

"ZACH ATTACK!!"

As usual, he didn't see it coming.

One hand larger than the rest grabbed the back of his head and smashed it a second time against the cold locker door, hard enough to hurt. An elbow into his face and his thick black glasses tumbled off. Then the leg behind his knees.

He sprawled on the floor, squinting up at the circle of faces. The same five boys who "Zach Attacked" him as often as they could. Without getting caught.

Zachary tried to focus on Ernest Ronald.

They called him "Bump." He wore a dirty T-shirt, ripped jean shorts and worn out work boots. He looked like an idiot, but no one could ever tell him that.

"My name is Zachary, not Zach," said the squeaky voice from the floor. He started to get up, his knotted black hair almost as high as his tiny body.

Bump's muddy boot pushed him back down to the cold cement.

"You don't know Jack Zach!"

He spat the words into Zachary's face and pushed his shoulder once more while he cracked a huge bubble gum globe.

Bump spat the wad of chewed gum at Zachary's face. It bounced off his forehead and onto the floor.

"Eat it! Eat it now!!"

He remembered the last time he hesitated. It hurt.

He picked up the gum, closed his eyes and slowly put it in his mouth.

Two boys streamed live with phones held high. A few kids paused to watch and laugh. It was a show they'd seen before.

Zachary picked up his scratched glasses and pushed them onto his nose. Same boys as always. They were all big but from the floor, they were hungry giants.

“Eat it. Swallow it now!!”

Laughter. Loud and together. Like a sick choir. “Eat it! Eat it! Eat it!” they chanted.

Zachary gulped down the huge wad of orange gum and shook with a wince.

“And what happens when you tell, Slack Zach?” said Bump.

Bump gave him one more shove.

“We'll be back Zach … lots of words rhyme with Zach, boys! Bone rack. Whacked Zach.

White-black Zach. Head fat!”

“Fat doesn't rhyme with Zach … with Zachary.”

He pushed himself off the floor, the daily nightmare over.

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Zachary eased the classroom door open. He peered in, knowing he was late.

“Loser,” Bump coughed from the back of the class.

“Ernest!” Mrs. Peacock warned. “Please sit down Zachary.”

As he slid into his front-row desk, his mind wandered back to the start of the day. His Dad knocked on his door at 7 a.m., the same as every other school day, yelling: "Sunshine, sunshine, sunshine!" Zachary woke up smiling, even on the dreariest days.

Then his Dad knocked on his sister's bedroom door, with the same chant. After a few minutes, the three of them shuffled cereal boxes at the kitchen table, reading the same labels they did the morning before, and the morning before that.

Zachary's sister Zoe was his identical twin.

They were 12 years old, born either side of midnight on Christmas Day. Zoe was older by an hour, so she would usually take the lead.

Their father Adam came to Florida from Kenya with a university degree in rocket engineering and a dream to join the NASA space program at the Kennedy Space Center. But instead, he worked as the janitor at his children's school.

He met a local girl not long after arriving from Africa. He was black, she was white. He was tall, she was short. He was quiet, she was a joyous jibber-jabber. They were a perfect mismatch, and they fell entirely in love.

No one came to their wedding.

Adam's wife – Emma - died 18 months later, giving birth to the Twins.

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A good day for Zoe was avoiding the girls who followed her up the sidewalk. "Boygirl," they called her. "Old lady. Blackwhite. You will NEVER have a boyfriend!"

She paused before every street corner on the way to school, sniffing for their perfume. Knots yanked at her stomach – were they behind her? Or hidden in a bush. It was different every time.

Zoe was petite, but no smaller than her tiny brother. They were shorter than some kids five years younger. They looked like they may not grow any more than 4 feet 1 1/2 inches.

Other than Dad and their little dog Marvel, they were each other's only friends in the world.

"Uh... excuse me?" Zoe squeezed by Zachary on her way to her bedroom, her brother blocking the hall to finish a Switch game.

She opened her closet. Pushed to one side was a string of pretty new dresses on a hanger. Every few weeks, Daddy would buy another one from Walmart, hoping maybe she would wear this one. They hung in a perfect row with the price tags still dangling.

"Thanks Daddy," she'd force a smile, and then hang it with the rest.

She preferred to wear her brother's clothes, mostly. They fit perfectly, and Zachary didn't seem to care. And she liked it like that. Zoe didn't want to look like the frilly girls who harassed her. She didn't want to look like a girl at all.

On the rare occasions when they didn't find Zoe on her way to school, they would definitely be loaded and ready in the classroom.

