

Picnic

by Tim Chapman

They took Phillip Breen away the same week my mother went into the hospital. As far as I'm concerned, Phillip was the last guy they should have carted off. Sure, he was nuts, but in a lot of ways he was saner than some of the other kids in the neighborhood.

I don't remember how I met him. It seems like he was just around, always standing on the sidewalk watching us play ball while listening to his transistor radio or hanging out down by the creek, sitting and staring at the water and the iridescent pools of soap scum that floated past. One day he showed up at the front door. I must have waved to him one time or said "Hey" or something. I mean, I don't think he would have come up to the door if he didn't think there was a reason to. I was in my room, thumbing through some comic books, when my mother stuck her head in. She looked puzzled. "Bryan, there's a man at the door who says he wants to speak with you."

I didn't think much of it at the time. I went out and sat on the top step, and Phillip sat two steps down. Even sitting two steps down Phillip's head was about even with mine. He was tall, and while we talked, I noticed how greasy his blond hair looked, like he hadn't washed it in a long time. I don't know what we talked about. Probably the kind of small talk kids make when they're getting to know one another. "Who's your favorite Cub?" (The answer was always Banks or Santo) and "What comics do you read?" and probably "Jeez, it's hot." because it was the middle of a humid Illinois summer. After he left, my mother asked me who he was.

"Some guy," I said. "I think he lives a couple of blocks over."

"What did he want?"

"Nothing. He just wanted to talk, I guess."

"Why did he want to talk to you?"

"He's got no friends."

She looked at me like I hadn't understood the question. "But why did he want to talk to *you*?"

"I *guess* because he's got no friends."

She let it drop but I heard her talking with my father about it that evening. They were still at the dinner table, and my sister, Meg, and I were sitting on the floor, in front of the TV. I think they knew I was listening. I think they wanted me to listen.

"He's a grown man," my father said. "He's twenty-four years old, and he's been in trouble before. Why's he coming around here?"

I knew my mother hadn't finished her dinner. I could hear her fork, pushing the food around on her plate. "What kind of trouble?"

"I don't know, exactly. They sent him off to Dixon after the mother died. It's just him and his father in that old house. The father's gone at work all day and at T's Tap a couple of nights a week."

"Aren't there any programs? I mean, should he be running around unsupervised?"

That was about as far as it went that night. There was a game on, and my father moved over to the couch to get a better view of the 14-inch screen. My mother continued to push her food around for a few minutes, then cleared the table.

*

My best friend, both in and out of school, was a kid with a pituitary gland problem. John was almost a foot shorter than any of the kids in our grade and consequently was about the toughest kid in school. He could play any sport and, during football season, had a habit of tackling kids almost twice his size. Not that either of us was interested in the leagues down at the school. We played in an empty lot with the kids in our neighborhood. Almost everybody played. The only kid we banned from our games was Terry Walsh. His parents had given him an archery set for his birthday, and he used it to terrorize the little kids. These weren't rubber tipped arrows. It was a real bow and arrow, and he liked to show us how he could shoot an arrow right through the door of the old refrigerator the garbage men refused to pick up. Sometimes Terry would grab some little kid and make him stand in front of a tree while he shot arrows into the tree close to the kid's head. John and I caught Terry shooting his arrows at kids twice, and both times we pounded the snot out of him. It didn't stop him, though. Some guys never learn.

When we weren't playing with the other kids, John and I would go exploring. There were plenty of places to explore in our neighborhood. There were a lot of new

constructions, and when the workmen weren't around we'd go in and have a look around. We never graffitied or kicked holes in the walls. We just liked the way it felt to be the only ones in a strange building. Other times we'd walk down by the creek. We looked for wild animals and pretended we were the first people to discover that part of the world—except for Indians, of course. One time we shinnied across a fallen tree to the other side of the creek and found an abandoned mink farm. There was a barn full of empty metal cages and half-full bags of animal feed. I went out behind the barn and found a bunch of mink bones flattened out in the grass. Some of them still had skin on them. I kicked around in the junk behind the barn until I found some paper—an old potato chip bag. I used it to pick up one of the skulls, then called John out of the barn.

"Check this out. These things had some sharp teeth." The skull was about the size of my fist, with fangs on the top jaw. The lower jaw was missing.

"Looks like a cat," John said. "Only maybe with a longer head."

I pointed at the mink corpses. "What do you think happened?"

He got a serious look on his face, like he was really trying hard to figure it out. "I bet the owners went out of business, and rather than let the minks starve to death, brought them out here and killed them."

