

Thumb

by Adam Robinson

My DNA is all outta whack. At first I didn't know what I was thinking. Then I realized it wasn't me thinking anyway, it was my genes. I am a collection of binary strands of CAGT or whatever, ask Watson Crick, I dunno. But can't I separate who I am, what I do, from what I am made of? Don't I have an identity apart from my physical manifestation? Can't my body do things that I, my mentality, didn't do? Does that qualify as insanity, or a heightened sense of duality, which, one could argue, is an attribute of a highly evolved human. Sartre said that "a man is what he does and nothing more," but he let Simone de Beauvoir call him "*mon petit homme*" which I guess in French means "my little man," so that shows what he knew.

My DNA is wacky. There must be some problem with my chromosomes, so I sent a letter to the police and told them that on November 4th I intended to assault a passer-by at the corner of X and Y street in B—. Just any old passer-by. I made it clear that I wasn't going to do anything too bad, that I wasn't planning to jump on them or something. I was just gonna freak 'em out, maybe use the "C" word a bit. I wanted to know if it was illegal to write a letter like that. I put my return address on the envelope. I used my best letterhead.

It turns out it's a felony to conspire to commit a misdemeanor. That means that if you're walking down the street with your girlfriend or whatever, and you say to her, "I'm gonna J-walk at this next intersection," you can do some serious time upstate, if you know what I mean. That's fine with me, by the way. I never J-walked a day in my life.

Yeah, so my wife answers the door when she's making dinner. This is a day or so after I sent my little letter. I'm in the yard chopping up a tree with an axe, about a cord of it, got my jacket off, for our woodstove. Jenny's doing homework, of course, when the police

come knocking, asking for Robert Henderson, that's me, I forgot to say, or it's my name. My wife, she's beautiful, I love her, she says, "Oh, that old car's been sitting there two years not botherin' nobody," thinking those boys are there to hassle us about the '76 Impala I won back playing cards again. But they make their intentions clear and Jenny comes around back to fetch me, sweat and axe and all.

Now, I said already that my DNA is gone awry, so I'm not inclined to go downtown, Buddy, and talk some things over with the Lieutenant. I'm sure the Lieutenant's a real nice man, but I gotta ask you. That sweat, right, I mentioned it comes outta me once I get to swinging my arms — is that me? That water that's in me oughta be just as much a part of me as me. But supposing that water drips out my pores and lubes up my hands and makes that axe fly up, up and then down, down into somebody's skull, am I liable?

Well, it turns out I could be. I'm coming off my point, though, which is fine by me on account of my DNA and all. I'm just trying to get at saying that I, me, the me I, didn't do nothing wrong, I never got around to it, because the minute my hand starts guiding some ink around a piece of paper, and my legs get moving over to that Post Office drop box and I drop in that ink, all signed and sealed, I get a pair of Bobbies coming around my place to "ask a few questions." What I really wanted to do, I don't even know if I woulda, but what I was looking to see was if come November 4 there'd be a coupla squad cars out there at the corner of X and Y streets. Which of course there weren't gonna be because I'd already been detained, right there at my house, while I was chopping wood and my wife was making her special Rock Soup and Jenny was cracking away at her algebra.

Jenny comes to get me. She says, "Daddy, there's some policemen looking out front for you."

"I don't want them, Jenny," I told her.

"I don't know if it works that way," she said. She's a smart cookie, musta got her mama's brains on account of I still got mine, I like to say.

I said, "Well, shoot, girl. Tell 'em to come around back and fetch me theyselves then." Which of course she did because if there's one thing I won't tolerate it's talk-back and I raised my daughter right. Which means she won't talk back, she'll go and fetch the police and bring 'em around to her Daddy when he, when I, tell her to.

So they's two cops come hulking around the corner of my properties, right? Big ass oxen and mean-looking to boot. I'm sweating and swinging and it's hot for October in my work shirt, it's October, I forgot to mention that. These boys come back all business, hugging the side of my house for protection probably on account of hearing my grunting and the thud of the axe and the splintering of the wood. It's a big thwack, so they got their hands on their holsters and they're coming at me hugging and hulking. One cop's white and one cop's black and they both got these scars on their faces, these cuts running right around their chins like they had their skin come off and then get sewed back on. In case you're wondering, I'm white but it don't mean nothing. It's just my DNA.

