

FICTION

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Whipping Boy

WHEN WE WERE STILL FRIENDS, Brian Culp and I, he told me everything. At a certain definite point in time we became enemies and then he clammed up completely, of course. Of course. What would you expect? But even then I knew him so well, in spite of his having far surpassed me in the matter of childhood suffering, that I could use my imagination to fill in the blanks. My imagination has never failed me. Never failed me yet.

Take, by way of example, Brian's Saturday night routine during the summer. He ran the same identical errand every Saturday night, returning a load of bottles for a refund and then using that money to help pay for a brick of neapolitan ice-cream.

There were certain undeniable facts connected with this errand that I could confirm with my own eyes. One undeniable fact is this: Brian's speed on the homeward leg of his journey was always much greater than that between home and store. Two reasons occur by way of explanation. First, he wanted to get the ice-cream home before it melted in the sweltering heat. Second, he was no longer constrained by the presence in his bike's baskets of two dozen or so coke bottles, bottles that he and his mother had packed in place lovingly and with such care, united in their resolve that every last one of them should arrive at the store in a fully refundable state.

But damn it to hell—not so fast there. Haven't I already overstepped the bounds of verifiable factual knowledge? How do I know, without actually having peered through the garage window while they were engaged in the process, that they packed the bottles in the baskets lovingly and with care? Perhaps they quibbled and

bickered between themselves the whole time. It could be that Brian's mother, a formidable woman, taller and much thinner than the average, treated him to a few slaps and then made him pack up all the bottles by himself. On the face of it, that is a perfectly plausible alternative.

All I can say is, to me it doesn't ring true. The imagination, I conclude, must submit in the end to the intuitive faculty. Whatever rings false must be rejected automatically, it must be rooted up and thrown on the rubbish heap where it belongs. My intuition tells me in no uncertain terms that Mrs. Culp never slapped her son. She would sooner have cut her own throat with a kitchen knife.

I've been feeding my imagination for years by meditating on such foolishness—on Brian and his mother and on what was involved in the unspeakably trivial errand he ran every summer Saturday night. In my crablike way, I've reached a number of conclusions. One of them involves the speed at which Brian pedalled his bike homeward, ice-cream in hand. I've decided there might be a third reason to explain his increase in speed, not just the logical and obvious reasons involving the presence of the ice-cream and the absence of the bottles. It may well be that the boy travelled faster simply because he was headed home instead of in the direction of a commercial establishment; in other words, he was impelled on his way by love. There is no way to verify that, of course; I am simply exercising my imagination. Over the years, for me this exercise has assumed the form of my own peculiar act of contrition. I'll tell you why that is. I suppose I'll tell you everything.

Routines, as any seasoned general might observe, are perilous. They are so for the simple reason that they invite your enemy to lay plans for an attack.

We were Brian Culp's enemies. By "we" I mean the children who lived on the same block as he in a rundown suburb west of Philadelphia. By the summer of his tenth year, we had his routines down cold. At ten minutes to seven on a Saturday night, we knew exactly where our favourite whipping boy would be. He was standing in the garage with his mother loading up the baskets of his bike with coke bottles.

Consider if you please how carefully they worked, packing first the wire panniers behind the saddle and then the wicker basket on the handlebars in front. *Laborare est orare*—the Benedictines

were as right about that as they were about anything. Work is always such a devout and eloquent activity, especially if you shut out everything else and simply observe the person's body as he does first one thing and then another. I can see, in my mind's eye, the Culps bent over Brian's bicycle, and to me it is precisely that servile, preoccupied curve in their backs that betrays the rich vein of their eloquence.

God forbid, they seem to be saying, that a coin should be lost or a bottle broken. God forbid Brian should have an accident, be hit by a car, encounter a bully, and so on and so forth. God forbid a burglar or a madman should break into the house in Brian's absence and throttle Mrs. Culp. At times this eloquent twist in their backs seems to acquire an urgency that is positively interrogatory. There they stand, two question marks made of flesh. Is it too much to ask, they seem to inquire, to eliminate the element of chance from life completely? Is this too much to ask? Couldn't it be arranged at least for people like us who are willing to plan so carefully and work like slaves in seeing our plans through to fruition? Is this really too much to ask?

