

The Henderson Incident

by Smee

My father never had to say a word to me after the phone call that late Saturday morning. Now, even without children of my own, I can only begin to imagine what ran through his head when he answered to an adult's voice asking to speak with his thirteen-year-old son. He yelled up to me and I heard my name filter up from the kitchen to the room where Cory and I had slept that night before. Hearing the incredulous tone of his voice, I immediately knew what the call was about. Plus, the only other person who would have telephoned was already looking at me with the same worried expression on his face that I donned. I picked up the receiver and listened, never hearing the click of my father's end cutting the call, sometimes muttering a few incoherencies without trying to give out too much information so he couldn't figure out just what mischief we had been up to in the middle of the night. We never give our parents credit. Truth is, I wouldn't have known how to describe it anyways.

The Blue Room, as we called it because of the plush blue carpeting, was the last complete addition to our house. The sliding glass doors led off to the top-level deck, which doubled as the car port, and down a flight of stairs to the lower deck before emptying into the back yard. It was a much easier exit into the suburban night than what I dealt with before its existence. Years before, sneaking out of the house was a solo act that involved silent footsteps across the minuscule hallway, patiently opening a creaky bathroom door onto the back roof and then lowering myself onto the wooden cross beam of the lower deck. It was risky for a couple of reasons. Primarily, the proximity to my parent's bedroom made me susceptible to being caught in the act, and the calculated exit required a high level of stealth, the descent from the small shingled roof mirroring something of a mime inching into precise contortions as each advancing step threatened the silence of the night and the consequent stirrings of my parents awakening to the noises of an intruder. Moreover, there was also the real possibility of a misstep leading to a ten-foot fall. Despite these obstacles, my parents never suspected my absences in the early hours of the morning likely because they never could have imagined what there was to do in a rural suburban town of twenty-four thousand people. For me, it was the thrill of being rogue, abound in the world like a veiled vampire. It was about the silence, and the knowledge that the sleeping world was missing out on a great secret waiting to be discovered.

But for two eighth grade boys on this night, it was about a girl.

Jennifer lived a twenty-minute walk across town in a small ranch house off of Main Street. I never quite understood if her parents were uber liberal or just absent and irresponsible. Or, like my parents, overly trusting and a bit naïve as to the mischief one could find in quiet suburbia. Jennifer was notorious for her affinity to boys and generous with her distribution of goods, and when Cory and I delivered the prospect of a late-night visit, she didn't balk. Even though it sounded too good to be true and we were dubious it might actually happen, a plan was forged.

We crossed through the back yards of my neighborhood and emerged at Durling park, walking a hard, excited pace propelled by the fervor of adolescence and the prospect of a young woman. The night was beautifully silent and still, broken only by the urgent sound of our voices. As we traversed the town of finely trimmed lawns and precisely painted houses, we suffered the

opprobrium of two clandestine figures crossing the tranquility of a suburban scenery at night, which contributed even more to the enthusiasm of the excursion. When we finally arrived at Jennifer's house, the lights were out across the front face, including her room. Had we missed our chance? A part of us knew that it was too good to be true, which lessened our disappointment. Regardless, I rapped my knuckles lightly over the dirty glass of her window, semi committed to rousing her from her sleep. To my surprise, I heard noises and shuffling inside, and the window edged open. Jennifer's sleepy, but smiling, face appeared. She dressed and joined us.

We hung out and talked and put our hands in places that only the cover of darkness would permit in a public place. The plumpness of a young breast, the wiry excitement of someone else's pubic hair. We smoked a few cigarettes together and laughed and reveled in our freedom of making our own rules while the world slept. Cory and I watched her with unctuous grins as she enjoyed the company of two boys dotting on her. The time passed like a jet plane, and she decided it was time to return home. We didn't protest, for we had accomplished all we had set out to achieve for the night. The thrill of this encounter had been placated, as we hurdled another first experience in the slow numbing of life.

