

Remembering Hobbes

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Max was my first nick-name friend. He called me "Bean" and I called him "Wax." We were probably ten at the time. The names, I think, came from the cafeteria. "Bean" coined from the notoriety of my thunderous flatulence, and "Wax" as a kind of imagined retaliation for this embarrassing label (I accused Max of having waxy ears, though I never checked). Our nick-names were extremely important to me. In their reciprocity, they signaled an exclusive and personal binding; "Wax" and "Bean" were lashings that extended and strengthened my own identity. The names allowed me to blur our boundaries, prizing the unit of our friendship above the inadequacy of our isolated selves. We shared our strengths and our weaknesses fell to the road. His skill at basketball soothed the ego-blow of my athletic incompetence; my mathematic intuition eased his numeric anxiety. Max and I functioned as a continuous whole. We were ourselves and something greater also.

So much of my childhood was spent at Max's apartment, memories of its shape and occupants have the texture of my own home. Max didn't call his parents "mom" and "dad." He called them "Jeffery" and "Claire." For some time I did not understand this. I did not presume that Claire and Jeffery were *not* Max's biological parents, but neither did I make the mental leap needed to see his terminology as a faux-mature parent-child relationship. I remained jelled in a middle ground of confusion-Jeffery and Claire were people who lived with Max, who took care of him in the way parents should, but somehow they were *not* his parents. Not in the way that my mother and father were parents to me. When I spent the night at Max's apartment, I floated delicately around the two adults who shared our space. They approached me in a bizarrely even way, seeming to take my every statement with a credulity I had so far never experienced in an adult. Once, when I flippantly revealed my fear of becoming a poor driver (I may have been eleven at the time), Claire asked "Why?" noting that I was "very attentive and often overly cautious; I think you'll be a fine driver." Something in her tone-she sounded the same in that moment as she would have when talking to a peer-startled me. A frank appraisal of character was not something I expected from a person more than twice my age.

It was while I was friends with Max that my ability to distinguish between funny and mundane matured. Together we whittled down the general humor of the world at large into a more manageable sense of the absurd. Claire and Jeffery introduced us to *M.A.S.H.* and let us obsess over *Monty Python*. We learned the difference between a funny voice and an impersonation (one is funny for being ridiculous, the other for its associations), the relief of a well-placed pun in an emotional moment (it lets in perspective and air), and the basic structure of good jokes (long-winded set-ups need succinct punch lines). We learned to situate ourselves within our humor-every anecdote is a personal experience ("I," never "my friend"); laugh with your audience but never too loud-making jokes not a spear or sword to wield, but an armor that shone and encircled us. And, most importantly, we discovered what seemed to us to be the source of all comedy, the nascent fields of its birth: the comic strip. Max and I had both, from an early age, begun accruing the thick, poorly bound collections of our favorite authors' daily syndicated comic strips. It was important that we discovered comic strips here, in these large omnibus texts, and not in their native newsprint. Daily readership doled out small tastes of the larger whole-enough humor each day to keep a reader whetted and interested, but never enough to let the strips thrive. In daily syndication, the characters remained trapped inside recycled newsprint, slaves to the pound and a half of world news that encased them. The collections pulled complete storylines together; you could sprint through a month's worth of dailies in a few minutes. Individual frames clicked past our eyes rapidly at this speed. The difference between dailies and collections was the difference between photography and film. The collections fulfilled the illusion of motion and progress, so that instead of speculating, imagining, and guessing at the world that extended through the page, we could simply watch it live.

Max tended towards the absurd, cherishing the *Far Side*. This fit with his preference for *Monty Python* over *M.A.S.H.*; Gary Larson produced pure humor. His stuff wasn't cut with narrative or pathos, it wasn't sustained by anything but its left-right jabs of comedy. Reading a collection of the *Far Side* was like getting your body worked by Ali. It was exhausting. It was endurance humor. Max would photocopy his favorite strips while we were at the library, hanging them on his parents refrigerator next to Claire's favorite *New Yorker* cartoons. Articulate house pets mingled with mal-adjusted, mal-formed politicians, stock scientists and mildly bureaucratic aliens. I enjoyed the *Far Side*, but never like Max did. Larson's world seemed cold to me. Depressing. His characters lived in a constant state of confusion and unfulfilled desire. Only cretins found love, and death seemed as viciously uneventful and expected as the morning paper.

I was instead attracted to the narrative and characters of *Calvin & Hobbes*. Drawn and syndicated from 1985 (the year after my birth) until 1995, Bill Watterson's strip about childhood coincided nicely with my own. Warm and funny, *Calvin & Hobbes* was a natural extension of the venerable *Peanuts*. Precocious children, anthropomorphism, veiled philosophy. In *Calvin*, the parents had moved more into the foreground, their voices no longer rusty horns but intelligible speech; the world of the adults and children still separate but now co-habitable. And while Calvin and Charlie Brown were both outsiders, always looking at the fun of baseball through gauzy self-doubt, Calvin was more comfortable there. He was proud to be separate, living richly in the world of his mind.

I think, more than anything, it was the simplicity that I enjoyed in *Calvin & Hobbes*. Calvin and Hobbes were friends. They weren't siblings, co-workers, lovers, or teammates. They enjoyed each other's company and so they spent time together. There was no real effort or work involved for them to maintain their friendship-its existence was something intrinsic to their identities. Calvin and Hobbes could not help but be friends. It was an unconscious biological function, like goosebumps or fingernail growth. It just was. And that's what my friendship with Max was like. We couldn't avoid being friends. It wasn't a question of wanting to be, or trying to be, we just *were*. I would go to his house on Saturdays and we would watch *Monty Python*. He would come over to my house on Sundays and we would poke bee hives. I don't think I would have understood the idea of not being friends with Max, of my not liking him or he not liking me. It's not that it wasn't possible, it's that I couldn't conceive of it.