The short answer is yes. Oh, yes it is. The fact remains that even with all the pains they took with those bottles they were unable to eliminate the malignancy of chance completely. The glass in the end was even more fragile than they suspected. Oh, infinitely more. And it was we who saw to that.

One summer evening while the Culps were thus engaged with their precious bottles, we busied ourselves collecting all the garbage can lids and stout sticks we could find. An alley bisected the block we lived on, and it was down this alley Brian always came on the first leg of his errand. At the bottom of the block, where the alley branched into a T, we took up our weapons, and there we formed the Saxon shield wall to meet him. By the ancient apple tree as it were.

It wasn't long before the target of our animosity appeared at the top of the alley, riding in his methodical downcast fashion. He always proceeded in exactly the same way, his eyes glued to the path before him, on the lookout for the immediate obstruction while it was still avoidable.

I can't tell you what a thrilling moment it was for all concerned when he first saw us. He'd made it halfway down the alley before

something prompted him to lift his head. His whole body registered the shock of seeing us waiting there, united against him. Swiftly he craned his neck around, as if to calculate whether he had the time to scuttle back to safety before we'd catch him. Then, without giving it another thought, he steadied himself and came screaming on towards us.

A boy named Stepbacker held point in front, metal lid in one hand and softball bat grasped like a downturned sword in the other. A fine jaunty pose but exposed. "Halt!" was all he had time to say before the first coke bottle exploded like a grenade at his feet, the shards slicing across his naked shins to bring the red blood out for everyone to see.

More bottles came flashing through the evening twilight. We caught them with our shields when we could. Those we couldn't sailed over our heads or burst on the ground in front of us. The noise of battle accumulated—screams of defiance and rage from both sides, the beating with sticks on lids. The line wavered but held until Brian smashed the centre of it with his bike, hoisting my brother off his feet and spinning himself to the ground with a smack that shattered more of his load. All up the block screen doors slammed and adults ventured into the alleyway the better to see.

Brian was up on his feet again in no time at all, pulling bottles out of the baskets with both hands and heaving them at our heads now, aiming to kill. I had a good look at his face before I turned and ran. His huge nose was bleeding, but not from being struck, I thought. I remembered he bled from the nose whenever he was very mad or frightened, an automatic reaction. His eyes rolled in their sockets and out of his mouth came a profusion of grunts, moans, and whispers of encouragement. "Okay," he told himself. "Okay, come on, don't worry." He kept throwing the bottles even after we'd all turned tail and run away, taking whatever shelter we could find in garages, on back porches, down cellar stairs. He kept throwing them until every last one was smashed to bits. The final two or three he simply lifted over his head and broke on the ground in front of him. By then he was hysterical.

I waited in our fenced back yard to see what would happen next, peering at him through a break in the boards. His old hag of a mother appeared and folded him in her arms. They seemed to be fighting for a moment. He flailed away and she battered back at him but gently. Until he clenched her head between his fists and

collapsed against her old beanpole of a body. Wailing. “I wasn’t doing anything.” And so on. The look on her face then as she stood with him in her arms, the way she held her head to one side like a bird listening. She looked directly at the break in the fence where I was standing. A change registered in her gaze—her eyes focused—and I realized she could see my face through the hole in the fence. She didn’t look away. I was the first to look away.

When they were gone, the other adults cleaned up, and one of them walked Brian’s bike back up the alley and left it leaning against the garage door. Stepbacker went to the doctor’s office at the other end of the block and she stitched his leg.

Goddammit, that look on the poor woman’s face haunted me for years. It still has a certain hold over me despite the distance (in so many respects) I’ve managed to put between myself and that wretched alleyway in a Philadelphia suburb. Her gaze passed so freely and easily into my heart, I think, largely because I was the only person privileged to see it. That one look had the effect of separating me out from my companions and even from the adults in the neighbourhood, elevating me in a way. The problem was I was afraid of what I could see from that elevation.

I have a highly respected position now, and there is no need for me to bother my brain with such stupid foolishness. The War in Vietnam pushed me from Philadelphia to Toronto, where I have stayed ever since, and here I find myself instructing university students in the literature of Anglo-Saxon England. But just as I imagined the Culps praying in vain to eliminate the influence of chance from their lives, so it has proved impossible to expunge foolishness from mine. The harder I try, the more it asserts itself. I see this not only in myself but in others too; in fact, I see it everywhere I look.

