1. Gregory

On any weekday afternoon at the Springer county, the time the schools in the neighborhood ended their day was the time the various traffic zones suddenly sprang up to show how noisier a big group of parents and children could get to be. For few minutes it always looked like a big battle zone had just erupted. This was a lot different from the conventional battle zones: There were no definitions of the enemy lines; there were no definitions of who the commanders and the soldiers were. The parents and the children interchanged their roles as commanders and soldiers at will. The cry of the battle from the mothers who were there to pick up their children from the schools always trumped anything around, and nothing ever came close to that.

Very few dads showed up at the afternoon time to pick up their children, and the moms always outnumbered, and many times, outclassed the dads with their attention to the details: Did their child get their homework folder? Did their child eat every ounce of the lunch that was given, and drink all the water – to the last drop – from their water bottle? Did their child shame the ancient Egyptians with their knowledge of the food pyramid? Did their child wear the sunscreen – with different SPF for different parts of the body -- when they went out to play in the sun?

It appeared that even the mighty C.I.A could commission a study to master the techniques of interrogation from such moms. Such was their scrupulous nature.

The older kids from the neighboring middle and the high schools totally avoided the clamor around the elementary schools – specifically, not to be bothered by their own moms who were attending to their own younger siblings. It was always interesting to notice how a previous year's elementary school student could all of a sudden turn in to a "I am a big guy or gal now" mode on becoming a middle school student the very next year. Avoiding talking to the parents in public places turned out to be the first step to be out of being considered a child any longer.

Gregory Galvin, our protagonist, spent a few minutes playing basketball after the last school bell, and had a chat with his friends in front of the school library. He checked his reminder notes that his mother always asked him to write and keep, and noticed that he did not have any classes after school that day. Before he was on his way to his home that was just a few minutes away from the school, he played basketball with his friends for a few more minutes. He knew his time limit too well: he would get to see his mother at the school parking lot!

Deciding to go back to home was one thing, but how, was the next one! Gregory checked his reminder notes once again to see what was his mode of transportation that day. Every day, he had a few choices to commute: by walk, bike, scooter, Pogo stick, or skateboard. His parents dropping off and picking him up was the other option when he had too much to carry, or when he was late to school. Without the reminder note, he would look for his scooter when he must be looking for his bike, and he would look for his bike when he must be simply going home by walk. Forgetfulness thy name was Gregory!

Typically, Gregory made his decision about his commute by rolling his favorite dice that his dad got for him, from one of his business trips. As the dice had six options, and as getting dropped at school by his parents was his least preferred one – unless, it was absolutely needed -- he had that option masked in his dice. Many a times, when the Pogo stick option came, his mother vetoed it and he had to settle for something else. He thought of replacing the Pogo stick with the rollerblade option, but his parents from the start itself vetoed that thought. For quite some time, he had been looking for an alternative to replace the Pogo stick as a commute. He even posted it in his highly supervised and restricted Facebook page, and got really funny ideas; he had been waiting for his parental approval for quite sometime.

That day, the call of his dice was his scooter. To make sure that he had noted that correctly, he took out his smartphone – the one that was given to him for listening to music only – and tapped on the video he recorded earlier that day: it was the video of the dice roll! That confirmed the number on the dice for the scooter.

If his scooter had a mouth and could talk, it would have made news by complaining about being the most abused of all. Gregory always left the scooter wherever he wanted to: in the drenching rain, in the lawns of the park, in the asphalt of the parking lot, and many times under the hot sun on the driveway. On the softer side, the scooter was his good ally – like a pet dog – when he accompanied his parents for a walk. It was his dear friend, someone who was close enough to be his sibling, and someone without whom he couldn't spend a minute away –

even when he had to make short trips from the front yard to the backyard of his house.

One way to look was the endurance of that scooter. Under Tsar Gregory's tyranny, it was a manufacturer's delight. The scratches on the handgrips of it would tell stories on how it always hit the hard concrete ground so many times when Gregory did not park it properly against the wall. The mud on the wheels would tell a different story on how they were abused in the places where they were not supposed to be. If the manufacturers ever sought someone to endorse their scooters for its endurance, Gregory would be at the top of their list.

