

The Natural Order of Things

Randy - age twelve, a husky boy with blond, overgrown curls and a wardrobe of grass-stained, dirt-ridden, hole-laden clothes - meanders down the street toward the fenced off creek that lays between two neighboring houses. He climbs around the fence and sneaks toward the water. Slumped onto a damp rock, he unties his shoes, a set of black leather boots too hot for this weather, and shoves his socks into the shoes. He wiggles his toes into the mud and moss. A large tree branch rests to his right; he grips his fingers around the branch and thrusts it up like a sword. Gaining momentum he jumps from his stoop and swats the trees around him. Each thump startles another set of birds who flee their resting places. He lunges into the water and splashes the cold creek up under his shorts. He takes the branch and plows it through the sedentary water blasting it around him.

“You can’t be down there, boy, hey!” Randy looks up to see Mrs. Cook, who’s holding her yippy Maltese, at the tree line of her yard.

“Says who? *You?* You and that yippy, little *bitch?*”

“I’m no bitch, mister. Watch your mouth. You need a bar of soap shoved into that filthy trap of yours. That’s what you need.”

Randy takes to hitting the trees again to drown her rant. She stomps back into the house as the dog barks. He hears the slam of her door and this time it’s Mr. Cook and he’s holding his Pellet gun, typically used to shoot at squirrels or skunks or other pesky interlopers. He takes aim at Randy who grabs for his shoes and runs up the other side of the creek, around the fence and back onto the hot sidewalk. The pavement burns at his heels and he swears a ‘wash-my-mouth-out-with-this’ string of words before he feels safe enough to pause and cover his feet.

He considers the summer sun in his respite and wishes his mom had bought him the pool pass he asked for at the beginning of summer. She sat on the couch - her throne - and talked at him. A voice not quite a yell but louder than conversational tone. "Maybe, *maybe*, if you don't get expelled from the next school district, you could have a damn pool pass. But I don't know, Randy, you wanna make dumb choices, don't you?"

He thinks now to himself how he was only expelled because of Tim - the one who convinced him to throw the cherry bomb in the bathroom. He said they'd get out of the science test. And the time before that? "Shit," he says out loud then back in his thoughts: I didn't wanna fight Cody but he mouthed at me. Everyone everywhere is against me. Everyone everywhere wants to see me gone. Screw them. Screw this town.

The heat hits Sara in the face - it feels otherworldly to her - a stark contrast from the air-conditioned environment. She swats at the humidity and blows her bangs off her forehead. The thick bookbag causes her back to sweat. Sara's mom works as a 'literary liaison' - a volunteer job - who attempts to bring literature to a variety of readers: kids unable to afford books; kids who read under grade level; adults who read under grade level; senior citizens who can't get to the library; basically any human being who needs a book. But because this is a volunteer position on top of her already full-time position, Sara delivers the books.

The first stop, thankfully, is Mr. Katz. Not too far from the house. She hopes she won't see any kids from school, especially someone like Audrey Sageworth, the girl who sat beside Sara in math and whispered rumors that Sara liked Randy and *that's* why she did his math homework. When it was her birthday last month, Audrey's mom ordered a limousine for

Audrey's closest allies to ride through town - Sara, naturally, had not been invited. She watched from the window as the car stretched like black silly putty across the road.

She crosses the street and walks up Mr. Katz's driveway. She watches him struggle with the door. He's a skinny, older man. Frail, she thinks. His pug, O'Henry, grunts and snorts at his ankles.

"I have a book for you, Mr. Katz."

"Yes. I gathered that much. Tell your mom hello for me, now."

"Um, Mr. Katz?" But before Sara can explain that O'Henry has pushed through his legs and onto the front stoop, the dog bites Sara's lower calf. The skin blushes purple around the broken skin, which reveals red droplets. Sara crouches in pain and investigates the damage. Mr. Katz hobbles around her as he chases the dog. He manages to shoo O'Henry inside, grab the book from her hand and shut his front door without so much as offering the girl an apology.

"Randy? That you?"

His shoes thud onto the hardwood floor. An odor of woody creek entwined with sweat escapes as he peels off his socks. The smell wafts into the darkness. Heavy makeshift curtains cover each window and prevent natural light from entering. He walks from the front door through the narrow hallway that leads to the kitchen. To the left he notices Donna, his mom's friend, lounging on the sofa. She waves at him, but she appears in another realm shrouded in the darkness.

"Mom, why the christ is Donna here?"

“Randy, where are your manners?” His mom - a tight braid fitted on her head and hanging down half her back - scurries around the kitchen looking for something. Heaps of mess cover the counters and the rickety table, a pick-up they scored on trash day years ago.

“Yea, whatever.” He thrusts into the fridge to scrounge for food, and his mom continues to talk-yell at him. The words come at him - a fast barrage - but he only hears her say he has to watch his younger brothers.

