The day that I learned about fairness was the day that I drank the best can of Coke of my whole life.

Not the first time I'd ever heard about it; fairness, like in one of those storybooks that parents read to their kids to leave life lessons behind. Or weird German fairytales that end with selfish children dying of distended bellies from gluttonous indulgence of forest-grown candy. No, nothing like that.

Fairness. Justice. Truth and karma and all that shit. The divine force that befalls those poor souls who flip a risky middle finger to the rules, and pay for such pride. Often more dearly than they thought they'd have to. But real life isn't like that. It's just plain not always the case.

Take Pete. As an example, I mean. My best friend, at the time: Peter Travers. He was there, that day. I can't separate the idea of comeuppance from the memory of him.

Pete had always been quick on his feet. That's gotta be worth something, right? The ability to lie at a moment's notice isn't the only expression of versatility, although that's basically exactly where this story is headed. No, to be able to tell a convincing lie requires close attention to what facts are already on the table. No one can prove you wrong if the facts that are in play all line up. Keeping track of what's been said and what hasn't just happened to be something that Pete was pretty good

at. And to tell the truth (no pun intended), I don't recall ever having noticed that about him until the Summer of 1991.

Me? I guess I'm just not as lucky.

In the 90s, every city, big or small, must have had a mall like this. The Bayers Road Shopping Centre first opened in 1963, offering free elephant rides to 10 children at a time on opening day. On a real elephant. Peter and I were both born in 1980, and we only knew its most modern iteration. By then, it was a teenage boy's dream, boasting a hundred shops or more. Maybe it was only thirty or forty. It sure felt like more than enough to me. It had a toy store or two, a Baskin Robbins and an A&W, and a coin-filled fountain surrounded by leather-leafed lilies. The department store was next to the smoke shop. The pet store was down the hall from the liquor mart. And the bowling alley had an arcade permanently stocked with, oh, a dozen-and-a-half games, including a crowded Street Fighter II cabinet and a blinking Terminator 2 pinball machine. At least, it seemed permanent to us. Escalators and balconies. When you're 11 years old, the world that you know is the only world that's ever existed. And your experience with it makes you its king.

That was how Peter and I felt, every day of that summer. How I did, anyway. 1991 is a big year for an urban boy from the suburbs of a small city. There were around 180, 000 people living in Halifax then, and an incredibly small number of them made up our social circle. But when you're leaving elementary school –

bound for Junior High in the fall – you've had six years to get to know your day-to-day surroundings. The other kids you grew up with. The neighbourhood it all took place in. You were the master of your world, and there was nothing that anyone could teach you about it that you didn't already know. The railroad tracks we walked, the houses we trick-or-treated, and the corner stores that we spent where our meagre allowances in. The mall that you called your own.

I'd lived in Fairview my whole life, just over the railbed and up the hill from Bayers Road. The middle kid between two sisters, my parents owned a small house halfway up Central Avenue. Dark blue siding and white trim. A driveway with hockey net in front of a dented sheet metal shed. They were good parents, too. Kept me enrolled in some form of baseball league from the moment I was old enough to play, and Peter sometimes played, too. Although Pete, he'd never hit a single ball; barely swung at any pitch, in fact. No one'd blame you for taking that to mean he was a little slow, but all that it really meant was that he was scared of the damn ball. Poor guy'd seen a shortstop leap for a line drive and catch it right in the mouth. Was walked off the field, spitting blood and teeth and everything. Ol' Pete put up with being made to play by his parents, but he languished in left field and never touched a ball again. Me? I'd batted anywhere between .300 and .425 for years. Played first base pretty often. Even had the navy blue team jacket with my name embroidered on the shoulder and everything. SCOTT T (T

for Turner), in big block letters. Pete? Guy's glove was as stiff as the day he'd been bought it.

He was a good friend of mine, all through those first 6 years of elementary school. Neither of us knew it yet, but in Junior High I'd be getting lower marks, and need to be moved out of French Immersion from Grade 8 onwards. Pete and I'd be in different classes, and would be parting ways in a couple short years. It's funny, in a way; life is like that. People who you thought were best friends turn out to need to be convenient, too —once your paths stop crossing with regularity, you just don't connect anymore. Figuratively, and literally. I once left my favourite hockey stick at my uncle's house, and by the time I got it back, I'd already forgotten about it and made another one my go-to.

