

Little Slugger

Jerry Dean Wilkins picked at the fake brick tiles that were searing an imprint into his calves. His thighs were protected from the floor by the cargo shorts mom bought him for Christmas last year. The drawers drooped to his shins—just the way he liked them. His over-laundered Sponge Bob T-shirt was ripped across his left rack of ribs.

Jerry Dean Wilkins wiped tears with Sponge Bob’s giggling eyes then blew snot from each nostril, left, then right, onto the floor. “Shit.” Jerry Dean spit as he pulled a corner off the pre-glued tile. It was brittle. Probably as old as Jerry Dean Wilkins himself.

Memories of Monterrey Wilkins mopping that tile every Tuesday afternoon summoned up a deafening wail that could have very well come from a wounded coyote trying to escape Jerry Dean’s constricted throat. Wild with grief over his mother’s death, Jerry Dean Wilkins began to tremble.

“What am I supposed to do now?” he sobbed aloud to the sparkly popcorn ceiling, yellowed by 40 years of Monterrey Wilkins’ second-hand-smoke.

It was this very moment that Jerry Dean Wilkins realized he had no idea how to ensure his mother’s EBT card would refill itself monthly. Or if the state would pay their rent. And the monthly disability check. Jerry Dean Wilkins would need that check.

Ever since she moved into the unit just below—going on two years now—Mrs. Mulroney threatened to turn Monterrey Wilkins’ in for ‘cheating the system’ anytime Jerry Dean Wilkins’

Little Slugger

rode his bicycle across the lawn of the beachside complex, or crawled up the balcony to sneak into the Wilkins' apartment.

“I earned that money.” Jerry Dean Wilkins spit into the abyss. “Every fuckin’ penny.”

The rent, the food stamps, and the disability check his mother collected for thirty years—cause her job working the board at AT&T downtown gave her arthritis in her fingers—at least that’s what Brother Michael told Monterrey to say.

Mrs. Mulroney, banging on her ceiling and hollering for Jerry Dean Wilkins to be quiet, might really turn them in this time. It had been a hum-dinger.

Eyeing a half empty bottle of Jägermeister lying sideways under the kitchen table, Jerry Dean flopped over and then rolled to the bottle, pulled it to his swollen, chapped lips and swallowed.

Jerry Dean’s head pounded from the pressure of his echoing sobs. His sinuses were full of tears and grief. A steady stream of them dripped from his nose to his Louisville Slugger where they pooled in the logo burnt into the wood. The bloody mess dripped down onto Jerry Dean Wilkins’ dirty tube sock.

“Dang it, Mamma, you shoulda just given me the check.”

Mrs. Mulroney’s squalling from the apartment below, along with the familiar *thud, thud, thud* of her broomstick on her ceiling shook Jerry Dean Wilkins from his self-pity-party.

“If I hear your fuckin’ broom bangin one more time, lady—I swear I’ll bash your head in.” Jerry Dean Wilkins punctuated that with two swift slams of the baseball bat on the floor to let Mrs. Mulroney know: two could play that game.

Little Slugger

Jerry Dean Wilkins saw the lights reflect on the sliding glass doors to the balcony before he heard the sirens. Jerry Dean creaked as he pushed himself off the floor to grab his bat and the ancient alligator purse. Then, Jerry Dean climbed over the broken chairs then smashed two windows—making it look like there had been an intruder— before swinging his aging frame over the 2nd floor balcony where he hung for three seconds before dropping onto the spongy St. Augustine grass.

Moonlight bounced off the gold frame of Monterrey Wilkins's pocketbook.

“Why'd ya make me do that?” He grunted toward the broken windows.

Jerry Dean Wilkins blew his nose once more into the moist St. Augustine. It was then he noticed a quarter-sized pink seashell. It looked as soft and vulnerable as Kimberly's tiny silky ear the day she was born. Back when Tiffany was sober.

And his wife.

And alive.

Jerry Dean Wilkins had been twenty-one the day Kimberly was born. He had been full of hope. And pride. And shit.

Tiffany ODeD just two weeks after Jerry Dean took his baby-girl to the Piercing Pagoda for her 10th birthday. This was before the state sent Kimberly to live with his Aunt Alameda in Tennessee. But long after Monterrey Wilkins took care of the trouble.

The first Sunday after Jerry Dean Wilkins' eighth birthday, Brother Michael whispered in the boy's ear. Jerry Dean's tiny, pink, fragile, and innocent ear. Brother Michael came closer, for longer, each Sunday after that. The Irish Spring wafting to Jerry Dean's nose was calming; it

Little Slugger

smelled just like Roscoe Dean Wilkins. Each Sunday, Brother Michael's large hand lingered longer on Jerry Dean's shoulder, then knee, and finally thigh. When Jerry Dean Wilkins closed his eyes, it was his father pulling him close, he was safe. The smell and the strong hand felt like protection—Jerry Dean felt relaxed for the first time since his father died.

