

A Game of Dodge Ball

by Paula Sophia

Mo Dean fingered a pint of Old Crow in his front pocket, considered taking a drink, but there were children playing in a dusty field outside a crumbling school building. He listened to the shouts, the laughter, the cries. A short boy stood against a brick wall, crouched, alert. His white pullover had come untucked, and he had dirt on his jeans, a red ball cap backwards on his head. A line of boys took turns throwing a red rubber ball at him, missing every time. The little guy was quite the athlete, like a gymnast the way he could leap, turning in mid air.

Mo Dean had been like that back in the day, quite the dodger, a hard target. He'd had the moves, the agility, to avoid being pegged. He'd been the perfect dodger, a little wiser than the rest, a little faster.

A woman approached him, walking across the field waving her hands, shouting at him, but he couldn't understand what she was saying. He stared at her through a weave of fence wire, a pudgy old gal with a bob of blond hair fading to gray, large glasses and astonished eyes.

"Get away from these kids," she said.

Mo Dean grabbed the bottle in his pocket, started twisting the top.

"What are you doing? Are you playing with yourself?"

Mo Dean raised his arms to suggest harmlessness.

The woman took a cell phone out of her dress pocket, flipped it open. "I'm calling the police."

Mo Dean trotted down the street as fast as his wobbly legs could carry him. He ducked into an alley, crawled through a hole he'd cut in the fence enclosing the parking lot behind Dean's Pawn Shop. He crept through some tall weeds toward a small cinder-block shack with a rusty roof. He'd jimmied the door a while back, was able to gain entrance, make a little home for himself. He'd been staying there going on two weeks without being noticed.

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He collapsed inside the building, seized by a fit of coughing, gagging on a glob of blood at the back of his throat. The iron taste in his mouth made his stomach churn, a blazing pain in his chest. He grabbed the bottle of Old Crow and took a long tug, relishing the burn, the medicine aftertaste, the cool breeze on his breath. He stared up at a rafter of iron bars and succumbed to concentric waves of oblivion.

Mo Dean woke up sober.

And tired.

Tired of life, of soiled pants, rash, vomit, and whiskey sweat. Tired of holes in his pockets and blisters on his feet, of hanging signs asking for dimes and getting only pennies. And most of all, tired of the police, of Detox and delirium tremors.

Mo Dean realized he'd been hammered all his life, anchored by poverty, abused by family, pummeled by discrimination, alienated by injustice. He'd taken a beating, no longer the cleverest, quickest kid in the school yard.

He reached for his bottle of Old Crow, mouth aching for a taste, but the bottle was empty. The room was empty. Hell, he was empty, totally spent, wasted. He threw the plastic bottle against the brick wall, heard the hollow clatter when it bounced against the floor.

It was time to go home.

Mo Dean stood up, dizzy and belching vomit. He left his little shelter, crawled through the fence and walked out of the alley onto the street. He headed south on Robinson Avenue, past Dean's Pawn Shop, past the school, down toward 29th street. He ignored the prostitutes on 44th street, ignored the liquor and the 7-Eleven on Shields Boulevard.

He walked.

Somewhere near 89th street he thumbed an old pickup truck, told the driver he wanted to go to Carnegie.

"Ain't going that far," the old man said, stroking the stubble on his chin, shifting the chaw in his mouth. He spit out the window, the glob landing near Mo Dean's feet. "But I can take you to Tuttle."

Mo Dean climbed into the back of the truck, nestled himself against a bale of hay. He watched the sky, the way the clouds changed shapes, wishing he could change his shape — just when you thought you saw him, he'd shift, expand or contract, disappear. Before too long, the old guy pulled into a private drive.

"I'd invite you to the house, but you're a mess, mister. The wife would pitch a fit."

Mo Dean nodded a thank you and got back to walking toward the summit of a far hill, toward the setting sun, toward the edge of the earth. He walked until his feet ached, until the muscles in his legs cramped, until his stomach made him boll over in pain. Then, he lay down near the swerve of a curve at the top of a hill.

He lay in the road, knowing a car would squash him if he didn't move. Curiously, the idea had some appeal. He imagined his scattered remains inviting the buzzards to dinner, imagined them eating him entirely, flying away and shitting his essence all over the earth.

Then, nobody could say he was useless anymore.

He'd nurture the soil, make the grass grow, and in the fullness of time, they'd harvest the grass, roll it into bails and feed it to cattle. Farmers would milk the cows, bottle it up and send it to supermarkets, to convenient stores, to ice cream parlors, to schools where children drink their milk right before going out to recess.

Right before going out to play a game of dodge ball.