“Like hell I do.” He jolt at attention, the fridge open behind him.

“Oh, is that right? You in charge now, eh?” She pushes her chest up toward him. A sign of intimidation. “And shut that fridge door.”

She grabs at a mangy black leather purse and mashes into it a folded-up paper. She turns from the kitchen, collects Donna and yells some type of instructions to Randy. The front door slams. Randy pictures his father. The man towered over all of them, lording the space. They idolized him despite an ignored truth of him. He calls to mind the time they went for ice cream, just the two of them. They sat beside the parlor on a small hill facing a side street. Their chocolate-vanilla swirls of ice cream dripping down their cones and onto their fingers. Smoke and mirrors, Randy thinks now. A sleight of hand that misguided him and his brothers from the destruction inside of their home. But a pretend family was better than no family. Now his mom spends her days in between outings with Donna and her two part time jobs.

His three siblings yell a rainbow of slurs at each other as smacks of skin and responses of ‘ouchhhh’ filter into the kitchen from a back bedroom. Screw this, he thinks again. He sulks away from the Fight Club raucous toward the front of the house to a twin set of windows facing the front street. Someone once hung a sheet as mock curtains, and he brushes it aside. He spots Sara Brownstein from Lincoln. He remembers her tenth birthday party from two years prior. She

invited the entire class of students, even the teacher. Her parents decorated the yard with streamers of lively colors and hired a pony to give the kids rides around the yard. Randy pestered the pony on his turn: sticking his fingers into its ears, tugging on its mane, digging his heels into its sides. Small tricks, Randy thought, but her parents made him dismount the horse. He felt humiliated. Right in the middle of his turn with a line of kids waiting and staring at him. He fumbled off the beast and shouted at the party, “I don’t wanna ride on your stupid pony, anyway” and kicked the pony once more. The poor mule whinnied and its trainer held it back from a stronger response. The kids averted their eyes and Randy walked out of her backyard and out of the party.

He watched the other kids, though. He sauntered through backyards and found a tree to climb. He sat and watched as Sara’s dad hung the pinata and each kid had a turn to smack the colorful, twirling unicorn until a barrage of candy exploded from its innards. I’d’ve knocked that sissy unicorn down on the first try, he thought. He sucked on sunflower seeds and spit the excess from the tree until its owner spotted him and shooed him away.

“Mom said you’d be officer.”

Randy turns his head to find a half naked kid, his seven-year-old brother, with a red slit of open skin down his chest. “Piss off, Clark. Do I look like I wanna be goddamn officer?”

“We need a ruling. Only officer can rule. Shit, Randy, c’mon. Mom said you’d be-” One of Randy’s shoes clunks against Clark. “Officer can’t play! Damn, Randy, you suck.” The kid relinquishes to the back room.

Randy slinks down the hallway and into his mom’s bedroom. He searches through his mom’s dresser drawers and jewelry boxes for money. Wedged in the harsh assembly of costume jewelry is his mom’s wedding ring. I thought she pawned this, he thinks. Surrounded in his

pudgy fingers, the ring looks no bigger than a button. He scrutinizes the diamond and weighs its worth before he pushes it into an abyss of sequins. Crumbled ones, sprawling quarters and dimes jiggle in his folded hands.

He spills from the house and onto the front stoop. The yard pushes up dandelions and other weeds into chaotic disorder. The neighbor's finely cut yard, he notices as he dials the number for Speedy Pizza, has no sprawling trespassers. He assumes his mom forgot to tell him to mow the yard but knows he's not mowing without a request.

Sara approaches the next house on her list. She hears the argument and checks the paper against the house number: 2121 Edgeview. She checks again hoping she's made a mistake. Randy's house? She catches the gist of their dispute: Randy had handed the guy loose change that spilled throughout the grass and he demanded Randy pick it up and Randy demanded the pizza guy piss off. Sara stands in horror as the scene unfolds. Her nerves vibrate. Altercations cause her severe discomfort. Finally the delivery guy surrenders. Randy's eyes follow him to his car and realizes she's been standing there.

“Well fucking fantastic. Little Sara Brownstein, my math tutor.”

She wants to ask about the pizza guy - did he need to borrow money or something, but she hesitates afraid to offend him, even though she shouldn't be afraid to offend him because he's been bullying her for years. She unzips her bag; the sun beats against the black nylon and the metal zipper-pull scorches her fingers in the same way the injury on her calf pulsates heat.

“I have a book for Clark. Mom says he's in the program.”

“He ain't in no program.”

“With the library.”

“We don’t go to the library.”

“Right. I’m the library coming to you.”

