Ben

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Ben scratched and tore at the arms that dragged him down the stairs. His body hit each step painfully, the jagged and splintered wood of the staircase tearing the exposed flesh of his arms and legs. He struggled and fought to stand, but the man wouldn’t allow it. He stubbed his toes and knocked his knees against the steps but couldn’t find his feet. The darkness of the basement closed around the two, and Ben found himself on the floor of his bedroom, pain radiating from twisted ankles, scraped shins and knees.

The man was nowhere to be seen. Although escape was futile, Ben felt he had to try. Perhaps the man was in a joking mood today. Maybe if he could escape, the man would leave him be. So Ben rolled to his side painfully, found the door, and took a deep breath.

As silently as he could, he dragged himself to the door, his hand touching the cool linoleum of the floor outside his room. But the action didn’t go unnoticed as the man stepped from the shadows of the room and slammed the door shut on his fingers. Ben screamed and cried in pain, tearing his bloody fingers from under the door and pressing them into his mouth as though to suck out the pain. Thankfully, none of them were bloody stubs. Thoroughly amused, the man bent down and grabbed Ben from the floor like a rag doll and tossed him unto the bed. Then he threw himself upon the young man like a depraved beast, holding him down with much more force than needed. No doubt bruises would cloud the boy’s wrists the next day.

But suddenly, Ben wrestled free from the man’s grip and scrambled to his bedroom door, throwing it open with a deafening THUD as it slammed against the wall. He didn’t know how this sudden escape happened, but he was not about to give up on it either. He raced up the basement stairs and into the kitchen, and before his father could even rise from his well-worn spot on the sofa to see what the commotion was, Ben escaped through the side screen door of the house.

Instantly, the sun’s warmth seemed to burn into his face as he stepped past the threshold, but it was this warmth he welcomed. The sun caressed his face with gentle touches, expelling the pain and aches where the light reached. Ben’s heart felt light as air, he could feel it rise from the pits of his bowels to its rightful place in his chest.

With this newfound energy he leaped from the stoop and ran to the end of the driveway. He looked over his shoulder at the ratty, disheveled hell-house, the screen door flapping in the gust of wind that made Ben feel strong as he stood against it. His father and the man stood in the dark doorway like two angry trolls, watching him with surprise as though they were looking at some completely different person than the wimpy waif of a young man Ben always had been.

At that moment, Ben made a resolution—he wouldn’t return to the hell his father inflicted upon him each and every day. He would run and run and run until he found his place. He didn’t need money to get where he was going, he needed himself and the will to keep pushing on. Proud and glowing, Ben faced the cul-de-sac, thinking with humor that he should just hijack a passing car to get where he wanted to go. I can do it, he told himself, and I have the guts now.

“Benji!”

Ben’s thoughts were disrupted by an euphoric voice that he hadn’t heard in years. The voice seemed to be coming from the heavens, from the sun. But when he heard the slow squeak of pedals pumping rusted wheels, he looked to the cracked driveway of the house next to him. He caught sight of a figure on a bike, riding towards him at full speed. She was a young woman who Ben recognized immediately. She braked to a stop beside him, her back tire squealing and created a skid along the sidewalk, her smile standing out from under her waves of dark hair.

Wendy was different than he remembered; taller, longer hair, stunning eyes and beautiful, delicate fingers that beckoned him to hop on the seat behind her. But Ben couldn’t move. His legs returned to their weakened state upon the sight of her. She was so beautiful and Ben was too stunned to actually be looking into the face of his best friend whom left him long ago.

“Well?” she said, grinning, “Are you coming or not?”

Ben began to nod uncontrollably, the strength returning to his legs in a sudden burst of energy. With a smile a mile wide he jumped on the back of her bike.

Excitedly, he put his feet on the back wheel’s pegs and held onto her shoulders. “Alright,” Wendy said, “Wave adios and we’re outta here!”

He had nearly forgotten about the two men and his house. He glanced back to where his father and the man remained by the side door; without so much of a thought, Ben lifted his arm and hand and promptly presented his middle finger to the two, a wicked smirk replacing the wide smile. The noticeable change in his father’s reddening face pleased him immensely, and the old man flew off in a rage, stampeding down the stoop and towards Ben and Wendy.
“Good one, Benji!” Wendy cackled, kicking off the ground as Ben’s father attempted to grab at her handlebars. Instantly, the bike took off at a terrible speed, as though it were a motorcycle rather than a decrepit old two-wheeler. Ben tightened his hold around her, his father and old home becoming nothing more than a blur in the distance.