Just the other day, I was walking down the wide expanse of St. Clair Avenue, only a block or two from Yonge, when I heard the bleating of a lamb. It was quite distinct and unmistakable, but when I looked around I couldn’t find the animal anywhere. Then I heard it again. There was only one other pedestrian near me, a nondescript but well-dressed woman who was striding along minding her own business. Before I could look away, the woman’s lips curved back over her teeth and she emitted another bleat. Nothing else about her face changed, only the area around her

mouth, but the lips quivered exactly like the lips of a lamb when it lifts its head and bleats in response to its mother's call.

This is what I'm afraid of, that I'll be reduced to the same state one day, and my pent-up foolishness begin to announce itself willy-nilly and on a regular basis. Even when I wrote just a moment ago that I enjoyed a "highly respected position" in society, I couldn't help bursting into laughter. I think of those polls so solemnly set forth for the consideration of newspaper readers. Which profession do you admire the most? Somehow I always find myself and my colleagues—university professors, jackasses all in spite of our brains—right at the very peak of the scale, from where we can comfortably thumb our noses at the affluent lawyers on the bottom. Neither the complete meaninglessness of the poll itself, nor the prevalent and petty viciousness of university politics seem to have penetrated the popular consciousness.

But I've strayed off topic, I'm afraid, something I castigate my students for mercilessly whenever I find it in one of their papers. I was telling you a little bit about myself. Just enough to provide the necessary perspective, I think.

Success in the academic realm came more quickly to me than to any of my colleagues, and in the pride of youth I found that intoxicating. It seemed to me that my real life had only commenced with my career and that the years before belonged to someone else, a slighter, inconsequential person I was only too happy to forget.

In particular, the series of articles I mined from my thesis on the Anglo-Saxon erotic riddles had the effect of establishing an unassailable academic reputation, and the lengthy essay I wrote for a New York literary tabloid on "The Uses of Eroticism" served as my entrée to the popular press. I married a much older colleague, ensuring a barren but not unuseful union, and began almost immediately a series of affairs with my students, whom I find perennially irresistible, perhaps partly because they are perennially compliant.

One little sideline I began early in my career was book reviewing, both for academic journals and the press. I enjoy this activity for three reasons: it is absurdly easy to do, it augments my library at no expense, and it allows me to advance the careers of those who might be of service to me, while retarding the efforts of anyone who might do me harm.

Several years ago an editor sent me a coffee-table book on the Bayeux Tapestry, which has come to be a peripheral interest of mine and strictly speaking marks the end of my period of specialization. She asked for (and received) a proper hatchet job on the book. She described it in her covering letter as an agglomeration of pretty pictures with a text that never rose above the level of lowbrow drivel.

All true enough, except that the pictures were more than pretty, they were magnificent. Every scene in the Tapestry was reproduced in full colour, and most of them were given a whole page or a two-page spread in the oversize book. The detail was so fine you could see the patchwork repairs that have been knitted into the Tapestry over the centuries and you could even pick out the individual threads in the finely coloured embroidery.

In the western canon, the Tapestry stands as one of the great emblems of defeat and truly hideous brutality. Despite some advances in weaponry and tactics, it was still the case in 1066 that when you met your man on what the Anglo-Saxons liked to call the field of slaughter, you simply hacked away at or beat the shit out of him until he died. Then you cut off his head and stripped him naked. Few fatalities occurred instantly, an adverb we find for some reason reassuring when associated with death. William, the duke of Normandy himself, is shown in the Tapestry brandishing not a fine sword with ornately carved handle, nor a battle-axe like his enemy Harold, but a mace, which is a fancy term for a heavy wooden club covered with large knots. He used this weapon to fracture his opponents' skulls, something he could accomplish even through an iron helmet and a chain-mail coif.

I was leafing through the book in something like awe, when I came to a scene that stopped me cold and had the effect of completely spoiling my aesthetic response to the art. The scene falls in the section that shows the Normans plundering the Sussex countryside after landing unopposed on the English coast at a place called Pevensey. They bring all sorts of livestock and other foodstuffs into their camp and have a big feast with plenty of the barrelled wine they transported in their ships from France. Then the Normans build themselves a castle and burn down all the houses within a certain radius of it. "When in doubt, build a castle," might have served as a Norman proverb.

