

At 2:26, the bus turned the corner and screeched to a stop in a cacophony of squealing brakes. I stood up from my green, graffiti-ridden seat as the stop sign swung out with flashing red lights to warn the world that a bunch of middle school delinquents were about to exit the vehicle. I walked down the thin black aisle staring straight ahead and whispered a quick “Thank you” to the man sitting by the steering wheel, making sure that nobody would know I was actually *talking* to the bus driver. With a backpack full of binders and books, I strolled down the sidewalk looking more like a nerd than the delinquent that the bus’s stop sign suggested I was. I stared straight ahead, using my peripheral vision to make sure I did not step in any dog crap, and took the left onto Arbutus Ave.

Five minutes later, I passed by the blue house on the corner of Arbutus and Standish. The arch-shaped driveway was plastered with the artwork of the three-year-old girl that lived there. I think her name was Julia. I inspected her chalk drawings, reminiscing about my own childhood. At the end of the driveway closest to me were pink pentagons, shaped sort of like houses. As I followed the shapes across the driveway, I noticed that they became less like houses and the triangle on top became more and more exaggerated. Halfway through, her chalk must have broken, because the shapes changed from pink to blue. At the opposite end of the driveway was a perfectly drawn blue arrow, the kind you might see at a Mobil gas station or in a parking garage. At first I thought nothing of the strange shapes, but then I realized that the girl, Julia, must have spent all afternoon trying to draw arrows across her driveway. I respected her perseverance, noticing that the house shapes at the beginning must have been her first attempts and the blue arrows, her final product. Julia must have been a quick learner if she was able to figure out how to draw an arrow in just one afternoon. I remembered back to when I tried to

teach myself how to draw arrows with chalk. It probably took me a good week and a half, but eventually I got it. Then I started to remember everything else I did with chalk.

I remembered drawing entire chalk cities with my friends, Pat, Chris, and Matt Boyle. Every summer, along with the Boyles, my little brother, PJ, and I would haul our heavy plastic tub of matchbox cars out of the basement and lug it over to what we called “the Little Road.” We’d also take the significantly lighter, but equally important bucket of sidewalk chalk which was usually a special Easter gift.

Nobody lived on the Little Road, so during the summer, it was ours to draw on. Our mission would be to create a city complete with a network of highways and booming businesses. Everybody would start by drawing his own house and we would each choose a few of our favorite cars. I would always draw my house, a blue “Usonian” designed according to the style of Frank Lloyd Wright, on the one section of the road where a pothole had been paved over and the asphalt was smooth and flat. PJ always began by drawing his rendition of Fenway Park, which actually looked more like a landfill. Chris owned the car dealership where we could buy new matchbox cars and get our old ones repaired. We would drive our matchbox cars around the city going on errands, visiting friends, and travelling on vacations. If it rained and our city was destroyed -for it was only made of chalk- we would just draw a new one the next day when the pavement was dry.

Back then I reveled in innocence. I could spend hours outside with PJ and the Boyles and nobody would nag me to do chores. There were no tests or quizzes to study for. I was never up all night writing an essay. Those were the days when I wasn’t afraid to be weird. I was the only boy in the entire grade who preferred listening to classical music. I was the only one who tucked in my shirt every day, and I was the only person who ate lunch with the kid in the wheelchair.

Back when we still drew on the “Little Road,” I was oblivious to the way others perceived me. Like today’s World of Warcraft addicts, my entire world was separate from reality; only instead of being trapped on the internet, I was trapped on a road, enclosed by lines of chalk. The outside world was meaningless. To me, September 11th was just the day we got our pet hamster. The only devastating catastrophes were the rainstorms that washed our creations away.

One day, I learned how wrong I was. It was the first day of sixth grade, and the last time I ever drew a chalk city. By then, my youngest brother Sean had been born and was old enough to join us on “the Little Road.” Having just arrived home from school, I could not wait to draw. I picked up a brand new piece of pink chalk and started to draw a house for Sean. It was a Dutch Colonial complete with gabled roofs and a winding walkway. Having just survived my first day of middle school, I was feeling especially good so I even drew Sean’s house on the paved portion of “the Little Road,” giving up my usual spot. Suddenly PJ, Sean, and the Boyles got quiet. I looked up and saw them scowling towards the other end of the street. Approaching slowly were three kids, one of whom I had never seen before. Usually when other people came walking down the Little Road we would run and hide in the Boyles’ garage.

But today, as a sixth grader, I thought otherwise.

I was in middle school now and one of the kids I saw was in PJ’s fifth grade class. I thought, “*Why should I be afraid of 5th graders?*” and continued to draw Sean’s house as if nothing was happening. As the three kids approached I looked them over. The kid in PJ’s grade was named Ross. He was a known trouble maker and lived in the apartments right outside my neighborhood. Ross and another fifth grader named Cam were on bikes, which I had good reason to believe were stolen. The third kid was the same height as the fifth graders but I could

tell he was older than them and me. He had a diamond earring in his left ear and wore a black t-shirt that was way too big for him, even though he was overweight. His shorts were too big for him too, and they trailed along the pavement as he walked. Ross and Cam zigzagged toward us on their stolen bikes, laughing obnoxiously along with their older friend.

When the older kid reached our end of the street he stopped. “What grade are you in?” His voice was that of most teenage boys, cracking a little here and there.

