

Two of Us (And No One Else)

By Timothy Patrick Hughes

*Two of us riding nowhere, spending someone's hard-earned pay
Two of us Sunday driving, not arriving on our way back home
We're on our way home, we're on our way home,
We're going home.*

- The Beatles

James sat at his kitchen table in his blue PJs dotted with medieval knights, nodding and smiling absentmindedly to the song on the radio. His legs swung below the chair to the rhythm. He'd never heard the song before but it pleased his ear. It was Sunday morning.

He had a lot to be thankful for that morning. His mom had made him his favorite banana pancakes with a side of crispy bacon and a tall glass of OJ. He wasn't sure why she'd done this because technically he was still grounded from a couple days before when he forgot to put his legs away prior to dinner. He shook his head decisively; best to just enjoy the meal and not ask questions.

His mother, Betty, was sitting across from him slowly sipping some coffee. She was dressed in a light white blouse and grey linen pants. She seemed pleased about the breakfast as well, but there was something about her satisfied smirk that made James feel a bit tense. Better eat these pancakes quick before something happens, James thought promptly. For an eight-year old boy, he was pretty precocious.

As James munched on his second piece of bacon, his dad, James Sr., walked through the kitchen door in khakis and a cotton shirt. "Hey champ!" he exclaimed, ruffling his son's hair. James Jr. mumbled eager greetings back to

him through a mouth stuffed with bacon. James Jr., too preoccupied with breakfast, didn't notice the glare his parents shared over him.

"Whatcha eatin' there?" His dad asked curiously. "Pancakes and bacon! Mom made some for me!" James replied ecstatically. His dad forced a grin, "How thoughtful of her! And," he coughed, "what'd she make for your pops?"

"Coffee," she responded smoothly. "There's a cup I haven't finished."

"No breakfast?" James Sr.'s asked, pressing his lips together.

"No."

"And why's that?"

"Didn't feel like it."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Well what am I supposed to do?" his father queried quietly.

His mother shrugged. By this point, James Jr.'s chewing slowed to a halt. His stomach was feeling queasy too.

"I don't exactly," James Sr. pronounced while clearing his throat, "have time to make it for myself, do I? I have to leave for work in five."

She frowned with mock confusion. "Well, you made it clear last night that you didn't like my cooking so I--"

"Betty," James Sr. interrupted frustratedly, "all I said was that dinner seemed to be getting repetitive, that's all. We had pasta every night last week."

"I'm running a household, not a hotel, James."

A quiver went up James Jr.'s spine to hear his name used, even coincidentally.

"And," she continued methodically, "I was busy those nights."

"Busy binging your shows?" James Sr. purported pointedly.

"Don't be cute," she shot back. "Busy organizing James's field trip for next week."

James Jr. could not endure another mention of his name so he tried to slyly slide off his chair. As he was eight-years old, he was unsuccessful.

"Sit down and enjoy your meal, James," his mother commanded.

"If he doesn't want to finish the meal, don't make him," his father spurted exasperatedly. "I'll finish it for him."

"Don't try and make him feel guilty just because you don't know how to cook a meal for yourself," his mother rebutted.

"His father doesn't have the time to make his own meal because he's busy supporting this family," his father insisted angrily.

Betty threw up her hands in sardonic praise. "Oh we all know you're the sole contributor to this family, James! We live off your yoke!"

James Sr. pinched his brow. "Goddammit, Betty, stop with the sarcasm."

"Stop with the swearing--"

"It was one word--"

"He doesn't need to hear--"

"You find fault in every--"

"You bring this out in--"

"You love--"

"You hate--"

"You--"

"You--"

"Y--"

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James Jr. could still hear the echoes of the fight resounding in his fragile mind a minute after his father slammed the door. His mother, her eyes having been glued to her husband throughout the entire argument, finally tore them away and turned them on her child. Exhausted by the confrontation and overwhelmed by the excess rage, she tapped his plate dully.

"Finish your food I'm going to lie down"

She walked out the door in the blink of an eye. James, obedient child that he was, proceeded to finish every last bite on his plate, without a thought for his appetite or desire.

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James lay on his bed, staring at the dragons and constellations painted with care on his bedroom ceiling. Without any siblings, when he found himself feeling queasy and uncomfortable, this was where he docked himself to wait out the household storms. He knew to wait for his tummy to settle before asking his mother for anything after these confrontations. His stomach rumbled quietly, as if to tell him now was the time to go. With great willpower, he summoned up the courage to rise from his bed and go to his mom's room.

He knocked gently on her door. It was slightly ajar so it swung open softly with a touch of his hand. His mom was lying on her bed with her eyes closed and an icepack on her forehead. She cracked open an eye and let it drift towards her son.

"Mom," James managed to say, "if it's alright with you, could I go to the pond?"

His mother watched him for a moment. She had a flurry of words on the tip of her tongue: apologies, explanations, recriminations, and soothing consolations. She settled for a sigh and a nod. "Yes, James. Go to the pond. Mommy has to rest."

"Okay," James said simply. He began to back away from the door.

