

"Why didn't you let go when Wayne let go? Why did you keep hanging on?"

He said nothing for a moment, just pedaling; then he sighed. "I thought about it. Just for a second."

"Then why didn't you?"

"Alan," he said, as if talking to an idiot, "the thing cost me eleven dollars. A man hates to let go of that much money."

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Orvis Orvisen and the Crash and Bash

There are boys' names that you know will make a boy popular and successful and cool and able to talk to girls (more on this later) and will make him have a wonderful life and probably get rich and marry a cheerleader and have a hot car....

Clint is such a name, and perhaps Steve, although not necessarily Steven, and Brad, and maybe best of all Nick. You just know that somebody named Nick is going to get it all.

And then there are the other names:

Harvey, maybe, and Sidney and Gary and Wesley—names that connote, well, not necessarily a loser, in fact not at all a loser, but somebody

who you know is going to have to work that little bit harder to make it all happen for him.

A boy stands up in the back of a new class and says, "Hello, my name is Harvey Hemesvedt"—not Harv, or Sid or Wes, but the whole name, Harvey—you just *know* that kid is going to be busy for a while.

And if a boy's last name is Orvisen, and his parents are silly or addled or just plain cruel enough to give him the first name of Orvis so he has to say, "Hello, my name is Orvis Orvisen," they might as well just rub him with raw liver and throw him into a pit of starving wolves.

And if you take the same Orvis Orvisen and put him not in a public school but in a Catholic school, where all the boys play hockey—sometimes with live pucks if they can find a chicken or a cat—and think fighting almost to the death is a form of recreation . . .

Well, Orvis had a tough row to hoe.

"I barely made it home alive from my first day of school," he told me when I met him. "They

wanted to play catch with me—not with a ball, but throw *me* back and forth. Man, they were worse than the nuns."

We had all heard horror stories about the nuns who taught at the Catholic school, how they used yardsticks like broadswords and dipped the edges in salt so they would hurt more and didn't care if you bled as long as you didn't drip on the floor. Whenever I had seen nuns they always seemed quiet and almost nice, but there were Catholic boys who were so mean they scared bad dogs, and these boys would cross the street and hide in back of a garbage can in terror when they saw Sister Eunicia walking by.

And so Orvis came to be better and tougher than all of us combined, and so Orvis became the one who tried the Circle of Death.

But first, a bit more about him.

Somewhere along in the seventh grade Orvis evolved a novel method of self-defense. He would evaluate his difficulty, consider what was going to happen to him and then do it to himself.

It was brilliant in its simplicity. If, for instance, a group of boys were going to stick him in his locker—something that happened to him so often, he told me he was going to make an emergency pack with a flashlight and some food and water for when he had to stay in there for longer periods—he would just run to his locker, climb in and slam the door behind himself.

“That way I can control the damage. I thought of numbering the different types of punishment to make it easier for the bullies. They really aren’t very bright, you know. I’d just give them a list with the numbers and torture on it. So the locker would be one, and jerking my own underwear into a wedgie would be two, all the way down to going headfirst into a garbage can for seventeen or eighteen, and maybe twenty-two for being pantsed in front of the girls’ locker room. That way when I see them coming they could just yell a number and I could do it to myself.”

Well, it worked, and it made him tough. Later, a lot later, when he finally decided it was time to

stand up to them, he caught Bobby Bunnis, one of the worst bullies, in back of the hockey rink and beat him so hard they say Bobby wet his pants and cried for mercy. Orvis never talked about this but he never really corrected the rumor either. They did have a fight, and Orvis must have won because Bobby quit bothering him and focused on other boys—me, for instance.

Orvis’s final toughening moment came the night of the crab apple war.

There was a tent revival meeting that lasted the whole month of August. Aside from any religious thinking, it was pure drama for us, in the days before television, when movies at the Fox Theater only changed once a week. They put up the big tent (army surplus, of course) but kept the sides rolled down because—and I heard the minister say this—it made the women sweat and their clothes would stick to them so you could “see things.” He was a small man, the minister, with a pile of hair on his head and a flashy rayon suit that changed color in the light as he moved, and

he almost screamed when he preached, his voice bellowing as he ranted and tore at his collar and tie, and sometimes he spoke in gibberish and people would get up in the audience and come forward and babble in the same way and fall down and jerk around.

It was something to see. We would sneak to the back entrance to watch.

