

Sticks and Stones

A Story by Pat Spears

Mary is kneeling in her back yard, weeding dandelions from among the shasta daisies, sweating in the spring humidity, when the school bus brakes at the corner. From behind her privacy fence, she imagines kids crushing forward to the front of the bus, and pouring onto the street like the Great Flood. Their voices spill over the fence, and rising above those of all the others is the voice of the boy she calls *bully*.

She's heard him plenty of times, taunting the smaller, more timid kids, and with the neighborhood changing there are always new kids to torment. "Fresh meat," she's heard him baiting, drawing the scrappier ones into bloody fights where they've gotten the shorter end.

"Give it back, whore," she hears him say, "before I bash your fat face in."

She stands, listening, thinking he's at it again. But when their voices trail off, up and down the street, she stoops again to her work, believing that whatever it was has passed.

She remembers the nice boy from next door. What was his name? He'd brought sweet and spicy packages wrapped in warm waxed paper, and she'd called thanks to his momma who'd stood waving from her back steps.

"Shoot, what was that child's name?" she asks of her cat, sunning nearby. "Some days my mind's like a sieve."

He'd been the first person she'd talked to when she couldn't get Sarah at the school, after hearing Walter Cronkite say on TV that President Kennedy had been shot. The poor boy was later killed in Vietnam. "Tommy. Tommy Watson was his name," to the cat, now sitting in the watering pail.

That was the same year she and Sarah had bought this house and moved in. Back then they'd both had plenty of starch in their backbones. Now Sarah is dead, the neighborhood is for rent, and she has more good years behind her than ahead of her.

Back on the street, as though triggered by some primi-

tive signal, screams soar, the bully's rising like a lead hound's when it's caught the scent of prey.

"Get her," he yells.

Feet pound the soft ground along the power line right-of-way between her fence and the drainage ditch. She turns to see the board she's left loose at the bottom for her cat flip skyward, and a young girl squeeze through the opening. Her face flushed and streaked with sweat, the girl crawls on her knees and elbows through the azaleas, turning to sit on the ground against the loose board.

"Hold up," the bully shouts. "The little chicken-shit's crawled under Butch Stevens' fence."

The girl looks to Mary, her eyes pleading for sanctuary and whispers, "Please, Miss Butch."

Mary frowns, but she's not about to throw the girl to the head hunters on the other side of the fence.

"Bust it down." A second boy screams and they begin pounding the fence with their fists and feet.

Mary picks up a garden hoe, unlocks the back gate, and steps into the alley. The boys don't notice her until she's hit the fence a sharp blow with the hoe.

"Shit, the old queer's gone nuts," another boy says. He's bare to the waist, looking half-raw, his milky-white skin like that of an oyster. There are four boys, and some girls stand further back, near the street. They're all younger than she expected, maybe between eleven and thirteen.

"You boys mean to kick down my fence?" she asks in a steady voice.

Stepping forward, the bully says, "Ain't nobody hurt your fence."

Although she's seen him often enough on the street, she's never seen him this close, and for a moment she feels something for him. His head teeters on its thin neck like a ball on a rope. He stands, his jaw jutted forward, and his pale face is as transparent as an onion peel.

"She stole something we're getting back."

"If she's a thief, you can tell her folks. But for now she's staying right where she is."

"Her momma don't want her hanging around the likes of you," he says, looking to the others, who giggle. "She'll call the cops."

Can't let this one get under her skin, she thinks, drawing herself erect. She may be sixty, but thank goodness she's solid right on. Taking a firmer grip on the hoe handle, she locks eyeballs with the boy and lowers her voice to what Sarah had called her biker's growl. "Never mind that. Ya'll better worry about getting out of here before I lose my temper and start swinging."

Under her steady gaze, the bully's face loses some of its hardness and he turns to the others. "Forget the old bitch. We'll fix her later."

Mary watches as they round the outside corner of the



fence, hurling themselves into the street, jeering as a startled driver struggles to bring his pickup to a sliding stop.

Back inside the yard, the gate locked behind her, Mary notices the girl has continued to sit on the ground. She's wearing cut-off jeans, a dirty t-shirt ripped at the neck, and tennis shoes with broken laces. Mary thinks the basketball trading card sticking from the top of her sock could be the reason for the trouble.

