

The Kid Who Knew Something

by R. Daniel Lester

Shannon refused to jump from the castle drawbridge to the gigantic truck tire sunk halfway down in the playground quicksand. He just stood there-arms folded across his chest, bony knees sticking out from beneath ratty cutoffs-in silence, looking to Rollie very wise and mighty. Very above such adolescent play. But that was probably just because he felt so stupid. Stupid for being a follower. Stupid for slipping. Stupid for lying on the ground, winded and embarrassed, breath coming out in scary gasps.

Of course, Bobby jumped first.

Bobby, who was a leader and according to the hallway rumour had made out with Karen Roberts for two minutes during a class field trip to the art museum.

Squirrel, the sidecar to Bobby's motorcycle, jumped second.

Squirrel's real name was Russell, but everybody called him that instead because his dad liked to peg them off of trees with his BB gun on lazy weekday afternoons as he did equal damage to defenseless six packs. Squirrel's dad had a lot of time on his hands.

Rollie jumped last, after Cody, who had the easy grace of a natural athlete and landed perfectly. Rollie, though, somehow misjudged the distance and hit the tread with his chest. And after twelve years of breathing he had gotten used to it and just assumed the next breath would be there when he needed it. But it wasn't and his eyes got big as his lungs searched for air and he couldn't make a sound no matter how hard he tried. The guys circled Rollie for a second, but once they realized he was going to live they pretty much lost interest. Bobby was halfway to the big kid swings by the time Rollie's breathing even hinted at returning to normal and Squirrel and Cody weren't far behind him.

Only Shannon remained, standing high on his mountain, gazing down, mime quiet, while Rollie recovered in the fetal position, gasping, vowing never ever again to take oxygen for granted.

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They had known each other since the first day of grade seven and Shannon didn't say much then either. And neither did Rollie, really. He was too nervous. Because not only was it the first day of school but it was Rollie's first new school ever because since grade one he'd always gone to the same school and had the same friends. That is until a few months ago when his parents decided they needed a change of scenery, that they were "stagnating," and so Rollie was deemed stagnant by association.

So they left Edmonton for Calgary and Rollie said goodbye to his friends as if he'd see them again, but he wouldn't. To a kid, another city-even if it is in the same province-was as far away as the moon.

"New" had been the word of the day, that September morning. New grade. New teachers. New classmates. New haircut. New pants. New shirt. New shoes. New socks. New underwear. New backpack filled to the brim with shiny school supplies. The only thing missing was a sticker on his forehead declaring his best before date.

The school was big and foreign, strange hallways lined with strange lockers leading to stranger classrooms. Everyone seemed to be looking at him, staring at him, talking about him, and Rollie was about seventeen shades of red by the time he found his homeroom and crashed into the first available seat. He was relieved to be finally sitting down, to have managed to enter the class without being singled out for mockery because of pants that were so fresh off the shelf they made a sort-of whistling noise between his thighs.

Rollie's was a three-part plan.

Step 1: be cool.

Step 2: be cool.

Step 3: be cool.

But after two minutes he cracked under the intense pressure and, already blushing uncontrollably for no real reason, he shifted in his

seat to take a look around. And there was Shannon, in the desk beside him, projecting exactly the kind of cool that Rollie wanted to project. Dressed in a black t-shirt and cutoff jean shorts, with hair that hadn't seen scissors in a while, the two were polar opposites. Shannon didn't seem to care at all about his surroundings, while Rollie was listening for even the slightest mention of himself-“hey, look at that dork” or “that guy with the whistling pants looks pretty cool.”

No, Shannon just smiled his odd smile and drew on the wooden desk with a pen. He didn't even raise his head to talk. “You're new,” he said to Rollie. “Me too.”

“Don't let the teacher see you,” being all Rollie could think of to say in return.

Shannon shrugged, went back to his cubes, triangles, cartoon faces.

At lunch, they sat outside watching the others fall into their groups and patterns of play. Elite kids at the swings, the rest in surrounding pockets of decreasing popularity, waiting like farm team minor leaguers to be called up to the big show. By that analogy, at that particular moment, Shannon and Rollie were the farm team's bat boys.

“Isn't Shannon a girl's name?” Rollie asked.

“I'm not a girl,” Shannon replied.

And that was that: question asked, question answered.

Rollie offered him the apple out of his lunch bag to add some glue to what was clearly becoming quite the bond of friendship.

“Thanks,” Shannon said. “I like apples.”

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Okay, deep breath, Rollie said to himself. In through the nose, out through the mouth. It went well. He tried another. And another. His heart slowly stopped galloping the quarter-mile and returned to a light trot. Right and left lungs gradually allowed more air back within their borders. Never had he been so aware of his body and its delicate grasp on life.

Over at the swings, Rollie heard Bobby, in true alpha male fashion, daring Squirrel and Cody to go higher, faster.

"You didn't want to jump," Shannon said. "So why do it then?"

