

New Plains Review



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Windows to His World

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6 AM

Six-year-old Matt bolts out of bed, rushes to the window and peels back the shade to see if there is snow. Through the frosty window he sees a ribbon of white where the road should be, and snowflakes that sparkle in the glare of the streetlight. His eyes widen and his jaw drops, revealing a missing front tooth.

"It's snowing!" he proclaims in a shrill voice that reverberates down the hall, waking everyone else.

Five minutes later, I prop open the door to his room and announce with a smile that school is closed so he can go back to sleep.

We both know that sleep isn't going to happen. Within the hour, I will bundle him up, tuck his gloves under the sleeves of his coat, and cover his double-socked feet with bread bags so they slide into his boots more easily (Grandma's trick).

If it's a wet snow, the kind that makes the pine tree look droopy and tired, Matt and I will throw snowballs at the tree, and maybe at each other, and we will build a snowman with poker chips for eyes and a baby carrot for a nose.

Matt will catch snowflakes on his tongue and try to run against the wind to the top of the backyard hill, pulling a purple sled behind him. He will slip and fall to his knees, but he will get right back up as a white halo forms around the rim of his hood. Then he will jump on the sled and ride a magic, icy carpet, and his laughter will wash over the yard. He will do this over and over again until he can't feel his fingers.

When cold and exhaustion finally overtake him, he will clomp inside with his snowy boots, matted hair and rosy cheeks, and I will make him hot chocolate.

9 AM

Eight-year-old Matt should go to school today, but we have other plans. We have tickets to Opening Day for the Baltimore Orioles, so Matt stays in bed reading *The Hardy Boys* until the sun is high enough to peek through his window.

He sets the book on the nightstand, crosses his soft carpet — the color of deep ocean — and goes to the closet where he grabs his Orioles jersey and hat.

I will park the car downtown, and Matt will hold my hand tightly as we jostle among the crowd streaming toward the stadium, a school of fish returning on a current of April optimism. Hucksters will scream as they sell hats on street corners. Hot dogs will steam as they sizzle on sidewalk grills.

Once inside the stadium, Matt's little legs will work in overdrive, racing up the ramps toward our seats in the upper deck, his baseball glove on his left hand just in case a foul ball comes our way. He will get his first glimpse about halfway to the top: framed by the concrete bleachers above and the lower-deck seats below, a wedge of glorious green grass will announce, unequivocally, that spring has arrived.

When there are no more ramps, when there are no more bleachers blocking the view, when all obstacles have faded away like last winter's snow, baseball will explode into full bloom—orange jerseys worn by fans who relish a new beginning, an outfield that looks like an emerald carpet, an infield diamond laid out in perfect geometry, all under a dome of cobalt sky.

Our team will lose the game, but that's okay, because family traditions matter. As Grandma once wrote to a teacher on a day such as this, "Some things are more important than school, and Opening Day with your father is one of them."

NOON

Ten-year-old Matt looks out his window, watching me tie down his bike on top of the camper hitched to the car in the driveway. It's his new bike, the rugged one with thick tires.

We will drive two hours to a state park, the one with a gravel path around the lake. The path is a mile long, and Matt will zoom over every inch of it, in the shade of pine trees that are just a blur when riding a cool tenth birthday present. He will be sure to wear his helmet because I will say that he has to.

We will go canoeing, Matt up front and me in the back, and our oars will slice through otherwise placid water. Sunning turtles will scamper off a fallen log when we approach, and a great blue heron will skim over the surface, its beak like a needle in flight. We will feel the sun baking our arms and neck, and I will ask Matt if he needs more sunscreen.

We will build a campfire and roast marshmallows, and our clothes will smell like smoke for days. We will walk to the edge of the lake at night and crane our necks, and I will show him how to find the Big Dipper and from there, the North Star, as a meteor slices through the blackness.

We will wake to birdsong that heralds the dawn, pack up and head home, and we will already be thinking about the next trip.

3 PM

Twelve-year-old Matt is lying on top of the blue-and-white striped comforter, reading. He has always found value in quiet space. Yellowing leaves flutter just outside his window as a cold breeze separates them from the Norway maple in the front yard.

I walk into his room looking somber and say that I need to talk to him. He closes *Percy Jackson* and gently rests the book on his nightstand. I explain that Grandpa is not doing well, that he might not live much longer, and that I will be heading to Arizona to see him.

