

The Book of Borrowed Time

By Clark Endicott

Time isn't our enemy, but there are people in this world who can make it feel like it is. Some people can make every minute a terrible slog that you don't want to live through, while others make every minute pass only too quickly. Most people pride themselves on trying to be one of the former, but a boy I once knew, Seth Klein, well, Seth prided himself on making time in our world unbearable.

On frigid days, after the leaves changed color and the puddles of clear rain still stood unfrozen, I spent my lunch breaks inside with my friend, Logan, playing card games. Most kids spent lunches inside, including Seth and his group of bullies.

"I'm going to start my turn by playing this spell card and destroying your big creature," I said, and laid my card on the table. "After that—"

"Hang on, Ray." Logan laid his own card down. "I'm going to redirect that spell and target one of your creatures: this one."

I groaned, but I smiled, too. "I hate that card!"

"I know, but I love it. It's like I'm catching your spell and holding it in my hand before I shoot it wherever I want."

A mocking voice reached us from the next table. "It's like I'm catching your spell and holding it in my hand!"

My heart sank. Logan and I both fell quiet. I didn't want to make eye contact, but I couldn't help it. I peeked from the corner of my eye for just a second and saw Seth lounging at his usual lunch table. He leered at us like puppies he wanted to kick.

“You always say the lamest things,” Seth said. He stood and sauntered toward us. The legs of his baggy jeans pooled around his shoes, and his white shirt stretched against his chest and arms. A blonde mop shaded a face blotched by a hideous amount of acne. He slapped me hard on the back. “That’s why you’re always hanging out with your boyfriend instead of a girl.”

My hair prickled, and my skin grew hot. I wanted to say something witty and really burn him. I wanted to hit him, but when I searched around in my head for the right words, I only found fear and embarrassment.

“You should shower, too,” Seth said. “Girls don’t like smelly little boys who go to nerd stores, and they definitely don’t like little boys that stink up the place.”

“Is that why you’re always with those losers?” Logan said.

I felt my eyes widen on their own, and my heart tried to hide behind my lungs.

“What?” Seth asked.

Logan struggled to look Seth in the eye. “I never see you with any girls. Is it because you smell? Or is it because of that pepperoni on your face?”

I wanted to call Seth “pizza face,” but my jaw and the rest of my muscles felt wired shut.

Seth rounded the table and cast his shadow over Logan. He could look like a giant sometimes. Logan shrank away.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Seth said. “You’ll be seeing me later.”

Seth stalked back to his own table and dropped into the seat with a heavy *thud* that strained the bolts.

Logan and I cleaned up our cards and left. We walked through deserted hallways for a whole minute before I broke the silence. “I hate that guy. I’m sorry. I couldn’t even talk.”

“I know,” Logan said.

“I wish I could fight him,” I said. “I should work out and train up. I bet he wouldn’t bother us if we were as big as him.”

“Maybe.”

“You were pretty cool, though, saying that stuff about his face.”

Logan cringed and stopped in his tracks. His face reddened, and he squeezed his eyes shut tight, but the tears still found tiny avenues of escape.

“I can’t stand it anymore,” Logan said.

I put my hand on his shoulder and checked around for anyone who saw him lose it. “Come on. Let’s find someplace else to sit. We can go to the library. No one’s ever in there this time of day. Come on, buddy.”

I led Logan into the school’s library and, like I suspected, only the librarian occupied the room—only not Mrs. Plainview. Instead, a man nearly twice as tall as me and wearing a business casual blazer stood behind the librarian’s desk. He looked carved out of wood, and only his head moved to track us as Logan and I crossed the carpet.

“Where’s Mrs. Plainview?” I asked.

“She has the day off,” the man said in a flat baritone. Pure white locks interrupted his otherwise gray, shoulder-length hair. “Call me Mr. Elam. Can I help you find anything?” He focused on Logan. Logan’s face still showed evidence of his crying. “You look like you could use a nice new book: something in which one can really disappear.”

Logan sniffled. “I could use a new book.” He slid his bookbag off his shoulders and pulled out a novel. “I just finished this one.”

“Ah, a classic,” Mr. Elam said. “I’m sure it did the trick for a little while, but you need something to really get lost in while the long hours pass, don’t you?”

Logan shrugged. "I guess."

"I have just the thing. Wait here, please."

Mr. Elam marched away and disappeared behind a tall shelf of books. Before I could even express my unease, Mr. Elam emerged from the shelves with a large book cradled in his arms. He placed it on the desk for us to see. "Here we are," he said.

