

A CARTON FOR BARTON
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Barton hated reading. “Why bother? We can talk into our phones and get answers to any question we have.”

But poor Barton! School came with reading requirements and maybe even worse, writing. “I can always see the movie, so why do I have to read the book?”

You could argue with Barton until you were blue in the face and get nowhere. Barton’s parents weren’t particularly dedicated readers so when they told him to read he chose instead to follow their actions instead of their words. In his extended family only Uncle Jesse loved to read. Jesse was his most interesting uncle by far. He was very funny but he was also intriguing, and provocative. He had a load of jokes and stories and was a warehouse of facts and figures, a fount of information. He was always reasoning through problems and inventing things, at least in his mind. Barton loved his Uncle Jesse, but that wasn’t enough to get him to read. Reading was hard, hence boring. Video games were also hard at first, but Barton loved them and had mastered most in his enormous collection. When he wasn’t outside playing some sport, he was indoors killing monsters and seeking treasures.

Then Barton turned 10 years old. How excited he was when a large box arrived for his birthday. It was addressed from Uncle Jesse. The box was real heavy and all taped up. What could be in it? It was far too heavy for video games. Barton should have guessed. He should have read the stamp saying “Media Materials” but since he wasn’t much of a reader he hadn’t.

Instead he began to tear the box open. As soon as he had ripped open one corner he peeked inside and spied...a book! Clearly, the whole box was filled with only books. Barton picked up the box and carried it across the house where he came to the door to the cellar.

The cellar was a dark, dingy, smelly place. Dust accreted into planitesimals on its cement floor. After the previous owners of the house had been robbed they bricked up the outside entrance so only slat windows just large enough to fit a cat remained to provide dim light. And for added security, they had riveted a sheet of metal that covered the cellar door so that even if you managed to get into the cellar, which was impossible, you could not gain entry to the house. Moreover, this filthy, unfinished cellar was a cluttered mess used solely for the oil burner that heated the house and for storage of anything that needed to be forgotten.

Barton opened the cellar door and heaved the box of books down the wooden slat stairs. It made quite a series of bangs before it came to rest on the cellar’s cement floor.

Barton’s mom heard the noise and came running. “What did you do, Barton?”

“I am storing old books.”

“Well don’t just throw them down and leave them for someone to trip over. Go downstairs and store them on a shelf!”

Sulking, Barton went down into the cellar and looked for a place to stuff the box of books. All the shelves seemed to be full but there on one corner of the dusty floor was the Flexible Flyer, a magnificent old sled that he loved when it snowed and that his mother rode on when she was a girl. He put the box on top of the precious sled as gently as he could but a microburst of dust still rose around all sides of the box.

Then Barton climbed the wooden slat steps and lo and behold, he discovered that the heavy cellar door had closed behind him and automatically locked. This wasn’t the first time Barton had locked himself in the cellar. So, peeved at the lousy door, he banged on it and screamed for his mother, until she heard him and let him back upstairs, after, of course, he removed his shoes.

A week or so later Uncle Jesse called. “Did you get the birthday present I mailed to you?”

“Yes, Uncle Jesse. Thank you for all those books.”

Have you started reading any of them, Barton?”

“I am real busy in school right now, Uncle Jesse. I’ll read them this summer.”

“Barton, its October. Summer is ten months away, and those books can help you in school. That’s one reason I got them for you. You should at least look at them now.”

“I will, Uncle Jesse, I promise. I just need some time.”

Several months passed and because Uncle Jesse didn’t bother Barton again the books were happily forgotten.

Now it was winter. A major blizzard had just begun. Barton’s parents raced out to go shopping, which was miles away because they expected to be stuck at home for several days. “Would you like to come shopping with us, Barton?”

Barton hated shopping for food and clothing almost as much as he hated reading. And they weren’t going to a store with video games. “No, I’ll stay home.”

So Barton stayed home. Soon it began to snow real heavily. The intensity was remarkable. Barton could not see the Clackson’s house 200 feet away. About two hours after the snow began, Barton’s parents called. “Barton, we are stuck and will have to stay in a hotel. Why don’t you go over to the Clackson’s and spend the night with them?”

“Mom, I can’t see their house. I can stay home alone for one night. I am OK. I promise.”

“Well, Barton, we may not be able to get home tomorrow either. It may take us an extra day.”

“That’s great, Mom! That means there won’t be school tomorrow. I’ll be fine. I can make Mac and Cheese for dinner.”

Barton’s mom was real worried, but Barton’s dad wasn’t. So they finally agreed to let Barton stay home alone with the normal instructions to be careful not to burn the house down or to die while they were away.

