

Watch Our Pride Blister

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The discrepancy between high school and real life aggravated our already restless minds. Laws required us to learn useless information while neglecting lessons of practicality. We all wanted out for different reasons. As maturity set in, the sieves separated the sticks and stones of us plain people from the gold. Our high school had a social hierarchy like any society, and those of us without physical prowess waited impatiently to enter a world that included other values. Our routine of waiting lasted until junior year, when one student's charade interrupted the peace.

By then, most of us were concentrating on community service for college applications or doing the same to make up for traffic tickets. Kyle still kept Transformers (the toys, not the hardware) in his locker, not even nostalgically—the retro-fashion T-shirts had yet to become popular in our town. He hadn't given them up. Strange things were rumored to be stashed in other lockers: condoms for Isaac, steroids for Arthur Coppersmith, a homemade porno for Katie Zans, an autographed picture of Alanis Morissette for Samantha, and an ounce of pot for Randy. These items had importance, though, and belonged to people admired more than looked down on. Also, these items were rumors; Kyle's robots were facts loaded into his very being as much as his locker.

We lived for the weekend, and a few people gathered to talk party plans one morning. As Samantha filled up her water bottle at the fountain, Copper dropped his pen in front of her. He snapped his fingers at Isaac as

she bent over to pick it up. Copper gyrated his pelvis, making three revolutions before she turned to him. Randy and a few other guys cracked up while Isaac, quarterback and Samantha's boyfriend of six months, grabbed Copper by the shoulders and slammed him into a locker.

"You wish," Isaac said. Copper looked past him to Samantha, who was more confused than alarmed.

"Pig," Katie said, the only girl to have witnessed the dry hump. Kyle wouldn't let a dramatic situation evaporate peacefully. He made one loud snort in Katie's face and then started laughing as if Copper's joke was for him, too. Katie grabbed Samantha by the arm and dragged her down the hall, leaving Kyle alone in the shark tank.

"We'll let you know when you're allowed to speak," Copper said, grabbing both of Kyle's arms. His spine smashed against the locker with a metallic ring.

"What powerful muscles you have," Kyle said, his face a mixed grimace and smile.

"Leave him alone," Isaac said, catching Samantha's glance from the end of the hall.

"Keep your mouth shut, faggot," Copper said, his fierce eyes only an intimate distance away from Kyle's. You could see Kyle's face turn red and tears well up in his eyes as Copper's grip tightened. Copper dropped him and the crowd broke for class.

"Have you ever thought about being a professional football player?" Kyle asked as they walked away, but they ignored him. He ceased to exist the moment Copper let him go.

Kyle ran into problems because he had too much energy and too

little . . . well, you couldn't talk to him without becoming his only friend. The weight of his existence strapped you into a straightjacket the second you sat down at his lunchroom table. Saying "hello" to Kyle in the halls was like volunteering to adopt someone else's child.

Kyle's social awkwardness was nothing new. During middle school, we had free days in gym class at the end of every quarter. Kyle didn't play games in the corner like Maria Reyes and "the Cao"—the other misfits. He didn't read like Jeremiah Stone, play hopscotch with Katie Zans, or alternate between kickball and football like the rest of us. Kyle took all the equipment no one was using and threw it on top of the bleachers. He even got a medicine ball up there once but always had to stay after school to put it all away.

Kyle brought Transformers to school every day back then, too. Grimlock, an Autobot Tyrannosaurus, actually roped in a few friends in the second grade. Years passed and he continued without shame to wave the broken plastic at us like an empty fishhook.

His shameless behavior encouraged equally shameless reactions. General statements like, "No one likes you," and, "I don't want to be your friend," became commonplace devices to expel him from whatever social sphere he invaded with his robot army. Casual friendships would have been tolerated, mostly by other nerds, but no one could keep up with his quirks. He talked quickly without breathing and rubbed your shoulders if you stopped paying attention.

People called him a fag. A name common enough to be trivial—Copper and the guys in his group used it indiscriminately. They used it on each other, sometimes like a joke, a mark of familiarity. None of us honestly thought that Kyle was gay. A dozen fags went to our school, but none of

them were gay. It was an idea, a myth invented by grownups to scare children, or for children to scare their peers—an excuse to be exclusive. It was a term as far away and absent as *weapons of mass destruction*. We learned to hate the bearers of the name, but we couldn't imagine them changing the lives we led in our small town.

Counting all the times people called Kyle a fag would be like counting the number of bullets fired in an action movie. It wasn't really the point. Name-calling had the same effect as shooting a werewolf with non-silver ammo. For a while in middle school, a few guys tried to find the right chemistry, the combination of insults and slaps to break his cool. Words that burned some kids alive had no echo in his ears. Still, the guys kept him full of bullet holes with the same amusement that their video games gave them. Then Kyle started to play the game, too. The contest wasn't like a football game, but he managed to threaten the tender place in their hearts where pride and confidence resided.

