

William Peters
from *Year of Yesterday's Complaints*

People trickle in. This boulder-shaped guy with a white buzz-cut and maroon biker boots – who Real Dad obviously knows – walks in.

‘That’s Sverg, right there,’ Real Dad says, suddenly distracted. ‘He’s crazy, that guy, crazy like wild boars. The stories – you could make a movie. Fell into a snowbank one time, crazy. He writes the music section for *City* magazine,’ he says again. Real Dad stands up, gives me the One-Minute index finger, and walks over to the guy.

‘Sverg!’ Real Dad goes. ‘Svergie! Hey! “Can I borrow your camera?” Am I right?’ Which, okay. The things people call funny.

‘Hey,’ Sverg says slowly, voice reclined and half-asleep on the couch, shaking Real Dad’s hand and looking past him towards the bar. ‘Hey. Good to see you.’

‘Let me ask you this—’ Real Dad pauses for effect, ‘Did you take the trash out when you got home? Right? Remember that?’

I already hate this Sverg guy. Look at him ignoring Real Dad. And, besides, Can I borrow your camera? Whatever that means. More like *this* Rambo’s not buying it!

‘Right, right, the trash is taken out, that’s funny,’ Sverg says, voice ladling sedatives gently. ‘Hey, what’s your name again?’

And, because I already want nothing to do with Sverg’s conversation, I go stand in the bathroom and pray that four hours will pass in five minutes. In the bathroom, there are stickers of local bands all over the walls. And then, as is always the case when I go out at all, when I walk out, I feel a hand on my shoulder. It’s a hand that immediately feels more like a life of success and of breadmakers and heated driveways than I’ll ever have.

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‘Nate?’ the hand says.

I wish time as we know it was remote-controlled, so I could rewind back home, steal money from Mom’s wallet, hit Irondequoit Mall and buy a dress shirt riddled with pins and cardboard. Because, turn around: it’s Garrett Alfieri.

‘Nate Gray,’ he says. ‘Your Mom took us to Chuck E. Cheese. We played Gauntlet and Raph would be the warrior, me the wizard, you the elf – Questor Nate.’

Garret Alfieri. The one friend Mom liked, the one who escaped, the one who stopped calling us after his mom found out he got a B. The one who volunteered at the SSJ Nursing Home during his lunch breaks junior year. The one who wouldn’t let us copy his homework. Look at him now – actually shaving, wearing khakis, a shiny blue shirt, incapable of sweating or failing. His hair is bright-blond enough to almost literally produce a halo-like cloud of glow. And here I am, flannel shirt, nylon running pants, and the world’s itchiest five-day beard.

‘Garret. Wow,’ I say. ‘It has been long.’

‘Certainly it has,’ he says.

So, we stand there, nodding, praying that one of us will think of a subject. Because, when you run into someone who you haven’t seen in five years, it takes a week off your life. You’re in that middle zone of: I’ve known this guy for awhile, so I should give him the Small-Talk Life Story? But since you were actually friends, the conversation demands more than a typical Small-Talk Life Story. But if I do the Small-Talk Life Story, then it will become clear I’ve been up to nothing and have nothing to say, and then it’ll end up being the Taco Bell of conversations.

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‘So, what have you been doing?’ I ask.

‘I finished up at Alfred in three years,’ he says, shifting his weight from foot to foot when he talks, the way he always did. ‘I did this internship with Bausch & Lomb. They had an open, full-time financial analyst gig. So I took it. I tell everyone in youth group: When you go into college, know what you want to do for a living before you’re admitted. If you lock down your AP credits beforehand in high school, and if you don’t drink, and if you do the homework, you can walk in three years. Head into that job interview, and it’s what’s up, throw down, closing time.’

‘Well, Holy Grail Points to you,’ I say. Which I don’t mean. The last thing I need is someone to make me feel like an appetizer on a medical waste platter.

‘Holy Grail Points, nice,’ he says. ‘Man, we said some stupid things back then. Maverick Jetpants! Riot! That takes us back, doesn’t it? *Daygo Frogstache!!* Right?’

I have no idea what he means by that, so I let him continue talking: ‘Anyway, my fiancée and I just moved into a place on South Ave.’

‘Your own place!’

‘It’s nice. We just have to draw the curtains when the Cloaked Man walks by – he’s the dealer on the block, and he’s black. So, yeah! But how about you? I trust things are going well?’

‘I’m going on welfare,’ I tell him, just to be annoying. ‘And if that doesn’t work out, Plan B is kill myself.’

‘Well. Sounds like you’re alive,’ he says, in a way where he means it as much as sugar-water means taste. Because, me: you know how I’m doing.