

## THE WINNER

Henry Smith is watching me. His eyes are emerald searchlights. There's no escape for me, as he bounds toward me like a kangaroo, defending its territory. No escape. But do I want there to be? The circle of bodies wreathed in smoke is a blur to me. Blackness beyond. The crackling fire at the center keeps me alert to its flames. But Henry is my pinpoint of gravity, around which all else swirls.

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I sit on the edge of the bench, crowded between bodies, watching the competitions--glad that I'm safely out of them. Muscle against muscle, balance against balance, skill against skill. The male myth of aggression and dominance. Why don't I need to lean on that?

Across from me, Henry Smith stands.

"I challenge woodcrafter Green to a chicken fight," he says in even tones.

Oh no! A cold dread engulfs me.

Henry stands unflinchingly. He gives off an aura of nothing-to-hide, while I cower with all my little secrets. But I have no choice. I must squeeze between the seated bodies and step onto the grassy dirt. There, I am exposed to the view of all--even in the dim light of the campfire. I face Henry in the flickering shadows,

which mottle and shield his gangly erect body.

He's awfully skinny, I note. He can't be very strong. We are both sixteen. The campers watching us range the gamut from six to eighteen. There are several adult counselors. Two of them step forward, double and tie each of our left legs with sturdy cord, leaving us to balance on our rights. They tell us, though we already know, that the object is to try to knock each other over. The one remaining upright on one foot will be the winner. We are allowed three tries. Then our hands are bound behind us. Like animals for the slaughter, I reflect. Am I imagining it or is Henry enjoying this? He seems to be smiling.

I try to find his eyes.

"You'll probably win," I say, "because my balance is poor."

His eyes become clear. They blaze with disbelief. Before I can register our intercommunication, a counselor barks, "One, two three, go!"

Henry is hopping toward me. I have no choice. In a minute he will knock me over. I steel my body for the onslaught. He barges into me. I manage to maintain my balance, though everything is becoming more of a blur. Voices are shouting, mingling, echoing..."Come on, Henry!" "Come on, Godfrey!" He's coming again! I try to bump him. His bump is stronger. We retreat and collide several times. Finally, I go down--fast. I take my time arising. (Is it trust? I guess so.) He's waiting for me patiently. Just like Henry! Always ram-rod straight. Fair as a summer's breeze. He's watching me. There's no escape for me. Watching me-

-Henry's handsome face, dark blond, neatly trimmed hair, eyes candid--devoid of judgement--patient, with just a touch of ruthlessness, eyebrows arched and bold. Henry, who always helped old ladies cross the street.

It comes back to me. Henry must have been eight at the time. A group of us kids were playing on the road. After a while we got bored and looked around for something to do. "Why don't we rake up old man Solomon's leaves and clean up his yard," suggested one of us, pointing to the mess in a nearby yard. After all, he's old and has arthritis. We agreed and set to work. One of us even borrowed a lawn mower. By the time we finished, everything was in shape. The others left, but I was tired and looked for shade. I found it in the space under the branches, next to the trunk of the great fir tree at the edge of the yard. There I was sheltered and completely hidden, but able to see through the branches. Soon after the others left, Henry arrived, searching for companionship. He took hold of the lawn mower, which they had forgotten and scooted it around, just for the hell of it. After a while, the old man approached. Seeing the work all done and Henry standing there holding the mower, he said, "Say, did you...?" Henry just looked at him with his handsome eyes. "Say," continued the old man, "That was a mighty fine thing to do. You know it's so hard for me. You're a fine lad."

"Thank you," said Henry, without batting an eye.

"And I want to give you something. Now don't protest," he said, as Henry started to object. So Henry took the bill handed to him and thanked the old man

profusely. "Forget it," said the man as he went inside.

And there stood the little blond boy, gloating over the reward he hadn't earned.

I'm irritated. After all, he knocked me down! He looks so clean and unbothered, his white t-shirt hugging his spare torso. His legs are also skinny, though I know he's a swift runner.

"Ready! Go!" the counselor sings out.

Henry moves away, to the side, then after putting me off guard, cleverly surprises me. He's almost on top of me! Yes, that competitive ruthlessness, bred into all boys. he's been touched by it: the myth of the supposed fearless male animal. Fearless, though tamed. A trace of the hunter's lust--the warrior's cruelty. I know I've seen that blood-and-guts Henry before. I try to place it. Yes, a couple of the boys had caught these little red lizards by the river and were playing with them, pleased that the little things were so tame. Laughing, Henry shouted, "Look!" and he ripped open the jaw of the lizard he was holding and threw it into the river. I shuddered and turned away, as it swirled in the current.

Yes, I say. Henry is not really that good and fine. So, why shouldn't I fight? Maybe...maybe I can win.

He's into me. I'm trying to butt him. I'm trying in earnest now...I'm really at it! I'm...on the ground again. There are groans and cheers from the spectators. I'm slower to rise this time. Let him wait, I say. Let them all wait! It's warmer on the ground, anyway--the heat from the fire. I'm bushed. Henry, so lank and lean,

doesn't even look tired. His body exudes energy.

Finally, I'm up. We come close once more. He isn't even sweating. If only I could break through that total command--that unperturbed demeanor. If only I could make him sweat! Make him work to defeat me! Knock his block off, to be precise.

I determine to get him this time, balance or no balance. (I'm taller, I say.) Everything seems brighter. Don't I detect a slyness in Henry's bearing--even in his beautiful eyes? His lips are moving. I strain to catch the words: "Now...show...me...your... guts!" The circle is closing in on me. The voices are getting louder. My throat is dry from the fire's smoke. We stalk each other. Henry's eyes glisten with the thrill of the kill as he nears me. Now I can see everything. His face is shiny. Must be sweat. Yes, I can smell the sweat, the smoke, the trees--all mingled...then we're both butting like crazy.

I stumble, reel precariously, manage to bump him. Then, with the force of my movement, I lose balance completely and tumble all the way to the ground. But I have pushed him off balance, also, and he falls after me.

We both get up and brush off the dirt. He is announced winner because I hit the ground first. The lead counselor raises Henry's hand high and a great cheer goes up.

When it subsides, Henry walks over to me--the same tall, proud, unperturbed Henry. He holds out his hand. "Good fight," he exclaims, as he

shakes mine. He looks me steadily in the eye. "Now I've seen your guts," he says quietly. He casually ambles back to his seat.

Yes, Henry will always be a winner.