Kyle had to go back to his locker for his red journal one morning, the one he kept for meetings with the counselor. He stuffed pencils into the fluorescent green fanny pack he always wore around his waist. Then Copper staggered out of the gym. Sweat darkened his pits and a greasy stripe ran down his back. Had there been no audience, maybe nothing would have happened, but Randy wasn't far behind in his sweaty, sleeveless Metallica T-shirt. As Copper bent over the drinking fountain, Kyle pointed at Randy. After a wink, Kyle silently thrust his pelvis behind Copper, his skinny fists pretending to pull Copper's muscular body closer to his own. Randy's silent, dumbstruck reaction wasn't enough, so Kyle gave two fake slaps to Copper's ass.

“Oh my God,” Randy said. “Gay.” Copper looked at him and then turned, but Kyle’s hands were already crossed behind his back. Kyle stared at the ceiling and tried to whistle. “No, man,” Randy said. He needed Copper to know what happened. “He was . . . gaying on you.”

“What?” Copper said. He looked at Kyle for an explanation. Had he shrugged, kept quiet, Kyle could have avoided trouble, but that wasn’t in his nature.

“Tell me, son,” Kyle said, impersonating the deep, grinding voice of a Western classic, “you ever played leapfrog with a grown man?”

“The fuck’d you say?” Copper said. If his current workout had in any way sapped his strength, Kyle’s shoulders couldn’t tell. Copper threw him into a locker like a basketball and caught him before he hit the floor. The sting in his spine reverberated to the end of each nerve in his body. “The fuck’d you say to me?” Copper pinned Kyle against a locker and leaned in, his eyes aiming like loaded rifles. Tears had already made stripes down Kyle’s face and he couldn’t stop shaking, but he saw Randy watching. Disgust and wonder alternated on the witness’s face. Copper squeezed harder, leaned closer, and repeated his question.

“Your love is too . . . powerful for me,” Kyle said, a smile trying to surface. They stood close enough that Kyle was able to get his hands on Copper’s waist.

Copper dropped him immediately. The violence between them had been transformed. Randy was watching as more guys came to the gymnasium door. Kyle leaned half hunched against the locker. Copper wanted to throw him into the locker again, but the very reason he wanted to do so was also Kyle’s only form of protection. Copper didn’t want to be seen with

Kyle's arms wrapped around him again.

"You dumbass," Isaac said. "You shouldn't have done that." Copper shrugged and walked past him into the gym.

"No, man," Randy said to Isaac as they all trailed in after Copper. "You didn't see what happened."

Some say that Copper started the whole thing, but no one could disregard all the things Kyle began to do. He began skipping classes and making excuses to get into the halls during his sessions. He defended the drinking fountain with gyrating hips and sexual gesticulations. However, this ammunition was only enough for a couple weeks. The guys messed with him before and after school, and Kyle stopped long enough for the bruises to heal—purple and yellowish welts that he showed off like trophies—but his need for attention always resurfaced once the trophies faded. The more they beat him, the more determined he became to prove his independence.

Kyle's disguised assaults at the drinking fountain went on until the guys in gym class started going out of their way to drink at other fountains. The strange part was that Kyle didn't follow them. When left his claim, the single strategic fountain, Kyle quit provoking the other guys. Copper and the others saw this as a personal defeat. Each time they bowed their sweat-covered faces for the water, they had to wonder what good the workout had done them. Despite his frailty, Kyle held a strange power over them. The cool water on their lips mixed with the salty sweat off their cheeks, and the ceasefire didn't last long. One by one, they all returned to Kyle's fountain.

Kyle, upon seeing Copper's white gym trunks snapped them as Copper had snapped girls' bras in the seventh grade. Kyle snuck up behind him, and just as Randy shouted a warning, Kyle pulled—underwear and all—and the

elastic waistband smacked Copper's butt like a rubber band. It wasn't guerilla warfare; Kyle didn't run. He said, "Zoinks!" like *Scooby-Doo's* Shaggy, and added, "Delightfully hairy!" to guarantee his beatdown. Copper didn't bother asking him to apologize. He grabbed Kyle's throat with one hand and forced him to the floor. Then he pressed down on Kyle's chest with one of his sweaty Nikes. The body underneath flailed and gasped, but when the foot came up, Kyle just smiled. Copper pinned his head to the ground with the same foot and slowly distributed more and more weight to it. Isaac came to the rescue before Kyle's head exploded against the dusty floor.

"Leave him alone," Isaac said. He held Copper's arm behind his back. "You know he's not even gay."

"My hero," Kyle squeaked from the floor. Tears streamed down around his cheeks, his face flushed.

"He wants attention, to get you in trouble," Isaac said.

"If he says a word—" Copper started.

"You'll kick his ass again?" Isaac finished.

"Why do you stick up for that faggot?"

"He's pathetic," Isaac said.

As if to assert his own superiority, Isaac checked out the fountain and took a drink while Kyle backed into a sitting position against a locker. As they all trailed back into the gym, Copper cast back a threatening glance. "Au revoir, Pee Wee," Kyle said. "Au revoir."

Somehow, between these provoked beatings and his regular schoolwork, Kyle found time to take up the Palestinian cause. Kyle called us swindlers and political oppressors. He told us how much money our government has sent to Israel every year for the past thirty years.

