

What's West?

By Brendan O'Brien

He rode in the backseat of a mustard-colored mustang with more miles on it than it was meant to have. Westbound on route 180. Two parents in the front, one sister and himself in the back. His name was, is and will be Tyler Rogers.

The rocks outside changed from the gray color they've always been to enormous red rock walls. Tyler just couldn't tell you when they changed because he fell asleep somewhere along the way. Bruce Springsteen faded out of the radio as Chris Ledoux faded in. A sign of the changing state lines and changing local radio stations. Lots of change.

Tyler wished that he had at least a week, just one week of second grade in New Jersey. And now he never will.

He knew his family had to leave and had to go West. He just wishes he could've been more ready for a new life. And more importantly, he wishes that he knew what West was.

But with all the changes happening at the same time, Tyler knew one thing was consistent in the world. His birthday was September 7th. And this year was extra special because he was turning 7 on the 7th. And it was extra, extra special because everyone told him, "Nobody learns how to ride a bike past the age of 7." Which meant that this was the year. And this was going to be the best year of his-

The car bumped and double bumped and swerved a little back and forth. Everyone in the car screamed and panicked and held onto every physical object that they could. Except Tyler. In some weird way, it felt like time slowed down and came near-close to stopping. He started reading Spiderman comic books last year and it felt like he had his own Spidey-Sense. Unfortunately for Tyler, time only slowed down after bad things already started to happen.

Tyler stood on the side of the road next to his older sister Emily as Mom and Dad bickered back-and-forth about "the right way to fix a flat." Emily said that her and Tyler had to stand next to Mom and Dad for moral support.

They got back on the road just in time for it to get dark, which was just in time to get off the road again. They stayed in this hotel called a "Motel." Mom and Dad argued back-and-forth about whether or not it was a good idea to keep driving since the kids had school in the morning. They ended up staying there that night.

Tyler laid on a cot, which was a mix between a really thin bed and an uncomfortable hammock. Emily laid on the floor because she was protesting or mad or angry or going through changes and she said some bad words in between that you're not supposed to say.

Tyler laid awake all through the night. But not because he was protesting or mad or angry or going through changes. But because of a movie he saw when he was little-little. The people in the movie talked

about how “there was no more beautiful sunrise than a sun rising in the West.” Tyler had to see it for himself.

The sun peaked its head out from behind the red dirt. Lifting up from the ground, like it was coming out of nowhere. And just as the sun’s forehead started to show... it was gone. The sky threw up clouds and rain and darkness and black all over the place. And that was how Tyler’s new life on the West coast started.

Mom and Dad dropped Tyler and Emily off in front of Sweetwater Elementary School that morning. It was not very nice looking. Very brown, very gray, very blah. That’s what Emily said sometimes. Some things are just “blah.”

Emily was really old, so she went to the section of the blacktop with the other 9-year olds. 9-year-old boys are scary looking.

Tyler went to the section with the other 7-year olds. A bunch of them were playing Wall Ball. Tyler had seen people play Wall Ball before, but he was never invited to play. There was a kid (with hair that Mom said was dirty blonde and that Dad said you shouldn’t say was dirty blonde because it doesn’t sound nice) who threw the ball. The ball popped as it smacked against the wall. It ricocheted and rolled, landing in front of Tyler’s feet.

Tyler didn’t want to draw attention to himself. Tyler wanted to slowly become a kid that the other kids looked at and maybe even knew and maybe, maybe wanted to be friends with. But now they all saw Tyler at the exact time that he didn’t want to be seen. He picked up the ball and launched it across the blacktop. Unfortunately, he only launched it 10 feet. It landed short of the wall and before he could think of what to do he-

“Run!”

Tyler ran to the wall like his feet were going to run out ahead of his knees. Just before his fingers touched the brick-

POP.

The blue, hollow, rubber ball smacked him right in the side of the head. Tyler didn’t think it felt very hollow. The school bell rang, signaling that school was about to begin. All of the kids ran inside. Except for one. Hello Tallulah Jackson.

Tallulah: “Does your knee hurt?”

Tyler hadn’t even realized that behind the pain of embarrassment and the pain on the side of his face, was the pain from his knee. It was really red. Really, really red. He regretted wearing shorts for his first day of school outfit.

Tyler: “No, I’m okay.”

Tallulah: “I have this ice pack that I always bring just in case because I fall down and hurt myself a lot. But you can have it because I don’t need it right now but you look like you do.”

Tallulah had thick, thick, THICK glasses and more braids in her hair than Tyler could count. He always got stuck after counting to 20.

Tallulah: "I was new last year and I know what that's like. Or how it was for me so maybe it's the same as you. I don't know. Anyway, I'm Tallulah."

Tallulah ran off, joining the crowd of kids walking into the school. Tyler stood up, dusted himself off and walked towards the school.

The second bell rang as Tyler made his way into the school building.

"Hold it Yankee."

Tyler had forgotten (until this moment) that he had his New York Yankees backpack on.

Tyler turned around and standing there was a slightly taller boy who was dressed nicer than some of the teachers in the school. Tan colored "not-jeans" and a baby blue shirt with designs that looked like the bandana that Tyler's Mom had sticking out of her pocket all the time.

And a shiny gold badge that read Hall Monitor.

"Are you new or something?"

Tyler wanted to say yes but was trying to think of what the "something" was that he was talking about.

"I'm new."

"Well, are you stupid too? Don't you know what the second bell means? Or don't they have bells where you're from?"

It felt like these were questions that this boy was asking but didn't want Tyler to answer.

"I'm Tyler."

"I don't care who you are. Everyone here gets treated the way that they're supposed to. That's the only way to be fair."

