

Finding My Niche · *Mark Costello*

I AM TEN YEARS OLD and having trouble with math. So much trouble in fact that I am serving this afternoon a kind of detention, sitting at the kitchen table trying to make sense of long division.

I can't. Into my remainders, my divisors won't go and after awhile I experience true excruciation: through me shoots a little panic that, stopping in the penis, snaps the pencil in my hand. I have never before snapped a pencil in my hand and thrilled and appalled by the glassy shatter of lead and wood, the miniature baseball bat complete with oval black trademark that I've broken, a word crackles through my mind. That word is *cocksucker* and though I don't know its precise meaning and have never spoken it before, its c's and k's seem so completely to correspond to my problem with long division, I know I am about to try the word on my income tax-frazzled mother.

I do.

Up the basement stairs she comes. In the beat of her feet there is the chatter of the typewriter, the thud of the adding machine.

When she arrives at the kitchen table and asks me what's the matter, I point my broken pencil at the paper in front of me and say: "I can't get this cocksucker, Mom."

"What?"

"I tried, Mom," I say, "but I just can't get this cocksucker."

My mother does not slap me intentionally on the ear, but that's where, palm cupped, some thirty years ago, her hand whams my head.

Good, good. It is a blow that stands me up. To the slap of my hand against the kitchen table, murmuring the c's and k's of the word I've tried and failed to get past my income-tax-frazzled mother, I get from her a question I somehow knew she'd ask. "Where, young man," she says, "did you get such language?"

Where indeed. Searching the kitchen wall for the face of the man from whom I first heard the word *cocksucker* spoken in anger, I arrive after a moment at a drunken uncle. His name is Charlie and as he hurls an unfixable clock against the wall of his fix-it shop, I hear him scream the word *cocksucker* so hard it brings, at about its fifth or sixth enunciation, my Uncle Charlie to his knees.

But I do not tell my mother this. Instead I scream what I cannot help but scream: “Why did you have to hit me?”

“I hit you, young man, because you will not use that kind of language in this house.”

“What kind of language?”

“You know perfectly well what kind of language.”

Yes, I guess I do. Impetuously, experimentally, I have tried to use in front of my mother a word I hoped might work like a vacuum cleaner. *Cocksucker*, though, doesn’t pull me from the paper in front of me, the doodles and delirium of a problem in long division. It draws from my mother, some thirty years ago, another word that gives me trouble.

That word is *apply*. Just before she turns back to the basement and the income tax business she conducts down there, she says: “Now you get, young man, right back to work, you *apply* yourself do you hear me, you *apply* yourself.”

I can’t apply myself. Neither, I think, can Uncle Charlie. Sometimes when I sit with him in his fix-it shop, I hear him mutter from the manuals with which he’s attempting to repair the irreparable mangle irons, toasters and sewing machines he’s promised his customers he’ll fix. These manuals are filled with the word *apply* and sometimes Uncle Charlie mutters the word so often and so breathlessly, I know his hands are about to begin to tremble, that, mangling a customer’s mangle iron, he’ll mangle himself, Uncle Charlie will apply the skin and blood of his knuckles to his workbench.

I feel the same way about math.

I know that I cannot work my problem in long division with my fists. But when my mother tells me to *apply* myself do I hear her, *apply* myself, the word makes me want to apply my fists to the kitchen table. Feeling in my hand the pencil-snapping panic that, with only a little help from Uncle Charlie, sent the word *cocksucker* crackling across my mind, I feel that I’ve been done, by the wham of my mother’s hand against my ear, a deep injustice. Wanting to call her back upstairs and to say: *I didn’t come up with the word cocksucker, Mom, my penis did*, I think that if I were to truly apply myself to math, that application might somehow involve my penis.

After awhile it does.

I am by now thirteen and a half years old and unable to come up with another word for my problem in math. I’m stuck with one that, contin-

uing to snap pencils in my hand, frees my penis from my pants.

I now know full well what the word *cocksucker* means and when, slamming me to my knees, my application to math seems most total, I feel like I'm about to break my back trying to perform on myself an unnatural act for which my mother, storming up from the basement, provides a final word.

That word is *handicapped*, but I am so busy scrambling back up into my chair, so busy zipping my pants, I hear near nothing until I hear my mother say: "Did you hear, young man, a word I said?"

"You said you give up on me in math. You said I'm hopeless. You said I'm handicapped."

"That's right, *handicapped*. You've permanently *handicapped* yourself in math and a person *never* outgrows that kind of handicap. If you don't believe me just come down and ask half the taxpayers in this basement."

I don't want to. If I followed my mother down the stairs, I might see in the faces of half the taxpayers in the basement, the face of Uncle Charlie. Mangled by the mangle irons he's mangled, undermined in the mouth and clouded in the eyes by the c's and k's of a word he can't stop screaming, Uncle Charlie's face, like the faces of half the taxpayers in the basement, bears the look of a man deeply handicapped in math.

