DARK SIDE

It was summer, 1963, on the South Side of Chicago. I was just shy of turning age 12.

We suffered a bully in our neighborhood named "Ralph." He was a year older than me and lived down the block. He was the kind of twisted personality who preyed on kids half his age. His family was either unawares or unconcerned. It was even rumored that he regularly asked to see boy’s private parts in the shadowy areas between apartment buildings that we called “gangways,” so as to be unseen by any adults. In short, he was a very sick, perverted individual.

One Saturday at dinner time, my nearly 8-year-old sister showed up late while we were just starting to eat, and when she did arrive she was crying. “Ralph won’t stop bothering me, either at school or on the block! He calls me bad names and he keeps saying that he’s gonna beat me up!”

My older sister, age 15, looked at my Mom. My Mom looked at my Dad, then she looked at me. “Well, what are you going to do about it? She’s your sister and you should protect her. So why don’t you go outside now and take care of Ralph?”

I was torn, for two reasons: First, I had never been in a fight in my life, for I was good about avoiding such trouble – and the nuns and priests made sure of that at school. Secondly, I thought that this predicament was something that adults should settle. My parents would talk with Ralph’s parents, who in turn would give Ralph an ultimatum, take the strap to his bottom, and that would be that.

While these reasons passed through my mind, my Mom kept staring at me with spiteful, mocking eyes. “Well, what are you waiting for? Are you a coward or some kind of sissy? Get out there and defend your little sister,” she commanded. My Dad, meanwhile, said nothing and kept eating.

I was frozen with indecision, my half-eaten meal sitting in my stomach like cement, my younger sister drying her eyes with her napkin, avoiding my pleading look, my older sister seemingly uninterested in the drama.

I put down my fork and slowly got up from the table and went out on our front porch, secretly hoping that Ralph had vanished. But no. There he was near the bottom of our front porch stairs, with a challenging, cruel smirk on his face. I headed down the stairs, one at a time. The weather was still hot and humid, just after 5:00 o’clock. I was starting to sweat. Soon, we were face to face. Ralph was about an inch shorter than me, and about five pounds lighter despite his being older than me.

“Look, Ralph, you’ve got to stop bothering my sister. My whole family is upset, and they’re ready to tell your folks. So just cut it out.” I wanted that to end the situation. But Ralph wouldn’t have any of it.

“Well, what if I don’t cut it out? What are you gonna do about? You gonna make me?” Ralph practically spit the words of defiance in my face.

Time and space seemed to flip me into a new dimension in that eerie moment. In a flash of just a few seconds, I thought of my mother thinking I was a coward and a sissy. (How horrible and unfair!) I was angry at her first and foremost, then I was angry at my little sister (even though it wasn’t her fault) for getting me into this conundrum. I was next angry at my father for his passivity. And, looking into Ralph’s evil, dull brown eyes, I was finally angry at him for causing all of this. That was the exact instant when I knew I had to kill him. Just like that.

Using both fists, I started on his face. He was totally surprised, then in terrified shock, his eyes widening and his face contorting. He tried to stop me by unsuccessfully blocking some of my blows, then tried to run away when he knew he was overwhelmed. But I had him in an iron grip. His nose was bleeding, and drops of his blood splattered on my sweaty white T-shirt. Next, I pulled him to the ground, then dragged him from our lawn area a few feet to a nearby street sewer cover, which had regular raised metal bumps sticking up from its lid. With my hands on his throat and he underneath me, I began choking him while banging his head up and down against the steel sewer cover. My strength was now probably doubled, my body’s own adrenaline exploding into my muscles and into the most primitive part of my brain. I was in total control in winning the fight, yet I was emotionally completely out of control. I was so oddly ready and able to finish the job of killing him, my sole desire. Ralph screamed. He pleaded “No! No!” his face smeared with his own blood, which oozed from his nose, lips, and gums. He had never even landed a single punch on me.