Each scene in the Tapestry bears a Latin label that explains the action and sometimes identifies the participants. The scene I

am concerned with is labelled *Hic domus incenditur*—"Here a house goes up in flames."

We see two Normans with torches, one on either side of the house, setting it afire. The man on the left is half-bald, with a long, sharp nose, a pencil-thin moustache, and a double chin. He has the bland, neat features of either a real killer or a competent administrator. He looks like no other figure in the Tapestry, and it is hard not to think of this as a portrait from life of someone who took part in the campaign, someone who a few years later sat for the artist's sketches that were transferred as cartoons onto the linen backing of the Tapestry.

The inhabitants of the house are also shown, a mother and son. They appear to us in profile, holding hands. She has raised her other hand as if in protest—"Why are you doing this?" The long sleeve of her cloak droops almost to the ground. This indicates, we are told by sartorial experts, that she was from the upper classes, since only the nobility could afford a cloak with such copious amounts of cloth. The boy's shoulders are hunched and he holds his free hand close to his chest, balled up in a fist. The two men pay neither of them any heed. They are engrossed in their handiwork, with watching the flames consume the house.

I hadn't thought of Brian and his mother for years; then I saw this picture and they came flooding back to mind. I saw that look on Mrs. Culp's face as she held her son in her arms, quieting his hysterical fury. I saw the two of them make their way back up the alley hand-in-hand like these, and like these without a single soul to take their part.

In every picture there is a presence and an absence. The artist has deliberately chosen to introduce certain elements to his composition, but he has just as deliberately ruled others out. Some of this missing material can be of great interest. The question that occurs when contemplating the picture of the burning house is this: Where is the husband and father? Why has he left his vulnerable family at the mercy of the Normans?

We know for a fact that William beached his ships on the English coast on 28 September 1066. We also know that on that same day the English king Harold and his army were far off to the north at York. They were still mopping up after their great victory over the Norwegians at Stamford Bridge three days earlier. I like to think that the husband and father who was absent from the picture of the burning house was present with Harold at York, one of his

housecarls, perhaps. We can only imagine what these men, still flush with victory, felt on hearing that the Normans had sneaked in the back door and were laying waste their home county. Yes, we can only imagine.

The truth is we shall never know for certain. Scholars disagree about so much to do with Hastings, it sometimes seems they can only concede the result—William beat Harold and killed him, then marched to London and had himself crowned king of England. Of Brian's father, on the other hand, we do know the cause of his absence from the little scene I embroidered earlier, we know it with perfect certainty.

I first became acquainted with Brian Culp when we were both seven years old and my family had just moved into the neighbourhood. It was he who sought me out, not the other way round, and he was attracted to me for another reason besides the similarity in our ages. As the new kid on the block, I held the promise of a friendship untainted by contempt.

He was already somewhat on the outs with the other boys in the neighbourhood. He'd earned a reputation for being a spoiled child, and he was different in a number of ways that made both the boys and their parents uneasy. He was unforgivably ugly for one thing, with a big beezer of a nose inherited from his father and a heavy, perfectly spherical head whose shape was emphasized by the buzz-cut administered to it every two weeks. Sports held little attraction for him, but he was mad about collecting things. He was never able to contain his enthusiasm for these collections of his and could talk about them for hours to anyone who would listen. This led the other kids to pick on him intermittently, and I'm afraid they were encouraged in this by their parents, who were vigilant in anatomizing the faults of other peoples' children.

The least worrisome or enviable of Brian's accumulations was a bottle cap collection that filled eight plastic buckets he kept on shelves in the basement. Those were just the repeats. The originals, along with any great rarities that came his way, he put in plastic sleeves in binders. He loved to leaf through these binders with me by his side. Although the caps were not labelled, Brian could identify for each of them the brand name, contents, and size of bottle and also tell when he acquired it or who gave it to him. He was mad about the colours on the caps and had given one

binder over completely to blue caps, which were his great favourite but relatively rare.

