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# Strong Boy

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## Introduction

A work of fiction often begins with a simple idea—a whispered question, a fleeting memory, or an image that refuses to let go. "Strong Boy" started in just such a fashion, with the distant sound of laughter carried on the wind and a pair of muddy boots by a broken door. The story unfolded itself in the rhythm of small-town evenings, where every cracked sidewalk and dusty store held their own kind of secret. The novel you are about to read was born out of a desire to lean into these secrets, to discover where fragility and strength collide in the shaping of a young man's heart.

"Strong Boy" is ultimately a novel about strength—but not the brute force of muscle or will alone. It is about the quieter, subtler forms of resilience that surface in the face of disappointment, uncertainty, and hope afraid to show its face. The central character, Tom, journeys through disappointment and expectation, shaping his own meaning of what it means to be "strong" in a world that too often measures the word by its own narrow ledger.

The setting—more character than backdrop—is a town as familiar as it is mysterious. Factories hum and whistles blow, but behind every gesture and every routine lie stories untold, motivations hidden, and dreams deferred. I invite you to walk its streets and alleys, to attend backyard gatherings and nighttime confessions, to become part of this world where everyone has a story and every story matters.

Writing "Strong Boy" has made me reflect on the ways we all inherit, resist, or reinvent the stories handed to us. The boy at the center of this novel encounters love, loss, rivalry, and redemption in ways unique to his place and time, yet his struggles and triumphs mirror our own. In the search for something to believe in—for a self that can weather storms and cherish gentle days alike—Tom finds that strength is sometimes letting go, sometimes holding on, and always trying again.

As you turn the following pages, I hope you will see yourself in these characters—not in their particular circumstances, but in the echoes of their longing, the pulse of their fears, and the quiet courage of their hope. This is a work of fiction. Yet, if it resonates, if it stirs a memory or provokes a question, then it will have done its work.

Thank you for choosing to journey with Tom and the others in "Strong Boy." May these pages remind you of your own strength, born in places both seen and unseen.

## CHAPTER ONE: The Hill Beyond the Tracks

The first thing you noticed about the hill beyond the tracks was the way the wind always seemed to be doing something up there. It wasn't a gentle breeze, not usually. It was a purposeful, sweeping kind of wind that smelled of distant factories and the coming rain, even on the sunniest days. For the kids of East River, that hill was more than just a lump of overgrown earth; it was the edge of the world, a place where the familiar hum of the town faded, and something wilder took over.

Tom knew that hill like the back of his hand. He'd scraped his knees on its rocky spine, traced the hidden paths worn by animals and mischief, and once, he'd even thought he saw a ghost amongst the skeletal trees at its summit. He hadn't, of course, but the idea of it had been enough to send him scrambling back down, heart thumping against his ribs like a trapped bird.

Today, the wind was doing its usual theatrics, whipping his hair into his eyes as he trudged upwards. He pulled his old canvas jacket tighter, the threadbare elbows a testament to countless climbs. The air was thick with the promise of late summer, a heavy, humid warmth that pressed down even as the wind tried to scatter it. Below him, the town of East River spread out like a crumpled map. The rows of identical brick houses, the grey roofs of the steel mill, the glint of the river itself – all looked smaller, less imposing, from this vantage point.

The tracks, a rusty iron scar across the landscape, bisected the town from the wild expanse of the hill. Crossing them was an unofficial rite of passage. No barrier, no crossing guard, just the raw danger of the occasional freight train rumbling through, shaking the very ground. Tom had learned to read the rhythm of the rails, to sense the distant tremor before the roar. It was a skill born of necessity, of wanting to reach the hill badly enough to face down something immense and unforgiving.

He wasn't alone today. Beside him, breathing a little heavier, was Mike, his best friend. Mike was all nervous energy and quick wit, a lean kid with eyes that missed nothing. He carried a battered baseball glove slung over his shoulder, even though there wasn't a game in sight. It was a habit, a constant reminder of the sport that consumed him. Tom, by contrast, preferred the quiet solitude of observation, the way the light fell on the rusted train cars, or the precise angle of a hawk circling overhead.

"Think Old Man Hemmings saw us?" Mike puffed, kicking at a loose stone. His voice was higher pitched than Tom's, a little reedy from exertion.

Tom shrugged, not bothering to look back. "He's always got one eye on those tracks."

Probably thinks we're going to derail a locomotive with our bare hands."

Old Man Hemmings lived in the first house on the other side of the tracks, a stoic sentinel with a perpetually suspicious squint. He had a reputation for chasing off kids, though Tom had never actually seen him catch anyone. He was more of a deterrent, a living myth that added a layer of forbidden thrill to crossing the tracks.

