

## The Whipping Boy

I was on top of him. He was flat on his back with his arms pinned down underneath my knees – exhausted, and now totally defenceless. I grabbed a handful of sopping hair, peeled his head up off the ground by it, and cocked my arm back to finish him off.

“Alright,” I heard myself ask, “Who wants to see some more blood?”

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In my whole life, I’d only ever thrown a punch twice. The first time, I took a swing at my older sister during one of my childhood birthday parties – not exactly a great moment in chivalry, I admit, but she was bigger than me at the time, and frankly, she fucking deserved it. She was jealous of all the attention I was getting and spent the entire party covertly terrorizing me – trying to ruin my special day! Finally, I lost it and let one fly at her.

I missed.

She retaliated, and beat the living shit out of me.

As far as setbacks for a budding pugilist go, getting Billy Jean Kinged by your sister in front of all of your friends pretty much takes the cake. After that, I stuck to the path of the peaceful warrior and years went by before I ever dared rise up with fists again.

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It was the spring I turned twelve and marbles season was just getting going – a time of year I looked forward to the way the other kids did Christmas or summer holidays. I may not have been the most imposing chest-beater in the banana patch (dudes who get shit-kicked by their sisters seldom are), but over the years I’d managed to compensate for this shortcoming by honing my skills in other areas. For malice and sheer depravity, there were few who could match my slurs about your momma or your cock-size, and when it came to marbles, I was a full-on silverback. My flick was powerful, my touch around the pot, precise, yet supple, and I was cunning in my use of mind games against players whose talents rivalled my own. Every spring when the snow melted, I’d haul out my booty from the year before and go through it – categorizing my victories by size, type, and quality. I took my time with this – partly out of a childish delight in taxonomy, but also to let my little crystal balls work their magic on me. A telltale flaw in a Cat’s Eye might transport me back to where and when I won it, and for a moment, it was like triumph itself was encapsulated in this worthless glob of glass. Others sent me hurtling forward. I’d catch my reflection in the sheen of an Oily Cobb, stare at it spellbound until my features distorted, and daydream about the coming days of conquest and plunder.

After my sort-through was complete, the next step was constructing a marbles pit in the backyard. Usually this amounted to little more than digging a hole in the ground and packing the dirt down around it, but that year, I decided to take my shit to a whole new level. This season’s offering was going to be the fucking Pine Valley of marbles: beautiful, treacherous – a pit sublime! – one to separate the pros from the schmoes. When I was done, and saw that it was good, I spent a whole week practicing on it every evening after school until I was intimately familiar with every nuance of the playing surface. By Friday night my lordship here seemed all

but unassailable, and the following morning, I summoned the others to gaze upon my work and despair.

Despite the unfair advantage of playing on my new home-pot, my luck was the shits that morning and I ended up going on a couple of costly losing streaks. By the time we broke for lunch, my stash had dwindled substantially. As I sat aslouch at the kitchen table, picking without appetite at my baloney and Wonderbread, a morningful of flubbed shots and strategic errors kept looping through my mind. This was bad enough, but flashing intermittently along this lowlight reel were the smug faces of my victorious foes – smirking, and snickering, and spewing derision at me like I was a fucking chump. Worst of all, I knew I'd have to set aside my thirst for vengeance when I got back at it that afternoon. It galled me, but however tempting a rematch with one of my equals might be, priority number one was recouping my losses, and for that I needed an easy mark. Better yet – a whale.

And as luck would have it, when I returned from lunch, one was waiting potside for me like a chubby wad of manna.

We called him Derf.

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Derf had transferred to our school midway through the fourth grade. His real name was Derek Ferber, but on his first day, he showed up carrying a Smurfs lunchbox with his name spelled out on it. This was a mistake. Almost immediately, a wave of dyslexic free-association went swooshing through the collective, and when the swell subsided, Derek Ferber had been redubbed, “Derf.”

