Too Late For Us

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Abstract

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“Okay, who’s got ‘em? Frankie?”
Frankie opened up the big grocery sack he was holding and turned it over on the ground. Eight or nine reddish-brown tomatoes came tumbling out, their skins dry and shriveled. A couple were downright rotten.
They were perfect.
“Holy Jesus, Frankie, where’d you get so many?” I asked.
“Mrs. Clinedecker’s got a whole garden of ‘em. I sneaked over our fence a few nights ago and got ‘em. Leave ‘em out in the sun a few days and they get real yucky.”
“This oughta show ol’ Mr. Demeter,” Mike laughed.
“They look like they’re gonna bust open just sittin’ there.”
Looking at the setting sun, I picked one up and hefted it.
“Okay, guys, we gotta get goin’ if we’re gonna do this before we hafta go in.”
“You s’pose he’s home right now?” Edward asked, popping the last of a chocolate bar into his fat face.
“I know he’s gotta be there,” I said, “I just went and saw his car in the garage.”
“Well, what if he’s waitin’ by the back door for us?”
“Why would he be waitin’ for us? We haven’t done anything to him for a few days.”
“But what if--”
“Edward, will you just shut up,” I interrupted irritably. “If you’re chicken, you can just go home and play with your sister.”
That did it. He lowered his head and mumbled, “Well, let’s go.”
Frankie grabbed the tomatoes and we cut through my backyard to the alley. I stepped into it and looked both directions. Not seeing anything, I motioned to the other guys and we headed up toward ol’ Mr. Demeter’s house. When we got there, I climbed up the outside of his fence and peeked over into his backyard.
Ol' Mr. Demeter lived alone in a small, two-story house with white aluminum siding, and a matching one-car garage sitting off to one side. Behind the garage, ol' Mr. Demeter's flower garden was in full bloom, and I was almost surprised that he wasn't out working in it. Leaning slightly atilt near it, with a few rumpled sheets hanging from it, was a square-rigged, tiered clothes-line that looked like a dilapidated TV aerial. Tied near the bottom of it was a length of chain with a clasp on the end. For his dog. Ol' Mr. Demeter and his damned dog. He was crazy.

We had to get him good.

"Okay, Edward," I said, jumping down from the fence, "you know what to do, don'tcha?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Then get goin'. We'll leave a couple for ya back here."

"An' make sure he comes to the door before ya give us the signal," Mike added.

Edward nodded again and took off in a waddling, bent-over run down the outside of ol' Mr. Demeter's side fence. We always gave Edward the job of going around front to ring the doorbell. It was the general consensus between Frankie, Mike, and me that if anyone was going to get caught, it should be Edward.

Meanwhile, Frankie dumped out all the tomatoes and we each took a couple, leaving the two smallest for Edward. We climbed up on the fence and looked over, breathing fast, and waiting for Edward's signal.

We waited a little longer and nothing happened.

"Geez, what's takin' him so long?" Frankie complained.

And then it came. We heard a mad scrambling about in the bushes up near the side fence, and then Edward's pudgy arm shot up above it, giving us an okay sign.

We were over the fence in a flash. Holding tightly onto our tomatoes, we rushed up towards the back of ol' Mr. Demeter's house as near as we dared. I made sure I was a little closer than the other two, and then, with all of our might, we plastered the back of his house, giggling in excited gusts as the rotten vegetables exploded against it. I threw one of mine at his screen door, figuring it had to be harder to clean off.
“C'mon, guys, let's get out of here,” I shouted in a whisper. We ran like lightning back toward the fence, just in time to see Edward mounting it and giving lob to his two. One fell short, but the other smashed all over a window.

We jumped up on the fence and got over it just in the nick of time. Behind us, I heard ol' Mr. Demeter's back screen door open, and his wheezy, old voice yelling at us to stop and come back.

We ran as fast as we could down the alley, and didn't stop until we'd gotten into our clubhouse in Frankie's backyard. Laughing hysterically, we all fell down and looked at each other with all the exuberance of a winning football team.

