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Dogwood Waltz

by Chris Bloss

Regardless of the season, the weather, or any particular circumstance, my parents always argued on Saturday mornings. I never really understood their arguments, only that when they argued, I felt guilty.

I always thought this was a shame because summer in Missouri was one of my best times as a child. This particular summer my Uncle Otis was also admitted to Whitaker Home for the Ill—he was hearing voices that didn't really exist. But I missed the best part of summer because of worry.

My father had worked for Norfolk and Western Railroad long enough that he had seniority, which meant he didn't need to work on weekends. He spent most weekends drinking whiskey at the kitchen table, which probably promoted most arguments with my mother. I never understood why the two argued, but I respected their desperation and worry. What else could be done? I was powerless in the situation to do anything.

One summer morning, shortly after I turned eleven, the sun slanted into my bedroom window reminding me of the possibilities of summer, and I wasn't so worried about their arguments. I dressed quickly in old blue jeans and a worn T-shirt—my goal was to dress quickly, follow the slanted sunbeams, and get out of the house before the yelling began.

Despite my best efforts to rise early, sitting at the worn kitchen table, my father clutched a bottle of Four Roses whiskey, while I watched my mother running cold water in a clean sink—she gazed out the kitchen window that was filled with old walnut trees, surrounding a murky pond in the distance, as well as a small orchard of overripe peaches damaged by the August heat.

This was all that seemed to attract my mother's attention as she gazed out the kitchen window. It would be years before I could see the depression and desperation she saw outside the window, I only saw another summer day while I was a child.

I suspect that my father could've seen my mother's perspective if he hadn't been so absorbed in the beige lens of a whiskey bottle. My father seemed to love drinking whiskey on the weekends more than he loved life itself, but I really never knew him that well. For the most part, we stayed away from each other when he was drinking.

On this particular Saturday, I didn't care about my father's whiskey or my mother's worry about the field beyond the kitchen window. I know both of them were upset with me because of the principal's phone call a few days before telling them that I was using "certain unhealthy expressions of language" at school.

Truth be told, I had learned some good cuss words from Timmy Jones, who taught me that with proper emphasis and placement, an expletive in a dialogue could mean all the difference in the world as far as meaning goes.

My mom really didn't say much about the phone call from the principal, although I'm sure my behavior made her sad; made her look at the trees outside the window, pour the water in the sink. She just stood, looking at nothing.

While hugging his bottle of whiskey, my father pretended to be more bothered by the phone call. As I tried to get out the back door, my father said, "Hey," his voice trailed off but I knew what was on his mind, "maybe you'll learn some new dirty words today." I stood still with two slices of toast and bacon.

He dexterously turned over his shot glass with only his index finger and thumb, then poured another drink from his bottle.

My mother began to sob as he drank. Mom cried silent tears that I would remember years later as an adult, long after the death of my father. While hugging his whiskey bottle my father pretended to be bothered by the phone call from the principal.

As I tried to exit the backdoor, my father said, "Hey Logan, you gonna learn some new dirty words from Timmy today."

I slipped the bacon between the toast and was hoping my father was done talking. I loved them both for the pain it must've taken to stay together, to keep the family from falling apart, but I also knew in the back of my mind that nothing I could do would save them. They were doomed with each other.

I've since learned over the years that not everyone can be saved, regardless of the heroic attempts made to do so. For my parents, dark desperation was what kept them together, a mutual situation of utter unhappiness and exclusive loneliness despite our family. I loved them and wished happiness for them, but it simply wasn't possible given their history and, invariably, their future.

"Here's a word you can teach Timmy. *Fuck*. It can be used in tons of different ways," he said gazing into his own imaginary world in the whiskey bottle. "You can say *What the fuck are you talkin' about* or *What the fuck's goin' on here?* Or you can use it in my favorite friend: *I'm fucked.*"

Looking out the backdoor, I saw all the possibilities of a summer day, and behind me in the kitchen I saw all of the pain of another weekend filled with drinking, yelling, and pouring water into a clean sink.

Behind were all of those terrible things that would always plague my family: a father who lived in a bottle of whiskey, and a mother who saw something outside the kitchen window that none of the rest of us could see.

I started again for the door and mom said, "Come home for dinner, Logan," as she wiped tears away with a worn dishcloth, the cold water still running in the sink.

Dismissively, my father added, "Don't forget to see if Timmy knows about the word *fuck*."

Once outside the house, I ran as fast as I could. A group of robins took flight from a mangled old dogwood that had been struck by lightning last summer. It was a crisp summer day that seemed to pulse with the rhythm of freedom and life and possibilities.

