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Bullies

by Karl Harshbarger

Casey saw them in the afternoon on his way home from school, two guys, both around 30, drinking beer and sprawled out on the steps leading up to the ticket office at the trolley station. Their backpacks, sleeping bags and other things, were piled up on the sidewalk and people wanting to go up to the ticket office had to walk out on the grass.

Casey stood there, looking at them.

The taller of the two wore baggy army camouflage pants, an oversized orange T-shirt and a dark, blue New York Yankees baseball cap. The other one, the shorter one, didn't wear a cap at all but had a bright, shiny bald head and wide cheeks and a mashed down nose.

So why didn't someone call the police? Casey wondered.

"Hey, fag-boy," Casey heard.

The bald-headed guy had said that. The one with the mashed down nose and the shiny bald head. He was looking right at Casey. The other guy, the one wearing the baggy camouflage pants, was looking right at Casey, too.

"You come here, fag-boy," said the bald-headed guy.

"Hey, wimpy-dicks," said the other one.

"We got something for you."

"We got something for you right here."

* * *

Casey waited to tell his parents until after dinner and desert when his mother brought out the coffee for his father. Then he told about how the two guys had been sitting right in the middle of the steps drinking beer and how the other people had had to go around out on the grass. And also how these guys had said some things which they shouldn't have said.

"Probably Italians," said his mother.

She said this because the city was building a new airport and most of the workers seemed to be Italians who had come in from somewhere and were living in a camp in New Liberty.

"Maybe," said his father.

"Probably," said his mother.

The next morning Casey waited for his father at the back door, and together, with his father carrying his big black briefcase full of legal papers, they walked through the yard past the sheds and then through the gate to the orchard and beyond the orchard to the little waiting hut next to the trolley tracks. Ever since his father had been made a judge at the courthouse they had lived out here in the country and every weekday morning they caught the 7:21 into town.

On these mornings Casey always went down the tracks a ways and watched for the trolley coming from New Liberty while his father read the newspaper in the waiting hut.

"It's coming," said Casey coming back down the tracks when he had seen the trolley's light.

His father folded up his paper and stood next to the tracks with Casey.

"Morning, Judge," said Bill, the motorman, as Casey and his father got on the trolley and some of the Italian laborers who had gotten on at New Liberty moved back to make room.

"And good morning to you, sir," said his father to Bill, placing his big, black briefcase down next to the motorman's seat. "Well, has the world survived the night?"

"If you say so," said Bill rotating the control lever around and starting the trolley up again.

Bill was always the motorman on the 7:21, and every morning his father stood next to him in front of the yellow line where you weren't really supposed to stand and talked to Bill about different things, but mostly politics, right now about Truman and how Dewey, thank God, was sure to win this time. Casey always stood right next to his father, also in front of the yellow line, even though he wasn't really supposed to either, and listened to his father talk.

On this morning when the trolley arrived at the trolley station Casey got out first and looked up the steps to see if those two guys were still there. They weren't. But they'd left a mess, beer bottles, food wrappings, that kind of thing. Some of the bottles had been broken and the glass shards were all over the place. Some of the Italian laborers were also looking, but others had gone across the street to wait for their bus out to the airport.

Casey poked at his father. "See, that's where they were sitting."

"Really?" said his father, setting his big briefcase down. "Casey, you wait here."

Casey watched his father go up the steps, maneuvering around the glass shards, and into the station. After about 30 seconds he saw his father

come out with the station master.

"Yes, Judge," Casey heard the station master say. "Right away, Judge."

The station master went back into the station and Hans came out with a broom and a bag. Hans didn't walk so well and already looked like an old man although he wasn't so old. He had just started working for the trolley company

"So I guess you can clean that up," said Casey's father to Hans."

"I will. Yes, sir, you bet I will." Hans put down the broom and the bag and looked at the mess on the sidewalk.

"So, Casey," said his father picking up his briefcase, "shall we? Onwards and upwards?"

As they walked along toward the courthouse different people said hello to his father and his father said hello to each of them. One man, probably a lawyer because he was dressed in a suit, said hello and then wanted to talk a longer time with his father.

"You run along, Casey," said his father.

At school Casey told Mr. Burns, the math teacher, about the two guys at the trolley station yesterday afternoon and what they had said. Mr. Burns was Casey's favorite teacher. He also taught PE and coached the wrestling team. Casey was already on the "C" team and sometimes the "C" team even had matches. Mr. Burns had told Casey that if he kept working hard some day he would make the varsity.

