

The Second World War · *Franklin Fisher*

THEY GOT IN under your bed and talked in pinched voices among the dustballs and waited for you to put a hand over the side. They were why you didn't get out of bed to go to the bathroom during the night, and in the morning, when it was too late, you could look over the edge and see where they'd left little claw tracks, and then you heard your mother beating your older sister in the next bedroom for lying there awake with the sheets between her legs and wetting the bed. You knew she was going to get to you eventually and you thought through the ways you were going to bring the evidence of their having been there in the night to her attention.

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That was in Santa Maria, where I also broke the hands off my parents' alarm clock and hid them in the furnace room, and asked Barbara to take off her underpants in the toolshed in her back yard and promised her I'd take mine off, too. Her father found us before I could, though. He was wearing cotton gloves and the wings of his nostrils were white.

"Who took off your pants, honey?" he said.

"Bartley," she said, which was not, strictly speaking, true. She was sitting on an oily wooden crate with her hands in her lap and her dress pulled up under her elbows. He grabbed my shoulder and gave me a swat on the ass and told me to go home, but things weren't actually any better there. At home, my father asked me why I had broken the hands off the clock. It was too many things to think about. I said I didn't know.

"You must have had a reason," my father said.

I tried to think.

"You wouldn't have done it without a reason," he said.

I recognized the philosophical mistake he was making, but I wanted him to be happy. He was sitting on the bed with the window behind him, a patient look on his face, holding the maimed clock in his hand. I looked at the white dial fringed with black runes and tried to reconstruct. It was an old clock, and the crystal was gone, so I had been able to get at the hands. I distinctly remembered bending the long one until it had snapped, but I was less sure about the short one.

“I had to go play with Barbara,” I said.

“That’s no reason,” he said.

I had been afraid it wasn’t.

He sent me outside to find him a switch. A branch had broken off the crab apple tree, so I dragged it inside the house and down the hall to the bedroom where he was waiting for me. It left a trail of red leaves on the carpet, which was going to get me in trouble with my mother when she had to take the vacuum to it, but I could only think of one mistake at a time. When my father saw what I was bringing him he lay back on the bed and laughed until he had to take his glasses off and wipe his eyes.

He ended by using a yard-stick, and afterward I went back out to make sure I had seen what I thought I’d seen in the grass under the crab apple tree. It was, as I had suspected, the headless and limbless corpse of my turtle, its shell chewed like tar, and I ran to find Squiffy. She was lying under the rose trellis next to the garage. I pounded her while she licked the tears on my face. My sister came out of the house and made me stop.

“Squiffy doesn’t know why you’re hitting her,” she said.

That was probably true.

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I learned to be afraid of the dark in that garage. My father’s yellow bicycle hung in the cobwebs that lined one wall like sheets of ice, and a wooden staircase led up to an attic that I was never allowed to climb to but where my sister and her friends played house among dusty trunks and boxes of bottled dried beans. The dried bobcat skin hung on another wall, a nail through one of its eyes. The concrete floor where the Studebaker was gone had a puddle of oil I was careful not to step in on the day I became afraid of the dark.

I had played with the rake and picked mats of grass off the lawnmower blades and stepped on a black stink bug that darted out from a bundle of newspapers and had worked my way over to the toolbench where he kept the hammers and the jars of nails. The window onto the back yard was dusty and clouded over, so direct sunlight was murky and confined to the toolbench and what was immediately around the toolbench. I was looking for something to sharpen on the grinder that was bolted to the toolbench when I heard the sole of a shoe scrape against the floor in the corner of the

garage where the bicycle hung. That was the dark corner; two windowless walls lined with tarpaper joined in that corner, and a stack of bald tires filled the space under the stairs to the attic. Light from the window did not reach under the stairs where the shoe had scraped. The hairs on the back of my neck moved, and I edged toward the door, feeling watched, opened it and ran out past the rose trellis.

It hadn't gotten me, but that night something yellow and ugly crept down the hall to my bedroom and would have touched the back of my neck in the dark except that I had pulled the covers over my head. I kept them pulled over my head every night until I was twelve, and it never got me.

That was my earliest dirty secret.