The honeysuckle was thick enough in the air to make me sneeze; lazy spirea bushes swayed under a gentle breeze; and the limbs of the peach trees sagged with overripe fruit that would never be picked. The freshly mowed field made me run faster, and I saw our two old horses—named "Jesus" and "Christ" by my father on one of his previous weekend drinking binges—drinking lazily from the pond as I ran between them, my chest burning like warm wet rags.

Timmy Jones was waiting for me at the end of the pond, sitting on a tree trunk that had fallen during a recent thunderstorm. I tore the bacon sandwich in half and gave him part of it.

"Where the hell you been? I've been waiting for almost an hour." Timmy didn't wait for an answer but bit hungrily into the sandwich.

I watched Timmy eat in large gulps, and for some reason I wanted to yell out a few curse words to the world, I wanted my father to hear me curse so he would notice me instead of living inside the brown whiskey bottle. I quietly handed Timmy the other half of the bacon sandwich and noticed that he had been wearing the same clothes for the past three days in a row now.

Although I was only eleven years old, I knew his family didn't notice his need for clean clothes or the fact that he was hungry. They didn't even know that Timmy and I both hated them for their incredible inability to overlook his most basic needs. I knew my parents had their own problems, but Timmy's parents were just lazy and guilty, in my opinion.

I liked Timmy, despite the fact that he didn't have many friends at school. He was overweight, and many kids teased him by calling him "Skinny" instead of "Timmy," a terrible exercise in rhyming that must've caused him endless emotional pain. But, in his defense, Timmy was tough and certainly not afraid to strike first. It was one of the characteristics I admired about him.

Brent Hurley, notably the toughest kid in school, once called him "Skinny" after school; Timmy punched him in the nose with one elegantly graceful move of his large body, then pummeled him to the ground in a flurry of fists while screaming, "Now say my name, *bitch!* Say it pretty, like I like to hear it."

Despite Timmy's weight he moved his body like a group of synchronized swimmers, like a chorus of ballet dancers who knew each other very well and acted without hesitation.

Personally, I was never afraid of Timmy, but I never called him "Skinny," either. After that, Brent was never quite the same bully, and the bus drivers who pulled Timmy away from the fight that afternoon had a story to tell that would become Timmy's legend throughout our school years.

The message was simple: Be careful the names you call people.

While Timmy gulped down the last of the cold bacon sandwich, I watched robins taking flight for destinations unknown from the spread of walnut trees. Freedom was in flight. I saw my father and mother forever arguing in a marriage that was doomed to fail. I saw myself as adult, a product of the same drinking problems as my father, and I saw Timmy, forever using his fists and screaming for someone to say his name for some sort of validation.

An ancient old crow settled on a limb on our worn fence, looking at Timmy's sandwich with a greedy eye. The old crow flapped its wings, and I wondered how many times I would see the same old bird, a beacon of everything sage, weathered, and angry, as the years passed. I wondered if all weekends would always hold pain and suffering, or if something different could possibly happen. Maybe there were lives with less loneliness, less worry and anxiety.

"Hey Logan," Timmy said, swallowing the last bite of the bacon sandwich. "Do you wanna stay over at my house tonight? We can sleep in the tent in my backyard." I couldn't keep my eyes off the old crow as I thought about Timmy's offer; I knew my folks wouldn't care if I slept over at Timmy's or even if I came home for dinner at all.

"I'll play my trumpet if you stay the night at my house," he said hoping to sweeten the deal.

Besides being tough, Timmy also played the trumpet like Louis Armstrong, W. C. Handy, and Al Hirt all rolled into one person. I didn't know much about music, but hearing Timmy play his trumpet calmed my worries.

Last summer, Timmy had ridden his to Salty Jim's Pawn Shop daily and practiced on an old cornet in the window display. Finally, Salty Jim gave him the cornet, mainly to keep him from playing the instrument in the shop. Salty Jim said, "I'm tired of the goddamn noise."

Timmy had a natural talent that transcended small lives in rural Missouri. He played the cornet like it was some sort of extension of his existence, like poetry; he filled the empty spaces of his life with the notes from that old cornet.

"Sure, I'll stay over tonight, Timmy," I said while staring at the old crow—I felt like the old crow and I were in a battle that may well last a lifetime—breathing in the scent of the honeysuckle and the freshly mowed grass, I wanted to scream. Looking back on it, I was in my own world, wondering if my parents would ever stop arguing.

I didn't go home for dinner that afternoon; it wasn't necessary because, like me, my parents were involved in their own worlds. I wondered if my parents would even notice me if I stripped naked and jerked-off on the kitchen table.

