

Mike's Fiction©



Boy Interrupted©

Sleeping late in summer is dumber than having coins in your pocket and passing by a Dairy Queen. Early in the morning is when the dew weaves spider webs in the grass and the sun makes big basketballs on the windows of the clapboard houses. Just past dawn, when I walked into the kitchen, I saw the Texaco calendar hanging by the sink showed August 13, 1977. It would turn out to be the day Elvis died. But that's not why I won't ever forget it.

Don't take but a few minutes to down a Minute Maid and a bowl of Kix. Pa says I'm in too big a rush to do nothing, but that morning I had a reason. I wanted to take the New York Times World Atlas out on the front stoop before it got too hot. Ma's folks mailed it one Christmas when she lived here. Maude would still be dusting the darn thing if the Motorola TV hadn't bonked out. When I picked up that book, I found more pictures than the Superboy comics—real ones—and nothing at all about Stewart Springs.

When I settled on the stoop and hefted the atlas on my lap, I turned right to the page filled with the Sears Tower. Seemed I'd never get tired staring at that big, black spike poking at the sky.

Our screen door creaks like a rickety rocking chair when it opens, but I'm so used to it that I pay it no mind.

"Frankie," Pa hollered.

I'm pretty sure my butt cleared the stoop.

"There you are," he said. "Might have known you'd be reading comics."

“Naw, it’s a book, Pa.”

“Well, best not let it cost late fees at the library, hear?”

“I won’t.” With Pa, sometimes it was easier not explaining.

He turned and called for Becky. I saw her sashay to the door and press her face against the screen before she opened it. Then, out she poured, like buttermilk, wearing a pair of my hand-me-down blue jeans and a Princess Leia tee shirt Pa got mail order from Kresges. That morning he tied red ribbon bows in her pigtails, to match her sneakers. She hopped down the stairs, one hand grabbing the railing and the other digging for gold in her nose. Pa followed her, toting a stroller with Becky’s triplets stuffed inside.

Pa said to me, “Maude’s hip is acting up and she won’t be over today. That means you have to keep an eye on Rebecca.”

Oh brother. “I’m supposed to meet the gang down by the Springs at nine. If I don’t bring towels, they won’t have none.”

“Well, they’ll just have to air-dry, I guess. Bring her to the store at ten, and I’ll keep her busy after that.”

I closed the atlas kind of hard. “How come I —”

“No lip, Frankie. No time for it this morning.” I heard him let out a breath. Then he knelt down and mussed my hair. “I know it’s tough without your mother. But you just have to be a man sooner than most.”

“Yeah. I know, Pa.” I heard it before.

“Is that for some kind of homework?” he asked, nodding at the Atlas and leaning so far over my shoulder that I could smell his Old Spice.

“Sixth grade don’t start for another two weeks,” I said, real sharp.

He stood up and stuck out the palms of his hands. “Ok, ok. I’ve been so busy I forgot for a minute.”

I just shook my head and closed the atlas. As I stood up, I sniffed at Becky and made a pee-yew face. “Did you dirty your diaper?”

“I’m five, silly. Only boys wear diapers that long.”

Pa patted her head. “Atta girl. Don’t take any guff.” As he headed for the car, he yelled, “See you at ten, Frankie.”

I watched him pull away in our sun-bleached Dodge Coronet wagon and wished it was a candy-apple red Cadillac that could take us anywhere.

When I turned around, I saw Becky standing with her hands on her hips, squinting at me. “What?” I asked.

“How come you’re not as tall as other kids?”

I might have given someone else a good shove, but with Becky all I could do was give back as good as I got. “It lets me see things on the ground better. Like that spider on your shoe.”

She jumped back and screeched so loud it shut up a bunch of wrens and robins putting up a ruckus over on the electric wires. Her hands covered her eyes, but after a few seconds I could see her peek between her fingers.

“I was kidding. There’s nothing on your shoe. If you promise to be a good girl and stay out of my hair, I’ll take you down to the hardware store later.”

