

*The Ninth
Acolyte Reader*



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Not Again

by Mark Derby

I shouldn't have the radio on this late, but the announcer just said Jared Felton tried to get in the Guinness Book of World Records by crawling on his hands and knees for more than twenty-seven miles. Maybe I heard it wrong. I can't imagine you doing something that stupid. Could it be you, Jared? You can't hear me, I know this is just pretend, but sometimes when I'm trying to go to sleep, I like to talk to you. Every day I still think about us. Why couldn't things have been different?

Did you get Mrs. Hurley's class again? She was great. Mr. Stratton, my teacher at this new school, he isn't like her at all. But being in sixth grade is okay. On the playground I used to be afraid of the big kids, but now I'm one of them.

Anyway, on my way to class today I noticed my arrows were gone. From the signs I made yesterday for the school carnival. I'd cut them out of construction paper with these little arrows sticking out the sides, showing how to get there. But some dork tore them off. I worked hard on those arrows, I was proud of them, but when I told Mr. Stratton about it he didn't care. So I started to cry, even though I knew I shouldn't, not over such a little thing.

Then he got really mad. He took me out to the hall and pushed me against the wall, holding me by my shoulders. He told me I'm a big boy, I'm too old for that, he's not going to have any crybabies in his class, and when I looked up at him I got so scared I cried even more, I couldn't help it.

Recess came right after that, so I waited in the bathroom for a minute. Until my eyes weren't so red anymore.

Me and Greg met and walked to the end of the field, behind the backstop. When I told what Mr. Stratton did, Greg said, "He shouldn't have pushed you around like that, Nicholas. He could have hurt you."

"Really? You think so?"

"I wish we could do something to get even. He's just a big bully." Greg always stands up for me. You'd like him, Jared. He's my best friend, after you.

But I still felt bad. "All my teachers before have been nice to me."

"Stratton's just stupid," he said. "Have you ever noticed what he

does when he's taking the class back upstairs after recess?"

"You mean the way he bobs his head back and forth?"

"Not just a little, either. I mean his ears practically touch his shoulders."

"It looks silly," I agreed, and we both laughed. "I don't get it. How can a teacher be a bully?"

"Easy. He's bigger than you are."

"It's not fair." Before I sat down, I brushed my hand across the grass, making sure it wasn't too wet. "I always liked school. I always trusted anything the teachers told me. Now I'm not sure what to believe anymore."

"Don't take it so seriously. Grown-ups aren't perfect."

You know he's right: that I'm too serious, I mean. Like, then I asked Greg if he believed in God.

"Don't you?"

"I used to," I told him. "A couple years ago I played hockey. Before the games I prayed that my team would win. It's not like I gave up on God because we lost; actually we usually won, even though I didn't play so good. But I realized I was praying for... selfish reasons. Then I started to doubt the whole thing, I guess. I don't know what changed. It's like I'm not the same person anymore."

"My dad used to tell me I was going through a rebellious phase. Could be that's what's happening to you."

"Me? Rebellious?" I liked how that sounded. "Maybe I'm just tired of trying to keep everything neat and tidy."

"Like what?"

At first I said I didn't know, but finally I thought of something. "Remember when the school band played outdoors? Where the wind blew so hard we couldn't keep the sheet music on our stands? We all chased them around, and Mrs. Caldwell kept waving her arms, trying to calm us down. What a mess. It was great."

"It wasn't like that. You were upset. Remember I blasted my trumpet in your ear, and you punched me?"

"Did I do that?" I couldn't remember. "I guess we weren't friends yet."

"Now we are," he said. "I mean, it's okay."

"You don't mind that I'm such a crybaby?"

"No. I know what it's like to be different."

What Greg meant was his eyes. They look weird, like his eyelids

are always half-shut. He was born that way, but still the other kids tease him about it. I don't care what they say; he looks fine to me. Not as tall and skinny as me, but close. He has straight black hair and wears a denim jacket that he writes on with a black marker. Once he let me write on it.

But while the other kids are playing four-square and tether-ball, me and Greg wander around the playground just talking. I worry about feeling different from everybody else. Is something wrong with me? The other day we got this new camera at school that makes tapes you can play back on TV. Everybody in our class got to take turns testing it, and I read this poem I wrote. When they played it back I saw myself and wanted to hide. Is that what I look like to other people?

Anyhow, after recess Mr. Stratton gave us a surprise test. It was supposed to take half an hour to finish, but I was done pretty quick. Remember last year? The teachers always gave us interesting things to do. Now I'm not learning anything.

Greg sits almost in front of me, just off to the left, so I stared at him. When he got up to sharpen his pencil I saw how tight his jeans fit, the light curve they made. Seeing it felt really good somehow. Then I noticed that my pants were too tight so I rearranged them, hoping nobody was looking. I looked out the window for a while, and the feeling went away.

