

# Stand Up

*by* Derek Osborne

"Here's what you do," Connie says, moving in and grabbing the fist I've made. He smells like cigars and Old Spice. He's only five foot two but he's wiry the way jockeys are and still in good shape. He's been showing me how to defend myself. It's Connie who runs the Stafford's barn; Connie who knows about life.

"Plant it here," he says, placing my knuckles in between his Adam's apple and this tendon running down the side of his neck. He's holding on tight, pulling my hand into his throat. "All you've got, don't be quitting. Imagine it going right through him."

"Connie, I can't do this."

"You want a shiner every month?"

He's referring to what's left of the bruise on my face, courtesy Buddy Abbott, our high school quarterback and the guy who's asked Maggie out to the senior prom. I haven't asked her yet. More to the point, the two of us haven't decided if we should. It's complicated—I'm a junior and she's a senior—no one knows about us, though Buddy suspects. Buddy and I go to Middletown and Maggie goes to Rumson. It's her senior prom. The Stafford's farm is our private sanctuary, way out in Holmdel, our own little universe. The in-crowds and politics of school don't matter here; our parents and their crapped-out lives more like memories nearly forgotten.

"Itsgonnastunnem," I hear Connie say.

As usual, I don't understand. Unless I'm looking straight at his face the English under his Irish sounds like a yard full of trampling feet.

"What?"

"I said it's going to stun him."

He's still holding my fist tight below the jaw, two little hands strong as a spring-trap. I can't help but wonder how it must look, this blonde six foot kid with a leprechaun at his throat.

"He'll reach up to protect himself and that's when you kick him."

I'm still looking away, the last few words spinning off in a riot of work-shoes and riding boots but I get what he's telling me.

"I can't do that, Connie."

"Yes... you can," he snarls, grabbing my jacket and shaking me hard. He's got the energy of an animal, nothing at all in its way.

"Rick, there comes a time when a man's got to stand up."

He's right in my face. I'm nearly cross-eyed trying to focus. He looks tight and it looks like he's going to cry.

"You can't be letting these people walk on you. His dad's a bully and the apple ain't rolling if you know what I mean. And I seen the way he's looking at your Maggie. He smells it, sure as any one o' these studs smells a mare."

I'm not used to this kind of violence. I've never started a fight in my life. He lets go and steps back, taking a moment to smooth my shirt and collar. My brain is still sloshing about and stars light up the brown oak stalls, the bluegrass bales of hay we've been breaking.

"And you'll forgive my saying, your Maggie's in heat, and if you want to keep her you're going to have to fight. It's how things are. Knock him down and they'll all leave you alone. They'll leave her alone, too"

He says it like—I don't know—like something you just need to learn. Basically, he wants me to sucker punch Buddy and kick him in the balls. The thought of it sickens me. It's silly fighting over a girl, even if that girl is Maggie. I haven't hit anybody since fifth grade and that was Pete Johnson and now we're best friends. And I really don't think Buddy's such a bad guy. It's his dad, like Connie says. The man's a miserable bastard. He never smiles. It doesn't help he's a senior partner in the same law firm where my father worked. My mom still has to go to their parties.

"What are you two up to?"

It's Maggie, way down the aisle by the double doors, a deep silhouette in the bright morning sun outside the paddock. I knew she'd come sooner or later. It's why I'm hanging around helping Connie do the feed. The boarder's barn is long and set up with box stalls either side, grooming pits every four gates. The pits hold every

piece of equipment imaginable. The entire set-up screams 'We have money', and they do which is part of the problem. I used to, that is, my family did until my old man died. I guess he had lots of debt. There's no way of telling how long Maggie's been standing there. The dirt floor and heavy timbers soak up the sound. Horses breathing and shuffling form an additional buffer. The air is thick and sweet with earth and open jars full of ointments. It's soothing. Sometimes I sit here against the stone wall and let the air go deep. Maggie calls it my meditation.

"Connie's teaching me how to dance," I yell down the aisle. "Wouldn't want to embarrass you at The Ball."

"Yes, we still have to talk, don't we?"

Now she's coming toward us. 'The Ball' is our code word. Everyone thinks we're talking about the annual Hunt Ball held at Ridgeway Farm, strictly an equine event, but it's really the senior prom, the one in Rumson, where Maggie lives.

"Oh boy," Connie says. He's taken another step back. "You know when a woman wants to talk nothing good ever comes of it."

"Connie."