We'd gotten ol' Mr. Demeter pretty good.

It was the summer after we'd gotten out of third grade. The hot sun shone down on us nearly every day as we sprinted to each other's houses across the blistering pavements that soon callussed our bare feet. It was the summer of the never-ending army game against the German Nazis who were trying to invade our neighborhood. It was the summer that Edward's obese sister tore down the NO FAT GIRLS ALLOWED clubhouse we had made out of three large refrigerator boxes. But I guess I'll always remember the summer after third grade as the summer that we really got ol' Mr. Demeter.

We killed his dog.

Usually, we saw ol' Mr. Demeter driving home at a little past five o'clock every afternoon. As his elderly, sputtering Buick slowly cruised down the street, we could see his thick tufts of white hair barely showing above the car door. Despite our shouting, his bespectacled gaze was never distracted from the road. When he got to his driveway, his brakelights would go on, and the car would make an incredibly slow, cautious arc into it. Old people always seemed to drive that way, and it made us laugh.

Watching from the bushes across from his house, we always saw ol' Mr. Demeter lock his car in the garage, and amble across the yard to his front door. It seemed to us that he wore the same thing every day: a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a thin red-and-black striped tie, and big, dark,
Sketch

baggy pants that appeared to come nearly all the way up to his shrunken chest. He'd always take the mail out of the box, place it under his arm while he unlocked the front door, and go inside, reaching down to pet his dog as he shut the door behind him. Later, usually after dinner, as the late summer sun began to soften, ol' Mr. Demeter would take his dog for a walk. He never came down the street towards the houses where we lived, but instead went the other direction.

Ol' Mr. Demeter hated kids, and that's why we hated him. Although he'd never really done anything to any of us, we had heard about what he did to kids. A guy at school told us that once ol' Mr. Demeter had caught him playing in his yard, and had tortured him in his basement. He even showed us a couple of scars to prove it. Even Frankie said that one night, he'd seen ol' Mr. Demeter sneaking around in the bushes outside his bedroom window, trying to get in.

We hated ol' Mr. Demeter's dog, too. It was a schnauzer, and would bark its head off at the drop of a pin. Its fur was always kept close-shaven, except around its face and paws. We never figured out why anyone would want to give a haircut to a dog, and thought it was a pretty stupid idea. Something ol' Mr. Demeter would do. Sometimes during the day, when he was gone and the dog was tied up in his backyard, we'd climb up on the fence and tease it. The dog would strain against the chain and bark so loud we could hardly stand it. And it would never quit, either. Even after we'd gone off down the alley, we could still hear it barking.

That summer we mostly did stuff to ol' Mr. Demeter like throwing tomatoes at his house. He'd always get out there with a rag and ladder and wash it off real soon, and we'd get him again a few days later. Once we threw a whole bunch of boxes up on his roof; once we even got into his garage and let the air out of his tires. But mostly we threw stuff: eggs, crab-apples out of slingshots, sour oranges, and rotten tomatoes. Every time, he'd come outside and start yelling at us, even though by that time we were already hiding, and he couldn't see us. He looked sort of ridiculous out there, waving his arms about, and shouting to no one in sight about how they should be ashamed of themselves. He never did anything to us, though. I'm not
sure he ever saw us. He just went inside, came out again with a
ladder and rag, and began cleaning up.

Early one afternoon, right after lunch, Frankie, Mike, 
Edward, and I were out in the alley by Frankie's house. Mike's 
parents had just given him a brand new BB-gun for his birth-
day, and he was letting us all shoot it. It was pump-action, had 
a real wooden stock, and could knock the heck out of a pop 
can. We were all somewhat jealous, seeing as Mike's parents 
were the only parents who thought Mike was old enough for a 
BB-gun, and we were all just as old as Mike. Edward was the 
best shot among us, to our dismay, and was once again in the 
midst of proving this when Frankie spoke up.

"Hey, guys, look!" he whispered, "there's ol' Mr. 
Demeter's dog."