It was as good a guess as any, and it made me realize that one of the reasons I was friends with John was because he could use his head for something more than a place to keep his hat. I slipped the mink skull into my pocket, and we headed back across the fallen tree. When we were a few blocks from John's house we saw Phillip walking toward us on the other side of the street. He waved to me, and I waved back.

"What are you doing?" John whispered. "That's that crazy guy. My mom said not to talk to him"

I had only talked with Phillip the one time, but I figured I knew him better than John's mom. "He's all right. He's just lonely."

"Oh shit. He's coming over here."

"Be cool," I said, trying to sound cool myself. I waved. "Hey Phil, what's happening?"

Phillip waited until he crossed the street to answer. "Hi Bryan. Please, call me Phillip. I don't like it when people call me Phil." He waved to John. "Hi Bryan's friend."

"No problem, Phillip. This is John."

John waved and looked up at the giant in front of him. The three of us walked together for a block or so without talking. Finally, I asked him, "Where's your radio?"

"No game today. Do you fellows like baseball?"

"Sure we do," I said. "How about you?"

Phillip got a big grin on his face, like he'd been hoping I'd ask.

"I really like it a lot. They used to let me play it at the school I stayed at. I was a good hitter."

John had been walking a few feet ahead of us, but now he slowed down. "What position did you play?" he asked.

"They put me in right field. I couldn't catch very good, so they put me out there."

"Billy Williams plays right field," I said, "and he's a good player."

"I was a good hitter. I'm pretty strong, and I didn't strike out too much."

"That's good," John said. "Teams need good batters."

I asked Phillip, "Do you know what a pinch hitter is?"

He shook his head.

"A pinch hitter's a special player who's good at batting. That's his main job, batting. You could be a pinch hitter."

"I can't play anymore. I only played at that school I stayed at."

"We play in that empty lot, over by the Catholic Church."

"Yeah, I seen you there."

John punched me in the arm to get me to shut up, and Phillip saw it.

"That's okay. I'm too big to play around here. My dad told me I should leave the kids alone."

"Well yeah," I said, "you'd probably hit all home runs. It wouldn't be fair to the other team."

Phillip got kind of a sorry look, and John must have felt bad because he said, "You can come by and watch us play if you want." Then he got quiet, like he was thinking maybe he shouldn't have said it.

By that time we were at the corner of John's block. We all lived in different directions so we separated there, John running home, and Phillip moving off with his slow, deliberate walk.

*

My mom was dancing around the living room with the vacuum in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She was singing along to the Beatles' "Please, Please Me" on the radio, flicking ashes on the carpet, and then vacuuming them up. Meg was sitting with her legs drawn up under her so the vacuum could get at the dust under the couch. I was at the dining room table, pretending to read, but we were both watching our mother. She hadn't been happy for several months, so her good mood surprised us. I think we were suspicious of the abrupt change. It was a sticky afternoon, and all the doors and windows were open, but none of us heard Phillip until he knocked on the screen door. My mother switched off the vacuum cleaner and her good mood at the same time. "Bryan," she grumbled, "it's your 'friend.'"

I went to the screen door and started to open it, but she got between me and the door and slipped the little hook through the eyelet to fasten the door closed.

"This is the third time you've come over this week, Phillip. I think from now on you and Bryan should visit through the screen door." She gave me a look as she turned to put the vacuum cleaner away. "You stay inside," she said, then sat down at the table, within earshot of the door.

Phillip and I talked for a while about the same stuff we always talked about. I was angry with my mother for coming up with this new rule. With the sun behind Phillip, looking through the screen made him kind of blurry, more of a silhouette. Phillip didn't seem to mind the screen. If he thought anything about it, he didn't say. He told me about *his* mother for the first time, though. She had gotten sick and died when he was a little boy.

"She was very nice. She gave me my radio." He held up his arm to show the little plastic radio dangling by a strap from his wrist. "The battery's dead, so I couldn't listen to the game today. I remember one time she had a party for me with a chocolate cake that she made. I think it was for my birthday. It was a long time ago. My dad says she loved us a lot, but the doctors couldn't help her. He says that doctors don't know everything."

My mother came to the door then. "It's time for you to go home now, Phillip. Bryan has to set the table for dinner."

It bothered me that my mother would lie that way. Meg and I always took turns setting the table, and it was her turn. It was also at least two hours before dinner.

*

The next day I walked to the dime store after lunch. My dad had given Meg and me our allowance the night before, and I wanted to check out the new comic books. As I cut through the park I saw Phillip sitting on a bench, just sort of staring off at nothing. I made a wide circle behind him since I didn't feel like talking and hoped he didn't see me.

