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ORION'S BELT

BY TOM SHEEHAN

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All things in that year of 1936 (as well as other years in that prohibitive stretch of history), when I was eight and the middle child of seven, were temperate and moderate to say the least, and signs of that firm modesty lay everywhere one would look. For me it was meal time as much as anything else that gave off signs of the times, because my stomach for much of every day had a language all its own and because all our meals were fixed more by economics of the period than by the design of any cook.

If I could have been embarrassed then by being hungry and noisy in one fell swoop, I would have been and with some justice or reason to it---but I wasn't, for it was not in the make-up that had been hatched for me. Hunger was an unknown though persistent sound, sub-vocal, more an ache in the gut than anything else, and what I've only come to know recently as peristalsis was its somewhat literal accompaniment, a sort of down-to-earth, slightly-less-than-volcanic expression of a natural order in its calamitous state. Meals were strict copies of bland predecessors: oatmeal in the morning, sometimes so thick and heavy it could be slabbed, sometimes thin as the gruel you might only find a description of in the Brothers Grimm---prepared in a thatched cottage or in a dank castle kitchen and given to the prisoners (and anything left over was given to my fiery Aunt Kay with which she tried to coax eggs out of a handful of oftentimes declining ducks); tomato soup and oyster crackers (for want of a better name) for lunch when we came home from school at noon time (with the doubly deep baritone Singing Sam marking the time on the radio); and supper, long before the terms became popular in the current magazine world, was always "pot luck" to my most magical mother, "catch of the day" to my stoic father, and "guess what's coming to supper" to the rest of us, four girls and three boys.

As it turned out, we were always hungry (state of the art my father came to call it in later in the comfortable years), but as healthy as young piglets, though without the fat portion. We were thin, we were quick of feet, hand and mind, and we never wanted what we never had, so it wasn't lobster thermidor or a roasted chicken or an eye of the round and heaps of fried mushrooms on the side that turned our mouths to watery caves, but one more decent mouthful of what we just had finished would often have done the trick.

And the clothes we wore, ordinarily as drab as the drabest part of the year, the stretch between the October fire and the first swirl of snow, (the corduroy thin and shiny in relevant spots, denim shiny too where it was most needed, wool stretched to its ultimate usage, cotton almost ready for Goldberg's junk wagon after one more wearing and one more wash and the ten thousandth time on the porch line), came circuitously with another kind of a price tag on them to "those poor, poor children who live on the third floor of the block." That was the seven of us, the

Wilcox kids.

That's how it came to be on a wild October Saturday in that fomenting year, a new wind at a frenzy, leaves well on their down-wind journeys and evening limbs becoming their spidery selves, Canadian latitudes already laying down on us their most serious threats, that Orion Stepinsward's belt, fashionably buckled on gold-brown leather which still had a sheen to it, came to be holding up my pants----the gray corduroy ones that no longer made any sound between the knees because all those minute corrugations had long since disappeared.

Mind you, I was not wearing Orion's shirt or jacket, not his pants, not his underpants, but his belt! Orion, schoolmate and classmate of mine, soon to depart for the private school scene, Fauntleroy even before Fauntleroy was thought of in my mind (Freddie Bartholomew bringing him home to stay as a real persona shortly thereafter), and son of the Gargantuan George---- bank director, mill owner, store owner, holder of the first pew in church and last word in town, and God Awful Protector of All Public Lands the Rabble Might Abuse.

To say that Orion and I didn't see eye to eye was easy. He was a snot of a kid from the word go, wrapped in ermine, silver-spooned, trying to speak the King's English so that we would know the difference---we Colonials, we whose parents and grandparents had been escaped prisoners from their own island. He was handsome, though; a lot more handsome than I was with my freckles and unruly red hair and teeth seemingly too big for my own mouth. I often thought my ears were too big too, but none of my family ever brought it up (though Patricia, once pointing at them, had obviously considered it in one of her moments). Of his good looks, you'd know the type right off the mark, having seen lots of them in the movies; dark and thick and wavy hair, high forehead, deep gray-blue eyes, nice nose, a mouth just short of pursed, a chin that was cut from some noble lord most recently out of armor. Normal ears, the kind that are mostly flat to the head and somehow not noticeable at all. Fair skin absolutely without a sign of blemish. Long dark lashes I think Patricia or Mary had looked at more than once to my everlasting dismay. A Norman, a Saxon, a Britisher rolled into the noble and everlasting One.