"What?"

"Gosh, you are stupid. Where are you from stupid boy?"

"I'm from Mahwah"

"That sounds like a made-up place."

"It's not. It's New Jersey."

"Where's that?"

"It's a long way away from here."

This hall police officer was only 8, 9 at the most. But he acted like he was at least 13. He scribbled on a notepad and had a smile on his face the whole time he was doing it.

"No hard feelings, partner. That's just the way it goes."

He pushed the paper into Tyler's hand. And even though the message on the paper said that he was late for class, it felt like he was sending a different message to Tyler. One that said "we don't like people who aren't from around here, around here."

Tyler walked to his classroom and his teacher Mrs. Little was much nicer than anybody else that he had met. Except for Tallulah. She was nice too. But Tallulah wasn't in this class. Tyler would find out later that Tallulah had to go to a special room for special students to be in a special class. Tyler wished that he was special.

The bell rang again and it was time for lunch.

Tyler loved lunch because he loved to eat. He was especially excited because he saw that they were making grilled cheese sandwiches. And that was his favorite. What's not to love?

This grilled cheese was not like the grilled cheese he had in New Jersey. It's hard to explain, but it was wetter and heavier. Everyone else looked like they liked it, so Tyler decided he better start liking it too.

Tyler had to pee but he figured that he could hold it until after he got to his seat.

Tyler pushed open the two swinging doors to the cafeteria. It was always easy to find a seat that was kind of by itself in Tyler's old cafeteria.

But this cafeteria wasn't like that cafeteria at all. It was crazy. One kid had to go to the nurse because he got hit in the head with an orange popsicle.

It was so loud and had so many kids, it was hard to concentrate on any one thing that was happening. It became clear that there were no tables with any space. Not even close.

But there was one little desk in the corner with one little red chair. There was nobody sitting in it and it looked like the perfect spot for Tyler.

Tyler walked towards the red chair and before he could get even halfway there, a group of bigger, older, scarier, hairier 9-year olds bumped into Tyler. They-

"Why the hell did you bump into me?" Said one of them.

"Yeah." Said the rest of them at different times.

They all said what their names were. It was like a teacher was taking attendance. But there were no teachers, just an aide lady who was dealing with the popsicle problem.

Their names were Russ, Wyatt, Chaelen, Eli, and Angela Cunningham. They looked like they only showered this week 7 times collectively. And 5 of those times were by Angela Cunningham.

Tyler's Dad would later tell him to not use the word gang because real gangs were serious. So, they were not a gang. They were just a scary, mean, rude group of people who all walked together all the time and had a leader. The leader's name was Butch, which sounds like his parents chose his name because they knew what kind of kid he was going to grow up to be.

"I..."

That was all that Tyler could get to come out of his mouth.

Everyone with two eyes or more was looking at Tyler. Great. The whole room stopped. Time slowed down. This probably should've been a clue that something bad was going to happen. Before Tyler could react-

THUD.

Tyler had been pushed to the ground. His lunch got all over his first-day-of-school outfit. He was covered in chocolate milk, hot cheese and pudding.

Tyler was just glad the bathroom wasn't far away.

School day number one was not great. But Tyler was just glad that he didn't pee in his pants because he came very close to.

So that's good.

Mom told Tyler that he had to take the bus to come home. Then Dad made Tyler confused because he said he would pick Tyler up from school if Tyler wanted. But then Mom confused Tyler even more because she said he had to take the bus because the basement had black mold. Tyler didn't know what that was or what that had to do with anything, but he didn't think it was important to know that at this point in his life.

So, on the bus he went.

On this bus, they made you sit in the same seat every day. This wasn't a problem for Emily. A bunch of the boys wanted her to sit with them. It was a problem for Tyler. Nobody wanted Tyler to sit with them. So, Tyler sat on the floor.

Tyler's new bus stop was right outside of his house. This was going to be the first time seeing his new house ever. Tyler did think it was a little weird that he was seeing his new home for the first time, at the same time as everybody else on the bus.

Tyler saw Emily getting up, which meant that they were almost there. The other boys were trying to get her to stay on the bus, but she said no. And when Emily says no, you better believe she means no.

Tyler closed his eyes as closed as he could. He wanted to see his new home with fresh eyes.

The bus driver pulled the reigns of the bus. The engine breathed a really, really loud breath and stopped.

Tyler opened his eyes and saw his house. It was a little plain and a little broken but Tyler liked that about it.

The inside of the house was like his old house. Smaller. But definitely, almost the same. Same stuff inside, just different everything else. Also, it smelled like Wyoming. Tyler wasn't sure if that made any sense.

Not a bad ending to the day. Chicken nuggies for dinner and lots of barbeque sauce. Tyler loved barbeque sauce.

Tyler went to bed, knowing that when he opened his eyes, he would be 7 years old.

Tyler's Birthday. Always has been September 7th, always will be September 7th.

Tyler wanted chicken nuggies for breakfast. His mom said no because they were having that for dinner later and his Dad said no because of a movie he saw that made him not want to eat chicken anymore.

Tyler was only getting one Birthday present but it was the kind of present that is equal to 1000 regular presents. Tyler's parents were taking him to a flea market to get him his first real bike.

It occurred to Tyler after maybe $3\frac{3}{4}$ of a minute that all of the bikes for sale at the flea market were used. But there were plenty to choose from. All kinds and shapes and colors and sizes and flatness of tires. But they were all bicycles.

"No more than \$50" Dad said.

"No more than \$40" Mom corrected.

The bikes in that price range were not the best bikes ever. But they were still bikes.

