

Flunking the School of Hard Knocks

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The older I get, and the closer I get to the specter of adulthood, the more I realize how much I've had



WHERE THE
HELL IS
WAYNE, ME

to learn just to be a somewhat normal member of society. And it is through those that somehow missed these lessons, that somehow missed entire pieces developmentally, that I see just how many things there are to learn.

Every trial, every event and occurrence we, in the haze of our adolescence, believe happens to us alone, everything we lock up inside journals and keep from the closest of friends and confidances, is not so unique to ourselves after all. Not only do these things happen to everyone, they are essential pieces of our development. We share these tragedies, disappointments, embarrassments. These are the essential lessons that shape us, and mold us.

The time at Matt Opuda's eighth birthday party when you, in the midst of "pin the tail on the donkey," didn't object in the slightest when Mr. Opuda failed to wrap your blindfold correctly, and so had little trouble finding the donkey-center of the massive rectangular poster's felt keister. You had even less trouble fastening your tail to it, believably left of center, while groping with outstretched arms at the wall for effect. The moment guilt struck you half an hour later and, unable to bear it any longer, you confessed your crime to

your father, who made you tell Mr. Opuda. Matt's dad was nice enough to let you keep the yellow plastic whistle ring prize all the same, and didn't even mention anything about the donkey incident to Matt or any of his friends.

The nights awake studying the dim ceiling above your bed, unsure if she was smiling at you during fourth period Social Studies, or if she'd simply forgotten to change her expression when she'd turned away from Anna Davis and caught you staring.

The dull ache of being vulnerable and squashed, the empty thud of betrayal. The kick in the teeth and the pieces of blood and plaque and bone and friendship that fall from your mouth to the dusty ground in a puddle.

The baseball-sized hole left in the game room window one summer when your legs proved quicker than your sister's arm, and the sudden realization that perhaps it was time to drop the subject of her and this Josh character. But instead you go outside and see if there were any baseballs to be found in the ferns off the east side of the cabin by the large bay windows.

At some point in our lives, we all go through these things. We have to. These times teach us how to behave in society, how to deal with our feelings and how to peel an orange without a fork, among other things.

These events stick in our memories because they force us to learn from them and develop as people. If someone misses one of their "lessons" during the windows in adolescence, it might be too late to learn.

The last time I saw my father, he had just returned from a road trip with two other men his age; men he didn't know terribly well. They went, the four of them, to one of the Mid-Atlantic States to play tennis but, sadly, it rained. One of the parties, my father said, picked his nose consistently with the edge of his thumb, invariably studied it a moment, and then dismissively pinched his thumb

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and forefinger back and forth around whatever fabric he could find, his shirt, pants, a tablecloth or a chair perhaps.

The other had a nasty habit of going into detail about stock portfolios and mortgage payments.

"Could you pass those M&M's?" one gestured to the brown plastic

bag that was then in my father's hand.

"You know, I once had stock in the Mars company," the other piped in as the bag changed holders. "Great company, really fabulous stuff. You see, the thing to keep in mind with those commodities stocks is household recognition. M&M's. I'd give an arm and a leg to have that one today. What else do you think of when you think of chocolate? Mars. Sold it at 42."

"What about Reeses Pieces?" the sharp thumbed one asked.

"They're peanut butter," my father corrected lethargically.

"Yeah," he scraped his thumb as he did all too often against the soft inside of his nostril, "but they're pretty recognizable, huh? Reeses?"

The man eyed the bag he now held in his free hand.

"What are you doin'?" my father's voice was now high and excitable as he watched the last of his traveling companion's thumbnail disappear from view. The man drew it out, studied it, and rolled a small swatch of his sweater up briefly in his thumb and forefinger.

"What do you mean?" He released the sweater, and made for the candies.

"You're gonna touch my food, now?"

"I thought we were sharing."

"We were."

"So, what's the big idea?"

"So, I don't want the inside of your nose on the inside of the bag and the inside of my mouth."

At this, the man thoughtfully dug at a bit of wax in his ear with the tip of his pinky. The other man, who'd been nervously watching from

his corner of the conversation, broke in:

"I ended up having to sell the Mars stock to cover my first mortgage, and good thing really," the man laughed uneasily, "because, I tell 'ya, if I was still living with those interest rates today, boy!"

The other man removed his finger from his ear, held it curved before his face to inspect it for a moment, then rested his palms on his slacks and looked quizzically in my father's direction.

"I don't catch your drift," he said.

At this point I imagine my father rose from his seat with his own palms outstretched in front of him in this way he has when he is beyond words, raised his brows as high as they could go, made a simple dismissive gesture with his hands, moving them away from each other in plane, and left the two developmental misfits alone in the hotel room to their unsanitary chocolate pieces and self-involved, stock market conversations.

And so if there are, at this point, those among us that haven't yet learned the social conventions or had the tough, character-molding episodes, time is running out. We are only malleable for so long before we turn into permanent nose-pickers and poor conversationalists. I hope at least that I don't, as my father did, end up trapped someday in a Holiday Inn with people who didn't flunk Chemistry or Math or German in high school and college, but flunked the growing process altogether.