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King of the Hill

• Riley Hughes

THE THREE PAIRS of eyes held hatred. Philip felt for a grotesque moment that his aunt would glare at him forever, and that he and she would grow old and gray together, staring. Philip giggled. Bootsie looked with a glassy-eyed, hot contempt on them both, and then maneuvered her oily rump slowly backwards, preparing to leave her chair. "See, you've frightened her," the aunt said, turning her face accusingly from Philip to the dog. Philip laughed unpleasantly.

"Did 'im hurt oos feelings?" Aunt Helen said, hauling Bootsie's limp twenty pounds into her arms.

"I said they were at me again today." Philip's voice was silky with menace.

"He expects sympathy from us," Aunt Helen said to the dog. She held Bootsie's muzzle in her curled hand and shook the dog's head slowly. "Bootsie can't think what to make of it," she announced.

"Tell her, Bootsie," the boy said with exasperation and without humor, "that I'm going out, and I'll be back when I'm good and ready."

"Bootsie says you'd better be back here by six o'clock. Sharp. You little hero."

He turned his back on them. Then he stood for a moment, relishing the thought that Aunt Helen and Bootsie were blotted from his sight. Annihilated too were the shapeless overstuffed chair with its three embroidered doilies and the mahogany table and its cut-glass dish and the

three books of verse bound in imitation leather. His aunt was saying "humph" without conviction. Bootsie's claws went *tlat-tlat* as she jumped to the floor. His aunt's mood had changed easily from indignation to self-pity, and Philip glanced back uneasily to see the tears rolling off the dark craters around her eyes. "Only Bootsie loves me." He went out.

His aunt's words were still ringing in his ears. He was conscious not only of that fact but of the words that described it. He decided the sensation he felt could accurately be called "ringing." "You little hero," Philip repeated. He kicked viciously at clumps of dirty snow in the yard.

The week had begun badly. Promptly at 8:25 Monday morning several boys of his own age had trapped him in a corner of the school yard. They had not offered him any violence—that time—but little by little they had reduced the arc they formed around him. Their feet shuffled as they kept ranks. They came closer and closer. When they were just outside the range of his arms they stopped. He could see no signal, yet he had the feeling somehow that the thing was arranged.

"He kicks," one of the boys announced wearily.

Philip's leg convulsed involuntarily. He moved slightly forward, but that was all.

Nobody spoke. Philip looked out at them from his lair, more in disbelief than apprehension. He

climbed, without turning his back to them, onto the snow-packed base-board of the wooden fence. Then he waited for them to close in.

"The stinker wants us to hit him!" somebody said. "He enjoys it."

Philip did not pause to consider this interpretation of his behavior. When they had first come toward him he had been thinking of Saint Sebastian. In the principal's office there was a huge painting of Sebastian, with five arrows sticking in his left side and six sticking in his right. But now he was not thinking of anything at all. He simply was not there, nor were they. He did not defy them; they did not exist.

Suddenly the bell rang. The circle around Philip melted quickly, and after a moment he joined them in the boys' line. He started to speak to one of the boys near him, but the other turned away.

Tuesday at the noon recess he was jumped by two boys he did not remember ever having seen before. He took a spare handkerchief from his left jacket pocket and wiped off his bleeding nose and cheek. He had not fought back.

On the way from school on Tuesday three of his classmates chased Philip home. He ran ahead of them silently and with even, contemptuous strides. When they reached Barton Street Philip slowed down to a brisk walk. At the corner of Branch Avenue, at the overhead traffic light, he waited. The others walked past him. "I live at home with my Aunt Helen," he heard one of them say. "And on the wall of the sit-ting room we have a Persian schamilitar," said another.

Philip cringed as though he had been struck. Last week in English class he had been called on for "free oral recitation." He had talked effortlessly for over ten minutes on "My Life at Home." Instead of a framed motto saying "Home Sweet Home" there was, he revealed importantly, a Persian schamilitar on the wall. The jewels were missing from the handle, he admitted. His teacher, he saw from her impatient gesture of plucking at her sleeve, had wanted to stop him. But he had rattled on, painting with broad, satiric strokes a picture of a beautiful, talented woman devoted to her nephew. At this point the teacher was called out of the room. Philip dismissed her with a cheerful nod, and before she could dispose of the class in any other way, plunged again into his story. He invented a dentist (whom he was careful to keep anonymous) who came to court his aunt. He described the dentist's extravagant attention to Bootsie and told how he would pop chocolates into Bootsie's mouth from across the room.