The only thing Mr. Stratton does that's cool is he lets you go to the bathroom without raising your hand to ask. All you do is sign out on the blackboard. Once someone wrote my name in the girls' box; big joke, right? Anyway I signed the boys' box and left, trying to catch Greg's eye. I guess he saw, or maybe he was bored too, 'cause I looked back and he was running down the hallway, catching up.

Our room is on the third floor, the highest. But to get to the bathrooms you have to go even higher, up these thin stairways. Nothing else up there, so they don't really count as a fourth floor. The other kids were still taking the test, back in the classroom. It seemed far away. "You finished?"

"Not yet," Greg said. "I can't figure out those decimals."

"It's just like regular long division, except you've got to figure out where to put the decimal point when you're done." I showed him. There's a slate on the bathroom wall, and chalk; they think we won't write on the walls if we've got something we're supposed to write on.

"I've got an idea," he said. "Let's trade clothes!"

"So you wear mine, and I wear yours?" He meant we'd do it like a token of friendship, I hoped. I said okay and took off my shirt. "I wonder if

Mr. Stratton will notice."

"Yeah," Greg said with his shirt over his head. "I can't decide if I want him not to notice, to prove how dumb he is... or if I want him to get freaked out by it."

Then we both had our shoes and socks off. "Pants, too?"

"Why not," he said, and turned away as he pulled off his pants. I hesitated, then took mine off. When I looked up he wasn't wearing anything at all. My underwear was still on, but I covered myself with my hands anyway.

I couldn't help staring. Okay, sure, I've seen lots of naked boys in the locker room, but this was just me and Greg, so I could really look. Weird, I know; do you mind me telling you this? Skinny legs like mine, but more muscles in his arms and shoulders. His bottom looked like I'd imagined, watching him back in class. Same shape but without his clothes, all pink and smooth. He looked nice.

"Don't laugh," he said, nervous.

"How come?" I moved closer.

"No, don't look." I promised not to laugh, then he turned around. "I've got a boner."

Wow. It was so big, and pointing at the ceiling almost. "I'm always hearing guys saying, so-and-so's got a boner," I said. It had been driving me crazy, wondering what it meant.

"You don't know? Why didn't you just ask?"

"Cause I figured you'd laugh. Like you're doing now."

"I'm sorry, Nicholas." He really did look sorry. "I just thought everybody knew."

I kept staring. "It's really big. And you've got hair, a little bit. How come I don't?"

Then he looked proud, and grinned. "Don't worry, you just haven't hit puberty yet. I'm probably early."

"But you don't have a beard."

"That comes later. I think."

"I want mine like that too." I felt left out. "Only I don't know how. Usually it just happens. Like when I'm on the bus, especially if I get the seat over the tires."

"It's easy," Greg said. "I'll show you something." He got down on his knees, grabbed my underwear from behind and slid it down to my ankles. Without thinking I raised my hands. It's been a long time since someone undressed me.

"Shouldn't we be getting back to class? Mr. Stratton'll miss us."

"Doesn't matter," he said, "you're done with the test anyway, right?" There was a little shiny drop of something on the tip of his thing. He rubbed his finger in the stuff.

I looked away, hugging my shoulders. "I don't want to get in trouble."

"You won't." He put his hands on my bottom, spreading me apart down there, opening me up. Then when I felt his wet finger going around and around my hole, I couldn't help it, I made a little yelp.

"I'm sorry. Are you scared?"

My heart was beating fast. "Uh-huh," I said, "but go ahead anyway," and his finger slid inside me. It felt funny. No one ever touched me like that before. When I was a little boy Mom had to take my temperature down there. I hid my head under a pillow, I guess because your hole is like the most secret part of your body, it's supposed to be dirty. So back then, when she stuck it in me, it felt funny. But Greg didn't *have* to touch me there; he did it *for* me, to make me feel good. I decided it still felt funny, but I liked it.

He pulled it out. "Look, yours is hard now."

I nodded. Mine was still thinner and shorter than his. But bigger than it was.

"Do it again," I whispered. He pushed his finger back into my hole, farther this time. It felt so good.

Then we heard someone coming up the stairs, and hid in one of the stalls. I was putting our clothes in a pile when Greg reminded me both our feet would show. I crouched on the toilet seat and he stood in front, facing away from me so it'd look like he was the one sitting there. Squatting like that, I got sore, and it seemed to take hours for the other boy to leave.

Finally the door closed. I hopped off the seat and stretched. Greg flew out of the stall, panting. He held his breath the whole time, I think.

"If we get caught, everybody'll call us fags," he said. I felt stupid again, like with "boner", but it turned out neither of us knew what "fag" meant.

