

Belly Up

Coshocton was what my mom called a sneeze on the tongue. She said it was a place where stupid goes and stupid does. Even stupid bugs that didn't have enough sense to find the Ohio River, where breeding was better. When I asked her if that was true, why we were still living there, she said, "Stupidity doesn't exclude you or any other boy, Junior" she paused, "It doesn't exclude me, either."

I stopped trying to understand her a while ago. She was the kind of woman to put salt on her melon and sugar on her peas. I didn't think the town was all that bad, anyways. It smelled like the next season coming, and everyone said hello so much even the trees were doing it.

We moved here after dad left us alone with the Mississippi bugs. Mom said he went away for work. Apparently, that meant we had to leave too. She still talks with him on the phone sometimes. They yell and I pretend not to hear. I'm not supposed to tell anyone about their fights, not even the trees. Not that I ever would, considering how they spread their hellos.

Everything was that way for a long little while. We were in a nowhere town with nowhere people. The kind of people who sleep-walk through county jobs and noon lunches. The people I saw my mom becoming.

Then June before seventh grade came. The whole town woke up on the first day of summer to find the air smelled just of that—summer. It was as if everything finally got tired of being in the wrong place at the wrong time and changed overnight without so much as shaking a leaf. If a year in Coshocton taught me anything, it was that the town ran backwards. Something was wrong.

We learned why when those county workers finished their noon lunches. Cooper H. Harley's small body was found swimming belly up in the Walhonding river. The coroners, or officers — or maybe just my mother — said he'd been like that for sixteen hours. It was just enough time for those stupid bugs to make home of his body. Only the bugs weren't there anymore. They chewed the small boy up and finally left like mom said they were supposed to.

That night, mom sat me down at the dinner table and told me what all the officers and mothers told her. We had peas with salt this time, "It just doesn't feel like that kind of day, Junior," she said. That was okay with me. I didn't want to eat peas with sugar anyway. Even if I did just feed my supper to the dog.

She spoke more seriously than when our table was in Mississippi, and she told me all about how it would move here. I watched an ant crawl over the wood instead of her. I could practically see her face in the frowning grains, anyways. But all I thought about was who I would share a locker with, now that Cooper was floating. And when the ant crawled too close to my hand, I smashed it in one touch.

I guess Cooper's parents thought he was at my house, or Curt's, or Al's. They thought he was anywhere, really, but in the Walhonding river. So, with Coop blown to the size of a balloon and turning a funny color, mom said the officers were starting an investigation. The trees shook at that.

For the rest of that evening mom and I watched TV until I didn't feel like watching TV anymore, so we went to bed. Only sleeping didn't really feel like sleeping. And thinking only felt like "Cooper H. Harley wasn't stupid at all."

He wasn't like the rest of us. He was smart. So smart he was going to jump a year ahead in math. Smart enough to ask for a locker by our English class, so there would be more time to talk between the bell.

I spent the whole of that night trying to convince my eyes to shut themselves, but they kept giving me reasons not to. I finally had to pull my eyelids down, so I could rest.

I guess morning didn't care that much about yesterday, because it came anyway. Just like that, the first day of summer was over: quick as death.

Unlike Cooper H. Harley—Allen J. Fillmore was stupid. About as stupid as stupid does. Stupid enough to call a meeting in the treehouse. Stupid enough to think it could still be our place without all the people to play its parts.

Al munched on those potato chips from B's Groceries, acting like something mighty. He waved his salted fingers in the air. "It just don't make sense to me, Harley hated that river. He said there was no place on Earth mud stuck to ya more than down by that river." He said it like a detective.

Al wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. But it was no use. The real crumbs were stuck to his tongue. "I'm telling you guys, Coop hated that river."

It's not like he was saying anything we didn't already know. Just saying it for himself, saying it to feel like his words mattered when nothing else did right now. But those words fell like fat flakes into his bag of chips. They weren't going to take us anywhere.

Al looked to Curtis for support. As always, Curt found footing in Al's boot marks. "He's right, bad things aren't supposed to happen to people like us. They're only supposed to happen to those idiots in big cities, like Philly." When the body was found, Curtis's mom told him he was a gift from God. She said there was no way God would take away a gift like that. Curtis believed it too. I saw it in the way he made temples with his hands, pointing them high to the sky. But the way he spoke made it seem like Cooper wasn't a gift at all.

