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A Boy Out of Time

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A Boy Out of Time

A Time Twins Adventure

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Introduction

The dark haired man looked quizzically at the piece of clear metal on the table. It had all the properties of real steel, except that it was transparent. He had to find out how it was made.

“Seth, where did you get this?” he asked the pale teen who had shown it to him.

“Back home in the market place, Professor. We have all kinds of things made with it.” Even though he was almost 14, and short for his race, Seth stood as tall as the Professor.

Professor Theo picked up the sheet of steel and looked at it from all angles. It was cold like steel, heavy like steel, but transparent. His mind just couldn’t wrap around the idea. “How is it made?”

“I don’t know. It’s made on the island of Tubal,” Seth replied. Then knitting his eyebrows together he added, “It’s a very bad place. I’ve never been there. Maybe my grandmother knows.”

The phone at the other end of the lab started ringing. The Professor reluctantly set the clear piece of metal down and walked over to answer it.

“Marge, it’s good to hear from you; is everything okay?” He listened. “Ben is still having a rough time of it; well, we knew it was going to take time.” He listened, knowing Ben was still dealing with his sister’s death from the previous summer.

“I thought your move to Washington, D.C. was going to help. It didn’t? So, what do you have in mind? Marge, I don’t know what to do with a 13 year old boy here.” The truth was, he would love to have Ben come and stay if it weren’t for the secrecy of his work. “Yes, I know Seth stays near here, but with

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his grandmother, not me. Fine, he will be 14 before he comes, if he comes.....Okay, let me think about it and I will call you back in a couple of days."

"Was that your sister?"

"Yes, she and her husband were offered a chance to go to Turkey to a new archeological dig, and they want to know if I would take their son, Ben, for the summer. The thing is, I would love to. He's a good kid, and we could have a lot of fun." He loved Ben as if he were his own child. The fact that he knew he probably would never marry and have kids of his own, added to his closeness with his nephew. Ben was a great kid, and until his sister's death last year he had always been easy going and fun to be around.

Seth knew who Ben was through letters and IM (Instant Messaging). The Professor had introduced the 'pen pal' idea to the boys last Christmas. Since Seth was staying with his grandmother, which was far from his own home, the Professor thought he might like communicating with someone his own age.

"So, are you going to let him come?"

The Professor was leaning against the desk, lost in thought. "I'm not sure" he said slowly. "I think I could trust him not to tell anyone what he sees here, but I don't want him knowing where you come from."

"I know he doesn't like it in Washington D.C., he told me so on IM." Seth stood there staring at the Professor. He was hoping he could finally meet Ben face to face. "Also," he said hesitantly, "I think there is something else bothering him that he won't talk about. Do you know what it is?"

"I do, but I think it would be best for him to tell you when he's ready, so don't go probing around for an answer." The Professor tried, unsuccessfully, to look stern at the tall, pale youth. "He's had a hard time of it this year. You know if came,

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he would figure out something was going on. How would you handle that?"

"Do you trust him?" Seth asked, knowing that was the real issue.

"Of course I trust him!"

"Then let him come. If he learns anything he won't tell."

"And you would have someone here to get into trouble with," laughed the Professor. '*H-m-m-m, a visit from Ben might help Seth, too.*'

Chapter 1

Mr. Robinson had pulled the 'short straw' this week, giving him the responsibility to watch over the kids staying after school for detention. Most of them weren't bad kids, just a little too much energy and not enough outlets. He figured that while they were in detention they could work on homework, and if they didn't have homework, then, they could read a book.

He was surprised to see Ben Javan here. Ben was in his third period geometry class. The detention list said that he had been late to his history class a number of times. Something didn't add up. Ben was always on time for geometry, and seemed to be a good student.

He got up from his desk and started walking up and down the rows, looking at what the students were working on. When the bell rang, the students jumped up to leave class.

"Ben Javan," he thundered above the ruckus the students were making. "A moment of your time please." Ben stopped, then turned and walked over to him, and looked up. "I see you are here because you have been late to your history class. What's going on?" he asked looking down at the small boy.

Ben got red in the face. "I'm just late." He hoped that would be enough since he knew that no one crossed Mr. Robinson. Most of the students were afraid of this tall man with gray hair and eyes. It was said the man could stare wallpaper off the wall, and those eyes were now trained on him. Ben was determined not to say anything, nor look away.

Mr. Robinson knew the reputation he had with the kids, and he had worked hard over the years to encourage it. So it surprised him that this small boy would try to stare him

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down—though judging from the boy's red face it wasn't impertinence, just determination. Realizing Ben wasn't going to give him more information he dismissed him. He wondered what the problem was as he watched Ben leave. Maybe he was just having trouble adjusting to the change in schools he thought. Quickly he gathered up his stuff and left the empty room.

When Ben reached the outside door he saw that the last bus had already gone. Now he had to walk home. It had been a hard day and he had been picked on again. How long was this going to happen? It didn't matter what he did, he couldn't make it stop. He had tried fighting them, even getting a good punch in on Matt, but they were bigger and overpowered him. If he went a different route to class, the two boys found him and made it worse. One time he had made the mistake of saying something about the trouble to his History teacher, Mr. Weber. That's when he found out how much of a 'teacher's pet' the two boys were. He had been told, in a voice the whole class could hear, that he needed to stand up for himself like a boy, and not come 'tattling like a girl.' The giggles from some of the students made him burn with embarrassment. The glares from the girls were directed at Mr. Weber. It didn't matter even when the two boys had dunked him, upside down, into the toilet, Mr. Weber wouldn't do anything to them.

'Maybe I deserved it. After all I did let my five year old sister die,' he thought.

Ben's parents had told him that it hadn't been his fault, but when they had gone for a hike, he was the one who had volunteered to stay in camp while she took her nap, and he was the one to leave for a few moments to 'take a leak'.

'Why had she picked that time to wake up? She must have been scared when she came out of the tent and didn't see anyone. She should have just stayed in camp and we shouldn't

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have camped so close to the river either, but that had been his idea too. He just wanted to be able to stay near camp when he fished.' Unshed tears blurred his vision.

The ranger had found her body just a little ways down stream snagged in the roots of an old tree and told her parents that she must have slipped into the water fairly quickly. The noise of the rapids down stream would have drowned out any screams for help.