“Sixth,” I answered, “What grade are you in?” My voice shook as I struggled to make conversation with this stranger.

“I’m in eighth grade,” he scoffed. I didn’t believe him. Despite his excessive weight, he was abnormally short, probably only up to my chest, and I was only in sixth grade.

“What’re you drawing?” he sneered. As he spoke, flabs of neck fat jiggled beneath his chin.

“Nothing,” I said, suddenly finding myself embarrassed to be caught with a *pink* piece of chalk when I was in sixth grade.

“Well, you seem a little old to be drawing.” he decided.

“Why don’t you just leave?” It was a terrible response. Technically, this kid didn’t even pose a threat to me. I was taller, I was obviously smarter, and I was in sixth grade. But, I was also embarrassed, uncomfortable around strangers, and not very good at thinking on the fly.

“Whattya wanna fight or sumthin?” he threatened in a new, thick Boston accent.

“No, n-not really.” I stuttered. We were walking in circles now and I felt like I was in the middle of a boxing ring. The Boyles, my brothers, and the eighth-grader’s friends stared intently. They seemed to be inspecting our every move, just as unsure about what would happen as I was.

“Come on, let’s go,” he taunted, trying to get me to hit him. I tried to remember back to the anti-bullying classes of fifth grade, but my mind drew a blank. All I could manage to recall were the black and white still-photos that the school psychologist would hold up in front of the class. One in particular showed a girl named Suzy eating alone at lunch. Instead of remembering that Suzy would later make friends by joining a game of four square at recess, I only saw Suzy’s lonely, defeated face, staring down at a lumpy mound of cafeteria mystery meat. I grew dizzy as the eighth grader and I continued to circle. I had no idea what to do. My fists clenched and sweat coated my brow in a thick brackish layer as I braced myself for the first blow.

And then, deus ex machine, something I wouldn’t fully understand until Ms. Kreinsen’s English class three years later, occurred. To my relief, a familiar voice interjected with “Lemonade!” My mom, my new favorite person, came strolling over with a pitcher and a few of those red plastic cups you see at cookouts. “Who are your new friends?” she asked while gesturing to Ross, Cam, and the eighth grader.

Nobody responded. The Boyles, PJ, and Sean glared angrily at the other kids while I tried to use facial cues to tell my mom what was happening. I might as well have been trying to speak Chinese to the Pope. The eighth grader had a sour look on his face and began to shy away.

“Ok. Well, I’m gonna go talk to Mrs. Boyle.” she said, leaving the pitcher and cups at the side of the road so we could help ourselves.

As soon as she was gone the eighth grader decided it was time to leave, before some other mother showed up with iced tea. “Come on guys, let’s get outta here,” he grumbled as he turned to walk up the street. Ross, however, shrugged off his older friend's request and decided to stick around.

“Is he really in eighth grade?” I don’t know why I even asked. The moment the words left my mouth I had regrets.

“Ya, why?” Ross said.

“I dunno, he just seems kinda short for an eighth grader.” From the look on Ross’s face I could really tell I had made a mistake. I had just dug my own grave.

“Hey Chad,” he yelled to the departing eighth grader, “This kid’s makin’ fun o’ your height.”

“You callin’ me short?” Chad shouted as he sauntered back towards me. I knew from the unsteady undertone of his voice that he must get crap about his height all the time. Beneath my uncontrollable fear, I even began to feel bad for him.

“No, no, of course not.” I muttered in desperate defense, shaking my head for emphasis.

“Good.” he punched his fist into my arm as he said it. That made me angry but I held back. “Come on Ross, let’s leave.”

As they disappeared up the street, we all let out a sigh of relief. In a silent oath, PJ, Sean, Pat, Chris, Matt, and I looked at each other and agreed never to draw a chalk city again.

The following week, I let the rain wash away the remnants of Sean’s half completed pink Dutch-Colonial. Intentionally, I left the entire bucket of chalk outside during the storm so that I wasn’t tempted to rebuild.

When I saw Julia’s arrows in the driveway on Arbutus Ave., I realized how much things have changed. The Little Road is all asphalt now. A few lonely matchbox cars lay littered among the dead leaves and dried up shrubs on the side of the street, but no other evidence of the once-thriving chalk civilization remains.

The day that Chad came to the Little Road was the day that I decided to grow up. I untucked my shirt and reprogrammed my clock radio so that Kiss 108 was the default station instead of 99.5: Classical New England. Chad had taught me how important it was to be perceived by others as normal. I found new friends to sit with at lunch so that I didn't have to eat alone with the kid in the wheelchair anymore. I started watching the news every night so I could talk about sophisticated adult things, like sports, the weather, and the economy. I erased my chalk world and dove in to middle school head first. I even decided to refer to the little road by its actual name: Marion Ave.

When I saw Julia's arrows on my walk home from the bus stop, part of me secretly wished I could draw with her, but, the new adult in me knew I could not. Inside I hoped that Julia would not be made fun of for drawing with chalk. I didn't want her to end up like me, drinking bitter coffee and staying up late because they are the *adult* things to do. But then I thought again. Like Julia's arrows, I have transformed. I started out kind of messy and confused, but step by step I straightened out, refining the edges of my personality. Today, from the other side of the driveway, I can see who I *am* and who I *was*. Each day, I embrace a new aspect of my new adult life. And each day, the image of the person I *was* fades away a little more, like chalk dust blowing in the wind.