

Blade of Grass

Little Ned Dirby finds it strange that he is now nine, after having gone to sleep at 8:56 p.m. Wednesday at the age of eight and waking at 6:32 a.m. Thursday a year older. The seasons will eventually do the same thing, with their jarring cycle of fall, winter, spring, summer, but for now it is still late afternoon on an early August day, and Ned is not yet in school. The grass outside the house has turned the color of straw and feels sharp as he lies in it.

His mom is inside making the cake. He can see her through the open kitchen window, hair done up in a bun, arms at work on something below his line of sight. Every once in a while she pauses and peers out at him. It always seems as if she is about to call out to him or wave to summon him over to see the result, the glorious chocolate frosting over chocolate cake with chocolate sprinkles he has asked for, but alas.

So Ned acts like his attention is fully on the dandelion puffed up like a round cotton swab a few paces away, too far to exert the motion of rising to pick it and scatter its seeds to the wind, to pretend they are paratroopers on an important mission venturing into hostile territory.

Besides, he already gets one wish today and birthday wishes trump dandelion wishes anyway. Dandelion wishes are everyday things, found between cracks in the sidewalk or along the fence lines of neighborhood houses. Anyone can go and pluck one up at any moment and cash in their wish but Ned is the only one he knows who has his birthday today. So his wish has to count for more.

Back in Late July, no more than two weeks ago really, Ned and Ollie Dreyfus from down the street had gotten into an argument over the ownership of a baseball they'd found unattended in the park. Well, Ollie had found it but Ned had wanted to take it with him. The other kids

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would probably like to play a few games with it. He thought they might even let him be a team captain. There was no way they'd ever give Ollie that honor, or really even let him play, so what use was it to him. The only shot he had was if Ned vouched for him.

"It's almost my birthday," Ned said.

"Yeah?" Ollie didn't seem to hear. He held the ball with his back turned while Ned tried to peek over his shoulder. "It belongs to somebody."

"Sure does," he tried to grab at it. "To us."

"They might come looking."

Ned looked up at the sky with satisfaction as pink crept further from its corners. "It'll be dark soon. They're not coming back."

Ollie seemed to be weighing the toy in his hand. "They might come first thing tomorrow."

"They might not," Ned was getting frustrated. "The weather lady on the TV said it might rain."

Ollie looked over at a couple of picnic tables beneath a protective awning. "We could leave it under there."

"Look, Ollie, I get it, but we're here now. You know how it works."

"Finders keepers?" Ollie sounded like he wanted to spit those words out of his mouth like a glob of snot.

"That's right," Ned said. "Now hand it over."

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Ollie dropped the ball back into the grass and turned to face Ned. His forehead had sweat on it that made it look like it was already raining. His cheeks burned red, bright red like they had been painted on. Looking down Ned noticed that both Ollie's arms were trembling slightly, his hands rolled into loose, doughy balls.

This didn't worry Ned. Ollie may have been two inches taller and ten pounds heavier, but he was also the biggest wuss Ned had ever met. Even their teacher Mr. Kensington had laughed when Ollie screamed after Diana Warren showed them all her pet garter snake in class. He didn't like snakes apparently. Or dogs or cows or people really.

"Pick it up, Ollie. Give it here." He said it like he thought Mr. Kensington would, with the same strength in his words, the kind of authority that usually got Ollie snapping stiff as a board. Ned stepped forward, hand extended, but Ollie didn't even look for the ball he had dropped. Instead, he pushed Ned back the step he'd taken and then some, seeing as Ned hadn't been expecting it, so that he slid a bit in the grass and almost fell.

What followed next sent Ollie rushing screaming away and left Ned all alone in the park looking half dazed at his surroundings. He tried stumbling around a bit, eyes all puffy and tearing up like he was having a sudden allergic reaction.

At the perimeter of the park his hand started throbbing, and it seemed like it could be another symptom, but he didn't look down to check it. It would be swollen, he was sure, but Ned was more concerned with seeing Ollie's blood on his knuckles.

And it was then that Ned realized what he had done and that it was too late to do anything about it. The way Ollie had breathed with that first intake as his nose cracked sideways, the

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sound of all that thick, thick blood being sucked inward as if through a straw that had been irreparably kinked.

Ollie would run through the neighborhood crying and choking and dribbling blood all the way home. And his mother would see him right away and shriek and then rush him into the bathroom where she'd try to stem the flow with cotton swabs or something. As she's doing this she would ask repeatedly how did this happen, how did this happen. And the first few times in her distress she would not hear his reply, but later she would and she would know.

And by this time Ned would be back at home, sitting in the kitchen with his mom, watching her as she pops a roast into the oven and wringing his hands as his dad walks through the door just as the phone starts ringing. Soon his dad would know. And then his mom. Then the whole world would condense to a singleness of knowing truly what he had done.

