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# MARSHALL BOSWELL

## *Bloody Knuckles*

**W**e were all connoisseurs of pain in those days. The boys, at any rate. Right now I am unable to recall a single game we played that did not somehow involve violence. Modes varied, of course, and my older brother, Scott, mastered them all.

There was, for instance, the frog, a swift sinister punch aimed at the thigh or biceps. In other parts of the country this punch was known as the Charley Horse or the Knuckle Buster, while one kid from my fifth grade class—he was from California—called it, rather exotically I thought, a Monster Mash. But we just called it a frog, in lower case letters. Not a proper noun at all.

To execute a Texas Titty Twister all you had to do was pinch your victim's nipples between your thumb and forefinger and twist outward, right hand clockwise, left hand counter-clockwise. Other favorites along this line included the Noogy, the Fart Blossom, and the Monkey's Uncle. The Chinese Corker was essentially a variation on the frog, the crucial difference being a cocked middle finger. A thwack on an erection constituted a Pecker Wood, a vile form of torture popular at Boy Scout outings and, in my case, grandma's house, where Scott and I shared a sofa bed. Take a kid's forearm in your two hands and twist the skin—again, right hand clockwise, left hand counter-clockwise and you've got an Indian Rope Burn.

As I said, Scott mastered them all, a virtuoso of violence without peer. He was, after his own fashion, an artist of sorts, and pain was his medium. He was a Beethoven of bruises, a DaVinci of discomfort. For him, agony was both an essence and a pal-

pable reality. In fact, one of his favorite forms of torture was positively Platonic: after getting his saliva good and viscous with a glass of milk or a bowl of ice cream or (just imagine it) a hefty plug of Red Man chewing tobacco, he would pin you to the floor and let descend, ever so slowly, this adhesive rope of spit which, if you were lucky and you did not move, he would slurp back up just before it broke and dropped along your chin. No pain was involved, you understand: just bald torture reduced to its quivering essence.

But it was Scott's resourcefulness that finally set him apart from the others in my neighborhood. A simple thump of the finger, for instance, achieved a kind of oriental majesty in Scott's capable hands. With well-deserved pride, he would lick his middle finger, cock it back like an archer lining up an arrow and then, with an adroit and muscular flick of his wrist, thump your cheek, head or hand. It hurt so bad your ears rang. All the kids in my neighborhood tried to master it, and soon a game called Thumps emerged, a simple act of endurance similar to Bloody Knuckles, a game in which you and your opponent take turns scraping a comb across the back of one another's hands. In both games the object is not to flinch; the first one who surrenders loses. To my horror, Thumps almost eclipsed Smear the Queer in neighborhood popularity.

Perhaps I am exaggerating Scott's part in all of this. Maybe he didn't really invent Thumps. It just seemed at the time like he did. In fact, at that period of my life, it seemed like he was responsible for just about everything.

Hence the cruelest thing he ever did to me, the single most audacious and revolting atrocity I ever suffered at his hands fills me now, in hindsight, with a kind of misty-eyed admiration. Perhaps this is just a function of memory, the way all of our acts, no matter how embarrassing, acquire a halo of goodness in recollection. I suppose that is what we mean when we speak of the Good Old Days: the past is that part of ourselves that has entered the Eternal, where nothing ever changes, where everything is remote and innocent. And anyway, recollected pain is hardly pain at all, being, as it is, painless. Rather, it is something else, though what that something is eludes me right now.

The year was 1976, that bloated Bicentennial summer of my childhood, and my family and I were trekking cross country, westward ho. The trip was my mother's idea I'm pretty sure, intended, no doubt, as an educational experience for "the boys." Nevertheless, all I can remember about that trip are the hotels and what kind of swimming pool each one had. (I was crazy about pool slides that summer—pool slides, roller coasters and dolphins, in that order; also, I discovered Jules Verne and *The Who*—and erections, my own, exclusively). If I make an effort I can also recall gaudy souvenir shops, mounds of turquoise "Indian Jewelry," a bubbly Elton John/Kiki Dee single, and the Democratic National Convention, which my father insisted on watching every night, sprawled like a beached whale on the hotel bed in nothing but a pair of open-fly boxers and a Hanes tank top. The intimacies of family.

