



Scavengers

by Dylan Gilbert

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I tossed my Adidas bag onto the passenger seat and started the engine. I couldn't wait to get to the gym. I hadn't made it there once this week, but I would make up for it today—I had the entire afternoon.

As I backed down my driveway, I glimpsed a beige form in the street through the rear view mirror. Edging closer, I saw it was a dead squirrel splayed in the road. A car passed, moving left to avoid it. I stopped, fearing I might roll over him when I got to the street. Another car whizzed by. Thunk, thunk. The wheels rolled over the dead squirrel. The next car drove over him again, spitting the limp body out from under the tire. Jesus, I thought, can't they go around him?

I got out of my car and took the plastic snow shovel that was leaning against the garage door and walked down the driveway to the street. A car was coming, but it was far off. I inched the blade of the shovel under the dead squirrel, his innards hanging out of his belly, and tried to scoop him up. He was floppy and I couldn't get the shovel under far enough to lift him. It took me a half dozen attempts before I was successful.

A horn blared as I moved toward the sidewalk. I turned and glared at her, a lady in a white SUV full of kids, but she stared straight ahead, as if she hadn't just honked at me. I set the squirrel down in a patch of dirt under a Juniper bush in my front yard. I studied him, lying on his side, little hands curled up at his chest, lids closed over bulging, bloodied eyes. I gave the squirrel a silent blessing and walked back up the driveway. My hose was still in the garage, so I wiped the shovel on a pile of dead leaves to get the gook off and then in a mound of gritty slush left from the last storm.

I had no desire to go to the gym now and deal with all those people. Since Delia walked out on me, I've had trouble being around anyone: at work, in the grocery store, on the train. It's not just that she left, but that she left me for him, Peter Magnus, a friend of ours. And people knew, our other friends—they had to. But I haven't heard from any of them; I've been alone with this thing for weeks. Now anytime I get near someone, I feel skinless and want to run.

The gym was out of the question, yet being alone at home seemed just as grim. So I walked back down the driveway, peeking at the dead squirrel once more, then turned up the street, cars whizzing by me.

As I walked, I thought about a time when I was seven or eight and found a baby bird, only half her feathers in, at the bottom of a big Spruce tree. I couldn't find the nest, so I picked the little bird up and carried her home, keeping her cupped in my hands against my body. I

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made a nest for her with an old sock in a cereal bowl. My mom became shrill when she saw: "You'll catch a disease. We'll get parasites."

The baby bird was hard and dead in the morning. I buried her in the backyard and sat in a patch of grass by the mound for hours.

I had brought home other broken creatures as a child, a robin that had smacked into a window, a mole I rescued from a cat, but always with the same result.

I turned right on Foxdale, a quiet street lined with bare oaks and maples. A soft breeze rattled clusters of dry leaves, swirling them about in the yards of small, well-cared-for homes. A pair of ravens soared overhead, one swooping down and landing atop a gray Tudor. I walked a block and a half before a car passed and then it was quiet again, empty, and the calmness of the street consoled me.

I headed down a narrow path toward Ramon Field. There were a few wooden picnic tables by a basketball court where I could sit. I enjoyed that spot; it caught the sun and sometimes in the summer I would perch myself on a tabletop and watch basketball games.

I reached the park and the picnic tables came into view. But there was a man down there sitting on one.

As I got toward the bottom of the hill, I saw he was older, stocky, wearing nothing but sweats and a T-shirt in the middle of March. I wanted to take my spot at the picnic tables, but felt strange with this guy there.

I walked around the outside of the basketball court, studying the man, and realized I'd seen him before. He was a local character who often hung out on Main Street, talking to the shopkeepers and townies. He seemed to be working out a problem in his head now, his face fully engaged, his hands gesturing.

After my lap around the court, I had to make a decision: stay or go. I figured it would be stupid not to sit there just because of this guy. In the city strangers sit three to a bench—I could sit at a table twenty feet from someone. Without looking at him, I walked to the other picnic table and plopped down on it.

