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BUCKY

by

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Bucky arrived in our grade school classroom mid semester. That alone was strange. Where the rest of us were thirteen years old, Bucky, we found out, was sixteen. What was that about? Time spent in prison? A couple of years lost running drugs in Latin America? We were at an impressionable age--some of us still thought we were on our way to becoming Daniel Boone, or at least a forest ranger battling grizzlies in the Rocky Mountains. Our imaginations ran rampant.

And Bucky was large, even for his age. Not fat large. Big large. Broad shoulders, bulging biceps, the weapons of our childhood playground. He was formally introduced by our teacher on his first day.

“Boys and girls, we have a new class member. Bucky, will you please stand up.”

Bucky did as he was told, standing tall with a confident smile on his face. He stood there as our teacher told us he had moved to our city from Terre Haute. At lunch time, many of us went to the library to check out Terre Haute, but found nothing—no maximum security prison, no CIA school for spies, just a lot of really normal stuff.

Before Bucky arrived, the undisputed toughest guy on our playground was my friend, Ted. He was fast, short and compact and once had given me one of life’s painful lessons. This was a time when kids arranged sports contests without any parental involvement. A group of us strapped on our cheap helmets, our cheap shoulder pads, and gathered in a field next to school for a tackle football game. We bargained over the rules and went through the choosing of sides ritual. Ted was chosen first, and I, who

was fast, could catch a football, but had a slight build, was chosen next. On the second play of the game, I saw an opening in the line that I thought would lead me to a touchdown. Suddenly Ted filled that opening, we collided, and I went down like a cheap tent in a hurricane. My sports dreams narrowed immediately-- no future in contact football for me.

Would Ted take on Bucky? For whatever reason, Bucky didn't play sports. And Ted didn't challenge him for playground fighting champ.

"I don't know how I'd do against him," Ted said, "but I'll pass on it. He's welcome to the title."

From his side, Bucky didn't challenge Ted, or anyone else at our school. I guess he just didn't need to. For the most part, he was a quiet presence in the classroom and on the playground. His legend did grow when rumors spread that he sometimes slipped into the shadows of the furnace room in the basement to enjoy an illicit can of beer.

"That's Bucky," we all said.

Like every boy in the school, I wanted to be on Bucky's good side. For some reason, he did seem to like me. He'd say hello on his own, used my name, uttered a few friendly words every now and then. He wasn't a talker, but each thing he said was noticed and welcomed. As much as every other young boy, I had somehow realized that alliances of all kinds were important. This fact of life became clearest when someone was singled out as a scapegoat, whether due to looks, or being too quiet or being too loud. The world grades you as surely as the teacher does, we all learned. Or didn't, at our peril.

Bucky's presence was especially important on Thursdays. The pecking order at our school was established enough that there seldom were any fights. Rivalries and jealousies were explored mostly through sports, in the classroom and at weekend parties, where girls' choice dances identified winners and losers. But on Thursdays, boys from a nearby school came to our school to use the shop class

equipment. Our neighborhood was slightly wealthier than that of the visitors, so we had the band saws and other machines needed for shop lessons. Among the visiting boys was Marty something or other, we never knew his last name. Marty was short, powerfully built, had cropped hair and a mean, virulent smile frozen on his face. Marty loved to fight or just bully anyone he chose. He'd pick someone out, walk up, snarl, and insult, often within embarrassing earshot of girls. Why he was like this, no one knew. He was not attractive looking at an age when boys become resentful of what this means. Maybe he saw us as the rich kids who deserved a beating. Whatever it was, he was a cruel person and perhaps remained one all his life.

Marty's group, all trailing him in line, would assemble on our playground at lunch break time. Before heading into the shop, Marty would scan our group for a possible target. Any loners were often spotted by him. Few dared to fight back, so Marty just pushed them around. Like every other boy at our school, I imagine, I always figured some day Marty would come after me. I was a good athlete, maybe that reputation would set off Marty. On Bucky's first Thursday, I found myself standing next to him, like a rabbit in a rainstorm under a sheltering oak tree. Marty seemed at first to be heading my way. He saw Bucky, stopped in his tracks, held his cruel smile in place, but straightened up. Bucky smiled and nodded, like he always did. That was all he had to do, Marty or no. Marty's mind seemed to be running, struggling to make an unfamiliar calculation. He looked down, looked up, leered, and turned away. The playground world had changed.

Bucky stayed the rest of the semester, but didn't return in the Fall. Where had he come from? Terry Haute didn't seem to explain him. Why did he show up at our school? Did he save me from a beating on the playground? Where did he go? Life does have its mysteries, doesn't it?