I think we got as far as Arizona and then turned around. I saw the Grand Canyon.

On the whole that trip marked the fullest flowering of Scott's brutality. Things got so bad, in fact, that at one point—somewhere in Texas I suppose—my father pulled our red Delta 88 to the side of the road and moved Scott up front, leaving me in the back seat with my mother. For the last 130 miles Dad had been threatening to "pull over" and, lo and behold, the man was true to his word. To my eternal gratitude.

Scott was fourteen that summer. He sported thick tear-drop wire rims, long blond hair parted down the middle in the feathered style of that era, denim flares and pinhole jerseys. He wore a choker and braces, of the clear plastic variety also in vogue. He was probably about five six, five seven, something like that, but he seemed enormous.

The Seventies were in full swing, in other words, and my brother was perfectly attuned to the Times, thoroughly assimilated to all the latest trends, insofar as a fourteen year old can assimilate to the prevailing culture. On the other hand, despite my protests, my hair stayed short; I wore ill-fitting tennis shorts and knee-high tube socks. Something felt vaguely wrong with my appearance, something slightly out of kilter and uncool, yet even as I scratched my sock-chafed shins I was unable to put my finger on the problem.

We were right outside Flagstaff at a Best Western hotel boasting a Grand Canyon motif I loved. I was a kid and had no taste. Although it was the height of the Arizona tourist season, this particular hotel, chosen by my father, was a good hour or so from the Canyon itself and was therefore full of vacancies. To all outward appearances we were the only family around. I think perhaps my parents were fighting and this was Dad's revenge.

It is evening and Scott and I have the hotel pool all to ourselves.

The pool-side lights in my foggy perception are wreathed in rainbows. My skin is slick as a mink's, glossed antiseptically in chlorine. Since I'm not wearing my glasses the cast-iron deck furniture is, no kidding, completely invisible, the whole poolside decor dissolved into deceptively airy blurs of black and blue.

My older brother, wielding a tightly rolled wet towel, is chasing me.

This has been going on for about ten minutes. So far he has thwacked me twice, on the back of my left thigh both times. But somehow I end up on one side of the pool and he ends up on the other, thus effecting a stalemate. Between us the water sends forth a vast turquoise glow, the same color as my father's new Navajo bracelet. My nose burns with chlorine as I gasp for air.

Scott says, "Come on, pussy."

I put my hands on my knees and steady my breathing. "Suck my thing, you asshole."

"I'm serious, don't be such a fag." *Fag* and *pussy* are essentially interchangeable epithets in Scott's limited repertoire, both conveying the same withering charge. Scott has made it clear to me, repeatedly, that I am in danger of becoming both, though I have no clear idea what either actually is. "Get your own towel."

"Dream on, dick breath, dream on."

"Get a towel, Paul. Don't make me have to kick your ass."

An interesting dilemma: either I get a towel and lay myself open to repeated thwacks on my thigh, or I refuse and get beat up. Sometimes Scott explains his beatings as his attempt to make me a man; unlike chicken, little boys apparently toughen if you pound them senseless. Other times he says he is just trying to provoke a "reaction"—that's all. When he punches me, he explains, he's just trying to see what I'll do. Of course as soon as I *do* anything—like fight back, for instance—I am quickly reminded

(in words first) that I can never hope to kick his ass, and then I am swiftly subjugated, having made the grave mistake of piquing his anger (*Hey dickhead, you bloodied my lip; you're gonna pay for that, you little prick*). He must somehow assume I haven't caught on yet—or maybe he genuinely forgets why he was tormenting me in the first place. He's not too logical a guy, my brother.

"I'm going in," I tell him, though I don't really mean it.

"Okay," he says, reconsidering, "here's what we'll do. You do this one thing I ask and we'll call it a truce. One thing, a dare kind of, and it's over. No one wins."

