

The Injuries to Tim Dale

by H. W. Moss

I suppose it was inevitable that I find Tim Dale again later in life. After all, he had been on my mind for more than forty years.

The exact circumstances of that chance meeting might be given in laundry list order. I followed my usual daily routine, breakfasted on cereal and coffee, left the house at 7:45 that morning with plenty of time to take a train into the downtown business district where my offices are on the fourteenth floor of the former Wells Fargo building on Montgomery Street. I say “former” because we still call it the Wells Fargo building even though the bank sold it in the late 90’s when the depreciation schedule and mortgage interest deduction crossed each other on the benefits curve. No matter. Old news. Purely a financial decision. Nothing emotional about it.

I would have bought a paper, and this is critical, if the rack were not empty. This was the variance in the routine, the change that brought on the episode I am about to describe. Had it not been for the paper being sold out, I never would have glanced in his direction, taken the first step, said word one and my life would be now as it was then, under control, in the proper order, taking the correct direction which is as it should be.

How I recognized Tim Dale is a matter for conjecture. After all, we last saw one another when we were approximately ten years old, could have been younger, which means we no longer looked the same.

Yet I saw something in the eyes as they glanced in my direction aboard the train that day. There was a face associated with the eyes that was fuller, fleshed out and larger,

more round, but it was familiar in a nagging way, a remembrance of things past, a tug in the mind that would have remained unanswered throughout the day if I had not turned directly toward him and asked, “Tim? Is your name Tim?”

There was a cloudy instant of non-recognition, the “do I know you” expression we all have when confronted by a stranger. He shifted on his feet as the car tumbled through a tunnel on its way toward the future.

“Why, yes, as a matter of fact, it is. But, I’m sorry, do I know you pal?”

I found myself at something of a disadvantage. Ordinarily no one notices another human while en route to work. It’s just easier that way and I usually practice the technique by firmly burying my nose in the paper. Today’s missing paper. No news. Was that good?

“Well, then. Tim Dale is it?” I had to be sure it was the same person all grown up and, by the looks of him, a successful businessman on his way to work. Just like me. But how similar our lives had become I had no way of knowing or I might never have asked that opening question. I wanted to add, “Are you the boy I knew as a child, now a man?” But I did not. Then he stuck out his hand to shake and I was certain it was him before he even spoke because he had only four fingers. The ring finger was gone.

This did not surprise me. After all, I had cut the finger off more than forty years ago. And that was undoubtedly what made me think of him, the fact I still rued the day my cruel, disagreeable, childish self chopped a fellow school mate’s finger off in an instant of pure, unadulterated mean-spiritedness that I condemn myself for to this day.

It had come about because at Christmas I got my wish: a Swiss Army knife. The Spartan had half a dozen parts including a wire stripper, cork screw and two different

length blades. School was not in session between Christmas and New Years so, as boredom set in, I played with my new toy and envisioned things I could cut up or chop, whittle or throw it at with or without precision.

No, it never occurred to me to use it on another person until the exact moment when I did.

Tim Dale was a year younger. That meant he was technically persona non grata to me and my friends, none of whom had a lick of sense or a sense of obligation to be anything but annoying to anyone not in our group. That meant adults and, most especially, our siblings and their friends, of whom Tim Dale was one.

I remember Franky and me discovering the mausoleum which was unlocked and, somewhere deep in its arced red roof interior behind a thick curtain, the entrance to the crematorium. One of us dared the other, it was typical childish behavior, to enter the room where we crept up to the only thing it contained. I pulled on a handle that looked very much like a silver towel rack which lowered a door revealing an empty interior lined with a porous, off white colored stone. This was the inside of the furnace where fire consumed the caskets and we were briefly in awe.

However, this turned to devilment in no time.

“Let’s scare Tim.” Franky may have been the one to come up with the idea, but it could just have well have been me. Three of us had ridden out to the cemetery. We left Tim to guard our bicycles while we explored. Now we had a purpose, so we returned to the outside world and shouted from the entrance that Tim should leave the bikes behind, no one would bother them, and join us. Look what we found, and the statement remained unanswered because we could not very well tell him, that would have spoiled the fun.

“Come on over here, behind the curtain,” I said directing the unsuspecting youngster to the hidden door. He poked his head inside and Franky gave him a shove while I slammed the door shut. I held the handle so that he was locked in and his screams were almost instantaneous.

“Let me out!” we dimly heard. The paneled walls must have been sound proofed because his shouting and ranting was limited. It could only be heard through the door and then it was muffled. His voice rose in intensity as his fright grew and the pounding of fists began after he tried the handle and failed to break my grip on the other side.

