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summer 2009

A Game I Once Enjoyed

by Patrick Somerville

THE KID WAS TOO YOUNG to be there. It was a bar stocked with local men late-thirties and up, and he thought he needed to get loud in his white cotton t-shirt to make it clear he was intimidated by neither cold nor the working class. He reminded me of something I hated. The fight happened outside. I don't remember the beginning, but I remember that he came at me, and we grappled. I felt the young strength in his arms when he had both hands on my shoulders, and soon I was looking at the snarl on his face and thinking about how I was about to lose. I was reminded, too, of how ugly people become when they try too hard.

Empty street, street lights, the front of the tavern, sidewalk, some ice, a few piles of snow, and two men struggling with one another, breasts afire with greatly misdirected passions. Surprisingly, I twisted free. He seemed surprised by it, too, so I cracked him in the nose.

He fell and I ran and for 15 minutes I felt as though it would be alright. It was only after I got home that I realized my hand was mangled.

On Wednesday, I didn't bother going to work at the supermarket, since I knew I couldn't bag and I couldn't stock and no one was interested in cutting me any slack, especially Kelly, Mr. Big Man. They all heard what happened to the hand, as this was not a big town, and there was some talk that this kid had found out where I worked. All of these reasons compelled me to call in and officially retire from my career as a grocer.

After lunch I drove to the hospital in Green Bay and showed them my lump of meat.

"Sooooo," said the doctor, nodding with respect, not bothering to touch it because I guess he knew what he needed to know, visually. "What happened here, then?"

"I had a fight," I told him. Best not to lie to doctors, ever. They know, anyway.

He ordered up X-rays and not long afterward he came back into the room and stuck a few into the wall of lights. He said, "OK, Mr—" Here he looked for my name on the corner of the X-ray.

"Herb."

"Mr. Herb, OK," he said. "See this?" He pointed to a knuckle with his pen. Where he pointed, my bones looked like a river delta. "You're going to need some pins," he said. "That also means surgery."

"What kind of pins?"

"Small metal ones."

"I see."

The doctor shrugged. "It is what it is."

"I don't have insurance."

"Your hand doesn't care," I stared at him.

"We'll work out a payment plan," he said.

I was angry at the news, but I liked this doctor and how bored he was. It made me think he was good. He explained to me what I could expect if I tried to ride it out and just let it heal on its own, which I had done once or twice with smaller things. In this case, though, this was my right hand, and it was pretty much a question of whether or not it would work again, and I'll just say the thought of meteoric debt is not frightening compared to being the guy using his hook-hand to open beers at your birthday party.

Besides, I was tired of restarting my life.

"OK," I told him. "Do your thing."

\$8,000, it turns out, is how much it costs to repair yourself after you punch someone you don't know for no reason, by the way.

ALTHOUGH PERHAPS THERE were reasons after all. I lived in Kaukauna, Wis., I was 39 and alone, I was a felon forever, and this winter was already unbearable. In the summer the smell of Kaukauna is the smell of burnt shit mixed with ground-up cattle-lips—come see us some time—but I would take that over a frozen Wisconsin January when things are not well with your soul. My girlfriend Jamie was gone, moved to St. Louis at the end of September, for a job. At least that's what she said. Her departure correlated exactly with me telling her I loved her for the first time.

I took it easy the night I got home. I did not think about the police arriving. I did not think about the consequences of another arrest, or the terror of going back to prison, or that truly, I would rather be dead. No lie. It was a casual night. I made supper, and I cleaned as best I could, did the dishes, made a vodka, and went to the couch to enjoy the Vicodin. Alcohol and Vicodin and a show called NCIS that I could not quite understand.

There were some good things to think about, though, and so I thought about them and leaned into my buzz. For example: I liked the feeling of my house tonight. My theory: in nearly a year I had not spent a night away, not one, so a long chain was broken, and being away had somehow bleached out the lasting memory of Jamie and I cohabitating.

It was also beautiful that I never had to go

We're on our way north again, folks, for Poetry magazine's Chicago Printers Ball July 31, 2009, and Opium's attendant Literary Death Match, sort of the American Idol of indie lit (long as we're being crass—and who says we shouldn't be, considering the circumstances). Our 30th broadsheet's author **Spencer Dew—Songs of Insurgency**, Vagabond, 2008—will represent us in the mortal battle with the likes of *Make* mag, *Ninth Letter*, Switchback Books, the venerable *ACM* and others—surely loads of monstrous destruction await. Go Dew! Then watch for this issue's writer, **Patrick Somerville**, with Dew, contributor **Greg Gerke** (with the new *There's Something Wrong With Sven*) and the great **C.T. Ballentine** at Chicago's Quimby's, 1854 W. North Ave. in Wicker Park, Aug. 13 for the release reading, supported in part by a grant from an anonymous donor to *Poets & Writers*. In any case, this is Somerville's second broadsheet since the release of his short-story collection, *Trouble*, but the first since his novel, *The Cradle*, launched into the cultural imagination with coverage in the form of reviews in places as high as the *New York Times Book Review*. Don't let that turn you off, though, Somerville's work is as viscerally humorous and elegantly dramatic as the best out there, as evidenced in this epic story. He lives and writes in Chicago.