On the sixth Sunday after his birthday, Jerry Dean Wilkins was forever shattered. This was the day, after standing in front of his weary congregation, Brother Michael told Monterrey to take the afternoon for herself, and then the Pastor led Jerry Dean Wilkins by the elbow to the plastic paneled room in the back of the sad cinder block church. The church they walked two blocks to each Sunday, Wednesday, and holiday. The church who's steeple drooped and who's paint curled away, as if they were uncomfortable being associated with the damp building surrounded by scraggly sandspur grass and a gray gravel parking lot surrounded by a rusted chain.

Brother Michael's office smelled of Lysol and sour eggs. His socks, underwear and t-shirts hung from a thin laundry line across the side of the room where two beat-up file cabinets leaned against the sweaty wall. Jerry Dean was sure though they'd been washed, the skivvies were the root of the stench.

That day, the smell of Irish Spring and the strong hug was partnered with an offering from Brother Michael—a glass of Comfort. Jerry Dean did as he was told—he drank and immediately felt woozy and soon found himself falling down a blurry rabbit-hole, spinning, confused, and feeling very small. When he hit bottom Jerry Dean broke into a thousand pieces.

Little Slugger

“Baby, Jesus is all we have now.” Is all Monterrey Wilkins would say when Jerry Dean begged to skip church each Sunday after that. “We must accept the pain to get to the Promised Land.”

“Sinners, you must bow before Jesus and pray for your salvation.” Brother Michael waived an angry fist toward the sky and seemed to pull the words from the dark heavens above. He directed Jerry Dean and Monterrey to get on their knees each Tuesday he came to pray for the Wilkins. “Dear Lord above, have mercy on these sinners. Let me show them the path to deliverance. Lord, I beg you to guide these lost and wandering souls to your will. Dear Lord I pray you will use me as your instrument to drive the demons from their souls and guide them to the salvation they so desire.”

These Tuesday evening visits, Brother Michael would then give Jerry Dean a dollar and send him out to buy candy. Often, waiting outside, Jerry Dean Wilkins could hear Brother Michael proselytizing powerfully through his mother's bedroom window.

“Accept the Lord sinner. Accept every inch of him into your torn soul and he will provide.”

Jerry Dean’s spine crawled when he heard this; it was worse when he heard his mother whimpering and crying, much like the women did during Brother Michael’s Sunday morning services. Much like Jerry Dean whimpered at Brother Michael’s touch.

That night Monterrey told Jerry Dean that Brother Michael fixed it so she would never have to work again—she could stay home and take care of Jerry Dean—always.

“Don’t ya see? The Lord provides, Son. Just like Brother Michael said. We’re pushing through the pain to get to the Promised Land.”

Little Slugger

It was during a group session at a state mandated stay in a drug rehab center in 1998 that he first remembered the Sunday afternoons when Brother Michael offered to take Jerry Dean so Monterrey could rest after church. Those Sundays when Jerry Dean had to drink a cup of Comfort when he was told—the syrup was too sweet and burned his throat, but by then, Jerry Dean understood he must drink so he would forget to remember.

In 2004 Aunt Alameda paid for Jerry Dean Wilkins to go to a famous rehab center. It was there that Jerry Dean burst into angry tears when his counselor asked why he hated his mother. The simple question fired Jerry Dean back to 1975.

“I’m telling mom what you done to me.” Jerry Dean Wilkins screamed as he tried to escape Brother Michael’s angry grasp.

“Now son, your mother asked me to show you how to be a man. That’s all we’re doing here. You mother can’t teach you, now can she, son?” Brother Michael’s words were sweet and syrupy like the Comfort he served, but his grip on Jerry Dean’s neck made it hard to breathe. “It would kill your mother if you reject her wishes right now. Kill her. You hear me? Your dad is dead, she’s all you got, boy. You want to kill her, too?” He pushed Jerry Dean into a chair and gave the boy an extra large glass of Comfort, this time. When Jerry Dean choked it down, he asked Brother Michael gave him more. Jerry Dean knew by now he must always forget to remember.

Little Slugger

In 2015, Jerry Dean Wilkins sat with his court appointed attorney as he faced charges of assault of his mother. “Boy, what the hell did your mother ever do to you?”

Squeezing his eyes tight Jerry Dean burst into tears, then looked deep into his soul for the answer. Desperately needing the answer, Jerry Dean Wilkins banged his head against the putrid cinderblock walls of his cell. It was there, in his orange jumpsuit and foam shower sandals that Jerry Dean Wilkins finally shook the demon lose from the rotting caverns of his mind.

