

# The Blue Trail

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The school bus, loaded with sixth graders and their camping gear, followed the road by the long, curving lakeshore. Nearly all the students were at some mischief as their ride made its slow way to the state forest that Saturday morning. Fred Gaines played a game of ruffling Orson Chambers's hair simply to make it a mess. Doug Kincaid kept shoving Wendall Jones on the back in mockery of his bright, red blazer. Tommy Daschner and chubby Sam Alston hurled crumpled paper at each other's heads. The teacher chaperones in the front of the bus, Mr. Scarpetti and Mr. Mercier, told the students to calm down, but none seemed to hear. During the ruckus, Ronnie Krupinski sat quietly looking through the window across the lake. Through his wide glasses, he drank in the lime-green light from the pines by the water. It's just as nice as I hoped, he thought, not hearing his fellow students yell. But this is only the wood near the forest. The forest where we'll camp will be even greater. He warmed with the idea and imagined finding in the woods the peace that he missed in everyday life.

Ronnie had long had trouble fitting in at school. He was the ungainly kid most of his fellow sixth graders would label a geek. He had a geek's wide, wire-rimmed glasses, the pale face from reading indoors rather than playing outside. His red hair, cut by his doting mother, sat like an upside-down bowl atop his head. At the sports middle schoolers playground, his thin arms and legs moved awkwardly. His classmates made fun of him for these quirks. Doug Kincaid called and pointed at Ronnie when he walked the hall, science book hugged under his arm. "Ronnie, you're such a nerd," he cried with his Pop Warner friends gathered at his side. "Can't you be normal!?" Mark Sanders from the local Little League team laughed at

Ronnie because of his glasses. “How are things looking for you?” he liked to ask him, hands cupped around his eyes like a pair of oversized binoculars. Ronnie felt how wrong their attacks were. He knew he could not be much of a freak carrying his books. He thought his wide glasses looked fine. If he was thin compared to most, he was not plotting to get thinner. He never said any of this to his classmates, though; he dreaded the idea of speaking back, especially to Doug Kincaid and Mark Sanders who were too liked and too strong for him to fight if it happened. He wound up taking their ridicule and keeping quiet. He kept from most of his classmates in time to avoid their heckling.

The friends he made belonged to the set the class thought gawky but close enough to normal. Tommy Daschner numbered among them. Ronnie liked to talk with Tommy over math, which they both found fun and did better at than their classmates. However, Ronnie knew they were more “sometimes” friends than the usual kind as Tommy preferred to hang out with the kids on his Little League team. Ronnie did the best he could with other acquaintances, getting mixed results. He wound up pursuing several Brainiac interests that he never mentioned to anyone else.

While big on science, Ronnie especially liked to learn about nature. He was fascinated by the idea that trees, sprouting in open fields, change a landscape slowly into woodland. Forests seemed full, wonderful places to him. Ronnie was glad, therefore, when his homeroom teacher announced an Outdoors Club was forming for sixth graders at his school. Club members were to take several trips into the woods during the spring. Finally, Ronnie thought, a way to make friends who *like* something that I like. He signed up for the club when the sheet circled the class and imagined the hikes and journeys he was to take soon with his fellow forest lovers.

His fond view of the club was short-lived. He discovered at its first meeting that most of the kids joining belonged to the typical set of students who mocked him during school hours. Doug Kincaid, his football-playing tormentor, was a member. So was Annie Stahl,

who made fun of Ronnie's starchy, plaid shirts. No one in the club promised much chance of becoming a closer friend except Tommy Daschner. The club's first trips proved less than exciting, too. Led by their tall, loud teacher-mentor Mr. Scarpetti, the group had trekked only into the small woods behind their middle school. The raised ranches of the neighborhood had shown through the maples and oaks everywhere they passed. The robins sang too rarely and from afar. Two blocks away at the woods' edge, they walked by the firehouse and the dog pound that most of them saw from the school bus every day.

The weekend camping trip to the state forest, the Outdoors Club's major outing for the year, promised to be different. Ronnie learned the place had thousands of acres of woodland to explore. Amid them spread rippling ponds and lakes, green wetlands, clear streams. Visitors heard warblers and thrushes sing from cathedral-high pines, saw white-tailed deer in the brush. Ronnie expected the place and its wildlife to be beautiful and wonderful. Imagine all that nature, he thought packing his gear for the trip. I know I'll like it. Even everyone who picked on me will like it. The day should be good.

