

1. Dylan and Lou

“Um.”

I let him have a moment. Everyone is in such a rush to be so certain, maybe the world would be better if instead people were in a rush to be less certain. I gave him a smile of encouragement.

One deep breath for composure and off he goes, “Grande half-caf soy macchiato.”

“On it.” Ordinarily he’d lose points for using the Starbucks’ sizing term but, hey, any port in the storm. We’re tucked away in a corner of Seattle so obscure it’s miles from the nearest Starbucks. Every customer that makes their way here is a minor miracle. We’re might have a geographic monopoly but it doesn’t exactly pay the bills. The surprise isn’t the indecision of the customers we get; it’s that we get any customers at all.

So, I’m grateful for the business. Against all odds he somehow found his way here. And how did I find my way here, you might ask? It’s a story of wrong turns, hasty decisions, and poorly thought-out choices. So, pull up a chair, friend. To get at the whole truth we’ll have to back up a little. For one thing, I was born second.

The first arrived STAT; almost beat the doctor to the operating table. He popped out screaming bloody murder. That was my brother Dylan. The second snuck out all but unnoticed once the coast was clear. And immediately went back to sleep. That was me. Lleu. Lleu Mulligan. And, yes, our folks are very into their Welsh Irish heritage. Call me Lou.

Let me start by disabusing you of any theories you might have about identical twins. We’ve all heard them: look alike; dress alike; talk alike; think alike. We were the other kind. For instance, Dylan was perpetually early, and I was perpetually late. Family photos were often just blurs on both ends; Dylan exiting stage left while I’m arriving stage right. More Sasquatch sightings that verifiable proof of twins.

If we weren’t typical twins, we were definitely typical brothers - on an endless quest to make each other’s life miserable. We didn’t always succeed, except in exasperating Mom. I’m not seeing much Purgatory in her future.

Sometimes it escalated to the point where adults had to step in. In fifth grade the principal called in Mom for a special visitation. We were invited as well.

Mrs. Nelson, our principal, kicked it off. “If I have the chronology right, I believe this started when Dylan ate Lou’s homework.” There was a lot of context to add to that but I took it rhetorically. It was math class, and I was sitting in the back of our row (as usual) while Dylan was in the front (as usual). Mr. Glyzewski had us pass our homework to the front. When he got to our row the homework count was one short. He gave our row a quick glance to see if someone wanted to clear that detail up and then just shrugged and proceeded to the next row. Dylan then turned around and pointed to his mouth. He was chewing on my homework. How did Mrs. Nelson find out? There’s a rat among us.

“Then Mr. Glyzewski found some profanity written on the sidebar of Dylan’s homework.” Again, Cliff Notes version but not entirely incorrect. The night before I had taken the liberty of looking up some Polish swear words on the Internet and sprinkling them into Dylan’s homework before we went to bed. I had a hunch Mr. Glyzewski would be a connoisseur.

“Later that afternoon, Lou couldn’t complete his history assignment because he didn’t have his textbook. It had been replaced in his book bag by a dictionary.” Had to admit, her intel was pretty good. Meanwhile Mom was silent but you could see the steam rising.

“Finally, at the end of the day Dylan had to leave his bike at school because someone had let the air out of both tires.” Okay, that one is completely outside her jurisdiction. Did not happen at school. But I decided that maybe this wasn’t the time or place to correct her.

Besides, the sad truth was that these events were a specific Monday but could’ve just as well been any Monday.

We spent a lot of our intellectual capacity on these forays. And while our grades didn’t suffer, they didn’t exactly flourish either.

Mom had a theory about our grades. With Dylan, ideas tended to explode out of his head – five or six of them racing to the end of a sentence. Mine were more like a solitary butterfly, floating randomly on the breeze to their final destination. Our grades were more a reflection on how the teacher preferred their facts rather than the rightness or wrongness of what we were presenting. Some like Dylan’s energy; some liked my introspection. Taken as a whole we both spent most of our schooling smack dab in the middle of the bell curve. Our one exception was standardized tests; we both measured off the charts on them. This never worked to our advantage though – the school just used it to prove we needed to work harder; to exert ourselves.

For all our histrionics, the end of the day would bring peace to the valley. There in our bedroom Dylan and I would lay in our beds, stare at the ceiling, and recount the day. The day wasn’t done until we talked it over. Dylan getting a glimpse at life in three quarter time while I got a chance to see what was happening around the corner. Eventually Mom would plead for us to please, please go to sleep. And we would. But for those few moments we were something else. Not brothers up in arms but brothers in arms. Come morning though, we’d be right back at it again.

Occasionally fate would pair us up – often to even more disastrous results. Like the first day of our Christmas break when we were twelve. As usual we were off doing our own thing. Dylan was in the alley, having gotten it into his head that if he built a snowbank high enough and close enough to our neighbor’s garage, he’d be able to climb onto the pile, jump off and dunk a basketball on their garage rim. After a few failures he finally built the bank high enough and, sure enough, the plan worked. Such as it was. He had skipped the part about getting back down. Five-foot-three-inch sixth graders do not have much experience dunking basketballs. Luckily Mother Nature had a plan for just this very contingency. Gravity. This would have worked fine if she had just gently whispered into Dylan’s ear to let go of the rim. But she hadn’t. Down came baby, rim and all. Dylan hit the ground butt first, followed shortly by the rim still in his right hand – which promptly bonked him on the head. He sat there quietly, waiting for the cobwebs to clear.

