

Just Who Does Miller Think He Is?

by Jerry Ratch

This new kid on the block, named Miller, showed up out of the blue one day, while we were throwing rocks and boulders down on this flimsy gray sheet of construction plywood that was covering an open trench in front of a new house on our block. One of the guys, I think it was Andy, was down in the trench, cowering beneath this skimpy sheet of plywood as we hurled rocks down on him. The noise underneath that sheet of wood was thunderous and frightening, but each kid on the block had to take his turn to go be in the ditch. Dust got up in your nostrils and made your eyes tear. Each kid came out from underneath looking like a war hero, covered with grime, grinning our goofy survivor grins, after actually being scared witless down in that trench. You could see that old thin plywood flexing with every blow.

It's a wonder it didn't break when one of the really big, muscular teenagers threw down the biggest boulders they could pick up. Guys like Freddie Kachunk's older brother, Denny, who was a weight lifter and had these huge muscles rippling out of his shirt. You knew when those enormous boulders were coming, because you could hear Denny grunting with the weight of the things. It made you cringe at the expectation of near death.

Then all of a sudden here was this new, short little dark-haired punk we'd never seen before, hurling rocks down on the sheet of plywood and yelling right along with the rest of us like there was no tomorrow.

"Who the hell is he?" someone asked, pointing.

The new kid had a demonic look and this little shit-eating grin. Everyone stopped throwing stones except him. He was keeping

it up. He really couldn't seem to stop himself, he was enjoying the excitement of the kill so much.

"Hey, short-stuff, what the hell are you doing?" my brother asked.

We were all gawking at the kid. He had about a ton of butch wax in his short little crew-cut hair. A wave of dark hair shot up directly from his forehead. Other than that, everything else was pretty much cropped close to his skull. You could see where a number of white scars showed through from previous scrapes. He didn't understand that maybe he was close to getting a new one added to that crop. It took some nerve on this kid's part. He had no idea, apparently, what he was in for with our crowd.

"Quit it with the rock-throwing, will you?" Harris said. "What do you think this is, a picnic?"

"Yeah," the kid responded. He really didn't seem to comprehend the politics around there at all, that you had to suffer your round first, before getting the chance to come up to the surface and maybe, just maybe join the others in the rock-tossing. But first there had to be an apprenticeship period. You couldn't just go whistling your way in like that. It helped if you actually took a hit and showed some blood. That sped things along in our crowd. It was, you know, like the Red Badge of Courage or something.

But not Miller. That just wasn't in him. Miller didn't like having to work for things. He liked riding in on someone else's coattails, that was his way. Let someone else do the work, then come in for the kill with that little shit-eating grin of his that the girls, later on in life, couldn't seem to resist. As though they just couldn't figure out what in the world he was up to. That was Miller, all right.

My brother took hold of the kid's arm as he set to throw another rock down in the trench. "Hey, you little turd, I thought I told you to stop already. Am I not making myself clear? Or are you cruisin' for a bruise?"

"I guess I am," Miller replied. He had that stupid little grin set on his face, which he couldn't seem to erase, no matter what. Didn't he know it could get him into some real hot water here, or

even care? I think he really may have been cruising for a bruising, and my brother, for one, could give it to him. In fact, the kid was risking the whole pack of us being set upon him.

My brother's head, which had been thrust forward, suddenly pulled back. Harris looked at the new kid for a good minute and a half. Time definitely slowed way down. The afternoon light took on an amber color. That was when Harris reached out and smacked him one across the face. It was the oddest thing. It wasn't a punch, like you'd expect. It was a definite slap, a smack you could hear. I thought it might have loosened the kid's jaw a little.

But he barely moved. Instead, he seemed to thrust his face forward even more. He was ready for the next blow. His left cheek turned a bright crimson. I think he may have even enjoyed pain.

All of us were waiting for him to cry. But there was nothing, not even a whimper. The kid was like a little gorilla. That slap was a definite blow, that could have been heard in downtown Chicago, for all I know. We were all looking at each other. What in the hell was wrong with this little twerp?

That was when he said it. That little shit-eating smirk came over his face. "Go ahead," he said, "give it all you've got. *I deserve it! I deserve it!*"

He was practically screaming when he said that. It was edgy. Our whole crowd sucked in our collective breath.

