

From one side to another.

The metro blew through the Arlington stop. Chris caught a glimpse of his blue blur of a house as they flew by.

“Jesus *Christ!*” Chris said.

“Could you not use the lord’s name in vain?” Nate asked. He was very religious, a Catholic with a Mormon’s devotion and a Scientologist’s buy-in.

“Oh come on with the Jesus stuff, Nate,” Chris replied. Chris was hardly religious. Arguably irreligious, if you’d asked Nate.

“All I’m saying is-” Nate began.

“This happens every time.”

“It’s normalized I get it, but you really shouldn’t use-”

“Every *fucking* time we take the metro-”

“Hey, just chill out man,” Nate said. “We’ll hop off at the next and turn around.” Chris didn’t reply but just stood there looking out the tram window, jaw tense, hands in his pocket. Then, he suddenly loosened.

“What if we don’t?” Chris asked.

“What?” Nate was uncomfortable by the idea of spontaneity, and visibly looked it.

“What if we just took it down to DC. To the mall.”

“The monuments? Why?” Nate asked.

“Why not?” Chris shot back. “Same amount of time it’d take to get home at this point.”

“Except at the end of that time I’d actually *be* home, where I can eat my dinner and then do my homework.”

“We’ll grab a bite to eat downtown,” Chris said. “Forget about the homework.” Nate winced. The train pulled up to the next metro stop and the tram doors opened. Chris looked at Nate. “I’m going, you’re welcome to join.” If Nate said no, Chris would probably have left too. But Nate didn’t call his bluff.

“Alright, sure, Why not? Can’t spend every day on homework,” Nate said. Chris was surprised. The doors closed.

The ride downtown was contentious. There was a disagreement over what the wars in the Middle East were about. Was it strategically important for National Security? Nate thought yes and Chris the opposite. Was it all about oil? Chris thought yes. Nate thought no, probably not.

This was the norm for them. Since 7th grade Chris and Nate had been locked into a political battle which neither was willing to lose. They were now seniors in high school. Mostly they argued whatever their parents believed in, with a sprinkle of their own ideas mixed in.

Nate’s family had generational wealth and was well-educated, wealthy, enormously kind, and extremely Christian. They were probably the nicest people Chris had ever met, and yet, Nate’s father was a political lawyer of some sort who hoped to get onto the Cruz campaign, Chris’s most hated politician. Chris didn’t get it.

Nate was Indian-American, which, ironically enough, gave him more comfort and confidence as a Republican than most white men. When *they* said that they were “socially liberal” yet “economically conservative” they could be labelled as racist. Nate, however, was

impervious to the charge. He'd look down, at his hands, smile, and say "I'm christian and I'm brown, how could you call me hateful or racist?"

Chris's family were former Catholics, something which bothered Nate. Chris's family also struggled with mental health and addiction, something which Nate clearly tied to the word "former" in the phrase "former Catholics."

Chris's parents came from poverty. They grinded tirelessly and eventually stumbled onto enough money to live well. They felt overly fortunate for the fact and looked to give back. They were the people who marched in the 60's. JFK was, is, and always has been their man.

Chris's family was not religious but they followed three rules. Rule one was to identify what you can and can't control, and to focus only on what you can. Rule two was to be useful. Rule three was to be kind.

Nate didn't think three rules was enough. Chris didn't think it was all that complicated.

They were always bound to be best friends. All you had to do was consider the law of magnetism. Both were so entrenched and convicted in their opposite beliefs, that it would've been a disservice in their eyes to leave each other alone.

And so when the doors to the Smithsonian metro stop opened, they were still arguing over the middle east. As usual, both still believed what they'd believed, but had forced, and had been forced, to make some concessions.

The Smithsonian stop was underground, dark and cavernous. The walls and ceiling were made of concave white concrete coated in dirt. The air was thick in the nostrils and smelled like smoke. The floor swelled with people packed together like sardines, and neither Chris nor Nate got one glimpse of the floor as they shuffled their way out. They were arriving just as the city's workforce was leaving.