"No offense, lass, but I've got more years than double the two of you. Some things are as they are."

She's still coming down the aisle, shadows and shafts of sun whenever she passes an open stall. She hasn't put up her hair this morning and she's dressed in a sleeveless white shirt, her blue jeans tucked into dusty black field boots. She's tall and thin and only seventeen but it's already there. In a few more years she'll be impossibly beautiful. I don't know that but I do. So does everyone else.

"Lordie loo," Connie says, down into his collar. He digs a knuckle into my arm and turns to walk up the aisle. "Sooner the better lad, and remember, in front of a crowd."

"Good morning, Connie," Maggie says as they pass.

"Top 'o the mornin' to you, miss."

He touches the brim of his cap and then she's standing in front of me. Connie takes one more look before heading out into the light. I

turn back into her eyes, Maggie's eyes; they're smiling the way they do whenever we get that close, little crows feet hinting out near the corners and wet beneath her lashes. She reaches up to touch the darkened space on my cheek. It hurts but I don't care.

"What was he thinking," she says, meaning Buddy.

"He was thinking of you."

"Well, we're going to nip this in the bud... immediately."

It's always like this whenever we're alone, like we've never kissed before, like we're both thinking it's finally time and then we are, her hands flat on my chest and me holding her face, all the others be damned.

"Stop," she whispers.

I'm not about to.

"Rick, we really do have to talk."

I pull back. She's got that tone and the look and I know it's coming. She always has the best of explanations. We've gotten so close this past year I'm pretty sure we can read each other's mind, and maybe we can, or maybe it's just how young people fool themselves, thinking love can fix a thing, like all the adults like to say in that sad and broken way, but I don't want to hear it—I know all the reasons—I know it makes sense but I still don't want it spoken. Maggie's mother and Buddy's father are trying like hell to push them together, like Rumson and Navisink are two little fiefdoms and when they combine there'll be some grant from the King—Prince Buddy, Princess Maggie—I'll play Heathcliff.

"So I guess it's a done deal." I say.

"It's only a silly dance."

"Not to them. It's The Senior Prom. It's the tux and the dress and the limo, it's the beach later on..."

"You think I can't handle him?"

"That's not what I mean."

"It's not?" she says, moving back in. "Then what?"

I won't say it.

"Only if you let them," she answers for me.

It's the age thing again. A year may as well be ten when you're still in high school. It's lucky I've got my Farmer's Permit and drive; at least I don't have to suffer parental chauffeurs. Now we're both standing a little apart, the line drawn into the packed sand floor along with hoof prints and bits of straw. We've had this discussion before, agreeing it's easier to keep things secret and not fight the adults, not endure the wrath of the in-crowds at both schools, but I'm wishing we never had to leave the farm. I'm wishing it really was an island far beyond the horizon. She buries her face in my flannel shirt and I give her a hug. She loves my hugs. She tells me all the time.

"By August we'll both be laughing."

Her body softens, molding into every part of my own.

"You think it'll take two months?" I say.

"Don't be in such a rush."

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The next day at school starts easy enough. I know where Buddy hangs and we each have different lunch periods. Avoiding him is simple. Today, Monday, is the only problem: Speech Class that afternoon. I think about getting there early or late but Connie's advice keeps playing my thoughts. I'm not a coward, so I convince myself I can do both; stand up by simply ignoring his games and not get suckered into a fight. I'll be the bigger man. I get there right on time as the one minute warning bell rings.

Some of our football team is standing there with him. They all have on their varsity sweaters with the big orange "M" bordered in blue. My older brother was All-State Center back in the day and a bit of a high school legend. My sister was on the Olympic swim team. She even donated one of her medals. It sits in the showcase downstairs in front of the gym. I'm something of a black sheep. People have always been pissed I didn't follow in their footsteps. A Phys-Ed teacher actually tried to flunk me one year for simply not caring. It irks them how I would rather hang out with the kids in fine

arts or watch one of Chris Miller's chess matches. They're jealous of my bike. I'm probably the only sixteen-year-old in the country with a '47 Knucklehead Chopper. I get close and notice they've blocked the classroom door. I feel surprisingly calm. I know I don't have to buy into it.

"Well, if it isn't farm boy," Buddy says. He's got his audience. Unknowing, he's gathered mine. "Surprised you didn't drive the honey wagon to school."

