

EMANCIPATION

by

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STORY FOUR

Beneath a weighted canopy of winter's early dusk

-- The Prophet

Evening was cold. School had been canceled the day before due to an anticipated snowstorm. Most of that winter afternoon I had spent participating in tackle football, amid icy snow and subzero temperatures. All able-bodied men in our neighborhood teamed together to create a simple network of wide paths leading from doorstep to sidewalk to the next doorstep throughout the entire block. For us, those passages were avenues of infinite excitement, adventure, mystery, and intrigue. Cowboys and Indians, American soldiers overwhelming a foreign enemy, secret agents thwarting communist spies, thieving pirates on the high seas, explorers seeking treasure in icy caverns harboring creatures unknown. Confrontations were acted out with snow-manufactured weapons: bullets, bombs, arrows, tomahawks, cannonballs, knives, bayonets, and grenades.

"You're dead."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am not. You only wounded me."

"That was a grenade. It blew up your whole body."

"Did not!"

"Did so!"

"It only took off one arm. I can still fight. I got another one."

"You'd probably bleed to death trying to fight with one arm."

"I would not!"

"You would so!"

On and on we created new scenarios of good versus evil. Worlds where justice always managed to eke out a triumph. Then the inevitable occurred. Our favorite winter pastime would joyfully emerge from the mere suggestion that we play: football. The word

breathed into us unanimous glee. Slipping, stumbling, tripping, sliding, belly flopping and pratfalls on slick, child-made, dull gray carpets where once lay thick pads of fresh white snow, we proceeded to horribly emulate those sports heroes we idolized. This mockery of sport and vaudeville continued until that fateful moment when the uncompromising voice of Grant's mother loudly ordered Grant inside. With Grant went the football.

We persevered by sculpting footballs out of snow. It didn't work of course. After whoever had, the snow-football was tackled -- if they didn't simply fall on it, drop, or crush it -- new imitation pigskins were constructed to replace its demolished predecessors. Intense arguments arose about how they should be designed. No one knew the actual dimensions of a real football (not that that would have mattered). No one had ever seen a real football, which I would later discover was twice as large as the one Grant owned. Size, shape, and weight became important issues needing accurate answers, matters to be hatched out and decided upon by a committee to maintain correctness and ensure the sanctity of our most beloved game. Once these points were hammered out to majority satisfaction, another instrument of play would be crafted. With each new ball sprang up novel considerations. To pass or not to pass, should the ball be hiked (particularly since it had a tendency to fracture or crumble during the exchange)? Should the person who had the football originally keep it for the entire play? What about lateraling -- or as we put it, throwing the ball backwards? How did we know when there was a fumble?

Each of us had our own preferences. Toby for instance was marshaled against passing, no surprise there. Toby couldn't catch Grant's football without it bouncing off his face. Curt wanted the ball rounder like a fat snowball. He was quickly vetoed. Had we been playing baseball or basketball, it would have been a valid suggestion. In football, it was definitely out of the question. Independently, each proposal was raised, voted on, then instituted or rejected. Former agreements were abolished after one play and reinstated later. No snow football lay wrecked without having existed under its unique set of conventions.

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After each play, something else occurred besides the structuring of a new football. Reggie brought it up first when he said he could not feel his toes. As if that statement touched us like an electric shock, we all suddenly realized, that along with our toes, parts of our own person could not be felt as well. Fingers, cheeks, noses, ears and the less believable eyelids, elbows, knees, and butts joined a list of numb parts. Eventually, Curt made the courageous suggestion that we quit. With mild reluctance, we all agreed. Parting with a few random snowballs bursting near their marks, we miniature-frozen athletes walked our separate ways home beneath a weighted canopy of winter's early dusk.

Mom immediately ushered me into my bedroom where she systematically stripped me of my wet hat, coat, pants, scarf, socks, sneakers, briefs, and thermal undershirt in exchange for a dry pair of loose-fitting cotton shorts, all the while chiding me on my critical foolishness at remaining outside in dangerously cold weather for so long. (Especially since I was supposed to be home by two that afternoon, a fact she had either dismissed or forgotten.) In all honesty, I did not know -- at that age -- winter weather such as that could turn a person's lungs to ice, freeze one's blood, or inflict a degree of frostbite so destructive it could result in the loss of fingers and toes. I was having fun with my equally foolish playmates. That was all I was aware of on that wintry day.

Cradled in her arms, bunched up against my mother's ample bosom, shivering and feeling safe, I was carried into the bathroom where she placed me standing inside the bathtub and ran lukewarm water over my hands and feet, fussing all the while. "What about my nose?" I asked. Mom flicked a few harmless drops of water at my face. They made me flinch. Mom laughed.

Mom continued to fuss and things went perfectly fine. "Gratey, sometimes I believe you're absent the plain good sense God gave most children. How could you not realize when you can't feel something -- things you were feeling before -- that something wasn't right?" Mom asked me this question in all earnest as if she expected a competent response. I said nothing. Her hands worked diligently, rubbing my hands under the water.

“Don’t you know better than to stay out in weather this cold?” When mom looked directly into my face that was my cue: “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” hesitating momentarily after she asked. Not really expecting me to say anything before continuing to fuss and rub.

It was not long before I started feeling what felt like thousands of tiny needles in my fingers and toes. “Mom, my fingers hurt my toes too. Feel like things are sticking them.”