Technically, of course, this isn't a truce at all. What I mean is, I have to do something—me, the losing team—before all things are equal. But it's as close to a truce as you'll get with Scott.

"What is it?" I ask. I am not uninterested. "Will it hurt?"

But he has dropped his towel and is already climbing onto the deck furniture. I can barely see him from across the pool.

"Get over here," he says, his back turned to me. "I said it was a truce. I won't touch you."

I am crazy with anticipation; my own impending fate fascinates me. What does he have in mind? I dive sleek and supple into the pool and let my momentum shoot me in one elegant underwater arc to the other side. I am still of an age that feels no compunction about pretending to be, say, a dolphin.

Scott has unhooked from the corner of the supply shack a purple fluorescent mosquito lamp. He holds the thing out to me, smiling, his teeth the color of egg nog in the lamp's eerie glow. I hear it hum.

"A friend of mine did this once," he explains, placing the lamp on the ground. My body tenses with fear. "It's incredibly cool."

"You better put that back where you found it." My biggest fear at this stage in my life is *getting caught*—doing anything. I have yet to develop a hierarchy of evil. "We're dead if someone catches us."

"Gah Paul, you are *such* an unbelievable fag. I swear to God. In case you haven't noticed, bonehead, we're the only retards in this hotel."

He stands back and regards his work. The lamp is propped against a deck chair, glowing.

"What happens," he explains, "is the whole light turns white if you pee on it." He just looks at me, as if I know what he's talking about. Which, in truth, I *do*. As if to reassure me, he adds, "Brett did this once at his pool."

"I'm not peeing on the thing," I announce. Inside my wet trunks my little nubbin shrivels to the size of a chick pea.

"This is all you gotta do, Paul, I promise. Nothing happens, except the light turns white. That's all. It's no big deal. And anyway, if you do this we've got a truce, just like I said."

"Have *you* ever done it before?"

"Tons. I already told you, Brett and I do this at his pool all the time."

That isn't exactly what he told me, but I buy it. The idea of the truce appeals to me. Also, I don't know much about electrical currents or fluorocarbons: as I said, the thing that concerns me most is getting caught. I am suddenly seized by a vision of the Best Western staff storming out here to read us the riot act, and there I am standing shamefaced with my pecker in my hand. The quicker the better, I figure.

"Okay," I tell him, "but only if *you* do it next."

"I promise," he assures me, straight-faced. "You bet."

I yank the string on my trunks and whip it out. The bright side to all of this is that I really *do* have to take a leak—wet trunks and all—and so the whole thing looks like it will be over in a jiff. As a dribble leaks out and I start to take aim, I feel a moth brush past my cheek, see it swoop down in front of me, hear it snarl against the lamp which, as Scott suggested, sustains a tiny white scar where the moth has met its doom. My stream gains momentum and I find my target.

Oh, I saw white all right.

The thing is, what did I ever do to *him*? What exactly was the guy's beef with me?

Well, for starters, I showed up. After all, he was three-and-a-half when I was born, old enough to have certain ideas about himself and his place in the divine order of things. Scott had every reason on earth to believe that he was, in some measure or other, the center of the known universe. Young parents with their first child, in clamorous company with a whole bevy of other young couples, all with first children of their own: that

was his world. Everywhere he turned he encountered friendly adult faces lowered to his scope of vision and contorted for his amusement. Every desire he had was satiated, almost instantaneously, by Mom or Dad, who seemed to have no other purpose on earth but to respond to his whims. Every accomplishment of his was greeted by ebullient applause, by calls to grandma and grandpa, by a shower of hugs and kisses. There was, truly, no one else in town.

Children, as everyone knows, are solipsistic little monsters. Before the onslaught of self-awareness there is simply an inner certainty of need. The pronoun "I" recognizes a displacement every child resists. A six year old will howl in rage at having to share a Tonka truck; a three year old will strike out and bite with all the territorial fervor of a wild dog. The first and most difficult fact of life is the realization the world must be shared.

So I showed up and displaced my brother. I became the center he once embodied and he struck out in protest. I made him recognize himself as a self and he hated me for it.

