

Mike's Fiction©



Small Town Heroes

Eddies of gray writhe above me, shrouding the sky. I pick up my pace. The walk down Mason to my store is eight minutes, but lately it seems a lot longer, like something is weighing me down. Sounds silly, I know, but I think I'm carrying Bobby Tucker's soul around everywhere I go. It may be his way of getting back at me. You might have read about Bobby, a genuine hero, not once, but twice. Not that it matters much, because you can betray a hero as easy as anybody else.

Bobby was always a center-stage guy, pulling off one antic after another. Most I've forgotten, but not the lunch recess when he got hold of a bunch of cracker balls—you remember—small amounts of gunpowder wrapped into tight wads of tissue paper. Throw them at a hard surface, and BANG. In no time at all, Bobby had Margaret Ashley hopping on the asphalt like a pogo stick with tiny blasts detonating around her feet. Just business as usual for Bobby. I only remember because of what happened that afternoon in old-man Donnelly's algebra class. As he chalked an equation on the blackboard at a pace in tune with our after-lunch lethargy, a flash and deafening CRACK erupted not three inches from his left ear. In the silence that followed, every eye tracked the pall of smoke as it drifted glacially toward the windows.

After school, I remember waiting for an hour until the Principal released Bobby from his office. "Jeez," I said, as I raced to keep up with him. "That was some cracker ball."

"Six. I re-wrapped six of 'em into one big one."

Next day, we learned the incident earned Donnelly a hearing aid and Bobby Tucker a suspension and the awe of the student body.

I'd like to think Bobby and I were best friends in school. But the truth is he didn't have friends, just kids like me who followed him around, mesmerized by his charisma. Bobby wasn't really a leader, though. He just tolerated the hangers-on. Bored, I'd say something like, "C'mon—let's go down to the tracks and smash pennies." We'd all stare at Bobby. "Naw," he'd say.

“But here’s one to smash for me.” He’d fish in his pocket and flip me a bigger coin, like a half-dollar, then drill those sad brown eyes into mine until I had to look away.

Bobby and I were actually alone only twice. The first time was a few miles east of town, on the five acres of worn out prairie he and his father called home. There was no evidence of a mom, and the place was a ramshackle disaster littered with broken bed springs, rusted junk and a clapboard house with a half collapsed roof over a wooden porch. To me it was an old-west ghost town filled with ancient artifacts begging to be picked up and examined.

We were back of the house, in a weathered old barn, the kind where sunlight leaks through and owls nest in the rafters. Bobby said, “I’ve got to pee.” He unzipped and aimed at a moldy pile of straw in a corner. Of course, I did the same. When we finished, he looked down at my boyhood. “Not bad, Frankie. Can you make it squirt?”

“I just did,” I said.

“No—I mean can you make yourself hard, until you come?”

I couldn’t take my eyes off Bobby and the way his forearms flexed as he stroked himself. As for my boyhood, it got hard all by itself. Soon, Bobby groaned and his whole body stiffened. I groaned too as exquisite pressure signaled an eruption approaching like a fast train. Then, a raspy voice behind me said, “Why don’tcha let me help you with that, boy.”

When I whirled around, there was Harlan Tucker, Bobby’s old man, straddle-legged in greasy blue overalls, staring at me. He coughed up a black dollop of tobacco sludge and spit it on the dirt floor. Then his hand drifted down to the huge bulge of his zipper. Well, I was no athlete, but I ran those two miles back to town with no trouble at all. At Ludington’s Ace Hardware, which my Dad owned, I charged down the main aisle like a small tornado, spattering sweat everywhere. As I whooshed past him ringing up a customer, his head swiveled like a Sunbeam mixing bowl and he dropped a customer’s change.

I suppose the experience was kind of like a coming of age—not because I came face-to-face with evil for the first time—but because I began to understand why I’d never connected with the bawdy remarks about girls that passed for conversation in our crowd. I convinced myself that I didn’t want another intimate moment with Bobby, or any other boy. It would have to be up to Bobby to make a move. But he never did.

The summer before high school was the second time Bobby and I were alone. The rest of his entourage had already peeled away in ones and twos, because Bobby expressed no interest in their suggestions of ways to pass the time. We were down at Stewart Spring, which like the town, was named after Mason Stewart, a pioneer on his way west. He decided the Nebraska territory was far enough, thank you, and one hundred-fifty years later, Stewart Springs lies stagnant at four thousand souls.