Mr. Culp found nothing unusual or to complain about in any of this. He helped his son organize the binders and persuaded people in his office to bring in all the unusual caps they could find. He was a nervous and highly strung soul whose most prominent feature was the gigantic nose he had, unwittingly or otherwise, passed on to Brian, and heavy bluish bags under his eyes which were very much his alone. These bags make me think in retrospect that Mr. Culp didn't sleep very well, and this in turn may help explain one of his more peculiar mannerisms, that of bursting into tears at the drop of a hat.

I suppose it's undeniable that the father spoiled his only child rotten. This would have been true even if Mr. Culp had limited his efforts to supplementing Brian's many collections. There was the matter of Matchbox trucks, for instance. Mr. Culp would drive the two of us all the way downtown, a complete shopping expedition, just to acquire the newest-issue Matchbox truck for Brian. When we returned from one of these trips, we would play with the truck collection on the floor of Brian's bedroom, but only he was allowed to touch the new one. My role was to look on and admire it from afar, something that increased his enjoyment of the toy tremendously.

His delicate constitution was yet another thing that set Brian apart from the other boys his age. He'd get carsick on the way back from downtown if the trip took too long or the day was too hot.

I remember in particular one burning afternoon in the car with Brian, who was clutching his new truck in one hand and discoursing non-stop on the question of what model would be released next, when he stopped speaking in midsentence, jackknifed forward, and filled a footwell in the back of the car with puke the colour of Pepto Bismol. My father would have slapped me hard enough to make my ears ring if I'd done something similar, but I didn't hear so much as a word of reproach from Brian's dad, not even the mildest recrimination.

"Are you all right, son?" he asked. "It's my fault, I'm sorry. I knew it was too hot for the car today." And so on.

This was just the sort of thing that would drive Mr. Culp to tears. He couldn't hold them back, they burst out of his eyeballs

like bullets from a gun. After blowing his huge red nose several times into what was, I think, the filthiest handkerchief I have ever seen, he dropped the two of us at a lunch counter called the Purple Cow and paid for milkshakes. When he returned, the car was spotless, you could hardly even smell it. He'd cleaned up the whole mess with his own two hands.

We were playing with the bottle caps in Brian's basement one day not long after the puking incident. We'd sink both arms into one of the filled buckets, then lift them up to feel the caps flowing in a lovely watery way between our fingers.

"Money," we'd say. "Twenty-dollar gold pieces. Pieces of eight."

We'd played the game many times before, but on this day Brian's usual enthusiasm was not apparent. After carrying the weight of the refrain for some time by myself, I stopped and asked what the matter was. It turned out he couldn't wait to tell me.

"My father had this big fight with his partners at work," he said. "These guys were supposed to be his friends, but they all ganged up together and stabbed him in the back."

A picture came to mind of someone sneaking up behind Mr. Culp and planting a stiletto between his shoulder blades. I could see the poor bastard stretching upwards at the blow, so surprised he couldn't even catch his breath. The rest of the jerks I pictured as forming a circle around the two men, jeering at Culp and egging the stabber on.

Brian wouldn't say anything more about it. In fact, he seemed able to forget the whole affair once he'd revealed it to me. Soon we were playing again, sinking our hands deep into the buckets and raising them up. The caps felt good flowing between our fingers, they sounded fine tinkling onto the floor.

We'd walk to school together every day, Brian and I and my younger brother. The funny thing about that arrangement was that strictly speaking we lived further from the school than Brian did, but it was always he who would stop by to wait for us, not the other way round. As he walked along, he kept his eyes glued to the ground, as if he were counting the total number of his steps to school, to see if they differed from one day to the next.

When school let out, we'd walk home together too, but then the three of us would take our own sweet time, seldom pursuing

the straightest path. If we were too late getting home, my mother would give us hell, my brother and me.

“Where have you been?” she’d shriek as soon as we walked in the door.

You could tell from the thickness in her voice, the way it caught at the back of her throat, she’d been at the beer. She would keep a little glass of it, about half a can’s worth, down in one corner of the sink. You couldn’t tell it was there unless you were standing right on top of her. She’d sing sometimes after a six-pack or so.

*I could have danced all night,
I could have danced all night,
And still have begged for more*

If I was standing in the alley behind the house on a summer evening with my friends, the song would drift out the open window sounding very sad and wistful. Beneath the voice you could hear the clattering of dishes as she prepared dinner. Everyone would stop what they were doing to listen. They would stop, listen for a moment, and then begin to snicker. She couldn’t hear the suppressed laughter, of course, and the singing would continue regardless.