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The blood on the driveway washed out next time it rained. The next day I saw a moist green snake flex its way across the driveway from the painted brick wall that marked the lot line and disappear into the geranium bed under the kitchen window. I knocked my tricycle over getting off and ran into the house to tell my mother, but I couldn't produce the name of the thing I had just seen. She sat there with a look of pain on her face while I tried to put it into language. Finally I simplified.

"Eddie rode by on his bike and said he was going to beat me up sometime." If it wasn't true then it would be sooner or later. Her reaction surprised me.

"If Eddie hits you, you hit him back. Do you hear me?"

I stood by the stove feeling how skinny my arms were in my striped tee shirt and watched her feed Pam in the high chair. I trusted that Pam knew it was my high chair and that there would be no unpleasantness about ownership when she had outgrown it.

"That goes for anyone else, young man," she said. "You don't let someone hit you and just walk away. You hit them back so they won't do it again. And show them you mean business."

That was the first time I'd heard that expression, but I could tell what it meant. Actually I dreaded having to show somebody I meant business, because in the first place it was possible that if somebody hit me I deserved it, and in the second place hitting them back seemed the best way to ensure

getting hit again, but it was difficult to explain that. So sometime later — it couldn't have been long or I would have pretended I'd forgotten — I was wandering through the play yard at kindergarten, probably mooning about Vicky, when George came down the steps from the patio and through the redwood gate on his way to the slide, punched me on the arm, said, "Hiya, Bart," and I whirled and bashed him between the shoulder blades before he'd gone two steps.

It sounds reflexive, but it wasn't. It was just that the mind worked very fast. I had had to decide if this was the blow that I had to respond to as though I meant business. It hadn't hurt, but that only complicated things. I'd been beaten up before, and spanked with various instruments, and I had even been cuffed in a friendly spirit by my brother, but nobody had ever punched me in the arm in passing while saying hiya, and I had to categorize the act before George got away.

He looked startled when he turned around, and I couldn't help wondering if I had made a mistake. It was just possible he was doing what his mother had told him to do if somebody hit him. His knees were in my chest before we were finished, and I had sand in my eyes. Miss Cann pulled us apart and marched us back inside the kindergarten building while everyone watched, and afterward George and I had to sit on our blankets at opposite ends of the room while everyone else drank their cartons of milk and ate their graham crackers spread with butter. I lay on my stomach and covered my eyes in the crook of my elbow and grew and grew until I met George cowering at the foot of the slide and picked him up with a single claw through his collar and tossed him in the air and caught him with my tongue, and only after I had held him sobbing in my hot red mouth, clinging to one of my teeth, did I gently return him to the ground, where he hugged my green foot and we became friends and I would take him for rides on my back.

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I don't even remember what it was about. I just remember how startled I was when she turned and hit me in the face with her little red purse and I stumbled and fell backward into the ivy at curbside. She straddled my chest and lit into me with tiny fists that I tried to ward off with my elbows. Whatever it was about was probably my fault. Her hot eyes and pressed

lips looked businesslike rather than angry. I had probably been harassing her. It was likely enough. We played house in her back yard, we squashed bugs together under the wooden steps at Sunday school, our families had dinner together at Christmas. There were all kinds of connections between us that might have led to blows there in the ivy waiting for the school bus while the big kids quit talking and watched us.

I didn't know what to do, though, when she got up—dirt on her knee and her white socks soiled and her Mary Janes scuffed—so I sat in the ivy until the bus came, while Sally went and stood at the curb with the big kids. One of the girls looked back at me with a hand over her mouth. What went through my mind as I sat there and felt a daddy longlegs crawl over the back of my hand was that the shame was over but people could still see me. I would have to come to this same curb tomorrow and wait for the bus with the same people, and I would have to pretend that it didn't matter. They would wonder what I was thinking. When the bus came I took a seat far in the back, though it meant walking past rows of amused high-school kids, and the next day the torment began.

“Watch out, Bartley! Sally's going to *beat you up!*”

The girls stood together at the curb holding their books to their chests and ignoring the boys, but they did glance over occasionally to see what I was going to do. They, and prim Sally, and the cars in the street, and the phone pole and my tormentors—especially the one in the yellow sweater and saddle shoes—dissolved before I could turn around and go back to the other side of the hedge to wait for the bus. I waited behind the hedge the next morning too.