The gentlemen we were, we dropped her off at her window and began the walk back home the long way, with no particular hurry. Cory lit another cigarette to share and, assured that the other wasn't looking, we took turns adjusting our swollen testicles we'd take care of later at our own leisure. We turned up Highland's long brick avenue until we arrived at Durling Park, only a block away from my home. At the far entrance, we spotted a figure strolling along slowly on his bicycle. Nearing, we saw it was Brad Henderson. He lived a block up the hill from me on Summit Street and, although he was three years older, we always had that intangible commonality of being neighbors. Playing together on the street hadn't happened for years, as he was well into high school, but he was my neighbor, nonetheless. Cory knew him as well through his older brother. At three thirty in the morning, a certain comradeship of rebellion need not be mentioned, and we waved him down as we were all going in the same respective direction.

We chatted and Cory and I thought that our cool meter had risen about two hundred percent because we were now officially accomplices to a late-night encounter with Brad Henderson, a known fringe character at school who might just mention our name in certain circles. We just had no idea how much of an accomplice we would end up being.

Before I go on with this story, I must interject a modicum on life experience and experiential knowledge, for there are certain events that change your understanding of how the world works and what it means for you, as an individual, to be extant in the world. This, of course, is called growing up, maturing, coming of age or whatever euphemisms are applied. Usually, as a kid, ascribing one of these words or phrases to an event means some bad shit happened that you had to deal with, but you were also lucky enough to walk away and say—holy shit, I hope I never have to do that again—knowing full well that you most likely will because that is the way that life is. And now *you* know it. For me, that night held two paradigm shifts. One I have already described above with luscious parsimony; the other went as follows.

The three of us turned down the cobble access road that cut through the near side of the park. The road was barricaded on each end by a thigh high guardrail that prevented through traffic. The raised

golden pebbles had a glossy sheen that glistened under the fluorescent light like snow in the summertime. We chatted and Brad rolled along side, down the incline at our walking pace until the road flattened.

“Hey, do you think I can bunny hop that guardrail?” he said. This terminology, ‘bunny hop’, is the description given to a self-generated jump on a bicycle, most commonly used to clear objects over flat terrain with a freestyle BMX bike. His question was rhetorical, though his tone made it sound like a challenge. No way, we both answered in unison, thinking he was joking. Without another word he peddled ahead on his lime green Mongoose, complete with axle pegs on both wheels and a low seat for crotch protection, and he circled the barrier to begin his approach. There was no hesitation as he peddled straight on for the curled metal barrier. In a swift motion, he jerked his bike upwards with a great force and launched himself into the air, lifting the bike like a magician levitates an assistant. In the shadows, it looked like a jump of a large person who at the last moment pulled his knees to his chest in smooth, a singular motion of practiced beauty. The back wheel lightly touched the rounded top of the guardrail and rolled over effortlessly, and Brad landed in stride to complete the acrobat.

Cory and I gasped in a guffaw of disbelief, genuinely surprised and impressed by his feat. We celebrated and said, Dude, that was awesome, for it truly was. Brad chuckled and turned abrupt face for a repeat attempt at a stunt he had obviously practiced many times. He pumped once for speed and counted his timing on the approach, the rubber wheels smacking over the white cobble stones like little hands slapping together in a chorus of applause edging him on. The pull and the sudden silence as the bike momentarily left the earth. In all aspects of the jump, Brad did everything correct. His speed was consistent, his lift was strong, his height sufficient. But a small variable had changed, for this time he approached from the opposite side. He cleared his body and bike followed, but in the last moment the back wheel caught the edge of the guardrail, the rubber knobs on the tire grabbing firmly to the fine metal. Brad’s linear trajectory over the obstacle abruptly changed to a circular one, propelling his torso downwards as his movement traced the extended circumference of the bike wheel. The crash was near instant, and Brad was thrust headfirst into the cobblestone road.

A simultaneous gasp. We ran over to see if Brad was okay, as he slowly pulled himself free from the twisted bike wrapped around his appendages, but neither of us was prepared for what we saw. I put my hand on his shoulder as he pushed himself from the ground and immediately saw the pooling blood. Brad’s face was no longer there, replaced by a pulp of freshly cut blood. Aghast, I instinctively took a step backward from the monster that had emerged from Brad’s skull. “Uh feh on muh fhey,” he mumbled through some opening behind the blood, stating the obvious, helplessly registering what had occurred to him.

