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Father

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I said yes to the snake wound in the tree like a question mark, not my nodding partner, but he will get all the credit. The bastard—if I hadn’t let him have a bite he would have remained a naked, brainless monkey tromping through the bush and dropping names, not the first romantic hero, not the spirited individual who wanted to be God, the man with guts. Yet, since my thin hands passed the fruit to his thick hands, young lovers will forever bless his name in damp sheets as they try to keep quiet. And when a man under oath grins at the genius of his lie, the credit will go to my husband, wrapped in a goat’s skin outside and flirting with our wifely daughters on the grass, as I touch my tight belly that holds a murderous seed, forming the mold for my particular role.

Unlike most of the other boys he knew, Dillon had never wanted a gun before. He had never liked Westerns or war movies or cop shows—he tolerated G.I. Joe cartoons simply because there was nothing else on at four o’clock in the afternoon. To him there was nothing fantastic or heroic about shooting someone. A solid punch to the jaw, a kick to the midsection, a judo throw, these things were heroic, requiring a special kind of skill and bravery that Dillon didn’t possess. He knew that anyone, including himself, could point a gun and pinch the trigger, and there was a serious, ugly finality to this, far removed from the clean angles of a striking fist or foot, that had always frightened and repelled him.

But that December morning, shivering in the thirty-degree sunshine, Dillon ignored the old cop standing before him and stared hungrily at the policeman’s neatly holstered revolver. He wondered what it would feel like to hold the weapon. He knew it would be heavy. Still, the gun’s rubbery black grips and easy silver curves told him that it was meant to be handled, that it possessed the reassuring weight of a baseball bat or an axe.

Dillon watched the revolver gradually sink out of sight as the old cop squatted down in front of him, his knees popping and cracking like muffled firecrackers. The gun disappeared, burrowing into the thick folds of the policeman’s coat. The old cop grimaced as he settled his weight onto the balls of his feet and exhaled sharply through his nostrils, covering Dillon’s face in warm mist. He was a big man; resting on his haunches he still towered over Dillon.

“What’s your name son?” he asked, searching for Dillon’s eyes. “Dillon Foster,” he said, mumbling into the zipper of his jacket. He tried to concentrate on the zipper’s nail gray teeth but the old cop put a gloved knuckle under his chin and gently tilted his eyes up.

The first thing Dillon noticed about the big man’s face was his nose, jutting out like a clenched fist. It was a villain’s nose, hard and straight, with a tip that abruptly curled in towards the upper lip, framed by wide nostrils streaked with purple gin blossoms. But a weak chin, a Christmas white moustache, and moist brown eyes softened the menace of that beak. There was something bittersweet about the old cop’s face that he immediately recognized and wanted to trust.

The old cop favored him with a tight smile. “He looks like a bull, like a tired old bull,” Dillon thought, as he watched the big man blow another jet of steam out of his broad nostrils.

“And who’s that over there?” the old cop asked. He pointed over Dillon’s shoulder to a small figure wearing an orange and blue stocking cap and a bulky dark blue coat that extended down past the knees and resembled an old sleeping bag.
Dillon answered with a distracted swing of his arm. "That's my little brother, Danny," he said.

The old cop waved. "Hi there, Danny."

Danny cautiously waved back, shy and silent. A cluster of white goose feathers escaped from his coat, whirled in the still winter air, and dropped to the ground like exhausted snowflakes.

"How old are you Dillon?" the old cop asked.

"Twelve," he said. Dillon scanned the dark creases of the coat for another glimpse of the revolver but it remained hidden.

"And how old is your brother?"

"He's six."

Danny's light voice broke in. "I'm almost seven," he said. There was an indisputable pride in those quick words that enlarged the old cop's smile, and he held up his hands and bowed his head in mock apology.

"Okay, okay, sorry about that Danny," he said. "Anyway, the reason I stopped by to talk to you boys is because the security guard at Safeway told me that someone had stolen some pallets off of their loading dock this morning. Now I need to know—and you boys need to tell me the truth, okay—is where those pallets over there came from?"