"Wait," his mom let out suddenly. "Give mommy a hug."

James hesitated for a nanosecond and promptly nodded. For some reason unbeknownst to him, it felt very hard to approach his mom, almost like a dentist having to pull the tooth from a tiger. When he arrived in front of her, he lifted his arms reluctantly. She leaned in and embraced him tight. He thought for a moment she was going to say something but she remained silent.

"Have a nice time," she whispered faintly, letting him go. She laid back down, closed her eyes, and kept them closed as he tiptoed slowly out of the room.

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James rushed out his front door like a dog on the loose. He was dressed in his orange flannel, denim jeans, and rubber boots: the perfect uniform for

the outdoors. He immediately began scanning the ground for hidden treasures when he stepped onto his bumpy neighborhood road.

It was a twenty-minute walk to Culver's Pond for an eight-year old boy like James. He always preferred to walk rather than drive there. Half the fun of going was seeing what little knick-knacks of nature he would collect on his way over. Jagged sticks, stodgy stones, snail shells, acorn shells, even once a seashell strangely enough. He could always rely on a whole assortment of treasures waiting for him outside his house.

He snatched a shiny pebble from the ground. He grinned as he eagerly examined it. But as he perused the pebble, his smile began to fade. He glanced around at the surrounding yards and the pebble slipped through his fingers.

Somehow today, the sticks and stones didn't have the same glittering luster that they usually had. In fact, nothing did. James searched everywhere on his walk, prodding the dirt, propping up stones, and sweeping through crackling leaves coating grassy patches but nothing sparkled for him. What was usually treasure could have been for everything in the world nothing but shattered fragments of concrete.

James frowned in confusion. A stray thought nudged into his head and whispered doubt to his heart. He shook that off quickly though in a huff of determination and proceeded to march the whole path to the pond with his wandering eyes glued to the ground. I'm sure the pond will be just like always, he thought assuredly. I always love the pond.

He never understood why people called it a pond because for him it felt like an entire ocean. Its water stretched out as far as his boyish imagination. Its surface was so smooth he daydreamed he could walk on it. Along its edges, old, pale-brown and crackly trees lined it so it looked hidden from the world, solely existing as a refuge for little kids kicking around for a place to call home. It was James' favorite place in the neighborhood. It functioned as his entire universe. He would come to the ocean-pond and skip rocks along its wide top or poke at the muddy basin with a sturdy stick. Like most things for a young boy, its contents were endless and its possibilities were astronomical. It never failed to turn his glumness to gladness.

His ears perked up. He could hear the neighborhood kids shouting from afar, always the first sign he was nearing Culver's Pond. They were just part of the environment to him however; he kept to himself so the kids remained strangers, only familiar as creatures of his home away from home. Hopeful butterflies fluttered about in him. He smiled, trusting that he'd be in the company of toads, tadpoles, and roly pollies quite soon. He curved around the last batch of neighborhood trees and set his eyes upon his pond hopefully.

Something sank inside.

The pond was despondent. It looked the same as always, but something felt off. He scanned his surroundings to see if anything was missing from his nature home. Trees, check; water, check; sticks and stones, check and check. Everything was there but it felt absent, as if its spirit had vanished. What could be wrong, James thought worriedly.

Maybe I am, James thought with another awful drop in his stomach. Maybe I'm the problem. The pond never changes, the pond's never different. But maybe I am.

This thought made James' heart sink even deeper, past his stomach, past his legs, past his toes, deep into his beloved dirt. If I don't have the pond, or my sticks, or my stones, what do I have?

You have your parents, a tiny wishful voice said inside James, but somehow he didn't think that was true. Even if he wanted it to be.

With the weight of all these impending discoveries, James didn't really think he could stand up on his little legs for much longer. He felt tired enough to curl up in bed and drift off, but he was also too worn out to return home. He decided to just sit in his usual spot by the water, even if it was just for old time's sake.

He sat like that for a long time as the day spun around him and the rest of the world continued on, unaware of this tiny inconsequential tragedy.

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"hello," said a lispy and inquisitive voice.

James twisted his head towards the voice confused. No one ever talked to him when he was at his spot. And suddenly, he was being greeted by the most strange sight he had ever seen.

A girl with brunette pigtails, blue mud-streaked overalls and ruddy cheeks squinted at him with a pair of curious eyes that peeked out of some oversized reading goggles strapped to her head. Her mouth was slightly open

revealing two front teeth so big they looked like they couldn't fit in her head. She kept her eyes trained on him, like a zoologist on a rare specimen.

"hello"

He managed a timid wave to her. "Hello," he said to be polite.

"What's your name?" She breathed out.

"James. What's yours?" He replied wearily.

"Tania," She responded proudly.

"That's nice," he said in a tone that made nothing seem nice at all. He turned away from her which caused her to stare at him even harder.

"What's wrong?" She sniffed her nose loudly.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I just don't feel well," he murmured with eyes downcast.

"Do you feel sick?" She questioned.

"No."

"Do you feel cold?"

"No."

"Do you feel hot?"

"No."

"Do you feel itchy?"