The Spring was a good place to be on a hot summer afternoon, especially where it widened and the water calmed, shaded on the east by towering cottonwoods and on the west by dense thickets of shrubbery. We stood shirtless on the bank and skipped stones across the water as dark thunderheads built to the south.

“Do you ever hear voices?” Bobby asked.

“You mean, like when there’s nobody around?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Like that.”

I turned to look at him, but my eyes were drawn to his bare chest. “No—but it sounds kind of cool.”

“Lately I’ve been hearing one.” He side-armed a good size flat stone and it skipped seven times. “It’s my old man.”

The mention of his father caused a chill, even at ninety-four degrees. I picked up a stone and hurled it like Bobby, but it managed only a timid plop. With some trepidation, I asked, “What does he say?”

Bobby turned so I couldn’t see his face. “He tells me to do stuff—all kinds of things, just like when he’s really there.” He bent down for another stone. “I can’t make it stop. Sometimes I just wanna rip my ears off.” He dropped the stone and turned to me, as if I could offer useful advice.

“Maybe he is there, but just out of sight,” I said.

Disappointment framed his face. “No.”

“Or—or a radio signal. I read in Popular Science that some people pick up stations through their braces.” As I spoke, I realized that Bobby didn’t wear braces. “Or, the fillings in their teeth.”

He seemed interested for a moment, then said, “When I’m eighteen, I’m gettin’ as far away from this town as I can.”

The thought of Stewart Springs sans Bobby Tucker disturbed me. I wanted details. I wanted to follow. “Where would you go?”

In the echo of the first thunderclap, he said, “Don’t know yet, but it’ll be somewhere I can’t hear Harlan no more.”

In high school, Bobby turned loner and wouldn’t tolerate hangers-on, including me. That hurt, but in one way turned out for the best, because his trouble-making escalated. One

Halloween at midnight he ran down Mason Street and smashed the front windows of four stores, including my dad's. He wouldn't have been caught if he hadn't left a bat with his initials on the handle propped against our front door. That time he got probation, but the following Halloween he spent three days in jail for cementing a highly suggestive appendage on the crotch of Mason Stewart's statue in the park.

By senior year, rumor had it he'd laid every girl clear down through the sophomores. I remember thinking that maybe he had something to prove to himself. Before graduation day, he made good on his promise to leave Stewart Springs and headed for Camp Pendleton. Later I learned he shipped out to Iraq. A few days after that, Harlan Tucker was shot dead by the father of the fourteen year-old boy he was sodomizing down by the Spring.

When Bobby came home, Stewart Springs threw a parade. It was quite an affair, considering how he terrorized the town as a boy. There were six floats, two more than the Cornhuskers merited for their last national football title, and the high school band played Sousa. Storefronts along Mason Street were dressed to the nines with sun-lit banners and all kinds of patriotic whatnot crammed into the windows. My Ace Hardware was no exception.

Both sides of Mason overflowed with folks standing straight as parking meters, some saluting. A number of vets wore their old uniforms and looked like not so freshly stuffed bratwurst. Before long, a lemon-colored Eldorado convertible inched toward me and I could see Bobby perched on top of the back seat, every inch the hero in his Marine dress blues.

I should have been happy to see him after eight years, but I was too distracted by my own misery. In Lincoln, where I started college, I'd encountered a much bigger world, but it turned out to be nothing but a tease. Before junior year of pre-law, before I even had the opportunity to set foot in Schmid Library, I had to come back to Stewart Springs because my father passed. He was woefully under-insured and my running the store was the only way to support my mother. For five years now, I've been mired in this God-forsaken fundamentalist town.

I saw Sergeant Silver-Star-Marine-Hero-Tucker wave from the pimp-mobile as it slithered by, and I saluted right along with the other rapt faces. After all, Bobby saved his entire squad. Pinned down behind their ruined Hummer outside Najef, Bobby charged an insurgent infested farm-house with nothing but a jammed M-16 and three grenades.

My status as a local merchant and sometime usher at our church didn't seem to stack up.

A week passed before I saw Bobby again, at Gil's, a quiet bar on Harrison where on most evenings you'll find me lubricating my miseries. The place is dark and damp, with the aroma of stale beer oozing from every crevice: in short, a perfect fit for my mood. When Bobby and three women made their entrance, Gil's turned instantly boisterous, with lots of giggling and touching as the four made their way to a table kiddy-corner to the air hockey game, which hadn't taken a breath in years. I managed a good look at the women. Two were young, maybe in their twenties.

I didn't know them. The third, Susan Kragan, was married to one of the dentists in town. By next morning I knew the gossip would reach my store.