Tyler was preoccupied with his questioning of why one of the green bikes had a bat and two baseballs scratched into its frame. And because of this, he didn't see one of the other bikes peer its handlebars towards Tyler. The only blue bike of the bunch.

That's right. The bike moved.

This bike took notice of Tyler as soon as he approached the stable of bikes.

Tyler didn't know a lot about bikes. But he did know that he would know when he found the right one.

Red bike, purple bike, green bike, gray bike, dirty white bike, brown bike. Browner bike. And a shiny, brown, purple, brownish green bike. And then at last: the blue bike. The only blue bike of the bunch.

Tyler touched its handlebars, petted its long flowing frame and patted its smooth, leather seat. He stared at the two plastic lights mounted on the handlebars.

"This one?" Mom & Dad said together at the same time.

Tyler shrugged and kept on walking.

This bike may have felt hurt. And may have gotten mad. And may have put its kickstand out. And Tyler may have tripped and may have fallen on his face.

And if all of that happened, Tyler definitely got mad and pushed the bike over. Which definitely made all of the other bikes fall on top of each other like dominoes. If it was up to Tyler's parents, he definitely wouldn't have gotten a bike. But the flea market definitely played by the rules of "You break it, you buy it." And this blue bike was definitely not, not broken.

Tyler was still having a super good birthday. He had his chicken nuggies for dinner and lots of barbeque sauce. And really tasty French fries because it was his birthday. And he still had a bike. It was kind of broken, but it was still a bike.

Tyler liked regular cake, but he loved birthday cake.

While everybody sings Happy Birthday, this is a good time to tell you what happened to Tyler. A week before his 7th birthday, something happened. Tyler lost his dog. That's what Mom & Dad said. They said they would talk more about it with Tyler when he's older. Mom & Dad were having enough problems with Mom & Dad and Tyler didn't want to cause any more problems for anybody by asking questions.

Happy Birthday dear Tyler...happy birthday to you.

As he laid in bed, Tyler felt like it was okay to admit to himself that his birthday made him sad. It was okay to say that if nobody else was around. He felt unlucky that his worst day in Wyoming was the same day as his birthday. But he was wrong. The next day would be his worst day in Wyoming.

Tyler missed the school bus because Mom and Dad overslept. Mom drove them and Dad sat in the seat next to her. And Tyler sat behind Mom and Emily sat behind Dad. And Tyler's backpack sat in the middle.

Do you know what "Kill the Carrier" is? It's a game that kids play. Mom said it used to be called "Smear the Queer" and Dad said that people shouldn't say that anymore. Tyler didn't know what most of those words meant.

Anyway, it's a game where a bunch of kids run around and tackle a different kid who is carrying a shirt wrapped up like a ball. Tyler didn't know any of this when he picked up that t-shirt ball laying on the ground.

OUCH.

Tyler went to the nurse's office. He didn't mind because the nurse's office felt like a safe place. Tyler didn't know a lot about being a nurse, but it seemed like Nurse White was good at her job.

Good news: Tyler found out the name of the hall police officer. His name was Marshall Wayne.

Bad news: Tyler found out because he got another write up.

"One more write-up and your tush is mush. Got it Yankee?"

"I got it, I got it."

"I only asked you once, so don't answer twice."

Tyler wasn't looking forward to lunch anymore, no matter how much he liked to eat. Lunch was pizza and it was also wetter and heavier. And it tasted like it was made out of sponges. At least there was jello for dessert.

Tyler wasn't looking forward to pushing those two swinging doors open again. He knew there was bad news on the other side of those doors.

But just like with the pizza, Tyler gritted his teeth and did it anyway. He pushed the doors open and they gave way. Those double doors entered right into the middle of the cafeteria.

Tyler scanned the room for a seat, which was hard to do when you're trying not to make eye contact with anyone.

"Hey Tyler." It was Tallulah Jackson. She was the first kid to call Tyler by his actual name since he arrived in Wyoming.

She asked Tyler to sit down with her and introduced him to her friends. She was a very good person. There was:

Docherty Griffin: They called him “Doc” because they didn’t know how to pronounce his full name. His favorite class was Math.

Luke Andrews: They called him “Puke Hands Luke” because he puked in his hands once and his name was Luke (Tyler would later find out that it was Butch that gave Luke this nickname). His favorite class was Gym.

Rosie Jones: They called her Rosie because that’s her name. Her favorite class was Science.

Miles Chino: His real name wasn’t Miles but nobody knew his real name. That was just the name he chose for himself. His favorite class was English Language Arts.

They were all in the special class that Tallulah was in. Tyler would’ve given anything to be special. Eating lunch with them was nice for a couple of minutes. And then it wasn’t.

Tyler wanted more than anything not to come in contact with Butch. But Butch wanted the opposite, so Butch got his way.

Butch walked with his not-gang up to Tyler’s table. He walked like each step he took charged up his superpowers like in a video game. His superpower was being mean.

Tyler would later find out that Butch was like this because he was insecure and had a bad Mom & Dad. And that he was being mean because mean people were being mean to him. But Butch looked like he enjoyed being mean.

Butch told the whole table that he saw something in the bathroom earlier in the morning. It sounded like it was going to be a gross story (which in hindsight Tyler would have preferred) but instead it was worse. Butch said he saw Tyler crying in the bathroom. And now, Tyler was crying in the cafeteria too.

Tyler was just glad that the bathroom was close by. It wasn’t the first time he ate his lunch in the bathroom so it wasn’t that big of a deal. At least he still had his pizza.

The problems really started becoming problems at recess.

In this school, everybody had lunch and recess at the same time.