Randy summed up our position: “Yeah?” he said.

“Doesn’t that infuriate you?” Kyle asked.

“No,” Randy replied.

“Those Israeli *civilians* all serve in the military,” he said. “Each one decides to be a murderer every day they don’t move some place else!”

Kyle’s tiny power was enough to freak out Copper, who started calling everyone fags. Most people thought Copper was a decent, funny guy when he wasn’t defending his masculinity. When the physical violence stopped working on Kyle, though, all he knew how to do was intensify it. Watching Kyle’s forehead smacked into a locker on a daily basis circulated bad press, though, and kids without any social standing threatened to tattle. With a quarter of the students behind him, Copper was intimidating enough to disregard the warnings a long time. Isaac was caught in between like the rest of us. An average guy, he didn’t know whose side to join. Neither was ideal, but he had to make a choice. Kyle had the weaker cause, but he could endure anything: he didn’t have anything to lose. While other guys gave Kyle shit like it was their God-given right, Isaac struggled to keep the peace while remaining unallied with Kyle. If Kyle did nothing, nothing at all, erosion would refill all the dirt he’d dug out of his open grave. That’s why Isaac hated having to defend him. Kyle wouldn’t put down his shovel. It was all he had.

Kyle skipped his session with the school counselor to come to the library. He stood in the doorway for a long time, glancing down at a page in his red notebook, then entered.

“You don’t belong here, young man,” our librarian said.

“It’s cool,” Kyle, said. “One sec.”

“I said—” but she was cut off by a polite smile and a middle finger. Kyle walked up to Samantha’s table, held up the notebook, and spoke loud enough to address a conference.

“My dear Samantha,” he said, “I’ve just overheard your boyfriend say, and I quote, ‘I would nail that bitch if she wasn’t such a tight ass.’” The entire room watched. Silent. Like the audience of a play transplanted into our tiny library, into our lives. Samantha’s face had caved in with embarrassment, anxiety, and fear. She wasn’t going to do anything. She had the same plan we all did: wait until it’s over. No one could imagine where the impulse came from, but Kyle leaned over the table and the kiss ended before Samantha could fight or complain. Kyle stood back with his hands on hips. He was vulnerable in that second, resignation filling his eyes while Samantha crumpled into a stare on the tabletop. He rubbed the tears out of his eyes. “Don’t worry everyone. It’s cool,” he said and winked at Samantha, shooting her with twin-finger pistols. “I’m gay.” Then he spat on the floor and rushed out.

News traveled fast, and everyone feared Isaac’s reaction. “Beating him won’t be enough. It just won’t,” everyone said. The day’s end guaranteed violent explosions, and, like Americans on the Fourth of July, we all lined up to see the fireworks. Isaac naturally denied the alleged quotation. “Of course I didn’t say those things,” he said to Samantha, and then added, “So what do you want me to do about it? I’m not going to put up with any more drama.”

No cage-match extravaganza took place that afternoon. However, someone told the faculty that Isaac planned to stab Kyle after school. It was either a spiteful invention or genuine concern for an exaggerated rumor.

The principal brought Kyle, Isaac, and the counselor into the office while the vice principal searched Isaac's locker. He didn't find condoms or a weapon of any kind.

Kyle didn't say a word through the whole meeting; Isaac had to lay everything out. After relaying one day's incident, the principal asked why the guys would have done such a thing if they knew it would only make Kyle act out more. "Why?" Isaac asked. "There are a lot of reasons, but I don't think that's the point—I mean, there's nothing he could have done to deserve it. But we all had our roles to play. Christ, I don't know why. You're the adults. You should tell me why. Why didn't any of you help him?" What he said took a lot of courage—courage that none of the rest of us had—courage that most of us still don't.

The counselor's mascara started to smear. "I didn't know, I didn't—" she kept saying, "He wouldn't tell me. He never told me." Who knows whether she was personally or professionally responsible? Perhaps neither. She walked out, the principal chasing after her. The secretary was in the next room, but Isaac and Kyle were alone. Isaac tried to apologize. "It's okay," Kyle said. "You could have stabbed me to death." Isaac tried to smile.

"But . . . why didn't you . . ." Isaac started, "I mean, you could be normal if you wanted to, right?"

"I was just watching." Kyle had dropped the charade, one of the few times anyone could remember him having done so.

"Watching what?"

"What would happen." Kyle shifted in his seat while Isaac hesitated to reply. "Once the Palestinian males transformed the beatings into a rite of passage, the Israelis had to find a new way to oppress them, to dominate

them psychologically. They raped them.” Isaac shuddered. “That was the one thing that couldn’t be turned into something positive. And from what I’ve read, they let it work, too—idiots.” Kyle sat back in his chair and exhaled. “Nothing can stop me, though. Not Copper, not a shrink, and not even. . .” Then he looked into Isaac’s eyes as if realizing he’d insulted him. “I’m sorry I kissed Samantha. I don’t even know why I did it. It’s just . . . you know what I hate? Waiting.”