Compared to the scooter, the bike was given a little more respect, as it had its own locks and a place to park. But the poor scooter did not have any such privileges. If somebody scripted a dialogue between his bike and his scooter, the bike would have played a tough bully teasing the scooter everyday. Like PETA was there for the ethical treatment of animals, Gregory's scooter thought that it was time for the establishment of an organization to standup for its rights.

Skateboard and Pogo stick: Let us not talk about them for now. For now, let us make the scooter feel good that it was the most victimized one. Both could very well have had their own Facebook pages describing their life under Gregory, unknown to the scooter. Who knew?

On his way from school, Gregory ran in to a few middle school students from his neighborhood and was teased by one of them.

"Hey kid, how is your elementary school?" teased Sarah, a seventh grader, who was his neighbor and his good friend. "Thought, you guys are not supposed to go home by yourself."

Until the previous year, Sarah and Gregory went to the same elementary school – Sarah being one batch older to him. With Gregory in his last year at the elementary school, she had already moved over to the next level – the middle school.

Gregory smiled. He had got used to Sarah's good-natured humor. He asked, "Who is your new friend? Is she new to the area?"

Sarah was with a new friend of hers, a tall, girl who looked very new to the neighborhood.

A sixth grader, it was his sweet age that he was no longer a kid, and he was still not a grown-up; the sweet age where he was about to explore the world with his unique curiosity; some of the harmless assumptions of the past were about to be made more interesting, and the rebelling thoughts inside him were about to be given some chances to come outside. He had a strange, inexplicable feeling – a sudden sense of adrenaline rush -- in him when he looked at Sarah's friend. Was it what people called, "The dawn of adolescence?"

Sarah turned towards her friend, pointed towards the scooter and said, "Danique, this is Buddy Blazer, and the boy – the elementary school kid – giving company to Buddy is Gregory, my naughty neighbor."

Danique giggled and blinked her eyes. "Buddy Blazer! His scooter has a name?"

Sarah Continued: "Not only his scooter, his other modes of transportation – to say – also has their names: Trent Trailblazer for his bike; Jack Jumper for his Pogo stick; and Skip Slider for his skateboard."

Gregory felt a little embarrassed to be made fun of by Sarah in front of his dream girl. He anticipated Danique to join Sarah in making fun of him. Danique didn't.

Gregory's puzzled look made Sarah respond again: "Greg, she has just recently moved here from Netherlands. She is a bit hesitant to talk to kids like you. European tradition, you know. It's a lot different from ours."

Danique giggled again and said, "Nice name. I like it."

"Gregory? What is so nice about it? It is so 18th century," responded Sarah.

"Not Gregory. Buddy Blazer…it is really creative," Danique clarified.

"Thank you," acknowledged Gregory. He felt a sense of vindication in him, and looked at Sarah and shrugged his shoulders to showcase that.

"I am a bit creative too," Danique said. "I like to paint and sculpt. Back home, I had a nickname, Danique Da Vinci. Gregory, what do you like? Writing?"

A foreigner with a foreign accent asking Gregory whether he liked to write. A crazy voice in him told to go to the end of the world to impress Danique. He looked at Sarah and she curiously waited for his answer. She knew all about Gregory's "fondness" towards writing.

"Gregory," faking a tone of wonder, Sarah asked, "Do you like to write? I haven't seen you hold a pen or pencil in months. Still, I wonder."

Talk about the determination to charm a girl. With confidence in his voice, he said, "Yes, I do. I like doing poetry."

It was not a total lie. It was partially correct. No one other than his parents knew about it. Still, his response surprised Sarah.

"WOW! That's amazing!" responded Danique. "A poet? That's really amazing, indeed!"

Gregory just smiled. He was a little worried about Sarah's reaction to his response, but sensing that he was all about to set the good impression on Danique, Sarah simply mouthed the words, "YOU LIAR," and shook her head in disbelief. Danique did not get to see Sarah's expression.

Gregory had one big trump card up his sleeve: his knowledge of geography! He realized that it was one of the most opportune times to unleash his splendor.