Rollie honestly didn't know how to answer, how to explain a built-in desire to hang with the cool kids. To be part of a group. To belong. A sufficient explanation was beyond his 12 year-old brain's ability to communicate. It was just human nature, right? And so all that came out when he tried to express his innate need to fit in was, "Uh, um."

But Shannon no longer stared down from atop his high-horse. He was beside Rollie, helping him to his feet. Rollie leaned against the huge tire, standing on legs of rubber.

Bobby and Squirrel and Cody were still on the swings, now on to the jumping-off-the-swing-at-full-height-and-speed part of the after school festivities. Shannon looked on, but seemed to be focusing past them, maybe on an idea or something only he could see.

"I'm not sure how important this all is, you know," he said.

"Huh?"

"I don't get why you jumped."

"Jeez, Shan, I just did okay? I tried to jump on to a truck tire from a fake wooden drawbridge in an elementary playground. And I missed. And I winded myself. And I feel like an idiot."

Shannon said, "Because we all grow up and people like Bobby will never give me high-fives or invite me to their pool parties." He stopped and turned to me. "And that's okay."

Rollie nodded because it seemed like the polite thing to do.

Shannon walked away, one white rogue thread of denim dripping down his leg.

Rollie watched Shannon walk away, thought about going with him, but instead made his way over to the swings, and Bobby gave me a high-five and said, "Nice wipeout, man," and they all laughed about it, and Cody said, "Shannon's weird," and Rollie agreed and they laughed again.

The next day things were different with the guys, like Rollie'd passed a test. All of a sudden he was in on the stories and the games and the dirty jokes whispered from the back of the classroom. Bobby

even invited Rollie to his 13th birthday party extravaganza. His family had an indoor pool, and there'd be tons of pizza. Plus, Melissa Hunter, teenage temptress, would be there.

In a bathing suit, said Bobby with a grin.

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Shannon and Rollie, they never hung out again. Like planets and moons they circled each other, orbits never crossing. Which seemed to be the way things went, for Rollie, in all the new school experiences he had. The person he met on the first day-the one who was a raft in an unfamiliar sea-was never his best pal at the end of the year. For a while they'd pass in the hallway and say hello, but soon they wouldn't even do that. And that's what happened with Shannon. Rollie saw him at his locker or outside reading a book by himself, and he never quite had the guts, or the desire, to go up and talk to him. Rollie didn't know why, he just didn't. Maybe because he hung out with the "cool" crowd and the part of him that was scared and shallow didn't want to be seen associating with a lower rung on the social ladder. Or maybe he didn't approach him because he'd passed Bobby's test, but failed Shannon's. Or maybe Rollie knew that Shannon knew something he didn't, that he was beyond crowds-cool or not-and that they'd have nothing to talk about. * * *

Rollie only saw Shannon one more time and that was in grade 11, when he had moved on to a high school known more for its basketball team than its math team. He tried out after a growth spurt left him a head taller than the rest of his grade. A little too slow and uncoordinated to be spectacular, Rollie could usually be counted on for a few points, a few blocked shots, and a few hard fouls. Anyway, the team's game plan was just get the ball to Cody, who'd become an amazing two guard. So good that he was already being scouted by a few local universities.

Rollie, Dave, Andrew and Cody were on their way to a league game. Dave, who'd gotten his license a week prior, was driving and Cody was in the front seat fiddling with the stereo. They were 16, in a car, the music was loud and anything and everything seemed

possible. Dreams were something you plucked from the sky and tasted on your tongue.

They passed a guy on a ten-speed. He was casually coasting down a slight hill, his shoulder length hair blowing in the wind. Rollie recognized Shannon right away, but played dumb when Andrew asked if anybody knew the kid on the bike.

"That dude lives across the street from me," he said. "Last year he got his girlfriend pregnant and now he works at some warehouse and goes to school part-time."

A father at fifteen, thought Rollie. A child with a child.

Obviously The Kid Who Knew Something didn't know to pay attention in grade 8 Health class when Mr. Stinson said to always (always) use a condom. Still, saddled as Shannon was with the burdens and responsibilities of fatherhood, a rush of jealousy rippled through Rollie. Because he hadn't had sex yet. Using the old baseball metaphor, Shannon had hit a home run while Rollie was still stuck on second base. That was with Julie Spencer and they always held hands when he walked her home. She was going to be in the stands for the basketball game, cheering the team on.

They won 78 - 54.

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A month after high school graduation, Rollie's parents sat him down and said they would miss him, but he could stay in Calgary with his aunt if he really needed to. They were Vancouver bound. Dad had a job offer and mom was born there and had always wanted to live on the West Coast again. Rollie decided to go along because he didn't know what he would miss, couldn't name it exactly. Again, he said goodbye to his friends, and again he knew he wouldn't be seeing them. The first truly independent decision of his life was made not in an effort to achieve anything particular, but to leave something nebulous behind.