The girl looks up at Mary, her eyes calmer than before, and says, "You'd have whacked him with that hoe?"

"Don't know," Mary says, shrugging. "Their kind usually turn out to be more bark than bite." Pushing her Bulls cap back from her face, she offers the girl a hand to stand. "Where's your folks?"

"My momma's gone to get our lights turned on," she says, tugging at her sock.

Mary notices blood on the girl's knee. "You hurt anywhere besides that knee?"

"No ma'am, besides scraping my back on a nail," she says, pointing to the bottom of the fence. "Guess I'll need to fix your fence since I'm the one who busted it."

"We'll leave it like it is for now. But you can drop the 'Miss Butch.' Name's Mary Stevens."

"Sorry, I— said what I heard them—"

"Forget it," Mary says, a little surprised at her roughness with the girl. "What's your name?"

"Jodie. Stands for Jolene," she says, her voice lifting, and Mary thinks there's a story behind the name.

"Jolene is a nice name, but I believe I'll call you Jodie. Suits you. We'd better go in and doctor those places."

Jodie sits at Mary's kitchen table eating shortbread and

drinking a frosty glass of milk. She's cleaned up, wearing an adult-size t-shirt, studying Mary's black cat sleeping on the back of the recliner in the family room.

"What's that cat's name?"

"That lazy thing is Tat. Sarah named him that when she couldn't think of anything nice that fit. He's ten."

Jodie nods, her eyes drifting to the picture of Sarah on the bookshelf. "She your sister or somebody?"

Mary tells Jodie only that Sarah was her best friend and that they'd lived together in this house until Sarah died, three years ago this month.

Jodie's shoulders droop and tiny puffs of air escape between her lips. Sliding the glass back and forth across the placemat, she says, "Me and him's the same age."

"Bet you don't bring dead mice and snakes home." She smiles, glad that Jodie has given them an easy way to go on talking.

Jodie frowns, "No way, and I don't eat raw cauliflower either. My momma tries making me 'cause she thinks I'm fat. Says boys won't like you if you're fat."

"Fat? You're just healthy. And who said it's up to boys to decide anyway?"

"You sound like my daddy," she says, smashing crumbs under her thumb. "He was my daddy till Momma caught him messing around with Bobbi's momma. You know, like Frankie and Dee on 'Days of Our Lives.'"

Then in a breathless tone she tells Mary that after a divorce, she and her momma moved to Selma to live with her momma's new boy friend. "When the new wore off, she said she didn't like Selma anymore. So, we stayed second grade with Aunt Jewel in Macon."

Jodie stops talking and looks away. Mary takes this to mean she's sorry for having said too much. But turning back to Mary, her eyes suddenly sad, she says, "Back

home, my best friend Bobbie's little dog got run over. And after that whenever she'd see a little brown dog like him, she'd cry."

Mary glances at the windmill-shaped clock hanging above the stove and wonders whether Jodie's momma is home. She's sure Sarah would have known what to say to make Jodie feel better. But then, she'd been a teacher until the school board—she'd joked—made her an assistant principal to a bachelor ex-coach who had never read Faulkner. Toward the end, he'd come by the house each day, bringing a single red rose, causing Mary to think he'd been sweet on Sarah. But Sarah had not remembered his name, only hers.

"Jodie, you want more shortbread? Milk? Anything, before I run you home? Your momma's got to be worried sick."

Mary drives Jodie in her red Toyota truck to the house Jodie points out, six blocks east, in an area she thinks of as infested and spreading. Jodie wears a tight face as they make their way onto the unlit porch. The front door is unlocked. Mary flips the light switch inside the front door, but there is no electricity. From the flashlight's weak glow, the room appears nearly empty, except for a beanbag chair, a TV, an exercise bike, and a few unopened cartons.

Jodie calls, "Momma, it's me," several times, and when there's no answer they wait in the truck for a while before deciding to leave a note on the torn front screen.