On his way home, Ned contemplated various scenarios that all seemed to amount to him running away, even as he continued, foot by agonizing foot in the same direction. And along the way he stopped where he found a full dandelion growing out of the sidewalk.

Plucking it up he pressed it gently against his lips and whispered, "Make it go away. Make it disappear." Then he blew with all his might and tossed the bare stem into the middle of the street.

That evening he got home just as his mom had popped the roast in, and he sat with her while it cooked, as he'd expected he would, waiting as the kitchen timer ticked down the minutes. His dad eventually arrived and the three of them sat down for a quiet dinner. The usual sort of dinnertime questions arose, but he deflected these how was your days and what did you dos with a few grunts and shrugs. And later after he had watched the television for a couple of

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hours he had gone to bed and at some point fell into a dreamless sleep that allowed no suffering and no healing.

Ned wasn't sure when it was the next the day that he learned what had happened to Ollie. But the other boy had never made it home, had instead found himself careening into the bumper of a passing Mercedes. In an instant it all went away.

Now Ned needs to believe that his birthday wish is more powerful than his last. Lying in the grass, with blades stabbing in him, he glances over to see if his mom has finally finished the cake and is met with an empty kitchen window. He rises, brushes himself off, counts the steps it takes him to get to the back door. The grass grits like sandpaper as he walks, so it almost comes as a shock when he reaches the concrete patio, the sheer quiet of it.

Sliding open the screen door and then shutting it once he's on the other side, he surveys the empty living room. Over the mantle is a picture of him and Ollie dressed in costumes from the second grade play, Ollie is a woodpecker and he has his wing draped over Ned's shoulder. Ned played the lumber jack who was sent to chop down the woodpecker's forest home, but then ends up having a change of heart after singing and dancing with all the forest creatures. He has his prop ax held on his other shoulder, the tool resting there benignly as the two boys smile wide for the camera.

The picture is a recent addition, pulled out of storage and framed in the aftermath of the mourning. Many other parents had done the same with their children's shared pictures with Ollie. All of a sudden everybody seemed to realize that they sort of knew this kid, that he had been in their children's classes, had played on the same teams. But nobody really had known him, at

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least not the way they'd used to. He'd fallen out of most everyone's lives in the past year or two. Only Ned really saw him anymore outside of school, his old friend now a strange boy turned into fresh bully bait.

Partly by coincidence Ned had been on his way to the park at the same time as Ollie. They had walked there together, but really had had no intention of remaining together once they had arrived. Ollie was a wuss, and Ned wasn't. Plain and simple. They didn't play together anymore.

Not a single word was uttered between them until the park. Ned had gone over to the basketball courts to watch some of the older boys play a pickup game. Every once in a while he'd look past the closeness of the jostling bodies and dribbling ball to the open grass field where Ollie walked. That's all he did, just walked back and forth along the length of the park, hands behind his back, legs kept oddly straight so that each step was long and exaggerated, head down so he could watch himself be ridiculous and maybe take some pleasure in being in full control of the spectacle for once.

As the other boys began packing up, Ned had looked over again to see where Ollie had gotten with his strut. The boy had stopped in the middle of the grass and was just bending over to retrieve something.

Ned hears the sound of voices in the dining room, so walks that way, sure they've probably been wondering why he's been standing in the living room. Before the doorway he can

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distinguish two voices, one being his mom's, the other being less certain. Stomping his feet extra loud, he makes sure they know he's coming.

His mom is sitting at the table with an older man. He has a thin frame, partly disguised by a thick denim jacket, and a narrow face halfway hidden by a bushy mustache. Ned can't be sure looking at him but the man might be smiling. His eyebrows are raised enough to reveal two collapsing sinkholes with bright eyes at their pits.

"This the birthday boy then?" Ned doesn't see lips move but the wispy voice that sounds a lot like quivering tree branches is the man's.

"Hi, I'm Ned." He holds out his hand but the man remains seated halfway across the room without indication that he will actually get up to take it. The man is rooted there, hands resting comfortably on his stomach, a water glass untouched before him.

"Do you know who this is, Ned?" His mom looked at him like he should know, expecting him to at least guess.

"Grandpa?"

His mom laughs. "No, sweetie, Grandpa died before you were born."

"Who is he then?"

The man chuckles "Carol, don't expect him to remember. He was still wearing diapers last we saw each other." He looks up at Ned. "I'm your Uncle Ned."

"Uncle Ned?"

"Speaking of diapers," the man, Uncle Ned, says, "Have I got a story for you, birthday boy."

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“Ned, why don’t you sit?” His mom indicates the chair next to Uncle Ned.

