

Do it, Chicken!

“Do it, Chicken!” Wynn said from the other side of the brook.

Patty hit Wynn’s shoulder, “Don’t call him chicken!”

Nick gripped the handlebars and could feel the knotty rubber bite into his fingers. His left foot was firmly planted on the pedal, his knee cocked and ready, but he wasn’t.

Chicken! He stared toward the brook fifty feet in front of and five feet below him. Only, in his mind it was still the raging river of last fall, when bucketing rains had washed away the banks.

The two best friends, minus Patty, spent the previous day building a jump out of frozen logs and a couple sheets of plywood left over from the dismantled ramp at Nick’s house. The jump rose three feet and gave plenty of lift to reach the other side fifteen feet away. When they were done with the jump, they rode over the bridge to the other side and marked off landing measurements every three feet. Then they bet five dollars on who could make the longest jump. Wynn had a brand new bike, but he was bigger and weighed more. That gave Nick the confidence that he could jump farther, but they’d spent so much time marking landings they’d run out of day light and so put the jump off until after school today.

Patty came along this afternoon to be the judge. But it rained overnight and they arrived to find their ramp now had a fine coating of ice. They tried to dig some dirt to throw on it, but everything was frozen. They tried to stomp on the boards thinking the ice would just flake off, but only small pieces did.

That's when Patty rolled her eyes and said, "Why don't you just turn the boards over?" With a fresh, dry surface Wynn jumped, and only *just* made it. His rear wheel dropped half-over the edge but he was able to get one foot down in time and his momentum carried him over. If he had not made it, the first thing he would have hit were the jutting rocks in the bank, then the icy water.

Nick didn't have the nerve to try the jump. Wynn had a new BMX-Pro with fat, knobby tires. "No grip. I'll see you back at the school."

"Chicken!"

"Stop calling him chicken!" Patty, slapped Wynn's arm again.

Wynn ignored her. "You owe me five bucks. A bet's a bet."

"My tires! I can't get the grip you can," Nick said. "Tomorrow." He didn't have the five dollars to pay him, either.

They all heard a car horn honk and turned to see Mrs. Powers, Wynn's mother, in the school parking lot flashing her headlights. They rode back to school, with Wynn and Patty taking the longer route over the bridge.

As they rode up to her car, Mrs. Powers said, "We gotta go, Wynn, you've got a dental appointment in an hour. Throw your bike in the back. You two want a ride?"

"No thanks," Nick and Patty said in unison.

Wynn threw his bike into the back of his Mom's new SUV. As he walked past Nick, he knuckled the top of his friend's head, clucked like a chicken, scraped his feet along the ground and flapped his elbows in unison as he got into the passenger's seat.

Break

"What was that all about?" Mrs. Powers asked as they drove off.

Wynn explained the bet, laughed and followed up, "I knew he was chicken when he said 'two out of three' after losing the first coin flip for who'd go first. That's when I knew I got inside his head. It was all a head game."

"Winthrop Woodrow Powers - *that's terrible!*" She took her foot off the gas and stared at her son. "Where did you ever learn to play *head games?*"

"*You* taught me!"

"*What!*" She noticed the traffic behind her was knotting up and stepped on the gas again, but not before the Mercedes behind her found his horn and exercised his New York Right to use it.

"You and Dad do it all the time."

"We don't play head games. We *challenge* each other to raise our game, that's all. You've never seen one of us challenge the other to do something dangerous."

"There was no risk for me. I knew my bike could make it and I knew his couldn't."

"And you'd somehow take enjoyment from that? Watching him break his neck? What if the bet was a little different? What if instead of bikes you were on horses? You would

be the chicken then. Wear those shoes the next time you dare a friend to do something that might get them hurt.”