She dropped her hands and her mouth wriggled into a smile. “Don’t matter if I’m good or not. Dad said you *had* to take me.”

Enough was enough. “Beat it. Go be somebody else’s sister.”

She stuck her tongue out, and I stomped a foot. That sent her lickety-split straight to the stroller.

Reaching for the atlas, I sat down on the stoop again. And wouldn’t you know, the page I opened showed a map of Nebraska carved up like a jigsaw puzzle. I knew enough about our state already. I knew that Omaha was the biggest city, though I’d never seen it, and didn’t much care one way or the other. And I knew Lincoln was only half its size. But at least it had the Cornhuskers.

I turned pages to get as far away from Nebraska as I could, but made sure I didn’t miss nothing in between. No telling how long I lollygagged like that, but right when a snowy-topped mountain in Alaska caught my eye, I heard a gravelly growl. It came from the south, and without even looking, I knew it was those glass-pack mufflers on Leon Daltry’s Plymouth Duster. Sure enough, a good piece down Mason Street, a tiny patch of yellow trimmed in black was throttling my way, too fast, as usual. I almost went to phone the sheriff, like Pa would. But then I remembered Becky.

I turned around, but she was gone. Wouldn’t it be just like her to have scooted around back in a huff? Then I tracked the stroller’s tire tracks in the grass. There she was, two houses down, just this side of the Henderson’s driveway that slithers from a barn in back all the way out to the street. I call it The Snake.

“Becky,” I hollered. Her head turned and she scrunched her face at me, then squared up and started pushing the stroller across The Snake. The Duster was roaring like a Tiger now. I got set to yell louder when I saw the stroller veer down the driveway where slopes to the street. Becky lost her grip and started to chase it. The Duster looked like a giant Yellow Jacket flying down the street. I could see Leon’s head bobbing, paying no attention to nothing but the rock’n roll song he had in the eight-track.

“Becky! Stop!” I hollered. I hollered it loud, loud as I knew how. But I don’t remember no sound coming out. Then I started to run, but it was like a dream, where the air turns to molasses and you can’t make no headway.

Becky should have woke up then. Aren’t you supposed to in a dream—before something really bad happens?

“She’s crippled.” Pa was driving worse than I ever remembered, jerking the wheel this way and that, blinking like a couple of light bulbs fixing to blow. It was nighttime and we were headed home from the hospital in Broken Bow, thirty miles away.

“They said her x-rays were like those soldiers whose spines got shot up in Vietnam, Frankie. They called her a paraplegic.” He shook his head and blinked some more.

I don’t know how I felt, because I wasn’t in my body at the time. I was Superboy, all steely calm. If I had a gun, I would have shot me.

“It’s not your fault, Frankie. I know you probably think it is, but it’s not. It’s your mother’s. Helen had no grit, wanted no part of Stewart Springs, or us.” He glanced my way and the car wobbled. “Or she’d still be here, son, and none of this would have happened. We wouldn’t have to worry about ten things at once. There’d be time to think, time to do things right.”

I don’t recollect if Ma told me to look after Becky and Pa before she left. All I remember is how she used to laugh at my knock-knock jokes and how she scrubbed my face too hard. I looked at my Pa’s face, all stubbly and scared looking, and the Ace Hardware tag dangling half-off his shirt. If I didn’t sew it back on tonight, he’d go the whole week looking like Raggedy Andy.

Then Superboy spoke.

“It wasn’t ma’s doing. It was me. I didn’t watch Becky good enough. Plain and simple.”

“But if Helen—”

“I’ll teach her to walk, Pa. You’ll see.”

The car slowed. “Frankie...”

“I swear. Nothing or nobody will ever hurt her again. I’ll see to that.”

I can’t say for sure why Superboy started to cry.

Maybe it was because of Becky. Or maybe it was knowing he’d likely die in Stewart Springs.

THE END