

Nigel, the Viking

DRAFT ONE

Brent Thomas, 2021

Nigel ran. He ran for his life. His heart thumped in his chest, his arms pumped air, his feet pounded on the ground. The steps could only barely match his beating heart. Behind him, he could hear them coming. There were at least three of them, their feet broke branches and made a great noise as they chased him.

Nigel didn't know why these boys wanted to hurt him. Perhaps it was his golden hair, or his skinny frame that caused them to make him a target. Nigel's breath started to burn as his tiny lungs pumped air in and out. He nearly gave up, but the end of the forest was so near, and his house, his safe place, was only a few hundred meters away. He knew that if the other boys caught him that a beating would follow. His fear compelled him, and those his vision became blurry he ran on.

"Run you little pussy. We're going to beat your ass. Stop, and we won't do you too bad." The voice belonged to Johnny Mackay, the leader of the small band of bullies. Nigel didn't pay heed, and ran on, his home just meters away now. He hit the grass in front of his house and collapsed, his breath strained he gasped for the small bit of air that he could take. He put his head up to look behind and saw the three boys standing on the road outside his house.

"You're lucky you little bitch." Johnny called out. At that very moment the front door of his house burst open and his mother ran to him. The sight of her scared the three boys. She came rushing out, her blonde hair blowing as if in a storm, her blue eyes blazing.

"Go home boys. Right now!" She said in a calm voice that betrayed her face and anger.

The three bullies turned and ran. Her focus was on her son, on his breathlessness. She walked calmly to him, picked him up by the arms, and brushed him off like he was a dog with burrs on him.

“Are you ok Nigel?” She paused to see his reaction, but he just stood on the front lawn hands on his hips gasping for air. ‘Oh, my poor little boy.’ She gave him a curious look. Nigel thought she was looking for the primary defect that had led him to this embarrassing situation. After a few seconds she inhaled deeply and took him up into her strong arms. ‘Don’t worry Nigel, they are gone now. Why were they chasing you?’

“I don’t know, they think I am skinny, and they hate my hair. Everyone in my class has brown or black hair, and mine is nearly white. They hate me.” Tears began to flow down his face.

“Ack, boy. They are children, what do they know? You are a beautiful boy, and you just haven’t filled out yet. You are Norse, you will fill out and then let’s see who chases who. Come, my love, it’s nearly dinner time. Your father will be home soon.”

Nigel cringed at the thought of the disappointment in his father’s eyes. What did he know of bullying? His father was a huge man with a glowing head of near-white hair. No one would ever say a bad thing about him. Nigel had seen his father lifting logs that were far too big for an ordinary man, yet here he was a scrawny child who was prone to be picked on. Father would not understand now that his shame had been realized and he had been rescued by his mother. Father wouldn’t say anything, but the look in his eyes would be enough to shame Nigel for the entire weekend.

Nigel went into his room. The walls were decorated with Marvel Heroes, men and women who had special powers, and special projects; they were everything that Nigel dreamed of. He lay on his bed and looked to the posters, wishing to find hope in the images. If only he had super-strength, super-powers, or special skills – then he could be left alone. He wondered if having all those things would aid his life, and what else might be expected of him in terms of saving the world. He covered his head with a

pillow, tears streamed again down his face until finally he fell asleep; dreaming of super-powers and responsibilities.

Nigel was woken by a gentle knock on his bedroom door. He pulled the pillow from his face, wiped his eyes, and looked to the open door. His father was standing there, larger than life. Nigel could not determine what the look in his father's eyes meant. His crystal blue eyes were damp, but it was not disappointment, nor anger, nor even pity.

"Supper Nigel." He said and turned from the door into the hallway that led to a spacious kitchen. Nigel followed him. The table was set and steaming heaps of food were arrayed in several deep bowls the rich smells filled the room.

Nigel took his seat but did not move to take any food. His mother looked at him with sad eyes and a half-grin. His father was busy scooping masses of food onto his plate, his broad shoulders nearly quivering with anticipation. Say what you may about his father, but there was no doubt that he could eat. His mother stared across at her husband and beamed a smile. She loved to see her men eat their fill. Nigel took tiny scoops, the weariness from running and the stress of flight had stolen his appetite. Neither parent said a word, they ate in silence.

After Nigel had cleaned off his plate and put his dishes in the sink, he slunk back into his room wanting nothing more than to just pull the covers over his head, squeeze shut his eyes, and banish all light. He was almost asleep when there came another rap on the door. Despite his mood Nigel sat up on the side of his bed. The knock had an awfully familiar dad sound, and Nigel knew that his father would not be denied.

"Come in." He weakly called to the door, ashamed of himself for the tremor in his voice. The door opened to show the large silhouette of his father. He was holding a blanket, a book, and a small hat. 'What's all that dad?' His curiosity was peaked.

His father came and sat beside him on the bed.

“What? All of this old stuff?”

“Yes, all that.”

“These are a gift to you, something to remind you of who you are, who we are, and a bit of our history.”

Nigel remained silent, waiting for his father to continue. Instead, his father looked at the items in his hands, and once sadly at his son. He sat on the bed with Nigel, his great weight caused the bed to nearly touch the floor.

“You know, son, that my name is Alf, but did you know that in old Norse that name means ‘elf’?” Nigel simply nodded, although he did not know that definition.

“I bet that you didn’t know, that at your age, I was about the same size as you. I got picked on, chased home like you, and beaten pretty good when my legs failed me.”

Nigel was stunned. In no way could he ever picture his father as skinny and awkward as he was.

“I will tell you the truth Nigel, the men in our family for generations have been scrawny kids who later grew into great men. Actually, our history is filled with the tales of great men, men of honour and valour. Now it is time for you to learn the old ways. I brought you these things to help you understand. So that one day, when you are grown, you will not be a bully. You will be a protector of the weak, and your own family. Come with me.” His father stood up, gathered the things that he had brought, and walked out into the hallway and towards the backdoor.

“Put on your shoes Nigel, but no coat. Here, this will keep your head warm.” He placed a small Viking skullcap on Nigel’s head. It didn’t quite fit, but Nigel did his best to keep it balanced upon his

head. Shoes on his feet Nigel, followed his father out the door and into the backyard. The sun was down, the stars blinked in their courses above. His father took him to the middle of the yard, looked at the ground, and nodded his head.

“Here, this will do just fine.” His father spread the blanket on the ground and nodded to Nigel to sit.

“I have a story for you to read Nigel. It is an old story about our people, about old gods, and their mischief, it is called The Journey. On a dark night just like this my father brought me into a patch of open ground in the forest behind our home. He told me to lay beneath the blanket, shut all troubles out of my head, and read. I was never a strong reader, so it took me a long time – but I stayed there under that blanket until the story was finished. When I rose up, I was a very different person. Now, it is your time. Just read the story and come back in the house when you are finished.” With that his father settled him under the blanket, gave him a flashlight. With a pat on the skullcap his father turned and walked into the night.

The book was old and tattered, it’s cover and pages worn thin by use over the years. Nigel tucked in under his cover, held his flashlight towards the old words and began to read.