Soon I lost interest in the rowdy little group and ordered another pint of Guinness, just to keep my paunch in shape. I had begun to re-gather my troubles, when I heard Bobby's voice.

"Yo—Frankie. Jackie here thinks you're the strong silent type."

I glanced over and saw him wave from his table. Jackie what's-her-name hid her face while she playfully pushed Bobby.

"She says you'd make a fine catch for any young lady in town." This time, Jackie landed a less than playful haymaker on Bobby's shoulder. I forced a smile and raised my glass, mostly to hide my reddening face.

It grew quiet again until ten-thirty, when Bobby stood and announced it was time for all God-fearing women to go home. There was some booing and at least one, "Well—I never," before the three cleared out.

I felt Bobby approach and turned to see a sexy hero in tight black Levis and a green Camp Pendleton tee shirt take the stool next to mine. He smiled and slapped me on the back. His breath betrayed Jack Daniels before I saw the tumbler in his hand.

"Did I embarrass you too bad."

I gulped some of my pint of Guinness, and said, "No—not at all. I thrive on public humiliation."

Bobby's laugh sounded the same as in school. It was contagious, and I couldn't suppress a smile.

"You always were the witty one, Frankie. And you had grit, too."

Now that remark surprised me. "I just run a hardware store, Bobby. You're the one with grit. Jeez, the thought of me charging a bunch of guns—"

Bobby interrupted. "Impulsiveness, recklessness. They don't mean someone's tough inside, podna."

I stared at him for a moment, then turned to my glass.

He clasped my bicep and a bolt of lightening bee-lined it straight to my groin. The voltage elevated as he leaned in close. "Listen, Frankie. Do you remember at the Spring that time—when I told you I heard my old man's voice?"

"Sure—sure I do."

“You were always a good listener.” He let go of my arm and took a gulp of his drink.

I looked at him. “Did you ever shake it?”

“For awhile. It comes and goes.”

“I’m sorry, Bobby.”

“It’s ok. I’m finally learning to live with it.” He finished off his drink.

I don’t know what got into me—maybe the beer, maybe those sad brown eyes, or maybe the need to know if Bobby was available—but I said, “There’s something you need to know about me.”

“Oh?”

“I’m gay. I finally admitted it to myself in Lincoln.”

No shit?” he said, and motioned to the bartender for another Jack Daniels. “Well, God knows there were enough gays in the Marines.”

His remark rankled, and some of my bitterness must have boiled over. “You know, hearing voices isn’t uncommon in child abuse cases. Might even be full-blown schizophrenia. You ought to get help.”

Without even looking, I knew that Bobby’s whole body had stiffened. He got up off the stool, and said, “I thought you were different, Ludington. But you’re just like everyone else in this one-horse town. You think that just because Harlan—” He turned his head away abruptly, then reached into his pocket and yanked out a bill. He slapped it on the bar, and said, “Drinks are on me tonight, Frankie.” Without another word, he walked away and out the door.

My eyes drifted to the bar top. A Fifty! He must have thought Guinness was black gold.

At closing time the following Tuesday, I heard the tinkle of the bell over the entrance to the store. When I looked up, there was Bobby Tucker, hands in his pockets, examining merchandise on the very first shelf. Pretending to browse, he slowly made his way closer, and finally spoke. “You sell pretty much everything in here, don’t you?”

“You should know. As I recall, you bought those cracker balls from my father.” That put a grin on his face.

“Yeah. That I did.” His gaze drifted past me and he shifted his weight. “Listen, Frankie. About the other night—“

I held up both hands. “Look, we both drank too much, and what I said was completely out of line.”

He reached out and put a hand on my shoulder. “It occurred to me later that I must have pissed you off the way I mentioned gays in the Marines.”

I opened my mouth to deny it, but he kept talking.

“Because that’s not how I meant it. To me, a man is a man, hetero or gay. In Iraq, gays had as much courage as anybody else. And you Frankie—you had the grit to stay here, do what you had to do. It was me that ran away.”

I was touched, but like most men felt the need to disguise it. “Well, don’t tell anyone, Bobby. If the Reverend Handel finds out, one Sunday I might be the headliner in his Sermon on the Mount. And you don’t need a name to know who The Reverend’s talking about.”

Bobby laughed. I hadn’t expected him to seek me out again, but I suppose we did have some history between us. Maybe I was the closest to a friend he had in this town.

