

The Sh*t-end of the Stick

by

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Come Back, Sit Down: Twelve and One Stories

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The Sh*t-end of the Stick

The school day ended with rocks being thrown at him, a routine of sorts that occurred nearly every day for no defensible reason, just one of those things. He stood steady there in the wood that led to his house. He'd tried running, hiding, throwing the thrown rocks back, but still they came, the rocks and childish invectives. This day'd involve the improvised stick defense, the one where he'd take the biggest, most scarily knotted stick he could find and run at them. They'd run away as they had before; he'd go home. They'd meet again tomorrow, or the day after.

It was still drizzling rocks, the muffled laughter and snorting insidious in its effects, as he readied himself for his defense, his gaze outward, bending at the knees for a three foot long stick, thick and sturdy, heavy among the autumn leaves and unruly blades of grass. Rising. But something wasn't right. The stick didn't feel barky, it felt more ... chewy, viscous, alive. That's what he thought. He looked down at his clenched hand as it rose up, wincing, the stench reaching his nostrils, his physical body and immortal soul recoiling, all in near simultaneous, unitary motion. He wanted to say *goddamn it*, wanted to bellow it, the way he'd heard his father say it, violently, but he didn't know what it meant. Not really. He dropped the foul-smelling stick and repulsively, instinctively wiped his hand along the length of his trousers, desperately, repeatedly. A rock hit him in the chest. A hooting erupted in the distance, a chorus of joyous disbelief. He looked out again, then down at the discarded stick, rubbing the impact point with his clean hand. It hurt. No more rocks came his way. He turned and walked away.

When he got home, trailing the stink smeared along the wrinkled seam of those trousers, he got – as his mother would later recount to his father – “his ass beat raw” as prelude, then, as dénouement, his nose shoved and rubbed and held into the trousers his father had fished out of the hamper.

“That’ll learn ya, *goddamn* it.”

And there it was again.

He was in the bathroom for a long thirty minutes rubbing the tip of his nose and bathing the inside of his nostrils. They remained unscrubbed in his memory. Later, he lay in bed consciously breathing through his mouth, his eyes attached to a single spot on the ceiling. By the time sleep came, or just before, he was breathing through his nose again. He knew by morning, it wouldn’t matter anymore anyway.

The first heavy rains came through that night, the vanguard of massive systems that would form and ready themselves along the plains to the east, coming first in torrents of water, cold and wet, then later, as the temperature dropped, cajoled by higher altitudes, into snow. But on that night, he slept through the rains.

The snows of these high foothills have a wet, heavy quality, sticking to bare branches like a doughy paste sweeping away appendages past their prime, the ground trading its pastels for a soothing monochrome, tucking their spent wards into a winter-long slumber. Word would go forth from before dawn that roads had become impassable, schools had been canceled, telephone wires downed, an accident on Rural Route 12A, a cat still unaccounted for. Snow fall and accumulation brought with it a brutal division of labor, the young to play, the able to toil, the hardened to carry on, the idle dreamers to dream, the old to fret. In a long life’s memory, all could be interchangeable. One had to be patient. And lucky.

The first such snow fall came in the early hours of late November. He was awakened soon after day’s break by a harried mother:

“No school. Your father wants you dressed and outside.”

He felt hungry as he opened the door to face the out of doors. An uneven whiteness stretched across the field and into the trees. The mountains beyond looked shorter, yet more imposing, jutting as they did into the seemingly stagnant storm cloud cover. Black birds still flew. Two boys tugged at two toboggans, the rope over their shoulder, trudging in high snow towards a hill not so distant. His father's voice broke the dreamy hypnotic spell:

“Get those shovels from the shed and clear the walk. Then start on the drive.”

He did as he was told, the shovel pressed against his stomach, pushing, a reasonably cleared path in his wake. The warmth built-up beneath his layers, and the pain came as the shovel hit uneven portions of the long walk, then the driveway, driving the handle into his gut. *Goddamn* it, he thought, adjusting to the unevenness, pushing forth again. The handle would drive into his belly another half dozen times before his labors were through. And later – much later – he would poke at the perfectly circled bruise just above his navel. But before that, still out in the elements, his father called out from the idling car:

“I can get out now. I want this drive looking like spring when I get back.”

His father drove forward slowly. He watched the exhaust climb, linger, then dissipate along his deformed piles of snow.

The sky had darkened early. The corned beef stew tasted good. He slurped quietly from a spoon, watching caged pepper grains through a clear glass shaker. His mother, in the other room, talked into the telephone: “I been trying to get a hold of him since three hours ago. He's yours during the day, so you tell me where's he at. It's ridiculous you can't tell me something as simple as that.”

They found his father the next afternoon. He'd wrecked the car in a shallow ravine and probably survived. But then froze to death at night. The sheriff had seen such things before along that very same stretch.