We all looked up the alley. Sure enough, sniffing around 
some garbage cans a ways up was that silly-looking schnauzer 
with the haircut. Somehow, it had gotten loose from its 
backyard. I had an idea.

"C'mon, you guys," I said in a low tone, motioning for 
them to follow. "Here, Edward, gimme that BB-gun, willya?"

Edward handed it over.

"Hey, what are you gonna do with that?" Mike asked me.

"Don't worry, I'm not gonna hurt it. Jus' give it a little 
sting in the butt to scare it off."

Mike opened his mouth to say something, but didn't. I 
began pumping the gun. I didn't really need very much, but 
for some reason I pumped it almost fifteen times.

Suddenly the dog looked up and saw us coming. For a 
second it looked at us with its head cocked to one side, and 
then it began to growl. Unlike its master, it knew who we were.

"Lemme get it! I know where to get it!" urged Edward, 
trying to be the hero, as usual.

"Will you shut up!" I said without taking my eyes off the 
dog.

It started barking.

Lining the gunsights on its hind end, I looked at the dog. 
It wasn't moving; it just stood its ground and barked at us.

My hands began to shake. I'd never shot at anything other 
than a pop can before. I really didn't want to hurt it too bad,
but then I thought about ol' Mr. Demeter. Ol' Mr. Demeter and his damned dog.

I pulled the trigger.

The moment I pulled it, I knew something had gone wrong. At last glance down the barrel, it wasn't aimed at the dog's hind end.

I heard the muffled hiss of the gun as it discharged, and saw the BB hit the schnauzer full in the eye. Mom had always told me you could put out someone's eye with a BB-gun. In one ear and out the other.

The dog yiped fearfully as its head jerked back violently. It stumbled once, dropped its head to the ground, and tried to stand up again. Still yiping, it half-ran, half-tripped for a few feet and then fell over on its side. Its four legs jerked a few times and then it lay still.

"Geez, why'd ya do that?" Frankie breathed, his face a mask of disbelief.

I didn't answer. I was so shocked and scared I thought I was going to throw up. My vision blurred and everything spun around a few times. When it cleared, I felt sick and wished I were dead.

As if in a dream, I heard Edward ask, "Is it dead?"

"Of course it is, you idiot," Mike shot back, his voice angry and scared.

The gun dropped from my hands. I couldn't say anything. I just turned and ran. Everyone followed behind me except Mike, who dropped back to pick up his gun, and then caught up with us. We ran as hard as we could, and didn't stop for a long time.

"Boy, are we gonna get it!" Edward groaned at last.

"Who do ya think'll find it?" Frankie asked.

"I don't know," I said, "but it'll probably be ol' Mr. Demeter when he gets home."

Mike didn't say anything. He just stood holding his gun and looking at the ground.

"Are any of you guys gonna tell?" I asked them.

Edward: "No way!"

Frankie: "No."
"Mike?"
"Nope."

Frankie chuckled. "Hey, no one saw us do it. What do we got to worry about? This oughta show ol' Mr. Demeter."
"Yeah, I s'pose it will," Mike said quietly.

We played army most of the afternoon. Edward and Mike were against Frankie and me. Mostly we just ran from hiding place to hiding place, arguing about who got who, who was wounded, and who got killed. Eventually, we all got killed about five times.

I spent that afternoon trying to put what I had done out of my mind. I was only scared that someone would find out, namely my parents. I'd get more than a spanking for this. But when I remembered that it was ol' Mr. Demeter's dog, everything seemed worth it.

Late in the afternoon, when we were coming home, we noticed ol' Mr. Demeter's car was in his garage. We all looked at each other.

"C'mon, let's go see if it's still there," I said, and we took off.

We looked up the alley from Frankie's backyard. We didn't see anyone, so we walked up to where we had left the dog. It was gone.

"Wow, somebody's found it already," Frankie exclaimed.

Edward made some stupid joke about it being good the garbage men wouldn't trip over it. Mike dug his hands into his pockets and looked skyward.