Sweetwater Elementary wasn’t the worst school. It also wasn’t a very good school. In the car on the way from New Jersey, Mom & Dad were talking about Tyler’s new school. Dad said that the school didn’t have a lot of money. Mom said that they didn’t have any other choice. Apparently, you need different amounts of money to live in New Jersey than you do if you live in Wyoming.

Emily was being really nice to Tyler and hanging out with him more than usual at recess. I don’t know if someone told her about what happened at lunch or if she just knew something was wrong. Either way, she was being a good sister.

Butch kept looking over at Tyler across the playground. There was something about Tyler that Butch just didn’t like. Tyler could see that and so could Emily.

“Who’s that?” said Emily because she was concerned.

“Who’s who?” said Tyler because he was trying to act like he didn’t know what she was talking about.

If Tyler's superpower was slowing down time when bad things were happening and if Butch's superpower was being mean, then Emily's superpower was reading minds. Or at least it seemed like she could. Her second superpower was that she was really good at saying smarter things than most other people.

Emily walked straight towards Butch and his not-gang. Tyler tried to stop her but Emily was really good at making a decision and then doing something about it. That was her third superpower.

Whatever Emily said to Butch, it really made him laugh. And then it really made him shut up. And it really made him listen. And it really made him look at Emily with this weird look on his face and say something to her. And whatever she said back to him made the rest of his not-gang laugh really hard at him. Which made Butch blush as Emily walked away. And then he looked at Tyler. And he didn't look like he wanted to embarrass Tyler anymore. Now he looked like he wanted to hurt Tyler.

Emily didn't go on the bus home. She was trying out for the cheerleading team. Or group. Or gang. Whatever you call a bunch of cheerleaders. This was great for Emily but scary for Tyler. Not because cheerleading was scary but because it meant he had to ride the bus by himself.

Tyler made sure to get on the bus as soon as he could. Unfortunately, so did Butch and the not-gang. They didn't sit next to Tyler, which was good. They just stared at him for the entire bus ride, which was bad.

The worst part of all: Tyler got dropped off at his house. Which was a good thing, except now Butch knew where Tyler lived.

At least Tyler was home. Mom & Dad were outside drinking beers. They liked drinking beers together.

Dad said that he had a surprise for Tyler. He rolled Tyler's bike out from behind the house.

"Mom fixed it for you while you were at school."

Mom & Dad tried teaching Tyler how to ride. They tried really hard and have been trying really hard for a while.

Tyler sat on the bike. He pedaled and then fell off. Pedaled, pedaled, pedaled. Fell off.

He got back on it again. Pedaled, pedaled, pedaled. Fell off.

Back on. Pedaled, pedaled, pedaled. Fell off.

Pedaled, pedaled, pedaled. Fell off. Pedaled. Fell off.

No matter what he did, that bike would not do what Tyler wanted it to do.

Dad went inside to make dinner. Mom went inside to pay the bills. Tyler said he would be right in.

The bike laid on the ground, staring up at Tyler.

Then Tyler laid on the ground and stared back at the bike. It was a battle of wits. Who would move first?

Then the bike started to move. Maybe Tyler was imagining it. Then that means he imagined it standing upright and staring at him too. Tyler stood up and stared back at the bike. The two of them stared each other down until Dad called Tyler inside for dinner.

Mom and Dad were getting along at dinner. Really getting along. Laughing and kissing and happy and more kissing. They did a good job of pretending they were happy, even when they weren't. But when they were really happy, Tyler could always tell.

Tyler went to bed. He just wanted tomorrow to be better. That's all he wanted.

The first half of the day seemed to go by fast for Tyler. He liked being in his classes. He especially liked them because it meant that he didn't have to deal with going to lunch. He used to really look forward to going to lunch.

"Just stay away from Butch and his not-gang. Just stay away from Butch, just stay away from –"

Tyler pushed the double doors open, but they pushed back. There was a thud on the other side. Then there was the sound of a plastic tray hitting the ground and food being mashed and mashed. And then silence.

"Butch, are you okay?"

Uh oh.

Then the door was open. It didn't swing open. It blew open so fast that Tyler didn't even see it move. But he did see what was on the other side. A very angry 9-year old with jello in his hair and fire in his eyes. And mashed potatoes in his ears.

Tyler was scared. Not "watching a scary movie" scared. Real scared. And Butch's ears were steaming. Either from the mashed potatoes or because he was very, very mad. Maybe it was both.

The school bell rang. And Butch didn't do anything. He just walked away, never taking his eyes off of Tyler. That was the scariest part of it all.

Tyler knew better than to stay in school. Most kids can get away with faking sick three times in a year before people start to catch on. This felt like a good use of one of those sick days.

Mom picked Tyler up because Dad was pounding the pavement. Tyler didn't know what that meant but it didn't sound like it was going well. Mom worked at a diner in town and was kind of upset at Tyler for making her come pick him up during her shift. But not upset enough to tell Tyler that she was upset.

Dad let Tyler play outside before dinner even though he was supposed to be sick. Tyler was going to ride that bike if it was the last thing he ever did.

No matter what he did, no matter what he said, no matter how many times he fell, Tyler could not get that bike to ride straight and stay up.

Tyler was so mad that he took his helmet off and slammed it on the ground. This was especially unfortunate because his street was on the top of a tall hill. The helmet rolled down to the bottom of the hill. Tyler put the stupid bike's kick stand up and walked down the hill to get his helmet.

That's when Butch and the not-gang showed up. And this time, they were riding bikes.

Tyler bent down to pick up his helmet but Butch beat him to it. The Not-Gang tossed the helmet back and forth like an unfair game of Monkey in the Middle. Until they got bored of tossing the helmet back and forth and started pushing Tyler back and forth instead.

