

Nathan

Caspian had to walk home from school *again*. His big brother Boris was a senior and could drive, but said in his usual ambiguous manner that he had something “to take care of”, and so he couldn’t take Caspian home. Caspian didn’t question Boris any further, but just sighed and took up his backpack, beginning the hour-long trek back to his house. 10 minutes into the walk and he already felt miserable, with sore knees and the sun beating down on him, on this beautiful 85 degree-hot day.

Right after this 10 minute mark had been passed, Caspian heard someone yell his name from a short distance behind him. Caspian didn’t need to turn around to see who it was; he slowed the pace of his steps and listened to those of the pair of heavy feet that came thundering to his side. It was Caspian’s friend-- and really everyone else’s, too-- Nathan.

Every day, Nathan had a new story. His life was like a reality show that got you hooked. Today, he said that he had asked out this girl he liked, Rebecca, to the dance this weekend. He called her sexy in front of everyone and got a good punch to the face. Caspian laughed hysterically as he poked Nathan’s black eye, a marker of his romantic defeat.

Nathan was a magnet for bad luck. Last week, he got whacked in the shoulder with an aluminum baseball bat (God knows how) and Caspian squirmed when he saw the nasty bruise it left him. The week before that, Nathan got attacked by his crazy cat, Fluffy; he told the story while rubbing the painful injuries left by the animal.

Caspian very much enjoyed Nathan’s company, and found himself in admiration of how Nathan could find the positive in all the crap that happens to him. Caspian and Nathan weren’t best friends, but they were close enough so that Caspian would come knocking at Nathan’s door

every day he had to walk to school, and the two of them would go together. Even though it was only the second semester of their first year in middle school, Nathan quickly became the guy in seventh grade that everyone got along with. He was a nice kid, who naturally flowed between different groups with the grace of a practiced manipulator. Nathan and Caspian, however, were only seventh graders, and so a middle schooler's idea of "charming" would probably be different from yours. Whenever Caspian spoke with the boy, he found that he hated Nathan just as much as he adored him. Walking alongside the young man who flashed bright smiles and chirped like an excited bird, he felt an undeniable cynicism stir inside of him as a reaction. *How is he so damn happy all the time?*

Today, Caspian was having a hard time paying attention to what Nathan was saying. He felt his stomach churning and his throat tighten, in uneasy anticipation. He wanted more than anything to ask Nathan if he could spend the night at his house, but Caspian knew that that would create more problems for him than good. Nathan bid Caspian *adieu* at their normal place of separation. Caspian wanted to ask Nathan the simple question, but the words couldn't come out. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and watched helplessly as Nathan bounced energetically into his welcoming home.

Caspian got home around 4:30 pm, and cautiously opened the door of the home, tip-toeing in like a hunter sneaking up on its prey. He scanned the perimeter carefully, and when he judged that Boris wasn't home, he tossed his backpack down and prepared himself. He went to the bathroom, raided the kitchen for all the food he would need, and went up to his bedroom

and locked the door. Boris still wasn't home, and the house was completely empty. Both of Boris and Caspian's parents worked full-time jobs, so they generally didn't come home until around seven at night. Boris, on the other hand, had an unpredictable arrival time, but there was almost always a period of time every day where Caspian and Boris would be alone in the house together. Caspian learned from these experiences that he must always be prepared, so this was his daily routine.

Boris got home at around six that night, and was the first person to arrive. Caspian knew it was him because he instinctively felt shivers run down his spine whenever Boris was near, even if he hadn't consciously been aware of it yet. Caspian snatched the tv remote and raised it to the tv with a shaky hand, muting the volume. He shook as he silently listened to the front door open and then get slammed closed with such force as to make the whole house rattle. The footsteps reappeared, getting closer and closer, until Caspian could see the shadow of a person standing on the other side of his door. He awaited the screaming and heavy solid fists on the central doorframe (or, on the worst cases, an object with such force as to bust open the door). But it never came. The feet just retreated and went on their own way. Caspian's parents came home an hour later, and Caspian joined his parents downstairs for dinner. Caspian was safe for tonight.

Friday morning rolled along, and Caspian got up at his usually early time, and threw on whatever clothes he could. Nobody else was awake yet, which is just how he intended it to be. Boris would get up and drive himself to school in an hour, but Caspian knew that it was a rare occasion when Boris would give him a ride. So he picked up his bag and began his march to the death chamber.

On his way to school, he came knocking at Nathan's door, like usual. Nathan then emerged, and the two started their way down the road to school.

"Dude," Caspian sniggered, trying to suppress his laughter. "What the hell are you wearing?!"

Nathan smirked and looked down at his long-sleeved turtleneck, and pinched the fabric between his fingers.

"I'm a fashion pioneer, bro. This is the latest trend in Europe. All the chicks *dig it*. And besides, it turns out Rebecca was into me the whole time. And I gotta look fly at school if I'm gonna keep that dance date as a solid yes."

Nathan clicked his tongue and made finger guns at Caspian, as he strode confidently into the walls of the school, displaying his exotic European style. Rebecca was one of the popular girls in their grade, so Caspian *knew* that turtle neck must be working wonders after all. Caspian would go out and buy a turtleneck the very next day.

After school, as the two boys went on their walk, Caspian finally gathered up the nerve to ask Nathan if he could come over for a little while.

"Sorry man, can't today! I got a lot to do."