The bus passed the large, blue lake and reached the tall pines that marked the forest entry. The bus went down the long, broken asphalt drive into the forest interior and pulled to a stop in the small lot by the group's camp ground. The students, now they had arrived, gave up their screaming and fuss and seized their gear. Here we are, big, green outdoors, Ronnie thought, bracing as he strapped on his pack. He filed from the bus with the other students and walked for the shaded area amid the pines where Mr. Scarpetti had asked they gather. As they assembled, Ronnie caught Kevin Flaxson studying him from the shade where he talked with his buddy, Doug Kincaid. An athlete like Doug, Kevin was tall, strong, and known to be rough. He enjoyed slamming open lockers to scare quieter classmates. He punched a boy in the shoulder once when he refused to give him some chewed-up pencil. "I told you to *do it*," he had said, glowering at the kid. Kevin liked being mean with a passion. Ronnie considered

this and became uneasy as the boy's eye held to him. He can't want to bother me, can he?, he asked himself. Not today? Ronnie was none too sure. He moved toward the far side of the group, feeling the need for precaution.

Soon, the last sixth graders had gathered and Mr. Scarpetti called everyone to order. In his hard voice, he iterated his expectations for the trip and the rules to be followed—"Keep your camp site clean. Don't harass the animals. Don't set fires without permission."—until he had bored everyone thoroughly. After the long introduction, he told the students to set up their tents within the pine area where they were gathered. Ronnie went over to kindly Matt Alvarez and Adam Ilardi with whom the Club had grouped him. The three boys unrolled the tent canvas and long rope that Ronnie had brought for their camp over some bare ground within the camp area. As Matt and Adam drew the rope beneath the canvas and bound it to the pines, Ronnie circled the fledging tent, tying shorter ropes through the steel ringed holes in its corners.

"We'll get this up quick," he said to encourage his tent mates. From his bag, Ronnie fetched the four spikes to secure the rope ends to the ground. He had driven down the first spike and attached a rope, when he heard the hard voice of Kevin Flaxson say close behind him, "That isn't how to do it, Krupinski."

Ronnie turned his head from where he squatted and discovered Kevin standing tall in the open space by the tent, glowering at him. Doug and a second boy had followed several yards behind and were watching them. Ronnie knew Kevin had come to make trouble and became uneasy as he did whenever he was bullied. He made to reply though, since Kevin seemed waiting on him. "What do you mean?" he said, barely hiding a tremble.

"The tent stake. That isn't how to secure it."

"But it is secure. Don't you see how I—"

Before Ronnie could finish, Kevin stalked forward and punted the steel stake into the tent canvas. "That's NOT HOW!" he repeated.

From the other side of the tent, Ronnie's tent mates, who had turned hearing Kevin, froze where they stood.

Ronnie rose, his face toward the ground, and went toward the stake flung by the canvas. Kevin's anger had shaken him just like the taunting he got in school. He knew; however, he had set the stake right. Before the trip (being a true geek), he had read the directions that had come with the tent gear, and they had said to drive the stake into the earth near the canvas as he did. Kevin had it wrong to suppose differently. Ronnie felt he had reason then to re-set the stake the same way as earlier. What else am I to do really?, he wondered, clutching the steel spike. He went shyly back to the hole from where it had flown as Kevin continued to glare at him nearby. Ronnie crouched and re-fitted the stake into the hole.

Suddenly, something hard shoved into his bent back and he fell forward, his chest and chin striking the ground. His glasses shot off his face and skidded into the dirt.

"I told you that's not the way," Kevin barked from behind. At once, Ronnie realized that Kevin had kicked him. He heard Doug and his other friend laughing hard as he lay unable to move. Pain and a sense of humiliation spread through him. This is worse even than school, he thought, unable to stir. As he lay flattened and embarrassed, footsteps neared the tent. He heard Mr. Scarpetti call out, "All right, this nonsense is over. Kevin, you come with me. The rest of you, back to making your tents." The scene broke and Ronnie's tent mates, who had kept apart, came and helped him from the ground. Ronnie put on his glasses with jerky hands, hiding his face as he could, and picked up the stake for the second time.

Ronnie and his two companions finished setting up camp and went to the spot by the pines where Mr. Scarpetti had asked everyone to gather after they had done. The teachers divided the students quickly into two groups, one to go canoeing at the lake, the other to go hiking up the mountain. Kevin got put in the canoe group, Ronnie in the hike group. Thank goodness, Ronnie thought as the groups split.

Mr. Mercier, with a martial air, led his half of the students to the Purple Trail a short distance away. As Ronnie knew, Mr. Mercier liked to work students. In his reading classes, he gave the kids essay-only tests where they had to answer at length and failures to reference text cost serious points. In the same strong-handed mode, Mr. Mercier had his campers form two straight lines by the Purple Trail head and start at a march toward the summit. “We’d all like to get to the top and back on time, I’m sure,” he told them.

Ronnie took his first steps up the hill. He sought reasons to like the hike from the beginning. He considered the warm, spring weather, a reprieve after the cool days earlier that week. He caught from afar a robin’s dulcet tone. However, he soon found challenges enough to staying chipper. Oak roots and stones foiled his every third step. Along the steep route, the trees showed few leaves though it was May. Black tree trunks loomed in dismal rows.

