Camp Hope

by Chad Rohrbacher

Tater didn't like three things in this life: his daddy, his momma, and the stupid dog that chewed his jizzed on socks.

He'd been through about a dozen socks already and his mama started asking questions. “Why is the goddamned dog shitting clumps of string, Tater?” How was a boy supposed to answer that?

Tater's father slumped at the kitchen table; his pasty legs peeked out from his worn boxers. Every time he shifted, a squeal of skin erupted from the metal folding chair. He sat there smoking cheap cigars for breakfast. He swallowed 2 different pills for his joints and chewed three peppermint Rolaids with his coffee. He sighed every once in awhile to let Tater and his momma know he was alive.

“You need something, Charlie?”

Tater glanced at his mother. She stood at the stove stirring a small pot of grits. Her red hair, an unfortunate accident with the color wash she bought on clearance at Clark's Pharmacy, was finally growing out betraying her dark roots. She was a short woman, not skinny, but not fat enough to make Tater embarrassed at school like Bucky Donovan's momma. That woman was 300 pounds easy. A pure puff-ball with slits for eyes.

His momma eyed his daddy like a snake might spy a dog, warily. His chest dipped in between his ribs and there was just a sliver of black in the gray patchwork of hair. It rose and fell. Methodical. He sucked on his cigar and sent blue smoke toward the ceiling.

“I'll just get Tater his grits then.”

“Tater get his own grits,” Charlie said.

Tater and his momma locked eyes. She nodded at him, wiping her hands on her robe.

“You heard him, Tater. Come get some if you want, otherwise I give ‘em to Zeek.”

Upon hearing its name, the dog's burr ridden tail wagged and he trotted over to the stove where he eyed Tater's momma.

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Tater kicked the dog aside, got his breakfast, and set to work on it as fast as he could while his momma did the dishes.

“Need you to run down to Earl's and get my carburetor. He said it would be done yesterday, but the bastard was out eating lemon merengue pie with Maggie all afternoon. “

Charlie took in a mouthful of smoke and exhaled through his nostrils.

“I like lemon merengue pie. Sure I do. Just as much as the next guy. And I'm sure it would make a fine afternoon to sit with Maggie, but when a man's depending on you, you gotta put your boner aside.”

Tater's momma slammed her washcloth into the sink sending small suds into the air. “Damnit, Charlie,” she exclaimed. Charlie waved her off.

“Old Man King has some trash and brush he needs hauling. How am I supposed to do that without my truck? Put a purty ribbon around it and pull? Maybe I should tie it to your fat ass.”

“Charlie.”

“Soon enough he'll have that rat-bastard Jamal doing it,” Charlie grumbled sinking a little deeper into his chair. “He done took quarter my business already. Town ain't big enough for two haulers. Barely big enough for one.”

Fishing her washcloth out of the sink, Tater's momma licked her chapped lips. “Maybe Earl's just looking out for Maggie, maybe just being there for her.”

The way the Randleman Reveille put it, Maggie's 15-year-old daughter, Alisha, went out for a Slurpee one night ago about 10:30 and never came back. The 7-11 store's surveillance camera backs up Rubin's account; she never stepped foot in the place.

Tater peered at his father. Anytime Alisha's name was spoken he paid particular attention, especially since his tube socks were often dedicated to her.

Charlie spit a little tobacco off his lip. “She probably run off with that Donny boy.”

Donny Preston was a 17-year-old gorilla fit into a leather jacket and holed jeans. He rode a Honda Shadow with saddlebags and had home-made blue tattoos of a cross, Casper the Ghost, and a face that looked like it had Draino poured on it but was supposed to be a headshot of Willie Nelson.

“No he didn't,” Tater blurted.

“What you know about it boy?”

“She probably just cut through the woods,” Tater said.

“Old Man King's woods?” Charlie humpfed. “She's dumber than I thought. At least she'd have a fighting chance against Donny.”

Tater looked down at his grits, his heart fluttering in his chest, his fingers gripping the spoon.

“She's not so dumb,” Tater said under his breath.

“What you say?”

“Nothing.”

“You didn't say nothing or you don't know nothing?”

Tater spied Zeek under the table waiting for scraps and he nudged the dog away with his foot.

“You were telling me you really don't know shit, weren't you?”

Tater made designs in the grits. Figure eights. Swirls.

“I asked you a question.”

“Right, daddy. Nothing.”

“Damn right. Absolutely nothing.”

“You have to know when to speak and when to keep things to yourself, Tater,” his momma said leaning down and setting some orange juice next to his bowl. Tater looked at his momma and knew she was right. Feeling her hand on his back, he thought of the week he was laid up last summer. Fever grabbed him and wouldn't let go. While he drifted in and out of consciousness, all he could remember was wondering how that whenever he woke up she was right there beside him, a glass of water in her hand. Sun peering through his blinds or moonlight illuminating his models, she was there. He knew she had to leave sometimes, eat, go outside, take a shit, but it's like she never did.

While he appreciated moments like that, he would've appreciated her more if she stood up to him. They could have left. Plenty of times. Even had his secondhand Adidas sports bag stuffed with clothes, a model of the Apollo rocket, and his journal, set out on the front porch waiting for her. But then when she came out empty handed, he knew. She would never leave. She looked at the morning sky a long time, listened to the birds wake up and chatter, then went inside without a word.

If his momma seemed ethereal, his daddy seemed locked down and dug in, rooted into the rotting earth that wouldn't produce a piece of fruit or head of lettuce for years. He could have grown from between two rocks on a mountainside and survived the pestering winters and burning hot summers with the same fuck you attitude. Tater heard stories, sure. They were all the same with slight variations. Bottom line, they all confirmed what Tater already knew: his father was a mean SOB.

Tater felt the cool grits on his tongue. Breaking the chunks against the back of his teeth, he decided he would go through Old Man King's woods on his way to Earl's. Tater's heart missed a beat just thinking about the woods, more importantly his old man King's slobbering Mastiff's that roamed the property. Regardless, he'd find Alisha, dog or no dogs.