Back in Mary's kitchen, they have cheese toast and scrambled eggs. It's the best she can do on the spur of the moment, since she wasn't expecting company. Sarah had done most of their cooking, while she had gladly done other chores. She describes her cooking as a pop fly to the infield. She's thought about signing up for a cooking class at the tech school, but figures it would be overrun with newlyweds, gay guys and divorced men.

When Jodie's momma hasn't come by the end of the Bulls' game, Mary puts Jodie to bed in the tiny second bedroom, the one in which Sarah had kept her clothes and they had called hers during scant visits from their families. When they were first together, they each visited with their respective families on holidays and special occasions as they were expected to do, but neither could stand the loneliness. So each began quietly refusing those invitations that hadn't included the other. Sarah's Aunt Ada had been the only family member to invite them as a couple. Still, even she was careful to offer them separate beds, pretending not to notice the one bed that was never slept in.

Sarah had laughed, calling it Aunt Ada's way in the Southern tradition of the three monkeys—see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. Mary admits she hadn't

been so quick to see the humor. But it matters little now, for there are no invitations from Sarah's family, and her own sister lives silently in Omaha.

She dozes, and it's after midnight when the doorbell startles her out of her sleep. A thin woman with slumping shoulders and transparent eyes stands at the door, tugging at a loose button on her blouse. She says she's Faye, Jodie's momma, and she's sorry to be so late. Mary invites her in, and there's the faint smell of whiskey and something else that's so loud it burns Mary's eyes.

Faye thanks her and hurries toward the car parked on the street, its motor running. Mary watches the glow of the taillights until they're out of sight, and wonders whether she'll ever see Jodie again to talk to her.

It's nearly three weeks after Jodie's first visit before she rides her new bicycle over to show Mary. Her daddy ordered it through Sears and had them deliver it on her birthday. Mary decides Sears playing Daddy is better than Jodie missing out altogether. There is ice cream in the freezer, so she invites Jodie to stay and have some. Jodie says it's like a party, but without other kids and presents.

The afternoon Jodie comes straight from the bus stop, Mary asks if she has her momma's permission. "No, ma'am," she says, "but she don't care. Besides she's not home."

Mary thinks Jodie is covering her feelings in the way she blows her straggly bangs away from her forehead and pushes Tat from the back of the recliner. Mary decides to take her to a local "Batters Up" to hit slow-pitch softballs.

Mary has finished Bill's tax return and is out back repainting the bird feeder, trying to remember whether it's ESPN or TBS carrying the Bulls at seven. She's done his bookkeeping for fifteen years, starting the year he went in business. He hadn't known zip about being in business; now he has three restaurants. Yet she doesn't think of them as restaurants, just chicken take-out places with a few orange plastic tables and chairs fastened to the floor. It's a pity that most folks don't really know fried chicken, just pressure-cooked like Bill's. Lord, couldn't Sarah fry chicken, and her mashed potatoes were like whipped cream.

She looks around the yard they had prized, and sighs. She works at it, but it had taken Sarah to make everything beautiful: luscious red and gold tulips, yellow daffodils, white and pink dogwoods, salmon, lavender, and red azaleas. Together, they had choked back the most ravenous weeds in their tiny yard, but with all their might they hadn't whipped Sarah's illness.

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It's good to get Bill's work off her desk and him on his way. A bucket of his chicken has smelled up the kitchen, and her stomach doesn't know it's pressure cooked. She's fishing around in the bucket for a leg when she hears the patio gate slam. Standing at the kitchen door, she says, "Hey, Jodie, I'm getting ready to have some fried chicken. You want some?"

One of the things she likes about Jodie is that the girl can always eat. But this time she sits on her bike, one foot on the ground, spinning a pedal with the other. She's wearing the look she gets when her momma forgets to leave a note.

"You coming in?" Mary asks, holding open the door.

"Can't. I gotta start my science project. So far all I got is three stiff roaches in a Jell-O box."

"That's a poor start, all right. But come on and have some chicken and let's talk about it."

Jodie gets off her bike and her eyes fill with tears. "She didn't used to be this way. It's that blame Buddy. He's making her crazy."

"Now, your momma's had it rough—what with ya'll moving and her not finding work."

