

Chip Off the Ol' Block



L. A. Sayler

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CHIP OFF THE OL' BLOCK

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Chapter One

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.

Chapter Two

One afternoon in late spring, our class was outdoors and we were, as usual, playing baseball on the playground. I was on second base and Chip was up to bat. He let the first pitch go by, which the umpire, a kid named Gordon DuChene, called a strike. Unfazed, Chip continued to stare down the pitcher. He turned his head, spit in the dirt and raised the bat back over his right shoulder. The pitcher threw the ball and yet another strike whizzed by. Still no reaction from Chip. With a smug grin on his face, the pitcher threw the last pitch. His eyes fixed on the ball, Chip swung his aluminum bat with ease and grace and the ball sailed away toward left field, arcing like a diver. I took off running and Chip dropped his bat, sprinting for first. He rounded first and easily closed in on second. At that moment, he had to decide whether to push on to third or to hold up at second. Without looking back, I headed for home and Chip decided that he could just make it to third if he tried. The left-fielder had the ball in hand at this point and the ball was thrown just as Chip pushed off of second base. It would be close. Chip ran like a madman toward third, allowing his momentum to carry him to the bag as he stretched his hands out in front of him and came sliding to a halt on top third base. SAFE. Everyone cheered for Chip and high-fived me as I ran toward the dugout. Just at that moment, the recess bell rang, signaling that it was time to return to class.

As Chip got up and dusted himself off, a look of panic flooded over his face. His hand flew to his neck and his eyes searched the ground. “My claw”, he yelled, “I lost my bear claw.”

Our teammates looked at Chip, looked at each other, then their eyes turned back toward the school.

“Sorry man, we can’t be late or we’ll get detention,” said Joe Moya, struggling to avoid Chip’s eyes.

Jason Timms echoed Joe’s sentiment, saying, “Yeah, I can’t afford to have any more tardies this year, I’ve gotta go.”

The others murmured their agreement, looked sheepishly away and took off at a slow jog toward the school.

I stood there for a moment looking at Chip, surprised at the emotion and worry that I saw in his face. I half expected Chip to call the guys a bunch of wussies and threaten to beat the living daylights out of them but he didn’t.

He saw me still standing in the dugout, the only one not staring at the ground or sidling away and he caught my gaze. “Danny, my grandpa gave me that necklace—it had the claw from a bear on it that my great great great grandpa killed with his bare hands.”

I considered my options for a moment and thought of having to miss tomorrow’s recess for being late to class today. Then I thought of what it might mean to be on Chip Harlow’s bad side and decided that detention was the lesser of the two evils. I trotted over to Chip, got down on my hands and knees with him and began searching the grass for the bear claw that had been strung onto his necklace that broke as he slid into third.

After what seemed like a year but was actually only thirty seconds, I had located the claw, wedged under the bag. I held it up in the air between my two fingers like a pirate would hold a gold coin. Chip's eyes rested on the claw, then made their way back to me. His mouth was drawn into a closed smile, as if he was overjoyed but didn't want me to know it.

“Danny, you found it. You sonofagun, you found it.” He clapped me hard on the back and we stumbled to our feet. I handed the claw to him and he slipped it into his pocket. I was still at a loss for words. Chip didn't say anything either as we sprinted toward the school but the look in his eyes expressed how grateful he was.

I've wondered what might have happened if I had run into the school with the rest of our classmates that day when the bell rang. I'm not entirely sure but I know that I would have missed out on something. It's too early in my story to do any more foreshadowing than that.

Chapter Three

Before I get too carried away, I suppose I should tell you a little about myself or rather, a little about my twelve-year-old self. My name is Dan Meyers. Back then, I was Danny to everyone. I spent a good deal of my post-adolescent life trying to get people to shorten my name to Dan. Just Dan. In 1995 though, I was Danny and I had no trouble with the extra two letters at the end of my name.

I've mentioned that my life was pretty ordinary and it was; however, it was ordinary in a good way. I had two good parents, Patrick and Catherine Meyers. My mom worked part-time as a receptionist at a doctor's office and my dad was a salesman at a large farm equipment store in the next town. He wasn't particularly a 'country' person but he had a good heart and he wasn't your typical pushy salesman. He had an easy way about him that helped him connect with his clients in an unassuming way. He really wanted to help out the farms that he worked with, not sell them something that they couldn't afford.