Surprise, surprise, Derek wasn't exactly thrilled with his new handle, but the louder he protested, the more it just egged us all on. Eventually his shame and frustration led to a weepy meltdown, but no one felt bad for him – he'd brought this upon himself. I mean, come on? – a Smurfs lunchbox? What was he fucking thinking? The nickname stuck. Before long, his real name fell out of use entirely and was pretty much all but forgotten.

I'd like to say that things eventually got better for Derf, but they didn't. Not that he didn't try – Derf struggled earnestly to redeem himself, but the truth was, he just didn't have enough going for him to pull it off. He was good-natured, and eager to please, but he was wheezy, and nearsighted, and well, kind of stupid – you know, one of those kids whose flies are always down and who always get picked last for teams.

But the thing that caused him the most problems was his size. Derf was a big kid, but weak, and flabby. He was easy to dominate, but his bulk always made doing so seem harmless and comical – even amiable, considering the openly Darwinian atmosphere of our little world. This all-round lack of fitness made him the perfect whipping boy, and we soon devised a vast repertoire of tactics to harass and humiliate him.

One of them was known as “Derf-Rider.” With a sudden charge, a burst of speed, and a hearty cry of “Derf-Rider!” one of us would leap onto Derf's back. The goal was to try and stay on as long as possible while Derf bucked and thrashed about trying to knock you off. The ride would be timed by a group count, and we kept meticulous track of who was the current record-

holder. This game occurred regularly until one of the kids actually rode Derf until he collapsed, and then yanked his scarf off and hog-tied him with it. Obviously, such a performance could not be topped, and for a long time afterward this undisputed champion was referred to simply as “The Rider.”

Another favourite was “The Derf Splat.” We’d all be hanging out on the playground together when the signal would be raised to initiate the assault. This could be done almost telepathically – a subtle glance, a raised eyebrow, or the slightest of nods. One of us would concoct some ruse to split Derf off from the pack and then suddenly jump up and wrestle him down into a front facelock. With Derf now in position, a co-tormentor would come hurtling across the schoolyard and plough into him with everything he had. Derf’s chubby body would go flying and kind of splat against the ground – thus the name.

As Derf dragged himself to his feet after one of these degrading ordeals, we’d all point at him and laugh. He’d swear his head off at us, but we all knew that any sort of physical retaliation was completely out of the question. There was a line in the sandbox and Derf knew that if he crossed it, he’d be viciously beaten within an inch of his life. It wasn’t personal or anything, though – we liked Derf. He was one of us – the last and least among us, sure, but one of us all the same. I mean, if an outsider had been caught pulling this sort of shit on him, any of us would’ve leapt to his defence like a junkyard bitch protecting one of her pups. Derf was *our* whipping boy, and though his role was an unenviable one, he was still an important and even valued member of the group.

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“Hey, Fatboy,” I called out to Derf as I approached from the house, “where the fuck have you been all morning?”

As it turned out, Derf had been at the Toys ‘R’ Us, loading up on new marbles, and now joined us with his pockets plump – and ripe for a picking. That was the thing about Derf: no matter how many times you whipped his ass at something, he always came back at you looking for more. Maybe he was just a glutton for punishment, but I don’t think that’s what was going on with him. I think he just never gave up believing that somehow, someday, next time would be his time – an admirable trait, I guess, but one that was also pretty fucking easy to take advantage of, and that’s exactly what I did. It took a little bit of finessing, but I eventually conned him into a ridiculously high-stakes contest, and before we even started, I was already congratulating myself for filling the void my earlier defeats had left in my bucket.

As I prepared to make my first toss at the pot, Derf, as was customary, began to wax abusive in an attempt to throw me off me game. His shit was feeble, and not worth mentioning, but it got the odd chuckle at my expense and thus demanded a response.

I came back at him with a scathing round of vituperation, focussing in particular on his man-boobs and reputed love of sodomy – probably not the sort of retort Samuel Johnson would be proud of, but hey, I was twelve. Besides, it worked like a fucking charm. The crowd was mine again, and Derf, put back in his place, now maintained a respectful, if begrudging silence as we completed our opening pitches.

No surprises there. One of mine landed closest to the pot, which gave me first shot.

