

Copperhead

One hot afternoon, the day after my birthday, I was sitting on my mother's porch thumbing through new baseball cards, when the screen door banged open. Out stepped Uncle Ed. He stuck a cigarette in his mouth and struck a match and looked like he was concentrating for a million bucks on the flame that danced on the end of the matchstick. He touched the flame to the cigarette and the flame seemed to bow to him as he sucked in the first lungful. Then a great puff pushed from his nostrils and he threw the match, still burning, into Mother's flower bed. He smoked and stood there staring out for a long time.

When there was barely anything left but the butt, Uncle Ed took one last draw, a big one, and when he'd let out the smoke in a slow, even breath he clapped his hands once, looked over at me and said, "Let's take a ride, boy."

"Where to, Uncle Ed?" I said.

"Into town."

There hadn't been any rain and the road between Mother's house and town was hard and dry. Dust blew in the windows and I pulled my t-shirt collar up over my mouth and nose, but I could still taste the dust—like dirt, like chalk. I swallowed and swallowed again until there was barely any spit left in my mouth and I was dying for a cup of cold water. Or better yet a glass of iced tea with a big lemon wedge. Or even better than that a soda, frothy and fresh pulled, sweet and bitter at the same time. I imagined the way a soda would sting my throat, would ice me down from the inside out. By the time I finally got my mind off it, my tongue had glued itself to the roof of my mouth.

Uncle Ed liked to go fast and he gunned the pickup over rock hard chuckholes. My head clunked the cab's ceiling more than once. I looked over at Uncle Ed after one that I swore should have busted the axels. He went bald early and there was a shine of sweat from the crown of his head down to his eyebrows. He grinned and I knew he was doing it on purpose.

“Rough road, huh boy?” Uncle Ed said.

“Cut it out,” I said.

“Cut it out?” And Uncle Ed grabbed the wheel in both hands and jerked it left and I slammed into the door. Before I could sit back up straight, he jerked it right and I slammed into his big shoulder. When he straightened it out, he looked over at me and laughed his head off. I tried to concentrate on the green roll of hills in the distance.

“You know the difference between a copperhead and a bitty garter snake?” he said.

“I know the difference,” I said.

“What’s the difference?” He said, but I didn’t answer.

“What’s the difference, boy?”

“One’s poison, the other ain’t.”

“That’s right. Which is which?”

“Copperhead’s poison.” Uncle Ed didn’t say anything this time, so I said it again louder. “The copperhead is poison, Uncle Ed.” The wind roared in the window. The engine growled, the chassis creaked and a cinder block thunked in the bed as we zoomed along.

“One you stomp. The other, you just let it slide by,” Uncle Ed said, “Let it go on about its business. But the one you stomp flat. The first time.”

I nodded.

“You hear me, boy?”

“Yessir. I heard.”

About a mile from the middle of town the road turned to asphalt and Uncle Ed slowed down. He drove with his big right hand on the bottom of the wheel, his fat fingers like slugs perched on a tree branch. He hung his left arm out the window and whenever we passed anybody—old ladies squawking by the Methodist church, Danny Gibbons patching up his bike tire—he’d wave and holler, “Howdy-do,” like a goon. Whoever it was would wave back automatically, their foreheads wrinkled up in pure confusion. We drove past the grocery and Sears and turned right on 7th Street.

“We’re going to Mama’s building,” I said.

“Look who knows so much,” Uncle Ed said.

My granddaddy bought a plot of land on the corner of 7th Street and Halter Street a long time ago, long before I was born and the town was still itty bitty. Granddaddy built a big square building on it. When he died a little more than two months ago, Mother inherited it. Red brick with white trim all around the windows, eaves and doorframes. Up top there were a few apartments, little studios that hardly ever got rented out for very long. Mother said Granddaddy would lease them out by the month. But the businesses on the first floor, those he leased out by the year.

