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In the Slightest Way

Cross Keys was a city filled with the wealthy and the privileged. Cruising down the newly paved streets troubles were blown as easily away as the wind through your hair with the top of the convertible down. Not a blade of grass shot above the freshly manicured lawns and stood out of place. Great extravagant houses were lined up along the curbside and an excessive number of expensive vehicles were parked on display in the driveways, adding an additional accessory to the overall landscape of the home. Everyone simply worked towards what they believed was the perfect equation in life: a lot of money plus a lot of things equaled a lot of happiness. However, what many came to question when they came to the point where they flourished in their wealth, was whether or not it was enough for them. From the looks of the town at bird’s eye view, not a thought would come to one’s mind that the people of Cross Keys didn’t live the happiest lives imagined. What many people outside of their city longed for they already had or could obtain effortlessly. Their problems however were rarely viewed from the outside; people had a good way to conceal their struggles, a good way to hide behind the luxurious life when they felt as if they were forced to fit strict expectations.

2802 New Valley Way, Cross Keys, Pennsylvania. The Davidsons were a family of six long before Jackson was born; his parents were joyful and young, and that was enough for them until they were negatively seen as the inexperienced parents with four too many children than they could handle. They did not fit the cookie cutter expectation for society they desired to become a part of. Jackson’s birth was considered a blessing to his parents, but a burden to the other neighbors, considering the Davidson household had then become the shrieks, ruckus, and playhouse of not four, but five children. The harsh advice and disapproving glances quickly pressured the Davidson’s to fit into the manicured society, and they ditched their honored values in order to not be known throughout their small town as the outcasts. Just like that, with the snap of the fingers, a homey family, with a life that many other families secretly longed for, was whipped into shape with the expected ideals of the wealthy society. Mr. and Mrs. Davidson began to raise their children in accepted and expected actions of their society. In the eyes of the people of Cross Keys the Davidson family ended up being a huge surprise and one of the best reflections of the lives people should expect to have if they were to move there. The four older Davidson children, now grown adults, went to Ivy League colleges, advanced onto very prosperous careers, at least in terms of wealth, but not necessarily happiness.

Jackson, the caboose of the family, had a lot of expectations to fulfill, especially now that he had taken the role of being the only child in his vast empty house. The constant pressures not only came from his society, but from the pecking of his parents and siblings that constantly found themselves superior to him. Jackson was not traditional in the eyes of Cross Keys; his abstract views made many people antsy about his presence, especially around their children who were so impressionable and desirous of something rebellious. Instead of suppressing his conflicting opinions, he boldly stated them, and instead of being driven by the goal of having a wealthy life, he was motivated by the fact that he could have a real purpose in society and personal impact on people’s lives. Jackson was motivated through the building and developing of relationships, no matter what socio-economic background they had; to Jackson what society saw as the most important factor, he saw as the last thing considered.

14 North Plains Avenue, Cross Keys, Pennsylvania. The Warner family had many unknown mysteries that caused them to be judged on the little that people saw of them from the outside. From the exterior the Warner household was just like the other ones down the street with long white columns and tall windows, but others would never know that the house and the people in it were filled with gloom and fear of the future. Taylor Warner was just a middle school boy, and he was not even a teenager, yet he was forced to live with such maturity that was not usually seen in Cross Keys, not even in some of the adults. His parents were in rough times, but they were able to hide their troubles and their neighbors were so inconsiderate that they went unnoticed by anyone else. The expectations they had to uphold for society became too much at times though. Amongst themselves in privacy, they painfully joked about the severity of their struggles; however, as the night rolled in the realities of their troubles and growing seclusion from the city, it became more consciously apparent. His parents sought for a way to escape, escape the present, and escape what was to come, all that were hidden by the dark of the night. His dad, particularly, found his comfort in alcohol, and the source of the evil it could bring was always at close hands in a city like Cross Keys. Night by night, Taylor’s screams of abuse and cries for help were muffled in other people’s minds that were already clouded with thoughts about themselves and their own shallow problems. Under the influence of alcohol there was little that Taylor could do to resist the inevitable, weary of the moment to come every night he simply waited for the pain that continuously added up, and cried longingly for the hope that the society would reach out for him, even in the slightest way.