I guess I can understand that.

I thought about my brother obsessively. To me his inescapable presence seemed, with all the vague uncanny certainty of a dream, always there, always somehow nearby. When he was in the house I hid from him, locked my door and listened for his footsteps to come thundering down the hallway. When he wasn't in the house I anticipated his imminent arrival with an ominous sense of dread. When I was out playing with my friends I fretted about going home. Every time I took a leak at school I saw some kids playing Thumps: he was omnipresent.

My bedroom, if you were scaling the steps, was the first door on the right. It was a spacious room for an eleven year old—at least it seemed spacious at the time—and felt to me, upon entering, like the inner sanctum of a vast labyrinth. I could lock my door, but only for form's sake. A coat hanger inserted into the door knob successfully sprung the so-called lock, and besides, there was something of an injunction in our house against bolting anything other than the bathroom door. With the exception of my poor mother we were a family of boys, open-door pee-ers all of us.



Even my bedroom wasn't safe from Scott is what I'm trying to say. I could lock my door, sure, and even cower in my own walk-in closet, but, in the end, these measures were pretty pointless. Ten seconds with a bent coat hanger and he was in, armed with a new "reason" to inflict punishment. *Lookit, you pussy, what the hell is this with locking me out?*

He would pound up the stairs and I, sprawled on my bed reading in immaculate paperback a volume of Tolkein, would grow rigid, drop my book and, with a teeth-numbing fear chilling to think about, glower at my door. Scott never knocked. He just jiggled the knob and then pounded. In these situations I would usually stay quiet, hoping to trick him into thinking the room was empty—a touching bit of reckless optimism, now that I think about it—but the pounding would continue.

"Hey butt pirate, open up!"

This particular ritual had as its most horrific aspect the following: not content with a concise broadcast of his desires, Scott would steadily drum on the door until I let him in, which meant that even as I was turning the lock mechanism the whole door, knob and all, would be quaking in my grasp. Or perhaps that's just an anthropopathism.

The door flies open, my brother fills the frame.

"What's up?" he says, helping himself inside. For good measure he tries to frog me in the arm. I deflect the punch but still catch it on my wrist. Which isn't to say I don't feel some pain.

Scott picks up my book, cracks it to the page I'm reading and tosses the text aside, thereby pissing me off on two accounts: first, he has lost my place; second, he has cut a permanent crease down the book's spine. Next he turns down my stereo, lifts the needle and palms the playing surface of my record, a gesture that is especially infuriating in view of the fanatical care with which he handles his own records. He drops the LP back in the still spinning turntable, entirely missing the spine. The record wobbles once and then careens to the floor, nicking the stylus en route. My mild fastidiousness, my tendency toward solitude and self-absorbed brooding, my love of order—all of these things, for some reason, infuriate him. He regards these aspects of my personality as somehow womanly, as "faggy," and has thus taken

it upon himself to beat them out of me. If you just pound hard enough, he apparently assumes, you'll find a man underneath.

"What are you doing with these?" he snaps, holding up a pair of white tube socks adorned with a fading Puma insignia. "You got these from my closet, didn't you? When were you in my room?"

"Eat me with a spoon," I tell him. My record—*Kiss Destroyer*—now sports a chalked slash on side two. "Mom put them in there, don't blame me."

But he has forgotten about the socks. Now he is busy with my computerized football game, which beeps and tweetles idiotically.

"Hey, I'm going to the weight room to work out," he says, working his jaw, scoring a TD (the game squiggles out a computerized rendition of the "1812 Overture," first measure). "Go with me."

I sleeve the record, my hands shaking with excitement. My friend Jasper Thorndike and I lift weights at his house on weeknights after "Welcome Back Kotter" (Mondays), "Happy Days" (Tuesdays) and "Mork and Mindy" (Thursdays). We do dumbbell curls, the bench press, squats, all of which Scott showed us last Christmas when Jasper got his totally boss set of Universal home weights, each plate elegantly cast in dull silver plastic casings. Each night after lifting I lie in bed, my arms sore (or so I like to imagine), and run through several enticing revenge scenarios concerning muscular me and my repentant older brother, and yet the irony of his asking me to go along with him on this gloomy February afternoon to pump some iron totally escapes me. I guess I'm too thrilled at the prospect really to notice.