My mom was first and foremost a mom and worked only three days a week. My dad and I were her first priority and she made it her personal mission to see that we were well-fed, clean and presentable at all times. As an only child, I sometimes felt smothered by my mom. I knew she meant well but her questioning and endless 'suggestions' sometimes were a bit much for a boy. On the other hand, I craved more attention from my dad, as most boys do. He was a bit aloof at home, not so aloof he didn't even know I existed but not so attentive that he knew I wanted to be an archaeologist when I grew up.

Together we lived as one, primarily happy, clan in our two-story home about five miles from downtown Ionia. Are you bored yet? Because I think I am. It's never the good stories with few imperfections that make the front lines. No, it's the juicy, dirty, gruesome events and tales that we find interesting. Given this, I guess it's not all bad to have led a fairly boring childhood. Then again, like I said, sometimes you need the perspective of time to find that it wasn't so boring after all.

Back to me then. As a child and as an adult I suppose, I have been a straight-laced kind of guy. If you saw me today, you would never guess my profession and would probably assume me to be an accountant or an actuary. At twelve, I seemed to also be on the fast track to a desk job with a calculator. I was the kind of kid who picked up after himself at lunch, always tucked in my shirt, which was practically a crime given the grungy styles of the 90's, and never turned in a homework assignment late. I was good at school and I enjoyed being good at school. I think that we all need to have something that we feel 'special' in and school was that for me. I got straight A's and I took pleasure in an approving remark from my teachers after an exam or a smile from my dad when I brought home another perfect report card. My grades, for me, were my assurance that I was a pretty decent human being and I had something going for me in this world. My grades and my brains would get me to where I wanted to go in life, if I just kept working hard. No slacking, no skipping an assignment and no forgetting to study. No sir. Never.

Are you getting the idea that I was a bit on the nerdy side? If so, then I've done a good job of painting the picture for you. Yes, I had glasses yes, I had braces and yes, eventually,

I would have a long and arduous battle with acne. Thankfully at this point in life, I hadn't yet hit puberty and wouldn't have to deal with that issue for a few more years.

Don't get me wrong—I also wasn't the type to sit in the basement playing my Gameboy all day long either. I loved sports, especially baseball and I spent a lot of time outdoors. I had a pretty good set of friends with whom I spent a good portion of my time. Our group of guys was mostly concerned with 'being cool' though. Do you know what I mean by that? The guy at the top of the heap is the one that never cries, always wears the Nike swoosh on his shoes, doesn't let the other guys tell him what to do, hits the most homeruns and thinks girls are as repulsive as a liverwurst sandwich. We were always trying to be tough and one-up each other.

This is typical of guys, I realize but looking back, I laugh at how much time we spent just trying to convince each other that we were tough as nails. Really, we were just a bunch of kids, hoping to grow up more quickly than we needed to. More often than not, I was at the back of the pack but for the most part, I was just happy to have a pack to be a part of.

Chapter Four

As we were running back into the school the day that I found Chip's bear claw, I didn't quite know what to expect from him. I was still scared of him but not in the same way I had been before. Seeing Chip standing out in the baseball diamond with that crushed look on his face had made him more human to me. He was a boy, not unlike me, who could actually have an emotion other than anger or indifference. Heck, he had even smiled at me, which was more than most could hope to get from Chip Harlow in their lifetime.

As we entered the classroom, out of breath, our faces red, it was safe to say I felt the weight of my decision to help Chip finally rest on my shoulders. The rest of the class was already seated, quiet and looking at Ms. Stenwell as she wrote on the chalkboard. Naturally, every head in the classroom turned to look at Chip and I. My face turned, not a whiter shade of pale but a brighter shade of crimson.

"Chip. Danny. Nice of you to join us this afternoon." Sarcasm poured from Ms. Stenwell. "Would you care to share with the class where you've been since the bell rang?"