One night, after the sermon, Orvis had an idea.

We had watched it three nights running. The sermon, or the part we could understand, was always the same and the people came back each time even though they'd heard it before.

"Right toward the end," Orvis said as we walked home, "he talks about listening for the footsteps of God—tomorrow night we're going to help him."

As the tent was filling the next night, Orvis took us to the Carlsons' backyard, where they had a crab apple tree. We pulled up our T-shirts and made pouches and filled them with crab apples and went back to the tent.

Just before the minister started talking in tongues, he raised up his hands, sweat dripping down his forehead, and looked at the heavens and screamed:

"Listen! Listen for the footsteps of God!"

At that moment we threw crab apples up on the canvas tent roof and then ran around to look in the back entrance. The apples landed and rolled down the canvas, sounding for all the world like footsteps.

For half a second there was profound silence as every face turned to the roof of the tent, including the face of the minister, who looked stunned. Then men and women started screaming in tongues and falling to the ground, rolling around and jerking. I was thinking this was way better than a movie when suddenly I was jerked off my feet by a man in a suit. He had to be seven feet tall.

"Boy," he said, holding me up like a rat on a string, "what's your name and address?" Stupidly, stunned by being caught, I told him my real name and address and he came later and told my parents,

and that was in the days when everybody believed in corporal punishment, so I couldn't sit down or walk right for going on a week.

The minister had a group of large, muscular men who traveled with him as organizers, to put the tent up and hang posters around town, and they were the ones who caught us.

The one who caught Orvis must have been a true monster because when he held Orvis up and asked his name Orvis became rattled and gave the first name that came to his mind. He told the man he was Archie Swenson.

This was wrong on so many different levels that it's hard to believe Orvis could have done it.

"I'm not sure why I said that," he said later. "I was maybe thinking about him, how cool he was, wondering how he would handle being caught—all in just a split second, you know—and the name just bounced out."

Archie with the good ducktail. Archie with the cigarette pack rolled in his sleeve. Archie with the engineer boots. Archie with the leather jacket.

Archie with the hot car and the half-naked girl in the steering wheel knob and the ability to flip a Zippo lighter open and set it alight for his cigarette with one snap of his fingers. Archie, rumored to have a raunchy tattoo on his chest, who might have once been in jail and who might carry a switchblade.

That Archie.

The one name in the whole world that was certain to cause massive retribution, retaliation and a reckoning.

And once Orvis had blurted it out he couldn't pull it back, and to compound the error, as soon as he had said it he pulled free and ran off. The church man took me home, and went to find Archie the next day, whereupon he found out that Archie wasn't the one who had thrown the crab apples. The church people never did find out about Orvis.

But Archie did.

For several days Orvis lived in a kind of mute horror, waiting for the ax to fall and wondering if it might actually be an ax. Then he decided to act.

He waited until Archie was at work at the Texaco station and approached him. He kneeled and begged forgiveness. Archie looked down on him as royalty might look down on a subject and said, "I don't know, kid. Usually somebody does this kind of thing to me, I gotta hurt them, you know?"

"That's not a problem," Orvis said. "I'll hurt myself." And he stood up, went across the street from the gas station, turned, crouched as a runner would crouch and ran full out, as fast as his legs could pump, and slammed wide open into the brick wall next to the grease rack.

He got a concussion, was out for over ten minutes and went to the hospital in an ambulance that Archie called. Orvis became something of a legend because he left stains on the wall that lasted for years.

"The little booger almost killed himself," Archie said later in wonder. "Hell, I was just going to give him a charley horse."

But that was Orvis.

That was the same Orvis who ran into the

two things that would bring him into the Circle of Death.

Showing off.

And girls.

First, about bicycles and how they helped showing off:

There are many different kinds of bicycles now—specialty bikes, high-speed bikes, BMX bikes, stunt bikes, mountain bikes, cruisers—the list goes on and on.

Back then there were two kinds: boys' bikes, with a crossbar at the top of the frame that would cripple and emasculate you if you took a bump wrong, and girls' bikes, with a swoop-down frame that would allow a girl to ride a bike while wearing a dress without being "indecent." (It actually said that on the brochure that came with the bike, that a girl in a dress could "ride with decency.")

No boy would be caught dead riding a girls' bike and no girl would ride a boys' bike.

When a child was small he rode a tricycle and as soon as he could manage the two-wheeler he