My brother raised his arm behind him. He held it back there for some time, getting ready to let a real blockbuster fly. I'd felt the power behind that fist, because my brother was in the habit of socking me in the upper arm repeatedly until my muscle turned black and blue from all the punching.

"But," said Miller, "I got a sister you may want to see first." That little grin never leaving Miller's face. "She's blonde and really well-built. Her name's Sandra. She's pretty hot. She's just about your age too, maybe a year younger. She's real fast."

You could see my brother hesitating. We all started shouting, "Hit him, Harris! C'mon, hit him! Smash him one! Give it to him! He's got it coming! He deserves it! He said so himself!"

"So, listen," Miller said, "how old are you anyway?" The whole time he could never wipe that stupid shit-eating grin off his goofy face. It was like he was born with it, or it was tattooed on. It made you want to smack him one on principle alone.

"I'm fourteen — fifteen!" Harris corrected. "Just getting my driver's license." My brother had lied about his age by a year, forging a copy of his birth certificate to get his license early, so he could drive down to my dad's gas station to work. In those days you could get a license in the state of Illinois at the age of fifteen. Not just a learner's permit, either, but a full-on driver's license.

"Harris!" someone whined. "C'mon, slug him. Slug him, he deserves it!"

But the truth was, my brother was a lover, not a fighter. He wasn't a warring man by nature. He had just gone out and bought his first car, an old green 1946 Chrysler 4-door sedan, which smelled old inside. That smell reminded me of the Second World War for some reason, I don't know why. It was like the cockpit of my father's little Aero coupe airplane. I think the sunlight got on the upholstery in the summertime and heated it up too much with the windows rolled up, and that old burned smell stayed with it.

My God, what a gigantic piece of iron crap that old hulk was, with its big shiny chrome bumpers and all, pitted out by the salt on the roads during the winter, but hey, at least it was a car! And the girls — you couldn't keep them away from that old behemoth. I honestly don't know how Harris ever got them to stay in that car for any length of time, with that old smell in there, but they would pile in by the boatload. You couldn't bat them away. They were like cats going after catnip. I'd see him in there with his arm around their shoulders, his hand drooped casually over one breast or another. It made us drool in anticipation of our on-coming adulthood. It made us nasty to get our own first car. We could see with our own eyes what it meant. It meant sex, there were no two ways about it.

Harris had used his own money to buy that car, which he'd saved from working summers and weekends at our dad's gas station

down in Chicago. I would get to work there myself, starting when I reached the age of twelve, the best I could, anyhow. But first I would have to grow enough to be able to reach the middle of the windshield in order to clean the windows.

"All right," my brother said to Miller finally, "but you have to go down in that hole like everyone else." He pointed the way down.

That was Harris — the stand-off was over. He would do nearly anything for a piece of tail. It was one of his failings, which would lead ultimately to his downfall. He went for quantity, instead of quality. Though I'm not exactly sure any of us should talk, when you got right down to it. But there it was, with my brother. And he was my own personal hero too, who would come to change my life one day. Our whole family, in fact, would blindly follow after him wherever he went, even out to California. He was the first-born, the one who would come to make the decisions in the family.

So, that was when Miller went down into the construction trench and got underneath the old gray sheet of plywood. We all really let him have it then, like no other time in our history. The noise from the downpour of rocks was thunderous, and went on through the afternoon without let-up, until we heard our fathers whistling for us to come home for dinner. We didn't even stay to see if he'd come out alive, or bleeding or anything. Although we saw him back at the construction site the very next day, throwing rocks down on top of the board with nobody even in the trench. We knew then what kind of nut we had on our hands, with this Miller kid. This was the kind of guy you had to watch out for, out of the side of your eye, or you would find him in the bushes doing things to some little girl. He was a strange one, all right. Really strange.

Miller was out there every morning that week, waiting for somebody, anybody, to show up at the trench. We would watch him throwing the occasional rock at the board, looking around to see if anybody else was coming. We laughed about this at first.

But he kind of grew on you too. He knew we were hiding, watching him from half a block away. One time he even gave a little wave.

Yeah, that was him. We all learned something from Miller, I think, though I would be hard put to tell you what exactly. But for better or worse, all of us took a good step back to consider what it was about him. All I know for certain was that girls saw something in that hair-trigger, perpetual little smile of his. And I set out to determine exactly what it was.