"Hey, buddy," he said, casual, like he was expecting me.

I glanced toward him. His face was big and red, his chest thick. "Hey," I nodded, then looked back toward the trees.

"How's the head doing?"

"Huh?"

He pointed to his temple and I realized he was talking about the Band Aid on my forehead.

"Okay, it's nothing. Just had a mole removed."

"Cut it off?" His voice had a barking quality, his eyes a strange look, like they were staring at me, but past me too.

"Yeah."

"I got moles all over." He untucked his T-shirt and pulled it up. His torso was large, not muscular, but not fat either, just thick and bull-like. "Can you see them?"

"Yeah, kind of."

He pushed himself up and walked toward me. "Look, got them here, here," he said, pointing to spots on his belly.

The guy was a kook, but seemed harmless. I chuckled and he got a big grin. "Got more on my back." He lifted his shirt higher and turned his back to me. "See, whole mess of them." I looked at his large back, which was covered with about a dozen moles, one spread out and swampy looking.

"You should get those checked out."

He turned toward me again, crinkled his nose, and swatted the air with a meaty hand. "Nah." He stood, his eyes on my face, but not my eyes. "You know me, right?"

"I think I've seen you in town."

"Yeah, you have. I'm Bolger's brother, Orton."

"Bolger? Hal Bolger?"

"Yeah, my younger brother, the crook."

Hal Bolger was a major player at Citicorp who resided in our town, born and raised here. He had been splattered all over the news lately for ethics violations and embezzlement. For a moment I thought this guy was delusional, yet the face was the same as Bolger's—older, rounder, less refined. But the firm brow line, the deep set eyes, and the strong nose were identical.

"I never would have guessed."

"Look." He pulled a thick wallet out of his back pocket, then sat beside me and opened it, revealing a faded black-and-white photo of two light-

haired boys looking very serious. "There we is."

"That's wild," I said.

"Yep, he was the ambitious one."

"What were you?"

"Well, I wasn't all there. That's what people always said. I'm still not."

"You seem all right." It was the polite thing to say, but I meant it, too. He seemed like a decent guy.

"Hah!" he bellowed, a big grin on his face, a black gap where three or four top front teeth should have been. He stayed like that, his mouth hanging open, staring in my direction but silent. I felt squirmy in the quiet and let my eyes drift back toward the empty basketball court and the trees beyond. He grunted and ambled back to his spot on the other table.

A moment later I heard a clucking sound and turned to see him on his hands and knees, making noises at a squirrel by the stone wall behind us. "Hey, little guy," he said, and clucked his tongue again. The squirrel stood up, alert, watching him. He took a few steps toward Orton, froze, then darted back to the stone wall, zipped up it, and disappeared into the brush.

"A squirrel got killed in front of my house today." I don't know why I said it. I didn't tell anyone anything—I hadn't even told anyone about Delia leaving. But this guy seemed like he might understand.

"Car or hawk?"

"Car."

"Yeah, they get runned over a lot."

"I was backing out of my driveway, and I saw him there in the road, dead. And this is what got me—people kept running him over."

He grimaced, open-mouthed. "Bastards."

"Yeah, just drive around him, for God's sake."

"No, they're all too damn busy, driving to the mall in their Beamers and Volvos," which he pronounced "Vowvows."

"Exactly."

"This place didn't used to be like this."

"I moved him out of the road and put him under one of my shrubs."

"Good. Poor little guy, he didn't deserve that."

"Yeah." I nodded, feeling a warmth toward this man. He got it.

"Oh, there's my pizza," he said, nodding toward a tall lanky kid with hair hanging in his eyes. The kid approached, holding a blocky red pizza carrier in his hands with a plastic bag on top. He set them on the table and pulled a pizza box out of the carrier, the whole time watching me with this odd look, his face crinkled up and eyes squinted.

