

Rotten Apple

Ignoring the truck driver's middle finger in the rearview mirror, Robert Livingstone bashed the gas pedal like it was a piñata brimming with candy. At the moment, he could risk running a red light or two.

What he could not risk was someone's life - especially if that person was his brother.

He had gotten the call early in the morning when he was flipping through the TV channels in the dorm with his roommate. What he was watching - Tom & Jerry? Or was it some other mindless and violent cartoon for cheap laughs?

Picking up the phone, the university student half-expected to hear his girlfriend complain about some trivial little thing, like getting her Godiva for her birthday even though she hated sweets. To his surprise, a monotonous male tone was on the line.

"...This is an emergency. There is an unidentified shooter currently in Memorial High School."

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," Robert's dad smiled down at his panting son, who had ran all the way from the 2nd grade classroom to the hospital's waiting room to tell the good news: his team made it to the state competition. Even though he despised running in winter, Robert thought it was well worth it to see the retired coach beaming.

"Is Mom making us apple pie tonight?" It was Robert's favorite desert.

His father stooped down, and looked into the child's chocolate eyes with his own brown ones. "Let's let Mom relax," he said, dimples reappearing, "You have a new baby brother."

Despite Robert's pleas to run up the five flights of stairs to Mom's room, his father adamantly decided to take the elevator. Robert agreed on the condition that he could press the buttons.

"Dad?"

"Hm?"

"What do you mean by the apple and the tree?"

“Ah,” his father answered absentmindedly, “It means the child’s very similar to the parent.” He said no more, eyes glued to the elevator indicator showing which floor they were on. Only one level separated the man from his new son.

“But what if the – ”

The elevator door suddenly opened to the fifth floor and a sea of couples carrying crying babies swarmed in. “Come on, Robby,” his dad said, “Let’s go meet Louis.”

There were lines under his mother’s brown eyes and her brown curls were in disarray. However, Robert saw that she happily cuddled her something wrapped in blue blankets.

“I’ll make him a soccer prodigy,” Robert thought, looking at the sleeping cherub, “Almost as good as myself.”

At that moment, Louis opened his eyes. He stared at his little brother with newfound curiosity, remembering his unasked question in the elevator.

But what if the apple *did* land far from the tree?

Louis’s eyes were crystal blue.

Robert loved going to the apple orchard because it meant they were having apple pie the following night. After analyzing which tree had the most delicious apples for a good half-minute, the sixteen year old settled on the highest tree on the highest hill.

"You have to pick the finest apples," Robert instructed his brother, "Mom makes the best pies."

Louis nodded vigorously, his curly hair bobbing back and forth, looking white in the sunlight. The scrawny eight year old had never tried the homemade dessert before but immediately believed Robert's opinion. After all, big brother was always right. It was even his campaign slogan for class president: 'Robert's Right!'

And he had won.

"Breaking news. Memorial High School is in a lockdown at the moment. Witnesses say a figure wearing a black trench coat walked into the school at approximately noon. Nobody knows how many casualties there are currently but several gunshots were heard-"

Robert immediately turned off the car radio, exasperated. Silence, although not golden at the moment, was definitely better than the constant humming of shooting updates which left him with ten more white hairs than at the beginning of the day and without any real news.

Louis was going to be okay. After all, what sick fellow would want to hurt a 5' 5" sixteen year old guilty only of stepping on ants on hot summer days? Who apologizes when the other person bumped into him first? With those clear, steady eyes that all the grandmas in town adore? One of the women even declared he would have good luck in the future.

"Light eyes, bright life!"

Louis came home on the first day of middle school with a black eye.

"Someone wanted to personally welcome me to 6th grade," he replied to his brother's horrified expression.

"Louis," the senior said, taking the blonde boy by his small shoulders, "Are you okay?"

Silence.

"Who did this to you?"

More silence.

He hugged his brother tightly. "It's going to be all right."

Robert explained to his parents what had happened that night. His dad's eyebrows furrowed, revealing several creases etched on his forehead.

"Now, darling," the mother softly murmured, massaging his shoulders. The doctor had warned her about her husband's health just yesterday. Further stress would only aggravate his condition.