Our neighbor Greg was two years older than us. To this day I only remember three things about Greg: big, dumb, and mean. The bully trifecta. He must’ve been inside watching TV, but he immediately stepped outside when he heard all the commotion. He looked at Dylan; Dylan looked at him. “Hi Greg,” Dylan mumbled. With that the cobwebs cleared, he let go of the rim, rolled over and hit the ground running. Greg, sans coat, shoes and the little common-sense God gave him, lit out after him.

Meanwhile I was working on vacation plans of my own. I was in our back yard building the snow tunnel to end all snow tunnels. Dylan turned the corner, gave me a quick glance, and ducked into one end of the tunnel. Greg turned the corner, pushed me aside, and darted into the tunnel after Dylan. Dylan popped out the other end and looked at me. I looked at him. We both shrugged. A plan emerged.

I smashed down the front end of the tunnel while Dylan did the same to the back end. We paused a moment to admire our handiwork and then took off up the alley. In the background we could hear Greg sputtering and muttering as he made his way out of the avalanche.

Ordinarily that would’ve been the end of the chase. Kids rule their neighborhood, and we were no exception. We knew every fenced-in dead end yard, every dog (mean, mad, or indifferent) and every house with no one home until dark. No adult could match the knowledge accumulated over hours and hours of scouting the terrain. Ordinarily anyone chasing us would have given up in short order. However, that advantage is moot when you’re being chased by another kid from the block. And as we were running, I couldn’t help but notice that for a big guy with no shoes Greg was pretty quick on his feet.

Desperate times call for desperate measures and I had a brainstorm while Dylan and I serpented up and down the alleys, yards, and streets of our neighborhood. I gave Dylan a quick whistle as we approached the Zeidler house. Dylan turned just in time to see me duck into the Zeidler backyard.

He screeched to a stop, retraced his steps, and continued into the yard after me. We knew Greg wouldn't dare follow us there.

Every neighborhood has one and our neighborhood had the Zeidler's. Oh, it was haunted all right. Though deserted for years, lights would appear upstairs in nights with a full moon. What else would you expect from a house owned by gangsters, complete with secret escape tunnels that led from the basement into the alley? Didn't do the Zeidlers any good though - it was well known they were murdered in their beds in a violent gangland slaying. Left to remain in the house until their murders could be avenged. No self-respecting kid would ever set foot near that yard - heck we were ten before we stopped crossing the street to avoid the block altogether.

Now I'm not sure if it was just the heat of the moment or the rare occurrence of me leading, but I tripped as we approached the house. Dylan bent over and tried grabbing for me without sacrificing any of his own forward momentum. I made it back to my feet but at that same instant Dylan stumbled. Soon we were both ass over tea kettle. We rolled up to the house and slammed right into and through a rotted storm cellar door. We then proceeded to tumble down the stairs and into the Zeidler basement.

Years spent avoiding the general vicinity and suddenly we were in the actual house, rolling around the concrete floor of the basement. Details get a little sketchy at this point, but I know what I know. I came to - although I knew enough not to open my eyes - in the dank silence of the Zeidler house. The first living person in that house in years.

But someone, or something, was raking scrawny skeleton fingers across my face. While someone, or something, was wrapping its legs around my legs, slowly drawing me in. I knew instinctively that I had only one chance to escape. One chance, or I was dead. Without opening my eyes, I reached out and grabbed hold of whatever it was in front of me. I grabbed what felt like hair. And at that exact instant someone, or something, grabbed a handful of my hair. I bolted upright and screamed.

Screamed in stereo. I opened my eyes to see a face not inches from mine, bug-eyed and screaming for all it was worth. It was Dylan. I had a handful of his hair in my hand, holding his head like a head-hunter's trophy. And he had a handful of my hair in his hand, holding my head like a head-hunter's trophy. Seeing our own hands holding up what looked like our own heads, we both let out another scream.

With that Dylan let go and was up the stairs and out the broken cellar door in a flash. I followed only moments behind. Back in my customary trailing position, I snuck one last glance behind me. Truth be told, it had already started morphing into an ordinary basement, full of old mops, shovels, and rakes. It had lost its magic. But not before it served one last purpose, saving us from the wrath of Greg.

Mom came and stood in the doorway of our bedroom. “Listen up. There will be no punishment for this episode. I have no idea what you were thinking, I don’t care to know what you were thinking, and I don’t care who did what. Three things. Your father is at the sporting goods store picking out a new basketball rim. The money comes out of your allowance. Tomorrow you’ll help him put it up on Greg’s garage. You’ll apologize to Greg in the morning as well. And finally, your father has a project in mind for that cellar door. Consider this my final word on the matter.” And with that she walked away.

I couldn’t help but wonder what we were in store for. Dylan, on the other hand, just wondered how Mom knew we were hiding under our beds. One thing for sure: when Mom said it was the final word, it was the final word.