Sunlight cut angrily through his slated wooden blinds; it was the end of the afternoon, and though night was still a long way off, the sun grew tired and red and hung low in the sky like a sleeping cat’s eye.

Just two days before Halloween Chris’ mother had resorted to calling the parents of the pumpkin-stuffing children and arranged for them to meet in the afternoon. Now holding two trays of pumpkin shaped cookies she knocked on Chris door with her foot.

“Chris honey haven’t seen you all afternoon! Time to stuff the pumpkin!”

In the garage stood a circle of folding chairs (with the occasional lawn recliner and bean bag) around the empty pumpkin exoskeleton. She waved (also with her foot) to the the train of kids steadily snaking into the garage.

Chris, slowly, opened the door to his room. Alerted by the sound of a turning doorknob, Chris’ mom (with a smile) walked to greet him in the hallway, but instead of her son she found only his casing.

“Honey, are . . .”, though she knew without asking, “are you alright?”

Chris’ eyes were as deep as the pacific, their aperture as wide as a satellite telescope, his smile as sincere as an Judas’ kiss. His facade fractured with a twitch as he slid past his mother to the open garage door. Leaves everywhere. Each child held a handful of dead foliage, shoving it into the still empty pumpkin bag while a dozen or so children gossiped and danced and ate merrily.

“Your mom said we could use leaves this year,” one child announced hesitantly to the quivering boy in the doorway, “Since there’s still so many in your yard.”

Chris snatched the orange, smiling sack off the ground - and darting with the ferocity of a feral animal dive-bombed the front yard face first, cutting his fingers on the sharp weeds as he scraped armfuls of leaves into the bag. Chris' mother watched silently as the sack bloomed into a horrible grimace. His eyes teared as it stretched; nearly spilling out the top. Chris cinched the bag with both hands, and for a moment it seemed like he had it; still the face split right down the middle and from the tear spewed a gush of yellow, orange and red leaves that slid around the breeze like a life cut into hundreds of thinly sliced, separately aching pieces.