Scarecrow

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I'd been reading about the Egyptians most of the morning, reading and waiting for Uncle Eddie to get up. Uncle Eddie worked the graveyard shift at Cook County Mental Hospital, so he usually slept most of the day unless the Cubs were playing at Wrigley; he had season tickets. The book I'd been reading said the Egyptians built the pyramids as kind of mass public works projects, so the people would have something to do. I'd always thought they'd built them just to bury the pharaohs in. I don't think I'd want to stack stones a thousand feet high just for the hell of it. Uncle Eddie goes to Cub games for the hell of it, at least that's what he's always telling Grandma.

I didn't much like the chapter my eighth grade history book had on the Egyptians, so I got the other book out of the library. The school book said the pharaohs were ruthless and made everybody they met slaves and had them build the pyramids so they could get buried there along with their jewelry and cats. This other book says the Egyptian leaders were worried that the different tribes would start fighting each other, so they got them all together to build a pyramid. I told Grandma about the other book and suggested we maybe get all our relatives together and build a pyramid or something, maybe like those cheerleaders did on that contest show Eddie was watching last weekend. She told me the school book was right, and why didn't I play with the neighborhood kids more instead of going off to the library. Didn't those guys play ball at the playground Saturdays, now that it was warm out?

Uncle Eddie finally got up about quarter to twelve, which was good because Ronnie and Joe Harris were coming by at noon to pick him up to go to the game. I allowed him time enough to go to the john and think about taking a shower before I showed up at the door, the book under my arm, to watch him shave. No matter what else he neglected to do in the bathroom when he got up, he never forgot to
shave. He would start with his neck, then do his sideburns, and finally the front of what Grandma called his "boo-boo" face. I think she meant baby face. The face hardly matched his body; Eddie was six feet five and a straight two hundred and twenty pounds. He had been a linebacker on the football team the year he was at college.

"Hey Braino, what are you reading now?" Eddie said, glancing at me, rubbing his fingers under his stubble filled neck. He always called me "Brains" or "Mr. Brains," or his favorite, "The Great American Reader," whenever Grandma Rosie wasn't around. I never said much about Eddie's nicknames for me. I moved the book around, so he could see the title. "The Egyptians?" he said, with a healthy amount of disgust in his voice. "Christ, they thought cats were some kind of gods or something, didn't they?" I shrugged a little and gave him a look like I wasn't sure what he meant.

The doorbell rang downstairs, and Eddie got a sudden pained look on his face. He quickly plugged in the shaver and nudged me out the door with his other hand. "I got to shave yet. Go talk to those guys and keep them away from Rosie, huh?" I said "Okay" and hopped down the stairs. I liked to watch Eddie shave because the electric razor smelled like the train set my dad put up on two pieces of plywood every year after we took the Christmas tree down until he and ma moved out to the country. I still live with them over vacations, but he doesn't set up the train anymore after the tree comes down. Ma and Dad wanted me to stay in the city and go to a private school, so I live with Grandma and Uncle Eddie and my cat.

I knew Ronnie and Joe Harris had let themselves in because Grandma was talking to them from the kitchen. If you were within hearing distance of her, she thought you ought to listen to her too.

"Joe Harris, you find that cat and wake him up." I slumped through the living room, seeing Joe sprawled on the couch out of Grandma's line of view.

"Hey Joe, where's Ronnie?" I called. Joe and Ronnie always came to get Eddie for these games.

He didn't remove the arm which was covering his face. "He got called into work," he mumbled. "Listen, kick the goddam cat so Rosie will be happy, okay?" He pulled his forearm across his eyes and forehead. "Hey, Rosie-girl," he yelled suddenly. "Come on to the game today. We've got box seats."

"I'll box your seats," she squealed back without hesitation.

I extracted the groggy cat from its habitual napping place behind the bookcase and deposited it on the floor next to the couch, within arm's reach of Joe. It pushed its paws out in a stretch and laid down again, and I trotted off to the kitchen.

Grandma was sitting at the kitchen table, peeling potatoes for the
potato salad she made every Saturday afternoon for Sunday dinner. She gave me a look of reluctant recognition. “That cat of yours bounced that damned golf ball against my door twice last night,” she pouted. “If it’s going to keep me awake all night, then I’m going to keep it awake all day.”

“You should’ve just taken the ball away from her,” I said pouring myself a small glass of juice that I knew Eddie would want as soon as he came downstairs. “She likes to start it out by the big clock and hit it all the way to your room without letting it stop.” Grandma didn’t look terribly impressed by the cat’s intelligence. “I think it’s a par four,” I added.

“I’ll par your four,” she said with a stern face. “You get in there and make sure that thing doesn’t go to sleep today.” I was nearly to the door when she hoarsely whispered, “Isn’t Ronnie there?”