Being privileged their whole lives, many teenagers that grew up in Cross Keys reached their 16th birthday and were not surprised, but expectant, of a brand new car. However, on Jackson’s 16th birthday, his parents were the ones who were disappointed with the rejection of the gift that they had put so much effort into making bigger and better than any other car that rolled down the streets of Cross Keys. Jackson chose to take the more scenic route that his city contained, it was the road less traveled. In the mist of all those that were obsessed with their lives and their lifestyles, many seemed to miss the magnificent moments that hid in the corners of the undiscovered; they missed the thrill found in adventure. Many people that lived in Cross Keys were too blind to see; Jackson, however, knew of these places, knew how to capture the moments, and knew how to live a life that wasn’t predetermined for him by the natures of his society.

On Jackson’s way home from school one day he decided upon taking a different route, and having more on his mind than usual, he needed more time alone before he was suffocated by the overwhelming presence of his parents. In a house that blended in just as well with the others on the street, there ran a child about the age of a young middle school student. His hair was frazzled, his clothes were disheveled, his face was sweaty, and he ran with a sense of urgency, worry, and fright… straight into the arms of Jackson.

Although he was startled by the encounter, Jackson still understood the look the young boy was trying to hide in his face, burrowed in Jackson’s chest. The racket from the house helped clarify the situation even further for him. In times where Jackson felt this way he ran, ran far, ran long, ran to a place that looked better than what he had to face. Jackson automatically felt whole again when he wasn’t around the people and things that were causing him such unhappiness. Taylor was now accompanying him on his alone time and surprisingly Jackson enjoyed it.

The silences that rested between Jackson and Taylor were comfortable and the hot sunrays penetrated onto them as they continued on their journey to temporarily escape together. Jackson had determination to not stop before he reached the place he knew that Taylor needed to be. At once, they were at their final destination; it was not a particular place pinpointed on a map, or an address in a GPS, simply away from the loud influences of society and into the peace of nature. Jackson noticed how Taylor had seemed mesmerized when they reached his safe haven in the fields and then further into the woods and he knew that he had just done exactly what he needed to do. Little did Jackson know, at that moment he changed Taylor’s whole life.

For Taylor the quick bond that he formed with Jackson was exactly what he needed to grasp onto. For as long as Taylor could remember all he wanted was someone that was willing to help him get away from the life that he had enough pain and anger built up from. For the next few days, not even weeks, months, or years, Taylor stayed in Jackson’s guesthouse. The stay was short and sudden, but much needed, and it was long enough for Taylor to realize what he did want and what he didn’t. Taylor saw the noticeable difference between the way that he was living and the way that Jackson and his family were living, making him really wonder which life he wished to live.

Jackson wasn’t sure what he wanted to make of his life, but he did know that he didn’t want to sacrifice his passions for wealth, which is what he saw a lot of growing up in Cross Keys. In Jackson’s mind everything his family lived for was superficial and he wondered why and how his parents had sucked themselves into such a meaningless world. However, when Taylor ran into his arms and even deeper into his life it gave Jackson assurance that he wanted to do something completely opposite of the lives of the adults around him were living. Jackson let Taylor stay with his family without a thought of how long it would be, or care of the fact that his parents would have probably disapproved of his abrupt actions in bringing such an unkempt boy into their clean home. To Jackson the house was empty for as long as he could remember, but with Taylor it not only had more people to wander the long hallways, but a purpose that filled the house with life. Jackson realized that the key to actual happiness in life, after his 16 years of living, was living it for other people and not just himself.

Taylor’s drunk and many times unconcerned dad started the rumors about his runaway, which were enough to make Taylor want to leave the no-life gossiping community even more. And so he did and followed what was calling him and he went for it. In the short time that he had spent with Jackson he learned a lot about him and the different way he was trying to live his life in order not to succumb to the unhappy lives that people in their city were satisfied with living. He ran, ran, ran, and then ran some more, into the quiet, and for their city, into the unreachable and the untouchable. Here he was surrounded by the soothing sounds of the stream, the rustling of the leaves under every step he took, away the restraints and overwhelming stiffness and pressures of society. The air was so light and free there was no worry of making the wrong move that would be looked down upon in society. He had no knowledge of where he was going, or where he would go from there. In a place where he thought all the people and places were unfamiliar he surprised himself when he looked up to see what his future was to hold of him now. He surprised himself to see that he had come so far from a place he thought he would never have been able to escape. He was surprised when he saw Jackson, the one who got him there, in the woods, the first place they had gone together, the first place they both realized they could be more than the life they were currently living.