They buried him as best they could in the hardening earth. His mother took the money from his sock drawer. It paid for the flowers. Such was his contribution to mourning.

His mother continued on at the filling station. But those were not living wages. He left school for work at the meat cutting plant, a red brick-faced relic from a gone age still relevant to those who needed it. Arcane laws from another time had long since attached themselves to the place, in their original form, more or less impervious to technology's evolutionary impulses, still managing to make the place reasonably clean, reasonably safe, a reasonably promising place for a young man of eighteen to be. No one complained. It was good enough.

Brooms, mops, and brushes are easily manipulated. And he worked hard, on his hands and knees, scrubbing the tiled floor like an anachronism, in the chilled, cavernous interior, an immigrant charwoman as native man in some distant fin-de-some-siècle scenario. Dickens updated. If such a thing were possible. He returned home smelling of piney disinfectants and entrails. He bathed slowly, meticulously, every square inch of skin attended to. He ate lightly and slept easily. The dawn took him back out again, six out of the seven days.

The diligent worker who doesn't grouse rarely goes unnoticed, not the one using his fingernails to remove calcified blood from the grout between tiles, at least.

"How'd you like to move on up to meat cutter? We can show you how, not a problem. Nothing to it. Pays more, too. Then on to wrapping. And packaging. It's unlimited out there."

They showed him how to cut, where to cut and how often, a few easy lessons quickly absorbed, and placed him along an assembly line of other like-minded workers, quiet in the rote

contemplation of their noisy labors, mechanical knives cutting through flesh and bone with industrial ease. Rest breaks disrupted the tedium of work, but his rhythm prevailed in his thoughts over the break, a mind in motion tending to remain as such. At times, he'd stand in place over the work to be done throughout his fifteen minute break. It didn't matter to him. He wasn't tired. He saw the angles of the grains, knew the force required for harmonious and efficient movement - depending on the cut - anticipating the woman standing to his left, aware of the pace of the other woman standing to his right, his force calibrated just so.

But no man is a machine, flesh slippery in its raw state. A misapplication of force in his focused state sent his right hand into the path of vibrating teeth. At first there was a viscous, translucent silence and disbelief, suspended for a strange eternity, his voice gurgling through a miasma of stinging silence in his head – *oh, goddamn, goddamn, goddamn it ...*

Nothing to it.

He staggered back from his position in the line, his left cupping his right, stanching the flow of blood from the three shorn knuckles, his pinky finger and thumb jutting out like saplings after a wildfire, turning to walk away, only to collapse on the floor a few steps away, his left hand giving way, his right slapping incomplete against the floor, his dulling eyes watching as blood pulsed as if from three parallel drain pipes at the knuckles' openings, flowing along the subtly inclined floor towards the drain beneath the steel table, mingling with bovine blood, becoming indistinguishable, disappearing.

Then welcomed darkness.

“There was never any realistic hope for reattachment. Not really. I'm sorry. Just too much nerve and tissue damage.” This was the doctor to his mother. He was awake now, after

three of being out, but fatigued, fatigued. His mother sat in a chair opposite the bed, smiling intermittently, inquiring as to his pain levels. He felt a palpable heartbeat in a void.

“You’ll have to learn to use the left one like you did the right one,” she said once. And gave him a soft rubber ball.

He squeezed the soft rubber ball gently with his left hand, his mind nowhere in particular. The bed was comfortable, the physicians occasional, the nurses considerate. His mother’d step outside the building to smoke a cigarette and something about seeing to a few things. He wouldn’t see her for the rest of the afternoon. She’d return in the morning before work, then in the afternoon after it. They each had their lives to lead.

For the better part of a month, he was prayed for, whispered about with deep, tsk-tsking sympathy, the profile on the evening news showing a young man in his prime, cut down by outmoded machinery and a callous indifference to established norms of industry safety. Mountain Credit Union established a savings account for him – essentially a large container to drop change into - a human interest series in the morning daily, an interview with a sympathetic labor relations official, legal minds of varying motivations and skills paid courtesy calls, leaving behind brochures and promises of brave new worlds. The lingering could only last for so long. Collective memory ached to move forward. A population still needed its meat cut, wrapped, packaged.

The better part of his month gave way to the cold winter of another, where the shoots of memory fade, wither, die. He had left the hospital. The meat cutting limited liability proprietors settled with him for an undisclosed amount. He bought a reclining chair and a television, and reclined and watched television. Mountain Credit Union collected \$114.25 and sent him a cashier’s check. He, in turn, sent a thank you note inside a colorful cardboard card written in a near indecipherable scrawl. The thrift mounted it behind a glass frame in their lobby.