Pete lived a few kilometres away, in an old Victorian farmhouse at the bottom of the Clayton Park hill. You could call that the next subdivision over from mine, although it was a pretty long walk. His parents found a hundred-year-old gem with a little more than two acres of yard, front and back, not counting the forest they were attached to. He and his younger brother had a couple of forts set up back there, and so did the neighbourhood teens. You had to steer clear of those areas. Pete decorated his forts with spruce boughs, and they did theirs with beer bottles; some broken, some just plain tossed aside. All of them were

rotting into the forest floor, and there was one or two spots in there where you'd have to watch your footing.

I grew up a block away from my ballfield and my babysitter. Pete grew up picking raspberries while barefoot.

The 1990s. A world right before the internet changed everything. In those days, schoolyard stories were as matter-of-fact as gospel. I remember hearing once that Mountain Dew made you impotent. Even today I still won't touch the stuff. There was no fact-checking, no online research or communities to ask, no Mountain Dew section in any encyclopedia that I ever read. None of us were plugged in yet. There was no such thing. We weren't online personas. We were mass consumers. And we wanted to be won. For an 11-year-old boy to want to trade money for it, it needed to be bright, colourful, or sugary (or all three). And oh, all of it was. Every article of clothing was a garish fluorescent. Every advertisement was obnoxiously loud. And every 1-to-5-cent gummy candy was imbued with only the finest artificial flavourings. *That* was marketing. These days, we've got what we call "Loyalty Programs". Earn imaginary points towards your next free cup of coffee. Incentives. Back then? We had contests. Win five thousand dollars. Win a chance to appear in the upcoming He-Man movie. Hell, win a can of pop right then & there by checking under the tab of the can you just emptied.

And wouldn't you know it? Pete and I each had a free can of Coke in our pockets—all we had to do was trade in our winning tabs.

So, when on one hot summer day we found ourselves with, oh, a couple bucks each and nothing better to do, we agreed to meet at the Mall. Pretty standard fare, really.

Bayers Road Mall was small enough that you could wander the whole length of it in about a half an hour. One wing was a single story high, and the other was two. And we wandered those halls east to west, top to bottom. Sometimes, as bored 11-year-old boys often do, we'd knock around around the asphalt surrounding it, too. Fire hose access points, propane tanks in chainlink cages, and a single loading dock peppered with wooden pallets in various degrees of degradation. Our scenery. And we knew every corner's every brick. I suppose the only other thing you need to know about the place was, in the crook of its L-shaped footprint, there was a freestanding building. An IGA. That's a now-defunct grocery store chain, and one of the only two real brands that had sprouted up everywhere in Atlantic Canada. They're not around anymore, having been consumed by the bigger chains that started further west.

We walked the inside and we walked the outside. Once on the asphalt (in front of the window for the poster & framing store) we felt the sweat hanging on our brows; mine being sopped up by the ballcap I was wearing. The July sun is a hell of a thing, in

Nova Scotia. We lived in Canada, sure, but the thermometer tended to linger somewhere in the low 30s. Think of something like 90 degrees Fahrenheit, if that helps you. Hold the humidity around 90%, and you begin to get an idea of it. Sometimes, you'd swear you could feel your body cutting through the thick, hot air itself. Like walking through gelatine, if you could heat it up in an oven first.

Thanks to that unbearable summer stifle, those aluminum tabs burned a hole straight through our pockets. All that stood between us and the IGA was a hundred yards of July heat and a parking lot on the left. One asphalt expanse later, and through the automatic doors, we walked the beige linoleum floor, an ice cold can in each right hand. As we strolled along the row of cashiers and their conveyor belts. I can't recall, now, which of us had the idea; I guess it doesn't matter now. One of us observed: "y'know… I don't think anyone's even looking at us. I bet we could walk through an empty lane and right out the door". (The words "without paying" were left unsaid.) The one of us who hadn't made the suggestion quietly agreed with it, nodding his head.

So we did.

We steered into a vacant checkout aisle, took a left at its end, and – momentarily blinded by the beaming sun in those big plate glass windows that grocery stores used to have – walked straight towards the automatic doors. They opened for us, and

we emerged into hot, white, parking lot air as they shut automatically behind.

Minutes later, we were walking the barely-air-conditioned Bayers Road halls with half-empty Cokes in our hands and smug satisfaction on our faces. We'd done it. On the outside, we basked in the thrill and we strolled lazily, not a care in the world. On the inside, we danced on a trampoline with the butterflies in our stomach and felt like we'd just gotten away with every sin we'd ever committed. I chugged my Coke and, I tell you, I only tasted what I can only call pure bliss.