"Psssst. Hey ... boygirl!"

The whisper came from a seat toward the back of the class. As always, Zoe ignored it.

There was a wave of snickering between the rows.

“Ms. Chambers,” Mrs. Peacock said sternly. “That will be quite enough.”

After a glare at the repeat offenders, she turned back to the blackboard.

Then Breanne Chambers shot a spitball. It hung in Zoe’s curled hair. The girls around her twittered like a string of twisted birds on a wire.

Every day, Breanne wore a new dress with matching color highlights in her heavy makeup. She wore a candy scent perfume that stayed in a room long after she’d left. The boys immediately looked at the floor if she caught them looking. She even intimidated Bump, whose face pumped red when she saw him staring.

Mrs. Peacock moved the Twins to the front of the class to keep them away from the worst kids. It hadn’t really worked, and she was frustrated as to what else to do.

Ernest, or “Bump” as he liked to call himself, was the son of the town’s mayor, John Ronald. He was all powerful in the small town of Titan, 15 minutes from the Space Center’s launch pads.

Bump could do pretty much what he wanted. No one would interfere.

As for Breanne, Mrs. Peacock’s conversations with the school principal seemed to go nowhere:

“Girls will be girls,” the principal recited. “It’s a territorial thing they go through that leads to a healthy adulthood. Very natural. I am sure it will pass.”

And day after day, she witnessed what these two brilliant, gifted children endured. In fact, they were so smart, she quietly gave them their own assignments as to not draw attention to how different they were compared to the rest of this group.

Because in Titan, Florida, being different was not a good thing.

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The best part of the day for the Twins was when it ended.

“You ready?” Zoe asked her brother.

After dishes, they took their fluffy white-grey cockapoo down the hall to the elevator and descended the 12 floors to the ground.

To the Field.

“Yeah,” Zachary pulled Marvel’s leash from the hook by the door.

It was just a six-block walk to the edge of town, where the streetlights stopped and the skies opened up into a glimmering diamond mine.

Past the old abandoned factory and into the darkness on the edge of town.

Their Field was the only joy of the day. But it had one serious obstacle.

On their way, they passed through the wealthy part of town, where the houses were bigger and more stately than the rest.

One of those was lived in by Mayor John "Thump" Ronald and his son Bump.

Thump owned the town's only hardware store: “Ronald’s Family Values Hardware Store.”

Mayor for as long as anyone could remember, people paid attention when Thump noisily stomped into any room.

He gained the nickname Thump in high school, when he ruthlessly hunted on the football field, sometimes smashing to the ground even his own players.

Thump loved his house.

The work on it never ended – crews were there every day working into the evening on windows, roof, driveway, gardens ... everything. And when they were finished, a few months later they would come back and do it all over again.

The Ronalds had a nasty dog called Rattail: squat, with short powerful legs, a ragged set of Jack 'O Lantern fangs and shoulders of rock. And when Bump saw the Twins on the sidewalk with little fluffy Marvel, he opened the door yelling:

"Get 'em boy!"

"Here we go," Zachary picked up the little dog before the monster got to her.

"Don't you know my dog doesn't like your stupid dog?" Thump yelled from his doorway.
"Why the hell don't you pick a different place to walk! Stupid!"

But this was the only way to get to the Field.

"Rattail! Now!" The dog run past Thump into his house as he glared at the old beat-up mansion across the road.

Thump hated that house. He hated it so much, he slammed his fist into his open hand every time he looked at it. His house, his subdivision was perfect, pristine.

Then there was this God-forsaken, tumbling down old piece of ...

A drape slowly cracked open in the grubby, unlit living room. A cloudy grey eyeball peered out at Thump.

"Disgusting old loser. Nice house. Nice. Old loser."

Thump dared the eye across the street to continue staring at him, and slammed his door when the drapes slowly closed.

Zachary and Zoe also watched the strange eye from the old house disappear, and they continued past the last street light to the darkness. To their Field.

"Disgusting. That's all it is. Disgusting!" Thump's voice echoed down the halls of his perfect home. There was no answer.

"You hear me May? Disgusting!"

"Yes. Yes John," came a tired voice from somewhere inside.

"That old man is ruining the neighborhood. The shutters are falling off the windows. The garage door is hanging off. The lights are all burned out. The grass hasn't been cut in ... has it ever been cut? Has it May?"

"I don't think so John."

"Can you imagine what his toilet looks like May? "

To this question came no answer.

Thump stomped back to the front window and scowled at the old house across the road, shaking his head.