The dime store was a bust. It looked like the comics had already been picked over; all the Marvels were gone. I bought a pack of baseball cards and, shoving the gum in my mouth and the cards in my pocket, headed home. I was going to bypass the park, but as I was leaving the store I thought I heard crying around back. I went to check it out, and there, in the store's little parking lot, was Terry Walsh with his bow and arrow and three kids lined up against the fence. All the kids were whimpering and shaking and holding cardboard boxes with circles drawn on them over their heads, and Walsh was taking aim. He had one eye closed and the tip of his tongue was sticking out of the side of his mouth as he sighted down the arrow. I yelled at him. "Hey! Quit scaring those kids!"

He turned and, without missing a beat, let fly, skewering a garbage can near where I was standing.

"The next one goes through your gizzard."

I didn't know what to do. I felt bad running away, but I didn't want to get shot. I started to head home, but telling my mother didn't seem like a good solution, either. All she'd do is call Walsh's parents, the idiots who gave him the archery set in the first place. Then I thought of Phillip. I ran back to the park and told him what was happening. He either couldn't or wouldn't go any faster than his usual ambling walk, so I was a good fifty feet ahead of him when we got to the parking lot. Walsh notched an arrow and turned toward me.

"I told you once," he began. Then he saw Phillip come around the corner of the building. "Oh, shit." Startled, he released the bowstring. The arrow thunked harmlessly into the ground at his feet. Phillip didn't say a word, but Walsh dropped his bow and ran

off in the other direction. The little kids, still holding the boxes over their heads, started bawling again.

"Shut up, you kids," I said. "And put those boxes down. You're not hurt."

One by one they dropped their targets and ran off. Phillip picked up Walsh's bow.

"Should we give this back?" he asked.

"Hell, no. That guy's a menace."

"Hell is a swear. My dad says you shouldn't swear."

"Okay." I laughed a little, then caught myself. I pointed at the bow in his hand.

"What do *you* want to do with it?"

He set the bow on the ground with one end propped against a cinder block. Then he stomped on it. He raised his foot and brought it down hard, three times, until the bow snapped off near one end. The taut string whipped the broken end around, kicking up gravel and making a "whaaang" sound.

*

My mother had been going to the doctor a lot, and normally one of the neighbor ladies would stop in to keep an eye on Meg and me. This day none of the ladies was around, so we had to go with her. The drive to the doctor's office was pretty uneventful. Meg had brought a bunch of doll clothes and was sitting in the back seat trying different outfits on her Barbie. We had to stop for a freight train, and since we were the first car in line, I counted the number of tankers, gondolas, and boxcars out loud. My mother counted them with me, something dad usually did, but this was a first for her. She even joined Meg and me when we waved at the man in the caboose as it passed.

Meg and I stayed in the waiting room at the doctor's office. I glanced at a two-year-old copy of Highlights Magazine while we waited, but Mom wasn't in with the doctor very long. There was a drug store in that neighborhood that carried comic books, and on the way home I asked if we could stop. My mother didn't say a word, just kept driving like Meg and I weren't even in the car with her. I started to get mad and was going to make some wiseass remark when I noticed she was crying. All the way home she drove with mascara-stained tears running down her cheeks. She didn't make any noise, and I don't think Meg even noticed. I kept my mouth shut, and we made the trip in silence.

*

That Saturday, John and I decided to go on a picnic. I stuffed my pockets with bags of lunchmeat, and John brought a loaf of bread from his house. We were on our way to the dime store to buy some candy and a couple of sodas, and there was Phillip, sitting in the park again. I suggested we invite him along.

"I don't think so," John said. "I'm not supposed to talk to him at all, and you're supposed to be behind a screen door. We'll both get in trouble."

I pointed at him. "Look at the guy. He's always by himself. We're his only friends."

"We're not his friends. We hardly even know him."

"That's worse. Maybe nobody knows him. What if nobody knew you? Think about it."

John thought about it. "Tell you what," he said, "give me your money, and I'll buy the sodas. You go invite your buddy, and I'll meet you both at the creek."

By the time Phillip and I got to the creek John had made a half dozen sandwiches. He gave us each two sandwiches and a soda. We ate one of the sandwiches while we walked alongside the creek and saved the other for the trestle. The trestle was where John and I went to talk. The Chicago and North Western line used to run across it, and if you walked out on the tracks you could sit on the end of a railroad tie and look down at the swirling water. There wasn't a lot of wildlife that could live in those polluted waters, but occasionally we'd see turtles or muskrats swimming around.

