



Pocket Philosophers

by Dorene O'Brien

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Daly says it's destiny causing all my problems, but I know better. It's Daly causing all my problems. Daly lives in a defunct cider mill just outside Lemmox. He's a drunk and a scrapper, but he's bright. He and Jared been carousing for over twenty years, and they got the scars to prove it. They can read each other's bodies like history books: the small scar behind Jared's left ear was from the knife poke in Saline after he fussed over that married woman; the jagged scar down Daly's back happened after he'd crotch-kicked one of them biker boys at Louie's; and the fourteen stitches from his forehead down the center of his nose, the ones I'm lookin' at right now, happened last night after he slammed his head into the aquarium at Pinky Tai's 'cause they didn't have no more Lucky Beef. That bastard's crazy, and I swear one day I'll kill him myself.

We were drinking over at the Apple Seed, me, Daly and Jared, and Jared says he's hungry. So Daly starts carrying on about Lucky Beef, how Pinky Tai's has the best damn Lucky Beef he *ever been exposed to*—that's an expression Daly uses more than I care to hear—how if he don't get some of that Lucky Beef yesterday he's gonna cave in. By the time Daly's done with a visual and olfac-try description of the Lucky Beef, Jared's passed out on the bar. I tell Daly it's late, but he does me like he always does and before long my sorry ass is behind the wheel of my rusted pickup. Daly throws Jared in the bed of the truck and we make our way up Pike and over the bridge into town. Sure enough, the place is closing just as we walk in smellin' of whiskey and no good. This whisper of a Chinese woman says, "We close."

"Listen, sugar," Daly starts in real nice, "I just want—no, I *need*—some Lucky Beef."

"We close," she says.

"Do you know you got the prettiest eyes I ever saw?" he says, thinking he's a little smarter than he actually is.

She stares at him, and then a little Chinese man comes out the kitchen.

"We close," he says.

"Are you the chef?" says Daly. "'Cause if you are, you're one kitchen magician. In fact, I don't believe I'll be able to sleep tonight if I don't get some of yer Lucky Beef."

Telling this story makes me laugh, seeing as I'm looking at Daly right now and he's sleeping like a dead man, out cold from that head-on collision with the fish tank. Anyway, the man says we can get a take-out order and this cheers Daly up considerably till he says, "But no

Rucky Beef."

Well Daly, who's prone to mood swings somethin' awful, starts fussing. "Do you mean you *have* no Lucky Beef or you won't give *me* any Lucky Beef?"

Now here's where I get worried 'cause I know Daly; his voice changes, his back gets straight, it even looks like his hair's standing up some. The little people stand there watching Daly's transfer-mation like it was nothing happening (though they ain't never seen his opening act, so how could they know?).

The man looks at Daly like he's cracked and says, "No Rucky Beef."

"Well, what if I just checked the kitchen?" says Daly, acting like the dang health inspector, and that's when I come in with reason, though that ain't never failed to fail before.

"C'mon, Daly. Let's just get some egg rolls." I turn to the straight-faced couple. "You got egg rolls?"

"Egg low?" says the woman. "How many?"

"Nine," I say, but I just know after Daly's Lucky Beef speech at the Apple Seed he ain't gonna let it drop. The woman reaches for a pad to write down the order—she can remember it, sure, but these people are proud of their record keeping—and Daly puts his mitt-sized hand over it.

"Now hold on a minute," he says. "I have this condition. I need Lucky Beef or I'll die."

The couple look at each other like they don't get it, but they stay still.

"No Rucky Beef," says the woman, who 'peers to be getting frustrated.

"What if I said I'm not leavin' till I *gef* Lucky Beef?" says Daly like he got 'em by the short hairs.

Then somethin' I never thought woulda happened does, and it ain't the part about Daly testing the aquarium glass with his head neither. The little woman in her red and white dress and shiny slippers, her dark hair all wrapped around sticks poking out the back of her head, her bony fingers on the edge of the order pad she can't budge 'cause this idiotic lug's strong arming her, starts screaming at Daly.

"You get out! No Rucky Beef! No egg low! We close! You get out. I cawra cops!" She reaches for the phone as the little man nods, but I can see he's scared, I can tell he wishes he'd brought along one of them ginsu knives from the kitchen.