My mother could see me from the front window of the house, walking more and more slowly beside the hedge till I got to the corner and stopped and peered around the bank of leaves. She told me years later how much it had cut her heart to see me do that. If I was afraid of the big kids, she had thought surely Sally would protect me.

Sally moved away the summer after kindergarten and I came down with polio. Thirteen years later, in a different place and a different life, she and I danced all night at her high-school graduation party and ate scrambled eggs and cold ham slices in the gymnasium as the sun began to touch the bunting through the windows, and a year later she and my best friend Dave Austin nearly got themselves in trouble, and at twenty-five she was dead; a note from my mother describing the same operation my sister was

about to have left me feeling squalid and depressed, and I tried for days to compose a letter to her parents and sounded stupid in every sentence.

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The doctor made my mother take me home and call him when she got there before he would tell her. He was afraid, I suppose, that she was going to scream and he didn't want her to do it in his office. It was the same year Roosevelt died. Lots of people had it. My father was in Oklahoma working for Phillips, and I crawled to the phone from the couch to talk to him when he called while my mother held Pam on her lap and bit her lip. Marjorie Anne pulled me around in the red wagon. I had to have chemical hot packs wrapped around my leg, and when I woke up sweating I couldn't get out of bed, so I lay there and listened to them scuttle and tried to hold it.

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It was a long narrow enclosed porch, with a bed at either end, and a window onto the living room where unless they had pulled the curtains we could watch our parents sit and talk or listen to the cathedral radio. My mother sat knitting on one end of the covered couch and didn't look at anyone. Richard's mother spoke to her and then sat and rocked when my mother didn't answer. Richard's father slapped his knee and asked my father if that wasn't the God-damned limit. Richard had told me to come over and get in bed with him so we could talk without being heard through the window. We lay side by side in a single bed, hearing the radio and our parents' voices on one side of us, June bugs battling against the screen on the other. There were hay smells in the air and occasional moans from wandering cows. You never got the distant hum of street sounds out in the country. You felt concealed from anyone who knew you.

"That's Dewey," Richard said. "I'm voting for him."

"Not me," I said.

"That's who my dad is voting for," Richard said.

"Mine too," I said.

"Sometimes I like to sleep with my pajama bottoms off," he said.

I thought for a minute and then took mine off too. It gave you a hot

glow to learn that other people did that. You felt more normal. And then you knew you'd been tricked.

"Hey, don't," I said.

"Whaddya got here, buddy?"

"Let go," I said.

"Rubber hose!"

It hurt when I tried to roll away. "Cut it out, Richard."

"I just wanted to see what you'd do," he said, and let go.

I found my pajama bottoms and got out of his bed to put them on and went back to my own. I didn't talk to him any more there in the dark, but had to listen to his squeaky little laugh a while longer, along with the radio and the hum of our parents' conversation in the next room and the tap of bugs against the screen.

I think Carl Windt was the only friend my father had in my lifetime, and it did the two of them good to slip off together and get sloshed, but it was an ordeal for me every time the families had to visit each other. I hated going to Bakersfield.

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I couldn't be mistaken. He was never out of my sight except when we separated at the door to the lavatory on our way in from recess or lunch.

"Don't you *need* to go?" I asked him.

"No," he said, and hurried down the corridor, knees together, arms stiff at his sides, poor Wally.

On rainy days we sat at one end of the classroom and drew cartoons while everyone else played hangman on the blackboard or read comic books or played chinese checkers. We drew an entire comic book that December, about a pair of characters named Whicket and Whacket. It was an odd collaboration; Wally took one character and I took the other, and if both characters appeared in the same panel it looked as though two different orders of reality were trying to be reconciled in the same landscape. We drew in pencil on white construction paper, and each page was smeared by the time we finished with it. We were going to contribute it to the comic box, to be read on rainy days, but one of us decided to keep it when it was finished. I can't remember which one.

In the cafeteria we pretended we were the richest men in the world.

Our cubes of green jello were cut emeralds and we complained that our swimming pools were filled with money, leaving no room for water. No one else ate with us, so it was a harmless game. In class we exchanged notes in codes that we invented. During recess we sat behind the backstop and listened to other people play softball and hoped nobody would come around to the other side. We invented dialogues for the characters we were going to create, and formulated new adventures for another set of characters named Pete and Repete, based vaguely on Whicket and Whacket. After recess I went to the can and he did not. It mystified me.