They were all being incredibly mean. But nobody wanted to really hurt Tyler. Except Butch.

Butch told Tyler that he didn't like people like him. Because people like Tyler were different than people like Butch. And that Butch's Daddy lost his job because of people like Tyler. As far as Butch was concerned, there were enough people in Wyoming already.

The others tried to stop Butch, but Butch wasn't a kid of reason. He was a kid of punching you in your face, which is what he did to Tyler. Everyone was surprised when it happened. Even Butch looked like he didn't know what that would feel like. But nobody was more surprised than Tyler when his front tooth popped out of his mouth and onto the street.

Butch walked over, looming over Tyler. He lifted his foot up and crushed Tyler's tooth beneath his boot.

As The Not-Gang tried to pull Butch away from Tyler, the bike at the top of the hill started to move.

It could've been the wind, sure it could've. But then the kickstand kicked up. And then the bike did what Tyler could not get it to do: it stood up and stayed up. The bike rolled down the hill and right into Butch, who fell into Chaelan who fell into Wyatt who fell into Russ who fell into Eli who fell into Angela Cunningham. Like dominoes.

Tyler was stunned. But the bike reminded him he didn't have time to stay stunned. The bike chirped its bell, effectively saying, "Get on and let's get out of here!"

Tyler climbed on cautiously. But he felt something when he got on the bike that he hadn't felt before. Safe. Tyler grabbed the reigns, kicked the pedals and off they were like a missile out of a submarine.

The Not-Gang all got on their bikes and pedaled after him. Tyler pedaled faster than he ever thought he possibly could. The wind was at his back and his bike was beneath his butt.

Butch and company quickly closed the gap because they were very good at riding their bikes. They followed Tyler past cross streets and through intersections. Bending and turning and riding as fast as lightning. Tyler and his bike approached Mulaney Lane, which was the busiest intersection in town. Each side had a blind turn.

Tyler and his bike sprinted past the intersection and broke through onto the other side just before four cars all collided at the same time. The cars all screeched as they stopped, blocking the road and sending Butch and The Not-Gang off of their bikes and onto the pavement.

Tyler and his bike rode away, onto the outskirts of town. Dirt kicked up at their heels as they rode like they would never run out of street. They rode towards the sun just as it set over the dirt as far as Tyler could see.

They looped around back to Tyler's house and pulled to a screeching halt. Tyler kicked down the kickstand and stared his bike in its now glowing headlights.

Dad's voice shouted, *"Tyler. Grab your steed out of the road and come inside for dinner."*

Steed. Tyler & Steed.

Chicken nuggies for dinner always made Tyler feel better about whatever else happened during the day. Everyone else seemed like they were getting sick of eating them every night. But not Tyler.

Tyler's Dad was a writer. Which made it easy because he could write anywhere he wanted. But it was hard because nobody wanted to give him money to do it. Tyler thought that everybody got paid for working hard but that didn't seem like it was true either.

But living in Wyoming made it easier for Mom to make the money that they needed to be okay.

Whenever he started writing something new, Tyler's Dad let him choose the title.

Tyler was glad that even though Mom & Dad made mistakes with each other, they were very good at being Mom & Dad. They always let Tyler name things and make decisions about what he wanted to do. They let Tyler name their dog. Tyler named him Bernard because Dad said that he was a St. Bernard.

Tyler knows he was just a dog.

Because that's what they all said when they thought Tyler wasn't listening.

And Tyler knows that losing a dog is not as important as losing a person.

And he knows that you can always get another dog.

But Tyler also knew that none of that was true.

Mom wasn't happy when Tyler told her what Butch did to him. Dad was even unhappier when he heard what Butch said to Tyler. Emily wasn't as surprised. She said that in Wyoming, people treated people who looked like Tyler and his family that way all the time, no matter how old you were.

Tyler kind of understood all of that. But he didn't really get it.

The next day Tyler asked his teacher Mrs. Little if he could eat his lunch in the classroom with her. She said that she wasn't going to be in the room because she had a meeting with the board. Tyler acted like he knew what that was, but he honestly had no idea.

The cafeteria was serving meat for lunch. Tyler didn't know what it was, but he knew it was some kind of meat. He had gotten used to how crazy and loud the cafeteria usually was. He preferred that over what he walked into: A dead silent room with everyone looking at him. Tyler thought maybe he was imagining it. Until he heard scattered whispers with mixes of "That's him, that's the kid." And "Butch is gonna beat him up."

Tyler would've felt safer if the only aide in the cafeteria didn't just go use the bathroom. But at least Butch and the Not-Gang were nowhere to be-

"Howdy Stranger."

Tyler was not as lucky as he was hoping he was going to be that day. Standing over him and surrounding him all at the same time were Butch and The Not-Gang. Tyler's missing tooth was nothing in comparison to the matching road rash that they all had on their faces. If they didn't look like a gang before, they definitely looked like one now.

“Do you know how much it’s going to cost me to fix my bike because of you?” With each word Butch said, spit sputtered from his mouth into Tyler’s face.

“What’s going on over here?”

Tyler had never been so excited to see Marshall Wayne, who walked right up to Butch. They stared each other in the eyes. A cold, firm stare locked between them. Just when it seemed like they would never stop looking at each other, Marshall’s eye watered up and he blinked. They smiled, Marshall handed him a dollar bill and they exchanged a weird secret handshake that was a combination of hand slaps and chest bumps.

Tyler’s feeling of relief quickly turned to a disappointment & fear sandwich with anxiety bread. Tyler would later find out that Butch and Marshall Wayne were friends. Butch’s stepdad coached the baseball team that Marshall Wayne’s Dad sponsored. Sweetwater PBA. That’s short for Sweetwater Police Something Something.