Right then I take a tally: no Lucky Beef, thirteen straight whiskeys and the fact that he was outdone by a little smidgen of a woman and wasn't a thing he could do about it (Daly's a fighter, but he ain't never hit no woman). So he goes over to the fish tank real calm outside but bubbling over indoors and says, "Maybe I'll eat some fish then." The woman's yelling into the phone and she's excited; I'm betting they can't understand her but they'll be by soon enough.

"Let's go, Daly," I say.

"Well, I'm still hungry," he says, "and if these folks won't give me no Lucky Beef"—and he starts drawing pitchers on the aquarium glass with his finger—"I'm gonna eat the big black one with the wings, and that one on the bottom with the whiskers."

"Po-reese coming," the little woman says. Actually she sings it, her voice rising on the *ing* part like a little kid sees the ice cream truck up a hill. *That's* what helps it along, I'd say. Daly don't like being ignored or looking foolish, although he contributes plenty to making it happen. So he tries to lift the lid off the aquarium and I go over to stop him but I don't need to 'cause he can't get it off. The little couple just stare at him—they must know somethin' special about that lid 'cause they don't even move.

Daly's steaming when he says, "If I can't eat some Lucky Beef I'm gonna eat some *unlucky* fish," which I think is pretty clever for a guy just had thirteen drinks. He's fiddling with that lid and doing such a bad job the fish don't even look scared. I know Daly, and I know just then he ain't thinking about Lucky Beef or Jared passed out in the truck or even the police coming to haul him off. All he's thinking about is getting that lid off. Anyway, he's coming unglued, banging on the top, looking at the sides for a secret latch or somethin', and then I see red and blue lights bouncing off the red velvety wallpaper, streaking across the lanterns over the tables, even across Daly's face above that aquarium.

"Jesus Jude," I say to him, "you done me in tonight."

The woman runs to the front door to let in the cops and Daly stops and smiles. Right as Ned Pearson, the judge's cross-eyed nephew just new on the force, plows into the restaurant in his overstuffed uniform, Daly slams his head full force into the aquarium. I hear the crack before I see what happened, and I ain't saying I believe in animal cruelty or nothing, but I was hoping it was the aquarium and not his skull that went. The glass cracked in a straight line from his forehead to his nose, and he went down like a lead sinker. I ain't gonna tell him none of the fish got out, that they sealed that crack with clear caulk and by the next afternoon it wasn't leaking much.

I get Ned to help me throw Daly into the bed of the truck next to Jared and I head for Lemmox County Regional, where I pull right up to the emergency doors. Two orderlies come running out with a stretcher as I unhitch the gate, and at first they start pulling at Jared.

"No," I say, "the other one."

I have to help 'em haul Daly out the truck and struggle his six-foot, four-inch body onto the stretcher, and when I see his size 13 steel-toed boots hanging nearly down to the wheels, I gotta laugh.

"What about him?" one of 'em nods at Jared.

"He's just drunk," I say.

"And him?" he nods at Daly.

“Drunk *and* stupid,” I say.

They tell me they’re gonna hafta stitch him up, take X-rays, that it’ll be a while. I look at the cherry-colored bloodstains on his work jacket.

“Okay,” I say.

Jared’s snoring when I hop into the truck and head for Daly’s place. I try to think about what he’ll need—a toothbrush, clean underwear, some whiskey, his *Pocket Philosophers*, the one he’s always quoting from. “Life is either a daring adventure or nothing, Wendall,” he says to me. “Simplicity is elegance.”

I turn onto Old Mill Road. It’s plenty dark now and my lone headlight shines up into thick stands of Scotch pine and dark spruce. The road is potholed somethin’ awful, and it’s hard to see where I’m driving cause of my cockeyed beam. As I head uphill I start wondering if I latched the gate all right, if Jared ain’t slipped out the back—I’d have a helluva time finding him on this moonless night. I peek through the cab window behind me and there he is, all curled up on some burlap. It’s at least thirty minutes to Daly’s, and I’ll be damned if I don’t get lonely with all that dark and quiet. I aim for all the potholes I can make out, but even as we bounce along like an apple down the chute, Jared just rolls over and settles in again.