Caspian felt his heart thump heavily in his chest; the thought of going back home terrified him. "Okay."

Nathan sensed his disappointment and apologized, saying this week was just super busy for him is all. He reminded Caspian that Caspian would see him at the dance tomorrow, as his parents said he could go. Nathan normally wasn't a dancer, but he couldn't pass up the chance to have this "smokin' hot babe on his arm".

“Yeah, I guess I will see you tomorrow. Could we maybe hang out sometime after school, when you’re not as busy?”

“If everything works out as it should then--” Nathan’s signature playful smirk appeared. “--you’ll be seeing a lot more of me.” He saluted Caspian a goodbye and rushed into his home to prepare for the big night ahead.

Caspian continued his routine that afternoon of locking himself in his bedroom and playing video games until his brother got home, in which case he would cower in silence and wait to see what would happen next. That day wasn’t as bad as it usually was. Boris walked up to his door, and pounded the palm of his hand on it so hard that Caspian was scared that he was gonna bust through the door.

“I know you’re in there.” He yelled. His palms turned to fists, as he used both of them to bang on the door repeatedly and forcefully, like he was a boxer destroying his opponent. Caspian held his breath and tried not to cry. He buried his head in his knees and sat quietly crying, until the storm cloud eventually passed on.

Caspian was excited to go to the dance, partially because he wanted to spend time with his friends, but also because it was an opportunity to get out of the house. Since it was a weekend, his mom was home and helped to dress him up in a little suit with a little bowtie. His mom drove him to the dance, and upon entering, Caspian’s main objection was to find his friends to chat with. He found himself initially overwhelmed by all of the booming music and the crowded dance floor, and found it all very disorienting. He took a moment to peer around,

looking for any sign of a familiar head. Then, on the other side of the room, he saw the top of Rebecca's head. He couldn't tell who she was with, but he shoved his way through the clouds of teenage sweat and angst and practically stumbled at her feet.

"Where's Nathan?" Caspian asked.

She cocked an eyebrow at him.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Uh... Nathan Johnson, your... date?"

She looked back at the squad of girlfriends that had gathered in a semicircle behind her. She gave them an amused sideways glance, which they all knew was their cue to laugh along with the queen bee. She told him that she had no idea what he was talking about, and that she was way too pretty to go on a date with someone like him. Caspian's face turned red, but restrained his anger to ask the girls if they'd seen him anywhere. With disgusted sneers, they all answered no, and all turned to walk away in unison, swishing their ponytails in his face.

Caspian looked for Nathan, but couldn't find him anywhere. Eventually, he caught up to one of Nathan's good friends, Enchilada Steve. He asked Ench where Nathan was, and Ench laughed in his face.

"He doesn't go to dances, dumbass! Never has." And Ench went about his business with his condescending head held high as he headed over to the group of popular girls, who welcomed him openly and pulled him into their dance circle. Eventually, Caspian found his friends and hung out with them the rest of the night, forgetting about Nathan and his absence.

The next morning, upon waking up, Caspian suddenly felt a sharp pain in his side. He knew that something wasn't right, and he felt a strange inclination to text Nathan. He messaged him and asked him why he wasn't at the dance. Then, he found his finger on the call button, but Nathan did not answer. He called a couple more times throughout the day, and still heard nothing back.

Later that afternoon, Caspian went to check his email, as usual. He found his attention inexplicably drawn to the top news story, in the upper right corner of the screen, in bold, bright red letters. It read: 'Police Continue Their Search for A Young Runaway Teen'. Caspian felt his heart drop. His shaky finger clicked on the article, and he covered his eyes as he waited for the page to load, peering at it through the tiny slits in between his fingers. When he finally mustered up the bravery to pull his hand away, he was horrified at what he saw. It was a picture of Nathan.

The article talked about how the boy had been reported missing at around 10 pm Saturday night, which was half an hour after the dance had ended. The last time his parents saw him was when he left their house, dressed to the nines, to go meet his date at the school dance. They expected him home around 9, but he never showed. It was not until hours afterwards that his mother realized that he had taken his wallet with him, his piggy bank was empty (as well as all of the money from the mom's purse), and he had left his phone and electronics on the kitchen table.

According to the article, the boy's father was a notorious alcoholic, and the child had been suffering severe physical and emotional abuse at home for years, but he never told anybody about it out of fear of parental retaliation. Trapped in his bubble, Nathan's only pleasure was being at school, because it was his chance to escape his vicious home life. A couple details stuck

out to Caspian, as he read the article: Nathan was not allowed to play any sports, and the family was just him, his mother and his father, nothing else.

All of a sudden, Caspian felt his stomach drop.

Nathan couldn't have bruised his arm while playing baseball, because he wasn't allowed to play sports. Nathan couldn't have gotten mauled by his cat, because he wasn't allowed to own one. He had never even *spoken to Rebecca in his life*. Nathan loved wearing t-shirts, why would he randomly decide to wear a turtleneck, unless he was trying to hide something he didn't want the rest of the world to see?

Caspian thought back to the last thing Nathan ever said to him. 'If it all works out like it should, then you'll be seeing a lot more of me'. Nathan was all over the news, in the newspapers, in the Sentinel...

This whole time, Nathan had been suffering just as much as he had, but Nathan was suffering in silence. All of the hints and pleas for help that Nathan had laid out for him came crashing into Caspian's conscious mind and were finally understood, like the final flashback before death. It was all there, but he couldn't see it.

"Shit."

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