Ben thought being picked on must be God's way of punishing him for letting her die. Last year he had been Class President and this year he couldn't even make a friend in school.

He turned the corner and walked up the empty driveway to his house. When he unlocked the front door, motion sensors picked up his movement and turned the entry way lights on. Too discouraged to even eat he went up to his room and flopped on the bed. 'I hate it here', he thought...

He was searching the woods for something he had lost, but he couldn't find it. He had to find it, he had to. Who's crying? Why doesn't someone help her? Why is she crying? Oh no, she's in the water. Why can't I get to the water? Why can't I move? Oh God, don't let her drown, please don't let her drown!

"Ben, wake up, Ben!" a voice called. Ben lurched up, his eyes unfocused and wild when they opened.

"Are you okay? You're damp with sweat." His mom reached over and felt his forehead—no fever.

"I—I'm fine Mom, just a bad dream," he said pulling away from her.

"Another one?" she asked. "What was this one about?"

"I don't remember." He got up and headed for the bathroom, her eyes followed him until he closed the door.

She had worried about him ever since her daughter's death. Ben had been close to his sister. His cheerful and easy

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going nature had become sullen and moody from carrying too much guilt for something that wasn't his fault. She wished she could get through to him; even their move to a new town hadn't helped. At the last teacher's conference she was told he was given to mood swings. Since she hadn't told them about Mary, they figured it was just 'that age'.

Several weeks passed with Ben getting picked on at least twice a week. The last time they jumped him was on the way to art class. The art teacher, Mrs. Hodges, wanted to know what happened, but was unable to get Ben to respond. She did catch his sideways glance at Mike and Matt and put it all together. The two boys were called aside after class and Ben made it to his history class safely and on time. The glare he got when they walked in late let him know that he was really going to get it the next time.

The next day as he cut through the gym between art and history class Mike and Matt came up behind him and dragged him into the boy's bathroom. Several boys ran out as the two dragged him into the larger handicapped stall, his shirt ripped as he struggled. Matt held him with his arm painfully twisted behind his back while Mike peed into the toilet. When he finished zipping up, he grabbed Ben by his other arm and belt, and between the two boys they flipped Ben's struggling body upside down. Matt flushed the toilet and they lowered him until his hair swirled in the yellowed, foaming water. Ben had hit the back of his head on the lip of the toilet and then again on the floor. One hand went to the sore spot on his head, the other grabbed at Mike's pant's leg.

"Ah-h, did the little boy's hair get wet?" Mike jeered, and with his free foot kicked Ben in the stomach. "That's what happens to stool pigeons," he screamed. Ben balled up trying to protect his body.

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"We better go, Mike, before someone comes," Matt said nervously.

"Yeah Matt, we don't want to be late for history again." The boys raced out of the bathroom.

Ben heard them leave before getting up from the floor. He walked to the sink, rinsed his hair, being careful of the tender spot. His stomach hurt as he bent over at the roller towel on the wall to try and dry his hair. They had never kicked him before. Moving back over to the mirror he lifted his shirt and saw a bruise starting to show on his pale skin. The final bell rang as he quickly finished combing his damp blond hair back into place. Ben ran to his class, hesitated, took a deep breath and opened the door. Mr. Weber stopped in mid-sentence and glared with disgust.

"What's your excuse this time?" he sneered, ignoring the torn shirt and wet hair. "Well?"

Ben saw the two bullies in the back of the room glaring at him. "I, I..." he started to say. A couple of the other kids snickered pointing at him.

"Shut up and take your seat." The teacher wrote out a tardy slip and handed it to Ben. "Apparently detention means nothing to you Mr. Javan; let's see if a trip to the Principal's office improves your ability to show up on time."

History had always been his favorite class until he moved here. Now he dreaded the class. Walking over to his desk he sank down, hoping to make himself invisible. One kid passed him a note, and his face turned red when he saw the word "LOSER" written in large letters on it. It hadn't been like this back in West Virginia. There, he had friends and spent his free time playing in the woods. This move had changed everything. Now, he was a 'loser'.

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At the end of the day, Ben looked through the door to the school office and saw a red haired boy sitting in one of the chairs, scuffing his shoe on the tile floor. When Ben entered the boy looked up and mouthed the word 'loser' before looking back down and continuing to scuff his shoe. Ben sat down and fidgeted. He heard the wall clock ticking the seconds away. If he didn't get through with this soon, he would miss his bus again. He looked up as the door to the inner office opened.

"Ben, come on in," the Principal said.

Ben followed the Principal into his office and was directed to sit in a wooden chair in front of the large wooden desk. The Principal then walked around the desk and sat down in his leather chair. Ben sat focusing on the floor not daring to look up, his hand protective over his hurting stomach.

The principal scanned the file in his hand. Ben Javan, eighth grade, good in school, never in trouble, some health issues. He looked at the smallest boy in the school sitting in front of him, his shirt was ripped and dirty in places. He then noted the boy had his arm covering his stomach. He knew what was going on; he'd seen it all too often. He could even guess who was behind it, but he couldn't do anything unless he could get the boy to tell him names. "You okay?" he asked.

"I—I'm fine," Ben answered somberly. He continued staring at the floor.

"Then why are you holding your stomach?"

Ben winced as he dropped his arm.

"I can see you're not fine," the principal added in a firm, quiet voice. "Let's see."

Ben pulled up his shirt to show the ugly bruise on his lower stomach.

"Okay, what's going on? Mr. Weber tells me you come into his class late and today your shirt and hair were wet."

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Ben continued looking down at the floor, his face flushed. It seemed like life was just getting too hard. The silence was loud. Briefly he looked up to see the principal staring intently at him, just staring and waiting. Ben's heart pounded in his chest. The principal continued to wait for him to answer the question.

"I've been picked on by a couple of boys," he said. His shoulders slumped with this admission. It was out for everyone to see, he couldn't defend himself; he was a nothing. "They catch me coming through the gym from art class. I've even tried going different ways, but they find me anyway."

"Ben, look at me." Ben had been afraid to look up, afraid he would see the same look Mr. Weber had before he berated someone. Instead, what he saw was a look of compassion.

