

Shooting Dice With The Shoeshine Boys

Alexander, a boy of ten, ran past Mr. Weed's grocery store and down the alleyway, wearing his good brown church shoes, for it was Sunday noon and the congregation had just let out minutes ago. The pockets of his newly ironed blue dress pants were stuffed with wadded one-dollar bills, all five of them, he took from his hidden cigar box underneath his bed at home. Two years worth of working odd jobs and saving, forsaking what most boys his age wanted; candy, a new baseball, and a cowboy comic book, led up to this very day.

Today, August 13th, 1953, was Alexander's tenth birthday, the day he wanted to beat those Shoeshine boys. He would beat them bad he if he ever got a chance. But as Alexander rounded the corner there was no one there. It was the right location, the alleyway next to the grocery store. The right day, Sunday. And the time, noon. But Alexander, despite being the best runner in fifth grade, took too long to run home two houses down from the church, gather up his money, and then run back past the people still talking in groups standing on the sidewalk. But that is not how it exactly happened.

The Shoeshine Boys were there, all three brothers; Marcus twelve, the oldest, Julius the same age as Alexander, and Whitey, who was an eight-year-old half-albino with the one pinkish-red eye in the right-hand socket of his face, a Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde kid who liked to scare people just because it was fun. People around town never saw anyone like him. They were easily frightened and superstitious. All three were there, alright, but not at the same level of sight as Alexander.

In fact, the brothers were crouched down behind the banister on the overhead back porch overlooking the alley. The slats on the railing gave enough room to peek down to see Alexander so the brothers could pour a bucket full of pig innards through the rails down to the unsuspecting boy.

“Oink, oink, oink,” a nostril sound came from one of the brothers which alerted Alexander to look up at the precise moment the bloody intestines met his face.

“Happy Birthday!” the Shoeshine brothers said in unison.

Alexander screamed out loud, each time for different reasons. The first because he still wore his Sunday church clothes and he knew a whipping would commence as soon as he arrived home.

The second because Alexander got corn-swagged into such an arrangement, not unlike calling someone chicken, then doing something stupid just to prove you aren't. The third because he was outwitted, a new feeling for someone who usually outwits others first.

But the final scream, a blood-curdling sound up from the depths of Alexander's toes, was anger, the anger you feel when revenge boils up through your whole body and soul.

The shoeshine boys felt it too. They couldn't quite make it out but they knew it wasn't the same anger Farmer Johnson had when the boys stole the swine entrails from him. It was more, much more.

Then silence. No chirping birds, no words mispronounced, no heavy breathing, only Alexander looking up at the shoeshine boys from down below, with a cold stare, the blank stare of an evil

eye. The three boys noticed its presence. With a unified turn, all ran, leaving the bloody bucket behind as evidence.

Alexander took his blood-soaked hand, reached into his right side pants pocket, fumbled past the wadded up paper money and found the folded metal pocket knife he had secretly hid.

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By suppertime, Alexander appeared at his house by the side porch screen door, still bloody from the noon-time meeting, but now with a fresh coat of boy-blood mixed among the previous stains of the swine.

The best runner in fifth grade, knife still in hand, knew he would beat them bad if he ever got a chance.

While attending church that morning, Alexander overheard Farmer Johnson say the cornfields were late to be turned over this year and that he might wait till spring to do the field. There was no hurry.

Now, Alexander thought that was just fine. He was in no hurry either.

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