Suddenly, I felt two pairs of strong men’s hands grab me from behind in an attempt to separate me from battered Ralph. It was my Dad and a next door neighbor father who heard the screaming. They lifted me off the ground, but I wouldn’t let go of Ralph’s throat. “I’ll kill him! I’ll kill him!” I swore, my face hot and red like an enraged beast. The men had to pry my fingers off of Ralph’s neck. Ralph lay crumpled in the street, his T-shirt torn and half ripped off in the fight. I noticed with scant interest his parents running towards us, and my Mom and both my sisters coming down our high wooden front porch stairs, their faces frozen in gasps of horror. As Ralph’s parents attended him, my Dad explained to them what had happened, and why. Ralph was helped up and led away, back to his house. He was petrified to even look back in my direction. My Dad, however -- a combat vet from World War 2 -- knew what to do about my condition. He easily lifted me up and carried me into the house, to our only small bathroom. He wet a washcloth with cold water from the sink and gently rubbed my face with it while talking with me, telling me to calm down. “It’s all over now, son, it’s O.K….catch your breath, relax…relax,” he murmured. When my Mom came to the bathroom doorway, he told her I would be fine. “Just let him be for a while,” he suggested.

He left the bathroom and my Mom walked in. She put the damp, cool washcloth atop my head like a cap, checked me for any cuts and bruises, and finding none, left me sitting on the toilet seat lid. I got up and looked at my expression in the bathroom mirror. I was still red-faced and somewhat wild-eyed. My muscles were slowly jettisoning their excess adrenaline, which caused some shivering and shaking. I was not feeling very pleasant or happy. In other words, my “victory” in the fight made me feel rather ashamed and embarrassed at losing all self-control. My mother popped back in and handed me a clean t-shirt, so I peeled off the dirty, sweaty one and gave it to her. “Do you want to finish your food now?” she asked. “No, I’m not hungry,” I answered. I went to bed early that night, exhausted. It was a day I wish had never happened. I’d like to forget all about it, but I can’t.

The incident with Ralph had the unforeseen consequence of sullying my relationship with my mother. I never trusted her again, or cared about her opinions of me. Maybe I never even loved her again after that fateful day. She had forced me into an area I didn’t want to go, and I felt she was completely insensitive to my needs and emotions. In other words, she wasn’t thinking about me, like a good mother should. It was shocking and appalling, a betrayal of the parent-child bond. I am embarrassed to admit that I hated her as much as I had hated Ralph on that day.

As the years passed, any time I spied Ralph, he would walk away -- avoiding eye contact or silently ducking into his house whenever he saw me.

In 1966, my mother died of lung and breast cancer at age 46, probably triggered by her cigarette smoking.

Ralph was either drafted or enlisted into the Army after struggling through high school. He went to Vietnam. When he came back home to Chicago, he was a hard drug addict, a loner, friendless. He bought a Harley-Davidson motorcycle and grew his brown hair long. He lived at home, unemployable. He was also drinking heavily.

I saw him one more time in 1973 – some ten years after our fight – on a visit home during my Spring break from college. I felt like I should try to talk to him, to apologize somewhat for what I had done to him. But when I finally saw him by chance and waved a friendly greeting, he looked back at me with terror and quickly scurried into his house. I let him go.

Ralph died the following year in a motorcycle accident at the age of 24. Some say it was suicide. He got stoned and sped his bike into a brick wall at full speed, they whispered. I never knew the full details. The fight taught me a valuable lesson. I never knew that such violence could exist in anyone, especially within myself. I told this story every year to my students during my teaching days, as a real-life, first-person lesson against bullying and fighting. I have never been in another fight since that strange day back in summer, 1963. The general idea of war and killing continues to bewilder and confuse me. Are we humans just brutal animals under a thin veneer of civilization? Why does violence still exist? When will we as a species evolve past this curse? Will we ever learn? What will ultimately happen to the human race?

The End by Jack Karolewski

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