They reached a small plateau, a natural ledge where the incline leveled out for a bit. Below them, a small, murky pond reflected the bruised sky. Locals called it the 'Frog Pond,' for obvious reasons, and its murky depths were rumored to hold everything from lost wallets to mythical serpents. Mostly, it held mosquitos.

"Race you to the top?" Mike challenged, his grin widening. He always wanted to race, wanted to turn everything into a contest.

Tom merely grunted, already moving, his gaze fixed on the highest point. The top of the hill was marked by a solitary, gnarled oak tree, its branches reaching like skeletal fingers towards the sky. It was old, probably older than the town itself, and it had seen generations of kids climb its sturdy limbs, carve their initials into its bark, and dream their dreams beneath its leaves.

They didn't really race, not in the competitive sense. Tom walked with a steady, relentless pace, his long legs eating up the ground. Mike, meanwhile, darted ahead, then fell back, distracted by a particularly interesting rock or a bird's nest. He was easily sidetracked, a trait that sometimes exasperated Tom, but mostly, he just accepted it as part of Mike.

"Think it's true about the hidden cave?" Mike asked, finally catching up. He was a fount of local legends, having absorbed every whispered tale from his older cousins and the older kids on the block.

"There's no cave, Mike," Tom said, a slight exasperation in his voice. "Just an old root cellar for a farm that isn't there anymore."

"But what if it *is* a cave?" Mike persisted, eyes wide. "What if it leads to somewhere secret? Like an underground passage to another town, or a treasure chest?"

Tom chuckled. "It leads to a lot of dirt and maybe a couple of very large spiders." He'd been in that root cellar. It was damp, dark, and decidedly un-adventurous.

They continued their climb, the wind picking up, rustling the dry leaves underfoot. The scent of pine needles joined the factory air, a cleaner, sharper note. As they neared the summit, the sounds of East River faded further. The distant hum of the mill, the occasional shriek of a train whistle, the faint shouts of kids playing street hockey – all

dwindled to a murmur, then silence. Up here, it was just the wind and the whispering trees.

Finally, they reached the gnarled oak. Tom leaned against its rough trunk, feeling the ancient strength of it beneath his palm. From this vantage point, the world felt vast. He could see beyond East River, to the hazy outlines of other towns, to the faint shimmer of the interstate highway. It was a view that made his chest ache with a nameless longing, a feeling of being both small and impossibly large at the same time.

Mike, meanwhile, had already found a comfortable spot, pulling out a half-eaten candy bar from his pocket. "Want some?" he mumbled, offering a sticky piece.

Tom shook his head. He wasn't hungry. He just wanted to stand there, to let the wind buffet him, to feel the quiet power of the hill. There was a sense of freedom up here, a temporary escape from the expectations that seemed to cling to him like burrs back in town.

Back in East River, he was Tom, the big kid. The one with the wide shoulders and the steady gaze. The one who was supposed to be strong. His father, a burly man who worked the relentless shifts at the steel mill, had always emphasized strength. "A man's got to be strong, Tom," he'd often say, his voice rumbling like distant thunder. "Strong in his back, strong in his mind." Tom had tried to live up to that, to embody the unspoken demand in his father's eyes.

But up here, on the hill, strength felt different. It wasn't about lifting heavy things or winning fights. It was about enduring the wind, about finding his footing on loose earth, about the quiet resilience of the old oak tree. It was about simply being, without the need to prove anything.

He closed his eyes for a moment, letting the sun warm his face. The air was cool against his skin, a stark contrast to the humid air below. He could hear Mike rustling around, probably trying to find a comfortable position. The silence, broken only by the wind, was a balm.

"Hey, Tom," Mike said, his voice softer now. "Remember that time we thought we saw the Hemmings' dog up here?"

Tom opened his eyes, a small smile touching his lips. "Yeah. And it turned out to be a really big rabbit."

Mike laughed, a genuinely amused sound. "I swear, for a second, I thought it was a wolf."

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, just watching the clouds drift by, listening

to the world from above. The sun, a hazy disc, began its slow descent, painting the sky in soft shades of orange and purple. The factory smoke, usually a dark plume, now caught the light, turning golden.

Eventually, Mike stirred. "We should probably head back. Mom's gonna kill me if I'm late for dinner."

Tom nodded, a familiar weight settling back into his chest. The magic of the hill was always temporary. Down below, the world waited, with its demands and its expectations. He pushed off the tree, stretching his long limbs.

As they began their descent, the wind seemed to push them, urging them onward. The town below, now bathed in the glow of the setting sun, seemed to beckon, a mosaic of light and shadow. The rusty tracks gleamed faintly, a path back to the familiar, to the place where Tom would resume his role as the strong boy. He knew that even if the hill offered a temporary escape, it was in the town, in the everyday struggles and quiet triumphs, that he would truly find out what that strength truly meant.

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