Franky was hunched over next to me, silently laughing, holding his hands over his mouth to stifle his mirth. The handle attempted to move again as Tim screamed and began whimpering. He shouted and beat against the door, kicked at it and tried to force it once more to open. His screaming turned to crying which fell on deaf ears.

This lasted for several minutes and then there was silence on the other side.

I don’t know when it became clear the joke had gone too far, but eventually I decided to let the poor fellow out. I twisted the knob, heard the soft click as metal released from latch, gave a push and gradually the door fell away from its frame.

Franky was shoulder to shoulder with me as we stepped into the room. But Tim was nowhere to be seen. It was eerily quiet with the door open behind us and we looked everywhere. There was nowhere, really, that he could have gone because this was the only entrance or exit, it seemed to us, and there was no furniture in the room, nothing except the furnace which was . . .

It struck us at the same time that perhaps Tim had crawled inside. Acting in unison as if that were so, we crept toward the mouth of the oven once more. Together we placed our hands on the wide steel bar and together we pulled down.

It was as we had first seen it: empty. That is when Tim, who had somehow managed to remain concealed behind the open door which we forgot to examine, leaped upon us in an attempt to force us into the cavernous mouth of the hideous device.

He was far too small to accomplish this and both Franky and I turned to wrestle with the child as all of us, since we were children as well, screamed and fell to the floor under our combined weight. As Franky pinned one of Tim Dale's arms above his head, I leaned forward and withdrew my new knife. I placed a knee on his wrist and used my free hand to open the longest blade. I slapped his hand and the fingers flattened out against the hard, highly polished wood surface and then I held one finger by its end and drew the blade across the space where crease meets palm and the finger, pink like a tiny raw sausage, came free and immediately curled up like a worm as blood sprang from the severed knuckle area and both Franky and I leaped to our feet.

Strangely, there was silence. Tim Dale did not scream or cry out, but rather, when freed sat up astonished. He placed his now four fingered hand next to his face as if he needed glasses to visualize the immense degree of insult he had just endured. With every pump of his heart an ounce of blood spurted like a fountain from the palm of his hand.

I looked around and realized Franky had already fled the room. I had not even noticed I was so caught up in my cruelty. Now, instead of offering condolences or even attempting to help, I tossed the finger into the furnace and ran.

Whatever Tim Dale told his parents, it did not involve us. I was never apprehended for my horrible deed, never reproached or accused or in any way connected, as far as I know, to the loss of his finger.

School began a week later. Almost the first day I saw Tim Dale in the hallway, his hand wrapped in a large white bandage which covered from the elbow down, the thumb and fingers exposed, but, curiously, one was missing.

The bandage came off eventually and by then everyone knew Tim Dale had suffered some kind of accident over the Christmas vacation, an accident that somehow involved the cemetery which made the story even more fantastic. Tim said he lost it in his bicycle chain which I knew was absurd, but how could I argue?

Until today, forty plus years later, when he and I shook hands and stood together on a commuter train heading into the City, staring into one another's eyes. I told him who I was and he said, yes, he recognized me, sort of. I told him I had to ask his forgiveness.

“What for?”

“Do you remember when we were kids, we rode our bikes out to the cemetery together?”

“Why, no.” He appeared baffled by this question.

“I did that to you,” and pointed at his hand hanging at his side. “The finger. I cut your finger off. And I want to apologize.”

He stared and his jaw dropped open almost in cartoon parody of being surprised by this statement. “You didn’t cut my finger off,” he said raising the hand and holding it in front of me in all its nakedness. The stump was vividly exposed. “I cut it off myself. By

accident when I was a kid. Ran my hand into the chain of my bicycle after lifting it in the air and giving the crank a good turn. Stupid of me. Really, really stupid.”

He blamed himself and he was serious. I had to confront the fact that either he had completely blocked out the memory of my deed, or I never committed the crime in the first place. Had I labored under an illusion of guilt all these years? Was it purely my imagination that I had chopped off his finger? I could not be sure, memory is such a fickle thing.

“Funny,” he added with a wry grin. “It kept me out of Vietnam. Otherwise, I’d have been drafted. Instead, I was able to go to college at my own pace, get an MBA and now I run a large corporate office where I’m headed to work right now. I was never even called in for a physical. If I hadn’t lost the finger, I could well have died over there. That’s what happened to Franky. I found his name on the wall in Washington, DC. Died in ’68 age 19, one year out of high school.”

The train came to my stop and I turned to get off. I said nothing, merely nodded at him as we separated. I did not say goodbye, never asked Tim Dale for his phone number for I had no interest in contacting him. But I was stunned by the news about Franky. All these years, I thought he was still alive and well.

Had he died to wash away my sin? It was not in me to believe that. In any event, the stain was gone after more than forty years. And I had no idea why.

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