Cory kept his composure. “You just had an accident,” he said. “You’re going to be okay, but you need to get help.” The equanimity in his voice calmed me, and to this day I have never ceased to be impressed at my friend’s clarity. If ever I were thrust into battle with the heat of enemy fire buzzing around me, there would be no other person I’d want next to me. Fallen comrades could not be in better hands. And in the shock to my senses, his lucidity brought me back to the immediacy of the moment, understanding clearly we were now solely responsible for managing

the situation and the gravity of Brad's injury. For the first time in my life, someone's fate wholly depended on us.

Brad got to his feet, bent at the waist, the blood dripping to the cobble pavement in long gelatinous strands. He instinctively put his hands to his face and pulled at a long string of hanging tissue. "Ugh. Ahs muh tungh." And indeed, it was. We encouraged him not to touch his face again. My gag reflex under control, Cory and I formed a plan, coaxing Brad onto the tiny seat of the bicycle. I sifted through the congealing blood and selected the small white shapes of what I thought resembled teeth and slipped them into Brad's pocket. But the light from the security lamp was poor, and Brad quite possibly discovered later that I had given him nothing more than a random collection of round, white stones.

The walk to his home was three suburban blocks, beginning with the monstrosity of the Boyer Street hill. As Cory and I pushed, we continued to talk him down—everything's gonna be fine, we're not far now; you're not so bad—and other lies to keep the situation under control. We turned the corner to my street and progressed steadily, passing in front of my very house. I imagined my parents coming out and what I would say—please don't lecture me now, I'm dealing with something, or I would say something of great importance to show how assured a self-aggrandized teenager could be. In reality, all I wanted was be sleeping peacefully in the Blue Room.

In fifteen minutes, we were at the side door of Brad's house. The pain had set in and he began to teeter on the bicycle like a lazy spring, groaning with short, guttural sounds and low toned snorts. With no worry for noise, he dropped his bike and threw open the aluminum screen door. There were no secrets anymore for this night, and Cory and I could not abandon him now. We steadied his walk, each of us holding onto an elbow, and marched him through the first floor living room and up a small staircase to where Brad's parents slept peacefully. It was the first time I had seen his house, and here we stood in a strangely intimate scene, crossing the threshold of privacy to his parent's bedroom, uninvited to a place where they rest and restore their souls, read books to escape daily life, trespassing on a place of tranquility, where they speak conjugal secrets, and, possibly, conceived their children, only to be confronted by a deformed figure calling the woman under the covers, mother. Brad stood at the foot of their bed, the blood dripping from his chin onto the light-colored carpet. As they stirred from their sleep, he incoherently spat out his need to go to the hospital. Thank god they didn't turn on the light, for I don't know if I could have dealt with it. In the hand off, Cory and I backed away and slipped out the side door. Our work was done. Poor parents, was the only feeling I remember.

As the light of the morning doused the sky, we slipped back into the Blue Room, removed our shoes and pants, and tiptoed to the basement bathroom to wash the blood from our hands. With the original shock worn off, fatigue had set in. We crashed hard on the plush floor, only to be awakened a few hours later by a phone call.

I found out Brad's condition via others. The multiplicity of his injuries required a long list that included a shattered nasal cavity, various fractures of the zygomatic cheek bone and the upper maxilla, a broken mandibula and numerous lost teeth (all replaced by a prosthetic, by the way). The real danger, however, was the shredded tongue, which, compounded with his inability to breathe through his nose, had swollen to restrict the air intake through his mouth. Had he not made

it to the hospital when he did, as his mother desperately informed me on the telephone, he most likely would have suffocated to death. She was indebted we had saved his life. Somehow, I failed to see Cory and myself as heroes of the night and more like accessories to a self-imposed disaster.

I had entertained the idea of going to the hospital to see Brad, but one gratuitous image of his mutilated face was all I could bear. Best to let things lie as they were. In her infinite wisdom of parenting, the only comment my mother ever made concerning the Henderson incident was, "You know, none of that would never have happened if you weren't out there in the first place."

How right she was. But that's life. You never know until you go.