

# The Core of Strength

By : OmegaSun

On the morning of the first day of high school, two coming-of-age teenage boys discover the truth about growing up, and life changing secrets are revealed, as they realize that their lives are only now beginning.



Published on  
**Booksie**

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By Jack Cloudt

The grey straps of my backpack dug into the blades of my shoulders as I waited out front of Paul's house all of those seemingly few years ago. It had been the first day of high school for us, and I remember not being able to believe Paul was already running late this early in the school year. What could be taking him so long?

Eventually, the front door opened as Paul slumped out, as if we had all morning to get to school. That or he just didn't care to spend his morning sleeping on a textbook instead of a pillow.

"What the fuck took you so long?" I questioned as we started walking in the direction of the high school.

"I don't know," Paul replied lazily. "I expected you'd still be in the middle of your morning jerk off right now."

Paul was chewing gum, his jaw shifting gently. Under his jaw, I could see Paul's light birthmark that was shaped somewhat like a letter 'P.' It wasn't very noticeable, but when you've grown up next door to your best friend your whole life, you eventually come to know everything about him. His birthmark may not have been a big deal, but it was one of the things that distinguished him. I wonder if he knew that.

Our converse and sneakers softly spanked against the sidewalk as we made our way quickly beneath the late summer sky to school.

"What do you have first period?" I asked Paul curiously.

"Biology I think."

"Fuck! I've got geography. I'm not gonna know anyone in that class."

"Whatever, man," Paul replied. "At least you can fucking pass geography. I barely passed history at all last year."

Paul was right. I had probably been one of the highest ranking students in our class last year. Paul, on the other hand, wouldn't have had a chance at passing without a sneaky eye. I worried about him sometimes. Middle school was over. High school would be different for the both of us.

"God damn it, we're gonna be late," Paul announced, checking the time on his outdated keyboard phone.

"No thanks to you," I said.

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By now, the lone of one story houses beside the sidewalk had ended, and made way for the wide entrance of a deep forest. Paul stepped off of the sidewalk and started towards the forest. "Here, we can go this way. The trail leads out to behind the school."

"I don't think we should go in there," I said cautiously. "I think we should just keep going this way."

"What are you afraid of?" Paul interrogated before approaching a dirt trail that led into the forest. I waited for a moment, debating whether this was a good idea or not. Yeah, I was scared, but I couldn't admit that. Besides, I knew Paul came to this forest regularly to smoke pot, so he knew the trail. We didn't really talk about his drug related activities, but I knew about them. I followed him.

As we followed the unpaved path, I could feel the terrain changing to rock beneath the thin soles of my converse.

Paul didn't talk much. He hadn't really talked much really in the months leading up to that day, now that I think about it. He just led the way through the forest that was entirely new to me.

"You gonna try and get with that chick Cameron?" Paul asked, finally letting out his voice.

"Cameron?" I asked. "Nah, I don't think so," I answered.

"What not? She's hot."

I stopped in my tracks. "You think that's all there is to her?"

"Um, yeah? What the hell else is there to know, Romeo?"

I was silent, fighting the embarrassing warmth in my cheeks, my fists digging deep into my jean pockets as I thought of the way she laughed as a sincere smile was maintained by her aqua blue eyes that swam beneath the sea of her long, brunette hair. I admired the way her presence emitted a warm glow that shined throughout the otherwise dull room. I remembered the way her soft pink lips felt against mine during that lifelong second at the end of the year party on the last day of eighth grade, before she hurriedly left me, stunned and alone, not sure if what just happened had been reality. I hadn't believed in God since I was twelve, but she was the closest proof I had to the existence of angels. I wanted to point these facts out to Paul, but I knew I couldn't. I knew Paul would only think of me as a pussy or a faggot. Guys aren't supposed to show their feelings. Yet we have them. And all Paul could see was that Cameron was "hot."

Paul started walking again and I followed. Then Paul crossed a line, his words sending a silent ringing through my core. "If you don't fuck her, I will."

If I had known then the truth of Paul's love for Cameron that he shared with me, that he was only disguising his jealousy beneath his words for the same reason as me, I wouldn't have done what I did next. But if I didn't do what I did next, Paul may not have ever gotten the chance to tell me the truth one drunken night at a party a year or two later. Life is funny like that.

Paul was hit from behind out of nowhere by a strong force, and he hit the ground hard. He wasn't as shocked or hurt as he should have been. He was used to it. He got up and turned to face me. I still don't know what he saw when he looked me in the eyes in that moment. Maybe he saw all of my anger, years of building momentum inside of me, never able to find an escape until now. Maybe he saw a look that was familiar to him. Whatever he saw, he never told me. I never asked.