"Listen Ben, it's hard enough to fight off a bully, let alone more than one, and if something isn't done it will only get worse. Will you give me their names?" This could be a turning point. He knew that several kids were being picked on, but he hadn't been able to get any of them to tell him who was doing it.

Ben knew he had to make the choice. If he did give out the names, the two boys would pick on him even more, and if he didn't, they would continue to pick on him anyway.

"Ben, you have to trust me. I can't help you if you won't tell me; but, if you give me their names I can make sure they don't pick on you again."

Ben hesitated; again the principal was just staring at him, waiting for him to make the next move. His shoulders sagged in resignation. "It's Mike Cummings and Matt Grant," he mumbled.

Finally, he had names. Now he could do something. "I promise you they will not pick on you again. You may go now."

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Ben walked out of the office, past the red haired boy and ran down the hall, out the main doors, only to see his bus pulling out. Now he would have to walk home again. At least it was Friday and he wouldn't have to face school for the next couple of days.

Clouds had rolled in during the afternoon, and the light drizzle coming down reflected Ben's somber mood as he walked toward home. He thought about how bad life had become. First he let his sister die, and then five months ago he had to leave his friends and move to a different city and start a new school in the middle of the year. It just wasn't fair. Why did he have to trade his little mountain town for this big, dirty city? He hated it here! The only friends he had now were in his church's Youth Group, which was on the other side of town and none of them even went to his stupid school. Until his sister died he couldn't remember the last time he had cried. Now it seemed the tears were always waiting to betray him.

The only good thing that had happened, since moving here, was making friends with a boy named Seth, who lived in Alaska near his uncle. Uncle Theo, his mom's brother, was his favorite person in the whole world. There had always been a connection that defied understanding between them. When his uncle had come to D.C. for Christmas, he had a letter from Seth that contained a request; Ben remembered it word for word:

Dear Ben,

I know your name because your uncle, whom we call the Professor, told me. I am Seth. I spend a lot of time with my grandmother because of an illness. There are no other kids here and it is not possible to write my friends back home. I am looking for a pen pal. The Professor thought you

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might be interested. He said you had just moved to a new town and might not have many friends there yet. He also told me that we are the same age, even born on the same day.

If you are interested in being a pen pal, send a letter back with the Professor.

Seth

At that time, Ben was feeling like there was no one in the world who wanted to be friends with him. He had shut down with most of his friends after his sister's death and moving here had isolated him even more. At the time the letter was given to him he really needed someone. The fact that help came through his uncle made it even more special. It was just like his uncle to come to the rescue and not even know it.

Ben decided it would be cool to have a pen pal, and sent a letter back. A week later he got another letter from Seth. Soon they were writing every other week. For some reason, maybe because the friendship was only through letters, Ben felt he could tell Seth anything, well – almost anything. He hadn't told him about his sister. He did tell Seth about being small and how he was being picked on at his new school and how he wished he didn't know anyone taller than himself. Seth had written back expressing how angry he was when he learned how Ben was being treated. Last month Seth had gotten a computer and had learned about Instant Messaging. He wanted to know if Ben wanted to talk on-line. This started a whole new line of communication between them. 'Wait until Seth hears about today,' Ben thought as he got closer to home.

Wet and tired, Ben stood in front of his house; the windows were dark and no cars in the driveway. "Great no one's home, a perfect ending for a rotten day!" he muttered.

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Today was his 14th birthday and his mom had been hinting about a big surprise for him. His parents were archaeologists and frequently, when they were working would lose track of time. It wasn't that they were neglectful, just caught up with a new find from Turkey.

Unlocking the door, he went into the dark foyer with a long hall where he dropped his backpack and kicked off his wet shoes. Lights came on as the motion sensors picked up his movement, living room on the right, stairway on the left, junk food straight ahead – that was the direction to go. The kitchen was a big room set up to cook for a lot of people and to entertain in as well; not that his parents had time to entertain. The fridge not only held food, but the front of it had become the communication center for the family. It was the main way he and his parents communicated since moving to D.C. Ben stopped to turn on his computer before going to the fridge to get something to eat. After grabbing a pop and some lunchmeat, he spotted a new note on the door.

Happy Birthday Son,
Your father and I have meetings until 7:00.
Get cleaned up; there will be a taxi at the house
around 6:45 to pick you up. It will take you to the
restaurant where we are going to have dinner. Look
nice.
Love,
Mom

"I guess they did remember after all," Ben said aloud then looked at his watch and saw it was already almost six. He was going to have to hurry. Cheered up a little, he ran upstairs to take a shower. Having a bathroom off his bedroom had been

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one of the few perks of living here. The warm water felt good on his sore body. Drying off, he looked critically at his reflection in the steamy mirror and what he saw was a short, skinny boy with almost no muscle, blonde hair, and a large ugly bruise on his stomach. He thought that by 14 he would have changed a little more.

The doctor had started him on an experimental treatment a year ago, when he had fallen so far off the growth chart that someone had finally noticed. They told him the shot, would make him grow, but so far all it had done was leave a bruise on his butt cheek where they gave him the shot and make him tired. If the pain of the shots were related to how tall he would get, then he should be ten feet tall by now. He complained to his dad when he didn't see any changes and was told it would happen when it happened. Looking at his reflection he had to admit he had grown some, but he was still shorter than everyone else his age and he still didn't have much muscle. 'Oh well' he thought. Going over to the door frame he stood with his back to it to measure and see if there had been any real growth. Turning, he was disappointed to see his hand was at the same mark as last time. Throwing the towel on the floor he went back to his room to get dressed.

He had just tied his shoes when he heard the taxi honk outside. He grabbed his coat as he ran out to the waiting car.

"You Ben Javan?" the driver asked through an open window.

"Yes."

"Hop in." When he saw Ben hesitate, he hollered for him, "Hurry up the meters' running, and..., oh yah, hold on where's that note?" The driver searched through a mess of papers sitting on the seat beside him. "Here it is, I'm supposed to tell you 'tree house,' whatever that means."

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That was the code word Ben's parents used if they sent someone to get him. He quickly jumped in and the taxi sped off though the busy wet streets of the city. It stopped in front of a large blue and black building Ben knew well. It was the Planetarium.

