

Secret Sidewalk

By Tom Lichtenberg

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One

When Marcus was eleven, and his little brother Ben was only six, they lived on a boat in the harbor with their mother, a hard-working grocery store clerk named Kristen Holmes.

Sometimes Ben had trouble sleeping at night, and he would climb to the upper bunk and jab his brother in the ribs until he woke him up. Marcus would open one eye, and then the other, and eventually say,

"What?"

"I can't sleep," Ben would reply, and Marcus knew what that meant. He would sigh and say "OK," and then they'd both climb down, slip on their shoes, sneak up deck very quietly so as not to wake their mother, leap onto the dock and head out to the secret sidewalk which was right across the street behind the parking lot.

Usually it was a hot summer night when this happened, and no one else was around, just Marcus and Ben, some crickets and skunks, and sometimes a bulldog named Sparky who was supposed to be guarding the fleet, but most of the time did not.

The sidewalk was hidden between a wall and a hedge, and it basically went nowhere at all. It was lined with the backs of old buildings, which housed a variety of tenants; a body shop, a nightclub, a diner, a tattoo parlor, a newsstand, a mysterious dark office and a beauty salon. It started on Riverside Drive and extended one block, then it came to an end at Battery. The hedge kept it hidden from view from the lot.

Nobody ever walked on this sidewalk. No one except for the boys. Only they knew why it was secret and at night, and especially at midnight, and especially at midnight on a hot summer night when Ben couldn't sleep and their mom didn't know, something remarkable occurred on this sidewalk, something completely and totally weird.

This sidewalk turned into a city.

One Hundred Thirty Seven

They reached the corner at Riverside and stood, face to face, on the very first square of the sidewalk. The night should have been dark, but the reflected light of the downtown sky kept the stars at bay and the moon soft and pale.

"I'm thinking of a number," Marcus began, "between one and one hundred thirty seven," and Ben began to squint and squirm.

"Twenty!" he shouted and Marcus had to remind him to be quiet with a shake of his head and a finger to his lips.

"Sorry," Ben whispered. "Thirty two?"

Marcus smiled and said "How did you know?" as Ben shrugged and laughed without making any noise.

"Thirty two" Ben repeated, and began to walk off the steps. He knew from various experiments that there were exactly one hundred and thirty seven Marcus-steps from one end of the sidewalk to the other. With Ben trotting along beside him, Marcus marked off thirty two steps, and stopped at an oil spot rainbow on the path. Marcus nodded for a moment, and then began.

"The Dark Rider came through here not long ago," he said. "You can tell by the blackness of this spot." He knelt down and put his nose to the ground, waving at Ben to do the same. After they'd both sniffed around the area, Marcus asked Ben what he smelled.

"Gas," said Ben.

"What else?" Marcus prompted.

"I don't know," said Ben. "I only smell gas."

"There's cinnamon in there too," Marcus replied. "There's also a scent of root beer, root beer candy ..."

"I love root beer candy," Ben interjected.

"... and sawdust. and also licorice," Marcus continued, "that's how I could tell about The Rider. He was in a hurry, too."

"Why?" asked Ben.

"Oh," said Marcus, "The Rider is always in a hurry. Ever since that day," and Marcus paused again. Ben stood up and stretched his legs. Marcus also stood and turned to face the building wall behind them.

"What day?" Ben pleaded. "What happened that day?"

"The day he became The Dark Rider, of course. Before that he was just a kid named Phil."

Mister Pete

"Yeah, Phil was just a regular kid who used to love to hang around Manny the Mechanic's all hours of the day and night. Manny didn't like the kid, and was always telling him to 'scram' and 'get lost'. Some of the Brazilians, especially Junior Bus and Levantin, used to stick up for the little guy, but Manny would shout them down.

"Ain't I got enough going on around here without some pipsqueak getting in the way? What's the matter with you guys?"

"But he ain't doing no thing," Junior Bus would say, "he like to learn, we show him, ok?"

"You show him at your own place you don't like it doing what I say," Manny yelled, "this is my shop now the old man's gone and kicked it."

Sure enough, it hadn't been the same since old man Sam fell off the roof of one of those Land Rover things and busted open his head and died. Manny was not his son but acted like it all the time, and managed to get the bank to let him carry on as long as he could make the payments. Customers didn't like Manny so much as they used to like Sam, and one by one they were going somewhere else. The Brazilians who had been around awhile would try and get him to see where he was going wrong, but Manny was the best mechanic this side of town and damn well knew it too. Problem was, that wasn't enough.