There's this new girl Kirsten. She talks funny, like if we play marbles she says "Oh, stink" when she misses. Some of the boys called me a fag after I was nice to her. I can be a fag either because I like girls, or because I like boys? It doesn't make sense.

But I just thought of something. Do you remember last year, when some kids started saying Nicholas and Jared are fags? Not long after that, we weren't allowed to be friends anymore.

Can you believe when me and Greg were alone again, we did more stuff? If I tell you I liked it, I want to do it again, you won't make me feel ashamed, will you? No, I knew you wouldn't. I trust you, Jared. Always.

Greg kept pushing down on his thing so it slapped against his belly button, wobbling up and down like a diving board. "Look, I've still got one."

All I saw between my legs was a sad little pink worm. "I lost mine," I said, and knelt down in front of the toilet. Concrete floor, so cold on my bare knees. The lid was down; I grabbed it, bending over. "Help me make it big again."

"Let's try something else this time," he said. "I think mine's hard enough."

I couldn't see him, but I could feel his hand moving in a slow circle on my back, right above where my rear end starts. "Try what?"

"Just stay like that." He spit a few times and rubbed it on something.

"I know it now!"

"Not so loud," he hissed. His hands moved down, then around, resting on the sides of my hips.

"Sorry," I whispered, "I mean, you're going to put your thing inside there, right?"

"Can I?"

Even though I didn't know when it'd happen or what it'd feel like, still it was okay. I wasn't afraid anymore. He wouldn't try to hurt me.

"You can have it, I want you to," I said, and let out a deep breath. I turned my head sideways and closed my eyes. Being there like that – I mean waiting, everything dark like you're in bed, letting Greg see my bottom sticking up in the air – when I thought about it, my thing got even harder than before.

His belly shook; it rubbed against me, smooth. "I'm going to try to do this slow," he said, guiding it with his hands. He found the spot and gently pushed. Then he was inside me and it was too hard, too wide. Too big. But soon I seemed to stretch inside, find room. My arms glided down to my sides.

He said it was all the way in. I tried to answer but could only make a thin, squeaky rattle in my throat. His weight pressed against me, breath hot on the back of my neck. I croaked, "Don't be afraid to move," and arched my back, wiggling closer.

"Does it feel good?" he asked, and moved back and forth a couple of times. Then he slipped out.

"Some more," I said. When he went in again, it didn't hurt like before. Instead it was this slippery feeling that started down there and spread through my whole body. He pushed it as far as it could go. I was warm and full inside.

Back and forth, he moved faster. Again, again, and again, the speed of it, a drumbeat. Under me, my thing pressed against my stomach so hard it almost hurt. A new scary wonderful feeling grew, like when you're winding a clock and the further you wind, the harder it gets to turn.

"Whoa! You're tightening up on me." Greg's voice was high, buzzing – didn't sound like him. That odd feeling just got bigger and all I could do was breathe, breathe, then I shook, my hips jerked, we fell on the floor and the feeling faded.

I laid there peaceful for a moment when something landed on me. Something wet. He must have been feeling it too, he shook even crazier, only he was holding his thing in his hand and this gluey stuff came out. His eyes were big and black, with a dreamy look.

I can't tell you how it felt. Like nothing else. Greg said it was called *coming*. I asked him why that white stuff came out of his thing but not mine, and he said maybe it was because he's twelve and I'm only eleven. It still felt good even if nothing came out.

Me and you, Jared, we never did anything like that. Now I kind of wish we had. I was always afraid to touch you. Do you remember that night I slept over? We talked for hours, lying in the dark. No matter how sleepy I got, I didn't want to stop. Finally I was just babbling, didn't know down from up. You hushed me by singing, "Let us be lovers, we'll marry our fortunes together." I knew that song, too, so I joined in, "I've got some real estate here in my bag." Neither of us could carry a tune, but I liked the way our voices sounded together, half singing, half whispering.

When we got to the part that goes, "I'm empty and aching and I don't know why," I started crying, even though I was happy. You said to be quiet but I couldn't stop. After you got out of bed and came down into the sleeping bag with me, I felt better. I was still crying, softer though, and you were running your fingers through my hair when the door opened and the light came on. Next thing I knew I was alone, except for your dad who was driving me home in the middle of the night I sat in the back seat, shivering in my pajamas. He told me I was a bad influence on you, that what we did was unnatural.

We gathered our clothes from the stall. Greg didn't forget: we traded

everything. Socks and underwear, too. I liked seeing Greg in my shirt, but I got to wear his, which was better. As we walked down the stairs I thought, even after we're back in class it'll be like I'm still close to him. It was great.

But it didn't last long.

"I guess Mr. Stratton's not as stupid as we thought," I said, taking off Greg's shirt, which was a little big on me.