We each took a tie and sat quietly while we ate, listening to the water running twenty feet below us and appreciating the breeze. It was so hot my shirt was sticking to me, and I could feel trickles of sweat run down my back, soaking the waistband of my pants. I thought I saw carp in the water, so we wadded up some bread into little balls and dropped them in. The fish came to the surface and sucked them down, knocking each other out of the way and muddying the water. We each ate another piece of bread, then threw the rest to the fish. There was a short battle that lasted until the bread was gone, then they moved downstream. Finally, John asked Phillip the question I'd been trying not to ask.

"So, why did they send you to that place in Dixon?"

I could see that Phillip didn't want to answer. He started to fidget, then bent over at the waist and stared down at the place the fish had been.

"Some kids complained. They said I was bothering them. My dad told me not to mess with them, but I was headstrong. That's what my mom always said, that I was headstrong." He sat up suddenly and looked at me. "I'm not bothering you, am I? You tell me if I'm bothering you, okay? I don't want to bother anybody."

I felt a little scared, then. I looked at Phillip and, for the first time, noticed the stubble on his cheeks. His blond hair was matted, and his skin was shiny with sweat. His shirt collar was open, and I could see the hair on his chest. I realized we were out in the woods with a grown man. I looked over at John, and he looked scared, too.

"You're not bothering us," I said. "We wouldn't have invited you on this picnic if you were bothering us."

Phillip turned and looked out at the trees beyond the creek. He looked sad. "You fellows are the best friends I ever had," he said, but he didn't sound happy about it.

*

I don't know how John's mom found out about the picnic. He swears he didn't tell anyone, but I bet he told one of his brothers. Those guys are always squealing on us. Anyway, his mother grounded him from me again, meaning we can't play together for however long the punishment lasts. She does this every time we get in trouble. Usually it's not for very long, and usually she just tells John, who calls to tell me he'll see me in a couple of days. This time it was for two weeks, and she called the house herself to talk with my mother, who called me into the kitchen after she hung up the phone.

"I thought I made it clear that you're not allowed to talk with Phillip unless your father or I am around."

"No, I didn't..."

"That was not a question. There is no room for discussion here. If you break this rule I will call Phillip's father and tell him that Phillip is not allowed to come over again. Do you understand?"

She didn't sound angry so much as tired. She looked tired, too. I didn't argue.

"I understand."

"Good." She turned and walked toward her bedroom. "I'm going to take a nap. Your sister is out in the yard. Go keep an eye on her."

*

Phillip only came over once after the picnic. It was one evening after dinner, and I had gone to the store with my father. My mother told me when we got home.

John came over the day after my mother went into the hospital. She needed an operation, but my father said she would be fine. She cried the day before she went in, and after a lot of pestering, finally told me why she had to go—breast cancer. Meg cried, too. She didn't understand what was going on, but she knew something was wrong.

One of the neighbor ladies was keeping an eye on us while Dad was at work. She was inside watching her soaps when John came over. We decided to go for a walk, and I shouted through the front door, "Going to the park, Mrs. Patton." She mumbled something, and when I looked in through the screen she and Meg were huddled together on the couch, staring at the TV. John and I talked while we walked, catching up on things.

"I guess your mom was pretty mad."

"She still is. I'd still be grounded if your mom wasn't in the hospital. She said I could come over and keep you company."

"That's cool."

"How is your mom?"

"My dad called earlier and said they got all the cancer. She'll be okay, but she's going to stay at the hospital for a couple of days. Meg can't stop crying."

"Yeah."

It wasn't until we got to the park that he told me. We were walking across the empty baseball diamond.

"Did you hear about Phillip?"

"No," I said. "What about him?"

"His dad sent him back to the mental hospital down in Dixon."

I stopped walking. "Why? What happened?"

"Someone called the cops on him. Someone's mother."

"But why? What did he do?"

“Her kid said he was bothering him, touched him, maybe.”

“Bullshit!” I kicked up a cloud of dirt from the base path. “He wouldn’t do that. It was that fucking Walsh. He probably said it to get revenge on Phillip for breaking his bow.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know who it was.”

“I bet it was Walsh. Come on. We’ll find him and make him tell us, and if it was him we’ll make him tell the truth.” I kicked the dirt again. “Fucking Walsh.” I stalked off, determined to find Terry Walsh and make him confess, but when I realized John wasn’t with me I stopped. “Come on!”

He just looked at me until I walked back to where he was standing.

“It wasn’t Walsh,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

He didn’t say anything.

“How do you know it wasn’t Walsh?”

“It was my mother. She called the police.”

“But Phillip didn’t do anything to you. Why didn’t you tell them?”

“I couldn’t.” He started crying. “She’s my mother.”

“But you were his friend. We were his only friends.”

“She’s my mother.”

Then I couldn’t stop myself. I punched my best friend in the face.