

Karma, Old Dogs, and Fine Men

by Gary Justis

Wire Haired dog b

Small souls, extant and visible in the world, come around to fill in the gaps towards the fruition of our humanity. They offer small things that well founded and confident people sometimes cannot offer, a recognition of suffering and injustice... and with gentle resolve, they lie quietly at our feet, dreaming magnificent combinations of swift motion and adoration.

The surliness of my teachers from Junior High and High School was always a great mystery and source of fascination for me. Mr. Toad in particular (all teachers are renamed to prevent the desecration of their graves) was brilliant, but also a very "Tough Nut" as my father put it so often.

Jim Toad had gone to war during WWII and served as a guard at a secret US POW facility somewhere in the Philippine Archipelago. He was an expert in American History and World War II.

When someone victimized the helpless, he could be a mean bastard.

I was still in junior high school when I saw him slap an older kid, and the sound carried across the street from the schoolyard to the porch of a sweet old retired grade school teacher's house. She came onto her porch and stood with her hands against each side of her face.

"Goddamn you Jim...you barbarian! That boy is smaller than you!!!"

Mr. Toad's face flushed bright red and he turned and bowed to the lady, with his hands together in a sort of prayer gesture.

The interesting thing the old lady did not see was the way Dennis Braun and his buddies had nearly beat a stray dog to death at the edge of the schoolyard. The dog, a male, was not much more than a pup, with wiry hair in tones of red and grey. He limped over to the protection of a neighbor's hedge, and lay whimpering in the cool shade.

Dennis was the main instigator of the beating. He spun around when he heard Mr. Toad's shouting. He shot an insolent smile at his

friends, and walked over to face the teacher. Mr. Toad said something to Dennis, who rolled his eyes, mouthed something, and then spit in Mr. Toad's face.

Dennis was lifted off the ground by the impact of Mr. Toad's slap. Dennis ended up on the ground, lying on his back, crying, and I could see a red print on the side of his face. He climbed to his feet, in spite of the trauma, and walked up the sidewalk towards his house.

Mr. Toad was called down for the assault. He argued with the parents and the principal. Shouts punctuated the afternoon stupor of the dusty, hardwood halls at our school. When the shouting stopped, Mr. Toad was right back in our classroom, telling us how ridiculous *Adolf Hitler* must have looked doing his little jigs whenever his staff brought him good news from the various fronts. Toad was fair, but aggressive, and he hated only two things more than insubordination...Cruelty and Injustice.

Many of us had heard about the Law of Karma for the first time in Mr. Toad's class. He was talking about the estimated numbers of people killed by Stalin and Hitler during the time of their regimes. When Mr. Toad talked about villainy, his eyes narrowed, and he tensed his jaw, leaving little doubt of his contempt.

A student blurted out, "I'll bet you would like to get old Hitler in the ring for some rounds!"

Mr. Toad softened slightly. "My hatred for these oppressors is of little consequence. They are getting payback a thousand fold."

This was confusing to us. We all knew Hitler was dead...at least many officials said he had taken his own life. Stalin had died in 1953, one month before I was born.

"You people remember the thing you learned in science about every action creating its own equal and opposite reaction? The same is true in other realms. All of existence is continually recycled...again and again in infinite permutations. In other words, the actions of your life in your present form determines your future in other forms, after you die, and shed your present body."

Joey raised his hand, "You mean, Hitler will come back as a guy again?"

"Perhaps."

I was fascinated, "Or could he come back as a horse, or pig, or something?"

"We can't know for sure, but I am sure about one thing. The man must have a reckoning for what he did, a balance of his Karma, but no other person has right or reason to control another's progression."

"Mr. Toad, what do you think will happen to these two bad guys?"

Mr. Toad was clenching his fist. His knuckles lost color.

"It's not mine to decide, but for the sake of all the people who were slaughtered, I would like to think Stalin, along with his henchmen, exist at a mineral level, with the remaining molecules of their nerve endings grinding deep beneath the earth, in endless fire and impossible pressure."

We all sat stunned, as we always did when Mr. Toad read poetry, or launched a fascinating rant.