When I pull up to the mill, Trouble, Daly’s Boxer, bounds toward the pickup. She’s already drooling when I reach for the glove box and get the rawhide, and she sets still while I fumble the key off her collar in the dark. Daly stole her from a lumberyard when she was just a pup, and he called her Trouble for the fun of it. He’s always talking about how Trouble just follows him around, how he can’t go too far without Trouble hunting him down, how he even sleeps with Trouble, and this gets the women who don’t know any better feeling low down sorry for him. Well, the trouble with Trouble is she got beat up pretty bad by some guys at that yard and she’s skittish around everyone but me and Daly and Jared. Old Man Warner come over once to pick up Daly’s land survey—Daly leases his ten acres of apple trees to Warner, who combines it with his forty and sells to Mott’s—and when he went to scratch Trouble’s ear she near bit his hand off. That’s when Daly started putting the key on her collar. This also keeps him from losing it when he’s drunk.

“Go get Jared,” I say to Trouble, and she jumps against the passenger window, the rawhide dangling from her mouth. Then she runs around back and jumps against the gate, looks into the bed of the truck and gives Jared up for dead before following me into the mill. I click on the light where Daly set up the kitchen—he eats on the counter where the last owner used to sell cider and smoked beef sticks—and, as usual, the place is spic n’ span. There’s a wood burning stove in the center of the room and I check the woodpile since I don’t think Daly’s gonna feel like chopping with a freight train riding in his skull, but he’s more’n caught up. He got a yellow note tacked up above the steel sink, something I ain’t seen before, and it says in neat little letters: *Success is 99 percent failure*. “Amen,” I say out loud, and Trouble gives out a little whine. You can’t tell me she don’t know Daly’s gone and done somethin’ stupid again.

I grab a paper bag from under the sink and head for Daly’s bookshelves. They’re solid oak—Daly built ‘em himself—about nine feet tall and the length

of the south wall of the mill—forty feet, I'd say. My eyes get all crazy looking at some of those leather covers with the curlicue letters and, of course, I can't find *Pocket Philosophers*. He got books by a bunch of German fellas I don't care to spell out here, some foreign cookbooks, science fiction, and the smartest guy he *ever been exposed to*—Descartes. I throw a Descartes into the bag and head toward the metal "Mustard, Smoked Cheese" sign he left hanging over the bathroom. I throw his toothbrush in the bag and look for toothpaste but I can't find none. When I head for the closet, I see it on the window ledge next to the toilet: *Pocket Philosophers*. I throw it in the bag, then grab some underwear, a flannel shirt, sweat socks, his Bricklayers 204 union jacket and an army surplus blanket.

Back in the living room, which ain't a living room at all but a big open space in the center of the mill where the press used to be, I flop onto Daly's recliner and take a rest. Trouble flops down too, and by the sounds of it she's doing a dissertation on that rawhide. On the end table I see the photo of Daly, me and Jared standing in our waders holding up rainbow trout and smiling Olympic-scale stupid. My trout's the biggest, but that's only right since I introduced these fellas to the art of angling. I'd just pulled into town—still had my beat up couch and metal bed frame in back of the truck—and decided to stop at the first watering hole for whatever they had on tap. That was six years ago, and I can tell you Daly and Jared was in a pathetic state of trout fishing self-delusion back then. When I walked into the Apple Seed Daly was lecturing on fly tying. Every so often someone would say, "Is that so, Professor?" or "Smart boy like you oughta know." He was talking a blue streak where the facts weren't nearly as important as the delivery, and I could hardly keep still when he started in on the trout.

"You need a large, weighty fly with a flash of red." Here he touched the kerchief the barmaid had 'round her neck and I knew right off he was slick. "Trout need to see red if you want a good fight."

He seemed like a sociable, good-natured guy, so I said, "I think you're getting your trout and your bulls mixed up."

Daly looked at me, and it was then I realized he was about as big as a grizzly. "Excuse me?" he said.

"Well," I said, suddenly nervous as a blind man in a minefield, "trout don't care much about color. You can tag 'em with a red fly, a green fly, or a polka dot fly, don't make 'em no never mind. They just want something *shaped* like food and *move* like food, the bigger the better."

I was almost finished with my beer, but would have left the rest behind if that looked like the best course of action, and I thought about it when Daly got up from his barstool and started over.

