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A Close
Approximation
of an Ordinary Life

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To John, for the smile as he surfaced

Begin

I am ten now. Ten, two times five times one a million times over if I want. Or ten, ten ones are ten every time. Ten.

Look look look. Follow me, do not follow, look. That is what they say. They: Jan, Mom, Dad, Lucy. Look.

They want to know what I remember. I remember everything from before. Before today. Look.

At me, Leonard Anthony Pearce, ten years old. Listen, right, listen to me. Dad bought me this tape recorder to help with speech therapy. Lucy, too, she says I should practice, my...rehearse, yeah, rehearse my conversations. Conservation conversations, keep them all together in a box of tapes with a label that says "Len's tapes," so there is no confusion about whose is whose. That box is mine.

Len. I am Len. I am ten. Ha! That rhymes. Len,

ten, pen. Say when, Len. I live at 61 Canterbury Court, Wolcott, Mass. I live here with me, Oscar my cat, my mom, my dad, and my twin baby brothers, Alex and Tom. They are very tiny, only twenty pounds total when Dad jumps on the bathroom scale with one in each hand. Alex's real name is Alexander Palmer Pearce, and the other brother is Thomas Stephen Pearce. Mom says they will get louder but I hope not. When they cry together I go for a walk. And it will be winter soon, and too cold for long walks around the backyard long enough to make them stop, stop, stop!

So, I am Len. Ten. I used to go to Wolcott Elementary but not since I was seven. My teacher was Mrs. Bercroft and she wore a gold cross on a silver chain and swishy skirts and bracelets up her arm almost to her elbow. I liked the swishy skirts but those bracelets, man. I told Mrs. Bercroft she should leave those mangle jangle bangles right at home, and my mom got really mad. She says I am not supposed to say truth, except when it is really important not to lie.

That is not truth, lying. When if you think about it, it is not logical at all, because Dad says the truth will set you free, but in my experience with those pesky

clanking bracelets the truth got me a week without the Discovery Channel on TV. Free? No TV? No, not me.

Anyway, after what I like to call ‘Attack of the Killer Bracelets’ there was the ‘Roger March Affair.’ At Wolcott Elementary, I was in second grade. My best time was library time. Now that I am ten, I read about five or six books a week, solid books, no pictures or anything. Not like when I was seven, when I only read science books about animals with photographs. They are still excellent books but I am finished with them now.

In the library I sat at the corner table, next to the 598 Dewey Decimal System books on birds. They’re pretty good books, with exact captions and all the different Latin names of birds, extinct or not. The five hundred section is very interesting really, all about animals and plants. This is also known as zoology and botany, or life on Earth.

I usually used six minutes of library time to read two profiles from the *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. That is what it said in my organizer notebook, the green striped one with a big yellow “Len” sticker on the front so that it would not

get confused someone else's. My organizer has every activity in it, including times for eating and family talking time and tutoring and therapy and time for outside, outside play.

Lucy said that reading the field guide bird book would help get me in the mood for my other work, like writing, which I really hate. She lets me read two pages of my own copy that I keep on the kitchen table before we start our tutoring sessions now, but at Wolcott Elementary I had to get the book from the shelf in the library and sit down at the corner table.

One rule in the library was no talking. No talking in the library, easy peasy to remember, it was quiet and cozy and my best school time, even better than extra fourth grade II [Individualized Instruction] with Mr. Coulter. II, that is pretty funny, between you and me and Mr. Coulter I called it "I squared," which is a pretty strange thing if it was really me times me equals me squared. The library was better than II, and II was pretty good.

Roger March talked in the library. He started whistling when he walked in behind me, and he would not stop. He would not stop, even though the rule was

very clear about no talking in the library. He talked and laughed and was loud, loud, loud. Lucy told me to cover my ears if it was too loud, and I did, but I could still hear him.

Roger was at an all-time high volume that day in the library and he would not stop. Not when Mrs. Bercroft told him, not when Ms. Lem the librarian told him, not when I turned to him as he walked past my desk and said, “Shh.”

I said ‘shh’ and Roger would not, and I counted to twenty-seven, which is better than counting to ten because it is more and it is three times three times three, which fits. Sometimes, when I get to twenty-seven, my voice goes quiet like the library. Not with that Roger Marsh, not with that whistling. I got to twenty-seven and I could not stop counting, louder and louder so that my voice was louder and louder than his.

That is one of my talents. Mom and Dad say that it is about learning when it is right to yell, and when it is better to be quiet. But one of my great talents is that when I want to yell, I can yell longer and harder than anyone I have ever met.

That day, I out yelled Roger March. Ms. Lem

came running over to see what was wrong and I told her in my yellingest yell ever, “Rodger the Dodger would not be still, I will, I will, I want to kill.” And she tried to pull my out of my chair but I was glue stuck, stuck. And she knows, everyone knows that too much touching is not fine, my arm is mine and I bit her right on the hand.

The principal’s office was quiet, except for the ceiling fan. The dirty gray blades chopped the air over and over and over my head. Inside the fan, I could hear buzzing, buzzing bees, but they were soft. I counted to nine times nine times nine again, and my mom came in the door. That is seven hundred twenty-nine, which is a pretty big number, but not as big as the next up, nine again, six thousand five hundred and sixty-one.

“Len, honey, what happened?” Mom always starts like that. Sometimes, it is okay, but sometimes it is confusing because she already knows, and if she knows, what is that, the asking? This was the second kind.

“Roger, Rodger the Dodger, loud in a crowd.”

“Look at me, Len. Leonard?” Eyes wide, I found my mom’s face. Which was not that hard, because of

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