"All I know is someone has to spin us back around, because this place has gone all out of whack since Coop died," Al spoke and the leaves rustled outside. For a moment, something felt too alive.

I wanted to ask them how the unfamiliar salt on your peas could be worse than your friend floating in the Walhonding. I wanted to say none of us were out of reach of the stupid. But these weren't my friends, not really. Cooper was my friend. These are his friends. Now I was the one stuck with Coop's friends in a town beginning to feel not so great.

All of our talk must've finally gotten to Curt, because I saw his eyes tear up. Maybe he finally realized God had the power to take him away, too. It didn't even matter if he was still wearing the pretty little bow his mom gave him. Or maybe he just got salt in his eyes.

Mom made potatoes and gravy that night. We watched something on TV only she liked. Sleep came as it had the night before, quick as tossing and turning.

In the morning, my dreams whispered funny things into my ear, "Junior? Junior," and they shook me a little. Then they started to shake me harder. "Junior P. Raymond, get up. Your friends are at the door," I felt a pull on my ear, making me yelp. "I am not gonna have any more moms talking behind my back about you. So, get up and go play with your friends." Yeah, it was the dreams again.

Curt and Al dragged me to play kickball with the other kids in the neighborhood. I went, hoping it would get mom to pull my ear a little less. It surprised me how much they were able to laugh.

It wasn't so bad. Our team was up a few points, and the sun was warming my skin like I forgot it could. And when I got hit in the face with a red ball, it made red blood come from my nose. And when I closed my eyes, I felt something real for the first time in a while. I felt pain. Curt's mom watched the whole thing happen. She called my mom and suddenly I felt more embarrassment than I did pain. Everyone watched the blood drip from my nose while I stood still, waiting for someone to tell me what to do. I wondered if this is how Cooper felt when his body went belly up. Like the trees, the bugs, the sky were all watching him.

Mom drove me to the doctor, even after telling all the moms in the neighborhood I was fine. I was careful not to get any blood on her seats. I didn't want her pinching my ear again.

At the doctor's office my nose got the most attention it had ever seen. It was cleaned with Q-tips and set with a metal beak. When the doctor finished, she smiled kindly at me, which made my nose fall into a small throb. The pain was better. I watched her grab a mirror to show me the work she did. I told her I looked like a bird and we laughed together.

The doctor left me alone for a while, and I listened to mom speak with the nurse outside my door.

"He's just — he's been having a really hard time with it."

"Oh my goodness, poor thing. How long has it been?" The nurse asked.

"Oh, about three weeks." I could hear mom chewing on her nails with those words. I thought that I must still be dreaming from this morning, because it didn't feel like a few weeks. It felt like a couple of days.

"Here." A piece of paper was ripped, and mom and I were going home.

I realized I forgot to ask the doctor if they had any extra wings laying around. That way maybe I could meet Cooper in the sky somewhere.

We had Chinese for dinner.

"Junior?" Mom asked, picking the sesame seeds off of her chicken. It was just another one of those things she did.

"Yeah?" sauce dribbled out of my mouth.

"What do you think about seeing a special kind of doctor? Not like the ones at the E.R. or anything, but one that helps with something different?"

"Like what?"

She closed her eyes, "Like, they can help with the dreams you've been having. Maybe help make this one feel more real?" She spoke softly, not in a whisper like this morning, but like her words would shatter, leaving me to touch the pieces.

The doctors today weren't so bad. I could see more of them if it made her happy. I told her that would be okay.

She said, "Okay," and the conversation was over.

I started to see this doctor, and things were getting better. Summer was halfway through. Mom and I kept our routine of watching TV and eating dinner every night. Curtis and Al found something for us to do almost every day. The blood that came from my nose was red. I knew all of those things were real, but I don't think they were what Dr. Calhoun wanted to hear.

"Junior," he treaded carefully. "Do you know how Cooper passed?" His pen tapped against the papers on his clipboard. Pass. I kept hearing that word. Like death was a ball thrown to your face. A missed moment with a red consequence.

I shook my head. Dr. Calhoun had funny things in his office. There were yellow walls and a line of blue books on a shelf. A bobblehead of someone I should probably know the name of, but it didn't come to mind.

