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**BUSTER**

THE FIRST TIME I HURT SOMEONE was also the first time I learned how long pain can last. This was back in 1971 when I was nine. It was a Wednesday morning and we were playing summer hockey at Terrace Park. We wore roller skates and glided around the rink after a tennis ball; we flowed back and forth clacking our sticks and wishing it was December. We pretended we were playing on smooth ice, but it was a buggy July day and we had to make do with the heat. Everyone was there: me, Greeder, Bags, Lammers, Dude, Vikingstad, everyone. We chased a tennis ball around the rink and hip-checked each other into sideboards. We usually stopped when the ice cream man jingled his way down the hill or when someone wiped out and bloodied up his knee. During halftime we pretended our bubblegum was chewing tobacco and we spit long gobs onto the tarmac or we talked about how awesome it would be if Bobby Orr played for the North Stars.

“That guy needs to leave Boston and join a *real* team.” Greeder stood up and made a microphone out of his thumb. He lowered his voice. “It’s a great evening at the Met Center tonight folks ... Orr breaks away, he shoots, he scores! *The crowd goes wild!*”

Hockey was my religion and I was usually picked first for neighbourhood games. “I’ll take Wohlers,” someone would say, nudging his stick in my direction. I’d skate over like I had nothing better to do, but inside I sizzled with passion and nervousness. At night I looked at trading cards and wondered what it would be like to play against the greats like Gordie Howe or Phil Esposito.

That particular morning was muggy, cloudless, and we dreamed of ice beneath our roller skates. That’s when Buster came jogging up the road. He used to be a professional boxer in the 1950s and according to my Dad he got his “bell rung” too many times. Buster always ran around in a snowmobile suit, even in late July, even if it was 110 degrees out. He wore a black ski mask, boxing gloves, and he always, *always*, carried a hockey stick. Whenever he ran past a stop sign he gave it a few hard whacks and kept on running. Most of the road signs in Juniper Falls had dents in them

because of Buster, and these spooky stories floated behind him about how he strangled a kid in 1958 and dumped the body in a vat of acid. As he jogged up the street that day we stopped talking. Something curdled in my spine as Buster came up the road in a ski mask. He was panting hard and when he cracked his hockey stick into a yield sign it sounded like a gunshot.

Greeder leaned into me. "Throw something at him."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It'd be cool. Huck a tennis ball at him."

"Why though?"

"Just do it, Wohlers. The man's a psycho."

Vikingstad wiped sweat from his forehead. "Forget about the ball, use a rock."

"I don't know, guys ..."

Lammers spoke next. "He's in a snowmobile suit, right? Lots of padding on those suckers, *lots*. He won't even feel it."

Someone put a baseball-sized rock in my hand and for some reason I thought about how David slew Goliath. We heard the story last Sunday when Father Berg looked out from his pulpit. I was an altar boy and I stopped playing with my cassock long enough to listen to these holy words about how the meek can overcome the mighty. Buster was a big guy. Massive. Could I hit him? Was my aim good enough to take down the giant?

My arm became a tight spring. I focused on my target and my feet made a few stutter steps forward and then the rock shot through the air. It was a rocket, and it cracked Buster in the head. He stumbled ... he fell.

"Shit! What'd you *do*, Wohlers?"

The man dropped like a bag of spilling ice. I couldn't believe how fast it happened. One second he's running along and then he's on the ground.

Greeder pushed my shoulders and told me to run away, but I felt all sticky and slow like I was caught in honey. The other guys gathered up their lunchboxes and told me to run, but Buster was on the ground and I stepped towards him, confused. He wasn't moving. My throat went dry and Buster still wasn't moving.

"Run, Wohlers!"

That's when Mrs. Iverson came out of her house and began shouting. She was wearing a nightgown even though it was lunchtime and she was smoking a cigarette. I couldn't understand what she was saying other than the words "police" and "stay there, Nick Wohlers!"

Hearing my name made me freeze and that's when I knew I'd done something awful, something really wrong.

Buster was taken to Saint Paul where they ran all these tests on his head. The police brought me home and my mother—she was horrified—banished me to my room, where I had to wait for Dad to come home from the plant. His truck grumbled into the garage and the front door slammed shut. There were muffled voices in the front hallway and his boots scuffed over the carpet towards my room. No knock. He came in looking like he'd eaten something sour and poisonous.