"Scram, I said," he yelled at poor Phil, just a scrawny little guy whose father had a problem with reality. Phil loved to work on cars. Didn't he tear apart the old man's Honda? Now he really needed to figure out how to put it back together.

"Come on, I'll help," Levantin said, and called to Manny he'd be back some time or other. Phil didn't live but just a couple of blocks from here, over that way, just across the Front Street Bridge. Levantin was a big old shaggy guy who always wore his soccer shirt and harbored a deep, deep hatred for European football.

"They play like animals," he'd declare, "that never came out of the jungle. Why they gotta play like that? Holland! huh!," and he'd spit clear across the street, especially when mentioning Holland. Must've been about six foot four or five and two eighty or three hundred pounds and strong as anything. Roland used to say Levantin didn't need no jack, he'd just pick the car up by himself and hold it while they changed the oil.

When he saw what Phil had done he sighed and asked, "Oh boy, are you in trouble now?"

Phil shrugged. All the pieces of the Honda were still there. He was pretty sure of that.

"It's like Lego's," Phil replied, "I just gotta figure out which way is what."

"You got a lot of junk right here," Levantin told him, examining some of the bent metal and stripped bolts. "I tell you what. You run back, get Junior Bus and Roland. Tell 'em we need a case of any old bad beer and that little radio we keep up on the shelf. It's gonna be a night."

"OK," Phil shrugged, and hurried back to Manny's. That was just around the time Phil's dad woke up, looked out the door, and saw a giant wielding what seemed to be a club amidst the wreckage of his Honda in the driveway.

Mrs. Sweet

Mister Pete, which is what everyone had always called Phil's dad ever since he was a little boy for some reason which no one ever bothered to explain, or even knew, had a bit of trouble back awhile ago concerning some police activity. What it was is hard to say for sure. According to official reports, there was some kind of a disturbance, and that involved the neighbors, and something about a rooster, but like I said, it's hard to know. All I know is that the people around that street gave him a lot of room whenever he appeared, and Levantin was no different. He took off like anything down the street, leaving Mister Pete alone to examine the wreckage of his vehicle.

Another person would have called the cops but like I said, Mister Pete had had a bit of trouble back a while ago, so he didn't want to do that. He stood there on the stoop for just a bit, scratching his balls every now and then, trying to think of what to do. Someone looking from the side of him might have thought he wasn't even seeing the pile of scraps that formerly had been his ride. It was more like he was watching where the big mechanic headed off. Mister Pete was known to have opinions about some people.

This is when the telephone rang and Mister Pete went back inside to answer it. It was the call he had been waiting for. The lady on the other end was from the State and she was doing her job denying him his long-term disability. He had thought that he would get about a thousand dollars a month because he really couldn't function anymore, and even had a doctor tell him so.

"I got a note," he said into the phone, but the lady wasn't interested.

"I'm afraid it isn't my department?" Lila Sachs intoned, "I'm just delivering the message?"

"Is there someone I can talk to?" Mister Pete inquired.

"Certainly," Lila told him, and she gave him several numbers, each of which would lead eventually to the person who'd already reviewed and denied his claim four times. That would be Jalissa Sweet, who lives right over there, remember her?

"That the lady with the candy cane lights at Christmas?" Ben asked Marcus.

"That's the one," his brother told him.

"She works for the city?"

"No, the State. It's different. She also did the accident that time along the waterfront. Remember when Elliot on his skateboard was flying up the launch ramp and got whacked by that Jeep Cherokee with the sailboat coming down? That was Mrs. Sweet."

"What about Phil?" Ben wanted to know.

"Phil who?" Marcus replied.

"The Dark Rider," Ben insisted, "you were telling me how he got to be that way."

"Oh yeah," his brother said, "Well, it was later when he got back home with Junior Bus and all the other guys. His dad was not around by then. Levantin came up last because he was, well, he was not afraid. He never was."

"He was really big," said Ben.

"Yeah," Marcus said, "really, really big, but he wasn't stupid either and he didn't like the way that Mister Pete was staring.