“Where’s the excitement here?” Ronnie wondered, hiking past a birch rotting to pieces. “I may have this straight to the summit.”

Ronnie was hoping things would not get worse when Shawn O’Malley stalked toward him. A tall boy with black, frizzled hair, Shawn belonged to the sixth grade’s hard-edged crowd: he liked skateboarding the streets and had broken several windows at the town’s abandoned mill. Ronnie planned not to get any of the boy’s attitude after everything else that morning and tried to edge from him. However, Shawn drew close as they walked. “Why are you walking so fast, Ronnie?” he said, sneering.

Ronnie was trudging along, not walking, so did not understand. He would have said this, except, at that very moment, Shawn pushed him off the trail. Ronnie stumbled toward the bush beside them; he caught himself just before he would have fallen into its thousand pointy arms. At once, he turned and saw Shawn glaring at him with cold contempt. Ronnie was in disbelief. He pushed me because he knew what Kevin did, he was sure. The insult proved too much. I didn’t go on this hike to get it, he thought. Not one bit.

“What gives?!” Ronnie cried, feeling good and mad.

Shawn walked away up the hill, as if he could not be troubled to answer. Ronnie stepped forward.

“I didn’t bother you,” he called to Shawn’s back. “I didn’t at all!”

At this loud cry from Ronnie, Mr. Mercier, well up the trail, turned. “Alright Ronnie, that’s enough,” he said and frowned on the boy far below. “Stop yelling and get into line.”

Ronnie realized Mr. Mercier had not seen. “But Shawn pushed me for no reason!” he cried.

“Don’t pick a fight.” The teacher’s firm tone made it sound this must settle the boy’s trouble. He added quickly, “However things happened, we have to not get aggravated. Not on this challenging a hike.”

Ronnie stared up the hill. So I’m getting downgraded even by Rule-and-Order Mercier?, he thought. The man was sure that Shawn did nothing. Where is the end of problems for me today? Ronnie returned toward the advancing line of students but rather than join it, walked down the hill, his red head bowed.

At the tail of the hikers, Ronnie discovered his sometime friend Tommy Daschner walking alone. Tommy raised his head and called, “Hey there”, but Ronnie did not stop for the boy. He had taken two steps past when Tommy came by, grasped his arm, and said, “Hey, hold on.” Despite his mood, Ronnie stopped.

“How is it you’re going down the hill?” Tommy asked.

“I don’t think I’d like to go up it.”

“Oh?”

“Those other kids were giving me problems. Didn’t you see and hear?”

A short flicker entered Tommy’s brown eyes. “You shouldn’t let Shawn get to you,” he said, keeping down a smile. “He wanted to see you hurt.”

“Exactly, so I don’t want to be around him. Or the rest. I keep feeling they’re all mean. They stare while people pick on me.”

“Then what about the overlook? Don’t you want to go there? You came all this way.”

"I overheard Wendall say he saw it online and that it's nothing hot."

Tommy frowned. "Doesn't that bite?"

"Even if it didn't, I'd not go. This whole day's gone bad." Ronnie's pale face tightened, and his brown eyes went dark. "This trip was supposed to be something nice, not a waste. I get that in school. Today was supposed to be different."

Tommy scrunched his brow, confused. "So what are you aiming to do? You can't canoe until after lunch."

"I'll walk the Blue Trail. It starts at that oak with the blue mark down the hill." The group had passed the tree in question on their way up. "I'll follow it into the forest."

"By yourself? But you don't know what might be there."

"Maybe that'll make it good. I won't have to expect something bad."

"You aren't worried about Mr. Mercier being upset?"

"He's always upset that someone doesn't follow his rules. I'm going. If anyone asks, don't say where I've gone."

"All right."

Ronnie turned from his friend and descended the hill. He went with steps quicker than he had come, the trees passing by in a blur; at the oak he had named to Tommy, he started on the Blue Trail. The trail descended slowly through the woods, making it an easy walk. Fewer roots seemed to cross the trail there than on the hill. However, the scene was dull despite Ronnie's hopes. The tall, thin ash trees had leaves only in a few spots. Dead branches strewed the ground. It seemed to Ronnie a graveyard of a woods. He quit turning to the scene.

Everyone who got to canoe first must be enjoying themselves, he thought with new bitterness as he kept walking. So must Kevin. The guy who shoved me in the dirt. How do I always lose out? Like every time! Always I'm "Loser Ronnie."

Fired with anger, Ronnie seized one of the small, loose rocks by his shoes on the trail.

"Take that, Kevin!" he said and hurled the rock at the lichen-spotted oak that stood twenty feet away. The rock struck, knocking off some of the black bark. He bent and seized another rock.