“That’s good pain honey, means they’re coming back to life.” Then she went back to fussing. “Maybe next time you’ll come home ‘stead of staying out in the cold like you crazy.”

“Yes ma’am.” I listened, apologized, agreed, and then listened some more, all the time enjoying her brisk rubdown of my hands, feet, arms, legs, and occasional brush across my nose and cheeks. I savored the deep tones of concern and mellifluous melody of her voice: “Gratey, Gratey, Gratey. Baby what am I going to do with you?” Had I known how to express the feeling I had at that moment, I would have told her to love me, mom. “I don’t know mom,” is what I said.

“Can you feel your fingers, your toes? Is that better?” I nodded a deaf yes to each question. “They’re coming back to life.” I smiled at her. “What you grinning at?” She had caught my smile on her face. I surprised her with a hard hug around the neck. What motivated me to do it? I don’t know. Something leaped up inside me. Guess you could say it was love but it felt different, akin to love in its warmth and depth of closeness and feeling. All that stuff we harbor for those few choice people in our lives. Whatever it was, it bubbled up in me so fast and furious I had to let it out right then and there. Mom let me hug her for a while, her arms firm about my thin frame. She smelled great, like cocoa butter. Her skin was softer than my pillows. I closed my eyes and enjoyed her embrace.

With stark suddenness mom went back to fussing: “Boy if you don’t get your clammy hands off me, I’m going drown you!” But she was laughing, still hugging me back. I knew she didn’t really mean for me to let go. If she had, she would have tickled me under my armpits. When she finally did tickle me, some time after her

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affectionate threat, I let her resume bringing my deceased limbs back to life.

The needles stopped. I told mom so. She dried me from neck to toes and told me to stand in front of a heater after I ate.

Before I did as instructed, mom led me by the hand back to my room and handed me another pair of baggy white shorts and a short-sleeved green shirt. "Dinner is on the table," she said as she hurried off to her room to change out of her "wet things."

Two friends of my parents, Roz and Woodrow, sat in our living room on our puffy couch directly across from the living room gas heater. They were there when I got home. I knew I was not supposed to be in the living room when my parents had guests, but I would conveniently forget that rule -- selective amnesia that would later serve my purpose.

Mom and her friends were waiting on my father to come home from work so they could begin their all-night marathon of bid whist. Once dad arrived, first he would eat. (His dinner of meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and green peas were kept warm in the oven). Then he would set up the card table and chairs in the den (aided by Woodrow). After dad made certain everyone had what they wanted, he would mix himself a Canadian Club and Squirt on the rocks, marking the prelude to a night of drinking, joking, eating, laughing, card playing, and harmless badgering.

I quickly dressed; skipped into the dining room where I plopped down in my usual chair and preceded to wolf down hot, homemade chicken noodle soup that I assumed had been warmed for me by my mom. Had I known Roz did it as a favor to mom; I would not have eaten it. When I finished, I carefully carried the empty bowl and soup spoon to the kitchen, where on tiptoe and with some measure of concentrated effort, I managed to place them safely in the sink.

Had circumstances been different, mom would have dragged me by my ear if necessary, into my own room when I innocently positioned myself in front of the living room gas heater. After all, she never specified which heater. Her look told me she disapproved of my being there, but would allow me to stay, that time.

Mom was thin and had a lot less aches and pains then. (This was before the invasion of varicose veins, chronic back problems, and bad feet). But on that evening, it was her dark brown eyes suspended in a damp embrace, coupled with a smile that dissolved my few worldly doubts that dominate my recollection of her.

Waves of dry heat massaged the bare backs of my resuscitated legs as I stood before the gas heater, hands behind my back, thawing out the rest of the way. They laughed, talked, and sipped hot tea as I watched, a six-year-old observer with a grin. They seemed not to mind. Quiet me only speaking when spoken to.

Roz was much shorter than mom. I remember Roz as being round: round face, hands, butt, shoulders, and belly. Dad did not care much for Roz, although he tolerated her because she was mom's best friend. I did not like her either. Her smile was a lie her eyes never told. Eyes that were sharp and carnivorous. They made me uneasy when we were alone and Roz would stare at me calling me to her with her lying smile. I never came to her. I did not like Roz at all.

Woodrow was dad's best friend. He was wide and square and had large hands. His eyes constantly gleamed, like sunlight through clear glass. And he had a laugh that was heartier than any Santa Claus I had ever heard. He always wore tan leatherwork boots and had white whiskers and a pinch of snuff tucked inside his bottom lip. His bass voice made me smile, though there were times his breath would stink and I could not understand what he was saying.

When dad got home, the evening was set in motion. Sometime between the first hand of bid whist and my dad telling everyone this marvelous story about when he was eleven and first went hunting with his father, I fell asleep.

In the morning, my internal alarm clock woke me in time to enjoy Saturday morning cartoons. To get to the living room, where the solitary television in the house resided, I had to tiptoe past my parents' bedroom. I overheard sounds: grunting, groaning, moaning, bedsprings squeaking. I had heard these sounds emanate from my parents' bedroom before. Later in life, I would discover those noises to be the music of lovemaking. It is difficult to say for certain since that music was made frequently by my parents, but, I believe, in those

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early winter hours on one of the coldest days ever experienced in Pittsburgh, Camille was conceived.