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Jerry McGahan

BITING AN ORPHAN

YOU KNOW HOW SOMETIMES a grownup will tickle a kid too much? An uncle say, gets started and something pops loose inside him, so he can't quit until the kid starts to cry or the dad or mama goes after him. Or do you remember biting somebody, just a little bite on the arm say, a little play bite that says you could be an animal, too, ha-ha, and then something happens in your jaws and they *really* want to bite, like there is an animal that lives in there, and it's been waiting for years for this chance?

I saw this happen once to my neighbor, Marnie, only it was her father who didn't know how to stop. Marnie was five at the time. Marnie's father is a doctor. They didn't know I was watching them through the caragana hedge.

For the twelve- or thirteen-year-old boy I was then, Marnie was a pest, but a pest of the sort that I found myself careful not to provoke or hurt. I ran from her. Unless she saw me. Then I lowered my head and took it.

"Mason, wanna hear a joke I just made up? It's a joke I just—"

"Yeah, hurry up Marnie."

"What letters can hurt you?"

"Don't know."

"A bee. Where you going? Can I come?"

"Don't know. No."

"Mason, I just read a chapter book from the library."

"Good for you, Marnie."

"You don't think I can read, do you?"

"Sure."

"No sir. Write me a word." She dragged a pencil and a little pad out of a fanny pack made to be a belly pack. She always had it on.

I thought for a minute and then printed the word 'brought.'

Marnie squinted. "Brow . . . git?"

"All right, Marnie, I gotta go."

"What's browgit?"

“A word for six year olds”

“Spell me another one, one I know what it is.”

“No. Bye.”

“Mason, what number do you think is more than the one behind it is more than other numbers are than the ones behind them?”

“What?”

“I mean, I think that seven is more than six more than three is more than two.”

“What?” I yelled.

Not only was she seven or eight years smaller than I was, Marnie was little for her age. Her arms and legs were broom handles, pale and raw, dabbed with raw scrapes and nicks and cuts. She had a long mouth with little teeth, a sharp insistent voice, and keen, shameless eyes that burrowed.

In the summer I mowed the Burnetts’ lawn, and in the winter I shoveled their walks. The Burnetts had two new cars, but they didn’t pay any more for the mowing than anyone else on the block, even though I clipped along the hedges and flower gardens and, in the winter, I always got the snow off before any ice started. I was careful around Dr. Burnett. He had some odd ways. For instance, he wanted me to use the grasscatcher only when I mowed the front lawn and the piece of backyard that showed from the street.

Once he assumed I’d stolen his pliers. The throttle cable had come loose on the mower. When he came home from work, he showed me how to fix it. He set the pliers on the garage window ledge. A few days later he called me through the hedge and asked if I had his pliers. I didn’t.

“I can’t stand looking for things,” he said. A sticky bit of spit made a cobweb between his lips. His eyes were always urgent—like Marnie’s—except Marnie didn’t act like she was catching you at something. I showed him where he’d left the pliers. He said thank you, but it was like he didn’t want to say it.

So it was in the spring when I saw him take that bite of Marnie and forget to stop biting. Only he was digging. There weren’t any leaves on the caragana, so through the hedge, I could see him sweating and puffing and shoveling away at the root of a little tree that had sprouted up along his foundation. He banged it with a bar, then picked and poked

at it with a shovel. Then he cursed. That's what stopped me. I had never heard him curse before.

I liked it. Dr. Burnett was one of those people who always smiled too much, the smile of a chimpanzee, something that didn't mean much. When Dr. Burnett swore, it was like hearing him for the first time. So I was standing there on the other side of the caragana and enjoying his dirty little words when I heard their back door slam. Marnie ran around the corner.

Whatchadoindaddy? I mouthed.

"Whatcha' doing daddy?" Marnie is as predictable as gravity.

He was shoveling at the moment, shoveling and grunting.

"And don't say you're eating ice cream," Marnie said.

"I'm eating ice cream," he said.

I winced, waiting. "Daaaaddy!" Marnie shrieked.