The old cop rolled his bovine eyes over his shoulder at the sleeping oak tree behind him. Four wooden pallets were leaning against the trunk of the big tree, heavy and awkward, like drunken soldiers trying to stand at attention.

An hour ago, the old cop had listened impatiently as the store security guard meticulously described a crime he hadn't witnessed by starting each sentence with a slice of military time and fitting the words "patrolling," "perpetrator," and "theft" into each sentence. The old cop had passed the interview doodling in his notebook with a thoughtful look on his face. The security guard, his plump cheeks glistening with excitement, had assured him that the store would press charges against the perpetrators.

And that was the end of it as far as the old cop was concerned; he had better things to do. Still, he was curious. He had spent five years working in a cabinet shop before joining the police force; he knew wood. He knew that the tree behind him was an oak and that the pallets propped against it were worthless, that the pale yellow wood—raw with sticky amber sap and scarred with little knotholes the color of scorched paper—was "shit-wood," rejected board-stock, too ugly to season and too wet to burn. So why would anyone bother stealing freight pallets? It was this question that had propelled him out of the warm comfort of his car and into the cold to talk to the two boys.

The lie came quickly but the old cop's unexpected friendliness made Dillon hesitate. "I found them," he finally mumbled into his chest.

"Where'd you find them?"

"Across the street...in a shopping cart. Danny and me dragged them over here."

That sounded reasonable to the old cop. Dillon was small—he doubted that the boy could lift the bulky weight of a single pallet, let alone grab four of them off of a loading dock.

For the first time, he noticed that an old framing hammer was dangling from one of Dillon's belt loops, hanging awkardly from the little boy's waist like a misshapen stone, and a romantic spasm coursed through his body. He knew that these boys, like most of the people in his precinct, were poor. The exterior of their little gray house looked diseased: the clapboard siding was swollen with moisture and dotted with splotches of brown mold—a broken window had been bandaged with a piece of cardboard wrapped in a white plastic bag with the word "Safeway" running diagonally in faded red cursive. Yet, the old cop imagined that these two boys, standing in the ugly shadow of their poverty, dreamed of building a fort or maybe even a tree house with those four worthless pallets.

The old cop smiled. "Okay, fair enough, fair enough," he said, reaching out and playfully tousling Dillon's hair.

Dillon started at the initial contact but the old cop's hand felt gentle and good, like a warm blessing. A glittering fantasy rushed over him and in its wake the seductive image of the old cop's revolver flickered and faded into oblivion.

"Well, the old cop asked him and Danny if they wanted him to be their Father and they both said yes and ran to him. He gathered the boys into his big arms and told them that he loved them and would take care of them. He took his new tons shopping and bought them Levi's and Nikes and bikes and comic books. Then he took them out for pancakes and orange juice before the long drive out to the country where the three of them would live in a big log cabin and Danny and him would have their own rooms. And the old cop would teach him how to box and wrestle and he would grow strong and tall and he would protect Danny and the other kids at school from the bullies.

The old cop stood up, his knees protesting with another salvo of fireworks. "I'm going to let you boys keep the pallets this time," he said generously. "You know with some help from your dad you boys could use those pallets to build yourselves a really nice platform in that tree of yours—"

"We don't have a dad," Dillon said quickly, hoping that a father's absence would be enough, and the old cop would adopt them right there.

"Oh," the big man said. He studied the ground for a moment, methodically scratching the hard gray stubble on his chin. "Well," he said, patting Dillon on the shoulder affectionately, "there's nothing wrong with that son, nothing at all. I'm sure your mom could give you boys a hand, right?"

Drunken with expectation, Dillon wanted to tell him everything. He wanted to tell him about mom's broken promises: that she had stopped going to work and started shooting up again; that she had locked her bedroom door and he and Danny hadn't seen her in three days. He wanted to tell him that there was no oil in the furnace and he and Danny had to drag their mattresses down into the living room, so they could sleep in front of the fireplace. And that was why he had stolen the pallets off the loading dock at Safeway. He had done it several times before. His back bending like green wood, he had dragged and shoved the pallets
into the shopping cart, not to build a fort with them, but to destroy them, to smash them apart with the heavy framing hammer and burn the ramshackle wood in the fireplace.