It makes all the sense in the world we'd do it again. Try our luck. We agreed on that idea even quicker than the first time around.

And that was how it came to be that me and Peter Travers were arrested by IGA's in-store security one hot summer day in 1991, after the best can of Coke I'll ever drink.

We walked out those automatic doors as kingpins who'd just found the perfect crime; but those doors didn't shut behind us.

Instead, a gruff-and-bored monotone grunted: "you wanna show me the receipts for those Cokes, boys?"

Time froze as it only does for guilty men.

One of us fumbled through some sort of “she didn’t give us a receipt”, and the man forced us to re-enter the store and walk that linoleum one more time.

“We’ll just ask her to print one for you,” the man with the name tag said, “let’s start walking at Lane #1 and we’ll stop at the cashier who rang you up.”

And, yeah, we both slunk our way past every single cashier in the row. And kept on walking. Right past the last one. We were caught, stuck in a steady march, and we were now perfectly trapped. No escape.

“That’s what I thought.” His voice sounded even more gruff thank to his short beard. Just as bored, though. “You two keep right on walking.”

Dead ahead of us were the swinging double doors that led to the backrooms of the store. This was forbidden territory, as a kid. Those beat-up, scuffed doors — grey with maroon trim – led to the polar opposite of the streets paved with comfort and confidence that we grew up on. Even on a dare: you didn’t fuck around past the “STAFF ONLY” doors. That threshold was a bridge that went from our world to theirs, and you didn’t cross that bridge until you were older, quieter, and already at least a little lost.

We were ushered beyond those doors, and all I can remember is cinder-block walls painted a sickly light yellow and

a concrete floor painted grey. The smell of cardboard, metal, and bad coffee.

A hallway and a left turn and we were seated at his desk; Pete and me on different sides of it, and the bearded man in the middle. The office was untidy, with an overflowing metal trashcan and a coat thrown over the door, which he left open behind him. Fluorescent lights burned overhead.

There was a framed certificate on the wall, off-centre and just a little crooked. The certificate was crooked in the frame.

There was a cork bulletin board. I remember Post-It notes bearing phone numbers. And Polaroids of surly, blurry faces, bearing handwritten captions like “Meat Thief”. My god, we were the same as them.

While I panicked inwardly over the horror of photographic evidence hanging for all time in my neighbourhood grocer, Pete was the picture of calm. I thought he looked like couldn’t be less comfortable, too; he was shifting in his chair, slouching, and he was even rolling his eyes. I thought he was somehow unaware of the mess we were in. I later found out that he just wasn’t surprised that we were in it. He sat in this cinder-block cell and he thought only of getting it over with.

With shoplifting form and chewed-up pen in hand, the beard turned towards Pete and began.

“Name?”

“Mike Day.”

Sure was a good thing the man wasn’t looking at me; my blue eyes must’ve been wide as the whole damn sky.

“Address?”

“31 Mayflower Drive.”

Pete was lying about *his* name and *his* address, alright, but he was rhyming off pure fact. Mike Day was in our year, too, and he was what you’d call a bad kid. He got into trouble a lot. Smoking. Stealing. Breaking into peoples’ houses at night, just to “fuck them up a bit”, as he’d put it. Pete had a knack for being able to be friends with almost anyone, and he’d spent some time with Mike, playing his Super Nintendo and eating his mother’s junk food. Mike’s was a small house, just a few blocks from here. His mother got it in the divorce, a couple years earlier. You could tell she was an energetic person, younger inside than out. But her life, her job, and her kid kept her weighed down. Now that I look back, it’s clear to me that she was struggling to enjoy it all.

Pete had no problem filing out that form by memory, reciting every identifiable fact about Mike Day and his contact details. When the form was all said & done, I even watched as the security guard passed him the desk phone and forced him to call

“his” mother. Pete knew, of course, that Mrs Day was hard at work at that time in the afternoon, so he dialled the number and left a message on the machine, with detective Beardman adding his own gruff admonitions to it. They hung up, and somewhere, a few blocks over, an answering machine’s red light started to blink. The Day household was in for a bit of a dramatic evening, but none of the three of would be there to see it.

Satisfied, the man turned to me. I sat in the fictional spotlight’s glare and gulped. This was my turn. That same sweat was soaking my forehead again, although not from the day’s heat, this time. Who could I be? What other address or phone number did I know? What other name could I give?