I can't remember what he said, but when it came time for punishment I was expecting my allowance to be taken away or having to sit in my bedroom for a week. Instead, I had to apologize to Mr. Dupree.

“Who's Mr. Dupree?”

Dad's eyes narrowed into slits. “Buster. Dupree. You'll go to his house tomorrow and apologize.”

Something oily fluttered in my gut and I started to protest. “But no one's ever gone inside his—”

Dad put up a hand. “This isn't a discussion, mister. You *will* go to that man's house with Father Berg and apologize for what you've done. You hearing me?”

My feet began to sweat and I looked at my socks.

“I asked you a question, mister. Did you hear me?”

I nodded.

“Your mother's fixing a peanut butter sandwich for you. That's your dinner. You'll eat it and go to bed.”

My father unbuttoned his factory shirt and turned to go. He touched the wall. “What were you thinking throwing a rock at someone's head? His *head!*”

Father Berg drove up in a rust bucket straight out of the 1950s. It was all chipped chrome and dented tailfins. A crucifix dangled from the rearview mirror and the whole car smelled of hot plastic. The backs of my legs burned against the seat, but I bit my lips because I didn't think I should fidget or complain. Some song from World War II was on the radio, something with a lot of trumpets and drums.

“Good morning, Nicholas.”

Father Berg wore black short sleeves and it was weird seeing the white square of his collar along with his hairy forearms. He lit a cigarette and blew

out a sail of smoke as he put the car into drive. I wanted to put my hand out the window to let it ride on the wind, but I thought I should be serious, so I didn't. Instead, I put my hands into my lap and pretended I was in church.

Buster lived in a trailer home surrounded by pine trees. There wasn't a garage or even a driveway, but there was a gravel path to the front door. When Father Berg shut off his big boat of a car, I looked at the trailer. A tarp was slung over the roof and there were floral drapes on the windows. Weeds were everywhere, tall ones with purple thistles at the end. A punching bag held together by duct tape was suspended from a tree branch and an American flag dribbled down a pole. As I looked at the overgrown yard I wondered where Buster strangled that kid in 1962. Where did he burn the body with acid?

Father Berg snapped his fingers for me to follow—"Come along now"—and gravel crunched beneath our shoes as we went up the path.

"Buster?" Father knocked and pushed into the murky dark. "We're here."

The place smelled of bacon and sweat, a fan was rattling somewhere and the floral drapes looked like illuminated squares of pale sunlight. Underwear and beer cans were scattered on the floor.

"Ye-es," came a voice. "I'm over here."

He wasn't wearing his ski mask and I could see that his nose was mashed to one side like a little omelet. Scars trickled down his forehead and he breathed through an open mouth. He was bald, which surprised me, and a cotton bandage was plastered tight against his head. There was a stain of purplely black blood.

"Co-come in," he shouted. "Hello!"

His snowmobile suit was unzipped to the waist and he didn't wear a t-shirt or anything. When he moved, I could hear some kind of liquid sloshing around in his stomach.

"Buster, this is Nick and he has something he'd like to say."

A hand pushed me forward. "Mr Buster ... I mean, Mr. Dupree. I'm sorry for throwing that rock. It was wrong and I shouldn't've done it." I remembered the part Mom wanted me to add. "I hope this hasn't made you feel like you don't belong to the community. Because you do belong and we like you."

The large man tried to stand but slouched back and touched his head. He groaned. Then he let out a high-pitched laugh and his feet moved back and forth like he was an excited kid.

“You call that a hit on the head, boy-o? I’ve been wa-wa-walloped harder than that. I’ve ta-taken my lumps. A rock weren’t nothing.”

Father Berg pointed at the wall. “Buster used to be a boxer. A good one.”

There were posters with Buster’s name in big block letters. In one, he had his arms raised high in a V and he was holding a belt. He bubbled with muscles, and I looked from that man to the fat snowmobile suit in front of me. They seemed like different human beings.

“You certainly have taken some lumps,” Father nodded.