"Danique, are you from Rotterdam? 'Cause you don't sound like someone from Amsterdam."

"Wow! You know Rotterdam!" Danique expressed a lot of surprise in her tone. "Lot here, don't know anything other than Amsterdam, when I talk about Netherlands. It is like, just knowing only about New York and nothing else about your country. So rude."

Sarah knew right away that she could not outwit Gregory in that matter. After all, he was the school district's reigning Geography Bee champion.

"You know Danique," Gregory's confidence increased, "one of my old uncles used to work in Eindhoven – for Phillips."

"You know Eindhoven, too! A lot of my family people worked there, too." Danique was full of praises on Gregory.

Sarah's silence to join the conversation emboldened Gregory further. It was his moment to get back to her.

" One day, if I get to do International Law, I would like to visit The Hague." That sealed the lifelong admiration for him from Danique. He got closer to Danique's ears, and whispered, loud enough for Sarah to hear: "The girls like her might think, it is some kind of a plague. How silly."

Danique could not control her laughter. The giggling, slender European girl had a different side: her really big and loud, boisterous laughter.

"I got one for you…a really funny one," said Danique, holding Gregory's hand. He found it fascinating! Other than Sarah holding his hands to help cross the road, no other girl had ever held his hand in the recent times. Danique continued: "A student from our class – I won't say, boy or a girl – thinks, the Belgian city, Antwerp, is where a lot of ants crawl."

Gregory laughed out loud and said, "I am certain that it can't be our Sarah, because, her being a shopaholic knows that it is the diamond capital of the world."

Gregory then took leave from them, and on his way, he looked back and said, "Sarah, by the way, Netherlands is a country in Europe. Not a new clothing chain to shop in our mall. Don't waste your time looking for it there."

Sarah showed a fake scorn on her face and made a fist in her right hand to show an intimidating posture.

Gregory did not wait to respond.

As Gregory reached his home and glided his scooter on to the driveway of his house, he was surprised to see his dad's car parked on the driveway. Usually, there would be only his mother's car, as she always was home by the time he got from school. Since the day Gregory started going to his local school, there were only a few times his dad was home early from work. Those times were primarily because either his dad was sick, or they as a family had to make a trip somewhere. Even though it was not a big deal, still seeing his dad's car made Gregory a little curious. It was just the beginning of the school year and his dad mentioned about going on a summer vacation to some place that had nice beaches. Had the vacation come early? Were they going to pack their baggage and head straight off to the airport? Gregory wondered.

Gregory tried to keep his scooter by the garage wall, but it simply slid its way down towards the concrete. One more scratch mark on its handgrips. One more complaint it registered against its ethical treatment. He did not bother to keep it straight and he rushed towards the entrance door. He removed his shoes – without using his hands -- by pressing the back of the shoe in one foot, hard with the toe of the other foot. Even for the socks, he grabbed it using the toes without using his hands, as he had the lunch bag in one hand, and his backpack – the one that could shame even an Everest climbing Sherpa with its multitude of contents inside -- on the other. He could have very well kept them down, sat on the chair by the shoe rack, and could have patiently removed them all, one by one. But boys were boys. Even removing the shoes and socks took their valuable time away – the time that could have been spent on playing one more round of video game, or shooting one more

round of basketball to the hoops in their yard. If the schools had an award for something called, “The Homecoming Clumsy,” Gregory would have shown every other student that his bar was way higher than the rest.

Before he opened the door that was always kept unlocked by his mom, he made a checklist of the items he had to carry home: lunch bag, school bag with the “Planner Folder,” “Parents Folder,” books from the school library, the home work list, musical flute box with the flute properly kept in, and finally, his eye glasses right over his nose. One of the items got missed every day and his mom would make him run back to his school to get them back. Gregory was not the only one who forgot things on a regular basis: the “lost and found” room in his school was a proof of that. The school principal at one point even thought of asking the school district to construct a separate warehouse for the forgotten items.

Gregory wondered whether the presence of his dad that early at his home might affect his afternoon leisure time that day; thinking, he entered the living room and kept his bags on the floor.