He's talking about my jacket. Its leather and sometimes smells like the barn. Okay, it always smells like the barn. In a school of three thousand we all share lockers but no one will share with me. The solution was simple: they gave me a locker outside the teacher's lounge, a teacher's locker, full height and next to Mr. Vesneski. Mr. V is the accelerated math instructor and kind of a friend. We tell each other dirty jokes. I've had him all three years and he rides his Honda 305 Scrambler to school whenever the sun is shining. He lets me share his parking space out in the teacher's lot. I'm not exactly legal but Mr. Watkins, our vice principal, seems to have bought in. I walk toward the classroom door and two of the squad step forward.

"Guys, I'm not gonna to tackle him."

No one laughs. I'm as tall as them, maybe taller, and I'm also as strong, probably stronger. I've been lifting 75lb bales of hay since I was twelve years old. Last week when Buddy hit me I didn't strike back. Instead, I wiped my nose, saw that I wasn't bleeding, and turned away. The bruise showed up later. The guys he'd been with were speechless. I figured I'd won some moral victory but here we are again, just as Connie predicted.

"Is there a problem?" I say, squaring off to both of them. I smile, trying to lighten the mood. One of the guys, I think his name is Mike or Mark, he's one of the linemen, shoves my shoulder, hard.

"You think this is some kind of joke?"

It's all remarkably easy. I feel my fist come up, thumb and first knuckle crushing his throat just as Connie said it would. His hands begin to rise, leaving his body wide open. I kick with all my might and he crumples toward the floor, a look on his face both frightened

and pleading. The wind's gone out of his lungs. He hovers a moment, trying to stay on his feet, then knees go buckling and down he goes, curling up in a fetal position, one hand at his throat and the other over his crotch. He's in that never-never land of trying to breathe. It's happened so fast the other guy quickly moves back when I look over. Even the others give me some space. Even Buddy. I'm standing over Mark (I've remembered his name now) a lion guarding its kill.

*In front of a crowd, I hear Connie say.*

"Don't fuck with me," I growl at Buddy, my jaw set. He seems bewildered, like the whole thing has just been one of his games and suddenly somebody's dead. I look around at the other faces—they're afraid of me—I'm thinking I should feel good but all I am is ashamed and disgusted. As always, Buddy called the play and someone else took the pain. I'm getting sick but don't dare show it. Mark is convulsing, gasping for air, one of his feet is shaking in spasm.

"Rick," someone shouts.

It's Mr. V; his classroom is just down the hall. He's little like Connie, hair slicked back and always wearing these starched white shirts with narrow ties. He's got some disease that's making him shrink. It's already started affecting his legs. Down the hall I can see Mr. DeMassi running. Why he's there I don't know but it's good that he is. He's biting his whistle and waddling over. He's the football coach.

"Break it up," he shouts, blowing the whistle, but the fight is long over. I look down and Mark is still gasping but at least the foot has stopped. His eyes are open; he's beginning to breathe. Mr. DeMassi is kneeling and trying to get him into a recovery pose but Mark just keeps on moaning and grinding his cheek into the green tile floor. At least he's no longer choking, his moans more like a whimpering dog. Some of the guys are turning away and some of the girls are crying. I take another look at Buddy. He's staring, first at me and then down at Mark and then around at the crowd.

"He caused it," he says, pointing at me.

"Buddy, for Christ sake," one of the other kids says

"Bull shit," Mr. V says, "I saw the whole thing."

I've never seen him this angry. He's pointing his hand like a gun and the veins on his forehead are popping. "You've been baiting this kid for months. That should be you on the floor."

His words grind. I'm thinking maybe its Mr. V who needs restraint and I reach out to touch his shoulder. Buddy doesn't know what to do. He's looking around for support but all the others avert his eyes. Mr. DeMassi looks up at me.

"Is that true?"

Now Buddy's glaring. He's holding his arms out away from his body, fists clenched, his teeth tight with his lips open.

"You'd better watch it," he says to Mr. V.

"I'd better watch it?" Mr. V says, and lets out a chuckle. "I'm tenured, ya little shit." Then he laughs outright. I don't know why this is funny but Mr. DeMassi is also stifling a grin.

"Fuck you, Buddy," Mark says. The crowd appears to lift and lean back. His voice sounds like he's swallowed gravel and everyone tries to see. He's rolled onto his back now, knees bent, still with an arm up over his head. There's this pitiful look on his face but it's a relief to hear him speaking.

"You're eighteen, Buddy." He's grimaces every word. "Rick's a minor. I'm a minor. You are so fucked."