Wynn’s fear of horses stemmed from the day his parents went horseback riding when he was six years old. Wynn and his older sister had been left in the stable’s viewing area to watch. Wynn went to find a bathroom. He smelled what he thought had to be the bathroom, but found himself in a dimly lit horse’s stall instead. He heard the horse snort, turned and saw it for the first time. He screamed. The horse whinnied and reared. Wynn cried for help and cowered in the corner. Terrified, he peed his pants. Some grownups came to his rescue but laughed when they saw him and said the horse was probably more scared. He had pee all down his pants and horse manure all over his hands and strange adults were laughing at him. He had nightmares for weeks, and *still* couldn’t use a bathroom in the dark.

“You didn’t have to remind me of that.”

“And your Father and I do *not* play head games!”

Break

Sitting at the dinner table, Nick pushed the peas to the outside of his plate and took small, slow bites of shepherd’s pie. His mother sat across from him eating with one hand and holding her bible in the other. After reading a blessing for the meal, she read silently. There was a third place set at the table; a white porcelain plate with a knife, fork and spoon lined up on the napkin. No chair. It had been almost a year since dad died and mom still set his place at the table. At first it felt right, but lately it felt creepy, and right

now it made Nick mad. He missed his dad, but setting a place at the table wasn't the way he wanted to remember him.

Dad wasn't chicken about anything. He curled his mouth and remembered the day the repo man tried to take the van. Dad used his remote control to drop the wheelchair ramp and locked it down so the guy couldn't get the van onto his flatbed. The guy swore – something not allowed around this house - and dad went after him in his wheelchair, swinging his old cane like a sword...

“I miss Dad,” he said out loud.

“I do too, Junior,” his mother said, without ever taking her eyes off the bible.

Brushing his teeth before bed, Nick refused to look in the mirror. He got into his pajamas in the dark and knelt beside his bed. But he wouldn't pray for himself; he'd been taught that wasn't right. When his dad was alive it was easy to pray. But he couldn't think of anyone who needed more help than Nick Junior did right now.

So he knelt there in the dark and thought about the afternoon. The jump looked so easy when viewed from the landing side. The ramp looked a lot taller and seemed almost close enough to touch. He boasted about making the jump X-Games Style; with a loud *whaa-hoo* and kicking out his feet. But this afternoon, even with a dry ramp, the first forty feet were all ice, and knowing what waited below... Seeing how close it had been for Wynn... Well, he did chicken out. If he asked Mom for five dollars she would want to know why. And he couldn't lie to her. And then she would cry when he told her. Then she would give him the five dollars without saying a word. The she would go to her bedroom. Then he would hear her sob all night.

He got into bed and promised, *Tomorrow, right after school. If it's not too icy.* He tossed and turned himself to sleep. And he dreamt ...

Five-year-old Nick stood at the plate before a ball mounted on the T-perch. He swung and missed and whirled around the plate, but his helmet was so big it didn't move! The other kids laughed. They lowered the ball. He gritted his teeth and swung the bat again. And missed again, only this time he swung so hard that he fell down. And the kids laughed more. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his dad standing by first base. His dad was saying something to him and waving one of his crutches toward the outfield. His third swing missed too. The next batter stepped up to the plate. His dad hobbled up to him and said, "Don't look at the ball. Look at where you want the ball to go. Swing the bat *through* the ball, right to where you want it to go."

Break

Wynn Powers had trouble sleeping that night, too. His mother's reminder released frightful memories...

In his dream, Wynn was once again facing the jump over the brook, but this time, on the opposite bank, Nick was holding a long lance that glimmered in the sun. Nick's face was all cut and bleeding and he was wearing a neck brace. And he was sitting on a horse!

Wynn looked down and saw he too was mounted on a steed and holding a lance.

Patty was standing by the brook holding a red flag and yelling something he couldn't make out.

Beneath him, he felt the animal's heat rise and with it that acidic smell of muck. Steam was snorting from its nostrils. He tried to jump off, but the stirrups wouldn't let go of his feet. He heard his mother's voice, only it was coming from Patty down by the brook!