My DNA, see, like, something I own. Like, I own my DNA same as I own my '76 Impala, and both of them is a little off-kilter anyhow. I'm trying to get this said, this piece of fact. If I am a person who can own something, then that something that I own is not me, not me as a person. I do not own my foot, my foot is my own. It's like a whatsit, a semantic distinction I'm trying to make. (I went to a party once and they were having a spelling bee, and one fellow, the host of this particular party, makes an introduction to the spelling bee game that Jenny woulda been king of, queen of, and in his introduction at this party the host fellow starts referring to, like, some philosophers like Sartre and all that, and another guy there at the party says, he says, beer-handed, "Go college!" Which as a joke brought out quite a hoot. I mention it because every darn time I want to say some word with more'n two syllables in it I got this voice in my head hollerin' "Go college!" and then all these other voices laughing real loud making me feel like a darn patoot.) So hopefully I made it clear that I am a person who is a person who has DNA and the like. I got this DNA, and it's a little goofy.

“Robert Henderson?” says the white cop with the scar on his face, if it even was his face and not some face they replaced his face with.

“Such as he is.” Listen, I don't know what I said, but it was probably something along those lines. I'm not perfect and sometimes I can be sarcastic, too, and anyway what I'm sayin' I said just further illustrates my point.

“You know why we're here, Mr. Henderson?”

“Please, call me Robert.” I'm pretty sure I didn't say that but I can be as clever as I want to be in the retelling. So we go on with this footsie and I'm still holding the axe even though they asked me to put it down a couple times. But they got their guns, if you know what I mean. I mean, they have their guns, which are not who these men are, their guns.

I just realized that there happen to be a lot of weapons “on the wall” of this story, which I think I rightly understand might cause a little bit of uneasiness when someone reads it later on. I learned from the most normal situations that you're not supposed to point a gun unless you aim to shoot it, I mean *intend* to shoot it and I think that also means you shouldn't talk about a gun or write about it or give dictation about a gun unless that gun is going to be fired. The same thing would apply to any weapon, like an axe, but I don't mean axes used for chopping wood. I mean axes used to cut off some fellow's head while he's dang trying to get some sleep. So let me just say right now that nobody's gonna shoot nobody when this story is over, but I'm gonna get my thumb chopped off on an accident.

Okay, now hold on a second. I hope I didn't ruin this for you. And maybe you already changed the channel, I don't know. But look at it like this. I'm holding the axe and them two police already think I'm a big jerk because I wrote a letter to them about how I was fixing to sling a few cusses at their mothers and so the black fellow, he draws his sidearm as he called it to me later and dropped down onto his knee while the white guy does a little dive-and-roll maneuver and swipes my leg out from under me. Things coulda been a lot worse, too, what with the big pile a wood so close to my head when I come down on the ground, the soft ground. Then the black cop was up on

his feet and zooming toward me, I was watching him pretty close in case he was planning to do a piledriver on my head or a super fly off the woodstack. So I was watching him, not getting up or nothing on account of his partner there doing some ninja moves in my periphery and I could tell that they weren't clowning around and didn't think my funny conversational patterns were too funny after all. So I was watching them, like I said, watching them from the soft ground, and not thinking about the axe that was even then doing somersaults in the air and Mary Lou Retton-ing back down in all manner of flips. I didn't know about my axe. It had slipped my mind, so I wasn't thinking as it was flipping, "Dull end/Sharp end/Dull end/Sharp end" and so on, wondering which side gravity was going to pull onto my body, the body which is mine, which I own, which is not me.

Turns out it was the sharp end doing a 9.6 onto my thumb and sticking the landing, if you know what I mean. Sure, I've seen the Olympics. But you know what I thought, as the black cop and the white cop were hoisting me to my feet, the white holding my dearly departed thumb right next to his hand cuffs if you see my point? I did not think, "Hey, great, handcuffs are gonna be useless on me now," I thought, me and my DNA thought, well, there goes my thumb — and get this: I didn't care. I've lost things I own before. It's not who I am.

I'm Robert Henderson, and I've been coping. I've been coping.

