

A NOTE TO THE READER

I have always been fascinated by the adventures of Max Werner. There's no secret behind this fascination; for as long as I can remember, I have been deathly afraid of the dark. Due to this constant and overwhelming fear, I naturally thought being able to see in the dark¹ was the ultimate super power; better than x-ray vision, invisibility, or even flight. How could I resist the allure of a young man, only a year my senior², who could so completely, so effortlessly, dominate my greatest fear? His existence as a real, historical person made the appeal even stronger. Max Werner was not the mere imaginings of an author somewhere, but a man of flesh and blood. I remember dozens, maybe even hundreds, of nights I spent poring over the same biographies and histories, dreaming of everything I could do, all the fears I could overcome, if I could just see in the dark like Max Werner.

Only in recent years, now that my own children are at the age I was when I first discovered Max Werner, have I realized how far he has fallen from modern cultural awareness. Saddened by this decline, and driven by my own selfish desire to ensure my children share my love for Max Werner adventures, I spent several months searching out the same books that held such importance for me as a young reader.

Unfortunately, I soon discovered the books that I once considered magical adventures were in fact dry, historical tomes. While the escapades I dreamed so much about were still present, they were nothing more than facts in an encyclopedia. How could such works ever capture the imagination of anyone who did not already possess the most passionate love for Werner stories, or at least an overwhelming fear of the dark?

In order to alleviate this problem I have put together this selective history. As the title indicates, I am not attempting to recreate the epic, detailed works of Larson³. Instead, I'm

¹ A scientific explanation for Max Werner's ability to see in the dark is beyond the scope of this book, or the scientific expertise of the author. For a wonderfully clear investigation of this seemingly supernatural ability, please see *The Science of Max Werner: Modern Understanding of Night Vision* by J.P. Few.

² I was fourteen years old at the time, and in the first Max Werner story I encountered (the adventure which will be recounted within this book) he was fifteen. While Max Werner is actually eighty-three years my senior, I thought of him as being my age for most of my young adult life.

³ *A Complete History of Max Werner* by Stephanie Larson

simply offering a retelling of my favorite Max Werner story, and the one that started it all for me, in the hope that it will highlight everything that makes Max Werner stories so great – freedom, friendship, and adventure.

So, if you don't know anything about Max Werner, and this will be your first introduction to his unique style of adventure, I hope I can pass just a fraction of my passion on to you. Or, if you are like me and have been reading about Max for most of your life, I hope I can bring back a few fond memories of your own history with one of the 21st century's forgotten heroes.

PART I
THE IGNOBLE ADVENTURES OF MAX WERNER

1

IN WHICH WE ARE INTRODUCED TO A YOUNG MAN OF CONSIDERABLE INTEREST

Max Werner sat beneath the towering oak tree that stood outside his bedroom window, deep in thought. His dark hair hung haphazardly across his face, nearly reaching the bottom of his chin. Though clean, it did not give the impression of being well groomed. Ragged and unkempt, his hair matched the overall appearance that one got when glancing at Max – casual indifference. He appeared bored as he watched the bats dive from the tree in search of insects. If not for the slight movement of his eyes and face as he watched the animals in their rapid flight, the casual observer might not think that he could see the bats at all.

There was no light from the moon, not that it mattered to Max; neither the bats nor the moonlight were the subject of his thoughts on this evening. Only four weeks of summer vacation remained, and Max was trying to determine the best way to spend it. Once summer vacation was over, staying up late and enjoying the evenings would become progressively more difficult. He was given substantial freedom by his parents⁴, but he still hadn't successfully convinced them that school wasn't an imperative.

Max's summer so far consisted mostly of late night excursions through the surrounding neighborhood and the nearby town followed by sleeping as late as possible. Max didn't hate the daytime, but during the day he didn't have the unique advantages that perfect sight in pitch blackness afforded. Unfortunately for the town, those advantages weren't entirely noble.

