

As he sped down back-roads toward his new friend's house, the words of his father rang through Jack's head.

"No more being a kid," he had joked. This off-hand remark had knocked the breath out of Jack. Yes, he had just graduated high school a few days ago, and yes, the short, fair hair on his head was now matched by short, fair stubble on his chin and cheeks, but Jack was nowhere near ready to abandon childhood. Jack had spent many nights lying awake, trying to discover the point, or the meaning, of the life that lay ahead of him. Once, while high, a high school friend of Jack's had told him that 'life sucks, then you die.'

Now, in the car, he decided to adopt this mantra. The afternoon sun burned his eyes, so he pulled out his beat-up Wayfarer knock-offs from the center console. With them resting on his straight, freckled nose, he felt that, for a moment, he could take on the world.

As he drove, forests became farms, farms became suburbs, and finally he arrived at his friend's house. All the way, he had thought about what his father had said, and mourned the loss of his former self.

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It was a hot and quiet afternoon when Eissler first held a Rubik's cube. He turned the cube over in his hands, hesitant to break the uniformity and make the first twist. He tried to simplify it in his mind. Six basic colors and about six kinds of twists could only become so complex, right? But sometimes, simple things became confounding. The universal high school experience had nearly destroyed him, bringing on years of depression. Fake friends, who would last a year or so before leaving for someone more exciting, had taken an emotional toll. He wished now that his teenage years could have been typical and easy. Now came college, an escape, he hoped, from his tortuous life. Sitting on the edge of his creaky mattress, the dusty sunbeams that streamed through the window illuminated his face and made him perspire. A

single drop of sweat rolled across his hairline and down his cheek, causing him to reflexively raise his bony arm to dry it and push back his floppy dark hair.

Two sharp beeps of a car horn outside disrupted his thoughts. He tossed the cube in his backpack and the backpack over his shoulder. Leaving his room, he passed a mirror on his way out. Pausing to check his face, he frowned at the masculine brown eyes and eyebrows that clashed with the feminine sloped nose. Though their co-existence was no surprise, it upset him a little each time he looked at himself. Eager to look away, he continued down the stairs, out the door to the driveway where his new friend Jack waited in a white sedan.

Eissler got in the passenger seat and buckled in before turning to look at Jack's green-blue eyes. Jack stared back at him through square black sunglasses. Uncomfortable, he turned to the window to find something else to watch.

Jack was a different kind of friend to Eissler. They had met in astronomy class during their senior year, and bonded over a mutual abhorrence of their unpleasant teacher. When she would huff and puff, trying to reach the eraser to the top of the blackboard, Jack would discreetly elbow Eissler and make exaggerated facial expressions. The guys had been in the same school for years, but their social circles had never crossed. At first, after hearing all the terrible things said about Jack and his loser pals, Eissler was reluctant to talk to him. To his surprise, their sense of humor was similar and they had very much in common. By the time their classroom chat amounted to the basis for a connection outside of class, the school year had ended.

The two weren't strangers, but not yet close friends. Jack suggested spending the afternoon together at a local coffee shop where he could teach Eissler how to quickly solve a Rubik's cube. During the drive, the silence was undisturbed by either boy.

Only when they'd arrived at the café did Jack ask if Eissler had brought along his cube. He took it from Eissler's hands before Eissler had even finished showing it to him. Without hesitation, he twisted and spun it until each face was equally multicolored. Eissler had set down his backpack on the table nearest the large window and sat. The backpack was one of his favorite belongings, for its durability, usefulness, and sentimentality.

He had a lifelong habit of personifying objects. The backpack, however, was far from simply 'an object' to Eissler. He could remember the story of its significance vividly. In fifth grade while walking home from school, the strap on Eissler's bag had caught a protruding piece of metal on a lamppost. He was yanked backwards and prevented from stepping into the busy road. In the time it had taken to liberate himself, an SUV had blown by at 60 miles per hour where he would have been walking. This backpack had saved his life. Since that day, he knew it was special. It would never be left on the ground.