“And you?”

What other name could I give?

“Scott… what? Scott T…”

There are plenty of times, of course, when an uncounted number of thoughts pass through your head in a flaring instant. Even ones that don’t really make any sense. Did he just say my name? Does he know me? Know my parents? Is he a teacher? Is he a coach? One second had passed, and already I was out of time for an excuse. How in the fuck did this beard know my name?

And there it was. The man silently jabbed a finger at my left shoulder. Emblazoned in clean white block letters on a dark blue jacket's sleeve. My name. Embroidered. My baseball jacket.

Well, shit.

My face sank into a defeated frown and my spine softened into a useless stack of mush. This was what it felt like to give up entirely.

"Turner." I couldn't lie. I mean, really; what other name could I give?

I was done. I had no room in me for ideas, no schemes or falsehoods that could save me now. I wondered if I could flub my phone number, but knowing we'd soon be calling my parents until they answered told me it'd be a waste of time. And I didn't want to get in more trouble than I already was. We filled out that form with Scott Turner's personal information and we called his mom to tell her about the criminal she'd raised. My mom.

She answered the ring with a melodic "hello" and I was made to mumble "Mom, this is detective whatever-his-name-was" and hand the phone over to the beard before she could reply with more than a soft "…what?". He spoke to her, and then he hung up, replacing the phone to its previous angle on the busy desk.

Pete and I were each handed our paperwork, all signed and ready for our parents' future filing, and the man stood up and

faced us both. To be honest, he'd been pretty damn professional up to this point. You could tell he didn't give a shit about this job, and that he wasn't put on this Earth to catch young fools putting the company's profits into their pockets. He had a better career in his future, I'm sure. (I wonder how long he kept working there?) He made a deliberate and blistering eye contact with each of us, and said words I'll never forget:

"Alright, get outta here. You're banned from this Sobeys location for the next six months." That was enough of a cold splash of reality in our 11-year-old faces, but he added: "And if I see you in here again, I'll kill yas."

Didn't even walk us out the door. That walk of shame was ours alone.

Once back in the sunlight, we both felt it: the world was a different place now. Changed. Bitter. Somehow smaller and a hundred times as big, too. We were shown, in rather rough fashion, that we weren't shit; and didn't amount to shit. Being forced past the STAFF ONLY borderline, it just shone a great big light on the fact that every shop in our mall – in *every* mall – had that same boundary. And we were little pissants who belonged on *this* side of them. There was at least 50% of our neighbourhood we'd never, ever see. We didn't know shit. That, and we were criminals now. With records and all.

Well, I was. I felt ashamed and sheepish, and at least a few inches shorter than I did that morning. All kinds of hell awaited me at home, and I probably shouldn't dawdle on my way across the tracks and up the hill. Shit, was I in for it.

Pete, on the other hand, was in a clown of a mood, elated and perky. Guy had a spring in his step that wasn't really there before. He was trying to hide it, out of respect to the dead man walking alongside him, but he was scot-free (no pun intended). No one else in this world knew what he'd done, and he wasn't going to pay a comeuppance for any of it. He'd gotten away with his first crime, and any guilt he felt was for the fact that he felt little to no guilt at all. *That* was fairness. Or the complete lack of it. What the hell's the difference, anyway? No storybook moral to learn, here. No fairy tale world. Take the universe and put it through a meat grinder and sift away everything that isn't essential, and show me one grain of fairness.

We walked away from Bayers Road as different people than the 11-year-olds who'd walked toward it. The sun was just as bright, the air just as thick. I didn't have my old confidence anymore, but a battle scar on my psyche the size of a highway overpass. I didn't have a can of Coke in my hand anymore, either, but a folded-up security man's handwritten proof of my shoplifting.

Pete was changed too, although he'd learned the golden virtue of a solid lie. I don't think he came to make a habit of it,

but he'd clearly learned a new dance step. His one-size-smaller-Halifax was an oyster just full of pearls for his plucking.

Even now, as I write this in my mid-forties, I can't separate the image of Peter Travers stashing the evidence of his crime in an empty cigarette packet, (which was then stuffed in a guard rail by the parking garage), from my own sense of justice and cosmic balance. Or lack thereof.

Peter Travers had always been quick on his feet. Me? Hell, I guess I'm just not as lucky.

What a can of Coke that was, though. Justice itself isn't even as sweet as that. Shame that Coke tastes pretty damn bitter to me now.