So they got back to the house and it was dark already. Roland had the radio, and Junior Bus was carrying the beer. They were all joking in the driveway when Phil said he would go inside and check. That was when he found his father sitting in the kitchen on the floor, with the telephone still in one hand, and a bottle in the other. He wasn't moving and Phil thought maybe he was dead. He wasn't though. He was just sitting there."

Marcus stopped talking, and in the dark and humid night Ben waited for his brother to continue. He could hear a cricket or two, and once a car passed by which made him think it might be Mrs. Sweet going after yet another skater kid. But he didn't hear any skidding sounds, so he stopped listening to that and asked his brother what he meant.

"Just sitting there?"

"Yeah. Just sitting there. The guys outside came in and took a look.

"Sweet Jesus," Roland said. Levantin waved his hand in front of Mister Pete's blank eyes, but they never even blinked. He never flinched.

"Someone's got to call someone," said Junior Bus, but no one wanted to take the phone out of the sitting man's hand. They stood around and stared for a while. Finally Roland turned off the little radio that had been blaring salsa tunes for all that time.

"Come on, man," Levantin said to no one in particular. "Let's get back to Manny's. Maybe he'll know what to do."

Sugar

"You know how Manny sometimes keeps the shop open late at night. Right now it's closed but he was here till just a little while ago. Some people say it's because he needs the money to pay the bank and doesn't want to pay out any overtime, but I don't think he's doing work because I know what kind of sounds that makes and I'm not hearing them at night when all the other guys are gone. I'm hearing sounds like talking and sometimes I hear laughing too. That's what everybody heard when they came back with Phil that night, and there was Manny and Mrs. Sweet all getting cozy in the office.

"Mrs. Sweet? But what about Mr. Sweet?" Ben wanted to know, and Marcus shook his head.

"There ain't no Mr. Sweet. Didn't I tell you about that? Mr. Sweet went by the name of Sugar 'cause his last name, Sweet, you get it?"

"I get it," Ben giggled.

"So Sugar was a guy who used to be familiar all around this place. Anybody wanted something done they talked to Sugar first. Funny guy was Sugar. Normal sized and kind of thin but totally and completely bald. They say his hair fell out when he was only ten years old, just all of it at once one night. Sugar was playing by the tracks back there. They used to run the trains. When Sugar was a kid you know. Not now. They haven't run those trains since way before both you and I were born. Used to bring all sorts of stuff out to the harbor, when they shipped it out of here. They don't ship nothing now."

"What kind of stuff?"

"All kinds," Marcus said. "Like everything. But I don't know exactly."

"So what about Sugar?"

"Sugar? Oh, when all his hair fell out? I don't know. Something about the trains I guess. Anyway, that Sugar disappeared one night and no one ever heard from him again. That was not so long ago, in fact, and when I say disappeared, that is exactly what I mean. Larry and Drake will tell you they were standing there in front of him, talking about cars, the way they always did. Sugar was a big one on the cars, knew all the makes and models, everything about them. Drake and Larry, this was on a Sunday so you know. They'd just come from buying some lottery tickets at the liquor store when they ran into Sugar. Larry owed him twenty dollars, so Sugar came up next to him and asked about the money, so Larry changed the subject.

"Did you see the new Mercury line?" he asked. Sugar shook his head.

"They got some sporty models coming out I hear," Drake added.

"Oh I don't know," said Sugar, "those Mercuries are always just a Ford dressed up a bit"

That's exactly what he said before he started vanishing. It was just a little bit at first, around the edges Larry says, but pretty soon his hands and feet were turning into air. Drake and Larry stood there pretty shocked of course and couldn't say much. Sugar even saw it happening, they say. He looked down and saw his hands were gone and tried to move his arms but they were stuck. He looked down and saw that he was floating since his feet were gone, and soon the bottoms of his legs were also missing too. Sugar looked back up at Drake

and then at Larry, and then the very last thing he said was "I wouldn't spend good money on one of those Mercuries, boys. Might as well just get a Ford and save a few," and then he, pop, just vaporized."

"That really happens to people?" Ben was anxious to know.

"Naw, just to Sugar," Marcus reassured him, "that kind of thing don't happen every day."

Sharad

"Wish we had some lemonade," Ben said, "or maybe a Popsicle. A Popsicle would be perfect!"

"Ready to go back home?" Marcus asked. He deliberately didn't bring stuff with them so that sooner or later Ben would be ready to go.