"Do ya s'pose ol' Mr. Demeter found it?" I wondered.

"It would probably be good if he did," Mike said, "'cause he usually never does anything."

"Let's find out."

The four of us crept up the alley to ol' Mr. Demeter's house. The gate from the alley to his backyard was open. As quietly as we could, we made our way to a place behind the bushes by the side of his house, directly beneath a window. We crouched there a few moments, listening. I put my finger to my lips for everyone to be quiet, especially Edward; he made more noise than anyone I knew. Cautiously, I stood up and,
cupping my hands around my face, looked inside.

It must've been his living room. The late afternoon sunlight filtered through a front picture window, across a worn, delicately patterned carpet, to a fireplace with an ancient-looking metal screen before it. The furniture in the room was nice, but somehow old, like in a silent movie. On the mantelpiece, I noticed a whole bunch of pictures of a lady. Most of them were old, taken when she was still young and pretty. Some had been taken more recently though, when she was old.

And then I saw him.

Ol' Mr. Demeter. He was sitting in a rocking chair over in a corner of the room, just rocking back and forth. I don't think he saw me. His head was bent over forward and pressed against something he held in his arms. His dog—his dead dog. Rocking back and forth.

He was crying.

Ol' Mr. Demeter was crying. I could see beneath his thick white hair the wetness that flowed down from under his spectacles. His lips were tight and trembling. He reminded me of the way my grandpa looked at my grandma's funeral when he dropped a handful of dirt on her coffin. He didn't look very mean, either. He just looked sad, rocking back and forth.

“Hey, whadda ya see?” Edward whispered anxiously.

Suddenly, I didn't want to tell him. I didn't want to tell anyone. I didn't want anybody to ever find out about the sad, old, helpless man crying inside.

It was bad enough that I knew.

The summer after third grade slowly wore on, each new day not being much different from the one before it. Every day, the sun seemed to get hotter and hotter, and the four of us played in the shade as much as we could. We hit record highs that summer. Although we never finished our army game, we thought we'd done a good job of holding off the Nazis. We eventually got Edward's fat sister back for tearing down our NO FAT GIRLS ALLOWED clubhouse. We heard one day that she was going down the street to show a friend her new party dress. When she came out of the house—frilly, pink,
and airy—Mike turned the hose on her and the rest of us threw buckets of sand on her dress. It kept everyone talking for a while.

As for ol’ Mr. Demeter, we stopped bothering him so much. A couple of times, Frankie and Edward talked me into going and throwing tomatoes at his house; Mike even went along, too. But ol’ Mr. Demeter never came out again to yell at us. He never even came out to clean the mess of the tomatoes off his house. He just left it there, sticky, reddish-green stains baking in the hot summer sun.

No one ever found out about what we’d done—what I’d done—to ol’ Mr. Demeter’s dog. Frankie, Mike, Edward and I—we never talked about it. We never forgot about it, either. It hung over the rest of our summer like the pall of pollution above a dirty, noisy city—thick and nauseating. Whenever I saw him out after dinner in the early evening, walking alone, a sick feeling would well up inside of me; I felt . . . afraid.

A year or two after that summer, I took over the neighborhood paper route, which I worked clear into high school. Ol’ Mr. Demeter was a regular customer who, like a few other customers, even gave me a five dollar tip every Christmas. Still, I always dreaded collecting every two weeks from him.

He always had his money ready for me when I came by. With aged, shaky hands he gave me the money, collected the receipts, and then he would look up at me, his eyes peering out harmlessly from behind his spectacles. He never said much, although sometimes he would comment on the weather, or ask me how I was doing in school. I tried to be extremely polite and would give him as big a smile as I knew how to give. Sometimes I felt like explaining to him about his dog, and telling him how sorry I was. But I never did; it was too late by then. And after he said “thank-you” and “good-night,” and had shut his front door, I always thought about the dog and the lady pictured on the mantelpiece—both gone—and I gave the knife in my stomach another twist.