"So," said Mr. Burns. "Those boys were sitting there? Drinking?"

"And they left a mess. My father had to go in and talk to the station master."

"Did he, Casey?"

"Hans came out to clean it up."

"Good for your father, Casey."

Then the bell rang and Casey had to go.

* * *

When Casey arrived at the trolley station that afternoon after school he saw the same two guys sitting on the same steps, only now a little higher up. They were drinking beer again and had their things spread out around them and people wanting to go up to the ticket office still had to

walk out on the grass.

So why hadn't anyone called the police?

"Hey, fag!" called out the bald-headed guy.

"Fag guy!" said the one wearing the camouflage pants.

Casey broke off and started down the path through the grove of trees which was right next to the trolley station past the bench that was set into the trees and down toward Oak Street and then along Oak Street to the corner and Earl's.

"Hello, there, young man," said Earl's wife standing behind the candy counter. "Twice as much?"

"For a nickel, too," said Casey.

Casey lifted a Pepsi from the ice in the cooler, snapped the lid off in the opener and put his dime up on the counter. The price has gone up about a year ago.

"Thank you very much, young man."

Casey didn't know whether he should bring it up or not, but he decided he would.

"There are two guys sitting on the steps at the trolley station," said Casey.

"Oh?" said Earl's wife taking the dime and ringing it up on the cash register.

"Right in the middle of the steps. People are having to walk around them. And they're drinking beer."

"Well, that's not right at all, is it?"

"Shouldn't the police do something?"

"The police? Well, yes, I suppose they should."

"So why don't they?"

"Why don't they? Well, you can't always tell. Probably there are reasons, Casey. Different laws. Things like that."

"What laws?"

"Different laws, Casey."

Earl's wife sat down on her stool behind the counter.

"Well, I think they should do something," said Casey.

He looked at his watch and saw he had 10 minutes before his trolley left which was just enough time to drink his Pepsi at the bench.

"You enjoy the rest of your day, young man," said Earl's wife from her stool as Casey went out the door.

He went along Oak Street, crossed the street, started up the path between the trees, then cut over to the bench, sat down, and lifted the Pepsi to his lips.

And saw the shorter guy with the bald head and the mashed-down nose coming along the path.

Casey should have run. Maybe not run, but at least get up and walk away. He should have. He knew that. But, instead, he sat there, as if he couldn't get up. As if he couldn't move. As if he didn't have any choice. He watched the guy get closer.

The guy must have seen Casey. He must have. But he didn't seem to at all because he stopped, turned toward the bench, unzipped his jeans, pulled out his thing and let go with a stream.

Casey watched. His thing was really big. A lot bigger than Casey's.

"You looking at something, bud?" said the guy now looking at Casey and zipping up again.

Casey didn't know what to say.

"Hey, bud, I'm talking to you."

Casey knew he should run. Now.

But he kept sitting there.

"Bud, you get my meaning?"

The guy took a step toward Casey.

Now, Casey told himself. Now! Get up! Run!

"Huh, bud?" The guy came closer to Casey.

Run! thought Casey.

"You little shit."

Suddenly Casey felt himself being pulled up by his collar and then felt a sting on the side of his cheek. Casey saw the guy pull his hand back.

"Huh, bud?"

And suddenly Casey was off running. He didn't know how he'd done it, getting free. Twisting, somehow, jerking, and now he was running through the trees down toward Oak Street, then along Oak Street toward

the corner, then into Earl's.

"Well, hello, there again, young man," said Earl's wife from her stool behind the counter.

Casey reversed directions out the door and started running down Oak Street again, crossed 3rd Avenue, then 2nd Avenue, then 1st Avenue and ran up the sidewalk to the courthouse.

His father's court was to the right as you came in the door, but his office was to the left. Casey turned left and at the end of the hallway pulled open that door. Mrs. Kelly and Miss Ackerman sat behind their desks.

"Well, Casey!" said Mrs. Kelly.

"Is my father . . . ?" Casey started, but then, even though he didn't want it to, the weeping came up inside him. He tried to stop it. He really tried to stop it. But the crying came out.

"Casey?" said Mrs. Kelly.

"I'll get the judge," said Miss Ackerman.

In a moment his father was kneeling in front of him.

"Casey?" he said.

Casey threw himself at his father and got his arms around his neck.