I shook my head.

“Then tell them you’re going to go along,” she said through tight lips.

I stumbled into the living room and saw Joe propped up on one arm of the couch, poking the blinking cat softly. “This cat is stupid,” he yawned. “You tap it on the shoulder and it doesn’t even look around.” He jabbed it again, as if to prove his point. The cat shuddered briefly and laid back down.

“You boys take little Tony along with you today,” Grandma yelled from the kitchen.

Eddie came plodding down the stairs, cracking the knuckles of his left hand by pulling them with his right one. “Rosie wants us to take the kid along,” Joe whined. “Ronnie got called in to work,” he added almost sheepishly, sitting up. Eddie sat down on the other end of the couch; they looked like two tremendous and grotesque ends of a shelf with no books.

“You don’t want to go to the Cub’s game, do you Brains? Of course you don’t. Christ, they’re playing San Diego. Who wants to go see San Diego? I wouldn’t go unless I had to. We can sell Ronnie’s ticket at the gate.”

I stood off to the side and said nothing during his little speech. Grandma appeared in the doorway. “You can take him along. He needs the air and the sun. Look at his complexion; all he does is sit inside and read all day.” She pointed over at my bare arms. I tried not to look at any of them.

“Rosie, he’d rather stay here and play with his cat,” Joe interrupted.

“He’s going,” she replied through clenched teeth, her eyes wide with determination. “He wants to do things with you.” They often talked about me as if I wasn’t there at all.

“He’ll probably just sit there and read a scorecard the whole
game," Eddie smiled.

"I'll read your scorecard," Grandma snapped. She tip-toed up on the napping cat and spanked it once without warning; it scurried away and dashed up the stairs.

"Well, we've got to get going, anyway," Joe said, standing up. He yanked the car keys from his pocket and twirled the key ring around his huge finger.

"Okay, he can come along," Eddie conceded, giving me a shake of his head that indicated I wasn't to cause them any trouble the rest of the day. "Get your jacket, kid."

I ran to the closet, scooped up my sweatshirt and waited for the other two at the door. Grandma waved us goodbye and returned to do battle with her new enemy, the cat. I could have told her it would be asleep under Eddie's bed, but she didn't ask, so I never offered.

We got to our seats in the middle of the first inning; Joe had to park at least fifteen blocks away. I wanted to run, but I didn't say anything and they didn't seem in too big of a hurry to get there. In the car they debated various ways to get revenue against Grandma, and they settled on making her pay for the extra ticket since I didn't have any money. They asked me. I knew they would forget about it, though.

They each bought two beers from a vendor outside section twelve before we went down to find our seats. We were only about twenty rows from the field. The stands were sparsely dotted with spectators; I don't think the stadium could have been more than a quarter full.

San Diego scored seven runs in the third inning; the Cubs changed pitchers twice, but they still couldn't get them out. Most of the people in our section groaned whenever the Padres got a hit; a few of them booed when one of their players hit a home run to close out the inning's scoring. Joe and Eddie didn't pay close attention to the game after that. They tossed short comments over my head as they sipped at a seemingly endless string of beers; by the start of the sixth inning, there were at least twelve empty cups under our feet.

During the sixth inning, a short, stocky black man with a tremendously large afro slapped Joe on the shoulder as he walked up beside him. "Hey, fool."

"Leon, you dumb asshole. Where are you guys sitting today?"

"We were over in twenty-eight, but we're going to sneak down front for the last few innings." Another short black man was standing behind Leon, his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his leather jacket. He had on reflecting sunglasses and one of those little tweed caps like Englishmen in the movies wear.

"Were there any good looking broads up there?" Eddie asked, raising and lowering his eyebrows.

"Only a couple of thirteen year olds," Leon replied. "Just right for
you, though," he laughed through gleaming white teeth.

"Like hell," Eddie laughed back, shaking his head like a man genuinely disappointed.

"We'll be seeing you guys later," Leon called. He slapped his companion lightly in the stomach with the back of his hand, and the two of them marched with stoic faces down the cement steps toward the field. They sat about ten rows in front of us.

"Don't let that son of a bitch get away this time," Eddie spat out, eyeing a pot-bellied beer vendor walking up the aisle near Joe.

"Hey, two over here," Joe yelled.

The man deftly poured two bottles into plastic cups and took the money from Joe without saying a word.

After taking two huge gulps which emptied half the glass, Eddie decided that he wanted to get Leon's attention for something. He yelled out his name a few times, but the only responses were casual stares from the few people sitting around us. Eddie reached into the bag of peanuts he'd bought me and launched one in Leon's general direction. It floated easily through the air and landed without incident in Leon's spongy hair; he shuddered, but otherwise didn't seem to notice anything that happened.