A young man can lull himself to many points of pointless distraction, his days becoming identical days. A young woman of some enterprise can bring him back, refocus his purpose. A spring Tuesday proved a different day. She watched him before he saw her. She liked his calmness, sitting there patiently in the waiting room chair, holding a traumatized hand with the care of a new father, his face placid under unruly, wavy brown hair, an absent stare out of heavy lids of blue eyes, as if he were in some other place where, say, pain and worry and regret were quaint notions to be dramatized for affect, the slow, deliberate breathing, his chest rising and falling rhythmically.

She limped over to where he sat.

“Hello. I’ve heard about you. And read about you, too.”

With that she sat down. The talking came easy, an attachment to detachments that had been slowly evolving to define them each. She limped because her mother’s dog’s incisors and jaws had severed gastrocnemius nerves, if she was pronouncing that correctly. She didn’t know much more than that, but he could sympathize, he told her, very much so, showing her his still-bandaged hand. She touched it gently, suspending her finger tips to where his could have been, waiting, almost expecting to make it all better.

That day – their first day – they waited for one another in the waiting room, then spent the afternoon in the backyard of his house, searching out similarities, glossing over differences, drinking beer from tall, sweating cans. The sun gloried through the wordy afternoon, an air of fate drifting through, peculiar in its light scent, convinced of its inevitability, the time before the dusk glinting across the cans playfully arranged in the tall grass, leaning haphazardly against blades a fraction their weight.

The talking moved to inside the house, and the talking merged into silence, a hot, desperate silence that found them on the floor, under a blanket and asleep as midnight came and went. In the morning, not far removed from the light's first break, she awoke, dressed and limped out of the house. An inglorious start to the day, she knew, but there were no alternatives. Jobs for her were hard to come by. Later, she wished she had left him a note. She'd written it many times over in her head.

The September day she knocked on his door and called through the screen door, he instinctively thought her there to spend another afternoon together, a pleasant surprise that never failed to surprise. There could be no retracting the smile elicited by her voice calling to him. He pushed the screen door, inviting her in, but she didn't move as she told him of her pregnancy. Probably by another. She couldn't be sure, but was pretty sure, and that she didn't know of any shameless way to tell him. She was sorry. Then she turned and ran unevenly to her car, idling roughly in the driveway. He stood watching out after her long after she has was no longer there. He wasn't thinking sad thoughts as much as he was thinking about her. He had hoped it would end differently, somehow, end with them together, the way they'd seen it, old and together, with many more afternoons in the backyard emptying tall beer cans. Instead, she'd be having someone else's child.

His mother set wandering roots down two towns over to be with Frank, some older man he didn't know, leaving a few squirreled belongings in the house. She returned at haphazard intervals for odds and ends, a living ghost with reasonably friendly words coming in and going out the door. The days were spent as slowly as the settlement money, the late fall and early winter months returning yet again to prove their solidarity with his short days and long nights. A

morning after a snowy night, he found himself looking out over the undisturbed expanse of uneven white in remembrance of his days not so far removed. He didn't much miss the shoveling of the driveway, nor the pain of the shovel pressing against his stomach, nor his father. It was a general missing, as if something had been misplaced. He missed his fingers, he knew. He missed her, too. But an overarching thought never crystallized, never came into focus, a melancholy without an understanding of the melancholic, only a wistful weariness, unarticulated, that lived with him.

Until the thaws of the spring returned. And a new job came to him at a small church, poor and shabby, a large room reserved for the needs of needful and hurt children. There was to be no proselytizing, no magical myth-making, no warnings of damnation or conditions, or hypocrisies for the children to ponder, only doing the best that could be done, and a meager pay that he hardly ever took at all. But he knew himself to be lucky, comfortable at home and full, able to give until there was no more to give, and the children, too, understood, and looked upon his two-fifths hand as they would upon their own ailments and trepidations, unconsciously and unspoken of. It was a good way to spend the long days and into the early night, he didn't mind it at all, the grass in his backyard growing taller still from neglect and disuse, his nights at home spent asleep from a good fatigue, until the small morning hours that took him back.

And Sunday's were ice cream days.

It was another Tuesday morning when she limped across the church parking lot with a small child in her arms. He watched her from the window drawing closer, expressionless. Then he went out to meet her. He can't see and he can't hear, she told him. He looked at the tiny boy in her arms, his eyes open, but not there, his fiery red hair alive and jumping. He looked at her, still the same despite the missed time.

“He’s not yours,” she said. “He’s not yours, but I wished he was.”

She freed a hand to touch his hurt hand.

“Goddamn. I’ll be *goddamned*.” He could smile at such clear words.

He gently drew the child from her arms to hold him in his and led her inside to where his many happy children were playing, a space filled with movement and sound, to a place where they could be together for a while.

The End