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Two Short Shorts

by Douglas Cole

Rory

Rory was just a little off. Something was wrong with his smile, which was crooked and never kind. He was just a kid, like me, but he already seemed to know things about cruelty. I don't know that I could have named it at the time, but thinking back, looking back, I'd say he was missing a soul.

My mother knew his mother. And we sometimes went over to their house after church. They had a big house in the rich neighborhood of Hawthorne Hills, deep in a grove of cedar trees. The back yard sloped down to the edge of a little creek, and they had what my mother called a "sunken" living room. They had landscape paintings on the walls, each illuminated by its own little light. Rory had a bed shaped like a race car and a bin full of expensive toys. He had a television set all to himself. A rich kid, for sure.

The last time we went over there, he showed me his new kitten. It was a little black and white kitten not much bigger than my fist. He named it Rocko, and he cuddled it and played with it and batted at it and pulled it back to him by its tail when it tried to get away and laughed when it cried and genuinely seemed unable to tell the difference between giving it affection and torturing it.

Then something clicked, and he said, "Hey, I've got an idea for a game we could play." He stripped a pillow case from one of his pillows, picked up the kitten and said, "Come on."

I followed him into the backyard. My mother was in the house with his mother, but they were somewhere deep inside and couldn't see us through the floor-to-ceiling windows along the back of the house.

He put the pillow case on the ground and opened it up and pushed the kitten into it. This was "the game." He opened the pillow case and looked inside, but when the kitten tried to come out he closed the pillow case. He laughed a weird mean laugh and did it again. Then he picked up the pillow case and held it with the kitten squirming inside. I could see its little claws coming through the cotton. Then he began swinging the pillow case, and that cat let out a big yowl I wouldn't have thought possible.

Rory laughed and held out the pillow case and said, "Here, you

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try.”

“No way.”

He stopped smiling and looked at me like he couldn't understand what I said. He just kept that pillow case hanging in front of me and said, “Here, do it.”

And I did. I swung the pillow case around with that cat inside it, only now it didn't make a sound. But when I stopped, it started yowling again.

Rory took the pillow case from me and started swinging it around, faster, in big swooping arcs around and around as he spun, faster and faster, laughing all the way. Then he hit it against one of the trees. He stopped. It yowled again. He laughed and swung it against the tree again.

“Here, you try.”

And I did, this time without hesitating. I swung it against the tree and felt a nasty fleshy thud. My heart was beating fast. I felt a little sick.

Rory took the case back and swung it against the tree again, several times hard. He wasn't laughing, though. He was serious and concentrated, almost like he was in a trance. When he stopped, the cat didn't make a sound. We waited a moment, looking at the case and listening, and then we looked inside. The cat was dead, mouth and eyes wide open.

I couldn't really breathe. My mouth was dry. Rory looked at me like he was disgusted. “Don't tell,” he said.

But it was too late. Our mothers were standing at the window looking out at us. How much had they seen? I looked at my mother on the other side of that glass with her horrified expression, and I felt ashamed. There was no hiding what we had done.

We walked up to the house. Rory's mom took him straight to his bedroom. As my mother took me out to the car, she kept asking me, “Why did you do that?” She didn't even seem angry. She seemed mostly sad. “What were you thinking?”

I couldn't answer her. I was in a little shock, I think. I didn't know where I went.

Warrior Blood

I was out in the woods with Stuart. He was a neighbor kid who lived a few houses down the road from me. Not really a friend, he was just a kid I hung out with when I had nothing else to do. He was kind of a sickly kid, small, skinny. I think he told me there was something wrong with his liver or his pancreas, though at that age I had no idea what a pancreas was or even what a liver did. But he seemed sallow and weak and a little frail, and his mother watched over him most of the time like he was on the edge of some cliff of life and if she didn't keep an eye on him he might go over at any moment.

The day was ending and the woods were full of starlings chattering in the trees. We were moving in that dusk light, the half shadows of the evening. We weren't saying anything. We climbed over fallen trees that were covered with wet and spongy coats of moss. Little saplings were growing up out of one of those fallen trees, and I had just learned the name for that: nursery tree. And it struck me as a strange thing to call it, a nursery, even though I understood that the saplings were growing out of it like babies. It was just the word and the way I thought of words and what I pictured a nursery to be with balloons painted on the walls and a crib and a dangling mobile and soft blankets—but this was a dead rotting log that was a nursery.

The light was fading and the spaces around us were becoming darker. I knew the way back by instinct. I knew the woods well. But Stuart didn't. I could feel him getting nervous. I could feel his fear.

"I should be getting home," he said. "My mom will be looking for me. I don't want to get in trouble."

"Okay," I said. But I waited, to see if he knew the way back. He started tromping over the little trail we had been following, but he kept looking back at me. He was uncertain, and he kept stopping, looking back, waiting for me to go ahead and lead the way. But I didn't.

Then, I said, "Let's play war!" And I ran out into the trees. I picked up a stick and started swinging it over my head, hitting trees, making those shooting sounds.

"I gotta go home," he said.

"Get a weapon!" I shouted.

He picked up a stick and started running along the trail back towards home. I ran after him.

I caught up to him and cut him off. He faced me, and I swung my stick at him, slowly, as he raised his stick and deflected the blow. We went on like this for a bit, mostly with me attacking and him defending. Then, at one point, he just turned and leaned away and lifted an arm like he was shielding himself. I don't remember what was in my mind. I don't remember thinking anything. I just swung the stick and hit him in the back. I didn't use my full strength, but it was not a light blow, either. He dropped the stick he was holding and started to run. I chased after him, shouting, swinging the stick. I could feel his fear intensifying. I really could. Then I stopped and let him go.

When I got home, my father was already waiting for me. Stuart's mother had called. My father knew the whole story. What could I say? I got whipped with the belt. But the whipping felt perfunctory. I could tell my father wasn't really into punishing me. He was just annoyed that his routine had been broken. He whipped me, but he wasn't even there.

After that, I lay in bed, no food that night. I listened to the sounds of the house, to my father and mother and sister in the kitchen, to the clinking sound of forks on plates, to the sink water running, to the television set, to the "canned" laughter, as I had learned it was called, in one of those sit-com shows. And I just floated above it all, like a ghost, outside my own body, outside the family, witnessing it all in the dark.

Douglas Cole has had work in *The Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Red Rock Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Cumberland Poetry Review*, and *Midwest Quarterly*. He has work available online as well in *The Adirondack Review*, *Salt River Review*, *The Cortland Review* and *Avatar Review*, among others, and he recorded a story for *Bound Off*. He published the novella, *Ghost*, as a chapbook through the *Overtime* series of *Workers Write Journal*, and he has published a chapbook of poetry, *Interstate*, through Nightballet press. He has won several awards, including the Leslie Hunt Memorial Prize in Poetry for a selection called "The Open Ward;" a Best of Poetry Award from *Clapboard House*; First Prize in the "Picture Worth 500 Words" poetry contest by *Tattoo Highway*, as well as an honorable mention from *Glimmer Train*. He was also recently the featured poet in *Poetry Quarterly*. He lives in Seattle, Washington and he teaches writing and literature at Seattle Central College, where he is also the advisor for the literary journal, *Corridors*.

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