"Did you see that?" Eddie roared, throwing his head back in laughter.

My peanuts were immediately confiscated and Eddie and Joe spent the next minute trying to land more peanuts in Leon's hair. I tried not to look, but I knew from random yells that several of the peanuts had found other, less receptive targets. I lowered my head and began stacking the empty plastic cups in a crude pyramid.

"Cut it out," came a booming voice. I looked up to see a large man with no shirt on and his hands on his hips, stating in our direction from two rows in front of Leon. Both Eddie and Joe faked offended faces and pointed at me. I bent over and laid the third row of plastic cups.

Eddie and Joe laughed as soon as the man turned around and sat down. "I'm going to get that son of a bitch one more time," Joe said, and flung a peanut wildly; it hit the straw hat of someone sitting at least six seats to the side of Leon and bounced down in front of him. A very skinny man with wire-rimmed glasses snatched the hat off his head and whirled around. He stood and peered in our direction; from there I could see his rib cage pressing against his paper-white skin.

"Hey," he shouted, as Joe was aiming another peanut at Leon.

"Sit down, scarecrow," Eddie chimed loudly, without a second's hesitation. Several of the people sitting near us, who were becoming annoyed with the peanut bombings, laughed in spite of themselves. The man with the straw hat stormed toward an exit, looking rapidly around him, presumably for an attendant of some sort.

"We better cut it out," Joe said, still snickering. "We might get
the kid here in trouble." I was looking back over my seat in search of more plastic cups.

"I suppose," Eddie replied. He was still chuckling as he drained his beer and handed me the empty.

About five minutes later, a stadium usher and a uniform policeman made their way towards us, followed by the man with the straw hat. He pointed in our direction, and the other two stopped in the aisle, which was three seats away from Joe.

"You guys want to cut it out with the peanuts," the usher said with the air of someone totally indifferent to the situation.

"What peanuts?" Eddie replied, turning from side to side with open-mouthed innocence.

"I know he was throwing them," the man in the straw hat huffed, pointing at Joe, who pretended to be watching the game with keen interest.

"Just watch it with the peanuts, guys," the usher exhaled, patting the policeman on the shoulder. I drew a deep breath as they both ambled off toward the exit, and the man with the straw hat tromped back to his seat.

"See you later, scarecrow," Eddie yelled after the uniformed men were out of sight.

"Yeah, see you after the game," Joe added with disgust.

They watched intently where the man sat down, and threw short glances that way after every few pitches.

Eddie still sported a sneer of general annoyance by the time the Cubs were coming to bat in the eighth inning. They had only gotten three hits all day, and the score was already nine to one. It looked to me like Eddie and Joe were only waiting for the man in the straw hat to leave, and I wasn't sure I was ready for any ugly scene that might develop.

Before I was really quite sure what I was doing, I rose to my feet and, with a long, swooping sideways kick, demolished the now almost three foot high plastic pyramid that was in front of me. Plastic cups flew in all directions; one landed as far as two rows away. No one was hit by any of them except Joe, who looked more stunned than angry.

Before he or Eddie could say anything, I groaned "Let's get out of here," and looked impatiently towards the exit, glancing with tight lips at intervals from Joe to Eddie.

Eddie stared at me like I'd suddenly been dropped from outer space and had landed next to him. His eyes were clear and vacant, his jaw dropped just enough that I could see his pale white teeth.

"Okay," Joe said with forced calmness. "It's a lousy game, anyway."

I marched toward the exit without looking back. I turned when I reached the cement incline that led to the concession stands, and ultimately, outside. Eddie and Joe looked like disjointed soldiers as
they righted themselves and filed down the steps toward me with zombie-like expressions on their faces. They paraded behind me as we exited the stadium; neither of them said a word until we were out in the sun again, and they were walking slightly in front of me as they usually did.

There was a car accident about a block from the stadium; a Volkswagen had slammed broadside into a Lincoln Continental that had tried to make a left turn in front of it. The driver of the Lincoln, a middle-aged lady with a bright green dress and spike-heeled shoes, was very upset and fretting to a bystander about the damage.

“I’m sure my insurance will cover this,” she kept blubbering.

“No way, sister,” Eddie blurted out as we walked by. “They just passed a law that says they don’t have to pay if you’re driving in heels.” He nodded at the surrounding blank faces for confirmation.

The lady wailed and buried her head against the stalled car; one of the onlookers scowled at Eddie and moved towards her.

“What did you say that for?” Joe asked, as we sauntered away.

“I don’t know,” Eddie shrugged and turned toward me; I was almost a full step behind them. He reached out and grabbed my head in the crook of his arm in a playful manner. “Keep an eye out for more accidents, Brains,” he said, throwing me in front of them. I raised my head and watched the cars crawl by, their engines mumbling against the open city.