Buster reached for a glass of water and gulped it down noisily, which made me feel like I could look around the place. Cans of baked beans were stacked in a corner and there was a soldier’s helmet next to a cookie jar. I moved towards it as Father talked to Buster about groceries and unpaid electric bills. Blobs of old butter were on the countertop and I reached for the helmet. There was a swastika on it.

Father Berg saw what I was doing and barked, “Put that down, Nicholas!”

“No-n-no. It’s okay. Go ahead, boy-o.”

There was a name on the inside—*K. Guth*—and when I put it on, it covered my ears. I had to tilt my head back to see.

“Buster fought in the Second War. He was at Salerno and Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge.” Father turned to Buster. “You got a Purple Heart and a Silver Star, didn’t you?”

The man in a snowmobile suit waved his hand. “Th-th-they’re here somewhere. I forget where.”

I wondered what happened to *K. Guth* and why Buster had his helmet. There was a swastika painted on the side and when I touched it this electricity of creepiness filled me up. I put the helmet down and stepped towards the man with the bandaged head.

“Mr. Dupree? Did you kill a lot of Nazis?”

Father Berg grabbed my elbow and roughed me towards the door. “I’ll be in touch later this afternoon, Buster. So long now.”

When we were outside Father pointed at my nose. “Don’t ask a veteran that question. It’s rude and we don’t like it.”

*We?*

He straightened his collar and looked at the ground. He took a deep breath. “You have to understand that war is the work of the devil. It’s a tough thing to talk about.”

Our feet scrapped down the gravel path and Father turned to me as he walked. "Have you heard of a place called Buchenwald?"

I shook my head.

"You've heard of the Holocaust, haven't you?" He squinted at the sky. "'Course you have ... Sister Margaret teaches it in Social Studies. That's when the Nazis rounded up the Jews and other people they didn't like and ..."

His voice softened and I remembered photos about what the Third Reich had done. Dead people were stacked like lumber. Their fleshy skeletons were turned into ash. Sister Margaret said it was like murdering the entire state of Minnesota. And Wisconsin. And Iowa.

Father Berg cleared his throat. "Buchenwald was liberated by the Sixth Armored Division. We were led by General Patton ... you know about Patton, don't you? He was a famous general."

I nodded, but didn't know who he was.

"Buster was in the Sixth Armored and he was one of the guys who saw Buchenwald. He was the first US soldier to go into the place." Father made a clucking noise with his tongue. "Your life isn't the same after clapping eyes on something like that."

Father leaned against his car and continued speaking. He went on to say that Buster was in the convoy that found Buchenwald and, as he approached the main gate, there was a pole barricade with a stop sign on it. Father Berg crossed his arms like he was a genii ready to grant me three wishes, then he lifted one of his arms like a drawbridge.

"That's what a pole barricade is. You push down one end and the other side goes up. Buster walks past the stop sign and he sees ... it's hard to imagine what he sees, but it made him hurt the German guards. He beat them up. He paralyzed them."

"Then what?"

Father let out a long whistle. "I'll tell you when you're older, but for now I want you to remember one thing. You listening, boy? Wars never end, they burn on in memory. You remember that."

"Is that why Buster's crazy?"

"Oh for God's sake, Nicholas! Buster isn't crazy. He was a boxer, and a darn good one, but he got hit too many times. He's experienced things a little differently from other adults, that's all." Father nodded towards the trailer. "You kids should be kinder to him. Remember that line from the good book? *Let ye who is without sin cast the first stone?*"

I looked at my sneakers. "I remember."

“And you know something about casting a stone, don’t you?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Good.” He clapped his hands together. “As part of your apology you’re going to spend the afternoon cleaning Buster’s yard. Put the junk over there and cut the grass with that push mower. If you have any problems I’ll be in the rectory.” He pointed at the church across the street. “Do a good job, Nicholas. Make things right again.”

The priest with the hairy forearms left the car and walked towards the church. The pine trees shuddered in a soft breeze and mosquitoes buzzed around my face. *Slap. Slap.*

I took a deep breath and started working.

It took a long time to gather up the junk. It took even longer to cut the grass with an old push mower that didn’t work properly, but I finally finished, dripping with sweat, and I was covered in bits of itchy grass. Blisters bloomed on my hands and I looked forward to getting home.