"Name's Daly," he said, "and that's Jared." He pointed to a fella who was holding onto the bar like it was a telephone pole in a hurricane. "We're trout fishing tomorrow. Fall River. Interested?"

So that was that. We had a couple more beers and I told them about how the trout used to jump from the river, bounce two miles up a forest trail and then throw themselves at the kitchen window where my grandma used to tie flies. They helped me unload my stuff at the small A-frame my uncle left me and said they'd be by the next morning at five to pick me up. By five-o-one

we were in Daly's van—me, Jared, Trouble, a case of Millers, a fifth of whiskey and some fancy sandwiches Daly made outta half-moon shaped rolls and chicken. Trouble snarled at me the whole way, even after Daly gimme two rawhides for making friends with, but after a couple of trout and some full-scale sniffing, she calmed down considerably. An old fella fishing downstream came over for a beer and Daly got him to snap our picture with his Sure Shot.

Daly's high school diploma's the only thing on the wall, and it amounts to this: Daly ain't really no professor, although that has never stopped him from professing. He got a knack for philosophy, and since he talks pretty smart people around here have taken to calling him Professor. They think he knows what all about everything. "Professor, how my gonna get my tractor out the gulch?" and "What do ya think of livin' in sin before marriage?" and "How d'ya get grease stains off upholstery?" I guess Daly's a damn good professor 'cause he takes on every question without thinking too much.

I give Trouble a few pats and clip the key back onto her collar. Jared's still snoring when I cover him up with the blanket, throw the paper bag onto the passenger seat and make my way back toward town. It's about 4 a.m. when Jared knocks on the small window between the cab and the bed of the truck. When I open it he sticks his face in and says, "Where's the Lucky Beef?"

By the time we pull into the hospital lot Jared's laughing so hard he triggers a coughing jag and we gotta wait in the truck for it to clear out—you don't go walking into no hospital acting like you got TB. Daly's still out when we get to the room he's sharing with some guy jumped out the window of his married girlfriend's bedroom and busted up his leg. Daly's gonna have a philosophying field day with *that*. Anyway, I empty the bag into a little metal dresser next to Daly's bed and a big bruiser of a nurse with a cross 'round her neck comes in and starts manhandling his chart like it done smacked her around and run off with her best friend.

"How's he doin'?" I say.

"How does it look?"

"Well," I say, "I ain't of the medical persuasion like yourself."

"I'd say he looks like he commanded a freight train to stop, unsuccessfully," says Jared.

Daly's face looks like it been split in half and stitched up the center, and with his two bruised eyes it looks like he got a big ol' butterfly lying across his head.

"His blood alcohol level was point one-nine when he came in here." The nurse looks at us like she's studying a festering sore before stomping off.

Jared and me get some black coffee from a machine in the hall and get to talking about the real culprit here, Lucky Beef.

"You know beef ain't they specialty," says Jared. "They specialty's seafood."

"I don't see why they can't both be specialties."

He shakes his head like a man facing a river on a bicycle. "Cause what they got is plenty a fish. They surrounded by the H-two-oh. They ain't got no room in China for cows to be runnin' around. Hell, they hardly got room for themselves."

"Well, this ain't China."

"Folks stick with what they know. These people know how to fish and then how to cook it up. They ain't been cookin' up cows back in the Mink Dynasty. They ain't learned that till they come to 'merica, so how can they be any good at it?"

"It ain't that hard, Jared."

"Can you eat with chopsticks?"

"I ain't never tried."

"So what do you take to more natcherly, a fork and knife or some wooden sticks?"

"Well the fork and knife only 'cause I never learned—"

"That's right."

"But they can *learn* to cook cows just as good as shrimps."

"Will you ever take to the chopstick more'n a fork and knife?"

"That's different."

He waves his hand across his face to wipe me from his sight. "This only makin' me hungry," he says.

Three years ago when the little folks opened up Pinky Tai's there was lots of conversations like the one Jared and I just had, some of 'em occurring right there in the restaurant. No one could figger out why anyone would open a Chinese restaurant in Lemmox, 'specially these folks dressed in clothes with dragons on 'em didn't speak no English. But 'ventually they got the farmers and their families, some tourists come out to fish, even us bricklayers to point to something on the menu had enough English in it to sound good. They was always running when we was in there eating chicken with the almonds or Moo Goo Guy in a Pan or even Lucky Beef. People in Lemmox generly got to liking Chinese food, and I'd have to say we were all on pretty good terms till Daly tried getting into that fish tank the hard way.