"No."

"Huh," Tania let out, confused by his lack of clarity. "Then I'm stumped."

"I guess I'm just feeling down," James sighed.

"Uh oh," Tania's eyes widened. "That's worser than the other ones."

"I guess so," James mumbled.

"Well," Tania offered brightly, "when I'm sad, this pond always makes me feel better."

"Usually me too," James confessed, "but today... I don't know why, it feels like... it doesn't feel like it usually does."

"Oh," Tania said, further puzzled by his inarticulation. "There's lots of clouds out today. Could that be it?"

"I guess so," James surrendered, unable to debate his gloom.

Tania squinted her eyes hard at the glum boy. Her mom was a biologist who always encouraged her to tackle difficult problems with thoroughness and dedication, whether that be replanting a daisy she found helpless on a sidewalk or untying her ever-tangled shoelaces. She took a deep breath in, held it for a thoughtful moment, and let it out resolutely. She licked her two front teeth readily, resolved to solve the glum boy's problem.

"My mom always says if you want to figure something," she lisped out, "you have to start with its root. So," she crossed her legs quite seriously, "when did you start feeling down?"

"Hmm," James pondered as he bit his lip, "I suppose this morning when I had my breakfast?"

"What did you have for breakfast?" Tania probed carefully.

"Bacon."

"Anything else?"

"Pancakes."

"Anything else?"

"Some OJ."

"Anything else?"

"No."

"Hm," She considered. She shook her head sensibly. "No way that could have made you this down."

James spoke up, "It wasn't the breakfast that made me down, it was--" James suddenly stopped himself. He had never talked about his parents before with another person, especially not about when they'd shout. He wasn't sure why exactly, but it seemed like the sort of thing he could get in trouble for. He remembered something his mom once said around him about his dad, "I know he's probably up at his work right now, talking about what a bitch I am. And he doesn't think I know, but I know." He shuddered. If his mom could know what his dad was up to even when he was at his work, then by all means she could surveil her son when he was just at the park around the corner. He felt frozen with fear, trapped in a foreign land, unsure what to do.

Tania, her eyes fixed on the glum boy during his puzzling lapse in speech, tapped her knee impatiently. Thus far her questions had yielded very few useful answers and she hated for her time and talents to be wasted on the unwilling. At this point he had been silent for two minutes and her question had still not been answered. And when she asked a question, she expected it to be answered.

"Well?" she asked expectantly.

"What?" James responded, snapping out of his paralysis.

"What else happened at breakfast?" She demanded authoritatively.

"I-- I--" James stammered.

Tania sighed and threw up her hands dramatically. "I can't do this! If you won't tell me, I am going to have to go. It's getting late and I still want to catch a toad before the sun goes down." Tania began to stomp away.

"Wait, don't go! I can explain!" James called out desperately.

"I have places to be!" Tania threw back casually.

"Mom and Dad!" James blurted out. "It was my mom and dad!"

At this outburst, Tania stopped and turned slowly around. James stammered and began to spit out words quickly, quicker than the tear drops that rolled down his cheeks and dissolved in the dirt.

"They-- they were yelling and my-- my m-mom made p-p-pancakes f-for me which my dad d-didn't like-- like and s-so they y-yelled and I st-til-l had t-to eat my b-break--breakfast cause mom said so and--and--and I don't know why it hap-p-pened b-but I think it was my f-f-fault--"

At this last word, James bent over and began sobbing into his shirt, each one building on the last like crashing waves on a sailboat in the deep sea. In the midst of his sobs, a distant thought strayed in saying his mom would be mad if he ruined that shirt. But he couldn't stop, even though he was dimly aware the strange girl was still watching him.

Tania watched the little glum boy cry into his shirt. She was dumbfounded by the puzzle in front of her. She was used to tackling problems

with simple solutions and little clean up afterwards. Plant the daisy and watch it grow. Tie the shoelace and keep running. However, there didn't seem to be an end in sight to the glum boy's incessant sobbing. She didn't know what to do. So, like most things, she did what her mother would do in the situation.

She ran behind the sobbing boy and hugged him with all her might. His snot and tears began to cover her arm but she didn't care. She just wanted him to be okay. She held him for so long that she didn't even know if he'd be able to stop or if he could feel her tight embrace. But just as she began to lose hope, he gradually slowed his heaves and tears, and stopped crying.

James opened his eyes in a daze. He didn't know what happened. He brought up his head and looked out in front of him. His eyes blinked in amazement. It was as if his tears had cleared the pond in front of him. The sun was glittering on its glass surface and he felt its spirit resurrected. He himself even felt lighter, as if he could finally stand up on his two little legs. As sense returned to his trembling body, he became aware of the strange girl clutching him from behind. He turned and looked at her. She had her head resting on his back with her goggled eyes squeezed tightly shut in intense concentration. She slowly opened them to look at him. They both watched the other in silence for a delicate moment.

"Are you okay?" Tania asked gently with a glittering gaze.

James smiled cleanly and freshly back at her with his cheeks warming rosily. "I guess I am."

The End.