⁴ Historians still debate whether Max obtained this freedom as a teenager through a conscious decision of trusting parents, or as a result of inattentiveness and naiveté.

Max didn't always plan on using his unique gift to steal from his neighbors. However, once he discovered just how easy it was to find the unlocked car door, or sneak through a backyard without the aid of illumination, it simply came naturally. More than greed, though, Max's primary motivation was ordinary boredom. While moving unobserved throughout the town might be fun for a ten-year-old, by the time Max turned twelve, it was far too dull. And he couldn't bring anyone with him to roam the streets, because they wouldn't be able to see in the pitch black of night, and having to use a flashlight would ruin all the fun.

Now, just three years after starting his life of petty crime, Max was starting to get bored of even that. There was no challenge to opening an unlocked car when you knew you were cloaked in darkness and effectively invisible. Just as walking the streets became old once he had covered them all, now stealing had lost its shine. What Max needed was something more thrilling, something to fill the dead of night for the next few weeks. What Max needed, was one big heist that would get the whole town talking, not just a single sentence in the monthly neighborhood newsletter.

2

CONCERNING SISTERS AND THEIR NOT SO GOOD INTENTIONS

Max stood up, revealing his small, slender frame, and turned back towards the house. Beside the giant oak tree the house appeared small and fragile, almost like a perfectly crafted dollhouse. In reality, it was a solid brick structure that had no problem handling the light snow that frequented the area each winter.

Max, still considering what his options might be for the ultimate heist, was paying little attention to his surroundings as he neared the back door. While still several feet away from the two steps that led up to the rear entrance, an even smaller figure stood from the opposite side of the tree where Max had sat thinking, and walked towards him, completely at ease.

“You are so weird, you know that?” said a small, but confident voice. Max jumped slightly at the sound and turned to see who it was. As he took in the small figure of his little sister, he cursed under his breath at his own inattentiveness. Perfect night vision doesn’t make up for a lack of focus, he realized. Jenny shifted her weight slightly, and Max smiled to himself. People always get uncomfortable in the dark, even when they are so close to home. He continued to stare as she began to move her head slowly from side to side, the way everyone does when they are alone in the dark, as though a ray of light was always just at the periphery of their vision.

“So it’s weird for me to be out here, but when you sit behind a tree in the dark it’s totally normal?”

“Yeah, that’s right” Jenny’s voice was strong and confident as she responded, but the frown she thought hidden by the lack of light gave away her embarrassment. Max smiled again, this

time throwing in an audible snicker for Jenny's benefit before turning back towards the house again and heading inside.

"Hey, wait!" Jenny whispered in a half hiss, half shout as she began to jog quickly to catch up with him. Max, not at all interested in anything his little sister had to say, continued ahead, giving the back door an unnecessary push to close it, knowing Jenny wouldn't see it coming without the porch light on. Jenny, to her credit, knew her brother well enough to stop just in time. She took the last step slowly, reaching her arm out to find the door before picking up her pace again.

Though only eleven years old, Jenny was a tough kid, and was able to hold her own pretty well against her fifteen-year-old big brother. The size difference wasn't significant, Max being as small as he was, but physically pushing his sister around was never his style anyways. He preferred mind games over punches. Jenny, whether due to Max's inadvertent training regimen or some Werner family trait, knew the best way to deal with Max was to play her own games whenever possible.

Thanks to the light from the microwave, Jenny was able to catch up to Max as they passed through the kitchen. She slid to a stop in front of him just as he was about to take the first step towards the bedrooms upstairs.

"I know what you were doing out there" she said, moving to the first step and getting eye level with Max. He glared back at her, but in the dim light of the house the effect was lost.

"You know I was sitting under the tree? Wow, the education system in this area must be phenomenal⁵ if you could figure that out all on your own. I should tell mom, maybe they could give you an award, or something." Max tried to push past her, but she put her arms out, gripping the hand rail. Max sighed deeply, resigning himself to the fact that he was going to have to hear his sister out.