"This here is where I was told to drop you. You're supposed to go inside."

Ben stood on the sidewalk in the drizzle as the yellow taxi sped away narrowly missing another car. The door to the building was locked when he tried to open it, he knocked and waited. An older man in a guard uniform came to the door, unlocked it and then opened it a little ways. "What'd you want?" he asked gruffly. "Can't you see we're closed?" Then he looked closer, "Hey, haven't I seen you here before?"

Ben looked up at the guard, unflinching at the gruffness. "I come a lot. I'm supposed to meet my parents here."

You Ben Javan?"

"Yes."

The guard smiled as he opened the door wider. "Then come in," he said in a friendlier voice. "You need to go to the showroom. Oh, and Happy Birthday!" He relocked the door and shuffled back to a desk that had been just out of sight and sat down.

Ben walked towards the showroom door. How many times had he come here over the last five months? It was one of his favorite places. Back home he was able to go outside and see the stars. Rarely could you see them now because of all the city lights and smog. The big domed room was behind two sets of doors. The first set had to be closed before the second set would open. This kept out the outside light. When he opened the second set of doors he saw his parents and three of his friends from back home. They were all sitting around a big table.

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“Surprise” they yelled.

Ben just stood there; he couldn’t believe his friends were here. He hadn’t seen them in five months. Noise erupted as the boys rushed to greet each other.

After the noisy greetings were over his father looked at him. “We know you like this place,” he said, “so we reserved it for your party.” The table was loaded with pizza, buffalo wings, chips and cake while the stars twinkled overhead.

When they had finished eating, presents were pulled out. His friends had chipped in together and bought him a wireless keyboard and mouse for his computer. All four boys were busy looking at it when Ben’s mother tapped him on the shoulder and handed him the present from them. He opened the box and found an envelope inside with a card and an airline ticket to Alaska.

“What’s this?”

“Your father and I are going on a dig in Turkey this summer,” his mother explained. “We figured that with the turmoil in that area it would be wiser for you not to go with us. Theo agreed to have you come up and stay with him for the summer.”

Ben didn’t know how to react. He had hoped to talk his parents into letting him go back to West Virginia to spend time with his old friends, but he really liked the idea of staying with his mysterious uncle. None of the family had ever been to his place in Alaska. Every time they got together, Uncle Theo had been able to push off the next get together to someone else’s house. But he always came to Ben’s house for Christmas. His presents were always as unusual as he was. Last Christmas Ben had been given a small plant with broad translucent leaves, that glowed like foxfire. He had taken it to school to show his science class, since they were studying botany. Neither his teacher nor a colleague from the local college had been able to

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identify it. Ben had hoped it would help him make friends; instead it isolated him as a 'geek'.

"When do I leave?" he asked his dad.

"One week after school is over."

That night, the boys stayed up late watching movies in Ben's room. Ben told his friends about Seth, and the fact that the two of them shared a birthday. They tried to reach Seth on the IM, but he wasn't on-line. His parents checked in to tell them 'good night' long before any of the boys were ready for bed.

At one point in the night when everyone else had nodded off Ben got up to get something to eat; it seemed like he was always hungry. He was just dishing up a bowl of ice cream when Brian, his oldest friend entered the kitchen rubbing his eyes.

"What are you doing up?" Ben asked.

"Heard you go downstairs and thought you might be good to follow to get something to eat." Ben didn't ask, he just got down another bowl, heaped it with ice cream, and then handed it to his friend.

The two friends sat across from each other at the kitchen table just spooning ice cream into their waiting mouths. One was small and skinny, the other was taller with messy dark hair. Ben noticed how much his friend had changed in the last five months. He was taller, his voice was deeper.

"You like it here?" Brian asked through a mouth full of ice cream.

"I hate it!" Ben declared forcefully, jabbing his spoon into the ice cream.

Brian looked up at him in surprise. Ben had never been one to hate anything. He was always the one to find something good in a situation. However, he also knew that some of that

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changed after Mary died. He knew Ben blamed himself for her death, but he also knew it hadn't been his fault.

Ben looked up feeling Brian's eyes on him. "What?" It came out harder than he had intended.

"Nothing," Brian said with a forced yawn. "I think I'm ready to sleep now," he said standing up and putting his bowl in the sink.

The two boys quietly went back to Ben's room and went to bed. Ben lay there for a long time thinking of all he missed back home, and wondering what this summer would be like, and how glad he was that his three closest friends were here.

The next morning they went to play basketball after breakfast. Being the shortest, Ben wasn't very excited, but that's what everyone else wanted to do so he went along with it. The boys had had a contest to see who could drink the most juice at breakfast. On the way to the court Ben's friends now had to pay the consequence and make a side stop at the restrooms. Ben, who didn't like orange juice, hadn't competed with them, so he decided to go on ahead to shoot some practice baskets. Just as he was about to shoot someone pushed him down from behind.

"Hey!" Ben said getting up. He froze when he saw the two bullies from school.

"Hey what, geek?" Mike asked.

"Nice ball, right Mike? Give it here!" Matt demanded, reaching for the basketball.

"No, it's mine," Ben said, getting back up while holding the ball away from Matt.

"He never learns," Mike said, shaking his head, and then pushed Ben down again.

"You guys looking for trouble?" a voice behind the bullies yelled as Ben was getting back up.

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The two boys turned to see Ben's three taller friends standing there with their hands clenched into fists, looking ready to fight.

"Let's go," Mike said, realizing the odds were not in their favor.

"You okay?" Brian asked looking at Ben.

Ben smiled, "Yeah, let's just play ball." Seeing his bullies back down was the highlight of his weekend.

Brian won two games of 'horse' and decided it was time for them to get something to eat. The boys walked down to a fast-food place and ate as if they hadn't been fed for a month. Ben looked up and saw a girl from school sitting at another table. Brian caught him staring at her.

"Who's that?" Brian asked.

"No one," Ben said blushing and quickly looking away.

"Oh-h sure," Brian rolled his eyes.

Ben threw a french fry at him. The other two boys laughed and then started stuffing their mouths with more food.

That evening Ben's parents took the boys to a movie, and then they went to have pizza before heading back home. Ben really felt lucky to have parents who would arrange to bus his friends from such a distance and then give them all room to have fun.