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“Hey,” Paul began calmly, “I didn’t mean to—I didn’t wait to hear him out as I, consumed with a hidden rage, charged him again, shoving him again to the ground. I stepped to his splayed body, planning to kick him in the side as he lay helpless in the dirt. His shirt was lifted up slightly, and I noticed something as I approached him. On his chest, purple bruises covered his abdomen. That’s strange, I thought, I hadn’t punched him there or hard enough to have already left bruises like that. Then I realized it.

“Paul?” I asked sheepishly. “What were you late this morning?”

Paul stood, steadying himself, and hastily covered his purple chest with his now dirty shirt. He rubbed his chin, just above his P-shaped birthmark.

“I told you, it was nothing. I just forgot.”

“Tell me the truth.”

Silence.

“How long?” I asked at last.

Paul was quiet for a moment. His eyes rested on the laces of his sneakers, his fists clenched as if to protect the truth that he held. His voice pierced the empty forest like a squeaking of a mouse in a lonely field.

“Four months.”

“Have you told anyone?”

“No.”

“You need to.”

“No,” Paul snapped, looking up at me. “I can’t. It’s not like he can help it. It’s just rough right now with the divorce and the rent and all. He’s doing the best he can for the both of us.”

“Well obviously his best isn’t what is best for you.”

Silence.

I had never seen Paul cry before. He had grown up pretty poor, and he got in his share of fights, and I wouldn’t be surprised if his face had never felt the sting of tears. I guess I was right. I have still yet to have ever seen him cry.

“Let’s go,” he said through barely separated lips.

He began to walk, but I stayed where I was, still processing that I was blind to what had been going on next door to me, in the house of my brother.

“Paul,” My words stopped him, his back to me. “If you ever need a place to stay, you can always stay with me.”

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With his back to me, I could see Paul look down again and breathe deeply. “Thanks.” He started walking again.

At last we came to a creek. Several stones made a natural bridge over the creek. Across the shining water, the vast high school stood like a castle beyond the last of the forest’s trees. We were almost there.

Paul hopped along the rocks easily and stood on the other side of the creek, waiting for me.

“Come on!” he called to me.

I looked at the creek, and at the enormous school in front of me, where I would be spending the last years of my childhood. “I can’t,” I called back. I don’t know what I was referring to when I said that.

I crammed my hands in my jeans again, ashamed. We had come all this way, just for me to chicken out like a little kid. I was scared, I admitted to myself at last. Scared of what awaited me on the other side of the creek. Scared of the uncertain future that I would confront inside of the walls of that school that I used to long to attend when I knew I couldn’t go. Scared of being alone as I left the path that I had walked on with my parents holding my hands when I was little; that the time had come for me to go on and find out how to find my own way through this cycle of Life.

“Hey,” I heard a voice say to me. I looked up to see Paul back in front of me. He had returned from across the creek and now stood on the rock in front of me. “Follow me. You’ll be okay.”

I followed, as a bell rang from within the school.

In the beginning, Paul and I would talk at school and hang out sometimes on the weekends when our workload was low. He never took up my offer to stay at my place, but he was soon taken away from his father by Child Services and taken to a foster home across town. Something tells me I know who made the final call, though. After that, we began to hang out less frequently as it became harder to see each other on the weekends. Lunches together turned into hurried hellos in between classes as we drifted towards separate, new groups of people. Hellos turned into polite smiles, until even these eventually turned into nothing more than a shove as we squeezed through the same crowded doorway. It’s strange the way these things work. I guess it’s true that people change. It’s not that we necessarily want to or look forward to, but we do it still when we don’t mean to. I missed Paul at first, but after a while, I thought about him less and less, until he became only a memory. Only his P-shaped birthmark distinguished him in the crowds of tired faces during passing periods. I heard that he had changed for the best since middle school.

While I was in high school, I met an English teacher who I stay in contact with to this day. He was the one who showed me the meaning to my writing. He was the one who taught me how to translate my bottled emotions into words of art spread on a page. He once told me a quote by a man named Max Lerner: “The turning point in the process of growing up is when you discover the core of strength within you that survives all hurt.” I hope that I can someday teach this to my son.

My wife Cameron and I have just recently moved out here to Austin. I am hoping that this will be a good inspiration for my newest novel. I have the title down, *The Core of Strength*, and a dedication to an old friend. I am happy to see that our son is enjoying his new elementary school. He has even made a new friend. When my son invited his friend over to play one day after school, I couldn’t help but feel a strange familiarity about this boy. I figured out why when I opened the door for his dad after the play date. Underneath the boy’s jaw, he had a small, barely noticeable P-shaped birthmark.

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Just like his father.

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