Words spewed from my mouth at a rate of ninety miles an hour. Diarrhea of the mouth, if you will. "Ms. Stenwell, we're really sorry but Chip lost his bear claw out on the baseball diamond and his great great great grandpa gave it to him, so he couldn't just leave it out there and I stayed behind to help him find it because if we didn't find it now probably someone else would find it and take it home and never try to find out who the real owner was—"

"It was my fault, Ms. Stenwell," Chip cut me off mid-ramble. "My necklace broke when I slid into third base and Danny stayed behind at recess to help me find it. Honest. It wasn't Danny's fault."

Ms. Stenwell and the rest of the class looked, not shocked but just the slightest bit surprised. Never before in the history of our sixth-grade class had Chip Harlow stuck up for another kid and intentionally taken the blame. A long moment of silence followed.

"That may well be but you boys know what the rules are. Coming in late from recess means you'll have to stay in from tomorrow's recess. That's the way the cookie crumbles," said Mrs. Stenwell, dryly.

What an embarrassment. I was shamed, mortified, humiliated, all because I was too scared to run from Chip Harlow. I walked to my desk and slumped down in my seat, feeling defeated, too dejected to even pay attention to Ms. Stenwell as she reviewed yesterday's lesson which, as per usual, I had already gotten 100 percent on. I slowly turned my head to my left and saw Chip sitting in his chair two rows over from me. I saw his hand reach down to his right pocket and search for the bear claw that lay within. Locating it, he squeezed it with his fingers and the slightest smile came over his face.

As if the punishment of embarrassment in front of the class the day before hadn't been enough, I felt another wave of shame rush over me as the noon bell rang that next day. Kids quickly stood up, flinging their chairs backward in the process as they rushed out of the classroom door toward the playground. Ten seconds later, Chip and I were the only two students remaining in the classroom.

Ms. Stenwell stood up from her desk and walked to the front of the classroom. “Now boys, I have to go to a meeting in the teacher’s lounge for the next fifteen minutes, so I can’t stay here to watch you. Danny, I know I can trust you to serve out your detention here in quiet. See that Chip does the same. No talking, no laughing, no playing games and no leaving your seats, OK?”

I nodded very solemnly, trying to conjure up any shred of sympathy from Ms. Stenwell by giving her the biggest puppy dog eyes that I could muster. It didn’t work. Chip just sat with his arms crossed.

Ms. Stenwell left the room and Chip and I were left in silence. I looked around the room which was decorated with our art and various assignments from the prior few months. One wall was covered in short stories we had written about our families. We were supposed to talk about our parents and siblings and what we did together as a family and what our favorite games were and blah, blah, blah. Right in the middle of the line of papers was one assignment, not hand-written on wide-ruled notebook paper but typed on clean white computer paper. Jeff Jones. The kid’s handwriting was so bad that he had to be given a computer to type all of his assignments on. We called him Chicken Scratch Jones, which didn’t seem to bother him at all. Hanging next to his was Rachel Hanson’s paper. Everyone in the class knew that Rachel had lost her sister, Sierra, last summer. Sierra was considerably older than Rachel. In fact, I think she might have been in the tenth or eleventh grade when she passed. Sierra was one of those girls you would see waving from the back of a convertible each year in the homecoming parade. She was a cheerleader, ran with the popular crowd and boy was she ever a looker. She died in a diving accident that summer prior—she broke her neck when she dove into a friend’s pool and hit the bottom head on. Rachel never spoke about her sister or her death but being a small town, we all knew the details and had heard the story told a dozen times. I wondered what Rachel would have written about Sierra in her essay hanging on the wall. What would her family do for fun now that they had suffered such a tragedy? How could they play games, go to the movies or even eat ice cream together without thinking of Sierra? That was the first time I thought about what a crappy hand some people are dealt. My mind settled on a phrase I had heard my dad say frequently: ‘Life’s rough, then you die’. Truer words were never spoken.

I was startled by the realization that someone was occupying the desk next to me. “What are you staring at?” Chip asked.

“Oh, um, just looking at our essays on the wall over there,” I said nervously.

“What a load of nonsense those were. A bunch of sappy rainbows and fluffy bunnies. That’s what Ms. Stenwell wanted us all to write about. I’ll bet she got a surprise when she read mine.”