Daly comes to just as Florence Night-in-gale finishes up with Hopalong next door, and she warns him not to sit up too quick.

"You're an angel of mercy," he says, touching his face about the center like he's taking a survey.

"Hmph," she says.

"So, what now?" Daly asks her.

"Observation," she says. "Doctor likes to keep head injuries around for a while, make sure they don't do anything strange."

"That doctor shoulda been around last night," Jared laughs, but the angel of mercy just squeaks out the room in them ghostly shoes.

"How's she look, boys?" Daly asks, pointing to his face.

"Prob-ly a little worse'n she feels," says Jared.

"No matter," says Daly. "Mission accomplished."

Jared and me look at each other. Either Daly thinks he got some Lucky Beef last night, or he thinks he got into that tank.

"Well, Daly," I say, "the only mission you accomplished was to avoid getting arrested, and you went about that the hard way, if you ask me."

"Bah," says Daly, "I made a person last night. I'm Dr. Frankenstein."

"You sure look like it," Jared laughs.

"Not the monster," says Daly, "the guy who *made* him."

"They got you on some kinda medicine?" says Jared. "We brought along some whiskey'll shake it out."

Daly waves his hand across his face like Jared done earlier. "Didja see that woman come to life last night?" he says, smiling like an idiot. "You should have seen it, Jared."

Jared scratches his head.

"He's trying to say it was all *part of a plan*." I say it like I heard Daly say a million times before.

"Well," Daly laughs, "maybe one I didn't know about goin' in." He rubs the back of his head, squints and says, "But *everything* happens that way, you know. According to a plan. I'm just doin' my part."

"Well, that don't make no sense," I say, and open the *Pocket Philosophers*. "Look," I point to the words to back me up: 'it is characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.'"

"Well," says Daly, "define *desperate*."

"Aw, don't start *that* again," I say, and start flipping. "Here. 'It is not enough to have a good mind; the main thing is to use it well.'"

"I do," Daly says. "Give it here." He yanks the book from my hand and flips directly to a worn, ruffled page. "Listen," he reads, "'it is the duty of the mind

alone, not the mind and body together, to know the truth.' The body ain't relevant here."

"You demonstrated *that* last night," I say.

"What I *demonstrated* is growth. Anyone can get mad. Hell, that's easy. But to get mad at the right person, at the right time, for the right reason, in the right way—that's *not* easy."

"You talkin' about you or her?" says Jared.

"She got mad as hell," says Daly, a small smile grabbing hold of his face. "She'll be better for it. She will. It's good to know what you're made of."

"So you're saying you just got a lot uglier so some woman you don't even know can see what she's made of?" I say.

Daly shrugs. "What are bodies?" he asks as he slaps the book shut and stares at the cover. "Tiny envelopes that can't begin to hold the human spirit."

Me and Jared look at each other—we done heard this envelope speech before.

"I'm too large for my envelope," says Daly. "My body's too small for my mind. Now and then I gotta break out."

"You six foot four inches, what more you want?" asks Jared, but I suddenly know just what Daly means. That feeling that nobody ever really knows all a person has in him, all his history, all his feelings, all the things he can do that nobody knows about 'less he turns himself inside out and makes 'em look, 'less he splits himself open. Sometimes a person just feels larger than life itself; sometimes you just need to break outta prison, cut ties with your own body.

"Folks need to be shook up just to see what they're made of," says Daly. "The world needs to be shook up."

"Well, you're doin' *your* fair share," says Jared.

"I can not restrain my will."

"Maybe you oughta restrain your drinkin'."

Daly just laughs.

"You look tired," I say. "Whiskey in one of your sweat socks in the drawer if you need it."

"Thanks," says Daly.

"Need anything?" says Jared. "You want we should call Hogan?"

"I guess," Daly mumbles, the thought of Hogan probably ratcheting up the noise in his skull. "Look in on Trouble. There's chicken and livers in the

fridge.”

“Check,” I say. “Anything else?”

Daly smiles and says, “Rucky Beef.”