"Or maybe *I* should tell mom how you've been stealing from our neighbors all summer." Jenny smiled as she saw Max tense his body. How could she possibly know he was stealing? There's no way she would be able to follow him without his knowledge. She couldn't see in the dark, and any light would give her away immediately.

"I haven't been stealing anything. Don't be stupid, Jenny."

"Oh really? Then where have you been getting all that new stuff? It's not like mom and dad have the money for it, even if they wanted to give you an allowance. Plus Amy told me yesterday that her new iPod⁶ disappeared and I saw you with one just like it this morning. You don't seem like someone who would buy yourself a case covered in pink flowers."

⁵ Max's sarcasm aside, the educational system in Clampert County PA was, and still is, quite excellent. On average, high school graduates from Clampert County schools are twenty percent more likely than any other students in the nation to complete a post-graduate degree.

⁶A portable electronic device used to listen to music that was popular for most of the early 21st Century. One is currently on display at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History.

Max forced his body to relax. She was right, of course. He had been stupid and taken an iPod that belonged to his sister's best friend, but that didn't mean he had to make it obvious. He started to speak, but he couldn't think of a good response. He was so used to avoiding conflict by slinking through the dark, that he had grown rusty with making up excuses when the pressure was on.

"Fine, so you caught me. You going to go tattle on me to mom now?" He tried to keep his voice cool, as though he wasn't in the slightest concerned about any trouble that might come from his illegal activities, but he was only marginally successful. He knew it wouldn't fool anyone, especially not his shrewd little sister. Jenny smiled, a cunning little smirk that scared Max far more than he wanted to admit, and far more than even the worst punishment he could imagine⁷ from his parents.

"Not unless I have to," Jenny said. "I've been watching you, Max. I know how much stuff you've been getting, and I want in. I'm sick and tired of watching Amy and all the other kids at school walk around with their cool new phones and shoes. Why should they get to have all the fun? So the next time you go out, you're taking me with you, and I get to keep half of what you steal." Max started to reply, but Jenny cut him off before he could even open his mouth. "Or I *will* be telling mom and dad what you've been doing. And if they don't do anything about it, I'll call the cops."

Jenny finished her monologue by planting her hands firmly on her hips. If not for her diminutive size, she would have looked just like Max's geography teacher when she scowled at him for forgetting the capital of Spain⁸.

Max stood staring at his little sister, overwhelmed by a mixture of pride in her ability to outmaneuver him so perfectly and fury over her outrageous demands. His mind raced wildly as he attempted to discover some gap in the logic of her reasoning, but as the seconds turned into minutes he knew it was in vain. Years of success had made him cocky. He had hundreds of pieces of evidence in his closet upstairs that would immediately prove his guilt. There was no way he could dispose of it all in time if Jenny actually decided to call the cops. And there was no hope that she wouldn't. Max could see it in the steely glint in her eyes that she was serious. Jenny was never one to bluff, Max had taught her too well over the years with his sibling torture. He continued to wait, but Jenny didn't flinch, even in the semi-darkness that enveloped them. She knew she was in control of the conversation, and that eventually Max would have to come around to her plan. He did, sighing deeply.

"Fine. You can go. But two conditions," he said, beginning to consider the logistics of taking someone along with him who couldn't see in the dark.

⁷ Going to bed without dinner after refusing to eat broccoli, as recorded in Max Werner's recently discovered journals.

⁸ Madrid. Max always thought it was Barcelona.

“No way, no conditions, or the deal is off and I go straight to mom and dad.”

“Don’t be stupid, Jenny, I already said you could go. I’ve been doing this for a long time, and I know what I’m doing. These aren’t arbitrary conditions, they’re completely necessary if we don’t want to get caught. I might not want you to come, but if you are coming, we’re going to do it right. Which means we’re going to do it my way.”

Jenny considered this for a moment then gave Max a curt nod. “Okay, deal. What are the conditions?”