The heavy purple tome seemed almost too big to fit in a backpack and too thick to be worth reading. The dingy, wrinkled pages didn't rest flush with one another, despite their collective weight, and the cover didn't even boast a title.

"What's this?" I asked.

"This," the curious librarian said, "is exactly what you're looking for. This book will take you to a fantastic other world, where you can lose yourself for time immemorial. Within these pages, you can do whatever you want, as much as you want."

"Sounds good," said Logan.

"What's it called?" I asked.

"As you can see," Mr. Elam said. "The book bears no name, but I have come to call it *The Book of Borrowed Time*. You need merely open its pages, and you will be transported to a world just like ours, but without time. Observe."

Mr. Elam opened the book, and just like that, he disappeared.

Logan and I both shouted in surprise. I glanced around and searched behind the desk, but didn't find a trace of the towering librarian. Not a single word or character covered the open pages of the book. I turned the pages only to find more empty space.

Quick as a flash, Mr. Elam reappeared, his hand already slamming the book shut. I tore my hand away before he caught my fingers between the pages.

“Whoa! How did you do that?” I asked. “Where did you go?”

“I told you,” Mr. Elam said in his flat, deep voice, “I traveled into the book and into the other world. Time moves much faster there. You will learn how long I had to wait for just a few precious seconds to pass for you.” Mr. Elam pushed the book toward Logan. “Here you are, young man. You seem a quiet boy; I think you’ll appreciate this tome. Find a private place where you won’t be disturbed, and enjoy it to your heart’s content. I will take it back when you’re done with it—one way or another.”

Logan grabbed the book, but Mr. Elam struck like a snake and grabbed his hand. “A word of caution,” Mr. Elam said, “there are no ways to measure time in the other world. Take care not to forget yourself between the pages.”

“Okay,” Logan managed to say. He gathered the book in his arms and walked out. I had more questions, but I followed. When I glanced back, I saw that the statuesque Mr. Elam still watched us until the door closed.

Logan and I attended separate classes most of the day, but my mind kept drifting back to the book. During history, we sat next to each other, and I could see the outline of the purple-bound tome in his bag. He and I exchanged knowing looks.

After school, we ran home. I don’t know how Logan managed it with the thick book bouncing on his back. When we arrived, I called my house and left a message explaining that my parents could find me at Logan’s. Both my parents worked past sunset most days, so they wouldn’t mind.

I loved Logan’s room. Posters from all kinds of pop culture media covered the walls. A column of shelves stood against the only bare spot, and cool stuff filled it wall-to-wall. On the top shelf, Logan’s toys and figurines struggled to find space to stand, just below that sat Logan’s

library of video games, and on the bottom, a collection of Logan's favorite books crowded against one another in an alphabetized row. Logan's parents even gave him his own television and game system, but the room's newest addition, the thick and broad purple tome known only as the *Book of Borrowed Time*, commanded our attention. We stared at it in silence for a long stretch of time before Logan finally said, "Well, only one way to know."

That brave boy reached right down, flipped the book open, and blinked out of existence. In the next instant, he reappeared as he closed the book. "Oh, easy," he said, and opened the book once more. This left me stranded in the room, and I didn't know how to follow. I hesitated to act on my first thought: to close the book and open it again, but after a bit, I did just that.

I thought I might see something magical, like a brilliant flash of light or a light-speed trip through the stars, but I saw nothing. Only the color of everything hinted that I'd left my own world. The world without time lacked much of the real world's color. It looked like life bled away from everything: the books, the posters, the blankets on Logan's bed. Only the book retained the richness of its purple hue. It stood out like a flower in a field of dying grass.

Footsteps approached from the hall, and Logan moseyed through the door.

"Took you long enough," he said.

"Where'd you go?" I asked.

"I wanted to see if my parents were downstairs."

"And?"

"They're not here. No one is, not even my dog. The leash is just sitting on the ground."

I sat on the bed. "Weird. Well, now what? Can we do anything in here?"

"I can do this," Logan said. He leaned over the game console and pressed the power button. It beeped and powered up.

“That’s nuts! So, we can do whatever we want in here, and time won’t pass?” I asked.

“Well, time will pass over there, just much slower than here. Want to get started?”

“Heck yeah!”

Logan and I played video games for a long time. We played games we never had time to play before. Between school, homework, family dinners, sleep, and whatever else, days just didn’t last long enough. We played so many games that I actually grew tired of it.

I set down the game controller, stretched, and peered out the window. I couldn’t tell if the sun moved since I arrived in the world without time. I didn’t know if it ever would.