Jared and me make our way over to Pinky Tai’s, and Jared goes in to ask if they got any Lucky Beef. Maybe the woman pairs him up with Daly and maybe she don’t, but she says they ain’t got no Lucky Beef, disgusted-like, according to Jared. So I go in and ask how much it cost to fix the aquarium, or how much for a new one. Daly’s good that way—he always pays for what he broke. The woman nods at the tank and I see they put some clear caulk over the crack—the glass is sweating some and there’s a few drips on the carpet, but nothing to write home about.

“Your flend clazy,” she says to me.

“You’re preaching to the choir,” I say.

“We have no Rucky Beef.”

“I’m gettin’ that.”

“How ‘bout Sesame Beef, or Who-Nan Beef,” says Jared. “He’s so banged up he ain’t likely to know the difference.”

“Beef fleezer bloke,” says the woman, and the words just tumble around my brain. I look at Jared and I can tell he ain’t doing no better with ‘em. The woman shakes her head like we’re slow children. “No beef,” she says. “Chicken fleezer okay, seafood fleezer okay, beef fleezer bloke.” She don’t really look like a little woman no more; she’s standing straight up and giving us the business about them freezers.

“The beef freezer done broke,” says Jared. “They ain’t got no Lucky Beef.”

You can imagine I’d grown mighty tired of hearing *that*. “Well, whaddya put in that Lucky Beef?” I ask.

“In-gredients?” she says.

“Yeah, like mushrooms and peppers and what all. Like if I was to make it myself.”

She thinks for a bit, then goes into the kitchen and leaves us standing there.

“She goin’ to get a translator,” says Jared.

“Ain’t nobody in there speak English,” I say.

Soon enough she come out the kitchen with some plastic bags full of vegetables. “Here,” she says as she shoves ‘em at me, “fie ninety-fie.”

I give her a ten and tell her to keep the change.

"You got ginga?" she says. "Sesame seed?"

I shrug.

She shakes her head and stomps off to the kitchen. She come out with more plastic bags, smaller ones. I offer to pay and she pushes my hand away.

"Now the question's this," I say. "How'm I supposed to cook it up?"

"What?"

"You know," I say, holding up the bags. "How do I turn this into Lucky Beef?"

She slams her hand on the counter. "We no give out lecipe!"

"Okay, okay," I say, nodding as I back out the door.

We drive to the Piggly Wiggly over in Truman to buy four big, lean Porterhouse steaks, and then we head for Daly's. Trouble's happy to see us, and she gets even happier when we throw her steak into a pan and it starts sizzling.

"All right," I tell Jared, "you cut that meat into strips look just like the ones at the restaurant, and I'll look through these books for directions."

He takes a carving knife and goes to it while I flip through the Chinese cookbooks for Lucky Beef, or at least its next of kin. It don't take long to find a dish that looks just like it, got the same vegetables and the sesame seeds and everything.

"Bingo," I say, and pull a large skillet off the rack. "Says here to use Chinese rice wine. He got any of that?"

Jared fishes through the cupboards. "Got some sherry. They use that for cookin', don't they? Daly'll like that."

"Okay," I say, "hand it over. And start smothering that beef with them seeds before I cook it up. Hold the fort on them vegetables," I say. "They go in last."

I flip Trouble's steak once and take it out the pan 'cause she likes it rare. I cut it up and put it in the china bowl Daly give her for her last birthday. At that moment, she's one happy pup. Jared got that meat climbing with seeds when I heat up the sherry and oil in the skillet to near smoking.

"Send 'er over," I say, and Jared starts laying the strips in the pan like they dynamite sticks on a hot tin roof.

"We gotta make some a that rice goes underneath," says Jared.

"Check," I say, and fish a box out the cupboard. The directions are pretty

clear, and I realize for the first time just how easy and relaxing cooking can be. I measure the water and rice and throw 'em in a pot, then I shift the meat around a little.

After we get the beef about half cooked up we start throwing in the mushrooms, peppers, spices, the white disks size of quarters, some sugar and vinegar, even some garlic Daly had. We lay on the soy sauce and let it cook a little. In the meantime we eat some of the chicken and livers Daly got in the fridge so we won't be tempted to eat what we're cooking 'cause it smells so good and we got a hunger to beat the smell outta skunk.