Which is probably why, after we stopped being friends, I idealized *Calvin & Hobbes* even more. For a while after Max and I went to different middle schools, we continued to hang out regularly. But we grew up and grew out into different friends-Max dove into basketball and I pored over science-and one weekend somewhere (there's a year long space in my memory, the moment could fit anywhere inside it) I didn't call him or he didn't call me, and we just didn't see each other anymore. And it was fine and ok, because I had new friends at my new school. But it wasn't really the same. I made friends on the playground because I was lonely. I made friends around my birthday because I wanted presents. My friendships became specialized, each new one capable in ways the others were not. I had friends, like Patrick, who shared with me the top grade bracket and the awkward arrogance that required. And I had friends like Damon who, around the time of the state science fair, became my friend through a mutual interest in taste buds. We found and cherished our moments of synchronicity, hovering lightly through shared interest.

These friendships *were* broader than I imply. We played baseball, watched *The Simpsons*, and talked movies. Our ability to interact existed beyond our immediate commonalities. But still, these friendships orbited around separate stars, and so remain fixed, anchored in space. My attachments to Patrick and Damon aren't the same, or at least I don't remember them the same, as Max. The unconscious comfort isn't there anymore; there's an effort required, and a containment. While Max and I experienced a seamless meshing of personality, these other friendships have been defined as often by the moments of discord as by the moments of lucidity. For the last five years, Patrick and I have taken backpacking trips every June through the Rocky Mountains. We piss on the fire and talk about women and have a good time in the woods indulging the idea that we are men, built of muscle and blood, large and self-sufficient gods. At night when we feel the heat of the fire and the cold of the night cleave our bodies from head to tail, the shared sensation binds us with a fantastic proximity and knowledge. But these moments are high-wire acts, balanced lightly but temporarily above the ground. The first time I pulled out a baggy of weed while backpacking with Patrick, I knew he was judging me, and I knew that judgment made him uncomfortable. For my own part, I still reflexively think 'tool' whenever he lays out his roadmap to med-school and beyond. We've begun to settle into specific ideas of ourselves, and the places where those ideas don't line up are abrasive.

One of the things that changed, I think, was women and how we thought of them. In *Calvin & Hobbes*, there was always Susie Derkins, the girl next door. Dorky and shy, at times as devious as Calvin, Susie was the closest the strip ever came to a love interest. Calvin would ransom off her dolls, lob snowballs, and use swamp water to end tea parties. He would flirt with her, in the only way his six-year-old boy's mind would allow him to. Hobbes' presence would linger in the background of these tentative flirtations, with knowing eyes and teasing bluntness: "She's cute, isn't she?" There was a melancholy living in these strips, a breathy exaltation of innocence's brevity. Watching Calvin, Hobbes would smile and tease, knowing that as his place in Calvin's life waned, Susie's would wax. A boy's heart is too small to hold a best tiger friend and a real girlfriend at the same time. The strip that bound and reflected my friendship with Max also predicted its quiet dissolution, not with specifics but with the feeling and implication of a parable.

Time and space were what came between Max and me, not a woman. But women are the reason why, I think, my friendships with men have morphed so easily from the reflexive self-completion I shared with Max into the shored up, brotherhood-bound mold they cast today. There's a sense now that our sex throws us together as shipmates on a journey of common interest. We stand back to back and take joy in the same wind and spray as it strikes our faces, and find a kind of heart-pounding solidarity in shared experience. But we sail for the land and for ourselves, not each other. When I was young, Max and I augmented each other. Together we became something fiery and efficient, consuming life with a speed and vigor that was beyond each of us as individuals. That we once knew such a small perfection keeps us awake and searching for its return. But now, just as romps with Hobbes gave way to flirtations with Susie, we look not at each other but out into the world and women. I was nearly twelve when Calvin and Hobbes rode finally and infinitely off the page and into the past. Max and I were lightly holding the last threads of our friendship, and when we did get together, it was often to quietly mourn. We would pore ourselves through the final *Calvin & Hobbes* collections, laughing in voices metallic with loss. It was somewhere inside this year that our friendship gave up the ghost and blinked off for the final time.

That was sixth grade. I remember sitting in our middle school library during that time, maybe reading a collection of comics, head bent low into the dark-wood table. Damon and I were a few weeks from starting our tongue research; Patrick and I were in the midst of a cautious advance towards friendship. It was the free period before language arts, and I was filling the time with pictures and words. And though this is likely a compounded image, a false collage of imagined memories, I think it was then that I looked up and saw Katherine Whitney reading on the other side of the room. She was athletic and a tomboy, not at all a Susie Derkins. In my memory, our eyes meet and she smiles (her smile is a prototype for the sun) and I smile back. And maybe then, prompted by that smile, I close *Calvin & Hobbes* a final time, pushing it aside for new pursuits. Or maybe not. Maybe the book stays open, and I sheepishly dip my head back down into its waters. Whatever the reality, that was the year I first saw the fire and light of my friendship with Max glinting behind the eyes of an attractive girl, and comics began their long fade to gray.