

That's It

by Ben Tanzer

I am heading to work. It's early and Clare is still asleep. When I hit the breezeway I realize that I forgot my keys. I walk back into the house and start rustling through the junk on the table by the door. After a moment I sense someone standing behind me and then see their ghostly reflection in the window that faces the woods in back of the house.

I turn around to look at Mark who I haven't seen in quite some time. He is disoriented and looks like hell. His skin is sallow, his hair is thin and wispy, and his eyes which are dull and lifeless have sunk far back into his skull.

"Hey man," I say forcing a smile, "what are you doing here?"

Mark steadies himself by putting a hand on the table and then purses his lips, trying to form words that seem to get lost somewhere in his mouth before they can emerge.

"I-I-I was coming home from Thirsty's," he says stammering, "and I saw your door was open. I came in to close it, because that's not safe."

"Thanks man, I'm here though and Clare is still asleep," I say seeing a small twitch on his otherwise placid face as I mention her name, "so, it's cool, okay?"

"Yeah sure," he says and then he wanders out into the morning light.

The first time I really spoke to Mark we were in fifth grade and he was standing in front of his house on Brookfield stepping on caterpillars and watching their greenish-yellow insides ooze across the sidewalk. I didn't know him well. His dad was a local cop who was always drunk and his mom was a hottie who obsessively ran

laps down at the track next to MacArthur the elementary school we went to.

Mark didn't have friends that I knew of, but on this day he seemed cool and weird and I couldn't help but silently stare at him as he went about his business.

"Hey, you got a bike?" he suddenly said turning to face me.

"Yeah," I said.

"Cool, let's ride to Vestal Plaza and get some candy."

I had never ridden my bike all the way to Vestal Plaza and while I wasn't sure I was even allowed to, no one was home to say no.

As we started to ride I realized that I was kind of scared. I knew though that if my dad had been there and not running around with whoever he was seeing at the moment he would have told me to suck it up, that fear was for pussies. He also would have been right because as it turned out we did not find ourselves pedaling to the edge of the world, nor were there dragons waiting to fight us when we got to the plaza. We didn't even see any adults we knew.

"I don't have any money, do you?" Mark said after we parked our bikes.

"No," I said, realizing I hadn't thought of that.

"Don't sweat it," he said, "we can just shoplift."

"I don't know," I said, I had never stolen anything.

"It's really easy," Mark said.

"Okay," I said, "but how do you do it?"

"You grab what you want and then walk through the store saying 'mom, where are you, can I get this' and you walk right out the back door."

"That's it?" I said.

"Yup."

And it was. Day after day we stole candy, baseball cards, copies of MAD magazine, and shit we didn't even want, just because we could.

It was glorious, until it wasn't.

We were leaving the store one afternoon when Mark and I each felt a hand clamp down on our shoulders. We looked-up to see a guy with greasy, side-parted hair staring down at us and smiling madly, a mix of glee and malevolence.

"I've been waiting to catch you little faggots," he said, "come with me."

We were marched into an airless back room, which had little in it but an old desk and two folding chairs. There were no windows.

"Sit down boys," the guy said as he closed the door, "and tell me, who's the ringleader here?"

We didn't answer him.

"Not talking," he continued, "all right, I can always call your fathers."

I looked at the guy in his ill-fitting shirt and polyester slacks. If all he had was the dad threat I knew he couldn't do shit. We could ride this out. We just needed to be tough.

I looked over at Mark. He was sniffing.

"What's up slick," the guy said to Mark, "you don't want me to speak to your dad?"

"No, please," Mark said now blubbing and practically falling off of his chair.

"What about you," the guy said turning his attention to me, "how do you feel about me calling your dad?"

I looked over at Mark again who was still crying and saw in his eyes that he was imploring me to beg the guy not to. I recognized that this was a moment when friends, real friends, acted in a certain way. That this was about character, something my dad liked to stress the importance of when he was actually around. My dad also said though that crying was a sign of weakness, and while he could tolerate a lot of things, weakness was not one of them.

