

Phlegmatic

by Craig Lancaster

Eddie Dorsett was a dumb kid. Nobody could dispute it. More than that, Eddie Dorsett was a fat, slothful, whining, shilly-shallying, phlegmatic zero of a kid, the lowest of the third-graders for certain and a prime contender for the lowest of the entire Rutherford Hodges Elementary student population, no small dishonor. In the fall of seventy-eight, you could argue, Hodges Elementary was overrun by layabouts, hoods in training, crumb factories, carpet rats and crackers, and Eddie Dorsett, the sniveling little shit, was one of them. Maybe the worst of them.

So it was not without reservation that I stepped between Eddie and Mike Brill that October before Brill could blacken Eddie's other eye.

"Leave him alone."

Brill, the tallest kid in our class but one whose constitution wouldn't allow him to take on anyone but the weakest kids, stopped his advance on Eddie. "What's it to you?" he said. His cohorts — wingmen, I guess you'd call them today — looked at Brill and each other, uncertain what to do. I'd counted on that. If the three of them had been capable of rubbing together two cogent thoughts, they easily could have given me the ass-kicking they intended for Eddie.

"Just leave him alone, Mike," I said. "He hasn't done anything to you."

Brill stepped backward, something else I'd counted on, as he tried to save face. "It must be save-a-dork week. Or join-a-dork week. You joining up with the dorks, Rodney?" His slope-headed sycophants laughed and slapped Brill on the back, even as they walked backward with him.

I didn't say anything to that. I just kept my fists clenched, all the message the likes of Mike Brill needed. He threw a couple more sneers at me for good measure, and soon enough, he was on the other side of the recess yard, tormenting Roger Prager, who probably deserved it.

I turned to Eddie, still on the ground where he'd fallen into a defensive posture like the pill bugs I'd spent much of the summer crushing between my fingers.

"Get up," I said. "He's gone."

Eddie flopped onto his back, sat up and then scrambled to his feet, looking for all the world like a miniature version of Boss Hogg in Tuffskins.

"Thanks for that," he said. "Nobody ever stuck up for me before."

I didn't even look at him as I walked away. "Don't mention it."

* * *

The fat little fucker mentioned it. Somebody did, anyway. Mrs. Dorsett came by the house that night with Eddie in tow. (Mr. Dorsett — whose existence could be divined by the malformed mound of genetic material standing in our living room but who'd never been seen by me or anyone I knew — was out of town, his wife said.) She had these enormous pillows of fat hanging from her upper arms, and they became cellulitic metronomes, moving in time as she swung those fleshy stubs of hers around, excitedly telling my folks what I'd done for her boy.

Mom stood next to me and patted me on the head as Mrs. Dorsett unspooled the account of the thing. She got key details wrong, most notably that Eddie was backed into a corner rather than cowering in the dirt.

"Did you hit that boy, Rodney? Did you give him what for?" Dad asked.

"No."

"Too bad. Sometimes with a boy like that, a punch in the nose is the only thing that will get through."

I looked at Mrs. Dorsett and she was nodding, and it was only by the grace of my upbringing that I didn't ask her why she was nodding at me when she should have been stuffing that good advice into the ears of her idiot son.

"Well, I'm just so sorry about what those awful boys are doing to Eddie," Mom said, reaching out and patting Mrs. Dorsett's doughy arm.

I looked at Eddie and he had half a finger jammed into his nostril.

* * *

The next morning, Mom laid it out for me.

"The Dorsett boy is going to start spending the night over here a few nights a week."

I spat out my toast. "What? Why?"

"That family is in a bad way, and we can help. His mom got an offer to work the night shift at the hospital, and Eddie's dad is gone a lot, so he's going to stay here."

I looked at Dad. He tugged the sports page higher, covering his face.

"Why us? Doesn't she have family?"

"I'll tell you why, young man. First, no, she doesn't have family here in town. Second, we do not turn our back on neighbors in need. And third, you're friends with the boy. You can help him."

"I'm friends with him?" I looked again at Dad. He shook the paper but made no signal that he'd be joining the conversation. "I'm not friends with that freak."

"Rodney!"

"Well, I'm not. I can't believe you're doing this." I shoved back from the table and slipped behind Dad, breaking into a full-on sprint for my bedroom.

* * *

That night, I lay in bed, staring into the gray darkness at the bunk above me, now occupied by the smelliest kid I knew. Holy hell, it was bad, like the stench of my father's loafers and full diaper battling it out for airspace.

"Rodney?"

"What?"

"Will you be my best friend?"

I closed my eyes and bit my upper lip.

"Well, will you?"

I opened them. "How many friends you got?"

"Well ... I guess, just you, pretty much."

"Well, Eddie," I said, with the resignation of a condemned eight-year-old, "I guess that makes me your best friend." The mattress above me, protuberant from Eddie's ample ass, jiggled happily.

"Thanks, Rodney."

"Don't mention it."

"Rodney?"

"Look, Eddie, let's just go to sleep, okay?"

"Okay." He shifted in bed and the mattress morphed above me.

"Rodney?"

"*What?*"

"You're not mad at me, are you?"

"No. Go to sleep."

"Okay."

I waited, eyes open. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Twenty.

Finally, blessedly, came the sound of slumber. Naturally, Eddie snored, but under the circumstances, I was more than willing to accept that.

"No, I'm not mad at you," I whispered into the darkness. "I just think you're a P-U-S-S-Y."