Ned pulls back the chair and sits, arms crossed. He doesn’t want to look at the man, so he begins to study the wood grain of the table, picking out shapes in the patterns of alternating light and darkness. But all he sees are faces. Little eyes and noses and ears, little boys that look like Ollie, bigger men that look like Uncle Ned.

“You like horses,” Uncle Ned asks. “I used to work on a ranch?”

Ned shrugs because in truth he has never seen an actual horse, but he has seen plenty of pictures and a few old cowboy westerns. Horses didn’t seem that great, really. They bucked and kicked and even when they were behaving they still seemed like a lot of work.

“Well, I was a hand on this ranch in Texas, living in a one bed shack I rented from the owner. I had no indoor toilet, no running water, and an old mare tied up in the stable that I used to get around.”

“What’s this got to do with diapers?” Ned puts his hands down on the table to keep the faces from looking at him.

His uncle takes his hands off his stomach and puts them behind his head, so he can look up at the ceiling and tell his story. “Well one morning while I was out shitting, er, crapping, in a ditch I found a young woman huddled there in the grass alongside it, shaking and covered in these little dew drops that must have formed in the night while she was lying there.” Uncle Ned chuckled. “She had her head buried in the grass like if she couldn’t see me I couldn’t see her. But she knew I’d seen her. She was just afraid of what I’d do.”

“What did you do?”

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“Well, this young woman, this girl really, had a little baby with her wrapped up in an adult size t-shirt. Now, it was springtime but the nights were still cold. Neither of them were bundled up enough to stay another night outdoors.”

Ned’s mom excuses herself at this point to frost the cake, as it is finally cool enough. After she disappears into the kitchen Uncle Ned leans forward and raps a knuckle on the table. “You haven’t heard this one before have you?” When Ned shakes his head the man leans back again. “Wasn’t quite sure. You seem a little preoccupied. Of course it could be you’ve got your mind on that birthday cake in the other room. Looks good. Stick a couple candles in that baby and she’s ready to blow.”

“What about the girl?”

“Oh yes,” Uncle Ned seems surprised they’re back to talking about that. “I tried taking her inside, but she didn’t speak a word of English, so she didn’t understand what I wanted. Probably thought I was going to rape her or worse, call the police. But I did eventually get her inside and I gave her the blankets from my bed to warm up in while I heated some water in a pot.

“Her baby is all dirty, you see, and I want to give it a bath, or for her to give it a bath, and while I try to explain the baby starts crying and the woman gets all agitated because she thinks I’m responsible. But the little sucker won’t stop no matter how quiet or how far away I get, so I tell the woman to check him out. She does, and this kid is just naked under this t-shirt, and there’s all this dried crap in there with him.

“Most of it’s been wiped away, I can tell by the smears, but this baby is still sitting in a considerable amount of its own fecal waste. So what do I do, I tell the woman to stay there, wash the kid, throw out the shirt. I’m going to get her some diapers, but of course it’s only after I step

outside that I realize the only way I have of getting to the store to buy diapers is by riding that old mare.”

“So what did you do?”

“I rode that old mare to fucking Walmart and back.” His uncle sits upright and gives the side of his chair a smack like it’s a horse’s hindquarters. “When I get back the woman is gone of course. Probably ransacked the place in the first ten minutes. Didn’t take much, just some clothes and a bit of food, stuff I was willing to spare. Probably thought I was getting the police after all. Didn’t want to take any chances.

“You know what gets me though.” His uncle pushes a hand through his thinning hair.

“The woman turned off the stove and remade the bed for me.”

It’s after dinner and Ned’s mom is about to serve the cake, which means it’s almost time to make a wish and blow out the candles. Ned’s dad says something and his uncle chuckles. Ned looks over at this strange man and wonders which side of the family he’s on. “Am I named after you?”

The man twists his head back and forth like he is trying to loosen it up. “Doubt it. I’ve only seen you once in my entire life. Neither of your parents is very fond of me,” he says this low but not quiet. Ned’s dad laughs, but not his usual laugh. This one sounds higher, quicker. “No it’s probably after your grandpa on your other side. Isn’t that right?” Ned’s dad nods but appears momentarily disengaged.

“Why have we only met once?” Ned asks.

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“I spent most of the last eight years in San Lorenzo.” In response to Ned’s quizzical expression he adds, “Oh, you wouldn’t have heard of it. It’s a dirty little rock in the middle of the Caribbean. One of those little dictatorships built on Cold War paranoia. Not a banana republic though. They’re main export is ron anejo.”

Uncle Ned excuses himself to use the bathroom. Ned’s dad leans over and says, “You’re uncle’s been in prison for the last eight years. That’s what San Lorenzo is.” At that moment Ned’s mom arrives with the cake, candles lit, and she dims the lights to let the two of them soak up the glory of the massive pastry. His dad whispers to him. “He never could face his mistakes.”

And his mom says, “Are you ready, Ned? Make a wish.”