"Casey, what is it? Tell me."

Casey tried to explain it, how he was sitting on the bench, the guy in the white T-shirt coming down the path, his taking a piss right in front of him, calling him "bud," the rest of it.

"Just a moment, Casey."

His father undid Casey's arms and went into his office at the back with Mrs. Kelly and when he came out again he had his coat and hat.

"All right, Casey, we'll be going home now."

"Did you call the police?"

"The police? Now, Casey, I don't think there's any need for the police just yet." Then he said to Mrs. Kelly, "Mildred, so you and Helen will be able to take care of things?"

"Yes, judge."

"Bye, bye, Casey," said Miss Ackerman.

On the way back up Oak Street Casey explained it all again. "And he hit me." Casey showed by putting his hand up to his cheek.

"There?"

"Right here."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not any more."

"Then I guess you'll live," said his father.

Casey was sure that when they got to the trolley station the two guys would be gone. Because he was now with his father and his father was a judge and had a courtroom and lots and lots of people knew him and they always said hello to him when he walked down the street.

Except when they came around the corner and saw the crowd of Italian laborers waiting for the trolley, Casey also saw the two of them. They were sitting right in the same place up on the steps and people were still having to go around them.

"That's them!" said Casey to his father. "And that's him!" He meant the bald-headed one.

"Just ignore them, Casey."

"Shouldn't we call the police?"

"Not now, Casey," said his father.

Casey chose to stand in right next to his father but on the other side from those two guys so they wouldn't see him. And then there were all those Italian laborers between him and them.

Then Casey heard, "There's the little prick!"

That was the bald-headed one.

"A faggy-boy."

That was the guy wearing the camouflage pants.

Everyone, even the Italian laborers, looked in the direction of those two. But by now the bald-headed one was coming down the steps followed by the taller one. "I smell a fag," said the bald-headed guy.

"Now, just a minute," said his father.

"What?" said the guy coming up to his father. "You the pops. You fuck you're wife and get a boy like him?"

"You can't talk to me that way," said Casey's father.

"Pops," said the guy advancing on Casey's father, "I can talk any goddamn way I want, and, pops, if you don't like that you can shove it all

the way up where the sun never shines."

Casey's father started backing up and the bald-headed guy kept advancing on him.

"You some kind of fag, pops? You really fuck your wife?"

Casey's father stepped back off the curb and almost fell.

"The police . . .," Casey heard his father say to the people around him.

"Fuck the police!" said the bald-headed guy. He stepped off the curb and started for Casey's father.

And suddenly the most amazing thing happened. Just like that, almost faster than Casey could see, one of the Italian laborers stepped out of the crowd, grabbed the bald-headed guy by the shoulders, whirled him around and slugged him right in the face. The guy crumpled and went down.

"The motherfuck," said the Italian laborer pretending to wipe his hands and stepping back in among his own.

Then a lot of things happened at once. The trolley came in, but at the same time two police cars turned the corner and parked right in the middle of the street and the trolley had to wait. Plus the police were going around with notebooks talking to people, especially Casey's father, and writing things down. The station master came out and talked to one of the policeman and the policeman nodded his head, and several other policeman had handcuffs on the bald-headed guy and put him in one of the police cars.

"So, Casey," said Casey's father as the police cars drove away, "shall we? Onwards and upwards?"

Casey and his father were about the last people to get on the trolley.

"Hello, judge," said Bill, the motorman, rotating the control lever and starting up the trolley. "You start all this excitement?"

This time Casey stepped across the yellow line and pushed his way through all those Italian laborers until he got as far back in the trolley as he could possibly get.

He stood there staring out the back window and watched the houses pass by.

Finally he stopped staring out the back window and turned and looked up to the front of the trolley. But he couldn't see his father. All the Italian laborers standing in the aisle blocked his view. They were talking and talking and talking to each other in some strange language Casey couldn't possibly even begin to understand.

Karl Harshbarger is an American writer (living in Germany) who has had over 80 publications of his stories in such magazines as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Ploughshares*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Antioch Review*, *The New England Review*, and *The Prairie Schooner*. Two of his stories have been selected for the list of "Distinguished Stories" in *Best American Short Stories* and twelve of his stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He was a finalist for a collection of short stories in the Iowa Publication Awards for Short Fiction, the George Garrett Fiction Prize for Best Book of Short Stories or Short Novel and the Mary McCarthy Prize for Short Fiction.

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