Orton studied the big clunky watch on his wrist. "That took 40 minutes," he barked.

"Place is crowded," the kid said, looking at him sheepishly. "\$12.75."

Orton pulled his wallet out and put the money close to his face, then handed it to him. The kid shoved it in his front pocket, turned toward me like he was going to say something, but then spun around and left.

Orton pulled napkins and plastic utensils out of the bag, as well as a drink in a large Styrofoam cup. I felt funny sitting there with the guy about to eat. A couple of boys, one black, one white, had shown up on the court with a basketball. It was too cold to play, but I guess at that age, you don't feel it. They looked about fifteen, wiry, pretty good ball players. The white kid dribbled down the court, his body fluid, the ball a floating extension of him.

I heard a rip and saw Orton tearing the top of the pizza box off, steam rising from the pie into the cold air. He took a slice and pulled it away from the pie, stretching long strands of cheese till they snapped, and plopped the piece onto the cardboard pizza box top. "That's for you," he said.

"Oh, no thanks."

He crinkled his face, confused or maybe indignant. "That's good pizza. From Barrera's," which he pronounced *Ber-rer-o's*."

"But that's your lunch. I couldn't."

"You can have lunch too. It's big," he said, a lopsided smile on his wide face.

I threw my hands up in surrender. "Thank you, Orton. You're kind."

"Now the soda's mine," he said with a big open-mouthed grin, the black space prominently displayed where teeth should have been. "Stay away from my Mountain Dew." He held the big cup close to his chest

and took a slurp through the straw.

I smiled and watched the kids play one on one. The black kid swished a jumper with a hand in his face. Both kids were breathing heavy, exhaling puffs of steam in the cold air.

"Hey, I was just kidding about the soda. Want a sip?"

"No, Orton, I'm good. The pizza's great," I said, taking another bite. I felt content there, the winter sun on my back, munching hot pizza, and talking with this friendly oddball.

The whole thing felt a bit surreal. My wife was gone. Most of my friends were "couple friends," not guys I could really talk to. I hadn't even heard from them. They must have known. I was bleeding and these "friends" didn't offer me shit. Yet here was this guy, a bit on the margins of the community, a bit off, and he was beautiful. Offering me his pizza, his soda. I realized it would be good to see Orton again. Most people I knew, fake do-gooders, who were hypocritical and ruthless, would pass a guy like this by, but for no good reason. "Hey Orton, I appreciate you treating me to lunch today. How about I take you out to eat sometime?"

"I can't tonight. I'm going to Hal's," he said.

"Not tonight, sometime."

"Let's do March 25th."

"March 25th? Oh, tomorrow. Sure. We can go into town to the diner or something."

"Okay, I'll get a cheeseburger."

We decided to meet in the park at quarter to six and I gave him a card with my number in case something came up. He handed me a second slice of pizza and I bit into it, feeling the hot oil from the cheese on my lips.

"You ever been married, Orton?"

"Married? Hah! Who's going to marry me? I'm not all there," he said, with just a hint of sad snuck in behind the bravado.

"No, no, you're all right. If you're not all there, more people should be *not all there*," I said, looking at him, then back toward the game. The white kid backed up the other, but the black kid fought, his legs strained and bent, refusing to surrender ground.

"How about you? You married?"

"Yeah...but we're separated."

His face crinkled. "Oh, she's not coming tomorrow?"

I laughed. "No, she's got someone else now." I said it plain, flat, but it was the first time I had said it aloud. It felt like I was trying on something new, like a stiff pair of jeans. I had felt a little wobbly saying it, but it made me want to say it again, to feel the words in my throat and mouth. "She left me." It felt like a kick in the stomach, but good too, like that moment of relief the instant after you heave your guts out. "Left me..." I said it loud. "...for a friend of ours."

His brows furrowed in slow motion. "Bastard!"