On his 12th birthday, Jerry Dean sat at the wood colored Formica table as his mother walked a cake with two candles—a 1 and a 2—to the table. She had been in the tiny rent-free kitchen for the last hour making rows and rows of carefully carved crests in the chocolate icing on his yellow cake. From a distance, it looked like Monterrey’s head and her short curly brown hair on a platter.

Each time he went in to speak to Monterrey, she shooed him out with a distracted hand as she studied the picture of a perfectly peaked cake in her Woman’s Day magazine splayed open on the gold-flecked laminated counter.

Jerry Dean squirmed in his chair. He had decided this was the day he would truly become a man and stand up to his mother.

Monterrey finally walked toward Jerry Dean, carrying the cake. They both wore pointed cardboard birthday hats and devastated faces.

“What’s your birthday wish, baby?” Monterrey asked with a strained smile.

“I wish we could quit church. Momma, Brother Michael is a bad man. He is evil.”

Little Slugger

Before Jerry Dean could say the rest of his practiced speech, Monterrey's jaw dropped, and she barely choked out a few words. "How did you know?" tears streamed from her false eyelashes and pulled pink Maybelline streams down each cheek.

This was the exact moment Jerry Dean's spirit went from broken to devastated. Rage roared from his peach-fuzzed face. "How did I know? Brother Michael has been fucking me, threatening to kill you if I told." The pain that had been simmering for four years was punctuated by Jerry Dean slapping the plate from the table where it shattered on the floor. The chocolate iced cake broke into a yellow grimacing smile that taunted Jerry Dean Wilkins.

Four years of suppressed tears exploded and he slammed his head onto the table. Monterrey sat frozen, then calmly said, "I worked for the better part of an hour to make that cake just right." Her eyes were as empty as her soul.

"Did you hear what I said? Four years. Four fucking years and you told him to do it. Why Mamma, why?"

Monterrey's head seemed to crack open to reveal a grimacing smile of her own. Silently, trancelike, she rose, stepped aside and pushed her chair in, and then stepped over the cake and into her bedroom. She came out carrying the small Louisville Slugger bat his father had given Jerry Dean for his eighth birthday; the bat she kept under her pillow for safety. She stepped into a pile of cake and walked out leaving a trail of icing behind her as the aluminum screen door bounced twice and then swayed in the afternoon breeze.

Jerry Dean laid his head back down on the table, the rubber chinstrap biting into his neck, and pressed his face into the cool Formica to chill his searing forehead. He concentrated on the

Little Slugger

vibrations of the trucks that traveled Highway A1A. The road that separated Jerry Dean Wilkins from the calm and freedom of the ocean. He yearned for the serenity of the waves.

Jerry Dean could see that blue-skied day in his mind's eye. Warm sunshine on his face, the ocean breeze caressing his hair, Jerry Dean stood anxiously on the sidewalk with his new Louisville Slugger.

“Hurry Daddy! Let's play ball.” Jerry Dean waved and jumped, “Come on.”

With his heart full pride for his beautiful boy, Roscoe Dean Wilkins was anxious to please—he waved back laughing and focused on his son as he ran across A1A.

This is where that day always goes black in Jerry Dean's brain. Except for one last flash of Roscoe Dean Wilkins face down on the blacktop road, clutching the two now-crumpled packs of Virginia Slims.

“Come on baby, wake up.” Monterrey said as she placed two big chunks of the grinning cake from the floor onto each of the plates on the table. Monterrey Wilkins pulled the two candles out of a pool of trampled icing. Number 1 went into Jerry Dean's clump of cake, the number 2 on hers. Monterrey pulled the Bic lighter from her bra strap where she always kept it and a packet of Virginia Slims.

“Make a wish.” Monterrey said as she lit the candles. Then she went to the refrigerator, bloody footsteps mixing with chocolate icing. The slugger was on the counter, dripping onto a paper plate.

Little Slugger

“Now blow out your candles.” She returned to the table with two glasses of Comfort. Monterrey tipped her glass to clink with Jerry Dean’s. “Everything’s going to be OK, baby. Mamma took care of it for you.”

“But it wasn’t OK. It would never be ok. Three of us died that day.” Jerry Dean Wilkins finally told his court-appointed attorney.

Sirens woke Jerry Dean Wilkins from the torrent of memories. Jerry Dean slowly and deliberately crushed the innocent pink shell with the tip of the Louisville Slugger as he braced himself to stand as tall as a broken man can. He needed a fix so bad his teeth hurt.

“How’s that Promise Land, Mamma? I hope it was worth it.” Jerry Dean Wilkins shook his bat at the sky, as if he could shake loose her answer from the dark heavens above. “You coulda just given me the damn check.”

Jerry Dean Wilkins turned into the night in search of his next taste of Salvation.

###