

From *The Happiest Days of Our Lives*
by Wil Wheaton

Excerpted from “blue light special”

I held my brother’s hand as we walked carefully, for about three steps, and then I started running across the store, past a flashing blue light special, to the toy department. Once there, we dodged past the bicycles and ignored the shelves of board games until we got to the best aisle in the world: the one with the *Star Wars* figures.

Row after row of glorious *Star Wars* figures in blister packs hung from pegs in a wall that stretched up to the sky. Every one of them had a bright orange price tag, cut into a jagged sunburst marked “\$1.99!”

The smell of slightly burnt popcorn, kind of like the smell in the Rainbow Theater (where I’d go on countless eighth-grade not-really-but-we-called-them-that-anyway dates and watch *Ghostbusters* over and over again in 1984) hung heavy in the air. I stood there, experiencing what Douglas Coupland would eventually describe as “Optional Paralysis,” pondering one of the most difficult and important decisions I would ever make: which *Star Wars* figure would I purchase? They didn’t have the Chewbacca that I really wanted – no, *needed* – to fill a gaping hole in my cast of characters. They had lots of droids, but I already had the only two that mattered. They had some cool snow troopers, but they could only fight Han Solo in his Hoth outfit, and I didn’t even have a Hoth playset. (It made sense at the time.) They had IG-88, who was kind of cool and had an awesome gun, but it was only in one scene in *The Empire Strikes Back* and didn’t even talk. I stood at the wall of toys and wished, as I always did, that I could just get them all and sort them out at home while my jealous friends watched.

My brother said, “Come on, Wil. I want to go look at the Legos.”

“In a minute,” I said. I flipped through the ones I could reach, hoping that maybe Chewbacca was in the back behind one of the lame figures up front (that’s how I found Luke Skywalker in the Bespin outfit, which had a really cool light saber that you could take out of his hand and lose in the back yard the first day you played with it).

“Come onnnnnnn, Wil . . .” my brother said, tugging on my hand.

“Quit!” I said. “This is important!”

Lando Calrissian? He was a dick in the movie. There’s no way I’m getting him. That guy with the bald head and the light up headphone thing around his head? What is this, the Bespin Cloud City store? I thought.

“Willlllll,” my brother whined. Just then, my mom came around the corner.

“Willow, look what I found for you!” She held up a package of Luke Skywalker X-wing pilot Underoos.

“Oh cool!” I said. “Thanks!”

“And I have Batman for you, Jer Bear,” she said to my brother.

“Wow! I’m Batman!” he said. “Thanks!”

“Did you find something?” my mom asked, and then pointedly added, “Or are you saving this week?”

“Mom, I want to look at Legos,” Jeremy said.

“Okay, Jer, I’ll take you,” she said.

She started down the aisle and added, “You need to be ready to go when I come back, Wil.”

Left alone in the aisle, I could focus and make an informed decision. Suddenly, as if they’d materialized out of thin air, I saw several vehicles and playsets. The playsets were well beyond my budget, squarely in the realm of birthday gifts from relatives. A Death Star playset among them silently mocked me and my LaNdSPEEdR. However, the sunburst stickers on the vehicles were much more reasonable. I did some math in my head. If I saved, I could have my own Millennium Falcon in just a couple of months. If I could convince my mom and dad to let me do extra chores around the house, or if I got a commercial or something, I could even get it sooner!

Wow. The Millennium Falcon. It was so big, it took two hands to fly it. My friend Darryl let me watch as he put his together, and it had *two* sheets of stickers! It had this place where you could hide your figures, and you could recreate that cool chess game and Luke’s fight with the training droid thingy!

Could I do it? Could I save my allowance until I had enough to buy it? What if they didn’t have it when I was all saved up, though? Then what would I do? Mom would make me put my money in the bank, and I just knew I’d never see it again, while it earned something stupid called “interest.”

Excerpted from “a portrait of the artist as a young geek”

It was afternoon PE in fifth grade, and I was terrified. I ran and jumped and ducked, surrounded by a jeering crowd of my classmates. The PE teacher did nothing to stop the attack – and, in fact, encouraged it.

“Get him!” someone yelled as I fell to the asphalt, small rocks digging into my palms. I breathed hard. Through my adrenaline-fueled flight-or-fight response, the world slowed, the jeering faded, and I wondered to myself why our playground was just a parking lot and why we had to wear corduroy pants in the middle of a

Southern California heat wave. Before I could offer any answers, a clear and loud voice spoke from within my head. “Hey,” it said. “You’d better get up and move, or you’re dead.”

I nodded my head and looked up in time to see the red playground ball, spinning in slow motion, as the word “Voit” rotated into view. Pain exploded across my face and a mighty cheer erupted from the crowd. The PE teacher blew her whistle.

