

The Fearless Flyer

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On his last day of sixth grade, Andy Templeton rode his bicycle through the school hallway while smoking a large cigar. He had planned the act of rebellion carefully for years and executed it flawlessly, much to the horror of every teacher and administrator who witnessed his elementary school swan song. After climbing off the bike directly in front of the principal's office and letting it clatter to the floor, he puffed the cigar and exhaled the blue smoke with a triumphant grin spanning his entire face. Then, as the final farewell and his grand finale, and with the principal watching in slack-jawed amazement, Andy slowly raised his right hand with the middle finger extended. He took one last puff of the cigar while still flipping off the principal.

Then the plan fell apart. Out of nowhere, Bucky McClanahan's fist slammed into Andy's face.

"Nice try, Bub. Real cute," Bucky spat.

Andy tumbled to the cold gray floor. His cigar had fallen from his lips and landed a few inches from his face, the end still glowing red. The wheel on his overturned bicycle squeaked mockingly at him as it spun on the ground. His scheme, his last chance to leave his mark on the elementary school, crumbled mere moments before fruition. He felt blood trickle down his mouth, and he braced himself for Bucky's next assault.

Earlier that day at recess, Andy had decided for the first time to trust someone with the specifics of his top-secret plan. In hushed tones, he revealed his entire scheme to his best friend Shifty, who continually nodded his bespectacled head as he listened.

"So what do you think?" Andy said after he'd finished.

"You'll never do it," Shifty said, leaning against the brick wall behind him. "You haven't stuck up for yourself one day in your life. You won't start today."

Andy opened his mouth to disagree but thought better of it. He knew Shifty had a point.

“See what I mean? You can’t even disagree with me,” Shifty said.

“And we’ve been friends our whole lives. You’ll back down.”

Andy’s head dropped and he kicked himself for so readily proving

Shifty’s argument for him. The sounds of sixth graders at play buzzed on the blacktop beyond the out-of-the-way hangout where Andy and Shifty gathered every recess period. Since first grade, they’d spent their free time nestled in their corner, an intersection of two of the school building’s crumbling brick walls. No one, including the on-duty teachers, bothered them in their hideout, and they liked it that way. They despised recess.

Andy watched a few classmates playing kickball on the playground, then turned his attention back to Shifty.

“I have to do this, or I’ll never be able to live with myself,” Andy said. “I’ve dreamed about it too much to just let it go.”

“I’m telling you to leave it be, Andy,” Shifty said. He removed his glasses and wiped them on his pants. “Anonymity isn’t as bad as you think.”

Andy was about to ask what anonymity meant when a rubber kickball streaked by his head and bounced against the brick wall a few inches from where Shifty was leaning.

“Little help, Bub,” Andy heard Bucky McClanahan call from the playground.

Andy glared at the chubby redhead before picking up the rubber ball and hurling it in Bucky’s direction. The ball bounced halfway to its destination and rolled to a stop a few feet in front of Bucky. Andy watched as Bucky’s plump form bent over to pick up the ball before returning to the kickball game snickering and shouting, “Did you guys see that shot? It almost got both of them!”

Andy’s hatred of Bucky dated all the way back to his first every day of

school. In a very real way, Bucky had provided the inspiration for Andy's plan in the first place. On the first day of kindergarten, Andy and Bucky had been assigned seats next to each other in their classroom. When the time came for recess, Bucky asked Andy to race him on the playground, and Andy remembered thinking he'd made his first friend as the two boys dashed across the blacktop together, giggling with each stride. When the pair finally tired and stopped running, Andy panted with his hands on his knees. Without warning, Bucky spun around and hit Andy in the mouth. No provocation; no reason. Andy started bawling and didn't calm down until the teacher called his mother to pick him up. That was Andy's first day of school, and it haunted him every day since. Sometime soon after the incident, Andy wasn't sure when, he decided he'd have his revenge on Bucky and on the rest of the school. Today, his last day of elementary, things were about to come full circle.