“That’s enough for me.”

“Really?” Logan asked. “Well, okay. What do you want to do now? Watch a movie?”

“Maybe we should head back,” I said. “How long have we been in here? How many minutes pass here for every minute back home?”

“I don’t know,” Logan said. “There are no clocks here. I couldn’t even find a watch. Even the clock on the console is missing and the settings for it, too.”

“Wow. It’s like magic. Hey, if we really have so much time in here, shouldn’t we do something else?” I said.

Logan crouched and perused his library. “What do you mean?”

“Well, we could use the extra time to do something productive,” I said. “We could train. We could work out. We could get tough. Imagine if we walked into school tomorrow completely different. We could get so strong, even Seth wouldn’t want to mess with us.”

“I guess.”

“You want Seth to stop bullying us, don’t you? Let’s do it. Let’s stay a little longer and workout as hard as we can. You’ll do it with me, right?”

Logan shrugged. "Sure."

We didn't know much about working out or fighting, but I wanted to do something. I did push-ups and sit-ups and Logan helped me lean his parents' bed against a wall so I could use it as a punching bag. Logan worked out with me at first, but then he grabbed a comic and read on the floor while I kept punching the mattress. Punching felt good. I kept punching and punching until my shoulders ached. I never punched anyone or anything before, and I wanted to get used to the feeling, so when the time came, I wouldn't hesitate.

After a while of my noise, Logan moved back into his room. I found him later, and it took some convincing before he agreed to go back. We closed the book together and reappeared in his room. Less than an hour passed after we entered *The Book of Borrowed Time*, and Logan's mother didn't even notice we left.

It felt strange to do something as normal as going to school the next day, but in our world, time always marches on. I walked to school alone, like usual, and like usual, I found Logan reading a book under the tree in the school courtyard.

"Hey, man. Want to use the book again, today?" I said. "My dad says we have to train every day if we want to get tough."

Logan didn't look up from his book. "I guess."

"Something wrong?"

Logan sighed. "It's just... do we have to go there and train to fight? Can't it just be a nice place where we go to get away from it all for a while?"

"I guess," I said, "but all our problems will still be waiting for us when we come back out. Seth isn't just going to stop."

"Do you really mean to fight him?"

“Yeah. What else am I going to do?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but we don’t really have to close the book.”

“You just want to hide in there? That’s not right, Logan.”

Logan stood and grabbed his backpack. “Whatever.”

He spoke very little the rest of the day. I might as well have sat alone at lunch. Time dragged on while Logan read his book, and I poked at my food.

After classes, most of the students rushed home, and Logan didn’t meet up with me. I walked back to my locker alone through the deserted hallways, so no one but me witnessed Seth shove Logan against a locker and loom over him like a lion looms over prey.

“What now?” Seth said and shoved Logan again. “What? You were mouthy yesterday.”

Logan shrunk even smaller and turned his face away from his tormentor. Fear glued my feet to the floor, and I stood motionless at the far end of the hall. I forgot to breathe.

“What happened?” Seth pressed Logan’s face into the locker until Logan groaned. “You not so tough now that you don’t have your boyfriend to impress?”

Logan’s eyes focused on my frozen form at the end of the hall. The low sun filtered through the window and glinted off his tears. I wanted to help. I knew I could at least try to fight Seth, but my heart abandoned me again.

Seth followed Logan’s gaze, and he discovered me watching. “Guess that’s not it,” he said. “You two losers couldn’t put up a single fight between you.”

A classroom door opened in the hall, and a teacher stepped out. Seth let Logan go, and Logan slumped against the wall like a whipped dog. I cowered even worse.

The teacher surveyed the scene and said, “What’s going on here?”

Seth turned and jogged down the stairs.

“Mr. Klein,” the teacher called. “Mr. Klein.”

Seth didn’t stop, and the teacher didn’t bother to chase him.

My legs creaked when I managed to move them and walk to Logan, who still slumped against the wall of lockers. “You okay?”

Logan didn’t answer.

“We’ll get him one day, man,” I said. “We just have to get tough.”

“Whatever.” Logan pushed me out of the way as he stood and left.

Every time Seth cowed me or Logan with his bullying, my heart hung heavy on the walk home. I kept replaying the scene in my head. I could think of nothing else. When I arrived home, I took my anger out on my new wall mounted punching bag, but it didn’t make me any bigger or make me feel any better. I ate my dinner in silence and laid in bed for hours before I fell asleep.