For the three years I had known him he was harmless, never saying much against me or mine, staying on the neutral edge (which I never once thought existed except for the faint of heart), skipping recess every now and then and as if by arrangement with the teacher when we played Total War so that he would not be involved, not get hurt, not get dirty. I would have to say, however, in all his defense, that he was an artful observer of the raree on and off the school grounds. If he talked about me early in the game it was only to my face. There, he had earned some respect from me, because plenty of my own kind often shot off their mouths, like absurd asides, without thinking of what kind of debris would come out with the charge.

As I said, it was October, the day was cool, the wind was whistling, my dark worn felt-like jacket with a wide flat collar was tucked inside my pants and belt line. Where the jacket had come from, I had no idea. My mother, a few weeks earlier, had gone into her room, just before I was to leave only sweated for school, and came out with it in her hands. She was tall and beautiful, with red hair and great blue eyes that could tell tales without beginnings or ends, and warm as bricks behind the stove. She did not look like other mothers, did not talk like them, gave little explanation and demanded less. "This is for you," she said, without any more qualification; she didn't carry on about source--whatever was was. The jacket was not new, but was clean and fit me like a glove and I could feel its wrap as secure as the kitchen stove.

When I bundled myself, buttoned, cocoonish, feeling tight and secure as a drum, and then suddenly pulling down my pants and sticking the jacket down inside my

pants, she walked back into her room and came out with the belt. "Wear this."

The belt had a splendid brass buckle on it that looked like sets of horns head to head, and it was made of a finely tooled leather, though a design I could not identify with any culture or creed. At my waist, cinched, jacket enclosed, it felt snazzy. It was elegant and adventurous at one and the same time, and had a girth grip to it that called at me. My arms and chest even seemed bigger. I did not question the source of such good feelings, or any part of that good feeling. Just to feel so rock-ribbed, strong, invincible on any playground and in any schoolyard, was tonic enough to me. I hugged my mother and can still feel the touch of her hand at the back of my head, as if she had said I understand everything you feel. The touch is airy, it is feathery, it is full of small charges of neutrons or other electrical energy that carry a message just as surely and as quickly as does any of today's media. It said I love you, be brave, your time is coming, things will get better, there will come a time when you will not be hungry, I got this belt and this jacket for you to wear, there are no questions to be asked, I love you, don't ask questions so that your sisters won't ask questions, I depend on you so much at times like this, always remember how this hand of mine feels on the back of your head and what I am telling you now without having to say it, love me back the same way, always love me back the same way and no matter what I'll know it, you can depend on that.

Orion's belt, then, on that cool Saturday, was doing its job, and no wind or cool air could seek its quick way down inside my belt line. It was cinched tight, perhaps an extra hole slipped through the buckle. We were at the side of the school, hanging on the iron fire escape, Donnie Gearty, Billie Maxon, Vito Rossi, Beau LeBlanc, Dermott MacReady, Endell Shah, Orion Stepinsward, and me, a regular League of Nations kind of gathering. Orion had a new football. He wanted us to play and he would referee. If we didn't, he was going to take his ball home; another message in a line of messages he had broadcast. Donnie and Endell could not have cared less, both of them sort of waxy and white and firm as clover. Vito and Beau and Billie could have spit, someone's teeth were grinding, and at least two of them looked at me as if to say let's jump him and take his ball!

I said, "I could take your ball away from you, Orion, and you could run home crying. Do you want me to do that?" I'm sure I framed the whole statement with my chest thrust out and the jacket tucked tightly into my belt line. Charles Atlas himself inside jacket inside belt inside a busting frame. The warm dark collar, almost felt-like, was thick and firm against the back of my neck, part of the ramrod affect it had on me. It even touched into my hands that had become fists approaching the hardness of rocks. The feather of my mother's hand touched again, touched on that hardness that was me and getting harder.

When he looked at me he had this funny sort of look in his eyes that I had not seen before (I had read a lot of his expressions, you can bet) and I knew something different was going to come out of him. "Sure, you could take my ball, and then, surprise of surprises, you'd have my ball and my belt." He managed a real serious smile that tore its way right down inside me. "That's my belt you're wearing. Might as well take my ball too. All my leather, all yours."

"You're a liar!" I screamed. "My mother got this belt for me."

"She got it from a box of stuff my father left over to Reiser's Bank. Hand-me-downs he called them, for the poor, for the destitute, for the needy. My mother and Juliet, our maid, scraped them out of my room. Now you have my belt. It might be my jacket, too, but I can't tell the way you're wearing it."