We went to his house after school to play with his croquet set, which I set up while he disappeared inside the house. Once his mother was working in the garden when we got there. Wally's mother was a severe woman with thready veins in both cheeks. She put down her trowel and wrapped her arms around Wally from behind.

"How's my big boy?"

"Fine." Wally stared at me.

"Did you go to the bathroom today?"

"Yes."

"I didn't see you," I said.

"I did," he said.

His peculiarity stayed with me, as something I sometimes wondered about because children are cruel and don't have enough to do. Sometimes I enjoyed asking him if he didn't need to go. I did have a dim sense that something was probably wrong with Wally and that it probably had something to do with his being fat and persecuted. I was the only friend he had, except for a homely Armenian girl named Amelia Marian, who had black hair on her legs. Even the teachers didn't like him, and the other kids either ignored him or hit him with spitwads in class. I did see him in the lavatory once, poised unhappily in front of one of the urinals, his square, large, white face expressionless as he stared at a distant wall. I felt better knowing he was there at least once, though it's possible he was wasting his time.

The inevitable happened late one afternoon, minutes before it was time to go home. The bell rang at three and we all stood up to put our chairs on our desks, and first the front row and then the girls who sat by Mrs. Simkins' desk began tittering, and presently the whole class was frantic with pleasure. Mrs. Simkins pretended not to notice and dismissed the

class. Wally hurried home and didn't mention it the next day.

I don't think I ever said anything about it to him, and I never smiled when other people told the story.

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No one knew where you were when you went to Randolph. It was close to both the Wyoming and the Idaho lines, but it wasn't on the way to any place except Bear Lake, and there were better ways of getting to Bear Lake. My uncle dug up two freshwater clams and gave them to me in a jar. I wanted to see what they looked like, so he took one out and opened it with his pocket knife. It looked like something that had been in someone's mouth. The water in the jar turned murky after I'd put the clam back in. I kept the jar on the grass beside me all through the picnic, looking at it and hoping the clam would close again. Back at my grandmother's house I put it on the kitchen table and watched it with my arms on the table and my chin on my arms. Through the dark water I could see that both clams were open as they rested on the mud at the bottom of the jar, so I carefully picked the jar up and carried it to the storage room beside the coal shed where my camp cot was, and set it on the floor next to my flashlight and tried to go to sleep. You needed a flashlight to get to the outhouse through the weed path, and each time before I went and after I came back I shined it on the jar. The water was almost opaque, and shreds of lint floated in it, but I could see that the other clam had closed again. My body felt hollowed out, but I went to the outhouse several more times, waiting for the one I had seen to be closed when I came back.

We used Leonard's father's barn. Douglas was the sheriff and I got to be the deputy, because I was family. Sometimes his little brother Brent, now a rich veterinarian in Tremonton, got to be a deputy too. Even with a limp I kicked the shit out of Leonard, which pleased me. Leonard was the rustler, which put him at a disadvantage.

"Want me to work him over for you, Sheriff?" I asked.

Douglas chewed on a stalk of cheat grass and looked out the window of the loft.

The trick was, as Leonard was backing away, to grab his wrist in both hands and bring it over your head as you turned around. That way you

had him on his stomach on the floor of the loft with his arm behind him and his face smearing the chaff. Leonard's nose ran all the time. I think it was hay fever, but it made him rewarding to beat up.

We wore cowboy hats and cap guns in our belts, and we chewed wheat in the barn and looked at each other's penises. In exchange for Douglas showing me how the foreskin on Leonard's worked, Leonard got to suck Douglas'. Douglas stared patiently out of the loft window until it was over. We asked Leonard what it tasted like, and he said milk. After that I got to beat him up again.

We took off our underpants and showed Carol Jean and Nadine, too. They sat in their Sunday dresses on a wooden bench covered with shreds of straw in the empty hencoop behind Douglas' house. I didn't look at their faces, but the girls were very quiet until Nadine started to cry.

I presumed on continuity the next summer and prepared to work him over again and he pounded the shit out of me the first time we played sheriffs and rustlers.

"City dude," he said.

"I wasn't ready," I said.

