One Sunday In The Park

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THE PARK is filled with ripened greenness. The wind flutters the leaves into sound and ripples their shadows through the grass. A stillness hangs heavy as the dew. It is early Sunday morning.

The crispness will soon wilt, however, as the sun dries the dew and the people parade along the paths. For it's a hot summer Sunday in Miltown, Iowa.

And it's begun already. There, at the edge of the park, a figure has appeared. It is coming into the park. Silhouetted by the sun at its back, it looks like a black bug crawling into a salad.

The beetle-shaped man creeps toward the middle of the park. His head is sunken into hunched shoulders. His two fat arms curve out; flabby hands stuck at their ends are curled about a gnarled cane. Each of his legs moves forward in turn laboriously, trying to overcome the friction of fat thighs rubbing together.

Finally, Apey reaches a green picnic table. He lowers his bulging backside onto the bench and plants his feet on either side of the cane. He sits, motionless, except for his face. His bug eyes dart under puffy lids, surveying the cool surroundings. His jaws chaw mechanically on a tobacco wad. The juices dribble out the corners of his mouth and drip onto the already stained shirt collar.
He sits alone.

"God Almighty, why do I always end up here? Can't sit home all the time, but why do I always end up sittin' here? S'quiet, though. Lotsa purty trees around, standing so straight 'n tall 'n thin—like I did once. Not like the ape I am now. Impressive they are—like I was once. George Duval III—that's a name for ya—George Duval III—good French stock, all fightin' men.

"All French are s'posed ta be great lovers, too. Ha! That's a laugh. Wouldn't a woman come near me now. Just once, I'd like to have one look at me without droppin' her mouth open and turnin' away.

"Guess I cant' blame 'em, though. Nuthin' very purty about me... But I still ain't no animal. They got no reason to treat me like one. Least they could do is be civil once in a while. Least they could smile or nod their heads or somethin'. . . ."

People are beginning to drift into the park. Picnic tables are topped with food baskets. Families spread out under the trees, imposing color and movement on the neutral green background.

Around the fat old man is a circle inhabited only by him. Children stop, stare or point, and are dragged away by anxious mothers.

But a gang of small boys has escaped the watchful eyes of mothers, who are lost in lively gossip. They run, screaming and howling, around the trees and under the picnic tables. Half are Indians, half cowboys. They gallop along on imaginary horses and fall to the ground in mock death.

Suddenly, the little boy in the lead sees the ugly man seated on his bench. He stops short, then whirls around and gallops back to his friends. All huddle around in a circle, peeking out at intervals to see the horrid-looking man.

They are plotting something, for there is an occasional giggle and shriek of laughter. Now the band breaks up. Each small boy sprints for a tree to hide behind. At a signal from the leader, all start up the chant: "Fat, ugly Apey. He's a little crazy. Fat, ugly Apey."

The old man starts and stares out at the trees.

From the one directly in front of him, the leader of the
group pops out. He is tall, a freckle-laced ten-year-old. His spindly legs jump up and down, and a spindly arm points out at Apey. Thick glasses perched on his nose jostle as he hops about.

“If you’d stop eatin’ up little kids, ya wouldn’t be a fat, ugly slob! Apey! Apey! Ya’ll never catch me ta put in your buggy old house. You’re too fat and slow!”

Apey raises his hooked cane and swings it in the direction of his antagonist. The boy jumps and runs back a few yards. At a safe distance, he turns and starts his chant again. The other boys group behind him and imitate his actions, sticking out their tongues between words. But they tire of their game and drift back towards their families and dinners.

“Nasty, kids! Dirty, nasty, little brats! Someday I’ll get ’em. No sense in ’em doin’ that. No reason for it at all. I’d just like ta get hold of ’em sometime, and then I’d teach ’em some manners. Looks like their parents’ ’ud be decent ’nuf ta do that. No need in them runnin’ round saying things like that. If their parents were decent, they’d make sure their kids knew how ta behave. Course, they’d say the same things if they could. They think the same things, else why would their brats pick it up. Nasty litle brats! I’ll get hold of ’em sometime, ’n I’ll teach ’em a thing or two, . . .”