The next day, I walked to school through a cold, wet world. The little sleep I enjoyed improved my mood not at all, and when I approached the school courtyard, I found Logan’s usual morning reading spot empty.

What could I do? I collected my books from my locker and attended classes. In history, I sat next to an empty chair. At lunch, I sat alone and poked at my stupid macaroni while Seth and his friends laughed it up, but it didn’t take too long for him to notice my glare.

The smile ran away from Seth’s face, and he said, “What are you looking at?”

I spoke without thinking. “Just some loser.”

“What?” Seth stood. “You want to say that again?”

My heart shrank, and the sting of threatening tears clouded my eyes, but I swallowed down my fear. “I said, ‘I’m looking at some loser.’”

Seth used his signature move. He stalked around the table and cast his large shadow over me. “Wrong day to grow a spine,” he said, and he glanced at the empty seat across from me. “I see your boyfriend was smart enough not to show up to school today.”

My voice crackled as I spoke, but I didn’t lower my eyes as I said, “You better hope he’s alright. Nothing good can come from what you’ve done to him.”

Seth hesitated, but then he sneered. “Man, whatever.” He sauntered back to his table and knocked my cup over on his way, soaking my macaroni with apple juice. I didn’t even care. I could only think about where Logan might be.

I tapped my foot under my desk the rest of the day, and when the dismissal bell rang, I rushed from the room. My hands shook, and I dropped my books as I tried to stuff them in my locker. I pounded on the front door of Logan’s house when I arrived.

Logan’s mom answered the door, her face reddened by tears. “Oh, Raymond,” she said.

“Do you know where Logan is?” I asked, short of breath.

Logan’s mom tried to arrest her trembling lip. “I hoped you would know. I couldn’t find him this morning. He wasn’t in his room, and his bed was still made. I called everywhere. I called your house, but no one knows where he is. He didn’t say anything to you?”

“I think I can find him, Mrs. McKinley,” I said. “I just need to look in his room.”

“His room? Why?”

“Please, Mrs. McKinley, I just need to look.”

“Okay. Yes, please. I hope you find something.”

I slipped past Logan’s mom and bounded up the stairs two at a time. When I entered Logan’s room, I shut the door and locked it.

I checked the bed first but didn't see the book. I ran my hand through my damp hair.

"Okay, where? Where?"

The door jiggled. "Raymond?" came Mrs. McKinley's voice. "Why did you lock this?"

"I just need time, Mrs. McKinley."

"You know I have the key to this, right?"

A familiar purple hue caught my eye, and I spied that heavy tome known only as *The Book of Borrowed Time* on the floor. Someone closed it. "I just need time, Mrs. McKinley. Please, don't come in here," I said as I lifted the book from the floor.

"Whatever you're looking for, I want to see it." Keys jingled in the lock, and Mrs. McKinley opened the door before I could think. She laser-focused on the book I clutched. "That?" she asked. "I saw that. There's nothing in it. It's written in some invisible ink, isn't it? Is it Logan's journal? What does it say? Let me see it."

"I can't."

"What do you mean, 'you can't?' Let me see it."

"Mrs. McKinley, please. I promise you, I can find Logan, but I just need a little bit of time alone with this book. Please."

"Young man, you hand that book over to me right now."

"I can't!" Something came over me. I tucked the book under my arm and sprang for the door. Logan's mom tried to grab me, but I spun away from her grip and scurried down the stairs. At her age, Logan's mom couldn't keep up with me. I left the house and disappeared into the autumn woods.

I ran until the trees hid the nearest houses, set the book on a bed of wet leaves, and threw it open. In a blink, the oranges and yellows of the sleeping leaves dulled, shadows grew longer, and the sun's eye closed halfway.

With all the time in the world at my fingertips, I trudged back to Logan's house. The path I cut through the soggy leaves served as a guide back to the book.

I found the front door locked when I tried it, but no one could stop me from smashing the window and unlocking it. I prayed that Logan hadn't vanished into the unknown vastness of the world without time. I sprinted up the stairs, and when I entered his open door, my heart swelled. A long, low lump sprawled on the bed, and soft breaths filled the room.

I sidled to Logan's side and shook him. He awoke and blinked the sleep from his eyes.

"Hey, buddy," I said.

"Ray? What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for you. Do I even want to know how much time you had to spend in here to disappear for a whole day?"

Logan rubbed his eyes. "I don't know. I've been sleeping a lot."

"Well, we miss you. I thought you might want to come back to the land of the living."

"Why," Logan said, "so I can go back to school, do stupid homework, and wait for Seth to beat me up again?"