“You listen to everything I say while we are out of the house. Don’t go running off just because you see something shiny or try to scale some wall because you suddenly think you’re a ninja.” For a moment Jenny looked as though she was about to respond before deciding better of it and allowing Max to continue. “Second, we go when I decide it’s a good time. We can’t just run off any day of the week and expect to get away with it.” A look of disappointment flitted across Jenny’s face, but almost before Max could notice it, it transformed into a broad grin. The demands were annoying, yes, but she would work with them. She had no desire to get caught, after all.

“This is going to be so cool,” she said, turning away from Max and practically skipping up the stairs to her room. Max sighed yet again, and began to slowly make his way up to his bedroom.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” he said to no one in particular.

3

MAX ATTEMPTS TO DELAY HIS SISTER'S LIFE OF CRIME

Even before his relatively recent habit of trekking through the neighborhood at night looking for easy victims, Max spent years staying up late in his pitch black room playing with toys⁹, reading, or just reveling in the fact that his night vision made him unique among all the people in the world¹⁰. Needless to say, these late night indulgences turned Max into a poor sleeper. Jenny's manipulation, however, caused Max to sleep even more poorly than normal as his mind raced with what exactly this new deal would mean. Not only had his little sister completely outmaneuvered him, a stressful enough occurrence in its own right, now he had to figure out how he could bring them both safely through even the simplest of robberies.

Up to this point, it had been relatively easy for Max to steal without taking very many risks, but that was thanks almost entirely to his perfect night vision. How would he be able to get his sister to and from the crime scene, let alone commit the crime itself, without any light? She

⁹ An infamous, though not entirely confirmed, Max Werner story holds that at the age of four, Max scared his parents when they discovered him playing in the sandbox in his backyard one pitch black evening. His parents, frightened by what might compel their son to leave the safety and comfort of their well-lit home to play in the impenetrable darkness, rushed him back inside and tearfully examined him from head to foot. His infamous response of "What's light?" struck them as cute, and the event was soon forgotten.

¹⁰ There have actually been two other confirmed cases of Max's unique ability, Andrew McAllister and Samantha Clarke, both of whom lived at relatively the same time as Max. Aside from the presence of this fascinating gift, however, their lives were quite dull and so they will not be mentioned again.

would be clumsy, scared, and completely useless. His hope for a little notoriety had transformed from a daydream into an out of control, though no longer boring, nightmare.

Max sat up in his bed much earlier than normal, though with how much his mind had raced throughout the night, he found little difference between waking and sleeping. Without the pressure to arrive at school on time, Max would normally breeze past noon. The clock read 10:18 AM, breaking Max's previous summer wake up record by two hours and four minutes.

He fell back into bed, but he knew there was no chance of falling back asleep. Going over the previous night's events, he allowed himself a small smile. At least he had convinced Jenny to leave the "when" of their little expedition up to him. That should buy him enough time to figure something out, or maybe even convince her that he would steal her stuff, but she shouldn't come along. Even the conversation with her in his head about this possibility wasn't going well, though, so his hopes weren't very high.

With nothing else to do, Max rolled out of bed, grabbed some clean clothes out of the dresser at the foot of his bed, and headed towards the shower. The hot water felt good, and it helped Max clear his head further, but he still couldn't come up with a good solution to the problem at hand.

Done with his shower, and in no mood to eat breakfast for fear of running into Jenny, Max quickly threw on the clothes he had grabbed earlier and snuck downstairs as quietly as possible, slipping out the front door before anyone in the family noticed he was up. That was another advantage of always sleeping in so late, no one ever expected you to be active in the early hours of the morning.

Out on the lawn, Max headed for the bike he always left slung against the side of the house. His parents hated it, but like most things Max did, they ignored it rather than addressing it head on. Max pulled the bike away from the house, spun it around in one smooth motion, and jumped on. He pedaled hard, leaving the house behind as he hurried the few short blocks to his best friend Tom's house.