I ripped the jacket up out of my pants. "Is this your jacket?" I demanded to know, its full waist now exposed. Donnie and some of the others stared at me. Vito's eyes, though, had filled with fire, a black fire, a black fire I supposed was also in

my eyes. I don't know what really hit me then, but I was suddenly marking my friends, my enemies, setting people off to this side or that side. There were no fence riders as far as I was concerned, not in this life anyway. Vito, I knew, was right in my corner and was feeling just the way I felt, this awful sense of exposure, of being stripped of some of my respect, of some of my stature. I didn't like how I felt and could see the same reaction in Vito's eyes. And Beau had it too, that sudden heat you might have to count upon sometime, rising from the deepest part of the body, coming up out of all the roots. Their jaws were tight, locked hard and fast.

"It's not my jacket, but it's still my belt," said Orion. Then, in his haughtiest manner, with a face that has taken me a long time to forget, his eyes screwed up under that wide forehead, slatted so that he couldn't possibly take in all of me, his mouth in a pussy purse, his chin pointing at me like his big-shit father would do, he flipped the ball at me. My fist landed high on his head as he ducked. I heard my pants split someplace aft. He ran off crying. My drawers were showing. Vito slammed one fist into his other open hand. Beau faked a punch, a little jerk of his fist in saying Oh, boy, you just showed him! The others didn't seem to count any more, standing there like sacks of flour or sacks of oatmeal, their mouths open, their eyes blue and neutral and no kind of flame anyplace in them where you'd want a fire. I walked off toward home with my white drawers punctuating my backside. I had to talk to my mother.

So much was rushing at me as I walked home; there'd be noise from Orion's father that my father would have to contend with (there'd be raised voices, a few threats tossed on the air, a hands-off agreement finally cemented in place), the heat under my collar was still raging in a quiet way, the unspoken words my mother had offered when the belt and the jacket were given to me tried to find clearer meaning in my head, if I really was such a disappointment after her careful approach how could I face her, but I needed to know, wanted explanations.

The walk home was a major adventure in my mind because so many messages were coming directly at me. And so many images. Foremost of all of them was my mother, and the blue-eyed and red-haired solemnity that she bore with her, and which had crossed somehow between us. It was not so much a ritual but a feeling that such a crossing had been entirely necessary, and was only possible between the two of us. Nobody else could share that. She was harbor and haven, as steady as steady could be, and that import was in some manner at bequest; she had gifted me and it was up to me to use it. And here I was, hot under the collar, ragged at breath, a bit of blood on my knuckle, and Orion Stepinsward's belt still cinched about my waist. I felt the misery of failure swamp me as I climbed the three flights of stairs to our apartment. Still in recall is the weight of that feeling, a hollow sense of imperfection that crawled all over me. I kicked the risers practically all the way up, which was, unknown to me at the time, a clear cut message to her that I was coming along and bringing some kind of problem with me.

At the top of the third landing, in a light blue dress that caught at her eyes, a dark blue belt gathered at her waist that made her taller than she was, one foot set lightly on the landing edge so that her frame was slightly cocked at an angle and gave her an aura of an impatient mystic, stood my giant of a mother. Her arms were not folded across her chest as one might think, but her hands were clasped in front of her as if in minor prayer, a quick request for the good Lord's assistance.

"You've not forgotten what we talked about?" she asked. It was immediately clear to me that she had picked her words carefully; she had not said, You didn't forget what I told you, did you? That was not her style at all. She wouldn't lay it all across your shoulders at one time. The messages and the revelations were still coming at me, and here was this great dispenser of sagacity and behavioral attitudes who somehow had known that I was due at her doorstep with another package of trouble. Amazement transcended her. You have to know some other things about

my mother, and about me, I'd guess, at the same time, because here I was at eight years of age ascending the stairs and seeing her on the landing and I finding myself measuring my own mother. What she was and how she looked came straight at me. Her skin was as white and without blemishes as any imaginable, and you might see the like of it once in a blue moon, or every once in a while on something, like a brooch maybe, made of pearl or something from some island someplace. Not a mark on her, and she wore no color on cheeks or lips, nor red nor pink, and never got colored by embarrassment in any kind of situation, no matter what was done or what was said. She didn't poke at her hair all the time like some woman do, fixing what didn't need to be fixed. You never saw her with her hands on her hips as if she was getting ready to remind you of something she'd said beforehand about something you didn't do. There was none of that for her. Reasons were around for all kinds of things, both the good and the bad, and control was the ultimate of graces in her mind. She didn't preach it, she did it, so that we could see what it was all about. Frailty may be part of the human child, but it was not to be accepted without some cause or some explanation.