But there was only one business going at the time, Spencer’s Barbershop. Uncle Ed stopped across the street from Spencer’s and stared at the place. He put the truck in park and yanked the keys out of the ignition without watching. The keys he shoved deep into his pocket and the way he shifted made the seat springs underneath screech.

“Jealous, Uncle Ed?” I finally said.

He whipped his head around to me and his eyes were wide open and wild. I almost jumped. “What?” he said.

“Nothing,” I said quickly, “Just a dumb joke.”

Another minute, a man came out. His hair was fresh lacquered down and parted straight through the middle. He took the time to light a cigarette, then dropped a beat-up fedora onto his head, put his hands in his pockets and walked away whistling.

“Come on, boy.” Uncle Ed was nearly across the street before I even realized he was out of the truck. I jumped out too, slammed the door and followed. When Uncle Ed walked, the toes of his boots flipped up and out to the sides and his arms, cocked at the elbows almost ninety degrees, swung back and forth and back and forth. He banged Spencer’s door open and the cowbell fixed to the top of the door clanged.

Mr. Spencer was sweeping up when we came in. He’d collected a little pile of brown and silver fresh cut hair in front of the chair. When he heard us come in, he dropped the broom.

“Big Ed,” Mr. Spencer said, “Funny seeing you in a barber shop. Got overcome with envy, did you? Had to see how the well-quaffed live?”

“We come to collect,” Uncle Ed balled up his fists.

Mr. Spencer picked up the broom and rested it against the counter. Then he sat down in his barber chair and crossed his legs. He ran the tip of his index finger over his thin, flat mustache, first one side, then the other. He squinted at Uncle Ed.

“See, I paid the rent this month,” he said.

Uncle Ed didn’t say anything and Mr. Spencer kept talking. “Yep, your sister didn’t tell you? Sure enough, I’m paid up. So, no need to collect on anything. But while you’re here, maybe you want a trim? I can give you half price. If not, turn your ass around and get out of my shop.”

It took Uncle Ed just two steps to get to Mr. Spencer and one swing to topple him from his barber chair onto the floor. Splat, out cold. Uncle Ed started flinging open everything in the barber shop with a hinge or rollers. All the drawers and cabinets under the big mirror. At the far end of the shop, there was a little janitor's closet and Uncle Ed disappeared inside, only to pop out a second later with a fat roll of silver tape.

"Throw that lock. Pull them shades." Uncle Ed's voice was flat and quiet and—what else could I do?—I did what he said.

"Help me, now," he said, "grab his ankles."

Uncle Ed hoisted Mr. Spencer by the shoulders back up into his barber chair. I steered Mr. Spencer's lower half and set his shoes on the footrest. Uncle Ed peeled back a flap of tape from the roll and stuck the flap to Mr. Spencer's throat. He wrapped the tape around and around Mr. Spencer's neck and the head rest together, over and over again, twenty times, maybe thirty. When he was done, it looked like Mr. Spencer was wearing an enormous dog collar. He did the same to Mr. Spencer's arms at the wrists and elbows, taping them down to the chair's armrests and finally, to his ankles and the footrest.

"Let's wake him up now, what do you say, boy?" Uncle Ed said but Mr. Spencer had already woken up. He moaned, a low little hum that tumbled out through his lips and pushed a droplet of blood out ahead of it. I watched it drip down his chin.

"Well, look there," Uncle Ed said to me, and then to Mr. Spencer, "I feel bad for barbers. The whole lot of you. You spend all day trimming and shaving people, one after another, one after another. But when do you all have time for a trim or a shave? And who does it?"

I watched Mr. Spencer squirm against the tape, his entire body as best he could in the groggy stupor Uncle Ed had put him in. I watched Uncle Ed reach for Mr. Spencer's straight

razor, watched him unfold it. The blade shined and Mr. Spencer, the second he saw it, woke all the way up and screamed.

“You keep your blades pretty sharp, do you Spencer?” Uncle Ed said.