The two flew past the old, collapsing houses of their childhood and out of the grim, polluted town of Cedarloo until the whipping wind made it impossible for Ben to open his eyes and see around him.

It was like Wendy was driving a car out on a highway at two hundred miles an hour and his head was stuck out the window. He clung to her, resting his cheek against her back, breathing in her long lost yet familiar scent, smiling joyously at this surprise rescue.

In the air, he heard a deep laugh. When he tried to look around and the wind wouldn’t permit him, he curiously snaked his hand over Wendy’s shoulder and touched his lips, realizing it was he who was laughing. Raucously, he continued to laugh until he felt his hold on Wendy slip.

“Hold on, Ben! I’d hate to lose you again!” Wendy shouted and Ben clasped back unto her. He was sure that if he had let go, he would have been a bloody skid in the pavement.

Wendy felt his touch and found his hand with her own, intertwining their fingers. “Don’t worry Benji,” she called against the wind, “You’ll come and live with me in New York. I came back for you just like I said I would!”

She carried on, talking about the great big city, her new boyfriend, her friends, her job; all wonderful things that filled Ben with excitement. But as Wendy continued, the roaring wind made it harder and harder for him to hear her voice. He tried to pry open his eyes to see her. Out of nowhere a piercing pain stung through his eyelids, but Ben wanted to see. He had to see her, but it was as though his eyes had been glued shut with strands of white hot pain.

Suddenly, Wendy’s scent disappeared from his nose, replaced with the rotten, moldy smell of his basement room. The wind suddenly stopped blowing against his skin and he felt heavy heat from the body on top of him. He wanted to see, he fought to open his eyes, but they screamed against his skull. What happened to Wendy? Ben thought, his chest rising and falling in fearful gasps. Where did she go? She felt so real a moment ago.

Finally, his eyelids ripped open with vivid pain. The world around him was blurry and dark, save for the flickering lamp in the corner the man must of turned on. There was heavy breathing on his neck and face which reeked terribly of booze. The dreaded aches and pains returned to Ben like a wave, as did the realization that he had never escaped this hell. Fury boiled up inside of him and came out through his eyes as hot tears. The anger subsided into utter sadness that the dream was not real. Why would it be real? A voice sniggered in the back of his mind. If it was real, it would have required me being fearless and having the balls to stand up to my dad.

His attention returned to the man on top of him. This sort of thing had been happening for so long now that Ben hardly minded the pain between his legs. But he still winced with every grunt the man made. He felt the sting of his wrists which were wrenched painfully above his head. A futile effort, for Ben knew he couldn’t escape even if his hands were free. His body cried and groaned to every movement and thrust, but Ben thought it best just to simply lay there motionless until the ordeal passed.

His eyes began to feel tired after darting them around painfully in their bruised sockets. He closed his lids, weariness and pain easing his mind to just fall back into sleep, into illusion.

But it wasn’t a moment later that the man was finished with his business. He pushed off of the boy, stumbled to his feet and cleaned himself up in the darkness. Immediately Ben grabbed his sheet and pulled it over his head. Through an opening he watched the shadowy figure reach around on the floor for his clothes and grab something from off his dresser. Slowly, he brought his knees up to his chest and held them close, feeling it was safe to do so. After quite a bit of stumbling, the man found the bedroom door and left. Ben counted the number of steps he took to ascend the stairs until he could hear those clunky shoes no longer.

Unraveling himself from his ball, Ben wrapped the sheet around his body, sat up weakly, and leaned against the backboard of the bed. Just think, he said to himself, I’m nearly eighteen and then I can finally leave. Just one more year! One more year. Dad won’t have any legal obligations over me once I’m an adult. I’ll be my own person. One year and I can go off to see Wendy in the big city.

Yet as Ben told himself this over and over, his heart sank deeper and deeper with doubt and fear until it was nestled firmly back in the deepest part of his stomach.

Suddenly, a wave of nausea and tiredness washed over him. Feeling sleep was the cure as it was every night and day; he leaned over to cast out the dying light in the lamp.

There was another light, however, against his sheets that caught his eye. He traced it through the small hopper window across the room. He blinked and drew his hand out from the sheet, easing it into the stream of
The little light created a small amount of warmth that dulled some of the pain in his icy, crooked fingers. As he looked back at the window where the sun’s light permeated weakly, he laid against his pillow until his eyes succumbed to sleep and his mind slipped away from consciousness. Just one year, was his last waning thought, a small cracked smile spreading across his lips.

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