"But she promised. Teacher's gonna put the best one in the library," Jodie says, taking her place at the table.

"Shoot, what's so darn hard about collecting bugs? It's as easy as Montana to Rice."

"You know about bugs?"

"You bet. And what I don't, World Book does. And if that's not enough to suit you, there's the library."

From Kmart they buy yellow construction paper, a right-size display box with a see-through lid, and pins with colored heads, then they set sugar-water and fermented banana traps in Mary's back yard. They remember to shut Tat in the house so he won't eat the bugs, before they hurry to the library where there's an exhibit in the junior science section.

When they check the bug traps, they're loaded. "See, what'd I tell you," Mary laughs, "It's a cheesy-breeze."

"It's a what?"

For the next two afternoons, after peanut butter and jelly sandwiches topped off by strawberry ice cream, Mary and Jodie bend their heads over fragile bugs: cricket, silverfish, grasshopper, cockroach, dragonfly, horsefly, caddis fly, ground beetle, and Jodie's favorite—a Lady Beetle with a green circle on her back.

"It's beautiful," she squeals, dancing Mary around the kitchen, making Tat bolt under the table. Mary offers Jodie a ride to school the next day, afraid the bully boy might try doing in their hard work.

When Jodie tells Mary about her momma's birthday, Mary offers to help her bake a cake after school. The offer is good only if Jodie chooses plain pound cake

without glaze, the only cake Mary knows how to bake. "Pays to stick with what got you there," Mary says, searching the kitchen cabinets for the cake mix. Jodie giggles and pretends to stick a microphone in Mary's face.

Hearing the school bus pull away, Mary sets the oven to preheat, gets the mixer out, and greases and flours the cake pan. But Jodie doesn't come right away. To fill the time, Mary watches the second half of Oprah, and Dan Rather is talking about starving children in Africa before she hears a car in the driveway. From the kitchen window she sees it's Buddy's car, and the way he sits reared back in the seat with his arm out the window makes the whole thing unsettling.

Running into the kitchen ahead of Faye, Jodie talks so fast Mary can't understand all that she's saying. Something about busted plans. Mary quiets Jodie; she offers Faye coffee.

"Can't this time," Faye says. "Buddy's out in the car, hot to trot."

She explains he's taking her to the beach for the weekend and Jodie's not invited. "Baby, momma's told you it's a grownup party," she says, patting Jodie on the head. Then, turning to Mary she says, "Jodie tells me you were once a school teacher."

Mary explains about Sarah and Faye seems satisfied. Maybe it's enough that a teacher once *lived* in the house. She tells her that Jodie has plans, but Faye's too busy talking to hear. "Oh, Baby," she says, hugging Jodie. "Momma's real sorry, but you know how Buddy is."

Jodie pulls away from her momma and goes to sit next to Tat in the recliner. Faye tells Mary that Buddy's business is doing so well he's promised her a full-time job, starting soon. But Mary isn't listening, she's distracted by Faye's eye shadow. She hopes Jodie never decides to paint her eyes up to look like Ringo on the little rascals.

Over the weekend, Mary and Jodie decide to bake a birthday cake anyway. They make a trip to the store to buy decorations: yellow flowers and candle holders made of hard sugar. They buy thirty candles, even though Jodie doesn't know how many they'll need. When Faye hasn't returned by Sunday evening, Jodie begs to cut the cake and to pretend it's Mary's birthday. Mary laughs, saying okay, but they'll need twice as many candles, plus one.

When they cut the cake, Jodie shares a saucer of melted ice cream with Tat. Mary knows Sarah would have staged a runaway over him eating out of a human's dish, but she goes along, thinking what can it really hurt? Jodie holds Tat in her arms and "they" sing Happy Birthday. Mary laughs so hard, she wets her pants.

While Jodie is getting ready for bed, she grows quiet. Mary busies herself folding clothes while Jodie searches for words she trusts. "Did you and Miss Sarah decorate a Christmas tree and wrap lots of presents?"

"You bet. We were big on holidays."

"I thought so," Jodie smiles.