Finally someone asked, "What about old Adolf?"

"He is a suicide...I imagine the first sound he heard after the moment of death was the sound of his own cry as he was being reborn. I would like to imagine horrors that await him in this next life, but by expressing my wishes in such a way, I'm breaking my own rules here. I don't want vengeance to fester with me or with all of you. Let's move on to another subject."

Regardless of Mr. Toad's efforts to change topics, reincarnation remained the subject of the day, with broadly painted fantasies of our future forms. We compared wishes, not thinking about those ideas being connected to religion. It just seems like a seamless, likely order of things.

A number of years later, Dennis Braun was home visiting during his furlough from service in Vietnam, and he appeared in Mr. Toad's classroom door one morning. Mr. Toad stopped his lecture, excused himself in front of the class, and walked over to Dennis. They leaned their faces close to one another. Dennis was whispering something inaudible to Mr. Toad as a broad smile formed on his face. He grabbed the teacher's upper arms with both hands and gave him a swift, decisive shake. Mr. Toad walked back to the front of the class, signaling Dennis to come in and take a seat near the front.

Mr. Toad stood very straight, and announced in a booming, professorial voice, "Class, this man is Private Dennis Braun, he is home on leave from the Vietnam. He has just been awarded the *Silver Star!*"

The class erupted in applause with cheers and whistles. With the foreknowledge we had about the various awards given for bravery and sacrifice, we knew in that moment, we shared the room with our own sacred version of small-town greatness.

Other teachers, along with the principal appeared in the doorway. All the teachers and administrators shook our hero's hand in turn, some leaning in to comment under the surge of noise and excitement.

When the cheering faded, and we all reclaimed our seats, one of those puffy silences descended. For a brief moment, it was as if the cheers and shouts had not happened moments before. Dennis remained standing at the front of the class. Facing us, he shrugged, sat on the teacher's desk, and everyone filled the silence with laughter and merry chatter. Someone threw a wad of paper from the back of the room and Dennis caught it in flight. He spat out his gum into it and winked at the group.

Mr. Toad held up his hand, and we all fell mute, our voices and laughter dropping gently away in those few moments. He was smiling; the second time I had seen him smile in a month or so. Mr. Toad turned and walked to an adjacent wall where he kept a locked cabinet.

This was a mystery to most of his students. The cabinet had the obvious security of a padlock, and we knew it contained important things. He jangled a fat wad of keys in his huge, veiny hands, opened the doors to the cabinet and removed something dark. He wheeled around and threw a pair of black boxing gloves to Dennis.

The soldier was startled, but he caught the offering, looked back at M. Toad, smiled, and gave a slight nod. Mr. Toad walked back to the front of the class and bellowed, "People, gymnasium in five

minutes...do not be late, no messing around, use the restroom. I'm keeping role!"

In the lower level of our ancient school building, the glorious green tile of the floor dominated the beige walls of the small gym. Over the years, the cleaning staff had made a commitment to the importance of its surface. The coats of high gloss enriched our building with the deepest forest green. We all recognized the solemnity of the ground floor, and its importance to the identity of the space in which we found the grudging distances that remained for each of us to reach physical perfection. Ropes were dutifully climbed, basket shots were taken, volley-balls were mistakenly captured by the nets, and the stage that capped the southern end gave us a platform for the myriad imaginations of young, conflicted minds... and of all the attributes of that early twentieth century structure, the floor of the gym inhabited everyone's memories with a certain emerald perfection.

We assembled, sitting on the green floor, making a circular space upon the cold tile, where we imagined a drama of retribution would thrill us. We gathered, and traded speculations on the scene that would surely unfold. A few of the kids, knowing the story of Dennis and Mr. Toad, became a little frightful...some wanted to leave, others wiped back tears.

In the part of the circle of floor sitters where I was, one of the class bullies leaned out, looking in the direction of the distraught students.

"Pussies!...it's a boxing match!....for cripe's sake!"

Ferrin Torkelson was one of the unfortunate kids who were forced to grow into manhood before his time. He had lost his mother when he was eight years old. His alcoholic father, was gone most of the

time. Ferrin was tough and invincible. We stayed away from him when we could, or in circumstances where we were thrown together, Ferrin was not questioned.