Did Barton have fun that day! He went out for a short time, but it was colder, windier, and snowier than he had ever felt so he soon came in again. This was a perfect day for video games. He played for hours and just before he finally fell asleep around midnight he noticed that the Clackson’s house was still not visible.

It was still snowing the next morning but not so heavily. Now at last he could see the Clackson’s house. It was completely white. So was everything else. The view outside was weird. It seemed as if the house had sunk several feet into the ground. Barton went to the front door and opened it. Snow poured into the house. It was real deep.

Barton went back to his video games and played until noon. By that time the snow had stopped and the sun had come out. It was blindingly white everywhere, like a fairy land. Suddenly Barton remembered the Flexible Flyer sled in the cellar. The hill behind the house was just perfect for long, fast runs. Barton raced down the slat steps, tossed the box of books off the sled and carried it back up the steps.

As he approached the top step, Barton recognized his error. The cellar door had slammed behind him when he had raced down to get the sled and now he was locked in the cellar. And no one was home to open the door for him.

Barton tried to turn the locked door knob. Then he smashed the heavy door and kicked it until he was exhausted. But despite all these valiant efforts the door and its knob did not budge. Then Barton got a bit smarter. Maybe he could unscrew the door knob. After all, there was a tool chest in the cellar. But luck was against him. Of course, the screws were on the other side, for even at 10 years old, Barton instinctively knew Murphy’s Law. And as part of Murphy’s Law, he had left his cell phone in his room. And there was no way he could squeeze through the slit windows, which in any case were now deeply buried by the snow.

Barton was out of ideas. He was stuck. When he realized this, his feelings of frustration, anger, and fright gave way to the recognition of facts. He was going to be stuck in the cellar until his parents came home and that was all there was to it. He was surprised and proud he didn’t even feel like crying. Then again, he was 10 years old so why should he cry? It was what it was.

As reality took hold he began to think about what to do with all the time he was going to have to spend in the cellar. That box of books presented his only option. He actually felt thankful for it.

Barton took the sled to the base of the stairs right below the cellar’s single light bulb. He carried the box there, sat down on the sled and began to open the box and remove its contents. Out came a dictionary. Ugh! How dull! Next was an atlas. That was almost as bad although he did like

geography. There was *Oxford History of the American People* by Samuel Eliot Morison with such small print that only children could read without glasses and only adults could understand with them. (Years later he would fall in love with that book.) The boring books seemed to keep coming until one with the title, **The World's Greatest Stories**, an anthology of excerpts. That was the book for Barton.

Barton scoured the book for pictures and there were plenty of them. One caught his eye. It showed a giant Cyclops sleeping on his back on the ground of a cavern surrounded by sheep and goats. A number of what seemed like miniaturized men were holding a pointed pole like a battering ram, which was clearly aimed at the Cyclops single, giant eye. It was a tale from the *Odyssey*. Barton began reading in his stuttering manner, of course. But the tale was so compelling that he didn't even think of bemoaning his limited skill. Then his imagination began to work in ways that video games never had inspired. Barton could feel and see what was happening. From those video games, Barton was no stranger to the story's gore so was not queasy at all. But he sensed he was reading an original. He was fascinated by Odysseus's ingenuity, telling Polyphemus his name was "No Man", getting Polyphemus drunk so that he would fall asleep, impaling and boiling his eye, and escaping by clutching the rams' stomachs.

Barton was disappointed when the story was over. He started reading it again. Then he remembered that he had heard the story before although he didn't recall all the gory details. His Uncle Jesse had told him when he was 6 years old.

As Barton reached the point where Odysseus and his men gored and sizzled out Polyphemus's eye, he was struck by a sudden revelation of an ancient memory. One time when he was visiting his Uncle Jesse, he had inadvertently locked the bathroom door on the way out. Jesse had taken a paper clip, straightened it and poked it in the small hole in the center of the door knob. He poked several times, explaining to Barton that inside was a release latch and you had to find it. Finally, he heard a click and the door knob turned.

Barton raced up the stairs. "Wow, the doorknob has a hole!" He then raced down and over to the toolbox and soon found an ice pick that seemed thin enough to work. Bounding back up the stairs, Barton was overjoyed to find it was just thin enough. He began poking in and out and, CLICK! The door knob turned like butter and Barton was free.

Triumphant, mature Barton walked regally down the stairs, returned the ice pick to the tool box, put the sled back in its place in the corner, repacked all the books except for the book of stories back in the carton and gently placed the box back on the sled. Carrying the story book under one arm, he slowly climbed a few steps but then stopped on the stairs with a deep, thoughtful look. Then he turned back downstairs. "My room has plenty of space for all those books."