I don't want to grow up like Uncle Charlie. Nor do I want to grow up like my mother either. Sometimes when the pencil snaps, when the panic truly crackles, I think that if I ever *did* grasp math, it might earn me a place in the basement alongside my mother making out income tax.

Though she never quite says so, I think she would like to see me someday take just such a place. Often on Saturday nights, after the basement empties itself at last of taxpayers, she lights a cigarette and pops open with a church key, an ice cold can of beer. Then she does something I wish she wouldn't do. She has herself a little laugh at the taxpayers' expense. Especially at Uncle Charlie's.

"That Charlie," she sighs and says. "He can't add, subtract, multiply or divide, but he sure can sign his name. That man couldn't wait to sign his name and get out of here. If you don't believe me, just go down and look into the front window of The Niche."

The Niche is our neighborhood tavern, not a block from our house and when she points me toward it, my mother points directly at a holy picture on the wall.

It depicts the Pentecost and through it, without ever walking down there, I can see very clearly into the front window of The Niche at Uncle Charlie.

Over his head, in the shape of a tongue of flame, hangs the shame of having signed again this year, an income tax return he does not understand. This shame makes him thirsty and edgy and when the tongue above his head begins to call for a licking, he cocks his fist and, intent above all on missing my mother, determined above all to keep my mother out of this, he swings and hits the man standing next to him.

The man standing next to him is another taxpayer from my mother's basement and when Uncle Charlie's fist intersects with his face, a kind of tying of tongues takes place.

Above their heads a double tongue of flame whips round and round the c's and k's of a single phrase. That phrase is *cocksucking suckerpunch* and when under its Pentecostal spit, Uncle Charlie seems engaged less in a fight than in a deep fit of math handicap. I know that, staring through the front window of The Niche, I'm staring at my own future as a barroom brawler, a thrower of fists over which, as a blind signer of my own blind name, I have as little control as Uncle Charlie.

I am forty years old and having trouble again with math. So much trouble in fact that I can't meet the eyes of the man to whom I've come this afternoon for outside help. He is an attorney, a specialist in inheritance law, and adding power to the power of attorney he's already granted me, he issues me, the attorney does, a checkbook.

This is the second such checkbook he's given me, and taking it from him, I take another lesson in math. "Do you know," he says, "how to close out a checking account?"

"I'm not sure."

"Ok," he says, "I'll show you."

Show me he does. Through cancelled and outstanding checks, through bank statements and slips of deposit and withdrawal, through all of the fanned and annotated papers spread out before us, the attorney whips so quickly I want, when he strikes his balance on the very first try, to reach out and take a swing at him.

But I do no such thing. Instead, I do what the attorney asks me to do. I write out a check to him for the entire amount remaining in an account for

which I've been named executor, an account entitled The Estate of Helen Martha Murphy.

As I do so, the attorney makes a point of law I've heard him make a couple of times before.

At the moment of death, he tells me, a person's assets automatically and instantaneously freeze. He seems fond of this law and knowing that he's talking about my mother's death, my mother's assets, knowing that she too would have liked such a law, one that, blending thrift with refrigeration, stopped, when she died, a lot of numbers absolutely cold, I feel like I'm holding in my hand not a ballpoint pen, but an axe or ball-peen hammer. Tools that might draw from my mouth the c's and k's of a word I wouldn't want to speak in front of an attorney, a word that might bloody and botch the iced-up lock the law has placed on my mother's assets, I am trying to look up and meet his eye, when I hear the attorney say: *easy*.

"What did you say?"

"I said I know this isn't easy. The settling of an estate can be a complicated business. Particularly when it involves the sale of a business like your mother's income tax business. Now you're sure you understand the figures on that?"

"I understand them all right."

"And the figures on your share of the estate?"

"Yes."

"No questions?"

"No."

"Because I want you to take your time. I don't want you to feel rushed. I don't want you to sign anything you don't understand."

Neither does my mother. Still tense for the tenths of percent by which, miraculously understanding fractions, I might throw off my handicap in math, she understands how, blindly signing in an attorney's office, a check for a legal fee *I do not understand*, I might blindly sign to fight in a fight which, even as I hurry toward it, I incompletely understand.

The attorney, however, has no understanding of such matters. Smiling and accepting my check for his fee, a check that completely closes out an account he's explained to me that we *have to* completely close out, he doesn't notice the raising above my head of my mother's right hand.

I notice it, though, and when it whams my head, it tags with an earring the ear of a man standing at a bar some six blocks away from the attorney's office.

This earring is made of rhinestone and even as I smile and pump the attorney's hand, even as I thank him once or twice too often, I seem to swing open the door of a bar in the middle of which is standing, exactly where he ought to be, not a man with a rhinestone earring in his ear, but a man wearing a sleeveless white t-shirt.

When I find myself thinking: *he don't care what Momma don't allow, he's gonna wear his t-shirt anyhow*, I know that I should turn and leave. But I do not. Instead, I walk up to the bar and ask for trouble. I ask, that is, for a very dry martini on the rocks with a lemon twist.