"I hate that kid," Shifty said. "Think he kicked that ball at us on purpose?"

"Doesn't matter," Andy said. "I'm going to do this. I'm going to do it because of kids like Bucky who don't think we matter."

"You're thick," Shifty said. "But I hope you go through with it."

The on-duty teacher patrolling the blacktop rang the bell that signified the end of recess. Andy watched his classmates make their way back inside the school building, but he paused before doing so himself. He turned back to the brick wall corner and watched Shifty straighten himself out and adjust his glasses.

"This is our last recess out here," Andy said.

Shifty strode past him without a moment's hesitation.

"I won't miss it," he said.

Andy took one last look, then turned to follow his best friend inside.

The rest of the day, as the students handed in the last of their books and buzzed about their summer plans, Andy sat quietly at his desk, watching the clock. The teacher, a plump and elderly woman, droned endlessly

about what they should expect next year in junior high, but no one in the classroom listened. They were too eager to start their summer to worry about junior high.

Finally, the final bell rang and the children rushed out the door with the intensity of a volcanic eruption. They shouted to each other gleefully and scrambled down the three flights of stairs, often taking them two or three at a time, until they charged out the school's front door, no longer puny elementary students. They gathered in the school yard, some waiting for buses, others simply too excited to go home. Andy quietly avoided the crowd, hands thrust into his pockets, and made his way to the bike rack near the front door.

It was zero hour, and if Andy was ever going to execute his plan, it had to be now. Shifty's pessimism still rang clearly in his thoughts, and he almost picked up the bike and pedaled home. In his pocket, his hand could feel the cigar he stole from his father that morning. This stunt could immortalize him, he thought, make him a legend. He needed only the guts to go through with it. With shaking hands, he picked up his bicycle and walked it to the front door. The children around him didn't seem to notice until he opened the door and walked his bike inside. Quickly, he put the cigar to his lips and lit it with a lighter he'd also purloined from his dad's dresser. At first his shaking hands fumbled with the lighter's button and he worried he wouldn't be able to spark the thing up. The tiny flames finally flared from the lighter and the cigar began to glow on the end. He was in business.

The fear drained out of him, replaced with a brash confidence that seemed to propel him forward on the bike. Before he knew it, he was peddling almost full speed in the long school hallway. Teachers gasped and his classmates stared in disbelief, but no one stopped him. A trail of blue smoke wisped behind him as he rode, and he reveled in his first ever display of rebellion. When he pulled up in front of the principal's office, he paused to make sure he had everyone's attention. Fully satisfied that all

eyes were glued to him, he flipped the principal off, just as he'd done in his imagination a thousand times. It was the perfect score. He had ventured into the lion's den and he had given him the finger. The principal stood frozen, too shocked to even move.

That's when Bucky hit him. Crumpled on the ground, blood streaking his face, he heard his chubby nemesis taunt him.

"Nice try, Bub. Real cute."

Andy knew none of the teachers would dare stop Bucky from pulverizing him. They were too afraid to step into the middle of the onslaught. They'd let Bucky tear him apart until he was too tired to continue. He saw the cigar still glowing in his face and his bike wheel still spinning uselessly on its side. He couldn't let it end now. The rush from the stunt had awakened something in his mind. Shifty said he never stood up for himself. Today, he was going to change all that. He rolled over onto his back and slammed his foot into Bucky's kneecap. The bully squealed in pain. His shout sounded like a frightened pig. Andy rose to his feet and shoved Bucky into the drinking fountain behind him, Bucky crashed to the floor with tears streaming down his fleshy cheeks. He didn't get back up.

Andy picked up the still-lit cigar and put it back in his mouth. He puffed on it as he made his way down the hall, passing the dumbfounded teachers and classmates and ignoring the principal's angry shouts.

Before he got to the door, he turned around to face Bucky one more time.

"I'll see you next year," he said triumphantly, like the heroes in his favorite noir films. He flicked the cigar to the floor and exhaled blue smoke through his nostrils. Then he walked out the elementary school doors for the last time.