“Take that, Shawn!” he said and hurled, striking the tree again. He seized more of the rocks and sent them flying. “And that, Mr. Mercier!” he snarled.

When he had gone through everyone who angered him, he stopped and stared at the oak. On the impact spot, the wood had splintered and torn. Chips stuck from the trunk.

“Boy, I was violent,” Ronnie thought, gaping. I don’t think I ever damaged anything so much. I just lashed out. But I was never supposed to take as much as I did from them, was I? Turning from the oak, he continued along the trail.

The forest changed, as Ronnie advanced. He saw more oaks raise green heads skyward. Mountain laurels showed their large, white blooms. How many kinds of trees there are now!, Ronnie thought. Dozens. Each kind different. Growing at ease, Ronnie went on, looking everywhere. At a turn in the way loomed great maples with high branches. The sun made tall pine groves glow like emeralds. A chickadee gave its quick notes; a wood thrush sang. How nice the birds sound, Ronnie thought. Then came great colonies of fern that grew like a lime-colored sea. He was overjoyed. I never had this much nature at once, he told himself. There must be so much here that I don’t know.

Ronnie went down a dip in the trail and stopped. Before him on a small mound stood a tuft of pink lady’s slippers. The wildflowers outsized the bluets and violets he had passed by several inches, their petals in the remarkable shoe shape of their name. He crouched on the ground by them. They are amazing, he told himself. Just how there are so many on this one spot. He followed the curves of their slipper form, their petals’ overlap, their heads’ low bend. As his thought filled with the slippers, his body quieted; his breathing came softly, and his pulse slowed.

Suddenly, Ronnie heard rushing footsteps and saw Tommy Dasher burst onto the trail beside him.

“Hey there,” Tommy said, drawing up to him. “I got to you finally.”

“The hill hike felt too much for you?” Ronnie asked without moving.

“No, I had to come. Mr. Mercier saw you’d gone and sent me after you.”

“You told him where I went?”

“I tried not, but he asked if I was being straight. I told him, then, and he sent me. You should have heard him get all upset over you.”

He said, “We can’t have you kids wander off whenever you want. We’re supposed to stay *a group*.”

Ronnie smiled at the small rocks by his shoes. “I’d rather stay here if you ask me.”

“Sure, I’m not going to push. I’ll say you went down to the lake. So, what’ve you been doing?”

“Sitting and thinking.”

“Thinking? Is that all?”

“I was tired from walking so much. Sitting is easier, too.”

Tommy turned from Ronnie to the lady’s slippers by the path. “Hey, look at these flowers. Aren’t they *too pretty*?” Squaring his mouth to a sneer, he kicked at the mound where the flowers grew.

“Hey!” Ronnie cried.

Tommy again kicked at the flowers. Ronnie stood up, his back suddenly tense. Some reckless mood had taken over Tommy, he realized. Ronnie had seen it before in Doug Kincaid when the boy banged shut his locker. Mark Sanders had it when he made Ronnie drop his books. Ronnie had not spoken back to either of them. However, some sense that he should oppose Tommy came to him suddenly. He wanted the lady’s slippers left alone.

“Don’t, Tommy!” he said. A grin rose on Tommy’s lips. He won’t listen, Ronnie realized. Like it’s only fun for him. Ronnie’s arms tightened. As Tommy made to kick the mound a third time, Ronnie bound forward and shoved Tommy hard in the shoulders. Tommy stumbled backward along the trail, his arms and legs shaking before he managed to stop.

“Whatcha do that for?” Tommy cried, his brow all furrows. “I was only messing.”

“I don’t want you to kick the flowers,” Ronnie told him. Then he pointed to his own chest and said, “They’re *my* flowers!”

“*Your* flowers?”

“I found them so that makes them mine.”

“What? You gone crazy or something?”

“I haven’t. If either of us is crazy, it’s you. You kick at the first really nice things on this trail that you see as if they should be wrecked. I call *that* crazy.” Ronnie’s words came automatically, without his thinking, but he was certain he should say them. He admired the flowers and thought he had a right to defend them. After what he’d seen and felt on the Blue Trail that day, he knew he couldn’t do nothing. He couldn’t just take the grief as he always had.

Tommy stared in contempt at Ronnie as Shawn and Kevin did earlier. “Fine. You want to be with your flowers like some pansy, go ahead. Be with them. I’m going.” He turned and went back on the trail he had come.

Ronnie studied the hard stones in the path quietly. Tommy doesn’t understand, he thought bending again over the lady’s slippers. He came in a hurry and didn’t know the woods the way I have. If he did, he would have liked these, I think. So many of the others don’t understand either. But I can’t let them get to me on a day like today. Ronnie forgot about Tommy as he sat down again and looked on the flowers. The shade from the trailside set off their sharp, deep pink. Ronnie drifted into a long, peaceful quiet as the sun glinted through the tall pines.