Nate bumped into a man in a hurry who was wearing a Brooks Brothers suit. The man dropped his phone and an earbud came loose and dropped to the floor. He scooped them up quickly without breaking stride.

"Look where the fuck you're walking!" he called back to Nate, and then he was gone, disappeared into the crowd of people.

Chris and Nate made it up the escalator. At the top to the right was a homeless man leaned up against the wall, sitting on a cardboard box and holding up a sign that said he was a veteran who needed food. He was wearing an old olive green trench coat and a yellow stained-brownish beanie with a hole in it.

He looked up at us and clanged coins around in his old Dunkin Donuts cup.

"I'm sorry, I don't have any cash on me," Nate said, "but God Bless you." They walked on to the next escalator that went above-ground.

"Did you have any cash?" Nate asked.

"Just a twenty," Chris replied, "too big a bill or I would've."

"He doesn't deserve a twenty?" Nate joked.

"Oh come on, it's not about deserving," Chris said.

Once Chris and Nate surfaced they made their way to the monuments along the Potomac River walk. The first was MLK's, one of Chris's favorites.

Dr. King's statue stood wide and strong, arms crossed, shoulders sat square. His eyes had fear, sadness, anger, power, determination, strength, and radical acceptance in them.

Some families were posing for pictures in front of him. They took a goofy photo, laughed, and walked past the wall of quotes. Chris prodded Nate.

"Can you believe that?" Chris asked.

"Believe what?" Nate asked.

"That family just took a goofy photo with the statue and left."

"So?" Nate wasn't concerned.

"They didn't even read any of the quotes or look two seconds at the damn thing. Why even take the picture?"

"I don't know. For memories sake?" Nate, not seeing an issue, was already over the ordeal and ready to move on.

"What memories? All they have is a picture."

"I don't know, Chris. Why don't you go ask them why they do the things they do?"

"I just don't know why you'd take a *goofy* one." Chris shook his head and walked over to the south wall. He looked at the quote in front of him.

"We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Washington National Cathedral, March 31, 1968.

Nate walked up to Chris. "It's a pretty profound statement of faith, isn't it?" Chris asked.

"He was a very faithful guy in the public sphere," Nate replied.

"Public Sphere?" Chris asked. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well.. you know MLK cheated on his wife?" Nate ventured, cautiously.

"What?" Chris asked.

"Martin Luther King." Nate paused for a second. "You really didn't know?"

"I knew, Nate," Chris replied, "I just don't really care."

"You don't care?"

"No." Chris said. Nate was stunned.

"You don't care if someone cheats on their wife?" Nate asked again.

"I mean, of course I do, Nate. This is MLK, though."

"So if somebody does good things, they're now allowed to do bad things?" Nate pressed.

"Of course not, but it's not like, the first thing I think of," Chris said, almost yelling now. "I'm just saying I'm not going to discredit a heroic legacy because of a human flaw."

"Oh, Like Thomas Jefferson?" Nate replied.

"Jefferson owned slaves!" Chris cried out.

"Might be a worse sin, but sin is sin."

"What's your point, Nate?"

"You have to take people as they are," Nate said. "Good deeds and bad."

"Well that's my point," Chris replied.

"We're probably saying the same thing, honestly," Nate said, offering an olive branch.

“Maybe.” Chris wasn’t sure how that was possible.

After MLK the mood was soured. Chris wanted to get food and go home. Nate just wanted to go home.

They headed thirty minutes Northwest to a burger place called Benny’s. It was a west-coast chain with a mid-western theme that had managed to fling a store across the country to a gentrified area of Washington D.C. All the meat, buns, and toppings were organic and cooked fresh. The workers all wore red flannels and denim overalls.

They ate in silence, and quickly. Nate’s phone died. Chris pulled up direction to a nearby metro stop, and then they left.

“What do you mean, we’re lost?” Nate asked, panicked.