Wearily, he leaned the shovel against the house and picked up the bar. He stared at the little hole in the gravel, and he looked like the tiredest man in the world, more tired than wrestlers or marathon runners on TV, tired like somebody who is not just beat but beat up. Marnie seemed to see it and was quiet. Dr. Burnett banged at the packed gravel until his glasses slid down to the end of his nose. He stopped and pushed them up and then glanced at Marnie. "Hello little girl," he said.

Marnie jerked. "Huh?" she said. "What?"

Dr. Burnett began digging again. "Where did you come from, little girl?" he mumbled. "Never seen you before."

"Daaaaaddy, I'm your little girl. Marnie." She leaned forward and put her hands on her hips.

He glanced at her again. "Never laid eyes on you before," he said, "but you seem like a nice little girl."

"Marnie. I'm Maaaarnie," she screamed at him.

"Well, you seem nice enough, Marnie, if that's your name."

"You know it's my name. You and Mommy named me."

Dr. Burnett disappeared into his labor again. He got down on his hands and knees and scooped out handfuls of pebbles. Marnie watched quietly. I had never seen her so still, not for that long. By and by, Dr. Burnett started to get up. Sitting back on his heels, he seemed to see Marnie again for the first time. "Hello, little girl," he said wearily, "where'd you come from?"

"I'm an orphan," Marnie pounced. She screwed up her mouth to keep from bursting into laughter. "I don't have a name."

Dr. Burnett peeked at her. He got up very slowly, like boulders were clunking around inside him. He started banging with the bar and it sounded like he was hitting the concrete or maybe a big rock. He kept banging. He did not look like he felt good, and I thought he probably wanted to swear again but could not with Marnie there.

"Can I help?" Marnie asked.

"No thank you, little girl."

Marnie watched her dad. She seemed unhappy. Nobody said anything for a long time. Finally, Marnie spoke. "Daddy . . ." she ventured.

"Yes, little girl."

I saw Marnie's face wince. She jutted a lip. "Let's not play this anymore. I'll be Marnie again."

"O.K., little girl," her father said.

Marnie looked like she was scared. She watched her dad for a long time and then quietly she backed away. She backed all the way around the corner of the house. Dr. Burnett didn't seem to notice that she had left. I could see her sitting on her swing. She stared at the ground and twisted a little with one toe on the ground.

Dr. Burnett dug with the bar again. The metal rang. Then he swore again, this time with that short, square, dirtiest dirty-word. I would have bet money that was a word he had never used once. I was pondering this discovery, just who he really was, when Marnie came racing around the corner, her face all made up to be her regular pesty self, except that I could see it was all pretend. "Hi Daddy," she cried out just like she hadn't seen him for days. She sucked her lip.

Dr. Burnett stopped hitting with the bar. He looked at her and frowned. "Who are you?" he asked. "Whose little girl are you?"

Marnie's face cracked like an eggshell. "I'm your little girl," she said almost whispering, "and I don't want to play this anymore."

"You must be the orphan someone told me about," Dr. Burnett told her. He talked like a robot. He went down on his hands and knees again, scrabbling out the gravel with his hands. An enormous tear grew like a mushroom in the corner of each of Marnie's eyes. One broke loose and shot off down her cheek. She smeared it away with the back of her hand.

I ducked through the caragana. “Hi Marnie. ’Lo Dr. Burnett,” I said. They both said hello. Dr. Burnett gave me his chimpanzee smile. But, having just heard the sadness in Marnie’s voice, he saw the wetness on her face. He looked at me to see if I was in on it, too. By then, he knew that he was the only one who hadn’t been in on it. His eyes got a little funny like he felt cornered. Nobody was saying anything. Dr. Burnett and I were itching to get away from each other. Marnie didn’t seem to care about anything.

“Want me to spell you some words?” I asked her.

She nodded without lifting her eyes. “C’mon,” I said, “let’s go sit on the swings, and I’ll give you a few.”

Marnie started for the backyard. “Bye, Marnie,” her father said. He said it sweet, sweet, sweet as pie.

“Bye,” Marnie said without looking back, and it was like she was saying good bye to somebody she didn’t know. It made me think of a spirit whistling away at death, only this was smaller, just a little spirit leaving, maybe, for a little death.