"Go ahead," I said ignoring Mark and calling the guy's bluff, "you think I care what my dad thinks?"

The guy did a brief double-take, recovered and then took a moment to just stare at us.

"All right then," the guy finally said, "how's this, you guys don't come into the store for one-year, and if you do, I call your dads, got it?"

"Got it," Mark said, jumping up to shake the guy's hand.

We left the store and walked into the sunlight. Mark ran his sleeve across his tear streaked cheeks, looked at me sadly and then jumped onto his bike and rode away.

Clare and I go to breakfast early one Sunday morning at the Park Diner and then start the walk back home, past the carwash and up along the overpass and down by the Hess Station. As we cross Vestal Avenue we come up to muffler shop where the Pudgie's Pizza used to be when we were kids. It's cool and damp out, but fresh and crisp as well, with Fall looming somewhere off beyond South Mountain. As we start to walk up Pennsylvania Avenue we see Mark lying in the street alongside the curb. He is trying to gain his balance, one hand on the curb, one reaching for heights far beyond his limited range of motion. He cannot get up though and as he looks in our direction we see he is silently pleading for someone, anyone, to help him. We don't move. We are frozen and unsure of what to do. Mark teeters

for a moment and then falls to the street, no chance of getting back up. We look at him one more time and then averting our eyes we walk past him, not once looking back. It is the worst thing we've ever done.

Well, that's not true, it's the second worst.

Mark and I don't have much contact after the shoplifting incident. I know about him though. He is the first kid to raid his parent's liquor cabinet and the first to take Dexatrim after he hears that eating a whole box is just like taking speed. He is also the first to sneak into the Pine Lounge on the West side and get served and by the time we are seniors he is the most famous drunk in our school, someone you can count on to come to class intoxicated, throw-up at parties and pass out on the front lawn of whoever is hosting that night's party.

He is also with Clare, whose parents, like Mark's, are barely there even when they are there.

One night, I hold a party at my house and Mark and Clare come by. Once there, Mark proceeds to do tap counts from the half-keg we have rolled into the backyard. When he is done, he stumbles into the woods and then collapses onto the bed of leaves below, where he sleeps throughout the night sheltered by the trees above.

At some point almost everyone has gone home, except for Clare who doesn't seem to have anywhere to go. I have never talked to Clare nor have I ever noticed how beautiful her eyes were.

Until tonight.

"You're pretty quiet," she says.

"Maybe you don't know me," I say.

"I don't know anybody," she says.

"You know Mark," I say.

"You used to know him," she says, "what happened?"

"I don't know, people grow apart I guess and then they move on."

"I think I want to move on," she says.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, but I don't want to be alone," she says, "I need somewhere I can go to."

"Okay, where then, where's that going to be?"

"How about here," she said, "with you?"

"Just like that," I say.

"Just like that," she says.

For a moment, just a moment, I think again about character and weakness and about how my dad has always stressed that being a man means never going after another man's woman. I also wonder where he is tonight and who he's with.

One morning, I am walking out of CVS with Josh my three-year old son with Clare. We are happy and goofing off, thinking about lunch and how maybe we should watch Barney when we get home. As we turn onto Vestal Avenue I see Mark standing on the sidewalk. He is unsteady on his feet and wildly flailing his arms. I take Josh's hand, wondering how this is going to play out. Mark then looks at us, points his finger at me and starts to shout.

"You mock me like this," he shouts, "you throw your life in my face."

He looks stricken and I don't know what to do or say, so I pull on Josh's wrist and drag him across the street.

As I look back, I see that Mark is flailing his arms again. I also see that the sun is now slicing between the Garrett's and CVS, enveloping him in the soft, hazy afternoon glow and briefly

illuminating him as he silently rages about things I will never understand.