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****WRITERS:** send prose submissions (2,500 words or less Web, 5,000 print) to **THE2NDHAND**, c/o Todd Dills, 1430 Roberts Ave., Nashville, TN 37206 (todd@the2ndhand.com) or C.T. Ballentine (email only: ctballentine@gmail.com). **THE2NDHAND** is **editors** Todd Dills, C.T. Ballentine, **FAQ editor** Mickey Hess, and the janitor R. Beady. Literate (and soon-to-be-literate) apes unite.

back to work. The grocery was the job I'd had since the first week I moved to Kaukauna. My manager Kelly Dunn had a black belt in some self-defense bullshit and once, after he'd gotten comfortable with me and felt as though he knew me well, which he did not, he told me a story of going to Milwaukee for a date with a girl he'd gone to high school with who turned out to have become a hooker in the meantime, even though she tried for a lot of the night to cover it up. "Well, I figured it out," he said. (This guy always told stories with his arms crossed, pretty obviously to make his biceps look bigger.) "I could tell something was wrong with her. I said something about work and I started picking her story apart. She pretty much admitted she was a call-girl in the end and she cried and all that. Once I knew that I didn't give that lady the time of day and I drove straight home. Date over. No thank you."

"Was she nice?" I asked.

"Nice?" he said. "Are you not listening? She was a hooker." He said it all solemn and moral, like he'd taught her an important lesson by quitting the date, and he nodded gravely to encourage me to nod gravely as well. I found there to be something legitimately evil about Kelly from then on.

I watched a couple more shows, each a half-hour, and got up to get a new drink. I was aiming to be unconscious by 9:30. I was wobbly when I stood, but I just waited, staring at a crack in the wall to keep oriented until it passed. In the kitchen I pulled out ice and poured my drink. When I stirred, I looked out the window and strained to see the sky and see whether it looked like it would snow again. I prayed to the snow clouds to keep the cops from hearing whispers of my name. I asked them to send the kid back to his college, unhurt, with a story to tell his friends. I told them I was sorry.

When I looked down, my eye caught Mr. Kartalopolous, the next-door neighbor, framed in the window. He was sitting in his living room, right where he always sat, in his big brown recliner. I watched him. Jamie and I used to joke about him. We would invent stories about his perversions. Once, Jamie had this idea that at night, very late, Mr. Kartalopolous pressed a special button on his recliner that helped him perform fellatio on himself by folding into the perfect V shape with the perfect slopes. My joke was how he had granny porn on the TV all day, all night, because he was looking for the long-lost sweetheart who'd left him 65 years ago, not because he liked grannies. It was a lot easier to be serious without Jamie around. From this angle I couldn't see his television, just his side, but I could see the lights from the TV on him. He was a real old guy.

Must have been 85, with a good head of snow-white hair but a mouth that tended to hang open. He never left the house and he was a widower. Jamie and I went and said hello to him when we moved in. She made him some bad cookies. This was back when we were trying to be normal people. I shoveled for him when I could, too—

he never asked, I never discussed it with him.

He had a chessboard on the coffee table in front of him. I always found that pretty interesting. Jamie had a joke about him occasionally putting the pieces up his ass, but for months and months I'd been waiting to see a game going, to see the pieces in different places—maybe a mail game? Maybe a friend who came by? But nothing ever moved. They were always home. And of course now, staring at him, all drugged up and in this newfound serious mode, the question seemed important: Who did he think he was playing against? Who would show up across that table? God? I had learned to play in prison and it had won me cigarettes and toast. I missed it.

I must have looked at him for five minutes, buzzed and floating, thinking that I'd catch him moving a piece now, tonight, and it would be like catching the tooth fairy. "You know what?" I said aloud. I put my pills in my pocket and took my half-bottle of vodka and stuck it under my arm and took my second tray of ice out of the freezer, and with just those things, no jacket or nothing, I went out into the cold, went to the sidewalk, walked 15 feet, turned, went up to his door, and rang the bell.

He opened up right before I turned to go back home.

"Who's that?" he asked, squinting up at me. "Is that Eric McMichael?" He had on his glasses and was wearing a big white cardigan thing. An odor flowed forth from the house. Pipe tobacco and cat piss.

"No," I said. "Not Eric." I had no idea who Eric McMichael was and I wondered if I should have said his last name, too.

"What can I do for you?"

"It's Herb from next door," I said, leaning down, sort of trying to meet him halfway, vertically. I swear he grew a little bit when I did that, too, like me leaning down stretched him.

There was some wind tonight. I probably looked like hell. I was talking too loud. A paranoid old person would have right around now begun to believe a robbery was afoot. I smiled at him with teeth. I next tried to stick my thumb out and jab toward my house, but it turned out to be the hand all wrapped up in the cast, and so it was more of a general gesture that fucking hurt so badly I wanted to cry when I made it.

"Herb?" he said. "From next door?" He squinted more and poked his head out of the door to look at my house. "You live there?" he asked. "That's your house?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "That's my house."

"Is it?" he said shrewdly.

"I rent," I said.

"I know you rent," he said. "I know your landlady. She used to live there but she moved to Kohler, didn't she?"

"You'd probably know better than me." We looked at the house together. "Me and my girlfriend Jamie lived there for most of the last year," I said. "We met you a couple times?"

"I remember," he said. "I remember the awful cookies."

"She wasn't much of a baker."

"I'm not senile," he said. "I remember what happens."

"So I—"

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