When they were getting ready for bed, Kevin, the youngest of the boys, saw the bruise on Ben's stomach. "Hey! What happened?" he asked.

The other two boys came over to look. Ben pulled his shirt down, his face getting red. Brian reached over and pulled the shirt back up. "What happened?" he demanded.

"It's nothing," Ben lied.

Kevin looked at Brian, "It ain't nothing, it looks horrible."

Ben gave in, "One of the boys from the park this morning did this to me yesterday at school."

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"I knew we should have pounded them!" Kevin yelled balling up his fist.

"We could do it tomorrow," Kyle said hopefully. He was the quiet one of the three, but he did like to find any reason to fight.

"We won't have time," Ben said quickly. "We have church tomorrow." Church wasn't his favorite thing to do, but if it meant not getting into a fight, he was happy to go.

Sunday morning Ben introduced his friends to everyone in his Sunday school class. The teacher began talking about the early part of Genesis, which Ben found boring. How could something from so long ago be important? Today they were talking about the flood of Noah and the giants that roamed the land. He knew this couldn't be true. First, there was no global flood; his science teacher had told them it was some localized flood. Second, there wasn't any such thing as a giant. Giants were only in fairy tales.

During Sunday dinner, they were talking about the morning's Sermon. Ben's dad asked what they had learned in their class. Ben told them about the flood and the giants. He couldn't keep the skepticism out of his voice.

"Ben, you sound like you don't believe what you heard this morning," his dad stated. Ben's friends waited to see what would happen. They had found it to be 'not healthy' to express their doubts to their parents.

"Well, it does sound pretty far fetched," he said looking at his plate, idly moved peas around with his fork. When there was no response, he looked up and saw the penetrating look his dad was giving him. "I mean, there couldn't have been giants, could there?" sounding less sure of himself under his dad's gaze.

"Why not?" his dad asked.

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“Well there aren’t any giants now, so how could there have been giants then? I mean, where’s the proof?” He knew that as scientists his parents believed in proof, so he thought he had his dad there.

“Ben, one of the things we have learned by experience is to trust what the Bible says. A lot of times we don’t understand it, but as archaeologists, we have learned that when the Bible talks about a town, eventually it’s found – exactly where the Bible says it was. It has never been wrong. Just because we can’t always prove what it says at the time, isn’t a reason to dismiss it. Sometimes you have to take things on faith until you can prove them out.

“I’m still not sure I believe in giants,” Ben added stubbornly.

“Good”, his dad said, much to the surprise of Ben’s friends. “That means you have to do your own research to see if it’s true or not.”

“How?” Ben was getting hooked whether he like it or not. He hated that his dad could do that to him.

“First start with commentaries and see how they interpret the passage. Then, see if there are any other passages that talk about giants. After that, look into other histories—like Egyptian, Babylonian, maybe American Indian, and see if they talk about giants. Maybe the Smithsonian or the Library of Congress would have information you could access on line.”

Ben realized he had just worked himself into a corner. The look his friends gave him clearly said, ‘better you than us.’ He did like history, but lately he had wanted to challenge everything around him, especially his parents. Though in their case he was cautious, he knew they were smart.

His mom sat there smiling. “I think you have quite a project for the summer,” she said, amused that he once again

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had to find the proof for himself. Besides, she thought, it would keep him out of trouble while he was at his uncle's.

Later that afternoon Ben sadly watched his friends bus pull out of the depot. He wondered how long it would be before he saw them again.

When he was getting ready for bed that night, Ben stood by his bed touching the edge of his bruise when he heard a sound. Looking up he saw his dad watching him from the doorway. Ben's face turned red with embarrassment. He'd hoped his parents wouldn't find out about the bullies.

His dad came in, sat down on the bed, "What happened?" He patiently waited for an answer. When none came, he gently turned Ben so he could get a better look at the bruise. Why had his son not told him he had been hurt?

"What happened to you Ben?" he asked again examining the bruise. When he looked up, he saw tears in Ben's eyes.

"A couple of guys at school have been picking on me," he mumbled. He hated having his dad find out he couldn't take care of himself when he was picked on.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Since we moved here."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Ben stood there not answering. His dad motioned his son to sit down next to him. "Okay Ben, what's going on? Why didn't you tell me this was happening?"

Ben sat there looking at the floor. His dad reached down and gently turned his head, so that he would have to look him in the eyes.

"Ben, your mom and I love you very much. We have gone through too much in the last year to keep things bottled in. Now, what's going on?"

A Boy Out of Time

Tears started rolling down Ben's cheeks. "I figured God was punishing me for letting Mary die." The tears turned to racking sobs. "It was all my fault." His dad held him close.

Ben's mom stood in the doorway, tears in her eyes; it was obvious she had heard the conversation. She came and knelt down beside Ben, and rested her hand on his leg.

"God isn't punishing you dear," she said softly. "What happened wasn't your fault, it could have happened to either your father or me." She paused. "You're still blaming yourself, even after all this time?" Ben nodded.

"Your mom is right Ben, it wasn't your fault. You can't keep blaming yourself. God doesn't punish teens by having bullies pick on them. What's happening to you is wrong, and it has to stop now. I'm going to talk to the school tomorrow."

"You don't have to," Ben said between sobs. "Mr. Abbot, the principal, found out on Friday and is going to talk to them tomorrow."

"Have they bothered you away from school?" his mom asked.

"They started to yesterday, but the guys ran them off before anything happened. Please don't call the school," he pleaded, "it will only make things worse."

His dad looked at him before responding. "I won't call this time, but if there are any more conflicts I will step in." He stood up. "Now, get ready for bed, and Ben, remember we love you and you can come to us about anything, period!"

His mom gave him a reassuring hug and then left with his dad. Ben finished getting ready for bed and lay there in the moonlight worrying about tomorrow. He was dreading going to school. Even though the principal would have talked to the bullies before Ben had them in any class, he knew they were going to cause trouble somehow. Several hours later his

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worries turned to dreams that left him tired and drenched in sweat.