Sometimes the mere smell of a martini, the quiet of the ice, the clarity of the gin, the pallor of the lemon rind will remind that for reasons racial, even prenatal, I am someone who should never sniff, let alone sip a martini. But sip it I do.

As if on cue, I hear the c's and k's of the word I guess I came here to hear. I try to let it slip, but when a leather-coated man slips an arm over the shoulder of the t-shirted man, I cannot help but notice.

Noticing the drape of the leather arm over the t-shirted shoulder, the way both clash with the clothes and comportment of the attorneys, insurance agents and real estate men who inhabit this house of gin and tweed and law and real estate, I know that, before I hear my word again, I should turn and leave.

But again I do not. Instead, double-timing my martini and calling for another, I hear the t-shirted man say: "Don't do that."

"Don't do what?"

"Don't try to put words in my mouth."

"I'm not trying to put words in your mouth."

Yes he is. I think the leather-coated man is trying to put into the mouth of the t-shirted man the word I tried and failed, some thirty years ago, to get past my income tax-frazzled mother. When I think about that, I feel again the wham of a hand against my ear and something funny happens to my face.

My face begins to rattle. In my nose and brow, unbroken bones begin to snap, pop, call for cracking. Around my cheekbones and the sockets of my eyes, bullseyes begin to whisper: *rectify, rectify*.

It is a word that makes my mother nibble her knuckles. Knocking back my second martini and calling for a third, I watch the leather-coated man, using my word again, give the t-shirted man a little squeeze.

Nobody likes trouble. Especially my mother. Not even she, though, can deny the undeniable: in the right mouth, accompanied by a squeeze, my word can sound ugly indeed.

The leather-coated man has got the right mouth. In his mouth my word sounds so ugly I wish in a way the t-shirted man would just get up and leave. But he doesn't just get up and leave and when he shakes his head and asks the leather-coated man *please* to get his arm off his shoulder, the leather-coated man, using my word again, gives him another squeeze.

Nobody likes a bully. Not even my mother. But when, knocking back my third martini and calling for a fourth, I turn toward the leather-coated man, she gives a little shudder that says: *I think you'd do anything to hide your handicap in math. Don't reach out and tap that man on the shoulder.*

Reaching out and tapping the leather-coated man on the shoulder, I open my mouth and hear my mother say: *you have a terrible, terrible handicap in math.*

"What did you say?"

"I said why don't you just cut the crap? Why don't you just take your arm off his shoulder?"

"Are you going to make me?"

"Yep."

It is, I guess, a gaseous kind of answer. Above my head burps on a bluish tongue of flame and even before it can spit out the c's and k's of my deep mathematical shame, I hit as hard as I can the leather-coated man square in the face.

I have never before hit a man square in the face and thrilled and appalled that my fist has caught him in the mouth, I'm not surprised that, putting words into her mouth, gin and rage would have my mother whisper: *hit him again, Michael, kill the cocksucker.*

Such language is, of course, below my mother. So am I. Tempted to look up to see if she's still with me, I see that, astraddle the leather-coated man, I've got both his wrists pinned very tightly to the floor. It feels *good* to pin his wrists so tightly to the floor, but I am thinking: *what next Mom*, when I hear the leather-coated man say: "You suckerpunching cocksucker let me up. Why did you hit me?"

I hit you because you will not use, young man, that kind of language in this house.

"What? Who *are you* anyway?"

I am thinking: *I am the monster my mother never meant to make of me with math*, when I hear the leather-coated man scream: “You crazy fuck. I said let me up. What kind of number are you trying to *pull*?”

Trying to pull from the very air a number for the number that I’m trying to pull, I come up with the number for the cops.

I don’t know the number for the cops. But the bartender does. So, in a way, does the t-shirted man.

Dropping a hand onto my shoulder, he says: “You’d better let him up. The bartender called the cops. They’ll be here any minute.”

A minute, I know, contains sixty seconds, sixty quick ticks of the clock. And though I’m still no good at all with numbers, I *can* add, I *can* subtract. Adding the fifteen or twenty ticks that have already passed, subtracting that from sixty, I’m figuring I’ve got maybe forty seconds between now and the arrival of the cops, when my mother stops me.

Cupping a hand to my right ear, she whispers: *That’s enough math. Get up. Get out of here. For lo, Michael, he who would abet you is already at hand.*

Even as my mother speaks, the door of the bar swings open and standing in it, holding it open, is my attorney.

It seems strange to think of him as *my* attorney, but stranger still to see the look on his face.

On his face there is a look that says, having fought in a fight out of which I could not possibly have kept my mother, having fulfilled the contract I so recently, so blindly signed, I’m free now to get up and leave.

I do. Looking from my attorney’s face to the face of the man below me, I apply my fists so hard to the wrists of the leather-coated man he doesn’t, when I rise above him, move an inch. Neither does anybody else.

Thinking: *I’ve found my niche and I’ve got to get out of here*, I do what my mother would have me do, I back toward the door, I nod at my attorney, I get out of here.