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Max's Room

Max is my son, and he just turned eleven years old. To walk into his room is to walk into an exploded version of his mind, and it can be easy to miss the forest of what's actually going on in there for the trees you must avoid just to take a safe step into the room. A litter of Legos, glue sticks, marbles, colored pencils, action figures, magazines, comic books, drawings and scrawled notes (often in Sharpie using whatever paper was available) makes the floor a dangerous minefield of clutter, and heaps of clothes that look as though a young man dissolved out of them while walking take up the remaining reasonable pathways.

There is a musical presence here and there – a guitar lies on the floor, facedown and mostly unused, while percussion music is strewn around the bells, which are set up for practice. Max wants to move up to snare, but he just started percussion in the band, and in the meantime, he's taught himself the “Gravity Falls” theme song on the bells to stay in practice.

On the walls are Green Lantern, Batman, the X-Men, Fantastic Four and Avengers, along with maps of the moon, Earth and USA and pictures of Mars. One old family portrait called “Chet” is up high somewhere, the man's real identity lost to time. There is a special corner for Max's art projects – a particularly good grave rubbing, a cubist self-portrait and a robot screen print are some of the featured players here. Max's ceiling is festooned with a homemade rocket flying into the Solar System circa 2007, which still includes Pluto. Max is aware of the relatively recent reclassification of Pluto and does not hold anything against Neil DeGrasse Tyson – “Nova Science Now” is too cool a show for that. Max's telescope is at his East window, currently pointed at a distant weeping willow tree.

On the workbench are Lego building projects in progress, some eclipse-viewing glasses in a half-constructed state, origami Wookies and mermaids and monsters and a broken, half-disassembled four-slot toaster being used as a bookend next to a plastic skull. Around all of this are the ever-present apple cores, flame-adorned duct tape, tools, electronics, metal pieces and Silly Putty. Everything is a hat rack in Max's room, from the workbench chair that holds his gold and black dragon baseball cap and slingshot, to the bedposts and doorknobs that are the holders of towels and masks and Nerf guns when they come with straps.

The bunk beds are the foundation of what most people immediately call the Maxcave, around the bottom of which lies the arsenal – six different kinds of Nerf firepower, a kendo stick, foam swords, rubber-tipped arrows with bow, PVC marshmallow guns, a giant plastic shield – everything a growing boy needs to protect against his little sister and other invaders. The underside of the top bunk is strung with rope lights for reading, and the side table holds Max's radio/CD player, which is often tuned to MTSU's own 88.3. There is a small mountain of assorted pillows, many of which he's had since he was three or four. On the one side is a wall of four comic boxes filled with 1990s-era comics given to him by a family friend – so many that they hold the promise of never running dry. The void on the other side of the bottom bunk holds more laundry, usually, and whatever books have fallen off while he was sleeping.

The presence of books is inescapable. They are like Max's roommates. Max has a reading nook in the dormer window that faces the front of the house, and this has its own small bookcase, holding Rick Riordan, Big Nate, The Far Side, Calvin and Hobbes, N.E.R.D.S. & Wimpy Kid, the seemingly endless 39 Clues series, his Tolkien and Gaiman and Harry Potter, his books about Greek gods and superheroes and magic and space. Another, larger bookcase holds his less fun stuff – the science and history and books of factoids and randomness – and his certificates of participation in the Summer gifted program at Vanderbilt and in plays and his school chorus and steel drum band. Books lie on top of books and in piles around the bed, under the bed and around

the floor – soon bookcase space will reach a critical point and Max's room will have to be somewhat reconfigured for more books.

Next to the desk, which is piled with drifts of papers held down primarily with a hockey puck and root beer bottles and guarded by Max's Lantern Corps figures (except for orange, which he hasn't gotten yet), is the ten-gallon aquarium with Spot and Demon, the remaining two four-year-old goldfish after Rick passed away during this summer's heat wave and subsequent air conditioning breakdown.

The room is shabbily comfortable. There is nothing here so nice you'd be worried about spilling something or knocking stuff over. This is probably by design. Max coveted my knobby old blue chair until I gave it to him and asked for the workbench to be in a corner so he could pile stuff on it at will. An eleven-year-old's room is as much made by his personality as it is an expression of it – his personality made the room and is the room. The unique state of it is determined by an unconscious need for a balance between freedom and self-containment, between functionality and security; it's dorm room 1.0 because it has to do everything. It's not necessarily a natural thing to sleep where you work, or to work where you play. A kid's room has to do all of that.

Adults designing rooms lose sight of that to a great degree. Adults become enamored with aesthetic to the point that functionality is somewhat lost as it takes back-burner status. There is still a reflection of personality in adult rooms – indeed, there is often a cloying proliferation of it, so much so that we have design shows and channels and magazines and cottage industries – but there is more ego than id in an adult room, more of a self-conscious need to achieve a thing rather than letting that thing work out on its own, which is a self-perpetuating cycle, and not always pretty.

Max's room is a near-perfect track of his eleven plus years on the planet. The house surrounding it, by design, does this job less well. While the adult rooms in any house have points

of interest in them which reflect a journey or the collective journey of a family, everything in a kid's room is a conversation piece – if it weren't, it wouldn't be there. While a home is a slightly safer, more secure version of the world – when it works like it's supposed to – a kid's room isn't the world at all – it's a place where they can go and close the door on the world, capturing freedom away from it for a while.

Probably why I like hanging out in there so much.