Tom and Max had been friends since they met on the first day of kindergarten, ten years ago. The teacher, trying to come up with a way to seat the children in her classroom without succumbing to the hated alphabetical scheme, decided to order them according to birth dates. Once the mass confusion that resulted from nineteen five-year-olds trying to figure out everyone's birthday simultaneously died down, Max and Tom found themselves seated side by side. Their birthdays¹¹, only one day apart, became the catalyst for immediate best friend status.

After only ten minutes of vigorous biking Max arrived at Tom's house. Out of breath, but no longer thinking of the problem with his sister, he jogged to Tom's front door, opening it without even knocking. There had long been a standing invitation to Max from the Stantons, which was

¹¹Max Werner – 6/17/1996; Thomas Stanton – 6/16/1996

beneficial for Max since he would have had little inclination to knock regardless of Mr. and Mrs. Stanton's feelings on the matter.

Max gave a curt nod hello to Mrs. Stanton who smiled and waved as Max turned down the hallway and towards Tom's room. The Stanton house wasn't any bigger than the Werners', but he always felt it was nicer. The carpet was always just a little cleaner, the couches inexplicably more comfortable, and the dinners slightly tastier. Tom's room, on the other hand, was always a disaster of clothes, paper, and toys, some of which the two friends had given up on years before.

Not bothering to watch where he stepped, Max unceremoniously tromped over piles of clothes and half-broken action figures as he made his way towards the old La-Z-Boy that Tom kept against his far wall. The room was small, only just large enough to hold a twin bed, the chair, and a dresser with an old TV stacked on top. Tom, barely even acknowledging Max's entrance, was busy fiddling with the old Fender guitar he only recently started playing. Max threw himself into the chair and watched as Tom picked out a few hackneyed guitar riffs.

With no clear purpose for going to Tom's house in the first place other than to get away from his sister (a noble enough reason), Max sat quietly, leaving the responsibility of conversation up to his best friend. It wasn't like Max could just tell Tom what was going on with his sister; that would not only mean revealing the truth about his criminal lifestyle, but his night vision secret as well¹². Despite being best friends, Max still kept his night vision secret, even from Tom.¹³

Finally finishing the song he was working on, Tom tossed the guitar onto the bed and looked at Max.

"You're up early," he said.

"I couldn't sleep."

Tom laughed at this.

"I didn't know you knew there was such a thing as bad sleep. I saw you sleep through the bell after first period every day last year. What happened? Jenny picking on you again?"

¹² Revealing the truth would also mean admitting defeat at the hands of his little sister – a concession Max would have found less desirable than all the others.

¹³ Not long after Max and Tom met for the first time, Tom had invited Max to a sleepover at the prodding of Mrs. Stanton. Max, excited to spend some time with his new friend, agreed and both boys planned for their first real sleepover. As all boys do, they stayed up late, destroying whatever toys they could get their hands on. At nearly midnight, Mrs. Stanton entered the room, wished the boys goodnight, and flipped off the light. Tom, realizing the evening's fun was over, headed to bed. Max, however, continued to play, not understanding what was keeping Tom from joining in. Max claimed later in life that it was at this moment he realized he was different from those around him. Instead of sharing the secret, however, he chose to remain silent, thus setting the stage for his long standing fear of revealing the truth to Tom, or anyone else he met.

Max scowled at this, not just because Tom's guess was correct, but because Tom always picked on Max about his little sister. Max reasoned this was mostly because Tom feared Jenny, but the subject had never been addressed directly so he wasn't positive.

"Yeah, you got it," Max replied, trying to force the sarcasm into his voice, "she's blackmailing me to help her steal a new purse. You know Jenny." Tom laughed again, throwing himself onto the bed next to his guitar.

"Not again!" Tom said with such conviction that even Max, caught up as he was with the truth behind his sarcasm, couldn't help but join in on the laughter. The fear and anxiety that troubled Max did not melt away completely, not even a day of hanging out with his best friend could do that, but the laughter was real enough, as was Max's appreciation for his best friend. Without knowing what drove Max over to his house this morning, Tom said exactly what he needed to. As Max continued to laugh and joke with Tom some part of him realized how lucky he was to have such a great friend, though the part that dreaded the thought of returning home and facing reality once again grew larger as the day dragged on, until his gratefulness for Tom was drowned completely.