"No," Ben declared. "I want to know about Manny and Mrs Sweet."

"Oh, they had a lot in common, those two. For one thing, they hated kids. They were always talking about ways to get rid of them, and how many points you'd get for different things"

"What kind of things?"

"Well, like when she hits a skater kid with her Jeep, she gets a thousand bonus points. Like that. She even gets a hundred when she just scares them off their boards. Manny's secret dream is round up all the kids and dump 'em in the sea."

"No way," Ben did not believe it.

"I heard him say it myself," Marcus insisted. "One time I was over there with Karly when she was planning to get a tattoo even though she's only twelve and they won't do it over there, but she was asking anyways, and that's when we heard Manny talk about his plan. Now whenever I hear about a missing kid I think they ought to check his boat for clues."

"What kind of tattoo?"

"Oh, Karly is going to get butterfly dragon things, you know, all pretty wings and a killer head. She has got it all drawn out. It's really beautiful, I think. You know Otto, the tattoo guy? He asked if he could borrow the design but she said only if he'd do hers first but he said no he can't because she's only twelve and that's the law. Otto is the one who had the idea that Mister Pete was going to be OK because he'd seen that kind of thing before. So he told everyone "just leave him alone" and that is what they did. Phil wanted to know if he could get his tat done too, and that's when he became The Dark Rider. It's his tat.

Karly was pissed because Phil's sixteen and that's still less than the law I think, but Otto was feeling sorry for the kid because his dad was in a state and there was nowhere he could go, so he did Phil's right then that night. It was after two a.m. when Phil went home eventually, and found his dad still staring on the kitchen floor. He started to tiptoe up the stairs when suddenly his dad jumped up and started running around the house screaming as loud as he could about ninjas, grease, and engine oil. Phil was so freaked out he jumped out the bathroom window and took off running down the street.

Mister Pete got on the roof somehow and that was where the fire department found him when they came. Nobody could talk him down until they brought in this guy they called Sharad. He was some kind of guru-looking guy, old and bald, long beard and everything. He showed up in some kind of sweet sky blue Mercedes convertible, hopped out, and scrambled up the ladder to the rooftop. He sat up there like a Buddha, you know, and Mister Pete sat down beside him, and discussed about whether a man could really fly. Finally they both came down, and the fire chief let Sharad take Phil's dad back to his compound at the Buena Vista Trailer Park.

Emma Biggs

"What's a compound?" Ben wanted to know, and Marcus told him it was like your own little country where everybody did what you told them to as long as you were the one in charge. Like at the trailer park, he explained. There's about two dozen trailers all lined up in two neat rows, twelve on the left and twelve on the right, and they are all numbered like even and odd so that one is on the left and two is on the right, like that. Sharad lives in lucky number seven, exactly in the middle, and he's got families and couples and people in the other trailers just the way he wants them.

Sometimes he likes to mix them up. He'll take a husband from trailer three and stick him with the family in trailer seventeen, so now there's a wife and two husbands there with all the kids, while back in number three it's just the mom. This way he can re-arrange the families and by now it's everyone has been with everybody else so it's all like one big family. Antonia's from there, remember her? She came over that one time to see the boat?

"She's got lots of moms and dads?" Ben asked. He was catching on pretty quick.

"Yeah, like every woman there is like her mom, and every man her dad. And all the other kids are like her brothers and her sisters. She says it's pretty cool, because if one of her moms says no, she can't have ice cream, she's got like fifty other moms that she can go to, down the list. She always gets some ice cream somewhere!"

"Awesome," Ben put in. He liked the idea of always getting ice cream.

"But they have to give him all their money," Marcus said.

"Give who?"

"Sharad," he said. "He takes in all the money they all make, and then he hands it out again however he wants. And everything has got to go through him. He makes all the decisions. He decided that Mister Pete was not allowed to bring his family, so Phil still lived at home all by himself, at just sixteen. Pretty soon Roland and Junior Bus moved in, just to look after the kid, you know, they liked to say, but they were having parties every night. It wasn't actually their fault. Roland's just a happy guy and everybody likes him, so one guy started coming over, then another guy, and pretty soon you know the house is full of people. Lady next door, not happy. That was Emma Biggs."

