Chip Off the Ol' Block

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Chapter 1

Chip. What a name. For my friend, Chip, his name stood for everything that he hated. “Chip off the old block” is what his name was meant to imply. It was as if his whole existence was defined by that of his father’s; after all, the Chip and the block from which it came are made out of the same stuff, right? Maybe this wouldn’t have been so bad if his dad had been a war hero or Michael Jordan. But to be Ron Harlow’s son was nothing to be proud of. In our small town of Ionia, Ohio, it was rather a shame if your last name was Harlow at all.

There were three or four clans of Harlows that still lived in the greater Ionia area at that time. Chip, his two brothers and his mother and father lived on the old Harlow farm that had been in the family since the mid 1800’s. Although Chip didn’t think too highly of his family, he was proud to tell the story of how his great great great grandfather had come over on a ship from Germany and had braved the rugged terrain and bloodthirsty beasts to find this very piece of land, stake his claim and make it his own. I’ve often wondered what Chip’s great great great grandfather might have been like. I could see him as a young man, Chip his spitting image, with those clear blue eyes, pale freckles, and sandy brown hair. I could see him atop his horse surveying the land as he went along, trying to discern if the composition of the soil would be suitable for crops and livestock. I saw the patriarch of the family as a brave, hard-working and determined young man, much like I found Chip to be.

Equally as often, I’ve wondered where along the line the chain broke, so to speak, and the Harlows became a group of mean, lazy, people who were no more skilled at farming than they were at building a nuclear reactor. Whenever you went over to Chip’s house, it looked as if whatever his dad had been working on that day, he dropped it in mid-stride and left his implements right where he had been standing. The tractors were old and rusted, some still sitting in the same pit where they had gotten stuck in the mud months before. The mud, of course, had since hardened; making it look almost like the tractor had driven itself right into a lot of fresh concrete. The house and the barns were badly in need of paint and new shingles. In fact, many of the shingles lay around the yard, Mr. Harlow ‘too busy’ to pick them up or, better yet, to put them back on the buildings.

Chickens ran around the yard, and frequently, the cows did too when they managed to squeeze through a hole in the dilapidated fence that was intended to keep them at bay.

Mr. Harlow could never afford to hire anyone to help him with the work on the farm. “That’s why I had kids.” I had heard him say more than once.

Chip, twelve, Stu, ten, and Jeremy, nine, were each assigned a workload that would shock most people today. A lot of people found it appalling back then but just didn’t have the guts to say anything about it. Chip started his day with feeding the chickens and the cattle and collecting eggs. When he got home from school, he would muck the barn and get the slop for the pigs. How he could carry that slop out to the barn without adding to it the contents of his stomach, I was never sure. How those poor pigs survived on whatever that noxious mixture was composed of was also a mystery.

I can’t remember everything else that Chip had to do but I do remember that his old man always kept him busy. Despite his work, a farm can’t be run by a twelve-year-old boy and Chip’s dad was none too interested in working very hard or long days. Most typically, his dad could be found sitting in his ragged recliner in the living room, watching TV and drinking a Budweiser, while Chip was still out in the barn.

Ron always looked like he had just come from the barnyard and he smelled no better. His best plan in life was to win the lottery by playing scratch-offs, which he spent most of his money on. When I think of Ron Harlow, I still picture one of the bad guys from an episode of *Bonanza*—dirty, a cigarette dangling from his mouth and that cold, smooth smile on his face that was completely devoid of any humanity.

Chip’s mom, Shelley, was a hard woman to describe. With his dad being mean like he was, you would expect Shelley to be mousey and submissive. In some ways she was, but in other ways, she was quite the opposite. For instance, Chip told me that one night when his old man and Shelley were having a real yelling match, Shelley picked up a lamp off of the nearest table and flung it at Ron with everything she had. Ron turned his back but wasn’t able to get out of the way quite in time and the lamp shattered into a million pieces across his shoulder blades. With that, Ron turned around and went upstairs and nothing more was ever spoken of that fight. Shelley may have been able to stand up for herself every now and again but she never did the same for her boys. Ron ruled the roost in that sense and he exercised

his dominion over the boys in any way he saw fit. It wasn't beneath him to use physical force either.

From the genes of Ron and Shelley Harlow came Curtis 'Chip' Harlow. It sounds strange to even say those words, almost like it's an oxymoron. In fact, that's what Chip was: an oxymoron. Chip was an anomaly in so many ways and even at twelve years old, I could appreciate that. On the outside, you might have thought Chip was just like his parents and not only because he looked like them. I am a firm believer that humans are chameleons. We can change our personality, our mannerisms and even our appearance to best suit our surroundings. When we're in a friendly environment, we can drop the masquerade and show our true colors but if you're born into an environment like that of the Harlow homestead, you have to grow a shell much thicker than that of an egg. You have to grow a thick, ugly exoskeleton like a cockroach in order to protect your soft insides from the likes of Ron Harlow and friends.

Chip was no dummy, so that's what he did. He was an expert in survival tactics and his exoskeleton was hard as a rock. I had seen Chip drop a kid on the playground for cheating in baseball and throwing the pitch before he entered the batter's box. Chip had been known to put rubber cement in the teacher's morning coffee and to call out a kid two years older than him for trying to take the last piece of dry, dust-flavored chocolate cake in the lunch line at school.

No, Chip Harlow was no softie that was for sure. I had avoided him like the plague, hoping to only fly under his radar so as to never become a target of his shenanigans. I was able to do this successfully until our sixth-grade year, when Chip and I were placed in the same class. At recess, we ended up playing baseball on the same team and occasionally we lined up next to each other when the class got ready to go to lunch. Whenever I got near him, I made a point to remain quiet and to avoid looking him in the eyes, much like one would act around a grizzly bear if they happened upon one while hiking in the backwoods. I should have known that I wouldn't be able to avoid him forever.