“Pussies you say?”

We were shocked hearing those words coming from an adult voice. It was Dennis Braun, standing to the side of the stage, having entered the gym, silently through one of the stage access doors. The students went silent. All of us watched Dennis, wishing for shades of a promised performance from this new hero.

We waited... Dennis walked to the center of our circle.

“Some of you know the details of my old relationship with Mr. Toad. On the field of engagement in the theaters of war, a man's stamina and courage is stretched to the point where most of you will never venture. I'll briefly share with you how one of the lessons I learned at the school saved me, and several other brave buddies of mine.

On the boarder with Thailand, we found what we thought were the remains of a small dog in one of the blast ditches along the ridge of a hill where we were attempting to set up a staging area. The pup was alive. Several of the men thought we should kill it, reasoning that the kill was the merciful thing to do. My Lt. said no.

In my mind, I heard Mr. Toad's voice, telling me to step up and take responsibility. ‘Opportunities for showing kindness must be seized, and in turn rewards are given...’

The words were one of the centerpieces of his insistence that kindness opens sacred possibilities in the world. I took the pup, washed his wounds and brought him back to fitness where he could be used as a working animal. He was a sound Labrador and

Doberman mix. We named him Styx. He stayed with us for the next 18 months. The lives of six infantrymen were saved by the audacity of this dog. He could find the enemy far in advance of any other means we had for detecting the VC.

One morning, Styx ran into the jungle and we never saw him again. Regardless of the character of our enemy, I hoped he was fine with the VC. Dogs are eaten in this part of the world, but I always had a good feeling about his safety, and on a practical note, we never came across any bones, or scenes of animal slaughter.

Styx won the medal...not me. In the time we had him, he lead me across enemy fire to rendezvous with four soldiers, one of whom was in bad shape, I was able to radio them out, and were it not for Styx, those men would have died in the ditch where I found them."

The silence of the gym was unusual. Not even the creak of our ancient plumbing would fill the soundless void. All the students were mute, thinking about the drama on the other side of the World; where unimaginable confusion and heartache was a constant companion, with no stillness anywhere, save in the fellowship of comrades, both human and K-9.

"You kids...you expect a contest. But I am tired of fighting. Mr. Toad knows this. I have worn these gloves before, and in the times I was in school, I came to know the difference between what a man might selfishly take from his fellows, or what he might rightly do to benefit all people."

Dennis turned to Mr. Toad and said, "Sir. I will not fight you. I forfeit the contest in honor of the things you showed me...things to live by."

The gloves fell to the floor.

Mr. Toad smiled. He walked past Dennis, patting his shoulder. At the double doors that opened into the gym from the adjacent hallway, Mr. Toad swung them open. In the entryway stood a student holding a leash. To his left sat a wiry haired dog, whose rosy coat was punctuated with wisps of black and grey. Mr. Toad giggled slightly, then gave a soft whistle...He turned and said:

"I called him Jack. He is my best friend. He loves this old gym. He loves...he loves...."

The cheers were deafening, some kids jumped to their feet. Others whistled and called out. The student led the eager dog towards the soldier. Dennis, overcome with emotion, fell to one knee...he embraced the dog. The student handed the leash to Dennis, as Jack excitedly writhed back and forth, his tail seeming to wag his wiry bulk.

Mr. Toad was holding a handkerchief to his face. He was gesturing with his hand as if he was bidding someone or something to take off. It was easy to read as one of those signals that said, "I'll be OK, your stuff is more important."

One of the most memorable things about that day was seeing Ferrin Torkelson petting and stroking the dog. His face softened as he fended off Jack's jumping nose butts and wet, busy tongue.

More than anything, I'll never forget being slightly shy and numb, lying on that shiny green floor, with my ear pressed against it's cool surface. I always tried to listen for Stalin's terrible wails, remembering his karmic exile making him a tenant of the mineral world. It was only a strange fantasy of my extraordinary teacher's design, and those vengeful imaginings faded quickly as I watched the upside-down, emerald reflections of our splendid reunion...

Green Floor