He looked up at the old cop—the big man was smiling down at him, one of his big hands was perched lightly on Dillon's shoulder—and the secret words of his life filled his mind. He felt dizzy and winded. Tell him, he thought, just tell him everything and he'll save us.

A female voice, heavy with static, intruded from the old cop's belt. "ALL NON-EMERGENCY TRAFFIC OFF THE AIR AT THIS TIME. ALL UNITS STAND BY FOR TONE."

The old cop bowed his head in concentration and fiddled with a black knob on the top of his radio. The radio jumped back to life with a high-pitched squeal and the female voice returned. "ALL AVAILABLE UNITS, 27-ADAM AT THE U.S. BANK ON THE NORTHWEST CORNER OF KILLINGSWORTH AND MLK BLVD. NO FURTHER INFORMATION AT THIS TIME."

"Damn it all to hell, that's the third god damned time this week," the old cop muttered in disgust. He yanked the radio off of his belt, exhaling slowly before speaking into it. "881," he said impatiently.

There was something different now about the old cop that troubled Dillon. His placid amiability had disappeared; he sounded tired and serious and his big body looked heavy and brittle. But, more than anything, it was the loss of the big man's attention that made Dillon's lungs clench and ache with panic: the old cop hadn't looked at him once since the radio's intrusion.

"GO AHEAD 881."

"I'm just a couple of blocks away from that call. I'm leaving from 9th and Jessup right now." The old cop lumbered off in the direction of his police car, plodding past the stolen pallets with the reckless agility of an angry old bull.

"Wait!" Dillon yelled at the retreating figure. "I need to tell you something, something important!"

The old cop was at his car now. "Sorry boys, I've got to go. You two have fun with those pallets!"

He clutched the frame of the car door, gingerly lowering his big body into the vehicle. Sunlight caught the polished silver handle of his revolver and the hard light flashed against Dillon's eyes, flickering like a malicious wink.

Dillon blinked and the old cop was gone. The tight pressure that had been building in his throat settled heavily on his chest and stomach.

And he realized that there was something cruel about the winter sunlight, so distant and cold, but bright, so bright there were no shadows to hide the garbage, sprinkled through the yard like fallen leaves: white and yellow cigarette butts, scraps of silver and gold foil, wisps of cellophane and sinewy twine, even a couple of bleached chicken bones. Amidst the garbage random tufts of leaden grass mixed with stubborn weeds, tiny shards of yellow wood and long twisted staples littered the earth around the big tree.

This worn patch of ground had been the setting for some of Dillon's greatest adventures; his fluid mind easily transforming a pile of chicken bones into gigantic dinosaur skeletons, bright foil into dragon-guarded heaps of precious metal, and tall weeds into leering enemies easily dispatched with a series of well-aimed punches and kicks. And Danny, always Danny, standing beside him, the eternal sidekick happily guided by the whirling compass of Dillon's imagination, forever willing to be captured by the enemy and heroically rescued by his brother.

Removed from the old cop's bulky silhouette, Dillon surveyed the yard and, for the first time, the ugly squalor surrounding him remained unchanged, immutable to the fading power of his imagination.

"Wow!" Danny said, his voice shrill with excitement. "He was big! I bet he's really strong too, isn't he Dill? I bet he coulda lifted up a car. Don't you think he coulda Dill? I bet that if a guy was stuck under a car or a tree or somethin' he could save him, you know, just like the Hulk does." Danny found a stone about the size of a man's fist and, gripping it with both hands, jerked it over his head, "RRRGGH, he could do it! Just like that, he could save a guy!"

Dillon didn't respond. The noises of his little brother's voice sounded distant now, flat and blue, like a forgotten television set left on in another room. All he could think about was the old cop's revolver, so clean and beautiful, flashing in the sunlight like a signal.