The light begins to fade and the picnickers load up their baskets and douse their cooking fires. The park’s crispness is gone. Napkins and paper cups litter the ground. Matted spots mark where blankets were stretched for afternoon naps. The stench of hot dogs has not yet been dispelled by the evening breeze. And the summer insects are beginning to flutter hopelessly around just-lit street lights.

Harried mothers round up children and dogs and scoot them off in the direction of parked cars. Still the crowds give a wide berth to the bench on which the ugly man sits. At a distance they group in twos and threes for a minute or two and wonder about him.

He’s crazy, they know, but he’s never been like this before. How can he sit there all day, without moving? What does he think about? You’d think he’d get bored or tired or something. Usually he’s hobbling about on that cane of his. He probably should be put away, but you can’t really prove
for sure and certain that he’s crazy. Trouble is, you never

can tell when he might go completely off his rocker and hurt

someone.

Oh well! Speculation is brief. Each family has to get home
to put the kids to bed and catch the ten o’clock news, and
besides, the mosquitoes are really getting too bad. A frus­
trated mother makes a last effort to round up a wayward
child: “Jamie, if you don’t come here this very minute, you
can walk home alone! We’ll go off and leave you here—now
I’ve had enough of your nonsense!” But no Jamie comes, and
the park is, at last silent as dawn.

“They don’t care. I could sit here and die, and they’d
still walk around me. But they didn’t feel that way when I
fought for them in the Big War. They’d have called me a
hero then, if they knew. I wasn’t fat and sloppy. And if it
wasn’t for the war and what it done to my nerves, I wouldn’t
ever have been like this. But they figure all they got to do is
let the government send me some money, and that’s all the
pay I need for being what I am.

“And then they go and tell their kids to stay away from
me, like I was a bogey-man or somethin’.”

“Uh. Got to be gettin’ home. Can’t stay out here all night.
Wish that pain in my chest would go away. Damn doctor
doesn’t care what he gives me. Just sugar-coated pills—all
they are. . . .”

Apey sits hunched over the bench, one hand on his cane,
the other grabbing at his chest. His breathing is short and
heavy. But louder comes the sound of a little boy’s feet plod­
ding along in the grass and the high whine of a little boy’s
crying.

Apey sits motionless. The spindly legs come into view,
then the familiar freckle face. The boy’s eyes are red and wet
with tears. As he stumbles along, he doesn’t see Apey until
it’s too late. The cane snakes out and catches the small boy
behind the knees. He utters a tiny yelp of surprise as he is
yanked over to Apey’s feet. Then his eyes widen in terror.
Apey’s fat hand clasps the boy’s tousled hair, holding the
child firmly at his feet.
The boy squirms and cries out, but now his fear turns him to ice. Apey drops his hooked cane and brings his other hand down to rest on the boy’s bony shoulder. A grin cracks open Apey’s ugly face, revealing yellowed, decaying teeth. “Now,” he whistles softly. “Now.”

But the boy is too scared even to scream. Tears streak down his face unchecked, and his mouth works desperately to bring out some sound. Apey’s eyes glint as he watches the boy’s contorted face. Then—they soften, piteously, and two tears roll down his florid cheeks. His hand glides down the boy’s back till it rests on his flat fanny.

Apey brings his face close to the child’s, and shakes his head back and forth. “Why are you so scared of me?” The hoarse voice is full of pity. “You don’t have to be scared of me. I ain’t no animal. I talk like a human being. I got feelings like a human being. . . .”

The boy’s sobs convulse his thin body. His face glistens from his watery eyes and runny nose.

“Don’t be so scared of me,” Apey is almost pleading with the child, shaking him gently. “I’m a man—only a man, d’ya hear?”

He loosens his hold on the boy and gives him a pat that propels him away. His spindly legs churning wildly, the boy sprints out into the dark. Apey watches him with sad, puffy eyes, then slumps over the park bench, clutching his chest.

A siren splits the still air, growing louder as it approaches the park. But they needn’t hurry so. It will make no difference now. Apey can’t hear it, and he can’t run away.

His fat hand gleams white in the park’s gloom. A beetle, black in contrast, scrambles laboriously over the finger-mountains in its path.