On the landing above me, tall, white like a birch after rain, her eyes as good as any kindly sky in summer, I saw in her my own immediate failing. She was what I wasn't and the world of difference leaped up inside me.

"I did it again, Mom. Orion said this was his belt and maybe his jacket and I punched him. He ran home crying. He said it in front of all the kids and I just had to hit him. He made me so mad I couldn't help it."

"That's not the truest statement you've ever made, is it?" If there was one thing you could count on, more than what I've already said about her, it was that she'd always give you the first chance to explain a deed or a misdeed. My father was not like that at all; there'd be a problem and a strap or a whipping, neither of them too heavy or too careless to be sure, but punishment of itself, and mere explanations would come along afterward from either side. I felt like leaping upon her and being drawn in, but she would let me know that there was a small bridge to be crossed before such twining could take place. One of her difficult-to-imagine but obviously true adages was that growing up is letting go, and I knew at that moment I was at the very edge of a new life. It was difficult to acknowledge the break. But Terry and Michael had made it and I'd be expected to make the same break. An ominous sense of loss came over me on the stairs, at her feet, looking up at her, feeling eight but feeling much older, loving her with my whole heart, feeling terrible again that I had let her down, waiting for some note of calmness and acceptance that all would be right in my life, that she would not show disappointment in me.

Then, in the merest second, with the utmost illumination one can imagine, all of life began to change before my very eyes. I can tell you now that color changed and thought changed and imagery changed and decades changed and history changed---and love changed, right down to the last penny of it. Love became a real thing, not a rose-smelling satisfaction, not a self-indulgent ache. In one instant it became, at another and most infinite level, a command of life. There above me, birch tall and white as I said, the light suddenly left her eyes as if it was drawn in, as if a vacuum was drawing on her outer parts. Her right hand leaped to her left breast. Her left hand reached out to touch me, to speak, to talk to me, to tell me what it was at that mere moment. She seemed to implode, going back in to herself, all her parts drawn inward like reclamation of sorts, a claim being made. Her mouth opened, yet her cheeks were sucked in on themselves as if she was going to utter one Oh, one long and drawn out Oh, one Oh to last me a whole lifetime, which indeed it has. An Oh I am bound to carry all the days of my life. I felt the nails of her left hand rake my cheek, and then that hand went to join her other, clasped they became over her breast tighter than prayer, more serious than prayer, fists of bone yet the skin still so white, so much better than pearl.

On my cheek I could feel the remnant of pain and the onset of blood being freed; it

flowed down my face. My mother had cut me! But something greater was wrong. There was a knife of thought gouging at me and digging up disbelief. It dug deeper. She imploded and I exploded as a wild, wild agony cut loose itself. Her eyes had gone back into that past only she knew. She was not sharing, that I knew. Her hands clenched themselves more strongly and more possessively, some treasure being squeezed up in them, some artifact with one handle left for grasping.

Then, slowly, a soft look surfacing on her face, almost an apology on that beautiful whiteness now only finding a new color tinting it, she began to sink, first to her knees the way she sort of sloped herself to the kneeler in church, her back straight, one hand in front of her which I know was for one more touch of me (for I was at that moment her universal child, her one contact with this life) rather than for the back of a pew to hold her, then to her haunches. To this day I know that she tried desperately to hold within herself the last sound she made, a ghostly, eerie, painful exhalation commingling horror and disbelief. And I was locked in place forever, my tastes changed, my colors changed, my imagery changed, my thought changed, all the elements of my history changed, my love gone the way it could never come again. In that last moment she had touched me, had drawn my blood, had cast my life anew. The belt had done this.

And Orion Stepinsward would pay for it!

I'd spend my life getting even with him! The small hatred grew in me, but it was not alone. Something else started with it, kept that hatred company even as we buried her down beside the river, mad October crawling away from us, the sky a hard and steely blue, a few clouds as set and as trim and as cold as diamonds, the ground threatening to close itself off. Shifting myself slowly in the throng, I was able to look at my father and brothers and sisters as a group, hoping it was not the last time we'd be together, and the ominous pairing welled up inside me. Threats seemed to hang in the air for an unknown reason. And on the cool air I almost caught some of her last words, but a little zephyr of wind carried them off. I looked around old Riverside Cemetery and saw immediately that the winds and snow of November and on would blow across my mother's grave like runaway trains across the prairie. There was not a bit of shelter, no hummocks, no trees, no walls, just a flat expanse with sparse dominoes of gray stones sticking up in their quick play at geometry. A bit of tolerance came on me then, her hand touching again, no doubt; I promised I'd plant a tree for her for shade before I'd do anything about Orion Stepinsward. I'd get him, but there had to be the tree before that anger. I'd know the anchor of that vow forever.