"Yeah. He noticed right away." He tossed my shirt on the bathroom floor.

"I was afraid he was going to make us change back, right there in class."

"Wasn't that great?" he laughed. "He was really mad!"

"I didn't think it was so funny." I sat on the floor and wrapped my arms around my knees. "Before I was your friend I never got in trouble."

"You should be glad. At least you're not teacher's pet anymore."

Scrunching together even tighter, I rolled onto my side.

"You okay?" He tried to undo me but I wouldn't let him. "I didn't mean it. Anyway, Stratton's a goon. You shouldn't care what he says."

I closed my eyes and thought, Leave me alone.

"Come on, don't shut me out. Hey. I've got an idea."

Why did he have to call me teacher's pet? I already know everyone thinks I'm a weenie. You never said anything to hurt my feelings, Jared.

Greg bugs me sometimes. But I did start talking to him again, after he told me his idea: our secret. Here's what happened first, though, when we got back to class.

Mr. Stratton handed back our papers, saying he was very disappointed. Nobody got more than half the answers right. That bad? I couldn't believe it

While he went on and on about how he guessed nobody listened to yesterday's lecture, I redid some problems. "Mr. Stratton?" I asked, raising my hand. "Can I see the answer key?"

He asked why. How do you tell the teacher you think he screwed up? "Maybe I could use it to tell what I did wrong."

Then he asked which one I wanted to know. "How about number three?" But instead of looking it up, he punched a few buttons on a calculator and said 13.27 was the answer.

"No, it's 13.28, I think."

I must have made a mistake, he said.

I walked to the board, took some chalk and wrote 23.9 divided by 1.8, and all the kids whispered back and forth. How else could I convince him? I figured he'd tell me to sit down, but he just watched.

"Okay, that's it, 13.277 and the sevens go on forever. If you round off to the nearest two places like you said we should, that makes 13.28. Do you see anything I did wrong?"

He wouldn't answer me. Just did the problem on his calculator again and said it was 13.27.

"That thing must be chopping it off at two places without rounding at all," I said.

What did that prove, he asked. By then all the kids had figured it out, but he wouldn't budge.

"You should throw out the scores."

Then he made his voice all high and blubbery, and asked would I cry if he didn't?

Why can't he act his age? He was just trying to scare me off, I knew that. But I couldn't say another word; it took all my strength just to stand there and not cry.

I was ready to give up. Until I noticed Greg giving me this wild look. At first I thought he was joking about our secret: how after we got in trouble we had to trade our clothes back, and we did. Mostly. Only the things Mr. Stratton could see, though. Not our underwear.

But then I understood. Greg was egging me on, trying to make me brave. I looked up at the teacher and said, "After you asked us to round off one way, you graded it another way. That's not fair. The whole test is wrong."

Then the most amazing thing happened. He said I was right, the test was invalid.

All the kids cheered. Greg pounded his desk, smiling at me. Seeing him, I felt like I could do anything.

With his back to me, Mr. Stratton stepped forward to tell the class to be quiet. Before he could speak I screwed up my face all goofy, then I climbed imaginary stairs, bobbing my head left and right.

The class exploded. You should have seen it, Jared: total chaos. Way beyond what Mr. Stratton could control. Everybody was laughing, screaming, throwing paper wads, hiding under desks. Kids ran around, scattering like the sheet music at that windy concert. Only this time there was no doubt – it really was great. And I created it.

So did Greg. I couldn't have done it without him.

Okay. That's all. But I almost forgot the time before, back in the bathroom, after I stopped being mad at Greg.

"Hurry up and give me my pants back. If we're late again, he'll really

kill us."

"Greg." I rushed to finish undressing. "Why do you put up with me? I'm always afraid. Don't you get sick of it?"

"Only a little," he said. "Maybe you do need to loosen up a bit. But you must get sick of me, too, the way I push you around sometimes."

"So we're still okay?"

"Of course we are! You're my friend, Nicholas. Anyway, you need me. To protect you."

While he had his shirt over his head, I was sneaking up behind him, and I bent forward and lightly touched the back of his neck. With my lips.

He spun around, surprised. He didn't say anything. But I watched his face carefully, and I could tell he didn't mind.

I never thought I'd have another friend like you, Jared. Not that Greg is like you. Not better or worse, either. Just different

Me and Greg, we make a good team. I'm afraid to do crazy things – like cut class – but he can talk me into it. He's afraid to think crazy things – like a boy can love another boy – but maybe I can talk him into it.

He makes me feel stronger. Like I don't have to be afraid anymore. But one thing still scares me. Will we be allowed to stay together? It won't happen again, will it? Not again. Not with Greg.

I'd better go to sleep now, before I think too much about it. About whether they'll take him away from me, too.