“Okay, well, I’ll take your dumb book but Clark can’t read.” She extends her arm to hand the hardcover version of *The Giving Tree* to Randy. “*Giving Tree*?” He says incredulously. “All a tree ever gave me was a pain in the ass. You see this tree?” He points to a sugar maple on the front lawn, “I had to rake every one of its damn leaves last fall and likely I would again this fall but betcha Clark has to do it on account of my leaving, so really, Sara Brownstein, he ain’t got no time to be reading about a tree when he’s working under a tree.”

When she doesn’t respond Randy continues, “Anyway, like I said, I won’t be here.”

She knows he’s baiting her, but she plays along and asks why not.

“Well, Sara Brownstein, the school don’t want me back so mom’s sending me to the Bernadette district. My uncle has a house there and I’ll stay with him. Whatever, no big deal.”

“Oh.”

“Right, yeah, I’m sure you’re, like, crushed to see me go, huh?” He returns to the stoop with the box and chooses a slice. He nearly shoves the piece into his mouth and continues talking, “I get it. You’re just like everyone else in this town.” Sara watches red sauces squirt between his teeth. He swallows a massive lump and chugs from a two-liter. He belches and Sara puts her hand over her nose.

“I...Randy, maybe you’ll like it there.”

“Whatever. You can go if you want. I’ll give the book to Clark, but he ain’t gonna read the damn thing.”

“Okay, well, do you have any returns for the library? I can take the returns, too.”

He has a second piece wrapped around his tongue. He wiggles his head to indicate ‘no’.

“Okay, no problem. Well, I do have other stops, so I guess I’ll go.”

She turns to leave and Randy eyes the welt on her calf. “Whoa, gnarly gash there.”

“Oh,” she blushes and cranes her neck to inspect the soreness. “Yeah, just happened. Mr. Katz’s dog.”

“Holy shit. You know you can have the dog snatcher take that thing away for something like that.”

“No. No, I didn’t know that. But anyway, the dog’s ancient. He didn’t know better - I don’t think he can even see anymore.”

“Yea, well, more reason to send the pain in the ass away, if you ask me.”

“But Randy, they *kill* dogs at the pound.” She eyes him suspiciously. An image of O’Henry lifeless on a cold, concrete floor flashes in her head.

“Like, they strangle them?”

“Like, no - but, *jeaze*, Randy! They have medicine - an injection - it’s all sterile - ” Randy’s face goes blank like he’s fixated on a daydream.

“Hey, do you have a pool pass?”

“No, Randy, I don’t like the pool.”

“No?” Randy’s eyes widen and Sara thinks they may roll right from their sockets and onto the pavement like marbles. “Man, that’s bogus. I love the pool.”

“Yea, well, you wouldn’t catch me *dead* in a public pool - too many germs. Too many people. Anyway, you don’t have to have a pass to go. Anyone who lives in the city can pay two dollars to enter.”

“You’re shittin’ me.” Sara shuffles her feet and looks toward the sun in response. “Well, no shit. I’m gonna grab my suit. You wanna go?”

“No, no I have these deliveries and like I said - ”

“Right, right...no pool. Okay, your funeral. But hey, I get those kinda bruises all the time playin’ paintball.” He points toward her leg and she notices a mixture of dirt and pizza sauce on his fingers. “Try some ice. See ya later, Sara Brownstein.”

Sara watches him hop into the house. The empty pizza box and half empty Mellow-Delight stay on the stoop. A sparkle of silver grabs her attention: a quarter tucked into the grass likely intended for the pizza guy.

That evening Sara peers through the window and squints against the six o’clock sun. She sees Mr. Katz from his porch. He calls her mother over and she ambles up his driveway. He waves frantically and nearly falls from the cement block and onto the geraniums. Likely to apologize about my leg before mom sees it for herself. She watches their body language: Mr. Katz like a windmill and mom with her arms crossed, mouth agape, a militant fold in her brow. She turns toward home with fists at her side. The front door flings open.

“Sara! Sara Elizabeth, what happened with Mr. Katz’s delivery this afternoon? Did you encourage it to bite you? He’s a raving nutcase right now, Sara. We’re long term friends. Members of the community. He thinks you’re a ‘dog ageist’. That’s what he said, ‘dog ageist’. Is that a thing? Are you a dog ageist?”

Now Sara flips through the phone book under the A section. Animal Control. She uses a pencil to circle the phone number connected to her city. She picks up the phone and dials the number. With each ring her heart pumps a little harder and she again imagines a dead O’Henry with a contorted neck, its tongue lolled from its mouth - a pink geranium stuck to it.

She hangs up as soon as someone picks up on the other end.

“Mom,” she yells down the hallway. Her voice travels over the white carpet and photos of distant relatives. “Mom, I’m going out. Just a walk.”