I wanted to jump up and hug him. "Yes! Bastard! No good, sick bastard! And know what he is? A doctor. The elite of society. And he's an evil, shit bastard. And I'll tell you, Orton, this thing has just made me lose faith in people. Like, we're just an evil species."

"Not everyone's bad."

I felt lightness in my chest. "Yes, Orton, right. You're right. You're ten times the man doctor backstabber will ever be. You're more de—"

An orange blur whipped past. The ball smacked into Orton's cup, crushing it, soda exploding everywhere.

Orton jumped up. "God damn it!" The kids stood frozen in the middle of the court, their mouths agape, their eyes big. "Mister, I'm really sorry," said the black kid, stepping forward, his shoulders raised toward his ears.

"Sorry," said the other kid. "the ball just got knocked away."

Orton stood over the crushed cup, his shoulders hunched, arms bent. "Damn!" he said from deep in his throat.

"Orton, it was an accident," I said.

He squatted down under the table and pulled the ball out. "No, they're messing!" he snarled, his neck strained and red. He got up and walked to the kids. "Take your ball," he said, lifting it in the air with one hand, "you damn black!" And he hurled it at the kid's head.

"Orton!" I shouted.

The ball made a cruel ping sound as it hit the kid's face, sending him stumbling. The boy clutched a hand to his forehead and backed away. The other kid grabbed his arm and pulled him farther from the menace.

I was paralyzed, my tongue caught in my throat. Orton stood, breathing

hard, hunched over like a bull.

"Orton, they're just kids," I managed.

He said nothing, his nostrils flaring.

"You shouldn't have done that," I said. I thought to run after the kids, to make sure they were okay, but they had already reached the far end of the park and were leaving through the side gate.

"They were messing!" he said as he walked back to the table, kicking the Styrofoam cup.

I noticed the park was empty and felt a shift inside, like I might not be safe with this guy. Even if I was, I wanted to get far away from him, and every person on this planet. I definitely didn't want to be there when the kids' parents showed, or the cops. I faked a look at my watch. "I have to go. I have to be somewhere."

"You didn't finish your pizza," he said, no affect, as if he hadn't just attacked some innocent kid.

"Oh, yeah," I said, feeling like I'd regurgitate the sluggy cheese in my gut. "I'll take it with me."

I grabbed it and walked toward the gate. "See you," I said under my breath.

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

I cringed, a jolt of tension in my shoulders and neck. "I'm actually going to have to check my calendar," I lied. "I don't think I can make it tomorrow."

He stared, stone-faced. "I'll call."

I started to walk away, then turned back. "You know, those kids are going to tell their parents what happened. The police might come, and if they do, I'm going to tell them exactly what you did to that kid."

"The police?"

"Yeah."

"Psst," he said, flapping a bulky hand. "Hal Bolger's my brother."

I turned and walked away, the feeling of the nasty pizza in my gut, the semi-digested sauce rising in my throat. I still had the cold, half-eaten slice in my hand, but once I was past the park, I chucked it into the brush along the side of the road, then wiped my greasy fingers on

somebody's dead lawn.

I unzipped my down jacket and pulled it off as I walked up the center of the street. I held it by an edge and dragged it. I wanted to feel the cold, anything but what I felt.

As I approached my house I saw two ravens in front of the juniper bush, pecking at the dead squirrel. One jerked its head, tearing off a piece of flesh. "No!" I roared, sprinting toward them. Then I stopped. What difference would it make? If I chased them off, they would just come back. Or other scavengers would come.

As I got closer, walking now, the ravens stopped feeding and became alert. They took to the air as I passed, but landed close by. From the top of my driveway I saw them on the squirrel again, and a third had joined.

Scavengers. They're all scavengers.

Dylan Gilbert's fiction has appeared in *Slow Trains*, *Potomac Review*, *Word Riot*, and *The Westchester Review*, among others, and he has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He can be found online at <http://dylansstories.weebly.com/>.

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