We open a couple a beers and Jared says, "We gotta call Hogan."

"Tomorrow," I say. "Don't want to talk to the devil on Sunday."

"He's gonna flame."

"He can go to hell."

Hogan's our foreman at the Brentwood Estates we're building over in Easton County for rich folks don't know what to do with their money. Daly actually got both me and Jared our jobs—got me on as apprentice bricklayer, Jared already knew what he was doing going in—'cause he's the union steward and he got say in such matters. I'm thinking about just the same thing when Jared says, "Think he's still steamed about McCory?" That happens a lot, us thinking the same.

"If it ain't McCory it's someone else he's hot for," I say. "Hogan's always thinking about someone."

We were on overtime Saturday morning putting the final shakes on a foundation when McCory, a new kid on the job Hogan been riding like a mule, runs a CAT into the east wall of the house we just finished next door and Hogan flies off like a man from a cannon.

"You stupid son-of-a-bitch," he yells at McCory, who's sitting on that CAT with his mouth open, looking as if someone else just hit that wall. "Back it out," Hogan yells, but McCory's so shook up he forgets to put it in reverse and smacks the wall again. Then Hogan's up on that CAT pulling him off by the shirt. Daly gets a gander and he's between 'em before I can ask God for assistance.

"You're fired," Hogan screams at McCory, and it's all the kid can do to keep from crying. Then Hogan stomps off and Daly stomps after him.

"Hold on," says Daly, all red in the face and looking like he needs to kill somethin'. "You just hold on."

Hogan stops walking, turns to face Daly, and I ain't never sure when this stuff happens if Hogan listens 'cause he's scared of Daly or 'cause Daly's the union steward or both.

"You're not gonna fire this man," says Daly, pointing to McCory, who's standing off to the side sniffing. "He's still in training. He messed up 'cause you been pushin' him to do the work of three guys since he started." Daly

gets up close to Hogan, puts his finger near Hogan's eye and says, "It's *your* fault he hit that wall."

"I can't afford mistakes," yells Hogan. "*His* mistakes. He's gone."

"All right then. C'mon, fellas," says Daly, waving his arm across the site as if to sweep us all up.

Jared drops a spade full of cement and climbs over the foundation wall, then Sam and Chevron wipe their hands on their aprons and leave the cement mixer, and Max and Ripperton climb down off their CATs and start walking, too. I take off my gloves and hat and set 'em on the ground.

"What do you think you're doin'?" yells Hogan. "What the *hell* do you think you're doin'? We're starin' down a deadline here."

"You take McCory back, we all come back," says Daly. "You fire him and we all walk."

Daly's the best damn bricklayer in the county, maybe even the state, hell, maybe even the world, so Hogan knows what he's losing. Of course Daly's always up Hogan's ass like a flaming hemorrhoid, so Hogan knows what he's gaining, too.

"All right," says Hogan, all red in the face, "But no one leaves till that wall is fixed, and I'm not payin' anyone past six."

"Fair enough," says Daly 'cause he saw what I did two seconds after McCory hit it—that there was only surface damage. We could grind it down, replace a few bricks. "Something else," says Daly, and here Hogan starts steaming 'cause he knows Daly don't give somethin' for nothin'.

"What!" yells Hogan, wiping his forehead with a stiff hand.

"We're *all* working towards improvement, not perfection," says Daly. "Every man here gets respect. You touch one a these guys again, there's gonna be hell to pay." Daly's shaking mad, almost as if he hates Hogan even more for backing down, for not hitting him, for not giving Daly an excuse to break outta his envelope.

Hogan nods and stomps off toward the trailer, the one where Daly spray painted *Man is born free, and he is everywhere in chains* across the side, and Daly tells McCory to grab a spade and work alongside Jared.

"Wendall," he says to me, "let's you and me fix that wall. Let's set a record."

We finish the wall and the foundation before six, and that makes Hogan none too happy, so we're feeling like we just won the war when we get to the Apple Seed and settle in for a few drinks. Thirteen whiskeys later Jared starts whining about being hungry, and you know the rest. Looking back, maybe Daly was still mad at Hogan when he crashed into that aquarium. Or maybe he was mad at himself.

"Hogan ain't mad at McCory," says Jared. "He mad at Daly but ain't a thing he can do about it but pick on the men. That's how he gets to Daly."