"Do it, Chicken!"

The horse bolted forward and Wynn screamed for help, dropped the lance and hugged the horse's neck as it galloped toward the brook...

"Are *you* all right?" His mother asked. "You were screaming for help. It was just a bad dream. My God, you're covered in sweat!" She went to his dresser and got a new pair of pajamas. "Here, I'll I get you a towel. What were you dreaming?"

Wynn just hugged his pillow and stared at his mother with fright-filled eyes, his heart pounded with contempt.

Break

Nick told Patty his decision in school the next day. "If the ice has melted, then I'm gonna try it, but I don't want Wynn there. But I need a witness, otherwise he won't believe me."

"I'll do it," she said. "But only because if you don't make it someone needs to call for help."

Nick spent the rest of the school day avoiding Wynn. He chewed his nails and missed everything the teachers said. He watched the sky during every class and hoped for a strong sun. But the sun seemed to play peekaboo every time he looked.

When he finally got out at 3:30 it was at least 40-degrees and without a cloud in the sky. He waited by the bike rack for Patty, but Wynn found him first. “Look, about what I said yesterday...”

Nick cut him off, “I’m gonna make the jump today. The ramp’s not frozen now. And I’m gonna *make* the jump!”

“No! Don’t do it. Don’t try. I almost messed it up and your old bike will never make it. You don’t owe me anything. It was a stupid bet.”

Patty walked up in time to hear all this. She dropped her jaw and said, “That’s the smartest thing I’ve ever heard you say, Wynn.”

Wynn ignored her. “Okay?” He held out his fist to Nick.

Nick bumped fists with him, but didn’t say he agreed.

Break

Down by the brook, Patty waited with her cell phone. She had 9-1-1 punched up and ready to hit send. The sun was setting and shadows were getting long. Under her boots, the ground felt spongy.

Nick did two dry runs right up to the ramp to see just how hard he could mash the pedal before the wheel would slip.

He sat on his bike at the launch point and stared straight ahead, not at the brook this time but at the third marker on the other side. *Focus on the landing*, he told himself. His foot stiffened on the pedal. He blessed himself, took a deep breath and forced it out in almost a whistle. He did it again then held the third breath and hit the pedal as hard as he dared.

“Nick! Don’t!” He heard over his shoulder just as he stood on the pedal and started his run. Jolted, he stopped, turned and saw Wynn riding fast and calling to him to stop. *Oh no you don’t*, he said to himself and set off down the run with his eyes fixed on the third marker.

Halfway, he turned to see Wynn had almost caught up with him!

Turning his attention back to the nine foot marker he peddled as hard as he dared. His rear wheel hit the ramp and slipped, and slipped again when he stepped with his other foot. The instant his front wheel left the ramp, Nick realized he was not going to make, and Wynn was jumping right alongside him!

The two bikes crossed over the brook side-by-side with Wynn’s front wheel higher than the handlebars.

Nick was leaning over his handlebars, and his front wheel was heading straight for the lip on the other side!

Patty screamed.

Wynn’s rear wheel landed just past the first marker. He skid to a stop and jumped off.

Nick’s front wheel hit just under the lip and the bike flopped into the brook, but Nick went ass-over-teakettle and somersaulted over the handlebars, doing a perfect flip and landing on his feet right at the nine-foot marker. But he didn’t nail the landing. He slipped and fell face-first into the mud and sticks.

“Are you ok?” Wynn ran up to him, slipped and slid down on his knees. Patty was right behind.

Nick rolled over. He was covered in crud and leaves but with only a few small cuts. He was laughing. “You owe me five bucks, dude!”

“No way!” Wynn said with a grin. The two got to their feet. They fist-bumped, and Wynn said, “Your bike’s down there, *dude*, mine’s up here. I win.”

“No you don’t!” Nick replied. “The bet was *who* could make the longest jump. Nothing in there about the bike having to be with you. Pay up!”

– 2,500 words –