

revenge he planned every night? The tortures he had lined up for Joey Moss? The misery and pain?

And then one day he was there. Walking straight toward Harold and then past without the slightest hint of knowing him; but Harold had smiled when he saw Joey coming closer. Not to be friendly, but like the boy with him had done. On all fours like a dog doing its master's bidding. Licking the hand.

Harold wanted to say he had stood up to Joey. That he had salvaged his pride with a noble act. But he hadn't. He had done the same thing he watched this boy do.

He had seen Joey Moss now and then over the years while they finished school but there was never another incident between them. They went in different circles and Harold really didn't know anything else about Joey Moss. But even now, in these late years, he sometimes dreamed about how he could have done something to make Joey respect him, to at least know he wasn't afraid.

It baffled Harold that this incident so long ago still bothered him. This thing with the two boys by the creek brought it all back home. He realized that by telling the boy to stand up to his tormenter he was telling himself that and was regretful he never had. Joey Moss didn't bother Harold again but the memory of it ... that was the torment ... what he had done to himself by doing nothing.

So he told the boy the story about Joey Moss and his fearful confrontation with Joey. How he had whipped Joey Moss good, and how the girl he lost came back to him because he had been brave and how it had changed his life ever after that.

The boy, James, finally looked directly at Harold. "Really?" he said, hopefully.

Harold looked away from the boy's eyes. "Really," he said firmly. "Cross my heart." He made a crossing sign over his heart.

"But," the boy began, "he'll kill me."

Harold considered what the boy said and figured it was true. The other boy would wallop this one. "Do it at school where he isn't expecting it and everybody sees. Just walk right up and smack him as hard as you can. If he hits back you can't cry. No sniveling about it. Just do your best. He might not even try to hit back he'll be so surprised. Might just start cryin' himself." Harold imagined Joey Moss doing that, stunned when Harold hit him right in the eye. Jeanne

standing there as surprised as all the other students and then, if there had been a fight, she would have dabbed a hankie at Harold's cuts and scrapes afterwards, saying what a brave thing he had done to the school bully. "Let me see you make a fist," Harold said.

The boy folded his hand into a small loose ball.

"Tighter!" Harold said, putting his hand on the boy's and squeezing gently. "That's it! That's a good hard fist. You hit Joey with that and he'll never forget it."

The boy nodded and appraised the fist. He seemed surprised to find it attached to his arm. He smiled a slim, satisfied smile, then looked puzzled. "Joey? His name ain't Joey. It's Tim."

Harold coughed, realizing what he had said. "I thought that was this other boy's name too."

The boy shook his head. "Uh-uh. It's Tim."

"Oh," Harold sat back. He hoped he was doing right. He wasn't sure. He thought about telling the boy the truth about himself. But it was too late for that. He had set the boy on a course, and Harold could only hope it worked out the way he intended, but ... he didn't know what ... just that he felt tired. "I need to go in the house now. You can stop by another time and let me know how things turn out. Pick some peaches if you want. Too many for just me." Harold stood. His right knee almost gave in. He stumbled and caught himself and the boy seemed to move a step nearer. Harold said, "It's okay," waving the boy off and reminded the boy to stop in again.

"Okay," the boy said and waited.

Harold walked him around the house to the street and stood at the curb to watch for traffic with him, though there wasn't much in his end of town. "Keep an eye out," Harold said, meaning for cars, and the boy said, "I'll watch for him."

The boy meandered across the street, intent on his hands, clenching and unclenching them into fists. He threw soft uncoordinated punches at the air, looking a bit like a newborn bird in his awkwardness. Harold sighed and closed his eyes and shook his head, unsure of himself.

When the boy turned the corner Harold walked back and onto his porch. He flopped back on the swing. He felt shaky and closed his eyes, then tried to rouse himself but could not.

He dozed, chin slumped onto his chest, hands flopped beside him on the rough wood slats. He dreamed vividly

of this new boy, James, walking into the bowling alley and smacking Joey Moss a good one; a solid right hook that knocked Joey flat. Jeanne standing behind the boy, wide-eyed at his nerve.

"It was my coach," the boy said.

Harold saw himself come in and touse the boy's hair and pat him on the back. Then he saw Joey Moss sitting there crying, and it worried Harold. He went toward him but Joey covered away until he was pressed up against the wall, his cheeks tear streaked, a fear in his eyes that stunned Harold.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Harold assured Joey but Joey shriveled into the wall until he was almost a part of it. Harold had to coax him away and put his arm around Joey's shoulder and wipe the tears away with his fingertips and soothe the boy like he was a baby. Then Joey said, "I'm sorry." Harold understood that maybe he was and it was a good time to let Joey go. "Well, it's all right then," Harold said and Joey, relieved, beamed a thankful smile.

They walked out, the three of them together, from the bowling alley into the woods it backed up to. "Good luck," Harold told Joey and the new boy. Joey smiled and shook hands with Harold, as did the other boy, their grips firm, and then the boys shook hands and strolled away, turning to wave as they went.

When they were gone, Harold smiled at the strange decency of things and walked a ways into the trees, glad it was autumn. Above, there was the canopy of yellows, reds, and oranges. The sky, a crisp blue, feathered in swirls of white. The leaves from summer covered the earth in a soft cushion and it felt wonderful to lie back and smell the loam and feel the cool air and hear the year-end songs of birds and watch the seeds of the maples helicopter quietly down, covering him in unruffled sleep.

Richard Huffman completed his creative writing undergraduate work at Eastern Washington University, and his graduate studies in sociology and creative writing at San Jose State University. His short stories have been published in *The Reed*, *Chicago Quarterly Review* and others. He lives in Santa Cruz, and has completed a gritty western novel.

DAVID CAMPBELL

The Giant (Ambush), 2013
Oil on Canvas, 7 x 12 in



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