Marshall Wayne’s Dad was the town sheriff. That made sense to Tyler.

Like father like son, Marshall Wayne played by the rules of “If I didn’t see it, then it didn’t happen.” An unfortunate motto for Tyler considering that Marshall Wayne strolled out of the cafeteria just as fast as he strolled in.

Tyler didn’t have time to be mad at Marshall, because before he knew it Butch grabbed Tyler by the scruff of his shirt. Tyler and Butch were looking eye to eye, but only because Butch lifted Tyler off the ground up to his face. Butch smelled like eggs and orange juice.

Tyler still had most of his teeth, so he braced himself to lose another. He closed his eyes as closed as he could make them. Just when Tyler expected Butch’s fist to be reunited with his face, Butch let go of Tyler and Tyler dropped to the ground.

Tyler opened his eyes and standing over him was Tallulah with a straw in one hand and a piece of paper with a bite taken out of it in the other. She took another bite of the paper, chewed it up and shot it through the straw, striking Butch in his hand.

Without missing a beat, The Not- Gang all stood at attention behind Butch. And without missing another beat, Tallulah was joined by her bunch of friends. Every eyeball in the cafeteria was watching to see what was going to happen next.

The toilet flushed as the aide lady finished up in the bathroom. Both sides sat back down at their tables. Even kids on opposite sides of the line could understand that any situation was better left without grownups involved. As the aide returned to her post, everything returned to normal. At least on the surface. Underneath, a lightning storm was waiting to strike that cafeteria. It was only a matter of time.

Tyler was just happy that he had somewhere to sit.

Doc gave Tyler his sandwich, Rosie gave him her cookies. Luke gave Tyler his fruit cup and Miles gave Tyler his potato chips.

Tyler felt lucky that he got to have lunch with this special bunch of kids.

Tallulah gave Tyler her chocolate milk and handed him a straw.

"You're gonna need this."

Tallulah took Tyler to the side playground during recess to teach him how to shoot spitballs. She told Tyler that she was going to make him into the next Annie Oakley. Tyler didn't know who that was but he got the idea of what she was going for.

"You see that old man statue over there?"

Tyler did. Arthur J. Pilgrim: the founder of the school. Tyler noticed that there were lots of old man statues around Wyoming.

"Hit him right in the kisser."

Tyler was scared to try something new, but he knew that Tallulah was his only hope and that she knew what she was doing. And Tyler knew not to make a big deal about being scared.

Tallulah handed Tyler two sheets of graph paper she got from the classroom. It was the best paper to use for spitballs.

"Let's see you shoot Pilgrim."

Tyler chomped down, gnawing off about half of the paper. As he lined up his shot, Tallulah said something about chewing off more than you can bite.

Tyler loaded up his straw. It had red and blue stripes running down on either side of it. A perfect and smooth surface. Tyler never thought before this moment how many perfect straws there were in the world. Even if a couple weren't great.

Dad would later tell Tyler that straws were bad for the environment. Tyler learned that just because things that you shoot used to be cool, it doesn't mean they are anymore. Straws are dangerous weapons of mass destruction.

But Tyler was going to war. And he knew that he needed to learn to use a straw, no matter how dangerous it was to the environment. Tyler learned the word environment a couple of weeks before all of this.

Tyler loaded the straw with ammunition, pulled back and shot forward. The soggy, spitty paper shot from the tip of the straw and plopped right onto the ground.

Tyler heard Tallulah crying behind him. Maybe he should've been more scared than he was. Maybe Tallulah realized that all hope was-

Tyler turned around and saw that Tallulah wasn't crying. She was laughing. Really hard. Too hard... it wasn't that funny.

After like 4 and a half minutes, Tallulah stopped laughing finally. She got up and told Tyler to shoot again. He did the same thing and it was worse than his first shot somehow.

Then Tallulah laughed again. It was starting to get annoying.

She grabbed the straw from Tyler, took 5 steps back and closed her eyes.

Tallulah may have been showing off or maybe she was just proving a point. Either way, she bit off a whole sheet of paper and chewed it up. Then she proceeded to do the most amazing thing Tyler had ever seen in his life. Tallulah shot out 4 spitballs one after another and hit Arthur J. Pilgrim in the nose, both eyes and in his private parts.

Now, Tyler felt like he had gotten hit in the private parts. He felt sick. There was no way he was going to learn to do any of this.

Tyler: *"There's no way I'm going to learn to do any of this."*

Tallulah: *"If that's what you say is going to happen, then that's what's going to happen."*

Tyler knew this was true. He also knew that Tallulah was the key to getting him through this situation and it was important to listen to what she had to say. She wasn't good at spelling, but she was very good at thinking.

Tallulah: *"Butch is going to shoot faster than you, harder than you and with more spit than you. But that's just because he's older than you. You have to spit like you've been spitting for two or three more years than you have. You have to spit like this will be the last spit you ever take."*

She handed the straw back to Tyler. Then she handed Tyler a notebook with 60 pieces of paper in it.

"Shoot until you run out."

She walked away, leaving Tyler to shoot spitball after spitball after spitball.

With a dry mouth and a worn-out straw, Tyler returned home on the bus. He didn't see Butch and The Not-Gang anywhere, but he knew that didn't mean they weren't around. When the bus pulled up to his house, Tyler ran inside quickly to avoid any unnecessary trouble.

Tyler got inside and things felt weird in the house. Dad was in the kitchen, Mom was in the living room. Nobody was fighting, but it felt like there was going to be a fight.

Tyler didn't like getting in the way and didn't like causing problems. But he was worried about school and needed to talk to his parents to find out what he should do.