Chapter 2

The red-haired boy, who had been in the outer office on Friday when Ben was called in, had listened at the door and overheard Ben telling Mr. Abbot who the bullies were. That same nosy boy had called his friends when he got home and told them everything he had heard. Over the weekend word had spread that Ben had 'snitched.' When Ben got on the bus Monday morning everyone was staring at him. *'Great, everyone knows.'* He found an empty seat and stared out the window convinced that everybody thought he was a coward.

As he walked through the halls to his locker kids stopped and stared at him, some whispered. Stuck to the front of his locker was a stick drawing of a hangman with the word LOSER written below. Ben angrily ripped the drawing off and crumpled it into a ball. *'Why can't people just leave me alone?'* he thought as he opened his locker.

The students started out their day in a homeroom class. The school used it to get a head count, while students used it to quickly try and finish undone homework. Ben sat at his desk frantically trying to finish the geometry assignment he had let slide over the weekend. The class time ended with a blaring of announcements from the overhead speakers. Ben was so busy trying to get the last few problems done that he almost missed the last announcement, "Michael Cummings and Mathew Grant, please come to the Principal's office." His heart did a flip, and he was almost sick to his stomach. Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at him.

Mr. King, the homeroom teacher, knew what was going on, looked up and saw Ben go paler than his normal color. A

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quick rap on his desk shifted the kids' attention from Ben to him.

When the bell rang Ben grabbed his stuff and bolted to gym class. Because of his small size some of the jocks seemed to get their kicks by teasing him in the locker room as they strutted by displaying their athletic bodies. He had just pulled his shirt off and was grabbing his gym shirt when one of the boys pointed at the large bruise and started laughing. He tried to get the gym shirt on quickly, but it got so tangled up, he had to pull it off again to straighten it out.

The gym teacher came walking around the lockers and saw boys laughing and pointing at Ben. Then he saw the bruise. *'Why did kids have to pick on the ones they should be helping?'* he thought. The withering look he gave the boys made them stop laughing and finish getting ready for class.

"Javan," he hollered, "sit out this class." He then turned and left the changing room.

With some relief Ben changed back into his regular clothes. He was glad he didn't have to participate today. They were doing inside soccer and he wasn't sure if some of them didn't think he was the ball, the way he kept getting hit, kicked, or knocked down.

The rest of the morning went normal. After gym he had Geometry, English and then lunch. His stomach was too upset to eat, so he decided to go to the library instead. He figured he would be safer there, because Mike and Matt never went to the library. He sat at a study table in the back of the room lost in thought, fidgeting with his pencil. He wondered what they would do to him. Would he make it through the day? Would his stomach quit churning before he threw up? He looked up when the bell rang ending the lunch period. Art was next. Maybe he could go home sick. He really was sick - okay, sick from fear, but sick nonetheless.

A Boy Out of Time

With reluctance he got up, grabbed his book bag, and then trudged off to his art class. Every time he looked up Mike and Matt were glaring at him. Finally the bell rang and class was out. Ben's heart raced as he quickly left the room ahead of the bullies. Instead of cutting through the gym, he headed outside where he would have room to run if he needed it. Mike and Matt came out a side door of the gym and bolted after him. Ben heard the boys coming and started to run, but he wasn't fast enough. Just outside the second set of gym doors they caught up and grabbed him from behind. Ben fell forward and landed hard on the ground, his books scattering. Mike reached down, grabbed him by the arm and jerked him to his feet.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" Mike asked as he squeezed Ben's arm. "I think it's our little stool pigeon!"

"You know what happens to stool pigeons don't you?" Matt said.

Ben looked up and saw a look in Mike's eyes that made him realize he had to get away. "Let me go!" He struggled against the grip, even getting a good punch in with his free hand, but it wasn't enough to make Mike let go. Ben winced as Mike squeezed harder.

"I don't think you should do that. Come on," he said pointing back to the gym. "Matt, get his other arm."

Students walked quickly past them, ignoring the whole exchange as Mike and Matt continued to drag the struggling boy into the gym and down to the bathroom.

Mike's face was red with anger. "So you think you can tell on us and get away with it do you?" he yelled throwing Ben against the wall.

"Where are your little friends to protect you now?" Matt taunted, flitting around behind his friend.

Mike grabbed the front of Ben's shirt with one hand and backhanded him across the side of the face with his other hand;

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a ring he was wearing cut Ben's cheek. Then he gave Ben a hard punch to his already bruised stomach. "Nobody tells on us," he yelled again.

Matt was giggling as if he had lost his mind. Mike grabbed Ben by each arm, got right into his face and spit. "I think you need a lesson to help you remember to keep your big mouth shut," and then bounced Ben against the wall again.

Just as he pulled back his arm to throw another punch at Ben, the bathroom door banged open and in walked Mr. Abbot.

"I don't think you want to do that Mike," he said firmly. The Principal's face was dark as a thunder cloud. "Let him go," he roared. "NOW!"

Mike let go of Ben and backed away. Ben slid down the wall, shaking from a combination of anger and pain and tried to wipe the spit and blood off his face.

"Ben, are you okay?" Mr. Abbot asked, not taking his eyes off the bullies.

Ben nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Slowly he got up with one hand protecting his stomach and walked over to stand by the principal. Mr. Abbott looked at Ben, took a handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to the shaking boy. "Put some pressure on that cut to stop the bleeding."

The principal turned back to the boys, "I thought you might try something like this, Mike. Apparently I didn't make myself clear this morning. Let's see if suspension will get your attention. I want all three of you to follow me back to my office." Then looking directly at Mike he added coldly, "And don't even think of running away."

Students stopped and watched as Mr. Abbot lead the three boys back to his office. Those who had also been picked on by Mike and Matt hid their smiles as they watched their tormentors pass by. Some of them recognized the small boy.

A Boy Out of Time

He was new to the area, but because he had become the prime target of the bullies, most of them had been afraid to get to know him. Ben's cut had bled down his neck and onto his shirt. Everyone could see the blood. Everyone could see he had been beaten up. Little did he know, some of the kids thought he was a hero for helping stop the bullies.

The principal stopped and said something to the secretary before escorting the three boys into his office. He motioned the two bullies over to the wooden chairs at the right of his desk and told them to sit. He motioned Ben to a chair on the other side. Mr. Abbott then went around his desk and sat down.

"Your fathers are being called to come and pick you up. I'm suspending you two for the rest of the year. Ben, we've called your father to come and take you home. You can come back tomorrow if you're up to it."