The patio gate swings open and Mary looks up to see Jodie, and she's not smiling. "Hey," Mary calls to her from where she's dusting the roses that climb along the back fence. "I'm just about done here and I could use something cold. How about you?"

"No, ma'am. I came to tell you 'bye."

"Bye?" she says, frightened by the panic in Jodie's voice.

"My momma's going off with Buddy, and I gotta go live with my grandmomma in Texas."

Damn, Mary thinks, remembering how she and Sarah had wanted a child, and here's Faye, letting her brain be blotted out by some here-today-gone-tomorrow man. Jodie is about to cry and Mary wishes she could think of something worth saying. "Texas?" she says, forcing a smile. "I bet every kid in Texas has got their own pony." That falling flat across Jodie's face, Mary feels desperate. "The Rockets play out of Houston you know."

Jodie says she doesn't care, if it means she has to live with someone she doesn't know. She turns toward the back door. Mary puts down the duster and follows her into the house.

Jodie goes to sit at the kitchen table and Tat leaves his view of the bird feeder, coming to curl in her lap. Mary washes her hands, pours Jodie lemonade and goes to the cookie jar. "Here, Jodie, try this. Fresh-bought this morning."

Jodie nibbles on the outer edge of the oatmeal cookie and pushes an ice cube around in the lemonade with a dirty finger.

"You got cousins your age in Texas?" Mary asks, rushing on before Jodie can answer. "Bet you do. I've heard Texans like to stay where they've got plenty of family and friends."

"Then I'm staying with you."

Standing at the sink, Mary carefully measures a teaspoon of instant coffee into a cup of water and puts the cup in the microwave, forgetting to press the *on* button. Sitting at the table, she asks Jodie how long her momma plans to be gone. Jodie says she doesn't know and gets up to start the microwave. Standing with her back to Mary, she says, "I'll be good, I promise. And it doesn't matter that you're—"

"Hush, you're already good. But you're dead wrong about the other."

"Mary..."

"You've heard those boys calling me names?"

"Yeah, but what does being queer really mean?"

"Honey, it's just a word. Some people use hurtful words for ways they don't understand and people they think they couldn't like."

Jodie pauses before saying, "Like what black kids get called?"

"Yeah, like that," Mary says.

"Then can I ask you something really hard?" Mary nods, holding her breath. "Would you've ever gone off and left Miss Sarah?"

"All I can say is, in twenty-seven years, neither of us ever did—well, once for three days after I acted the total fool."

"Then I'm staying, if you'll let me."

"You know I can't take a hoe to everybody that'll—"

"Mary, ain't you read in the Bible how sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me?"

"Child, that's not in the Bible."

"It's not?" Jodie says, looking defeated. "But I promise: I'm over those words."

"Is that why it took so long for you to come back after the first time?"

When Jodie nods, Mary pauses, remembering Sarah had been troubled by their many years of silence. Yet Mary had believed it a simple argument for not setting your tail on fire. But now she wonders whether she'd been right. "Even if we could work it out, your momma and daddy's got the final say."

"Shoot, my momma's so crazy right now she won't care, and he's got a new family." When Mary isn't convinced, Jodie pleads, "Then write something down that says she's not giving me away, just letting me stay."

Mary stands at the sink, watching Jodie ride off down the street past the bully and his buddies at the corner. Mary has said Jodie can stay, and she's gone to ask her momma, the signed paper clutched in her hand. Mary makes herself a strong Irish coffee and sits in the recliner. Tat circles her feet, begging for his supper, but she ignores him. She's imagining her worst fear: Faye agreeing Jodie can stay, but then she or Jodie's daddy deciding one of them wants Jodie back.

Looking up at Sarah's picture, she's afraid, but she knows she and Jodie will be in this alone. Then she smiles, certain that Sarah would have said yes and maybe she'd better have a little Irish in her coffee too.

It's nearly dark before Mary again hears the sound made by the Queen of Hearts playing card clicking against Jodie's bike spokes. From the window, Mary watches her coast up the driveway, her bug collection strapped to the fender rack, its second place ribbon flapping in the wind, and the bike basket loaded with wadded clothes. Seeing her at the window, Jodie raises her fist in the air, and Mary hurries to open the door. □