So the next April, Orion still eating away at me a whole winter's worth, I went to the edge of the swamp back in from Pressburn Hill and came away with a young maple sapling about as thick as my thumb. Its roots were long and searching already, like a kid at play, or like an old dowser at work, either telling me that messages abounded. Just about dark I planted it beside her grave, guided it good into the ground, sopped it wet, but someone there or thereabouts had it in for me or trees or shade, because I had to do it five times.

The fourth time her little tree was sawed into a dozen foot-long pieces, a weird message to say the least, and piled neatly on the ground. So I left my message tied on the fifth one with an elastic band: *Who takes down my mother's tree one more time will have his balls cut off by my uncle Nicolai.* I said Nicolai because he was the meanest looking man I had ever seen in my life. He worked in the package store and had a dark beard and one eye as red as a sore and a white scar that cut well into his upper lip and gave him the fiercest look. He was devilish looking, right out of the Saturday afternoon movies. Whoever had been cutting down the trees must have known Nicolai, for that fifth tree took good root and the small limbs and leaves began to grow, and a needle of shadow began its life over

my mother's grave.

Out of love and duty and a desire to see it grow as tall as possible, and wide as a dozen umbrellas for shade, I watered it every day. Sometimes I heard laughter from way off, or now and then a snicker of disdain from perhaps behind a stone or from someone secreted from me, but kept at my task. It took a lot of time and a lot of trips and a lot of water. Every once in a while, of course, the ground trembled a bit under my sneakered or bared feet, or a small wind would slide itself across a limb of the tree or across the edge of a leaf, or would slip up beside a piece of granite as if it had been held back for surprise, and my mother's voice would almost be in it. Almost that loveliest of sounds, almost that sweetest of memories. It was difficult to bring back a simple sigh because she had not used sighs to communicate, did not let you guess, did not try to threaten you by throat clearings, by phlegm letting sounds move through it. She had always used words, not sounds, plain and beautiful words, simple words, songs of words. There were times, before, when I had heard them in the hallway at night, a statement she'd made, or a piece of a song she had sung, things hung out for me to remember, the lips softly pushing them at me.

Struggling to hear, cocking my head in my best alert, I waited in Riverside for her words, for comprehension, for direction, for example. Unbeknownst to me, things were already done and cemented; it was in my act. All that summer it was in my act, in my deed, in my watering, and before August had fled with its dread heat, its overhead punishment of sun, its nighttime depressions of claustrophobic pounding, Orion Stepinsward had skipped away from my first attention.

And one particularly hot night in the last week of August, when I had slipped quietly and quickly from the house to water the tree while all the others slept, the heat as thick as the darkness around me, time slapped itself out across the merciful heavens. I lay under the tree looking up into the galaxies of stars flung throughout its limbs, and recognized Orion against that flat darkness and in that mix of limbs, and saw his arms at bow and his belt line cinched, and suddenly knew how far away Orion was there and Orion was here and how close my mother was, what her unending message was, even when she cut my cheek that mad October.

Tom Sheehan's *Epic Cures*, (short stories), 2005 from Press 53 won an *IPPY Award* from Independent Publishers. *A Collection of Friends*, (memoirs), 2004 from Pocol Press, was nominated for PEN America Albrecht Memoir Award). His fourth poetry book, *This Rare Earth & Other Flights*, issued by Lit Pot Press, 2003. Print mysteries are *Vigilantes East* and *Death for the Phantom Receiver*. *An Accountable Death* is serialized on 3amMagazine.com. Five novels seek publication. His short story collection, *Brief Cases, Short Spans*, is under consideration. He has seven Pushcart nominations, and a Silver Rose Award from ART for short story. He's co-editor of the sold-out 2500 copy issue of *A Gathering of Memories, Saugus 1900-2000*, (2001) and its sequel, *Of Time and the River, Saugus 1900-2005*, (2006, 2000 copies), historical and nostalgic looks at his hometown.

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