There was a knock at the door, and the secretary stuck her head in and informed Mr. Abbot that the three fathers had been called and that the school nurse was back in her office.

"Ben, I want you to follow Ms. Sanders," he instructed. "I want the school nurse to look at your face and stomach."

Ben followed the secretary out of the room and down the hall to the nurse's office. Kids stopped what they were doing and stared at the bleeding boy.

The nurse, a heavyset woman in her 50's, motioned him over, and had him sit so she could look at his face.

"I don't think you need any stitches," she said swabbing the cut with a sterile pad. "Sure is bleeding though."

Ben mumbled, "I get shots to help me grow and they cause me to bleed easier."

"Well, before I clean this up I need to get pictures, just in case your parents decide to take any legal action. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

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Ben lifted his shirt to show the dark ugly bruise on his stomach.

"Oh my," she clucked reaching to feel along the bruise to make sure it wasn't a serious injury. She took a couple of pictures. "Well, I think you're going to be okay this time, but, in the future, try to keep from hitting their fist with your stomach," she added lightly. "When you get home put some ice on your stomach to keep the swelling down. Now, let's get that bleeding stopped." She dabbed the cut with something that stung, but it made the bleeding stop. She then put a bandage on it. "Now, go back to Mr. Abbot's office," she said escorting him to the door. "Good luck!"

Ben came back into the Principal's office and sat down to wait. Mr. Abbot gave Ben a tablet of paper and had him write out exactly what happened. Whenever the Principal wasn't looking Mike would glare at him and clench his fist. The waiting was hard and he was still shaking a little. What if Mike didn't get suspended? He had been so angry earlier. If Mr. Abbott hadn't come in when he did how badly would he have been beaten? The only consolation was the look on Matt's face. He looked as scared as a rabbit in a trap, maybe even more so.

About 45 minutes later, Ms. Sanders opened the door and let in a tall, well-dressed man, followed by Ben's father. The first man ignored the boys and walked right up to the desk to stand with his hands on his hips. Ben's father stopped just inside the door and took in the whole scene.

"Thank you for coming gentlemen," the principal said as he rose from his seat, noting that Matt's father hadn't yet arrived.

"What's this about?" the tall man snapped. "I'm a busy man and you called me out of a very important meeting. I don't have time for all this foolishness."

A Boy Out of Time

"Senator, please, this is serious," Mr. Abbot stated, slowly sitting back down. He was beginning to wonder if he was doing the right thing. "Your son has been bullying a number of kids in the school," he continued.

Ben's father walked over to stand behind his son, and he put a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder. "What happened today?" he asked.

"I caught Mike and Matt in the middle of beating up your son again," Mr. Abbot explained as he nodded over at the other two boys. "Ben had been sent to me Friday for repeatedly being late to his history class. I saw the bruise on his stomach and finally coaxed the whole story out of him. This morning, I called those two in and warned them to stop or they would be suspended."

The Senator gave Ben a contemptuous look, sizing him up. "Well now," he said in his best Senatorial voice, "boys will be boys. I'm sure this has all been a misunderstanding, and I'm sure they can work it out. Boys, after all, have to learn to stand up for themselves." Then with a 'voice of reason' he added, "I don't think we want to make any hasty decisions."

"You're right, boys need to learn how to stand up for themselves, and Ben has done a good job of it" Dr. Javan agreed. "But, having to stand up for yourself against two opponents, twice your size is a little unrealistic."

"I'm sorry Senator, but both Mike and Matt will be suspended for the rest of the year," Mr. Abbot stated.

The Senator looked down at the man and decided to change his approach. He had dealt with weak men like this before. They all understood intimidation.

"Mr. Abbott, I don't think you realize just who you are talking to. I am head of the Education Committee. I'm not sure you really want to take this position." The Senator could see he had struck a nerve. This was good. This was how he had

worked his way into the Senate and maintained his position there.

The Principal sat there considering what his ultimate boss was saying.

Ben's dad could see him wavering. "Excuse me, Mr. Abbot, if I understand you right," he said slowly and calmly, "a student that has been warned after being caught doing physical harm to another student and then doesn't heed that warning, is suspended. However, because this man is a Senator, he thinks his son shouldn't have to face the same consequences as anyone else would. I wonder what the newspapers would think."

"Dr. Javan, right?" the Senator asked, his attitude even more condescending. "Aren't you working over at the Smithsonian, on some archaeological finding? A finding, I might add, for which my department is responsible. Now, why don't we all just forget this ever happened?" It was clear he was used to getting his own way, and thought he could intimidate Ben's dad just the way he had intimidated the principal.

Ben looked up at this dad wondering what he would do. If he didn't give in, he could lose his job, and if he did, the boys would continue picking on him. Then he saw the look on his dad's face, a look that made him hold his breath, knowing his dad wasn't going to back down. He had seen that look before and was glad it wasn't directed at him.

Dr. Javan looked straight into the Senator's eyes. "What your son has done is wrong. He is picking on someone half his size. I will press charges against both the school and you if something isn't done now! My son has the right to an education without fear of bodily harm. It's his right, as an American, and a right you have sworn to uphold. Also, if anything happens to either my job, or my wife's job, or Mr.

A Boy Out of Time

Abbot's, I will go to the papers with the story. I will bring with me witnesses who will testify to assault and attempted assault on the part of your son and his friend." he stated firmly. "It will not only be in the local papers, but I can promise it will be in your state papers as well. Now, Senator, if you want to play hard ball, I too, have friends on the Hill."

The two locked eyes until the Senator, whose face turned red, finally looked away. "Fine, have it your way," he growled. He reached over and roughly grabbed his son by the arm and jerked him out of the chair. "You stupid brat," he yelled. "Get out to the car. I will deal with you later." Then he turned to the principal, "I don't think my son will come back to this 'rat hole'. I want his transcripts on my desk tomorrow." He stormed out the door, slamming it behind him.

Matt had gone pale and was visibly shaking, suddenly realizing he was now alone. About that time the door opened again and a heavy set man, needing a shave, wearing worn construction clothes, walked in. Matt's eyes, full of fear, got very big.