On select afternoons, Gregory was allowed to have some playtime on his video games and he always utilized every such opportunity to perfect his skills. All the games, over the time fell for his mastery, and not only that, when he started adventuring in to the online gaming world, he got recognized as a legend in a very short time. His online screen name, “Mr. Galvinizer,” became a popular name in the gaming community. He was just 11 years old, but the gaming world saw a wizard in him that many of the gaming companies had started reaching

out to him to critique on their new games. The shy and calm boy at his school showed his completely different personality in the presence of his gaming console in the confines of his home.

Gregory was surprised to see his mother not standing by the kitchen island making his afternoon snacks – a routine, he got used to. She would always welcome him home with her barrage of questions asking him about the checklist of items he was supposed to bring home back from school; she was never satisfied until he answered all her questions about every details of the homework he was due to work on that day. Seeing her not doing her routine check on him made him a little less anxious, but he got curious to know why she was not there.

"Mom, I am here. Where are you?" he called. There was no reply from her. Their house was big enough to make it difficult for any one in the kitchen to be heard from the rooms inside. "Mom, are you there?" he shouted, that time a little louder than before.

He checked the backyard to see whether she was in her vegetable patch cuddling her cabbages, or caressing her carrots, or teasing her tomatoes. That was her domain that gave her immense peace of mind. As a follower and a promoter of eating healthy food, she loved growing vegetables herself, and one day, she wished herself on having her own little, farm.

She was not in the backyard either.

That time, a little more concerned, he walked towards his mom and dad's room to see whether she was there. As he approached their room, he heard voices of his mom and dad from the office room on the other side of the hallway. His dad seemed to be looking out for some

document and was heard opening and closing the draws in frustration. His mom on the other hand, was trying to help him out. In between the noises of the draws opening and closing, there were bits of conversation that seemed to be about something else. The more he got closer to the office room, the more the conversation got clearer.

"George, do we really have to do this now?" Emily asked. She did not realize Gregory's presence near their room. She was on the floor resting on her knees and was sorting through a pile of folders and loose papers.

"What?" asked George, and expressed his frustration on the missing document. "Damn it! Where is this document? I just kept it in this draw last month."

"Calm down, George! Calm down." Emily was annoyed. "I keep telling that everything must be kept in their own place and nobody listens to me. See, I am the one who is getting dragged in to everything."

"Mom," interrupted Gregory. He waited so long without being noticed and he just notified his presence to his parents.

"Yes, buddy," she replied, still looking for the missing document. "Could you make the snacks by yourself, please? I am a little busy here."

"No worries, mom. By the way, what are you guys doing here? Why is dad so early?"

Emily wanted George to answer Gregory's question and she gave a look at him. George noticed her look but he chose to ignore her. Gregory stood by, expecting some kind of answer from them.

"Greg, could you go and finish your homework?" said George. The message was very clear to Gregory: leave us alone.

Emily gave a stern look at George for his insensitive attitude towards Gregory. Their son asked a simple question and her husband did not even have the slightest inclination to answer him. In addition, she was very upset with George about the events he set out in motion just before.

"George," she rolled her eyes at him, "answer."

Seeing some kind of fight emerging between his parents, Gregory wanted to leave the scene as soon as he could. He did not want to get caught between his mom and his dad's fights and loose his valuable game time that way. He knew, he had a half hour of homework to do and then he could simply immerse himself in his video games.

"Take it easy guys," Gregory said. "I got work to do anyway."

As he took a step towards the kitchen – a long walk in their house terms – there came a response from his dad: "Greg, hold on, please."

There was something important he was about to hear from his dad that his mom did not want to tell herself. It was so important that his dad had to come early from work and to look for some document. Something that his dad showed hesitation in telling him right away, until his mom compelled him to do so.

All of a sudden a sense of fear caught in Gregory and he wanted to run away from that situation. His primal fear was one thing: his parents getting ready for a divorce. He had a few good friends of him at school already going through the pain of their parents' divorces. He heard things from them that it was all of a sudden, and they did not see it coming for them. Any 11 year old who understood what a divorce of his or her parent meant, would easily get rattled by the consequences of

that. Gregory trembled in fear inside. The eerie silence gave more assurance to his doubts that his last days of staying under the same roof with both his mom and dad were on its way.