The next day, the principal Mr. Bard arranged for the two families to meet. Robert tagged along, curious to see who had the audacity to punch the famous quarterback's little brother.

"Boys will be boys," the short, balding principal had a soft, whining voice. "Just a little riff-raff, right?" Robert wondered what the point of spectacles were if they slid so far down the man's hooked nose that he had to peer above the gray frames to see.

The boy who punched Louis stood behind a man with glassy eyes frenetically looking around the office, as if he was searching for an implanted bomb. "S-say so-rry, Kevin," his father stuttered.

Kevin stepped forward. "Sorry." The apology was flatter than their mother's violin strings which had been out of tune for twenty years.

Robert's driving instructor had failed him two times before he passed. Had Ms. Banks been sitting shotgun in her former student's car in the present, one of them might have had a panic attack and the other his license revoked.

However, the piercing voice screeching in his head, "*IT'S YELLOW!*" could not overpower darker thoughts fomenting in Robert's mind.

The white colonial house he had left for college hid family turmoil behind its sleek wooden doors. Dad's smile had disappeared along with his vitality, worrying their mother so much as to move him permanently to the hospital. Robert had buried himself in a swamp of homework, praying that Dad was not yet buried in a grave so -

"RED LIGHT, ROBERT!" He imagined Ms. Banks shrieking as he hit the brakes.

Robert stopped the car just in time. A little girl was happily eating an apple as she skipped on the crosswalk, oblivious to her near-death experience.

Stopped at the red light, Robert leaned back into the leather seat, sighing out of relief. Suddenly, a horrible thought came to him, jolting him upright like a flash of lightning.

With Mom obsessing over her husband the cancer patient and Robert seeking refuge in paperwork, what was Louis focusing on then?

"Pew, pew! Haha, you're dead!"

Louis blinked, fluttering his long eyelashes in panic. For Halloween, Kevin McLeay was dressed up as a cowboy. He pointed a real handgun at Louis's forehead.

"Be quiet," A classmate said, flicking the weapon to the sidewalk. His heroic deed reflected his identity appropriately as the boy was dressed as Superman. Everyone in their class knew that the gun was broken after Kevin brought it to show-and-tell, bragging that his father used it to shoot deer albeit illegally. The 6th grade teacher made sure it was defective and that a strongly worded letter went home to his parents.

Kevin laughed and then ran down the street to scare a group of Disney princesses, who dropped their pillow cases full of candy in horror.

The mini Superman patted the frightened boy on the back. Even though he wasn't close enough to Louis to call him a friend, he had seen enough of the bullying. "Don't worry about him, Louis. He's all talk and no action. Still, better stay away from him."

That was what he wished for his 12th birthday.

"His dad's gone mental, locked up in some ward."

Louis remembered the crazed look in Kevin's eyes.

"Heard that insanity runs in the family."

Haha, you're dead!

As soon as he arrived to the school, Robert jumped out of his car, plunging headfirst into the crowd. Some people were yelling into their phones, others at one another. Many shut their eyes, either crying or praying.

But they all hoped for the same thing.

Suddenly, Robert caught a glance of someone strange. The person wasn't particularly handsome. In fact, he was quite inconspicuous as a short, plump man with gray glasses. However, while parents lunged forward, begging to go inside the building, he stealthily moved in the opposite direction.

"Mr. Bard," Robert said, reaching forward to firmly clasp the man's shoulder. The principal turned around, sweat beads falling from his glittering bald head.

"Ah, Robert," he said, recognizing the star athlete, "It's good to see you." Observing the boy's expression, he quickly muttered, "I guess that phrase wouldn't do us justice in this context."

The one thing Robert wanted to ask was suddenly stuck in his throat. He wanted to throw up the question but was afraid of feeling the yucky sensation he felt too many times after vomiting. "Where's Louis," he finally croaked.

The principal's thin smile immediately shattered. Robert at once abhorred his reluctant hesitation and yet simultaneously dreaded hearing the answer.

Mr. Bard whispered, "He's gone."

