

Getting Picked Up

This is back before he was a writer himself, even before he was a teenager into Def Leppard and began circling my car keys the way tigers stalk meat. This happened on the day I learned the danger of getting picked up, when he was six months old and lived in a world where dire consequences were all still ahead of him.

I was teaching then, Freshman Composition, at a private college where most students could name more fashion designers than poets. Still, many of my students tried hard, some had talent, and a couple were so gifted it took my breath away.

But the one on my mind that day was Harold.

He was a banking & finance major who sat in the back and never looked forward. No matter what I said, his eyes stayed fixed on the chest of the blonde beside him to whom he passed notes throughout class. I'd just graded his first paper, indifferent babbles with spelling that looked a lot like Middle English. But I believed I could reach him, that at the least I had to try. I gave him the paper, little on it intelligible or rational except my **F**, and said, "Harold, could I see you after class?"

"I got accounting at ten."

"It'll take only a minute. You'll be in accounting by ten."

"Yeah, all right. I might blow off accounting anyway."

After forty-five minutes of exploring Jefferson's argument in the *Declaration of Independence*, I let the class go. When all but Harold were gone, I sat in the seat still warm from the blonde and faced Harold. He put his sandaled feet on the back of the chair in front of him and lit a cigarette. He tossed the match on the floor, arched his head backward, and blew a mushroom cloud toward the ceiling.

"I was wondering why your paper showed so little effort. I'd told you good writing takes hard work."

"Bad day, man. Almost didn't do it at all. Besides, I don't get into this stuff. I didn't want to take Comp. I didn't even want to go to this shitty school."

"I'd like to help you to do better. Would you be willing to work with me on drafts of your papers?"

"Look, man, I need the Comp credits for the core requirement. My dad said to just get it out of the way. But I don't get into it."

"What do you get into?"

"Porsches. Coors. Women. You know. You were young once. Look, all I gotta do is stick it out for four years. I don't need good grades. My dad owns one of the largest banks in Chicago, and when I graduate I'm a vice-president. I need three credits in Comp, so I'm here."

"I know people are in this class for the core requirement. I'm not nuts about it, but I understand it. But they can't get those credits if they don't pass the course. If you don't start writing decent papers, you won't be able to pass."

"I'll pass. It won't be any different from prep school. This college needs a new theatre building, right? If I ask, my dad'll write out the check. He always does. I always pass." He ground the cigarette out with a sandal and stood. "Can I go now?"

"Yes."

I drove home slowly, discouraged about Harold, wondering how much longer I could safely impose on my mother to babysit three mornings a week. Then I heard Frankie Valli singing "My Eyes Adored You" on the radio and I began singing along.

Nita was at work, and I found Marty gurgling in my mother's arms while she sang him "I Love You, a Bushel and a Peck" as she had to me a generation earlier.

"How's he been, Mom?"

"Terrific. He drank his whole bottle. He's up to something, though. There's mischief in his eyes; I can see it. He's a lot like your father." She traced her finger along the rim of his ear. "It's time for his morning nap. Where do you want him?"

"Here," I said, holding out my arms.

As my mother walked out the door, I looked in Marty's huge blue eyes, hoping I could teach him to be a man half as well as he'd already taught me how much love I had in me. I placed him in his playpen. I tried my best to sing him other songs my mother had sung me, "You Made Me Love You" and "I Don't Know Why I Love You Like I Do," but I kept forgetting the words. I watched his eyes for droopy lids. They stayed wide as poker chips, full of blue whimsy. "Okay, kid, let's see if your grandma was right. I'll be right in that rocking chair, and if you're up to any tricks I'll see 'em."

He lay babbling for a few minutes, cool in his Pamper, banging a teething ring against his forehead, drool seeping from the corners of his mouth. I opened the newspaper and studied the sports page to see if my favorite Pirate, Al Oliver, had knocked in some runs the night before. Then I heard a shriek.

I looked up, curious but unruffled. It was a happy shriek. I was amazed. Marty had slipped his pudgy fingers into the netting of the playpen and hauled himself to a standing position. I'd never seen him stand before. He shrieked again.

"You did it, Marty! You stood up!"

His face lit with conquest. But only for a moment. He began to totter. He hadn't yet learned that standing was best done on the whole foot, not just the toes. The conquest vanished, replaced by a puzzled twist of the mouth that seemed to ask: *holy crap, Dad, what's gonna happen now?* His left hand slipped from the netting. *I'm messing up, Pop, don't look; this isn't going to be pretty.* The right foot started to slide on the plastic playpen floor. The left foot kicked sideways into the air as he started to fall. I leaped up to run and catch him.

Then I froze. I saw before me not Marty but Harold. I couldn't move. What had his father done when Harold fell in his playpen? Caught him? Written a check to someone else who'd catch him? If I caught Marty, when would he expect me to stop? When he went off to nursery school? When he failed his first college class?

I sat, fighting the urge to catch him and pick him back up.

He fell hard, landing on his back and rolling onto his head. His eyes bugged wide in amazement: *I've just fallen, what the hell does that mean?* He checked his arms, feet, legs. All undamaged. He laughed. Again he reached into the netting, pulling himself into a more cautious standing position. Again he fell, and again he laughed. He stood and fell several more times, then, smiling, drifted into his nap. Three days later, he had learned to stand on his own.