"Greg, we got something to say," said George, "something, that could affect you."

Gregory looked at his mom for getting more sense out of that response from his dad. She responded with an empty smile and a sympathetic face. Just with her eye movements she gestured George to proceed.

"Buddy…" George hesitated again.

"Are you guys getting a divorce?" blurted out Gregory. He could not hold on to the suspense very long and he asked it out himself.

"NO!" came the response from both. "We are not, honey."

Emily got up immediately and in a flash came closer to Gregory and gave him a tight hug. She acted that way to put away the fears in him.

"Then, what is it?" demanded Gregory. "Why are you not answering me directly and why you both just keep looking at each other? Just tell me. I am a big boy now. I can handle anything."

"Greg, we are going to move to a different town for this school year," came the rapid response from George. He finished the whole sentence in a single breath and looked for Gregory's reaction. As he expected, he saw his son speechless.

Gregory did not respond to what he just heard. He stood petrified. For an 11 year old, the worst fear other than the parent's divorce was to go through the relocation to a different town. It came with the sadness

of loosing the friends, loosing the neighborhood, and all such familiar things. Getting adjusted to a new town, a new neighborhood, and a new school always took time.

"Greg," Emily called him with a consoling voice. She was saddened when she watched the anger incited tears coming out of Gregory's eyes.

"I don't want to move anywhere. I don't want to loose my friends," he screamed. "Mom, tell him not to move."

Ever since their marriage that was five years before Gregory was born, they stayed put in the same town, and to add to that, they just moved in to their first house – their current one – a little later after their marriage. Gregory was conceived, born, and had all his childhood in that house so far. The entire neighborhood was his playground. The shock and pain on him was very clear.

"It is just for two years and we will be back here," consoled Emily.

"No, we won't," said Gregory, wiping his tears, "that was what my friend Daniel told me when he left. He never came back here."

"We will, honey…for sure."

"It is a lie," screamed Gregory. Being casual for most of the time was one thing, but when he got disturbed the words of anger always flowed out of him like an unabated torrent. "You are all liars who care only about yourselves. You don't care anything about me."

"Honey, it is not like that—"

"Mom, let him answer," he snapped, looking at his dad. "See, he is avoiding an eye contact with me. You are lying for him."

"Greg, dad has taken a new job offer. For an architect like him, this is one of the best career opportunities that does not come that often."

“So what? Why he can’t just go by himself? Let him go and live with his boards and drafters. What does his career have to do with me?”

It was a very logical question from a troubled child that most of the parents oftentimes found it very difficult to answer.

“Greg, buddy, we are a family. We just can’t be far apart,” said George. Even for him, the move made him restless, but the prospects that came with that in his career encouraged him to take on some challenges in his life – at the risk of uprooting the lives of his son and his wife.

“I will miss my friends in middle school next year.” Missing Danique – his newfound admirer -- was one thing that Gregory could not accept that easily.

“We understand. It would be just for a couple of years and we will be back here for sure,” said George. All that time, Emily gently rubbed on the back of her son to let him express his emotions. She knew very well about moving from one place to another: her dad was in the armed forces, and growing up, she was never in one place for more than a few years straight.

“Mom, are you going to quit doing what you call the ‘soul food’, then?” Gregory asked. If the whole family had to move, then that question was expected. “What about those people who depend on you? You have been a beacon of hope for many of the organizations who see you as their savior.”

“Yes,” came the short reply from her. More than for Gregory, she was the one who would be letting go of a lot of things she had earned:

her position in the local non-profits that depended a lot on her guidance and support.

Gregory was stunned by his mother's stoic response. He knew very well about her that she never wavered once the decisions were made. She could never be manipulated by emotions. Still, Gregory wanted to try his manipulative techniques on her.

"Mom, you literally light up many people's lives. Are you going to drop everything just like that?"

Emily knew Gregory's intentions very well.