Tyler tried talking to Mom but she said he should talk to his father. Tyler tried talking to Dad but he said he should talk to his mother. This was very confusing.

At least Tyler could look forward to his chicken nuggies at dinner...

...there were no chicken nuggies at dinner. Only beans and something called sauerkraut that looked like gross, wet, brown lettuce. Tyler just ate the beans.

Everyone ate in silence. No talking, no laughing. Just eating. Tyler was starting to get used to these moments of quiet tension before something happened.

Mom said that they couldn't afford chicken nuggies anymore. Dad said that wasn't his fault. Then all at once, the table exploded with screaming and yelling and shouting and crying and door slamming and bad words and more crying.

Dad said he tried to get a new job but that it didn't work out. Mom said he wasn't trying hard enough. Emily said that they were both being dumb. Tyler didn't say anything because he was the only one still left at the dinner table.

Tyler couldn't get a wink of sleep, lying awake all night. No matter how closed he closed his eyes, he couldn't get himself to sleep.

At least Tyler still had...at least Tyler still had...at least-

Tyler got out of bed and walked outside. He plopped himself onto the front steps and he cried. And cried and cried and didn't care who was around to see it.

BRLING, BRLING

Tyler looked over and saw that somebody did see him crying. It was Steed.

Steed rang the bell three more times, effectively saying, "Get on and let's get out of here."

Tyler hopped on. The two of them rode off with no destination in mind, no return time planned. They just rode because sometimes you just need to ride.

They rode through every street, every road, every avenue and block. Up hills and down slopes. Then they came to a pass where the road almost completely disappeared. A dirt trail with no end in sight. It was too dark to see with no streetlights around. Steed clicked on his headlights, bucked onto his back wheel and tore through the night.

Tyler wasn't scared because things that make other kids afraid didn't make him afraid anymore. Not monsters or werewolves or creepy things in the night. Not even Butch. The thought of Butch just made Tyler mad. He pedaled harder and faster, even Steed was having trouble keeping up. Tyler was riding like he wanted to ride off the edge of the earth.

Just when it felt like they'd never stop riding, Steed pulled to a screeching halt just before they reached the edge of a cliffside.

Tyler got off the bike and walked to the edge of the cliff. Tyler figured that this was it, this was the end of the world.

But when he looked out, he was wrong. There was a bright orange glow coming up. Further than he was able to touch, brighter than he was able to see. It was the sun, rising up over the dirt horizon. And as the sun rose into the sky, it lit up more of the world than Tyler knew existed. Tyler realized in that moment that there was so much of the world to see, even if it didn't seem that way at first.

Those people in that movie were right: there wasn't a more beautiful sunrise than a sun rising in the West.

Tyler & Steed rode home. Not with fury or fear or worry. Tyler just felt different. And ready. Tyler didn't know what he was ready for, but he was ready.

Everything that day in school felt like it was building to lunch in the cafeteria. The gym teacher Mr. Flip (His real name was too long and too hard for Tyler or any of the other kids to pronounce, so they just called him Mr. Flip) would always say this weird thing that Tyler didn't understand. Everyday when the

bell rang for lunch, he would say it was “High Noon” which didn’t usually make sense because they had lunch at 10:38. But today it felt like it made sense.

Tyler and the Special Bunch all got on the lunch line at the same time. They knew that there was strength in numbers. Lunch was spaghetti & meaty-balls, creamed spinach and funnel cake with powdered sugar. Things were about to get messy.

The Special Bunch walked as a group into the cafeteria with Tallulah and Tyler at the head. It didn’t take long to spot The Not- Gang once they pushed through those double doors. They sat together at a middle table in the cafeteria, waiting.

The Special Bunch took their seats, clutching straws in each of their hands.

The teachers were doing an assembly during lunch for safety awareness.

Marshall Wayne was helping with the demonstration. He was dressed fancier than Tyler had ever seen before. A white buttoned shirt that looked like it cost a lot of money, boots with spurs and a white “ten-gallon hat.” But it didn’t look like it could fit ten gallons of anything in it.

It didn’t matter what Marshall or any of the other teachers were saying because there was only one thing on everyone else’s mind in that cafeteria: who was going to make the first move?

The Not- Gang slurped their noodles, The Special Bunch chewed through their meaty-balls. And everyone else just watched and waited.

Marshall Wayne was demonstrating the importance of making sure your shoes were tied or buckled tight so they didn’t fall off. He was holding up a bunch of different shoes and dropping them one at a time. It didn’t make any sense to Tyler, but he also wasn’t really paying attention.

Emily walked into the cafeteria and this time it was her who wanted to sit alone. But that wasn’t what Butch wanted, so he walked over to her.

Tyler knew Emily could handle herself better than anyone else could. But Tyler would’ve been lying if he said that it didn’t make him mad watching Butch bother Emily.

When Emily says no, she means no. Butch didn’t get that memo.

The tension was building as the blood boiled in Tyler’s head. Marshall Wayne was muttering about something, dropping one shoe at a time. The Not- Gang stared at The Special Bunch and The Special Bunch stared back. Noodles, meatballs, shoes, Butch, Tyler, Emily, Tyler, Butch, Tyler, Butch, Tyler, Butch.

And then all at the same time, Marshall Wayne dropped one shoe and then the other shoe dropped. Butch grabbed Emily’s butt. She grabbed a handful of spaghetti and smacked Butch in the face with it. Emily fired the first shot, the shot heard around the school. It was impossible to know who fired the second shot because it all happened so fast.

Food was flying everywhere in the blink of an eye. Splats of red across every face and chest from the tomato sauce, powdered sugar kicked up from every plate and tray. Creamed spinach soared across the room. It was madness and chaos. Every kid was caught up in the fray, even if they weren’t involved to begin with.

