

## Spare Parts

When I was ten, I traded my younger brother Bob, then seven, for three deer legs and a dead snake. The transaction took place on a July afternoon at an opening in the fence between our backyard and the Conwell's. The buyer was their youngest daughter, Alicia, a girl about Bob's age, with a permanent blackberry stain on the corners of her lips and the fingertips of her right hand.

She and Bob had played silently every afternoon that summer in the enormous sandbox and playhouse her father had built for her and which all the neighborhood kids under ten had coveted during construction with a dry-mouthed envy. Bob was like a child king there, Alicia a miniscule queen, the sandbox their joyous domain. They reminded me of kittens, innocently regal and playing in the sun.

Alicia had once reluctantly let a few of the neighborhood kids into her dad's taxidermy shed looming next to the playhouse. This was after some of the boys, me included, had called her every childish version of a liar that we could think of when she started going on about how many dead animal parts her dad had hanging on the walls of the shed. It was even better than she'd described — legs and heads and claws and hooves all tacked up on the walls like a spare parts warehouse for the zoo.

That summer, Bob and I had terrorized yet another housekeeper into leaving. Chung-sun, the Korean girl my dad had hired on a Sunday, was, by the following Friday, telling him in broken English and perfect Korean hand gestures that she wanted her pay for the week and would find better kids to take care of somewhere else. The day after Chung-sun left was the one-year anniversary of my mother's death.

We were planning on visiting her grave that sunny Saturday, but my father said we'd go the following week, told us Mom wouldn't be happy that we'd driven away another woman who only wanted us to be good boys. He left us alone while he took one of his long weekend runs in the woods near our house. Since Mom had died, he'd become a fitness junkie and if he didn't get his run in Bob and I knew we'd be in for silent dinners of rotisserie chicken and creamed corn. "Don't answer the door," he told me, "and if you need anything, call the Conwells. Please be good."

As I did whenever Bob and I were alone, I made hot dogs for lunch. For some reason, I noticed this time that the hot dog juice left in the pot looked remarkably similar to the lemonade dad would make from concentrate - cloudy, yellowish, the flakes of hot dog skin like citrus pulp. After I bunned and plated the hot dogs, I filled a clear tumbler with ice, poured the steaming hot dog juice in, topped it with more ice, stirred it around, stuck a finger in to make sure it was cooled and yelled for Bob to come into the kitchen.

“Bob. HOT DOGS AND LEMONADE.”

He ran into the kitchen, sat down and went right for the tumbler. A few gulpy swallows later, and at the apex of my uncontrolled laughter, he threw the tumbler of hot dog juice and ice at me and punched me square in the nose. The blow was so hard my knees jellied and I saw little white dots in my eyes. I could still hear him though. “You jerk. You jerk. You jerk.”

After I pulled myself off the floor, I put a hand to my nose and my fingers came away covered in blood. I smeared it all over my face and ran to where I knew Bob would be hiding. I was trying not to cry and when I found him in the closet behind all the winter coats Bob said, "Youcan'thitme, youcan'thitme, youcan'thitme, I'lltelldad, I'lltelldad, I'lltelldad.”

Bob had hit me before, but never with such bloody consequences. Whenever I'd gone to my dad and complained, he said I couldn't hit him back because I was older and bigger and had to set an example.

So, with no other choice, I marched Bob out to the fence, his arm behind his back, my nose bleeding down my white t-shirt and yelled for Alicia. She came running from inside her playhouse.

She looked at my face and shirt and said, “What happened?”

"I'll trade him to you. Forever. For something in there." I pointed to her dad's shed. She grinned a little and seemed to forget about how I looked. I held Bob in a headlock and could feel him shaking. Alicia returned with the snake and deer legs.

"These were in his throwaway box," she said and shrugged.

I pushed Bob away, took them out of her hands and said, "You're her brother now. Don't ever come back."

She held his hand and they walked toward the sandbox. Bob looked over his shoulder and I could tell he was crying, but the transaction seemed about the smartest thing I could have done at the moment

I clutched at the contraband and walked back into our house, listening for my dad, but he hadn't yet come back. The deer legs felt as hard as steel in my hands, the fur smooth and warm over the bone. I went into the bathroom to clean up. There was so much blood on my face and t-shirt that I threw up the moment I saw my reflection in the mirror. I cleaned myself up, wiped up the vomit, and imagined how nice it was going to be to not have Bob around anymore. I figured if my dad wanted to see him, he could always go over to the Conwell's.

When my dad returned from his run I met him at the front door. I put my fingers to my lips. "Shhh," I said. "We're playing hide and seek and Bob thinks I'm in the basement. He's down there looking for me." He tousled my hair and whispered okay.

I went down to the basement and, free of Bob and more fighting, I thought about what I was going to do with my newly acquired trophies. Perhaps a three-legged table that I could pose the snake on.

I knew my trade was discovered when I heard Mr. Conwell banging on our front door an hour or two later. I came up from the basement, heard a flurry of words including something about Bob wanting to live with the Conwells until he was a million years old, and my dad and Mr. Conwell were gone.

Certain of where they were heading, I made my way out our back door and to the opening in the fence. It was dark now, the only light from Mr. Conwell's shed. Alicia was standing over Bob and my dad reached down and picked him up. They all looked so small standing in the sandbox, Bob a lump in my dad's arms. I could see Mrs. Conwell through their kitchen window. She was wearing a light green apron and laughing into the phone.