Max sat on his bike, heading home through the gentle hills of his neighborhood. He wasn't riding as hard now as he had on the way to Tom's so the trip home would take a little longer. The sun was just setting over Max's shoulder, casting the street and houses in a grey, murky dimness. Max took this opportunity to practice his twilight vision. One of the first things he learned when he began his life of crime was the importance of distinguishing between the various shades of illumination¹⁴. Understanding how much darkness was enough to hide him from any potential observers was essential for successful thievery, and it had taken Max nearly a year of diligent effort to be able to see the difference between the paleness of a weak shadow and the rich warmth of sufficient darkness. Now Max worked like a studied artist, effortlessly identifying the best hiding places, the darkest shadows, and those areas dangerously close to, but not quite, dark enough to disappear into.

The neighborhood's slow descent towards darkness encouraged and invigorated Max, and by the time the last remnants of the sun's light disappeared, he had already passed his house

¹⁴ This concept will seem odd to those being introduced to Max Werner for the first time, but one must keep in mind the fact that Max does not understand light and darkness as you and I do. For us, lightness is that which makes it possible to see, and darkness is the lack of light, or the lack of visibility. Max, on the other hand, does not experience a lack of visibility no matter the level of illumination. When discussing this matter later in life, he attempted to explain his ability to distinguish levels of illumination, but he found it was not unlike trying to describe the concept of light, or color, to a blind man. As a result, I will not attempt to integrate Max's explanation into this work. Instead, I will do my best to present this concept using comparisons that have satisfied me throughout my life as a Max Werner fan with the understanding that this is a liberty I must take for the sake of literary effectiveness.

and was heading towards the outskirts of Stewart Lake. He may have promised Jenny that he would take her out the next time he went to steal, but he made no such promise about a scouting mission. After all, he had to do his due diligence to ensure neither of them was caught, and now was as good a time as any.

4

HOW MAX SAVED A LIFE AND MADE A NEW FRIEND

Max flew down one last hill, taking the curve at the bottom at top speed before rolling into a small suburb just outside of town. He pulled his bike behind a nearby fence, stepped off, and began to move silently through the shadows that shrouded the street. Lamps lit the area here and there, but Max found little trouble in navigating unseen among the homes. He was never voyeuristic in his nighttime travels, preferring to watch the outside of homes for telltale signs of easy pickings – open windows, unlocked doors in cars, or valuables being left on the front or back porch being the simplest and safest options.

Nothing was presenting itself this evening so Max decided to rest for a few minutes beneath the excellent cover of a nearby tree. He could tell by the way the darkness seemed to hold him that there was no way anyone could see him from here without shining a light directly on him. Plus, he wasn't technically doing anything wrong for the time being, so he gave little thought to being discovered.

As Max continued to watch the street in the event some resident decided to park their car and forget to lock it – an occurrence so common that it no longer surprised him – he noticed something in the yard across the street. There, among the bushes, he could see something struggling desperately. Max could see the animal clearly, but the distance was enough to prevent from knowing exactly what was happening. Now that he was focused on it, he could just barely hear small, pathetic noises coming from the direction of the struggling form. Max couldn't bear it. It was clear the animal was in trouble, and obviously there was no one else around to help it. He would have to be the one to do something if anyone was going to help.

Still, he hesitated for a moment, knowing full well that the street lamp that stood between him and the pathetic creature would cast him in stark relief against the dimly lit street. Anyone looking out their window would be able to see him perfectly. Yes, he wasn't breaking the law by being out at night; it wasn't even past curfew. But Max always made sure that no one saw him out at night; it didn't do him any favors to put his image in the minds of those that may soon become his victims.