“I mean my phone’s dead, and your phone’s dead, and I’ve never been here before.” There were no streetlights or lights on in the windows around them. The block was made entirely of brick and was entirely decrepit.

“Why’d you let your phone die?” Nate asked.

“You let your phone die!”

“This is a bad part of town, Chris.” Nate said, looking around wildly.

“I know.”

“We’re on Anderson street, do you know where that is?”

“No. We wouldn’t be on Anderson street if I did,” Chris replied drly.

“Well this is like, a *really* bad part of town. That store had metal bars on it, Chris. That window over there is broken. There’s broken beer bottles everywhere.” Chris didn’t say anything.

“Does the metro even come out here?” Nate asked.

“The metro goes everywhere in DC.” Chris replied.

“Yeah, but maybe not here.”

“If the metro doesn’t come here then that’d be pretty fucked.”

“What? Why?” Nate asked. Chris looked at him funny.

“Cause people *live* here?”

“Oh. Right.”

“We’ll find the metro stop, alright? There’ll be a sign or something”

Nate was quiet for a while after that. They wandered around for another thirty minutes and still couldn’t find the station. Chris was pretty sure they’d seen some place more than once.

Broken windows covered every building. Most were empty but sometimes there was plywood laid in place, sometimes a mattress or a tarp. Glass was scattered all around and between the cracks that ruined every square of the sidewalk. Grass the color of wheat was doing its best to survive in them. The buildings on the left and right were crumbling and covered in graffiti. There were parks every few blocks of overgrown long grass and dandelions, walled in by rusty fences that were choked by vines.

At one point they walked past some people huddled around a burning oil drum, just like in the movies. The whole thing was surreal to kids like Nate and Chris.

“Chris, I feel really bad about this.” Nate said, his voice trembling.

“We’ll be fine. ”

"It seems really dangerous here. People get shot and robbed here all the time." Nate kept saying things that Chris was trying not to think about.

"My aunt used to buy weed here, you know," Chris said.

"She bought *weed* here?" Nate asked, stunned.

"In the general northwest area. They drove down here when they were in high school. They'd drive around and find dealers on the corners."

"She *told* you that?" Nate was still incredulous.

"Yeah."

"My parents would never talk about that kind of stuff."

"I think they got weed for really cheap, back then. Only twenty five bucks for an eighth. It was really bad compared to what we have now, but it was cheap so I guess it wouldn't really matter." Nate was quiet for a few seconds.

"I've never smoked." Nate said.

"Yeah?"

"I don't know if I want to. It makes you lazy. It's bad for your lungs, too."

"It mostly gets you high," Chris joked.

Nate was silent for a while, again. Then, a hulking figure came up on their horizon. As it got closer they saw it was a man in blue jeans and a navy blue hoodie with the hood drawn up. Nate suddenly stopped. The figure kept approaching on their side of the road. Chris was scared, even though he didn't want to be.

"Let's go to the other side of the street." Nate whispered.

"We don't need to do that," Chris said.

"I'm really freaked out, man."

"We'll be fine, Nate, just keep walking."

"No I'm sorry man I'm crossing." Nate bolted across the street before Chris could respond. Within a second Chris was following at a sprint. And then so was the figure.

And when the figure got to them they screamed and screamed, until eventually the screams were drowned out by laughter. Nate and Chris looked up, terrified and confused, and the hulking figure in front of them who was now convulsing with laughter.

"Y'all thought I was trying to run up on you, huh?" The guy kept laughing. "Yo y'all is lost, aren't you? What is that, polo?" He gestured to Nate, who was wearing his Sunday best. "Goddamn you're lost, boy is wearing polo out here."

Nate and Chris stood there, not sure what to say.

"We are." Chris finally said. "We're very lost. Our phones died."

"Y'all looking for the metro?" The man asked.

"Yes." Nate said. The man introduced himself as Andre, apologized for the bad joke, and gave directions to the metro. It turned out the station was only five minutes away.