“We probably shouldn’t be talking,” I said, my eyes looking out the door, expecting Ms. Stenwell to return at any moment.

“Gee, you really are a straight arrow, aren’t you Meyers? Don’t worry, she’s not coming back. I’ll lay you odds that she’s just lighting up her second cigarette in the teacher’s lounge. Chill man, just chill.”

“OK,” I replied lamely, not daring to contradict him.

“By the way, thanks for what you did.” The words came from Chip in a stiff, awkward spurt. It was clear that these were not words that crossed his lips very often.

“That’s OK,” I said. “I would have wanted someone to do the same thing for me.”

We sat in silence for a moment, not looking at each other. I suddenly wanted to fill that silence, recognizing the opportunity our conversation presented.

“Did you say that your grandpa killed that bear, with his bare hands?”

“It was my great great great grandpa. But yeah, that’s what my grandpa told me when he gave it to me. He said that great-grandpa Cletus was out hunting in the woods behind our house. You probably wouldn’t be interested in the whole long story though.”

“No, I would,” I said earnestly.

“OK...Well, he was crouched in a bunch of scrub trees, waiting for a deer or a squirrel to come along. It had already been a long winter and at that time in March, the family was running low on food. He was almost dozing off when he heard a loud crunch, crack. Then, the biggest black bear you ever saw came into his sights. The bear musta woken up early, because it sure as heck wasn’t time for them to be out and about. Cletus was shaking but he raised his gun slowly, took aim and fired. He was a sure shot and he hit the sucker right in the gut.”

My eyes had gone wide, I’m sure. Not only had I never seen a black bear but I had a hard time imagining any person who would be brave enough to tangle with one.

“But one bullet isn’t enough to kill a black bear. The bear just got mad and started pawing the air and jumping around. Now Cletus was really scared—he stood up and loaded another bullet into his gun. He brought up the gun and POW. He hit the bear, this time square in the chest. But that monster still wouldn’t go down.”

“Holy cats,” was all I could say.

“Now, he saw Cletus and he started to run at him. Cletus scrambled to get another bullet in his gun but the bear was coming too fast. He turned to run away but the bear reached out with his paw, which was the size of a basketball, and tripped him up. Cletus’s gun flew out of his hand as he fell and the bear was right on top of him before he knew it. The thing’s standing over him, drooling and growling to beat all but he keeps his cool. Real easy-like, he reaches down and pulls the Bowie knife from his belt. Then, in one swing, he jabs the knife up through the bear’s jaw and right into his skull.” Chip clenched his fist and thrust it up into the air, imitating great great great grandpa Cletus.

“The thing fell down on top of him and pinned him to the ground. It took him two hours to crawl out from under that bear but when he got out, he had enough meat for three months and a bear skin rug to boot. He took this claw off of the bear and said it always brought him good luck. He gave it to his grandson then my grandpa gave it to me.” He paused. “I’ve sometimes thought that it seems kind of far-fetched but I guess it’s more fun to believe that it’s true. It makes a better story anyways.” Chip held the bear claw in his hands, considering its powers.

“That’s wicked sweet,” I said. It even sounded funny to me to hear myself say that. In my attempt to sound cool, I had taken it a step past authenticity.

“Yeah, you had to be hard core back in the day to survive,” Chip replied. “My old man still has the gun that Cletus used to kill that black bear. If you want to come over to my place after school, I’ll show it to you. Maybe we can even shoot it if you want.”

Holy schnikes. “Yeah, that’d be cool, I guess,” I tried to say it nonchalantly but the thought of firing a gun made me a little nervous. “I’ll have to check with my mom when I get off the bus, though. Then I could come over after that.”

“Why do you have to check with your mom?”

“Because she’ll get mad if I just disappear and don’t tell her where I’m going.”

“Oh, OK. They keep you on a pretty tight leash, huh?”

I just nodded, not really sure what to say.

The school bell rang—our detention had come to an end. The first and last detention I would ever serve. Chip stood up and moved back to his desk as kids started to filter back into the room. Ms. Stenwell made her way back to the classroom as well and I thought I detected the faint smell of stale cigarette smoke on her cardigan.

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