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Beginning with one corner, Jack explained the process of solving the first few squares. Listening intently but understanding little, it took two hours and two coffees until Eissler could solve two full rows by himself. When he finally did, he felt immensely proud, and immediately grateful to Jack. For a moment, they smiled at each other, both thinking about how carefree the other's life must be.

The car ride home was silent. Neither boy seemed bothered by it, each deep within his mind, pondering the cube, the car, or college. When they'd arrived at Eissler's house, they sat in the car for a minute, feeling the stillness and listening to the engine hum. Without a spoken goodbye, Eissler got out and waved a single, slow wave before going inside.

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Rubik's cubes at the coffee shop became a summer afternoon routine for the guys, along with silent car rides. Inside the sedan became a holy place that words could not permeate. The small space, common destination, and soothing motion connected them without need for communication. Gradually, Eissler improved his cube skills enough to solve it independently. Some days he and Jack wouldn't even touch the cube, discussing instead music, school, girls, or life. Every passing day brought closer the end of August and, for Eissler, the dreaded move to university.

His approaching future puzzled him. A new set of friends, intense classes, living alone; everything just seemed so impossible. Jack, too, was scared. His father agreed to hire him as an apprentice carpenter in September. Once he started work, it wouldn't stop. Disturbed by the prospect of joining the working class, he took to hiding behind a mask of apathy.

He pretended not to care about carpentry. When his father first taught him the basics when Jack was 10, he loved building things and openly expressed his enthusiasm. As he aged, the enthusiasm weakened, replaced instead by hate. He dreaded facing the monotonous tasks that would likely occupy his time for the rest of his life. With no other life plan, he reluctantly agreed to work for his father.

He pretended not to care about his stoner friends. Sometimes, he felt they never even cared about him. They consistently mooched off him for food, money, and cigarettes, so he began to loathe them more and more.

He pretended not to care about his family. His mother's concern annoyed him, his sister's successful university life infuriated him, and his dad's pride and work ethic seemed ridiculous. Rarely speaking or spending time with them made him feel mean and rotten, like a bad son. Pushing these emotions out of his mind was the way he dealt with them.

He pretended not to care about himself. Late at night, he thought at his most likely future as a stupid, unfeeling, and rough carpenter. Was there

nothing more to living? He had no answer. Pretending not to be bothered made the disappointment sting less. A little less. He was kidding everyone but himself. Using sunglasses to obscure his eyes stopped them from revealing more than he wished to reveal to those who cared enough to look.

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The Rubik's cube assured the user that everything was okay, that every problem was solvable. Eissler and Jack took solace in it. Eissler enjoyed being able to solve any mixed up condition the cube was in. The problems were tangible, simple, and had only one solution. Jack enjoyed the cube because he was good at it, sometimes solving in less than ten seconds. Alone in his bedroom, dirty and tanned from an afternoon of building outside, he sometimes held his own jumbled Rubik's cube, regarding it carefully before fixing it. If only life, he would think, had as definite an answer as this cube.

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At the end of the summer, Eissler bought a pair of aviator style sunglasses for Jack and presented them to him at the coffee shop during their last afternoon together. Jack accepted them speechlessly, then drew Eissler into a hug. They both smiled to themselves, feeling loved. Jack tried on the glasses right away, and walked to a small mirror nestled amongst various coffee-themed decorations on the wall. Frowning at his familiar reflection, he turned his head left, then right, before returning to the table where Eissler sat waiting. A small smile and nod were all he displayed of gratitude. Eissler had already learned Jack's unique language of gestures, and therefore was certain the present had been a perfect choice.

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Parked in Eissler's driveway, in their parting moment, the boys sat in the sedan in silence once more. Eissler spoke first, inviting Jack to visit him at school, and explaining the relatively short drive to campus. Jack considered

it, and imagined how it would be. He wasn't sure he would ever see Eissler again. His heart was breaking.

Saying goodbye, Jack removed his glasses and looked into his friend's eyes. The words caught in emotion, so he paused for moment to regroup. After clearing his throat, Jack said, "Keep solving those cubes, alright?"

Eissler looked briefly at the ground, then back to Jack, smirking slightly. "I will."