I sit on the corner of his bed, and we talk about the wooden chess set we made for Grandpa for Christmas last year. I remind him how we worked in the garage through the December chill, cutting every piece on the scroll saw, and how he had stained them with careful, patient strokes—some tan, some chocolate brown—to match the board his uncle had made. We agree that the knights, with their intricate curves and delicate cuts for the mouth, were the hardest but also the best.

I mention that Grandpa loved watching him play baseball, and that Grandpa was speechless when Matt took the game ball he was awarded, signed it in a looping autograph and handed it to him. I remind him that the ball, with blue ink still fighting through the dirt, has rested in a glass case on Grandpa's bookshelf ever since.

I tell him that Grandpa loves him very much, and I tap his leg a couple of times with my hand. Matt's brown eyes glisten and blink a few times, and when I ask if he's okay, he nods silently, almost imperceptibly. I tell him I will call with an update when I get there, and I quietly close the door.

Matt is alone in his room again.

6 PM

Fourteen-year-old Matt hears us downstairs eating dinner, the smell of lasagna and garlic bread climbing the steps and slipping under his door. Muffled laughter from his mom and sister rises through the floor. He lies on his bed, a hoodie pulled up over his head, and he plays a game on his phone. His eyes bore into the screen and his thumbs pound away on some virtual battlefield. He listens for a car, because his friend's family is taking him out for pizza and a movie.

He changes his shirt since his friend said those girls might be at the movie, and he rubs his chin to feel whether that pimple is gone. He hears a car turn into the driveway right below his window, and then a doorbell and an excited bark from the dog.

He darts out of his room, leaving a shirt and a sock hanging out of his dresser like prisoners trying to escape. He will take the stairs two at a time and quickly say goodbye to no one in particular before racing out the door.

He will run back in five seconds later to grab the twenty-dollar bill I left for him on the table, and while he's at it, dash into the dining room to make off with a piece of garlic bread.

I will tell him to be home by eleven, but he will not hear me.

9 PM

Sixteen-year-old Matt plops onto his bed under the ceiling fan, his shirt glued to his skin by the humidity, his window closed tight against the heat. He tosses his paycheck onto the nightstand, next to his learner's permit manual.

He hears me call his name once, then again, from the living room. He doesn't budge. Then he hears heavy footsteps on the stairs. The door opens and I shake my head and snap angrily that we wanted to leave for the beach half an hour ago. He takes out his earphones and says that he can get packed up in five minutes.

He will take a friend to the beach with him, and they will dive head-first into swells fed by an offshore storm. He will ride a wave on his stomach until it deposits him in the foamy sand, and he will get up, wipe his auburn hair out of his eyes, turn around and beg for more. I will watch from a chair and scarcely recognize the boy who feared the water when he was six.

After dinner, he and his friend will walk down the boardwalk, four blocks to the main drag. He will use his own money to buy ice cream, strawberry, probably, and he will stand a little taller when he passes the girls leaning against the railing, all smiles and tan legs and sun-bleached hair buffeted by the breeze.

I will sit on the porch and watch a kite soar above the sand, the lights of a freighter dotting the horizon. And I will remember when I used to walk down the boardwalk, four blocks to the main drag, with Matt on my shoulders, small fingers interlocked across my forehead. We would buy ice cream, and he would order strawberry, probably.

MIDNIGHT

Eighteen-year-old Matt is gone. I walk into his room, dark and quiet until the semester ends. The comforter is stiff with inactivity. One lonely pillow misses its twin. Faded laughter has settled into every corner.

The lamp along the front walk casts a shadow of six rectangular frames onto the ceiling, windows to his world. This was his view when he drifted off to sleep on Christmas Eve and listened for footprints on the roof, when he woke from a nightmare and clenched his comforter,

when he turned off the light during summer storms and watched for the flash.

A shaft of moonlight filters through the Norway maple and bathes the walls in a bluish hue, illuminating a shelf full of baseballs above the bed. Stories are stitched through every one, but I don't know why he saved these and not others. No answers emerge in this solitude.

I take a baseball and lie on his bed. I grip it in my left hand, just as I did when we used to play catch in the yard. The smell of leather and freshly-mown grass, the crack of a bat, the laughter of a boy, taunt from somewhere just beyond my reach.