Rather than going home, I ran through our field, past the sagging peach trees and the spread of ancient dogwoods, and stripped off my clothes and dove into the pond. Swimming in the morning-cooled water made me gasp for air, and I swam until it was time to go to Timmy's house.

Timmy's family lived in a doublewide trailer across the street from the Norfolk and Western Railroad yard, a dark place with little gravel paths leading to the time clock and workshops. A self-proclaimed voodoo woman sat on a stool at the entrance of the railroad yard, just across the road from Timmy's trailer. No matter the weather, the voodoo woman sat on the stool asking for donations from railroad employees and telling their fortunes or placing curses on them, depending on her mood on any given day.

The old voodoo woman wore a red bandana around her neck, which made her look like an emaciated John Wayne, and she also wore a necklace filled with pouches of powder to help her divine fortunes. The voodoo woman sitting across from Timmy's trailer at the railroad yard probably scared the shit out of most people, which is at least one reason few visitors came to call on Timmy's family.

Timmy's trailer was trimmed in a dark, worn wood; and the windows were covered with a thick film of nicotine and cigarette smoke. With the exception of infrequent patches of grass, the yard around the trailer consisted of summer-hardened dirt and loose gravel, with sacks of garbage and discarded appliances everywhere.

On concrete blocks in the driveway, which was really just the yard, sat an old Chrysler, of no consequential worth, that had seemingly always been there. Sometimes Timmy's father would sit in the old Chrysler and drink his whiskey on warm summer days. He sat there just to pretend it was a working car, since Timmy's family didn't own a working vehicle.

Although the old Chrysler sat on blocks and didn't have tires or an engine, Timmy's father would call to us while he was sitting in the car and tell us that he was listening to a Cardinals' baseball game. I suspect that Timmy's daddy was actually listening in an imaginary Cardinals' game *in his mind* without the use of a radio. Timmy's father struck me as unstable and dangerous, so I tried to ignore him whenever possible. And when I had to speak to him, it was done with immense courtesy. Timmy's father was like a storm cloud brewing in the distance

and I didn't want to see the cloud erupt.

Mostly I avoided him; he seemed like he could turn into a monster quickly. He didn't have a job and simply sat around drinking most of the time.

Last summer, Timmy's father became so crazy from drinking that he refused to get out of the Chrysler. For three days and nights, Timmy's father sat in the old car drinking whiskey under the summer sun and yelling to anyone who would listen, "I'm Moses sittin' here in this old car gettin' ready to lead my people to the Promised Land." On the third day, instead of going to the land of milk and honey, the sheriff took Timmy's daddy to Whitaker Home, a local asylum where my Uncle Otis now lives.

Timmy greeted me at the door of his trailer and I noticed he was wearing clean clothes. Timmy's momma had enough ham sandwiches to feed a small army; evidently she had invited several other boys. I ate three sandwiches before it occurred to me that I was the only boy who showed up for Timmy's party. It made me a little sad being the only one who came, but I wasn't very popular with other kids either, so it didn't seem so terribly wrong to me.

As I look back on the sleepover, I realize that Timmy's momma had done all she could to help her son make friends. Timmy's momma wore a faded paisley housedress and a tattered apron. I could see she was sad, but she tried to be cheerful for Timmy's sake.

"Logan, can you eat one more ham sandwich? There's lots of food left," she said with a sigh that said a great deal more than her words. I could almost feel her pain, her immense loneliness.

And I suddenly felt a new respect for Timmy's momma because the pain she felt wasn't for herself but for Timmy, her son; her sorrow and grief for her son served to make her noble to me. In that instant, I had a sudden impulse to put my arms around her heavy neck and call her "momma," I wanted to eat all of the ham sandwiches so she'd be happy, at least for one minute. I wanted her to know love, to feel my arms hugging her fat back.

I wanted Timmy's daddy to go back to the hospital, and I wanted to save my own parents from a doomed marriage and lonely lives. I recall thinking *I want I want I want I want* over and over again.

It was a purple-gold twilight when Timmy and I went to the small tent in the back of the trailer. Burning stars blazed hot-white through the darkening horizon, and a gentle breeze whipped through the old dogwoods, their large limbs dancing across the sky like a painter's brush. The dogwoods seemed to be scratching the back of the purple twilight.

Timmy brought his cornet with him, as promised. The horn had a few dents, but Timmy kept it polished so that it reflected the stars back into the universe. Somewhere on another planet, aliens saw the reflection of Missouri stars from the polished brass of Timmy's cornet.