"I know her," Ben said, "the lady with the shopping carts"

"Yeah, that's the one. She collects those things, makes weird sculptures out of them or something. Did you know she made the TV news one time? She had those shopping carts all twisted up and melted, painted, stuck together every sort of way. She said it made a statement, but I don't know about what, and then the K-Po people came and wanted to get their carts back"

"Mom went over there?"

"Not mom, just people from the grocery store she works at. I think they were security or something. They were pissed at Mrs. Biggs for screwing up their carts like that, so they were going to sue her for a lot of money but the TV crew came by and she was famous for a while.

Still thinks she is, you know. She goes around wearing a button on her coat that says 'Action News at 10'.

So she was going to call the cops on Phil because of all the parties but instead she settled on a hunger strike. Sat right down there on the sidewalk right in front of Mister Pete's old house and wouldn't eat a thing. She was hoping for another shot on TV at the evening news and sure enough she got it. They asked her if she'd asked the neighbors if maybe they could turn their music down, but she said that was not the point. There were global issues here. Something about people suffering and a general lack of empathy.

Good thing she's so fat, you know. I doubt she even lost a pound those couple of days she wouldn't eat.

Sawdust Nation

"I'm hungry," Ben said, and Marcus said if they went home he'd sneak a hot dog from the fridge, but Ben didn't want to go just yet.

"You said there was sawdust"

"What?"

"Back when you were telling about how Phil became the Dark Rider, you said there was sawdust. I don't see any sawdust."

"I didn't say I saw it," Marcus said, "I only said I smelled it. Can't you smell it too?"

"I don't smell anything," Ben said. He always had bad sinuses.

"Licorice and root beer candy too," said Marcus, remembering from before. "That means there was a meeting of the Sawdust Nation here not long ago. They always have these rituals they do."

"What's the Sawdust Nation?"

"Do I have to tell you everything? Sheesh. I thought everyone knew that," and even in the dark Ben saw his brother's smile.

"Originally they were way up north, but came down here because their leader - his name was Johan something - anyway, he got sick and tired of being cold. It's funny because he was the one who took them up there in the first place because he said he liked the cold. Then he had too much of it, I guess. I never get cold, do you?"

"Not me. Never," Ben replied.

"These Sawdust people, though, they got really really cold and so they moved down here where they'd be warmer, duh. There were a bunch of them, maybe ten or eleven, and some of them had kids. Mostly they went around grinding up stumps because they liked to smoke the sawdust in their pipes. That's where they got their name."

"They smoked trees?"

"Yeah, pretty much. I think it made them calm or something. They were always getting in trouble with people whose branches they went around trimming without permission. Some of them were working for the city just so they could get it legal. They had some other weird things they did. One time I remember there was one named Bill, or maybe Bob, but anyway he was really good at jumping over cars from standing still. And every time he did that all the others gathered around and sang a particular song. They also liked to mix the stuff with licorice and root beer candy. Sometimes they'd have bonfires on the beach.

But after Johan went to jail for destroying public property, the rest of them did not know what to do. You could see them wandering around the waterfront carrying their chainsaws and their bus maps. Eventually they kind of went their separate ways I guess, but every now and then, there's some who get together on this spot right here and celebrate the old ways.

Uncle Bill

You would usually find Roger Bancroft hanging around Original Johnny's on a weeknight roundabout seven o'clock. This is when Maddy the waitress would come outside to check on him.

"Mr. Bancroft, are you OK?" she'd ask in that sugary sweet voice she had. Maddy was what they call a looker. You seen her so you know what I'm talking about.

"You're talking about her boobs," Ben guessed, and Marcus laughed.

"Not just her boobs. The whole thing. Anyway, what are you talking about boobs? You're only six years old"

"So? You're only eleven, and anyway, I'm going to be seven someday, and even eight and nine"

"OK, ok, some day you'll be a hundred if you're lucky and then it will be the same to you as now as whether she's a looker or she's not, but to Roger Bancroft, it was everything in the world.

"I'm good now, dear Madeleine," he always said, "now that I've seen you I know the sun will shine again," and then he'd wander off back toward the waterfront. Mr. Bancroft was the manager of that shipping office over there that closed when all the shipping went away. Back in his day he was pretty important. He wrote down everything about every ship that came to port, what their name was, where they came from, what they carried, what they took off with them. Wrote it all down in one big book. Every day he came to work and I mean every single day for forty years. Never missed a one. So he still came down even after there was no more work to do, when there were no more ships come in. Always had his suit and tie, and that fedora hat was on his head, and he was all bent over all six foot six of him. Hard to walk there towards the end. Shuffling back to where he lived, wherever that was at the time. Last time anybody saw him he was shuffling off like that.