*I could have spread my wings
And done a thousand things
I’d never done before.*

This may sound strange or grotesquely sentimental, but I think it’s true to admit that I never—no, “loved” is the wrong word because there was so little affection between us—but I never felt more deeply moved by my mother than in those moments when I stood in that shabby alleyway burning with shame and listening to the snickers of my friends mingle with her tipsy singing. I’ve never understood why that should be so, nor have I felt inclined to press the issue to find out.

Yes, but that howl of outrage if we came home too late. It suggested that we’d committed some unspeakable wrong that would haunt the family for generations to come. I must say, the woman had no sense of proportion. In the scales of her judgement, peccadilloes weighed just as much as mortal sins. The imprecations would go on and on until my father arrived home, when a sullen

silence ensued, one that always ended with an explosion of some sort or another.

One morning in early January we walked to school with Brian as usual, but at the end of the day he was nowhere to be seen. My brother and I dallied along the route in our customary fashion, and when we came home, there was our mother sitting on the ottoman in the living room. She'd been waiting for us, with a look plastered on her face that first I took for pique and then made out for terror.

"Oh," she cried and wrung her hands. "Brian Culp's father killed himself today. Hung himself in the closet with one of his own ties. Brian's mother only stepped out to get the morning paper, and by the time she got back the poor man was dead.

"Good Christ," said my mother. "First he loses his business and now he's left them all alone in the world. God have mercy on his soul."

Then she covered her face with her hands and filled the whole house with her sobs.

He wasn't in school for at least a month. Then one morning when the class filed in from the schoolyard, there sat Brian Culp at his old desk at the front of the room. He was sitting stock still and staring straight ahead, his hands folded on top of the desk. Nor did he look round to greet us. An excruciating moment for all concerned. His shaved head had a bulbous, fragile look from behind. The nape of his neck appeared so thin and stiff, you felt the heavy head might snap off at the slightest touch. But to us the most striking aspect of his appearance was that he'd been given leave not to wear the olive-green slacks of the uniform; instead, his legs were clothed in black flannel. He was someone set apart.

Another month passed before I found Brian waiting for me on the front porch of our house in the morning. I couldn't help smiling. I was glad to see him, I have to admit, glad that our routines were returning to normal. He, on the other hand, would not return my greeting or look me in the face. He only turned away and started walking. We didn't say two words to each other. This was towards the end of March. I'm not sure whether it is my memory or my imagination which informs me that the day was exceptionally fine, with a warm pressing wind that announced the imminence of spring.

We walked along and at some point my brother ran on ahead of us in the way that younger brothers have been programmed to do from time immemorial. Midway to school we came to a park equipped with benches. Sometimes there were older kids sitting on the benches who'd give us a hard time as we passed. Sometimes there were rough-looking older men who ignored us. This day the benches were empty.

Brian took a seat and motioned with his hand for me to join him. I sat down and he said something then that grated on me terribly.

"I wanted to ask you a question," he said.

This was the way an adult spoke. Someone your own age simply asked his question without a preface. I refused to reply.

"Did you," he said, then couldn't go on.

"Did you tell Stepbacker my father killed himself?"

It never occurred to me before that moment that Brian hadn't been told. I felt a wave of heat pass through and then a chill. I was aware of having committed a great wrong, and it came to me in a dim and dreadful way that thoughtlessness was no excuse.

I thought of my mother, who couldn't wait to tell me the terrible news. Someone else couldn't contain themselves either, or how did she find out? Surely, such a vivid vital rumour was bound to seek him out sooner or later and empty its poison in his ear. How had his mother kept it from him for so long?

He'd turned his face from mine and was looking at the ground. I could see his right ear, shaped like a backwards question mark, a funnel for every slander the world had to offer.

"I didn't tell him that," I said.

His eyebrows tensed and lines appeared on his forehead, but he didn't turn his eyes to me. I could see that he had something more to say but was unable to force it out. Blood, puke, tears, and words of every sort had once flowed so easily, but now nothing at all would come. He looked as if he'd been beaten on the head with a club.

From that moment on I couldn't endure him.