I don’t know how I managed to be the last kid standing on our team. I usually ran right to the front of the court so I could get knocked out quickly and (hopefully) painlessly before the good players got worked up by the furor of battle and started taking head shots, but I’d been stricken by a bout of temporary insanity – possibly caused by the heat – on this February day, and I’d actually played to win the game, using a very simple strategy: run like hell and hope to get lucky.

I blinked back tears as I looked up at Jimmie Just, who had delivered the fatal blow. Jimmie was the playground bully. He spent as much time in the principal’s office as he did in our classroom, and he was the most feared dodgeball player at the Lutheran School of the Foothills.

He laughed at me, his long hair stuck to his face in sweaty mats, and sneered. “Nice try, Wil the Pill.”

I picked myself up off the ground, determined not to cry. I sucked in deep breaths of air through my nose.

Mrs. Cooper, the PE teacher, walked over to me. “Are you okay, Wil?” she asked.

“Uh-huh,” I lied. Anything more than that and I risked breaking down into humiliating sobs that would follow me around the rest of the school year, and probably on into sixth grade.

“Why don’t you go wash off your face,” she said, not unkindly, “and sit down for a minute.”

“Okay,” I said. I walked slowly across the blacktop to the drinking fountains. Maybe if I really took my time, I could run out the clock and I wouldn’t have to play another stupid dodgeball game.

I washed my face and drank deeply from the drinking fountain. By the time I made it back to the benches along the playground’s southern edge, I’d lost the urge to cry, but my face radiated enough heat to compete with the blistering La Crescenta sun.

I sat down near Simon Teele, who, thanks to the wonders of alphabetization, ended up with me and Harry Yan (the school’s lone Asian kid) on field trips, on fire drills, and in chapel. Simon was taller than all of us, wore his hair down into his face, and really kept to himself. He was reading an oversized book that sort of looked like a textbook, filled with charts and tables.

We weren’t officially friends, but I knew him well enough to make polite conversation.

“Hey,” I said. “Why don’t you have to play dodgeball?”

“Asthma,” he said.

“Lucky,” I said. “I hate dodgeball.”

“Everyone hates dodgeball,” he said, “except Jimmie Just.”

“Yeah,” I said, relieved to hear someone else say out loud what I’d been thinking since fourth grade.

“Hey,” I said. “What are you reading?”

He held up the book and I saw its cover: a giant statue, illuminated by torches, sat behind an archway. Two guys were on its head, prying loose one of its jeweled eyes, as a group of people stood at the base. One was clearly a wizard; another was obviously a knight.

“*Player’s Handbook*,” he said. “Do you play D&D?”

I gasped. According to our ultra-religious school, D&D was Satanic. I looked up for teachers, but none were nearby. A hundred feet away on the playground, another game of dodgeball was underway. I involuntarily flinched when I heard the hollow *pang!* of the ball as it skipped off the ground.

“You’re going to get in trouble if you get caught with that,” I said.

“No, I won’t,” he said. “If I just keep it turned upside down, they’ll never see it. So do you play or not?”

“I have the red box set,” I said, “and a bunch of characters, but I don’t have anyone to play with.”

“That’s Basic,” he said. “This is Advanced.”

“Oh.”

“But if you want, you could come over to my house this weekend and we could play.”

I couldn’t believe my good luck. With a dodgeball to the face, Fate put me on the bench next to the kid who, over the next few months, helped me take my first tentative steps down the path to geekdom.



Praise for Wil Wheaton and The Happiest Days of Our Lives

“This is a wonderful little book. I hate to use a diminutive like ‘little’ for fear of implying that THDOOL is less-than significant in some literary way; it isn't. It is a charming, heart-warming, laugh-inducing, tear-jerking, and even envy-inducing read. It is not, however, long. I'd like to argue that this is a plus. Indeed, I think THDOOL is enjoyable in part because of its length (or lack thereof). It is, after all, a collection of short-form writing (blog-posts), collected, expanded, massaged, and served with a steaming side of post-modern nostalgic recollection. This is the face of contemporary introspective non-fiction, and it is exactly what we all like to read and write nowadays.” — Ken Denmead, Geekdad blog, Wired.com.

“Wil gives lie to the idea that there are no second acts in American lives. He's on his second act now -- as a writer -- and he's doing it without a net, because he's let us watch him start from zero. It's been hellaciously impressive to witness. I can't wait to see what he writes next.”— John Scalzi, author of *Old Man's War*, *The Last Colony*, and *The Android's Dream*

“Wil Wheaton's made a new career out of doing well that which is in fact the hardest thing to do at all: he writes, brilliantly and simply and gloriously, about joy.” — Warren Ellis, author of *Crooked Little Vein*, *Transmetropolitan*, and *Planetary*

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