“Someday Daly’s gonna kill him.”

“Ain’t a man on the site turn him in.”

The whole mill smells of ginger and garlic when we scoop the Lucky Beef into a plastic bowl and the rice into another one. When we get to the hospital Daly’s awake, and the angel of mercy tells us the doctor gave him near a double dose of pain killers but it didn’t knock him out.

“You look like hell,” Daly says to me, and I realize I ain’t slept in two days.

“Well, you’re the authority on *that*,” I say.

Jared takes the bowls out the bag, then sets ‘em on Daly’s tray.

“You got your rice and you got your Lucky Beef,” he says as if Daly’s blind.

Daly stares at the bowls like they’re full of diamonds. “Where did you get it?”

Jared starts in on a ten-hour story and I just interrupt. “It wasn’t no trouble,” I say. “We cooked it up real easy and we can do it again whenever we want. I don’t expect that at the present we’re welcome at Pinky Tai’s, anyway.”

“Do not content yourselves with the opinions of others,” Daly says as if we’re the ones just tried to poke our heads through a glass wall without the aid of equipment.

Daly’s eating so fast the sparks are flying from his utensils. “This is the best Lucky Beef I ever been exposed to,” he says, and Jared says *thank you* like I was a piece of dust in the whole matter. Daly stops eating to look at us and then says, “You fellas have the souls of saints, do you know that?”

Well, I don’t see myself as no saint, and I sure don’t see Jared as one, so I let it drop and blame it on the medication. He sees he made us uncomfortable, so he changes the subject.

“Call Hogan?” he says.

“Yep,” I answer without looking at Jared. “Said you had an accident and he said accidents happen. Get back when you can.”

Daly don’t appear to be surprised by this, but that could also be the pills playing with

him. “You tell him I’ll be back before anyone expects me,” he says. “That’ll keep him on

ice.”

Then I decide to ask something I been wanting to for years, thinking maybe the drugs’ll make him honest. “Daly,” I say, “you trying to kill yourself?”

He puts down his fork and knife real slow, then looks at me. “Is that what

you think?"

Jared looks at the floor and I realize he's been thinking the same thing.

"Seems mighty coincidental, you putting yourself in per-carious situations," I say. "Fighting, carrying on, slamming your head into solid objects and such. Do you wanna die? 'Cause if you do I can arrange it nice and neat. I ain't gonna watch you kill yourself inch by inch."

Daly laughs, but there's tears in his eyes and now I'm sorry I asked.

"I like living more than dying," he says. "I do a little of both every day, but the scale's still tipped on the living side."

He starts eating again, but now Jared takes on.

"I ain't sayin' it does a good job or nothin', I agree with you there," he says, "but you still need your envelope, Daly. You gotta stop."

Daly pulls the *Pocket Philosophers* from under the tray and flips to the middle. "Read it," he says to me. "The underlined part."

"To give up the task of reforming society is to give up one's responsibility as a free man." I shake my head. "That's all well and good," I say, "but what about your responsibility to yourself?"

"And to us?" says Jared, which comes as a surprise 'cause I been thinking the same thing.

"You are my brothers," says Daly, and then he starts blubbering to beat the band. This'll be our secret forever 'cause it wasn't Daly crying at all but the painkillers acting on him. Then he says, "But know that if you wanna change things, you *have* to catch the eye of the world, you *have* to make a fuss."

"Well," I say, "we're just gonna hafta come up with a better way to make a fuss."

Daly thinks about this for a long time. "We can do that," he says quietly. Then he passes out.

I stare at Daly, the soy sauce on his chin, his fist curled into a tight knot, and I believe he wants to change the world one person at a time, to take on his fair share of *reforming* society. But when I see the *Pocket Philosophers* open on the tray, the stitches crawling up his face like a tiny railroad track, the union jacket thrown over a chair, I know that Daly is also looking for something else, looking to find in me, in Jared, in Hogan, in bar fights and in aquarium glass what *he* is inside, how far he'll go, what exactly he's made of.

and Found, her first full-length short fiction collection, won the USA Best Books Award in Fiction. She is currently writing a novel featuring fossil hunters in Ethiopia. Visit her at www.doreneobrien.com.

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