Right from the get-go, I was on fire. The prospect of guaranteed victory lent a certain loosey-goosey swagger to my game and I quickly potted all but one of the marbles before Derf had even taken a turn. But as I approached the final shot, it occurred to me that I was running the risk of being undone by my own momentum and I decided I'd better cool my jets and refocus.

I paused for a moment, took a deep and calming breath, and then carefully scrutinized the position of the game-deciding lasty.

It was a long and somewhat difficult shot, but one that looked a lot harder than it actually was. During my week of practice, I'd figured out the trick to it and had spent a whole afternoon draining marble after marble from pretty much this exact spot. Still, I thought, though low-risk, this wasn't the most prudent move available. An even surer thing would be to reposition the marble just outside Derf's range, knowing full-well that Derf (being Derf) would go for it, bungle it, and leave me with an easy tap in. Why chance it? I reasoned – especially given the stakes.

I crouched down, and was about to set Derf's inevitable downfall in motion when a multi-headed shadow spread across the ground over my shot and started chirping at me from behind.

“Whoah, there's no way you'll make that shot, man.”

“No way. No fucking way.”

“Yeah, you suck today, dude.”

I scowled irritably, but just as I was about to turn around and lash back, I felt my features soften and my face splitting slowly into a devilish grin. Here was an opportunity to dumbfound the peanut gallery, restore my flagging prestige, and fleece Derf, all in one fell swoop. I actually had to restrain myself from cackling diabolically.

I got my shit together and looked up over my shoulder.

“Okay then, ladies,” I said, drawing attention undividedly me-wards. “Get ready to have your minds blown!”

I released my flick.

As the marble left my fingers, a weird, tingling sensation coursed through my body – a kind of sentiment of certainty. I just *knew* my shot was right on the money. I looked on with an almost detached admiration as my marble alighted on the sweet spot of the embankment that encircled the pot and then began rolling down toward it. I picked Derf out from among the crowd so I could watch his expression change as the wave of loserhood crashed over him.

“Game over, Fatboy.”

The marble dropped into the pot. Derf wilted. I smiled and then turned to scan the faces of the onlookers. Time to bask in the wows.

“Awww... What a fluke!”

“Yeah, total fluke.”

“You’re such a flukester, dude.”

My lip curled contemptuously. You gotta be kidding me, I thought. How dare these fuckers denigrate my triumph like this! I turned on them and snarled.

“That was no fluke, you bunch of fags! I can hit that shot all day long!”

“Whatever, Flukester.”

“Yeah, Flukester. Don’t make me laugh.”

“I betcha anything you can’t make that shot again.”

My ears pricked up and I whirled upon this last naysayer, whose voice came from behind me.

It was Derf.

I rose to my feet and moseyed slowly toward him. “Oh really?” I challenged, glaring at him with all the menace I could muster.

“Yeah. Really,” he beaked back insolently. “I betcha can’t.”

“Alright then, Crisco,” I said with a laugh, still not taking him seriously. “How much you wanna bet?”

Derf seemed to consider this for a moment. Then he waddled over to the pot and emptied his still-bulging pockets into it.

“Everything.”

For a moment, I just stood there staring blankly at him. This was a ballsy and surprisingly dumb-ass move, even for Derf, and it took a second for the enormity of it all to really sink in.

“Don’t even think about it, Flukester,” somebody heckled, snapping me out of my fog. “You’ll never make that shot again.”

“Yeah, Flukester. Don’t forget you fucking suck.”

“Hey, check it out! Even Derf’s trying to sucker him!”

This was almost too good to be true – nail this shot again and my mastery could not be denied. It would live on forever in the annals of the game – a great moment in marbles. I made my way over to the pot, counted out what Derf had added to it, and made an equivalent contribution.

“Holy shit!”

“He’s actually going for it!”

“You’re fucking crazy, dude!”

I returned my marble to where it was, took aim, and flicked.

The shot followed an identical trajectory to the first one, touched down on the embankment, and went rolling straight for the pot.

“Oh, yeah,” I smugly colour-commentated. “Enter the dragon, bitches!”