Mr. V smiles. Mark's dad's is another lawyer from a different firm. In spite of the pain, Mark laughs. It makes him ball up again. Now there's a real crowd gathering. People have heard and students and teachers are crowding the hall. There's a bit of a struggle in back and then three cops emerge from nowhere. I'm thinking they had to be waiting downstairs the whole time. One of them tries to arrest me. Mr. V pulls him aside. Its funny how small he is compared to the cop and how the cop is acting like a boy who's been bad and knows it. The oldest cop, the fat one, leaves. The other one comes up and grabs my arm.

"Get your hand off him," Mr. Vesneski says.

The young cop hesitates, but then he lets go. I'm pretty sure the young cop is Jim Veth, one of my brother's buddies. I had heard he passed the exam.



“Don't try and run,” he warns.

I almost do just because it is Jim Veth. The whole thing is getting surreal. I'm looking at *Officer* Veth and thinking he'd better cool it or I'll tell my brother. Mr. V is still squared off with the other cop and yelling like a baseball coach in an umpire's face. The cop has to tuck in his chin to look down. Christine Thompson, one of the babes in our senior class who understands the power of a sun-dress catches my eye and sends a shiver right out the top of my head. Some teachers are trying to crowd control but they get nowhere, the scene has taken on airs of a carnival. They're yelling at kids to get back into class. Mostly they're being ignored. Some of the students begin to leave but more out of boredom than anything else—though not without one final look—and then they are all filing passed like I'm a freak in a sideshow. Some appear curious; other's horrified. Most of the boys are smiling and nodding. Christine walks by and she brushes a hand cross my forearm. I don't dare look up. She whispers something I can't make out. The sergeant cop has returned and he's speaking to Mr. V and Jimmy in a low voice, glancing now and again toward me.

“Dude, that was awesome.”

It's some kid I don't know very well. His face is like rubber, almost clown-like, and the nausea's coming on strong. By now Mark is sitting in a chair the school nurse brought out from the classroom and sucking on ice chips. I reach in and grab a few for myself. The nurse pulls the bowl away like its candy. Mark is still bent but I hear him tell Mrs. Hyde his balls are okay and to please leave them alone. Mr. Watkins touches my arm.

“You alright, Rick?”

I know I must be white as ghost and I'm starting to sweat. Mr. Watkins decides to put us both in the teacher's lounge. It's the only way they'll get the hall cleared out. Mark lies down on the old couch they've got set by the windows, stares at the ceiling, one hand still near his crotch and the other back in its new official position up over his head. Mrs. Hyde sits nearby in her starched white uniform and little black bag in her lap, very erect and alert. She's left the bowl

full of ice on the chair in the hall. I'm sitting down at the big Formica table in the middle of the room. Around it are metal chairs I recognize from the old auditorium. The surface is sticky and needs to be scrubbed, the ashtray's piled high with lipstick stained butts. The smell is just awful. Mr. Watkins goes out and then comes back in to say my mother is on her way. None of us in the room have been talking.

"I've got my bike," I tell him.

I go to stand up, the nausea's gone by now, and I look across the room at Mark. He's lying on the couch, arm still over his head, eyes staring off at the dirty dropped ceiling. I think about going over but Mr. Watkins nods toward the door and Mr. V starts leading me out.

"I'm sorry, Mark." I say across the room.

He doesn't move, doesn't even blink. It's like he's not there and a sudden panic grabs hold. Is he dead? Then he lifts a knee, experimentally, and the knot in my chest dissolves. Mr. V touches my arm again and we walk out the door. When we get a little ways down the hall he slaps me on the shoulder.

"Nobody fucks with Rick."

He's beaming, a trainer with his fighter. It's like we're walking back from the ring to the locker rooms. The hallway is empty. Its strange being there and not in class, but then I'm not going to class—I'm not going home, either—and I won't end up at the farm that day, though I'm not aware of it yet. I won't see Maggie for months; Connie will have gone back to Ireland by the time I do return. It will be the first time I just take off. Each time after I'll wander much farther and then one day, more sooner than later, what is now will fade to what was. Maggie will find someone else a bit sooner than I hoped.

Mr. V squeezes my shoulder, gives me a little push in the right direction, then turns to walk back to his class, crooked legs shuffling, rocking his torso and clapping his hands. He reminds me of Stevie Wonder. He's so outside, and I'm wondering what it must be like, knowing you'll be dead in a few years. He turns the corner. Now I'm alone. I'm thinking how I will never die.