“You stop it right now, Ed. You knock it off.” And then, “Put it up, Ed. I have the money. I'll hand it over right now.”

“I don't like liars.” Uncle Ed said.

“Put up the razor, Ed. Go on. I'll hand over the rent. I'll hand over twice the rent.” Mr. Spencer was panting.

"Where's the money?"

"In the safe, in the safe."

“Where's the safe?”

Mr. Spencer said where it was—in the same closet where Uncle Ed found the tape—and hollered out the combination once and then again when Uncle Ed couldn't get it opened the first time. After he finally got it to spring, Uncle Ed stepped out of the little closet with a wad of bills, snapped off a few and stuffed them into his pocket. Then he said, “Spencer, did you say you'd go ahead and pay next month's rent too?”

“Yes, I did. I did.”

Uncle Ed snapped off a few more bills and shoved them into his pocket.

“What about the month after that?”

“What? Yes, yes, the month after that too.”

“Good.” And he snapped off another few bills and into his pocket they went.

He dropped the rest of the money on the floor. Then he waved the razor in front of Mr. Spencer's face and Mr. Spencer tried like hell to keep from whining, but he couldn't do it. The terror inside

him came pouring out in hoarse pleadings for his life and his business and for the sake of God. I remember feeling bad for him, but at the same time, repulsed. The same way I felt about worms on a fishing hook. Finally, Uncle Ed said, “What good would cutting your throat do, Spencer? If you wasn't around, who'd pay the rent?”

I watched Uncle Ed reach into Mr. Spencer's hair, slick with pomade, grab a fist full of it and yank it straight up. “You could sure use a haircut though,” Uncle Ed said.

He pulled up so hard it pulled Mr. Spencer's right eyebrow up too. In spite of how he hollered and thrashed against the tape, with that eyebrow arched up the way it was, it looked like Mr. Spencer might have a question.

Uncle Ed took the straight razor and sawed into Mr. Spencer's forehead, just below the hairline. A slice about two inches long, maybe two and a half, just above the right eye. I watched Uncle Ed dig his fingers into the slice up to his first knuckle. He grabbed ahold, gave what he'd grabbed a hard, sudden jerk backward and tore off a big piece of the crown of Mr. Spencer's head. It sounded like a zipper. I saw a peek of white through the hole, but it wasn't white long. The blood poured down Mr. Spencer's cheeks and jaw and the tape around his neck, down into his shirt until his shirt was sopping. This took all of two seconds, maybe three.

“Let's go, boy.” Uncle Ed tossed the razor onto the counter and bolted to the door. I couldn't move. “Now,” Uncle Ed hollered. My knees unlocked and I followed. But Uncle Ed stopped and turned back to Mr. Spencer.

“Spencer,” Uncle Ed said, “I'll leave this here. Might help you to remember what's due and when.” Uncle Ed plastered the piece of Mr. Spencer's scalp to the wall directly across the room from Mr. Spencer in his barber chair.

We dashed back to the truck, me lagging behind with concrete legs and Uncle Ed lumbering ahead as fast as I've ever seen him move. Before I knew it, we were out of town again, headed back the way we came, back down the dirt road to Mother's house. Uncle Ed's hands were bloody to the wrists and he left streaks on everything he touched—a hysterical red that faded to plain old brown as the wind through the windows dried it. Uncle Ed kept laughing, one long roll of belly laughter after another. He tried to stop himself once or twice and it was almost like something unseen had ordered him to stop. But eventually he'd snort and the laughter would boil out of him all over again.

He looked at me once and I could tell he was trying to say my name, but he couldn't get it out for the laughing. I saw his mouth turn into a garish cave. I saw it widen and widen before my eyes and the sound of that laughing got rawer by the second. Until all that filled my ears were Uncle Eds' screeches, something like the call of crows, but thousands at once and all in perfect time. I sat hypnotized, thoroughly rigid in the front seat of his truck. I didn't get out when we got home to Mother's house and I wouldn't come in when she called me for supper.