I’d already hoisted a fist Black-Panther-style in the air, when the marble suddenly hit a slight divot in the earth, creating an unexpected retardando in its forward motion. It came to the lip of the pot, teetered there for a moment, and then stopped.

Fuck.

Derf threw his hands up in the air and squealed with glee, his face aglow at this unexpected triumph.

“Ha! Ha! I got you, man! I fucking got you! I can’t believe you went for it! You’re such a fucking sucker!”

I guess it was understandable that Derf would want to savour this rare delicacy, and a certain amount of celebratory exuberance would have been permissible, even appropriate. But this was not enough for Derf. He went too far. He forgot himself. He forgot his place in the food chain and began to dance around, gloating, and swearing, and wagging his chubby finger at me.

And then he started humping the air in my direction.

“Suck it, sucker! Suck it!” he shrieked as he thrust at me, his little nuts bouncing against the fabric of his navy blue jogging pants.

Derf’s enthusiasm was contagious. Almost immediately, the others began to mimic him, laughing, and mocking, and humping at me along with him.

“Yeah, suck it, sucker!”

“Suck it! Suck it!”

This was an intolerable humiliation. With each jab of crotch, my position in the playground hierarchy was undermined further and further until it felt like there was no place lower I could sink to. A powder keg of lizard-brain hate began to smoulder within me, and as Derf gyrated toward me, lost in the fervour of his endzone dance, it suddenly flared up, consumed every kilowatt of power that my organism possessed, and then detonated as a vicious left hook into Derf’s blindly beaming face.

Derf crumpled to the ground like his skeleton had been evaporated.

The laughter stopped.

What finally broke the silence was Derf's horrible, horrible, sobbing. It started low, a sort of blubbery moan, but grew louder and louder into a deep and mournful roar. It was a black and ugly moment. Everything dimmed, like a light had gone out or something. Nobody said or did a thing. We all just stood there, looking down at Derf without pity or remorse as he slapped and clawed at the dirt, crying his heart out, and when he finally hauled himself up off the ground and staggered off toward home, we went back to our game as though nothing had happened.

Later that day, after everyone had left, I started feeling kind of shitty about what I'd done and decided to try and make it up to Derf. I went by his house, told him I was sorry about the whole thing, and gave him a large and, I thought, fairly choice selection of my marbles as compensation. At the time, he seemed satisfied by this peace offering, but I guess he wasn't. Before long, Derf started taking advantage of any opportunity that arose to antagonize me, and eventually, my patience with him wore off.

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Everything came to a head one evening while we were playing football. Throughout the game, whenever his team made a successful play, Derf would run up to me, stick his thumbs in his ears, and wriggle his fingers while he yelled, "Doink! Doink! Doink!" in my face. This was tiresome to begin with, but after he had done it five or six times, it really started to piss me off. And when the other members of his team joined in and started doing it to me, too, I decided I'd had enough. I would not be doinked at any longer, and the next time Derf bounded up to me, I stepped into him and shoved him. Hard. I figured this would put an end to it, but after stumbling back a few feet, Derf regained his footing and went into this ridiculous boxing stance.

"You gotta be kidding me, Derf," I sneered. "What? You wanna go?"

He answered by skipping around a bit, shadow-boxing, throwing jabs and crosses at the air between us. I was totally flabbergasted. I couldn't believe that Derf was actually willing to take it this far. The crowd began to swirl, shouting words of encouragement, and pretty soon everyone was swept up in the vortex. Derf continued to skip about for a bit while I stood there, astonished and kind of embarrassed for him, really. I laughed and glanced about, assuming that no one actually expected me to take this shit seriously, but the circle of our taunting peers had already wound itself around us and were closing in, tighter and tighter. There was no way out. I felt like a reluctant gladiator melting in the light of Roman noon, but as the cries for violence grew louder and louder, I realized I had no choice:

I had to kick Derf's ass.