"Do you wanna hear me play something, Logan?" he asked, gently running his fingers around the silver rim of the mouthpiece. There was something incongruous about this overweight boy who lived in a trailer across the street from the voodoo woman and the railroad; there was something hopeful for the world in Timmy's musical ability, something sweet and strong and innocent.

Timmy said, "Some of the prettiest things you'll ever hear in life are played soft and fast." I believed him when he said, and I still believe him. Timmy placed the horn to his lips and the music he played was little more than a whisper that echoed off distant ponds, lazy dandelions, and walnut trees. His music transcended time and space, as I understood them at the time, reaching the farthest boundaries possible under a Missouri summer evening, and in my mind I

even believed that the old voodoo woman was listening to Timmy play his cornet.

Timmy's fingers moved across the valves with lightning speed and confident accuracy. I sat up in my sleeping bag to listen to him play what was really nothing more than a rapid whisper, urgent and undulating, yet sweet and hopeful. My worries began to leave me. I was so intrigued by the backyard performance that I failed to notice Timmy's father come out the backdoor of the house clutching a kitchen broom.

From the light of our small lantern in the tent, I finally saw his daddy's face, red from drinking. "I told you to cut that shit out," he screamed, hitting Timmy's cornet with the broom handle. Timmy's father swung the broom handle down on the cornet before Timmy could even remove the mouthpiece from his lips.

The cornet fell, lifeless, to the ground, crushed beyond repair. Timmy's father stood looking at us, the impact of his blow against the cornet made Timmy's mouth bleed. His father tossed the broom over the tent and into the night and walked over to the old Chrysler.

Without saying a word, Timmy crawled into the small tent and covered himself with his old sleeping bag. I glanced at the silhouette of Timmy's momma in the kitchen, sobbing into her folded hands, something she did everyday, I believed. Sitting at the kitchen table in front of the uneaten ham sandwiches; she started smoking a cigarette to mitigate her tears, her life, and all of the pain she carried on her heavy body. Overhead, under a clear summer night, the limbs of the dogwoods danced in a sickly sweet breeze that smelled of lilacs and honeysuckle. The branches scratched up and down as the sky turned dark.

I lay next to Timmy listening to his hard breathing, while he tried to contain his rage and embarrassment. I placed my hand on his stomach as he gulped for air and said, "I liked your music. Look at the sky, Timmy; it made the dogwoods dance. They're still dancin', waitin' for more. Besides, your daddy is a great big *fucker*," I said, hoping to use the new word my own father taught me earlier in the morning.

Somewhere, beneath the soft breeze, the stars, the music, sleep came to us. Timmy held my hand resting on his stomach as if we were two brothers sharing the same life. Sleep peacefully came.

This story happened forty years ago when I was eleven going on fifty. I've never forgotten the smell of lilacs and overripe peaches, and I've always remembered Timmy's melody that night, soft and fast and all too short. Sometimes when I retell this story I lie and say that Timmy became principal trumpeter for the St. Louis Philharmonic; sometimes I say that Timmy opened a jazz club in New Orleans. But at my age now, I have a renewed respect for the truth.

During that same summer, Timmy's daddy went back to Whitaker Home and he was never released. Sometimes doctors would let him visit his family—the voodoo woman and the doublewide trailer—but he was forced to wear his pajamas because his behavior was too unpredictable. Invariably, Timmy's daddy would ask Timmy to play him a tune while he visited home, never remembering that he was the one who destroyed the instrument in the first place. Timmy's daddy never took another drink, the hospital doctors wouldn't let him.

Perhaps in a final act of defiance or independence, Timmy's momma had the old Chrysler body hauled away from the trailer. I think she did it just because she needed to start a new life based on something solid and dependable. My father and mother also separated that summer; my mother was tired of running cold water from the kitchen sink over clean dishes. My father moved into a small apartment next to the railroad yard where he worked. In later years, he started dating the voodoo woman who sat at the entrance of the railroad yard. During my infrequent visits to his apartment after the divorce from my mother, he would sometimes joke

that the voodoo woman had an eyeball tattooed on her left titty that could see all things; her titty knew the answers to life's mysteries. You could stare into her titty eye tattoo and see the future.

A few years ago Timmy sent me a postcard. And unlike the lies I sometimes use when I retell this story, Timmy never played the cornet again. His postcard sent a few days ago after his retirement from the River Bend Police Department, said that he was glad to have had the chance to make the dogwoods waltz at least once in life.

Maybe I'll write him back today, but I was glad to remember the dogwoods dancing as well.

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