I picked up Buster’s hockey stick and gave it a swing. It was a Victoriaville like mine. “Goodbye, Mr. Dupree! I’m taking off now.”

There was no answer so I shouted into the window. “I hope you feel better. I’m sorry for what I done.”

The voice was weak. “Ye-yes, fine, boy-o. See you later.”

I walked home through a salmon-pink sunset and heard Father Berg in my head like he was a 45 record that wouldn’t quit. *Wars never end, they burn on in memory.* I whispered these words in rhythm to my feet. I bobbed my head to their syllables. *Wars never end ... they burn on in memory.*

I was nearly home when I saw Reggie Lambeth on his mother’s porch. He got back from Vietnam only a few weeks ago and he didn’t do much of anything except smoke cigarettes. He wore a camouflage jungle hat and his beard was straggly. Two years ago he was a baseball star in high school, but now he wore combat boots and drank beer on his mother’s porch. It was weird to think he was firing a machine gun only last month and now he was back in Juniper Falls like the whole thing never happened, like the jungle and the VC and helicopters were all a dream.

“Hey Reggie,” I waved.

But he looked right through me, like I wasn’t even there.

We didn’t see Buster for a month, but I kept thinking about him as we played summer hockey and went canoeing down the Juniper River. It was early September and the leaves were turning bright orange. I looked at

the sky and knew that snow, magnificent snow, was finally on its way back home to Minnesota. Soon we'd sharpen our skates and strap on our padding.

On the day before school started we gathered in Terrace Park for one last game. We were all there: me, Greeder, Bags, Lammers, O.B., Tim and Tom Lockhart, Smoothie, everyone. We were lacing up our roller skates when Reggie Lambeth strolled into the park. He sat near a weeping willow and didn't say anything. Zip, zip, we powered up and down the rink shouting plays. We cheered and shrieked while he smoked cigarette after cigarette. A ribbon of smoke came from his mouth and we pretended he was a scout for the North Stars.

"I'm open," I yelled. "Hey Smoothie, over here!"

It was halftime when my team skated off the rink, high-fiving each other because we were up three-to-two, and we opened a cooler of pop. Lammers saw Buster running towards us and this set everyone talking in loud whispers.

"He's crazy."

"A psycho."

"The man strangled a kid."

The words tightened around me and for the first time I wondered if Buster was maybe shielding himself from something. The snowmobile suit was a kind of protective armour, the ski mask hid his face, and his hands were webbed inside boxing gloves. As I thought about this the guys around me raised their voices even higher.

"He's like Charles Manson."

"A killer."

"Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"

Buster breathed hard and brought his hockey stick back like a baseball bat and then—*whang!*—he unloaded full force into a stop sign. His stick broke and the blade arched up up into the air. It was a rifle shot of a noise that made Reggie Lambeth jump up to his feet and look around. Then a ghostly quiet filled the park. Nothing moved.

I don't know why, but that's when I ran over with my new hockey stick. "Here, take mine, Mr. Dupree."

The big bloodshot eyes behind the ski mask blinked a few times. The mouth was open and breathing hard. I knew everyone was watching so I held out the stick like a gift and then, slowly, Buster reached for it.

"Th-thanks boy-o. Gotta run!"



He took off with my Victoriaville and I waved goodbye even though I knew he wouldn't turn around. There was a *thwank* as he hit a fire hydrant and turned out of view. I walked back to the rink and nodded at Reggie Lambeth, who was sitting down again and lighting a fresh cigarette. He tipped his baseball cap at me and slouched over the metal bench.

Greeder spoke first. "Why'd you do that? The dude's crazy."

"He's not crazy, he's just ... look, it's complicated."

Lammers was next to razz me. "You can't play now, dipshit. You don't have a stick and if you think you're using *mine* you're smoking dope."

Others agreed and they moved back to the rink shoving and shouting against each other. The clack of sticks filled the air.

The leaves shook overhead as I stood on the sidelines. It'd take a lot of pocket money but I could probably buy a new stick before the snow came. I looked up the hill and imagined Buster running through the streets of my hometown. He had a brand new stick and it made me feel good to think about that. I don't know why, but it sure made me glow.