It wasn't long before Derf inadvertently danced within my reach. I lunged at him and grabbed a hold of the collar of his T-shirt. I swung him around to knock him off balance, feigned a punch at him, and he turtled. I did this again and again, trying to get him to stop by showing him how easy it would be for me to destroy him. At the same time, I shouted to the other kids, "For Christ's sake, someone tell him to call it off before I fucking kill him!" But the bloodlust of the crowd had reached that foamy, boiling-over point where leniency or mercy was simply out of the question. My appeals were echoed back at me, their meaning reversed.

"Yeah, kill him!"

“Kill him, man!”

“Kill that fat fucker!”

Taking advantage of my advocacy on his behalf, Derf suddenly whirled loose from my grasp and hurled a wild roundhouse uppercut at me.

My nose exploded in my face and I staggered backward, stunned.

He pounced on me, knocked me face down on the ground, and threw himself on top of me. Now that he had actually hit me, he knew he was a dead man if I managed to get back on me feet, and so he used all his weight and strength to hold me down. We must have struggled like this for five minutes or so while the accompanying howls for more carnage rose in a frenzied crescendo around us. Finally, I wriggled free of his grasp and managed to struggle to my feet with him still draped over me, pounding furiously but futilely on my back. He wrapped his arms around my torso and tried to lift me in the air to throw me down on the ground again, but he tripped and I landed on top of him. He grabbed and flailed at me for a moment or two, but I quickly pinned his arms down under my knees. He was flat on his back – exhausted, and now totally defenceless.

“Kill him!”

“Fucking kill him, man!”

“Kill that piece of shit!”

Suddenly, someone came up behind me and hissed into my ear, “Look what he did to your face, man. He fucking Lanny MacDonald’ you! Kill him, man! Fucking kill him!”

I snaked my tongue up along the crusty red moustache that now clung to my upper lip. The raw, metallic taste of it suddenly swept through me, thrilling the meat of me with a hot flush of shame and rage. I grabbed a handful of sopping hair, peeled his head up off the ground by it, and cocked my arm back to finish him off.

“Alright,” I heard myself ask. “Who wants to see some more blood?”

The crowd roared in approval. I looked down into my victim’s face to take aim. And what I saw there startled me. There was no anger in it, no “I’ll-get-you-next-time” sneer of hatred and defiance, just helplessness and fear - like a gunned-down doe whose almost-human eyes cry out mutely for mercy. He wasn’t even struggling anymore, and every time I moved, Derf would flinch and Bambi up at me again in anticipation of the beating he was about to receive.

I hesitated.

The screams were almost deafening now, and everybody had crammed in so close I could feel the thick, oppressive heat of their flesh weighing me down like a big, wet beach towel. It was as if the whole weight of the yelping pack was piling onto my back, pressing down on me to snuff him out so they could scavenge the carcass. It was so heavy, so overwhelming, and the longer I delayed, the more I felt like I was going to snap in half.



My cocked arm began to tremble.

And then finally it slumped to my side.

I couldn't do it. I don't know why, but I just didn't have it in me to ruthlessly pummel this completely powerless friend of mine. Maybe it was compassion, maybe it was just some sort of weakness, a lack of killer instinct or something, but whatever was or wasn't there deep down at the bottom of me made it impossible to deliver the coup de gras. Finally, I made like I was going to throw a punch, Derf winced and closed his eyes, and I leaned over and whispered in his ear.

"I give, Derek."

Then I rolled off of him, sat down on the ground beside him, and started crying.

"Fucking gaylord!"

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For pretty much the rest of my childhood, I regretted this decision. In a way, part of me still does. Initially, this was aggravated by Derf's insistence that he had won the fight. In my mind, this was absurd, but according to the rules of the playground, he was right. He'd landed a punch. I hadn't. He'd drawn blood. He'd held me down. And in the end, let's face it – I caved. In Derf's mind, and in the minds of everyone there, the decision went to him.

But even more than this, my inability to kick Derf's ass that day seemed to drive a wedge between me and everybody else. It was like I was no longer really one of them, and I became less and less so as the years went by. We continued to hang out together for the remainder of grade school, but even then, something told me that things would never be the same. And they weren't. By the time we were all in High School, their faces meant no more to me than any of the others in the crowd.

Now I can't even remember what their names were.

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