The whimpering and crying became even more frantic, as did the thrashing, and Max couldn't take it anymore. He slipped from behind the tree and moved as quickly as he could across the street without actually running. He angled his journey across the road so that he spent as little time outside the protection of the darkness as possible, but he knew that there were at least ten seconds in which he was completely exposed. He put the thought out of his head and continued on. Shrouded in darkness again, he stepped up to the bush. His silent approach coupled with the desperation of the small animal meant that it didn't notice Max until he was nearly upon it. Sensing danger, it stopped suddenly, giving Max his first clear view of it.

Caught amongst the branches, its body wrapped in some sort of string, hung a fair sized black bird. No, not black exactly, but an extremely dark blue, with a hint of iridescence when it attempted to flex its hopelessly tangled wings.

"Whoa," said Max, breaking another of his cardinal rules and speaking while out at night. "It's okay, buddy," he whispered soothingly to the bird. "I'm not gonna hurt you." Max, not wanting to frighten the bird more than he had already, kept his hands at his sides while he examined the predicament. The twigs and branches, while clearly an annoyance, were obviously not the main problem. If not for the string that wrapped itself tightly around the bird's wings and legs, it could easily have escaped the bush. As it was, however, Max thought it unlikely the bird would be able to free itself. The string would have to be cut, and Max would have to be the one to do it.

Without hesitating, Max reached into the bush, while whispering nonsense to the bird in the most relaxed, calming voice he could manage. The bird, seeing the hand near, began its frantic movements yet again, crying out pathetically. Max didn't stop, however, and within seconds he had a gentle, but firm, grip on the bird. As he slowly pulled his hand back out of the bush, the bird calmed. Whether it realized it was being helped, or had already lost all hope of salvation, it relaxed as Max navigated it deftly through the tangle of branches.

Once the bird was free of the bush, Max reached into a pocket with his left hand, pulled out a pocket knife, and flipped it open with a practiced flick of the wrist. He smoothly cut the string, allowing it to fall from the bird.

The bird stretched its iridescent wings, and quickly shot out of Max's hand. It banked smoothly and made a wide circle around Max before landing smoothly on a branch sticking out of the bush that was previously its prison. It cocked its head, watching Max intently. Max stared

back, enthralled by the slight shimmer that ran across the bird's feathers like a breeze across still water.

"Hello," he whispered, surprising himself. He didn't often find himself talking to birds, especially not while on a reconnaissance mission.

The bird squawked, as though it was returning the greeting¹⁵.

"Well," Max said, feeling awkward as he considered the bizarre scene, "uh... glad you're okay." Max looked at the bird for another minute, expecting it to fly off. When it didn't, he turned away from the bush and began to make his way back along the street and towards his bike. He left the yard he was on, and was just passing under a tree when he heard the rustling of leaves above him. He looked up and saw the flash of wings as the bird settled into the branches above. Max stopped walking, but when the bird didn't move, he continued on again.

Twenty feet further along, Max passed a large fence, and this time the bird settled along the posts just a few feet ahead. Max didn't stop walking this time, but continued on, careful to not let the bird's bizarre behavior distract him from sticking to the shadows.

The game of cat and mouse continued, all along the shadowed street until Max reached his bike. The bird, however, had made it there first, and was perched upon a nearby fence post. Max mounted the bike, looked at the bird and said with a laugh, "Well come on then." Without a moment's hesitation, the bird leapt off the post and glided effortlessly onto Max's shoulder. Still laughing, he dug his heel into the kick stand and took off, peddling hard. Max felt the pressure on his shoulder increase as the wind rushing past the bird began to pick up speed, but it wasn't enough to cause any pain.

A broad smile covered Max's face the entire trip home, and if not for the blackness of the night he would have looked just like any other boy on a bike in the middle of summer, carefree and happy. Max was overjoyed – he'd never had a pet before.

¹⁵ Though Gracian has been a known language for several years now, translations will not be offered here. There is some evidence to indicate that Max learned at least some of the language, but since no Gracian dialogue was recorded properly, I will allow the reader to make their own contextual guesses for the bird's comments.