Her mom, surprised to see Sara’s face removed from a book, yells to her, “Stay away from Katz’s dog!” Sara gives a ‘no problem’ type of wave through the front window.

At Randy’s house a skinny, little boy tells her he’s not home.

“Oh, right, yeah, he told me he might go to the pool, but even so, he said I could borrow his paint gun?”

The boy looks skeptical. “You a friend of Randy’s?”

“Yeah - well, kind of - I’m his math tutor?” Sara hears her voice waver and thinks she should just turn around and leave. Go home before anyone gets hurt.

“Whatever - but I don’t know where he keeps the dang thing. You can go have a look. Room’s back there to the right.”

Sara teeters into the house. The room appears muddled. The entire situation feels wrong and she wishes she wouldn’t have come but now she’s here and it would be even weirder if she just left.

Randy’s room smells worse than the smoky living room. She checks in the obvious places she considers a boy would store his gun, but she realizes she isn’t really sure what she’s looking for. She’s never seen a paintball gun. In a rickety desk cabinet she spies a piece of black machinery. Rolling around the desk surface are colored gumballs - she picks them up to examine and realizes they aren’t gum. She shovels the colored balls into her pockets and takes the gun. She shuffles from the room to the hallway, passes the empty living room, exits the house and exhales.

Dusk approaches. The impending darkness of night teeters in the near distance while the sun hangs at the edge of their city unwilling to drop. Vulnerability creeps against her skin. She imagines faces behind each window of each house transfixed on her. A myriad of eyes attuned to her ill-will. The paintball gun hangs at her side and knocks against her leg. She ducks around the back of Randy's house and hides within overgrown bushes.

The barrel feels smooth in her hands. She feels it in awe. It's not a real gun, she reminds herself, but an obscure feeling of power permeates from its presence. She rubs her fingers over its intricacies. The grooves of the machine ripple under her fingertips. She discovers where the paintballs go and realizes this is why the gun bears its name - she had pictured blue splattered paint on Randy when he mentioned the bruises, but hadn't pictured how it would have fired at him. She loads balls of different colors. The initial excitement begins to wear and she thinks, what next? Looking around through peepholes of the pine-tree bushes, she realizes she can see Mr. Katz's backyard. With a slam of a back door, O'Henry tumbles into Mr. Katz's yard.

The next day Sara peeks around the curtains, dust teasing her nose, and watches across the street. At a quarter to ten she hears Mr. Katz's car door. He carries O'Henry, who might have an eye patch covering an eye, but she can't be certain. White gauze wraps his frail head. Mr. Katz and O'Henry go inside and Sara stares at his door until it reopens and the two storm toward her house. She knows she can't hide. She knows *he* knows she's there.

She tugs at the door, swollen from the heat. The whoosh and release of the door is met with a hasty accusation.

"Listen you little brat. O'Henry is blind in his eye. Not just aging-blind, but left-without-an-eyeball-blind." Sara looks to O'Henry's pathetic dog face. The one eye blinks

repeatedly unsure of its focus. She notices flakes of pink on his fur. She thinks she should pet him. She draws her arm up, a slight tremble in her fingers, but pulls it down as soon as Mr. Katz yells again, “You did this. Why’d you do it, huh? Why? He’s just an innocent dog!”

Sara strains herself not to correct Mr. Katz: that dog is *not* innocent. That dog is a mean, old, confused beast who bit her leg (and the bruise looks worse today). And, moreover, Mr. Katz is a mean, old man to blame her for doing it.

“Look, Mr. Katz. I’m sorry about your dog. This whole situation,” she waves her hand in a circle over the dog’s face, “is an obvious nightmare. But I didn’t hurt your dog. You can’t blame me for this.” Her mind and heart rate speed up simultaneously as she understands what to do. The girl with Honor Roll, a student council position, first chair for the clarinet section is not a girl who shoots at dogs with paintball guns. “I promise it wasn’t me, Mr. Katz.” Her voice sweetens like cool lemonade on a hot summer day, “But...I bet I know who *did* do it.” She thinks of him behind her in math class poking her with his chubby finger, then poking her with his pencil, and suddenly poking her with the sharp tip of his compass. “Honestly, Mr. Katz, there’s only one kid in this neighborhood who pesters you and O’Henry. And it isn’t me.” She watches his face. His furry eyebrows crinkle before a moment of enlightenment alters his expression.

When a kid like Randy manages to gain a reputation that forces the town to idolize him as the bad guy - the one with no real future, no real goals - it’s easy for him to play the scapegoat, she thinks, only a flicker of guilt in her stomach as she watches Mr. Katz barrel from her house in search of Randy. She turns from the window and surveys her surroundings. She compares the order of her house to the disorder of Randy’s. Her life against his life, and she feels satisfaction in her decision. That in blaming Randy she has simply adhered to the natural order of things.