"Who's going?" I ask warily.

"Just you and me. Hurry up, I'm leaving in a few minutes."

I squirm into gym clothes (a jock strap is not yet part of my arsenal) and try to look nonchalant.

The woods we trudge through have the stark flushed look of a black-and-white photograph, a variation on a theme in basic gray. Beneath my feet twigs crackle and pop. Scott pulls surreptitiously from his tube sock a can of Copenhagen, thumps the can against his wrist to pack it tight, and helps himself to a hefty one. Silently, he passes me the can. I have yet to master

this delicate art, so it is with shaking hands that I pack my humble chew. He talks to me about school, freshman football, the anatomies of several girls it has been his honor to fondle (Trisha, Lori, Paige, Carnile). And I try to listen, honestly, this is crucial information, but the Copenhagen, which is sliding around in my mouth, has my head in a nauseous swim. It's like I've just swallowed a spoonful of ants.

"How's your dip?" he asks, smiling.

Transmission fluid dribbles down my chin and I say, "'S gleat."

As we tread across the empty school parking lot, Scott fishes out his dip in one swift move, using only the tip of his tongue. I take this as my grateful cue to follow suit, but all I manage to do is cover the roof of my mouth with the vile stuff, which pretty much does it. With no ceremony whatsoever, I vomit all over the backs of Scott's brand new Adidas Country.

"Whoa sport."

He moves beside me, oblivious of his shoes, and drops a reassuring hand on my back.

"Stay bent over," he advises, "just get some air, breathe deep. That's it. Take it easy." My vision begins to clear, the pavement quits buckling beneath me feet. "What'd you do?" he laughs, and pats me on the back. "Dumb fuck."

When we get to the weight room he keeps it up, this unexpected brotherly affection. Part of it is genuine, I realize, and part of it is for show. For there is one other person in the room, Scott's soon-to-be defensive line coach, this mountain of a man named Virgil Stallingsworth, who sizes me up and concludes without hesitation that I will be bigger than Scott. Natch. Stallingsworth is a creature of indomitable confidence and energy, with biceps the size of footballs and a neck so massive his whistle chain, which he wears even in the off-season, bounces against the solid shelf of his chest, the little ball within rattling like a marble inside a paint can. His mustache is the size of a gerbil, his thighs fill to capacity the polyester pant legs of his gray coach's shorts.

This weight room is a no nonsense kind of place, with steel rafters along the ceiling and cold concrete floors underneath. The benches sit on thick rubber pads and cast their silent reflections in a series of vast wall-length mirrors. The free weights, fash-

ioned into black cast-iron disks, have been primly arranged on triangular display racks, each upright peg like an enormous roll of Certs photographed in the negative. A draft tickles my shins. Inspirational maxims, painted in bold Wolverine red, decorate the upper walls, each maxim fashioned in severe block letters: NOTHING WORTHWHILE COMES EASY. WINNING IS THE ONLY THING. ONE HUNDRED TEN PERCENT! I read these admonitions as Scott and Stallingsworth run me through what they both insist is a "standard" workout, both of them barking encouragement throughout, Scott's voice a withering parody of his coach's baritone thunder.

In a couple of years I will become a frequent crawler of this very room. My hands will develop at the base of my fingers raw calluses. The pungent rich swirl of freshly cut August grass will become forever associated for me with pre-season two-a-days. I will be assigned a locker upon which I will scrawl in black Marks-A-Lot my last name and jersey number. These memories and sensations, coupled with a matrix of fear and anxiety, will to all accounts be mine, and yet, on this February afternoon, I know vaguely (it's just a flutter of recognition) that I am simply inheriting something, that this exercise room and everything that goes with it will never truly be mine. I will always be "Little Darby," Scott's less gifted younger brother. Another thing: Stallingsworth will be my coach and in the same breath not be my coach. How excruciating it will be, during my unspectacular stint as a Roosevelt High School Wolverine, to endure daily athletic embarrassment under the shared umbrella of my last name, which, it sometimes feels to me, I also only inherited.