The "schamilitar" business rankled the most. When he had given a carefully edited version of his recitation to Aunt Helen that evening she had laughed at him until she had to dab her eyes with her lace handkerchief to keep the tears back. "Bootsie," she had said, "you must always pronounce the word *scimitar*." She had spelled the word out for Bootsie. Philip had been too angry to make a note of the spelling at the time and had to look it up later.

Wednesday it snowed, and he was almost late for school. Aside

from a scuffle in the cloak room which resulted in Philip's having to retrieve one of his rubbers from the anteroom to the principal's office, nothing happened. By the end of school the snow had turned to a light drizzle of rain. He made a detour to the Rock, his name for an abrupt hill a half mile from the school. Here he kept a few belongings—some matchbook covers, a jack-knife too rusted for him to open, three Canadian coins, and a desk calendar—in a tin can. When he fitted the rim into the right position he could read the words "Vacuum Packed." The can had contained peanuts. It still gave off a faint odor. He lifted up the stone which concealed his treasure and checked everything. Nothing was missing.

Today was Thursday. When he'd returned home from school he reported in an off-hand, impersonal way as many of the day's events as he cared to relate. He always told, with meticulous detail and as though reporting something at which he was a disinterested bystander, when somebody had been "at him." Sometimes he would speak directly to Bootsie. Without descending to the "dog language" his aunt usually insisted on, he would give Bootsie a detailed account. He always folded her paws and made her sit in a special way. Today he had but one incident to report: in the corridor a boy had pushed him over the crouching back of another. He'd acted it out for Bootsie and had more probably bored than frightened her. But Bootsie had begun to whine and shift uneasily, and Aunt Helen had rushed into the room gesticulating

wildly with a piece of embroidery enclosed in round wooden hoops.

If he had to be back by six, he thought, he could make it to the Rock and back. He returned to the back hall for his galoshes. As he was bending the metal clasps into position he decided to leave every other one unlatched. He liked the mingled effect of tidiness and untidiness, and he found that his walking was not impeded.

He decided to pay a visit to the schoolyard, for it lay on the shortest route between his aunt's house and the Rock. There had been a persistent snowfall early the week before, and there were piles of snow in the schoolyard. With a glad leap he mounted on a snow wall thrown against the fence. He pretended to lose his balance. Occasionally he would jump through the more loosely packed parts of the mound of snow. "I'm king of the hill," he said aloud over and over again. Once he looked sharply behind him, for he thought he heard a snicker. There was no one.

He went over to the boys' rear door. When he got to the top of the steps he could look into Room 2A and see the clock. He peered through the paper Pilgrims and pumpkins, now ruckled and faded, pasted to the window. The clock said four-thirty. He would have plenty of time to get to the Rock and yet be home by six.

He walked on alternate sides of the street all the way, on the right for a block, then on the left. There were not many people out. A few automobiles were making their way cautiously on the highway.

His cache—he pronounced the word as though it had two syllables—was safe. He removed one of the coins and put it in his pocket. Although he rummaged through his jacket pockets he could find nothing new to add to his hoard. "I'm king of the hill," he said quietly to himself as he carefully fitted the top of the can in such a way that the letters on the rim and on the can itself would not quite come together.

After he buried the can once more and smoothed the snow around it, he came over to the edge of the hill. He stood near a stump and surveyed his territory. The road curled beneath him like a scimitar. It was a good three hundred feet from where he stood.

He noticed with some contempt that the one or two people walking below in the rapidly graying light were bent slightly forward with the effort of tramping through the snow. They looked like bugs to him. He ran over the list of bugs he knew and decided on beetles. They were beetles. One or two slightly larger beetles crawled more quickly than the human ones. One of the cars had its headlights on, though it was scarcely dark enough for that.

He was tiring of this game, and he decided to turn down the path again toward home. He towered over the scene, straining forward to impress everything in his memory. He saw that there were just two automobiles now, one coming from the right and one off to the left. It occurred to him that he could see both cars, but it would be another minute or so before they saw each other.

"Let them hit," he said suddenly, aloud. He peered down at them. He whispered an ejaculation. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," he breathed, spacing his words evenly. He would close his eyes tight while he counted three, and then open them.

The bugs came together. The one from the right seemed to do a slow dance around the side of the other and then it turned over. He could hear nothing. Somebody at the scene of the accident thought he saw a small figure move near the top of the hill, but he could not be sure. When he glanced up again, he could make out nothing but a rotted stump and gray patches of snow that looked as though they had been trampled on.

Resurrection on a Shiny Morning

● Dan Rodden

I have known mornings to shine
 Lucent, with a knowledgeable light;
 Mornings meaning more of what was mine
 And what you were, than ever I knew at night.
 Mornings down a street, or in a field,
 When somehow most of everything was clear;
 And these were cool and shiny mornings, yielding
 Confidence against our evening fear.