Dr. Calhoun wasn't a funny guy. He always talked with my mom after we talked, using more serious words than we had. While I would just think about those yellow walls and blue books. And the scientist I didn't know the name of.

I was looking at yellow some days before Mom told me Dr. Calhoun had a recommendation for us. He thought it might be good for me to see Cooper's parents.

That night, mom and I had a very serious talk.

"Junior, do you know how Cooper died?" I couldn't remember why those words sounded so familiar. We were sitting on the couch without the TV on.

"No." I didn't really care how it happened, just that it did. I think she already knew my answer before I gave it, though.

"Well, you know Martha, his little sister?" I nodded. "She was playing down by the river the day before, it happened." She poked her food. "Her grandmother had gotten her those earrings last Christmas. You know, those silver ones, because she had just gotten her ears pierced?"

I knew. Martha showed them off to me whenever I'd come over. They weren't much more than cheap sterling silver, but she liked them.

"Well, while she was playing by the river, she lost one of those earrings." Mom touched her own ear, almost as in remembrance.

"The next day, just after supper, she and Cooper went down to the river to find it. They were hoping to get it back before their parents found out." I didn't want to listen. Yellow walls. "Spring had just ended; all that rainfall made the river rise and the mud even muddier. At least that's what the officers said." She was talking about the same ones that made the trees shake, the officers responsible for the announcement that flipped this whole town upside down. I didn't like them very much.

Mom continued, "Cooper's shoes had gotten stuck in the mud, right by the bank. And when he finally pulled them out, he lost his balance." I noticed she wasn't using her hands to speak like she normally did, they were just laying real pretty in her lap. The bobblehead is Thomas Eddison. How did I forget?

"He would have been fine, but —" she choked on her words or air or something I didn't see. "He fell right into the river. The rapids were so strong that day." She brushed away crumbs on the table. "Well, he just ... got carried away." Away with the water.

Just like that. Like crushing an ant.

"But, Martha?" I asked.

She smiled a little, "Martha was scared, the poor girl didn't know what to do, so she ran home."

"Why didn't she tell her parents?" Suddenly those cheap silver earrings were the ugliest things on the planet.

She grabbed my hand, "Well, Junior, I guess for the same reason she didn't tell her parents about the lost earring. I guess she was afraid of getting into trouble." I didn't like Martha much anymore.

Mom was using her hands again, “Now, at dinner tomorrow I don’t want you saying anything to Martha, okay. She’s only six, the poor girl doesn’t really know what happened. She doesn’t understand, and it needs to stay that way. Junior?”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

I didn’t sleep so well that night. My dreams were real this time, and they came as quick as it takes to get your stuck foot out of mud.

Dinner at the Harley’s looked okay on the outside. They set out the China they had stored away, organizing the table in a way that made me wonder why people don’t always do this. I guess everyone saves pretty things to feel better on sad occasions.

Mr. and Mrs. Harley hugged me so tight I thought my stomach would pop out of my mouth. They made a pot roast with plenty of potatoes and green beans. It was pretty good for what the Harleys normally make.

After dinner mom left Martha and I were left alone to watch TV.

“Do you like this show?” Martha asked me, clinging onto the couch’s armrest. There was lots of animation and color on the screen.

“Yeah, it’s fine.” Truthfully, I didn’t really know what was playing.

“Coop and me would watch it all the time. Sometimes we’d pretend we were in it.” She nodded like that was the only way to assure me that it actually happened.

“That sounds fun.”

“Yeah, Coop and me would have lots of fun.”

“I miss him.” I said, looking to see her nodding like crazy some more.

“Me too. He’ll come back.”

Martha’s words surprised me. It was hard for me to really think Coop was dead, but I was starting to. I realized that maybe she needed to start thinking about it too.

“But, Martha, he won’t,” I said. “Cooper’s dead.” That was the first time I spoke it out loud. The first time I sounded stupid out loud, and not just in my head.

Martha began to tear up real tears. They felt more real than anything else had this past summer. Mom thought that was a good time to leave.

I don’t know why, but sleeping that night wasn’t bad at all. It came as quick as Martha’s tears. Cooper H. Harley was dead, and I wasn’t.