Maddy'd go right back inside and Lucky joked about her man. Lucky was always lounging at the counter. He was another one of those old guys leftover from a different world. Place is full of them down here. Spend most their time out feeding pigeons and gulls. Remember Lucky? He used to give us bubblegum.

"Uh-uh," Ben did not remember.

"Oh that's right," Marcus said, "it was me and Kansas. Never see Kansas anymore."

"I remember Kansas," Ben replied. "He was always good to me." Marcus agreed and lost himself in thought for quite awhile. Ben thought maybe he had gone to sleep. Both of them were standing on the sidewalk still. Ben realized that if Marcus fell asleep he would have fallen over, so he just sat down by himself and waited for his brother to recover from his fit of memory.

Kansas was Marcus' best friend when they were nine. He came from Sawdust people. Once his father and his mother disappeared for several days and Marcus made him come back home with them. Their mother was fine with that. Kansas had good manners, didn't eat too much, and was happy to sleep on deck. Marcus hoped that maybe Kansas' mom and dad

would never come back and he could stay with them forever. It was a bitter loss that day the Sawdust man came by and took him away. Sawdust man just showed up on the dock one morning during breakfast, hollering for Kansas. All the boys went up to see what all the shouting was about.

"Got to go now, boy," the Sawdust man said when he saw Kansas. "Your mama's waiting"

"Why don't she come then, Uncle Bill?" he asked, but Bill did not reply. He stood there arms akimbo waiting for Kansas to follow"

"What's akimbo?" Ben asked and after Marcus told him he continued,

"Next thing you know that Uncle Bill was right there on our ship as if he flew. Never saw a man do that before. One minute standing still, the next he's twenty feet closer."

"That the guy who jumped over cars?" Ben wanted to know, but Marcus shook his head.

"I think that guy was Randy or Mike or something. I forget. Anyway, he picks up Kansas by the belt and throws him, I mean throws him clear off the deck. Next thing there's Kansas rolling on the dock and Uncle Bill beside him again. Those Sawdust people, they can fly. I really believe they can"

"Wasn't dad one of them?" Ben asked.

"Uh-uh," Marcus said. "He liked to go with them sometimes but he was from around here basically."

"Do you think he went off with them?" Ben inquired and Marcus shook his head.

"Dad died," he bluntly told him, "You know that. Come on."

Now both the boys were quiet, both sitting on the sidewalk in the middle of the night. Even the crickets now were sleeping. The sky was still not dark. That sky never darkens anymore.

Kansas

"Wake up! Wake up! Marcus! Ben! Come on! Wake up!"

Karly was standing over them, yelling. Marcus was the first to his feet but Ben had already opened his eyes, surprised to find it was almost dawn.

"We must've fallen asleep," Marcus muttered but Karly was stamping her feet now.

"Come on! There's no time. You have to hurry. Come on," and she was pointing down towards Battery at the other end of the block.

"What's going on" Ben asked, and Karly impatiently replied

"It's Kansas. He's back and he needs our help. Sugar reappeared and Kansas needs us now!"

That was all Ben and Marcus needed to hear. They were off and running, all three of them, with only Karly knowing exactly where they were going. They reached the end of the block - Marcus slowing down a couple of times to help his little brother keep up - and followed the long-legged girl up Battery and into Markham's Alley just beyond the bakery. It was darker in the alley, almost night again. Karly slowed to an almost walk as Marcus caught up to her with Ben close behind.

"Where are they?" Marcus asked, and Karly shook her head, a little out of breath.

"Here, behind the dumpster" and sure enough, there was Kansas sitting on a milk crate, and there was Sugar, sprawled out along the curb. Sugar was bald as ever, not a hair on head or arm, and he was dressed in an all-white terrycloth bathrobe, with sandals on his feet. Sugar had never dressed like that before. He was always a double-breasted bow-tie man.

Kansas was if he'd never changed, still nine, if that was possible. He was shorter now than Marcus, where he used to loom above him. Ben looked carefully at the other kids. They were different now, even his own brother. Marcus seemed older, as old as Karly maybe, something in his face was changed.