He did it again the next time, and thereafter I avoided him, which in a town as small as Randolph is hard to do. Once when I was walking back to my grandmother's house from Douglas' house in the middle of the afternoon I rounded the corner where the John Deere dealership stood and saw him across the street, leaning against the wall of the social hall, his thumbs in his belt loops, a long weed in his mouth, gazing off at the sky, squinting. I turned around and went back the way I had come and cut through a pasture and came out on the road a block north of where I had been when I'd seen him. He was still there, idle and dangerous. Anyone passing him while he was like that would have been in trouble.

I didn't like to go fast, so I held on to the edge of the slide, which was wooden and pulling loose from its nails. I remember thinking as I rolled in the grass that pain came in waves and that pretty soon this wave would pass and I would get up and climb back on the slide. Douglas and Brent had a strange look on their faces when I stood up, so after a while I looked at the grass and then at my hand.

My mother and my aunt drove me to the hospital in Evanston while I watched the signs leaning against barbed-wire fences and thought about

the slippery white boluses in a can of pork and beans that you hid under the edge of your plate because if you had to eat them you gagged. They didn't have to stitch me at the hospital, because the wound was in the crotch of my hand. By taping my thumb tightly against my hand and wrapping the hand in gauze and taping the gauze in place they kept the tear closed and deprived me of the function that separates man from the brutes.

Before the movie that night in the social hall the two kids on the folding chairs in front of me turned around and looked at the swathe in my lap. It was hard to miss, even with the lights dimmed.

"What's that?" one of them said.

"A mummy," I said.

He looked at Douglas. "What did he say?"

"He said it's a mumblum."

"What's a mumblum?"

I looked past his head at the dingy screen, waiting for the lights to go all the way out and the movie to start. It was going to be about the King of Siam and a woman whose son gets killed. My arm ached and my face felt wet. I shouldn't have been there. I felt him push my shoulder. His eyes were hard.

"What's a mumblum?" he said.

We didn't go to Randolph until after the war, when the tire shortage had eased and my father wasn't in trouble. I was there in a fog of anomie, because earlier in the summer I had stepped through an aperture at home and come out in a world of imposters who were guarding a secret. I had gone with Billy Duncan to Summer Bible School the week before my family was to leave for Utah, and it had happened the first day. I don't know why my mother let me go; she didn't like her children going to other people's churches. The church was a spikey ecclesiastical building on North Lake Avenue in Altadena, where the lawn looked smooth as a quilt and you entered the dark chapel through a wooden door flanked by geranium beds with cigarette stubs lying crushed along the edge. You heard people singing songs you didn't know out of purple hymnals whose covers felt oily as you held them and tried to follow. After chapel we went upstairs, Billy to a different class because he was younger, where I was herded from room to room with strangers my age to listen to bible stories

and make shepherds and camels out of construction paper and finally to play kickball in the gymnasium. The gymnasium had older kids in it who kept cutting ahead of me in line because, they explained, that was what you got to do if you had made it safely home your last time up. At noon I searched the hallways and found Billy standing by a drinking fountain. He led me to a door and we went out and crossed the lawn to where his mother was waiting in her car at the curb, and that was when it struck me that we had never returned to the ground floor. I looked back at the door we had come out. It was flanked with stone pots containing flowers and had a window reinforced with chicken wire. It opened directly onto a terrace whose concrete base was flush with the lawn we were crossing. Kids were running across that lawn and parents were standing on it talking to each other, and there were palm trees at the curb, and someone who looked like Mrs. Duncan was sitting in a car watching us come. She pretended to know me as I climbed into the back seat. While she and Billy talked about what he'd done at Bible School I watched the church get smaller through the rear window and disappear when we turned off what appeared to be Lake Avenue onto a simulacrum of Woodbury Drive and thereafter to a duplicate of Morada Place with its tile roofs and palm trees and the Jacksons' labrador lying in the shade of an oleander beside the garbage cans. The woman who looked like my mother gave me lunch in the kitchen and I ate it and played dumb. When the man who resembled my father came home I wouldn't look at him because I was afraid my expression would give me away.

When we drove to Utah the following week I shared the back seat with someone they called Pam, who was too young to be in on the deception. I watched the landscape change to desert and finally to night and felt sorry for my parents who had watched me walk out the door one morning a week ago and never come back, and I tried to send them signals. I wanted to tell them I was all right.