"It's not just bullying and homework," I said. "Your mother's out there, man, and she's worried about you. Plus, there's still all kinds of books and games you haven't seen yet."

"I can live in peace here. No reason for me to go back and many reasons not to."

"But this isn't living. Do you really want to spend your life in this colorless world as a ghost in your own house?"

Logan pressed his head deeper into the pillow. "Better than out there."

I sighed and sat on the bed. "I can't blame you for wanting to lose yourself in here with nothing but your books, your games, and your dreams. The real world is a tough place. People like Seth can make your time out there unbearable... and I haven't had the strength to stand up for you."

Logan grimaced at me. "I don't need you to rescue me."

"I'm not trying to be your rescuer," I said. "I'm trying to be your friend. No one should have to face someone like Seth alone: not you and not me. I need you. You stay in here and you'll be leaving me and your mother alone out there."

Logan pressed his head into the pillow. "What will we do about Seth?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know. I've let my fear stop me from standing up to him before, but now I see the real importance of not letting him push us around. Maybe I can't fight him, but I can show him that I'm not afraid... and that I have something worth protecting."

"Me?"

"Us," I said. "Our friendship. We don't belong here, man. Our place is out there in the bright, scary world, and Seth isn't going to tell us any different."

I stood and offered Logan my hand. Logan sighed, but he took it, and I pulled him to his feet. I said, "We can make the world out there worth our time. Let's get back before your poor mom has a heart attack."

Logan and I trudged back to the book through the thick bed of leaves. "So, someone can move the book over there, and it will move it in here?" Logan asked.

"Turns out," I said. "We were lucky no one moved it the first time."

The book lay right where I left it. Logan and I closed the book together, and the sun opened its wide eye on us. A leaf of brilliant yellow fluttered past my face, and I smiled.

Logan's mom spent their reunion switching between threatening to slap the life out of Logan and hugging him so hard he couldn't breathe. She didn't seem convinced that Logan got lost in the woods even after we stuck to our story, but she dropped it because her joy overwhelmed her. She offered to let Logan stay home the next day, but Logan refused. If nothing else, we needed to return the book.

I slept easier that night, and in the morning, Logan walked with me to school. The bulky Book of Borrowed Time lent its distinct shape to Logan's backpack.

As usual, everyone milled in the school courtyard before the first bell. Logan and I cut through the crowd on our quest to return the book, but a troll stepped in our path.

"Look who's back," Seth said. "You learn your lesson about mouthing off to me?"

My heart tried to shrink away, but I wrestled with it and stepped between Seth and Logan. "Leave him alone!" I shouted, and everyone in the courtyard turned to see.

Seth scoffed at me and looked to Logan. "You need your boyf—"

I stepped into his line of sight again. "No! You stop talking. We've had enough of you, and we're not going to take it anymore. You want to bully him? You'll have to go through me."

Seth bent over and put his face in mine. "You think I can't kick the crap out of you?"

I gulped. "Maybe you can, but I'll be standing between you and him just the same."

"Why don't you leave them alone?" came a girl's voice from the crowd.

Seth barked back, "Why don't you mind your own business?"

"Just shut up," another voice said.

"Yeah!"

“Leave them alone!”

“No one wants to hear you talk!”

The whole crowd rallied against Seth, and he faced opposition from all sides. His skin reddened, and he glanced about like a cornered animal.

I turned to Logan. “Let’s go!”

He and I ran inside. In contrast to the noise of the world outside, the library possessed the still quiet of a tomb, and its crypt keeper stood like a statue behind the desk.

“Mrs. Plainview off again?” I asked.

“Yes, twice in one week. Quite the layabout, isn’t she?” Mr. Elam said. He cocked his head to look at Logan. “Do you have some business here, today?”

Logan slipped the purple tome from his backpack and held it out for Mr. Elam. “I don’t think I need it, anymore.”

Mr. Elam took the book in one large, bony hand. “Excellent. Always good to give others a chance to appreciate good literature. I’ll return it to the stacks. Thank you.”

Mr. Elam disappeared behind the shelf of books, and we waited, but we never saw him again. We searched but found no sign. I don’t recall the librarian ever taking time off work the rest of the time Logan and I attended middle school.

Logan and I never really talked about Seth ever again because we never ran into him, but I think about him sometimes. On quiet nights, when I lay alone in my bed and time seems to stretch on forever, I remember Seth Klein. No one knows where he went. His friends say he went to spend some time alone in the library one day but must have skipped town instead.

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