"Our real estate values – everyone's real estate values are taking a huge hit here. Huge. This neighborhood used to be great. May?"

"Yes. I believe you're right dear."

"What is the point in spending so much time and money on our place, to keep it up... you know? And that old man just hugely lets his place go to hell!"

Thump closed his eyes and raised his hands up in the air.

"I seen that old man looking at me. Looking at me with that big old ugly old face! When is the last time ... have we ever seen him in the flesh after all these years? May?"

"I don't believe so John."

"He's like a zombie or something. And ... he's not even a real American. Am I right May?" Thump leaned on the couch to get a better look out the window.

"I believe you are John."

"Well. SOMEBODY has got to do something. I just can't stand by and watch my real estate value crash. It's my town. And it's disgusting. And I think that somebody is me."

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Once the Twins cleared the Rattail attack, they headed for the darkness on the edge of town, passing the old closed-down factory that once employed half the town making parts for rockets and satellites.

There was one dim light bulb burning past the barb-wired barrier, beyond the broken pavement with sunburned grass spurting from the jagged potholes.

Every night, the shadow of a security guard stepped under the light. And every night he saluted his baseball hat toward the Twins.

It was an eerie thing to see through the nearly pitch dark.

The Twins let Marvel loose. She ran joyous circles through the dewy Field as soon as she got off the leash.

Sitting against their favorite tree, they folded their arms almost at exactly the same time, one on each side.

They adopted this huge old willow tree. They called her "Gramma Willow."

"Amazingly beautiful stunningly gorgeous sky," Zoe said, as she craned her neck against the tree and leaned skyward.

"There. Cassiopeia. See it?" Zoe pointed. "The queen of all constellations. Amazing."

"Mmm," said Zackary. "It's just a bunch of stars that make the letter 'M'. Less than amazing Zoe."

She sighed at her brother's lack of imagination.

"That's true," she said, "but the story behind it still makes it one of my favorites. Do you know the story brother?"

"Mmm," grunted Zachary, as he shuffled his legs under the tree and rolled his eyes.

"It's named after a Greek queen who couldn't stop bragging about how beautiful she is.

Sound like someone I know?"

Zachary heard this story before and chose not to respond. He stretched out and gazed at other more complicated constellations. Like piloting a video game, he imagined flying among their stars.

A few years ago, they saw the International Space Station fly by on a moonless night. It was gone now – a controlled crash into the Pacific Ocean a few months ago.

"Poseidon turned Cassiopeia into stars and locked her into the sky because she couldn't stop bragging," she paused and stared up at the 'M' shaped string of stars. "I'd like to do the same thing to Breanne Chambers."

Zachary rubbed his jaw where a new bruise was sprouting. "At least they don't thump you out. She's a nasty piece of work Zoe. You need to stay away from her."

"You think I follow her, like all of those other little dimwits who do?" Zoe said, shoulders slumping. "She finds me. She finds me no matter where I am."

"Well, maybe if you wore a dress sometimes, or stopped wearing my clothes?"

"What are you saying – you don't want me wearing your clothes?"

"No Zoe. No," he said, bending around the tree to see his sister. "I don't really care. I just hate to see you get teased like that. I wish I could do something about it."

"Your clothes are comfortable, that's all. And ... well, I don't even want to look like a girl."

"That's okay sister. I know. I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be sorry brother. Nobody does. It's just ...me. That's who I am."

Zoe gazed up at the new moon, its crack in the sky beaming a big toothy grin. The very last of the day's sunset glimmered to the west, the stars burst across the sky.

"Sometimes it's what you can't see," Zachary said. "Sometimes, that's what's important."

"What?"

"For instance, the moon," Zachary jumped to his feet. "What's interesting about it tonight is not the shiny part. It's the part you have to really stare at. See it Zoe?"

"Yes. The big dark half. I see it. I know it's there."

"I know you do Zoe. You see things others don't see. Those girls don't know you. Maybe I'm the same as you. Maybe I don't want to be anybody's friend. Maybe I'm ok with that."

Marvel skipped up and licked his hand.

Zoe stood shoulder to shoulder with her brother, reaching her finger in the air to draw a circle around the entire moon's sphere, as if it was really there at the tip of her finger.

"Maybe me too," she whispered. "Maybe I just ... give up."

They walked silently back toward the town's limits and the streetlights appeared row on row as the stars dimmed.

Predictably, Bump was in his living room window, and Zachary picked Marvel up.

"Get 'em boy!" Rattail rushed barked out the door.

Across the road, a drape eased open a crack. And that weird grey eye peered into the darkness.