"You don't have to say noth'n" he stated darkly. "I heard it all from outside the door. The boy's more trouble than he's worth." He looked over at his son and said, "You, out to the car." His voice dripped with hate. He turned back to the principal, "I'll deal with him at home. Will he need to come back this year?"

"No, we will see him next year," Mr. Abbot said, more visibly shaken than he had been by the Senator.

An evil grin replaced the scowl, "Good". Looking back at his son as he turned to leave he yelled, "NOW!"

Matt jumped up and followed his dad out. Ben looked over to where Matt had been sitting and saw the chair was damp from a bladder that had too much fear shown to it. He

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was sure he didn't want to know what was going to happen once Matt's dad got him home.

The room was suddenly very silent; it was as if a movie paused. Finally Dr. Javan spoke up. "Mr. Abbot, I am sorry you have to deal with things like this. It seems to me we have found out where Mike and Matt have learned to bully. Thank you for being there for my son." He lightly squeezed Ben's shoulder and added, "I think we'll leave now."

Mr. Abbot rose from his seat and shook Dr. Javan's hand. "I think we need to put an end to this cycle," he said picking up the phone. "If you will excuse me."

Ben got up and followed his dad out of the school and into the car. Once he was seated he let out a deep breath and tears pooled in his eyes. He had never been in a position to see his father in that kind of situation and hadn't known what his dad would do. He looked up at his father, a man who he now knew didn't back down from what he believed in.

"You okay?" his dad asked, putting a hand on Ben's shoulder.

Ben nodded, and then leaned into his dad with tears freely flowing. "You could have lost your job. You must think I'm a coward," he said with his face buried against the side of his father's chest.

"It's just a job, Ben. You, on the other hand, are my son. I think that's just a little more important. Besides, I've had to deal with men like him in the past, and I know where their weak spots are. Besides I think Mr. Abbot is going to see that those boys get some help." He reached over and patted Ben on the shoulder. "I don't think you are a coward. It seems to me I was called to your school last year when you walloped a boy who kept getting in your way. Let's get home and get some ice on that stomach."

A Boy Out of Time

Ben was in the kitchen, on his computer, when his mom came home. She came over and gave him a hug from behind, looking over his shoulder at the screen.

"Trying to get Seth?" she asked.

"I want to tell him that I am coming out for the summer, but he hasn't logged on yet."

"I'm so proud of you."

"Why?"

Your dad told me you handled today very well. You were very brave."

"I was scared, not brave."

"Being scared doesn't mean you weren't brave. Being brave is being scared of something you have to do and doing it anyway. So, see? You were brave." She ruffled his hair and went to fix dinner.

Just before bed, Ben's mother came up with the phone in her hand. "It's for you," she said, handing him the phone.

"Hello Ben, Happy Belated Birthday!" his uncle said. "I hear you've had a rough few days."

"Yeah, I guess," Ben replied, and then changed the subject. "Thanks for letting me come this summer."

"I think you are old enough for the trip and we have lots of things to do here." There was a pause, "Ben, it's still a few weeks before you come. Sometimes my work delays me. If, for some reason I don't make it to the airport I will send someone I trust to pick you up. I will give them the code word 'elf', so you'll know that I sent them. I know the next part may seem weird, but if they say 'dragon' do not go with them. I want you to run for all you are worth to a security guard or a police officer. That will mean something has really gone wrong. But, that's not going to happen, so know you will be safe."

"What could go wrong?" Ben asked.

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“People in my position can have enemies that would think nothing of using people I love to get what they want.” There was another pause, “Ben, we are safe, but I have to plan as though something could go wrong. If you want to back out of coming, I’ll understand.”

“I want to come,” Ben returned forcefully. He wondered what his uncle could be talking about.

“Okay then. I will see you in a few weeks. I’ll be there, but just in case, I want you safe. Now, tell me all about your birthday party.”

The next day, when Ben arrived at school, several kids said ‘Hi’ to him as they passed. There was a group of girls talking, and every now and then one of them would look over at him, then she’d say something, and the other girls would giggle. Ben got the impression that whatever was being said was ‘good.’ When he showed up for his history class, his teacher looked a little shook up, but seemed to have a more positive attitude towards him.

The next three weeks were the best he’d had all year. The guilt he had been carrying around about his sister’s death was reduced, though not entirely removed; that was going to take time. Since he wasn’t being targeted by Mike and Matt, he actually made a few friends.

A week later Ben was finely able to get Seth on-line.

Ben: Where have you been? I have some news for you.

Seth: Sorry, I went back home for a while, I just got back.

Ben: Well, happy late birthday. Are you going to be there at all this summer?

Seth: Yes.

Ben: Good, I’m coming up to visit my uncle, it’s his birthday present to me. Maybe we could get together while I am there.

Seth: I know, your uncle told me. Did you really mean what you said about being friends?

A Boy Out of Time

Ben: We are friends, what do you mean?

Seth: You told me it didn't matter what I looked like, we would still be friends.

Ben: Yes and I meant it. I don't care if you are 6 feet tall and have a horn coming out of your head; I would still be your friend.

Seth: Well I don't have a horn coming out of my head.

Ben: lol*. I know you are just 6 feet tall.

Seth: kind o'.

Ben: no seriously, you are my friend and I look forward to seeing you.

Seth: Really, I am 6 feet tall.

Ben: lol.

Seth: no, I really mean it.

Ben: Seriously?

Seth: Seriously.

Ben: Wow, I was just teasing.

Seth: About the friendship.

Ben: no dodo, about being 6 feet tall.'

Seth: lol.

Ben: Will you be there when I get there?

Seth: I hope so. My grandmother is going to be away for a while, but I will see if I can stay with my Aunt.

Ben: Good, I have never been up there before. It will be nice to have someone besides my uncle there.

Seth: I will see if I can come to the airport with your uncle.

Ben: Do you know my uncle very well?

Seth: It is because of your uncle I can come to my grandmother's. He is a great man.

Ben thought about that for a few moments. Seth might know his uncle better than he did. There was a slight pang of jealousy. Uncle Theo was his hero.

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Ben: How will I know you?

Seth: Oh, you'll know me when you see me, trust me.

Ben: Okay, see you in a week.'

Seth: Can't wait.

*lol: Laugh out loud

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