"I just found him here like this," said Kansas, after nodding a greeting to the others. "So I've been watching over him."

"My daddy opened the bakery and found him out here," said Karly. "Kansas, I mean. He didn't see Sugar."

"So Karly came out and I showed her," Kansas filled in. "That's when she went off to find you guys. We're going to need a team."

"Awesome," Marcus said. "It's like a genuine mystery"

"Who's that?" The voice belonged to Sugar, who suddenly opened his eyes and reached out to grab hold of Kansas. Kansas tried to lurch away but Sugar held on tightly to his sleeve.

"I can feel you," the old man said, surprised.

"Let me go," said Kansas, and Sugar, also known as Mr. Sweet, did let him go. Sugar sat up slowly, propped up against the bakery wall.

"I'm hungry," he said, and without a word Karly ran to and in the back door of her father's bakery, and emerged almost instantaneously with a donut and a cup of coffee. Ben wanted a donut too but he didn't speak out of turn. He was never much for talking, especially when there were people around he didn't really know, so he just watched them quietly.

Sugar took the offerings and carefully arranged them by his side.

"I think I should know what this is," he said to no one in particular. He seemed to be referring to the coffee because apparently he knew enough about the donut to stuff it in his mouth and take a bite.

Kansas and Karly and Marcus formed a semi-circle in front of the reconstituted man. Ben was farther off, a little behind and to the side of Marcus, from where he could watch the expressions on Sugar's face. The man was content to munch on his donut for awhile, seemingly oblivious of the children all around him.

"If you don't mind," Karly said, "but didn't you, like, vanish?"

Sugar looked up at her, confused.

"You mean me?" he asked.

"Yes," she persisted. "Everybody says you disappeared." Sugar didn't answer for awhile. He tasted the coffee and seemed to approve.

"Young lady," he began. "I've no idea what you are talking about. The fact is I have no idea who I am, or where I am, or who you are, or anything at all.

Flood Control

That's when Sugar stood up all at once like he hopped directly from his butt to his feet, and staggered off sort of like a zombie, straight into the bakery from the back door Karly'd come out from. Elrod Higgins, that's Karly's dad, was pretty shocked to see this white-robed ghost-like vision sneaking in and trying to snatch a basket full of chocolate glazed.

"The heck you think you're doing?" Elrod demanded, followed by "Karly, what the heck?" as he grabbed the other end of the basket and pulled. Both men tugged and the basket flipped all twenty-three hot donuts onto the floor

"Well doggone it," Elrod declared, "Look what you done now," but Sugar was already on his knees, stuffing the donuts into the pockets of his bathrobe. Karly rushed over with a broom and tried to shoo him away, while Kansas helped himself to a donut and Marcus and Ben hung back by the door in case they needed to make a clean getaway.

It was all bad timing that Emma Biggs happened to stop in right then. She was fresh off another hunger strike (this time because the escalators ran too fast at the Pay'n'Pay and she couldn't get on), and she was literally starved. She was out there in the front of the store calling and calling and Elrod didn't hear her due to all the commotion in the back, so she came around the counter and was about to help herself when she peeked in and caught a glimpse of Sugar on the floor.

Emma knew exactly who he was, and screamed.

"Beauregard Sweet!" she declared, "what the hell are you doing crawling around on the floor like a cockroach?" but Sugar didn't seem to hear, not Mrs. Biggs or anybody else. He was fending off the broom attack and trying to recover more glazed. Emma came storming back and got around behind him, stuck her arms in his pits and heaved him straight out the door and into the alley, knocking down the brothers who were in the way. All four tumbled onto the pavement, donuts flying everywhere and Sugar trying to snag them in midair. Then something really weird happened. Ben was sprawled and in a daze but he was certain he saw Kansas blast off right in front of him - a puff of smoke from the bottom of his shoes and there was Kansas overhead, flying down the alley kind of slow and uncertain, but going, going, gone.

"Marcus," he called out, and Marcus grabbed his arm and yanked him up.

"Kansas flying" Ben said.

"I saw it," his brother replied. "Come on, let's go," and both boys took off running after Kansas.

"Wait for me," yelled Karly and almost all at once she was in front of them running fast. All three kids were shouting after Kansas, who was just a few feet in the air, and not too far ahead of them, but Kansas wasn't looking back. He was just swimming in the sky.

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