Marshall Wayne joined the teachers in trying to quiet the craziness, but that was a losing battle. Instead of order, all Marshall Wayne got was spaghetti on his pearly white shirt and chocolate pudding in the face. His just desserts.

Kid against kid, brother against brother. Disorder rained down all over that Wyoming cafeteria.

Then the moment came that they'd all been waiting for: The Special Bunch and The Not- Gang came face to face. They each had a straw clutched in one hand and a sheet of paper in the other. Foods of all kinds were painted across each of their faces.

"Fire!" Tallulah shouted over the loud sounds of the kids in The Great Cafeteria War.

Spitballs shot out so fast that it was hard to tell which direction they were being shot in. One after another, balls of spit moving as fast as Tyler had ever seen.

Butch must've been absent from school the day they learned the word "loyalty" because he got out of that cafeteria as fast as he could, leaving his gang to take the remainder of the fire.

"Go get him Tyler," Tallulah said. *"We've got you covered."* Tyler followed Butch out of the cafeteria, hot on his tail.

Tyler ran down the hallways in pursuit of Butch. The school became a ghost town as all of the teachers and aides ran to the cafeteria to stop the hysteria. Tyler turned the corner and came upon a set of footprints marked by tomato sauce leading down the hall. And on the other end of them was Butch, standing there in all his glory.

"You better turn around and go back to where you came from. You don't belong around these parts."

Tyler stood his ground, locking eyes with Butch.

"There's plenty of room in this school for both of us Butch."

"That's where you're wrong. We don't like people like you around here. People who look like you, talk like you and act like you have no place here."

Tyler would later find out that this is something that Butch's Daddy told Butch. And his Daddy's-Daddy told him before. And it's the same thing every Daddy in Butch's family told their kids for as far back as anyone knew. There are people in this world like Butch that thought they deserved everything. And they thought that people like Tyler deserved nothing.

The speakers on the school P.A. system rang out:

WOW-WOW-WOW

"All students, please report to the cafeteria. All students please report to the cafeteria."

Tyler knew that this message didn't apply to him. He had unfinished business to take care of.

The two of them stood at opposite ends of the hall, each with a straw on their hip sticking out of their pocket. A balled-up paper lunch bag blew by slowly as Tyler and Butch remained still.

Butch blew on his fingertips, trying to get Tyler to draw first. But Tyler was ice cold, locked in and focused.

Without notice, the school bell rang and Butch pulled first. But before he could even get his paper spitty enough to shoot, Tyler fired 4 shots in a row. Two in the eyes, one in the nose and one in the private parts. He had the straw positioned in the gap where his tooth used to be and had pinpoint accuracy because of it.

That kind of shooting would be enough to bring most kids down. But not Butch. Butch threw his straw to the ground and charged at Tyler with the look of a raging bull. Just before Butch got his hands on Tyler, Tyler pulled his straw and fired one final shot right into Butch's mouth at point blank range. Right in the kisser and down his throat.

Butch fell to the floor, gagged and puked all over his hands. The rest of the school filled the halls just in time to see Butch, in all his glory. The Special Bunch joined Tyler at his side.

"Looks like there's a new Puke Hands around these parts" said the boy formerly known as Puke Hands Luke with a big smile across his face.

Butch cried in a way that Tyler had never seen another kid cry before. Butch ran off down the hall. If he had a tail, it would've been between his legs.

The Special Bunch celebrated Tyler's victory over Butch. They tried to hoist Tyler onto their shoulders but they didn't have enough muscles to do that. So, they just patted Tyler on the back instead.

WOW-WOW-WOW

"Tyler & Emily Rogers please come to the main office. Tyler & Emily Rogers to the main office."

Tyler figured he must've gotten in trouble, but he didn't know why Emily was being called to the office too.

Emily turned the corner.

Tyler: *"Emily, what's going on?"*

Emily: *"Mom & Dad are picking us up from school. We're moving again."*

Tyler: *"But we just got here."*

Emily: *"I know."*

Tyler: *"Where are we going?"*

Emily: *"West."*

Tyler: *"I thought we were West."*

Emily: *"More West."*

Emily walked down to the office. She would later tell Tyler that they couldn't keep their new house because Mom & Dad didn't have enough money. Tyler offered up his life savings but Mom & Dad said that it wasn't enough. They hoped that there would be better opportunities if they went further West.

Tyler turned to his bunch, his posse, his gang, whatever you called a group of friends. He hugged each of them goodbye. Tyler said goodbye to Tallulah last.

"Don't go Tyler."

"I have to. I don't have a choice. I'm only 7."

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I have to. I don't have a choice. I'm only 7."

Tyler walked down the hall, leaving The Special Bunch, The Not- Gang and the rest of the kids behind him. Just before he got to the office, he passed by Marshall Wayne. Tyler stopped, looked at Marshall and said:

"No hard feelings, partner. That's just the way it goes."

Tyler grabbed the hat off of Marshall's head and put it on his own. Tyler thought it was going to be a lot heavier than it was.

Mom and Dad didn't have their car when they came to pick up Emily and Tyler because they wanted to save their gas for the long trip ahead. But they brought Steed with them so Tyler could ride alongside them back to their house to pack up their stuff.

Tyler sped ahead on Steed. The kids from Sweetwater watched through the windows as Tyler rode away.

Most kids wouldn't have done what Tyler Rogers did and most kids wouldn't have felt the way Tyler felt. He wasn't mad or sad or scared or anything else. He rode towards the sun with Steed beneath him only feeling one thing: Ready. He didn't know what he was ready for, but he was ready.