Robert scarcely noticed how Mr. Bard squealed uncomfortably as his iron grip tightened unconsciously. "Who," Robert's dark eyes ablaze, "killed my brother?" Just two words from the

principal and Robert would be on his way to pummel Kevin McLeay's head like a battered football.

Mr. Bard looked up, his pale countenance meeting Robert's livid one.

"Louis Livingstone was the gunman."

Robert slowly loosened his grip on Mr. Bard, who wobbled back a few steps. He could read the sweaty man's terrified expression easily; it was one of those big billboard advertisements on the highway. But instead of advertising the latest product, it displayed his trepidation and thoughts. *Is he going to kill me now? What if he's working with his crazy brother?*

Robert gave a mirthless chuckle and took a step towards the man, looking him straight in the eyes.

"Boys will be boys," he said dryly.

Mr. Bard gave a small gasp in recognition to his quote but said nothing, eyes widening. Robert then looked around the high school campus, his arms motioning towards the police cars with flashing lights, the fire trucks' wailing sirens, and the maelstrom of crying teenagers and parents praying for a miracle to happen, for their loved ones to be safe, for this whole blasted thing to be over.

"Just a little riff-raff, right?"

"Owww." Louis groaned from the pain, tumbling down the hill like an amateur skier on an Olympic trail.

At the top of the slope, Robert looked down, chuckling. "We're supposed to be in an apple orchard," he chided lightly, "You haven't picked a single apple, have you?"

The younger brother stood up, brushing off leaves and grass. "I know, but I was just trying to get some of the other apples down here," he demurred quietly, kicking the dirt as if he could erase his embarrassment, "...and then I fell."

Robert laughed, amused. "There's so many close by," he said, "So why bother with the apples far from the tree?"

Louis ultimately never became a soccer prodigy. Robert's girlfriend yelled at him for ignoring her calls afterwards. Mr. Bard later resigned as principal without explanation. Nobody told old Mr. McLeay what happened that day - he would just go crazy, which he already was.

Many had addressed Robert's brother first and foremost as the gunman. More politely, the student. No one had bothered to call him by his real name. Whatever they called him, it did not change the fact that Louis Livingstone had shot five people. Three of them were currently in critical condition. One of the two dead was Kevin McLeay. The other was the shooter himself.

The police had asked Robert a few questions about Louis. When was the last time he communicated with you? Did he have access to weapons? Were there any warning signs?

"I don't remember. I'm not sure," Robert had slowly replied. The police were miffed by the vague answers, thinking that the brother was in denial or shock, but the truth of the matter was that he simply did not know.

What had made him so sure Louis was the victim and Kevin the gunman, when in reality, it was vice versa? That's easy. Kevin was always bullying Louis and making his life a living hell. Always? Then why didn't Robert stop him? That lanky Superman did tell him about the Halloween incident and Robert did try to help until - until Dad disappeared and Mom broke down and crashed like a flimsy paper airplane during the funeral preparations and Robert just wanted out, wanted out of this never-ending abyss in which he just kept falling and falling deeper and deeper into something he did not know, something he did not *want* to know. Wasn't Louis feeling the same - no, even worse - with some stupid jerk who made Monday to Friday a hellish battlefield with piercing bullets of denigrating remarks? Was today's incident an inescapable outcome of the accumulation of bullying, for the victim to become even more horrible than the bully, by trading a black eye not for a black eye but a life?

Suddenly it wasn't so easy anymore.

Robert never knew such darkness hid behind such light eyes. And now he never would, as the only person who could clearly explain this episode had shot himself on the right side of the chest earlier that day. The doctors would say the cause of death was by a bullet. Robert knew his brother died of a broken heart.

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

But what if it does? What if it falls down the slope, landing several yards away from the parent tree? Covered in bruises and dirt, it may look different from its siblings atop the hill, but they all hold the same pretty seeds inside. Nevertheless, while all the bright red ones are chosen quickly, this apple more than a smidgeon too far from the others is sadly yet inevitably neglected. And what happens to the poor little thing, left to wither away over time?

It becomes a rotten apple.