I should have played a different sport. I was not suited for a game like football, being as I was a recipient, rather than a bestower, of blows. I should have run track, tried my hand at wrestling, auditioned for the swim team. I should have mastered a sport that would have better exploited my penchant for solitude, one that would have pitted me against nothing more tractable than my own endurance and courage, something elegantly and irreducibly mine so that, later on, I might bask in the luxury of recollecting my emotions in tranquillity.

What do I remember most about that afternoon? I remember Scott saying "fuck" a lot. I remember Stallingsworth scratching his balls. And I distinctly remember the acid discharge of

fear I felt when Scott declared that I could bench press considerably more than my initial, and not very conservative, estimate.

This is the kind of thing he always does. *Be like me, do what I do.* At the moment he wants me to approach his strength, so as to shorten the distance between us. I have my misgivings.

"Just let me add a five kilo plate on the end," he insists, already slapping on the extra weight. "What'd you think coach?"

"Fucking-A," Stallingsworth agrees, spitting into a nearby trash can. "He can do it."

I don't know anything about kilograms—despite their name, the Universal Weight Company is an American firm that gauges their weight sets in pounds—so it is not altogether clear to me how much extra weight he is adding. Then again, the actual increase isn't really what's at issue.

I settle myself on the bench press, grasp the barbell, brace my feet. The first thing that feels all wrong is that my feet barely reach the floor. The second thing is the bar, which is thicker than I might prefer. I can't really get a good hold. Also, my thumb knuckle rubs against the finely waffled surface. In my arms tingles a premonition of failure. Scott looms above me, gripping the center of the barbell, his face flat and foreshortened.

"Ready?" he asks.

Yes, I nod.

Arching my back I heave at the weight which, to my astonishment, lifts effortlessly, as if I had just hoisted a slab of styrofoam rock. Confidence races through my arms. For a moment I am convinced—absolutely, genuinely convinced—that I can throw the thing right through the ceiling.

"Let's fucking do it," I say, figuring I've earned the right.

Scott lets go. All at once the enormous, invisible finger of God reaches down from the heavens and pushes the barbell into my chest. *Wham!* The impact is so solid my feet kick out, striking Stallingsworth in his massive shins. I fear my heart is going to squirm up my throat and out my mouth.

Scott shouts, "Push it, goddamn it!"

"C'mon biggin," Stallingsworth bellows, "squeeze it out!"

"You can do it, Paul! Push it, push it, push it!"

But the weight won't budge. My face feels like it's going to explode. To my sudden shame, I have to fart.

"C'mon man, don't give up!" Scott yells, taking the barbell in his index fingers. The load lightens.

"That's it, now, that's it, you got it." (Stallingsworth)

Scott adds another finger and the load gets lighter. The barbell rises an inch.

"Almost there, Paulie, just a little more man, you almost got it."

At long last my elbows lock, to which Stallingsworth shouts "Sonofabitch!" But I am too terrified to move. The barbell does not seem heavy anymore—the whole concept of *weight* has been disrupted in my mind—and I don't know where my hold on the barbell ends and Scott's begins. Scott guides the barbell to its resting perch and I let go, my arms dropping to my sides like spaghetti noodles.

And as I lie there on the bench trying to wrestle with the agonizing sensation of failure careening through my muscles, I catch a glimpse of Virgil Stallingsworth scratching his balls with all the blithe feral impunity of a dog sniffing its own crotch. When he catches me looking at him he peels off a fat, fatherly smile and says, "You'll get there, little buddy. You stick with this brother of yours and you'll turn out just fine."

Behind me Scott says, "You bet your ass coach. We'll make a man of him yet."

And the idea does comfort me, in a vague, conflicted sort of way. It lets me know that in this, as in so many other things in my life, I don't really have much of a choice.