"For the time being only. I will figure something out soon," she replied, in a much more calm voice, usually very different from hers.

Gregory was relentless with his questions.

"What if we move, and we don't like that place? Do we get to come back right away?" Gregory asked.

"We have to make it work, buddy," replied George. "I have already committed myself for two years. I just can't bail out."

"When are we planning to move?"

"A week from now," said George. Just seconds later, he found the document he was looking for – the one that had all the letters of authorization for his move. "Got it," he said in excitement.

The move seemed to be inevitable. No matter how much Gregory protested, his parents have decided to move and he could do nothing to stop them. His mother, who had more commitments than he ever had, had also decided to support his dad. He thought that if he couldn't stop them from moving, at least he could delay their move by a month. He

had something more precious, something he had been working so hard for, coming in a month.

"Dad, can we delay the move by a month?" asked Gregory. The delay in move by a month could mean a world of difference to him.

"What for?" asked George. He asked as if he was clueless.

Emily understood the reason behind. "George, he has his gaming competition next month."

"Gaming competition?" asked George. Once again he was totally oblivious of what it was all about.

"It is an online gaming competition – by invite only -- dad. This year, I got the invite. Don't you remember, I told you a month back?"

George hardly remembered anything in Gregory's calendar of events. Emily always had to remind him even for small things such as the school PTA and the other events.

"The competition is next month and they informed you only a month back?" questioned George. He did not know how prestigious that event was.

"Yes, dad. They invite the gamers only at the very last moment to let them get ready at the fastest. In the gaming world, it is like the 'Maverick's for surfers'. Only the cream of the top gets invited."

George understood the gravity of the situation very well. His son was given a chance that was so honorable, and their move could be an obstacle to it. But George had already committed to the move. He had to be on his new project as soon as possible, and he could not delay that. He had contractual obligations to fulfill. To top that, moving everybody

together made a lot of sense for everyone to get adjusted faster – particularly, for Gregory.

"Why can't you do it from the new place we are moving to?" asked George. He thought the online gaming must be accessible from any place that had the Internet. He was reasonable.

"Dad, you don't understand."

"What?"

"I got to train for that. Before we settle in I would loose very valuable time. I want to come in the top three. I really have to train hard."

"All you need is the Internet connection, correct? I will have it as soon as we are there. You could train as much you want."

To put more sense to George, Emily chipped in. "George, here he has a lot of resources…"

"Such as?" asked George. He wanted to exercise patience, but he was worried about the mother and son combination throwing a wrench at his plans from making the move to happen earlier.

"Such as," she continued, "local clubs for the gamers that provide a lot of strategy. The experience in learning first hand from them is something very valuable. We have a lot of veterans here."

"You could always reach through email," said George. He wanted to justify that through Internet anyone could talk to anyone in any part of the world instantly.

"Still, George, it could hurt his chances."

George was not ready to listen. He had already made up his mind. He had too many things lined up on his new project and he wanted to have their move done by the following week.

"We are moving next week. End of discussion," said George. "But I will make sure that you have all the online resources available there."

Emily did not want to extend the argument. Since her grad school days she had known George, she knew about his explosive anger, and she did not want him to get upset. She herself did a good research on the town they were about to move and it seemed very reasonable in terms of the availability of the Internet access and similar things.

"George, could you tell Greg where we are moving?"

George realized that the most important thing – the place they were about to move to – was still not informed to Gregory.

"It is the town of Gramville in Monte Sereno County."

"Gramville? Where is it? I have never heard of it," responded Gregory. He was very unhappy about moving to a place that was not that popular. Their family was about to move to a god-forsaken place in the middle of nowhere.

"I did my research about it," Emily chimed in, "it does have a good Internet connection."

Gregory did not say a single word. His parents had already made all the decisions. He had to move to a place whose name did not sound good to him. Only having a good Internet connection could help him train for his games very easily. He had very little time to settle down and train.

“I will not forgive both of you if I don’t get to participate in the competition,” said Gregory.

He did not know, what surprises that small town of Gramville was about to give him and what kind of transformation he was going to go through in his life because of that town.

-- END OF CHAPTER --