My store sold cold beer, so I locked up and we sat and drank Coors with our backs to the cashier counter, out of sight of the windows. For a little while we made small talk. He told me about a number of job offers, and how he accepted George Langstrom’s invitation to work as a foreman at the Tyson plant south of town. You didn’t have to see the plant; you could smell it. It processes chickens and they use one hundred percent of the birds, including the guts that fester in ponds to be sold later as fertilizer.

“Man, you should see it, Frankie. I gotta admit, I was shook when I walked in and saw six hundred people holding knives. As the chicken carcasses go by—they’re stuck up on an overhead chain that pulls them along—each person slices a little here and a little there. It’s one hell of an operation.”

He asked me about the store. I told him there were so many inventory records cluttering my brain that I had to forget something in order to remember anything new. Soon we ran out of small talk. That’s when Bobby took a good slug of beer and started to talk in a voice wound down to almost a whisper.

“At night—late at night is when it happened, mostly. I’d know right away, Frankie, asleep or not, when he came in. I could smell the booze.”

“Bobby, you don’t have to—”

He stopped me by placing a finger gently on my lips, then continued. “He’d sit on my bed and stroke my hair, tell me what a good boy I was. Daddy’s boy, he called me. Then he’d push my head down and—” Bobby’s eyes glistened, and he swiped at them with his shirt sleeve.

“Afterward, he’d do it to me. Sometimes he did other things.” Bobby turned to me and said, “Frankie, there were times when I’d get excited.”

This time the tears flowed unimpeded and I moved to embrace him, but he pushed me away.

“No. I’ve got to get this off my chest—all of it.” He took a handkerchief from his back pocket and blew his nose. Then his eyes locked on mine. “I’m no hero, Frankie. You know what I felt when I charged that goddamn house?”

I shook my head.

“I was happy, Frankie, happier than I’d been in a long, long time. You know why?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Because I knew I’d die, that there was no chance of not dying that day.” He grabbed my arm. “Do you understand?”

All I could do was nod.

“I’m such a fuck-up, I couldn’t even get that right.” His face clouded again and he turned away. I watched his body spasm until I couldn’t take it any more. I reached over and wrapped my arms around him. We stayed like that for awhile. Each time his body shook, I held him tighter.

Up until then, I would have seduced Bobby out of spite, because he shunned me in high school, and because he escaped Stewart Springs and became a hero. But all that was out the window. I felt sorry; not out of pity, but a genuine sadness.

It’s a damn shame that genes can undermine perfectly sensible brain cells. Our intimacy had stirred up my genes to the point there was no reasoning with them. I kissed Bobby on the lips, and he kissed back. I kept at it and it led to frenzied lovemaking, right there on the floor of Ludington’s. Afterward, still embraced, I felt Bobby’s body tense. Then, he untangled himself and stood up.

“It’s ok, Frankie. We are what we are,” he said. With that, he walked to the door, turned the key and left, leaving me sprawled on the floor, like the puddle of primordial ooze I was.

I stood among the crowd and watched the VFW color guard march down Mason Street, followed by the high school band playing a hastily learned dirge. At the rear was a brown and white Clydesdale pulling a wobbly old dray with its lifeless burden.

I had spent the last three days in a heavy fog, and God only knew what my customers thought. In that time, I had heard different versions of what happened out at the Tyson plant. None of them rang true.

After the funeral procession passed, the crowd began to murmur as it broke up. Behind me, I heard the falsetto voice of George Langstrom as he spoke to someone.

“I still can’t believe it happened, Daryl—and right there in the plant. When I saw the crowd outside the ladies locker room, I knew something was up, but I figured it was a catfight inside—it’s happened before. So I pushed through. And there they were.”

I could hear him take a breath.

“Maria Lopez’s skirt was hiked up and she was bawling like a baby. You could see she’d been man-handled. And Philippe—that worthless— Anyway, he had his knife out, which he’s supposed to leave at his work station. I figure Bobby heard Maria scream and came in before Philippe could finish what he started. The bastard was in a crouch, tossing the knife from one hand to the other, like in the movies. Right in front of him was Bobby, motioning for him to come and get it. I yelled loud as I could at Philippe, but he lunged at Bobby.”

The voices drifted to my left, so I followed.

“And that’s what I don’t get, Daryl. I mean, they teach hand-to-hand combat in the Marines, right? But Bobby didn’t move a muscle. He just let that bastard gut him. That’s when I screamed God knows what, and it must’ve woke him up, because he head-butted Philippe — dropped him like a turd. I told the crew to make Bobby comfortable—but no water, and not to let him move around. Then I called 911. But shit, you know how that goes.”

I hurried to catch up with George, and tugged on his sleeve. “Did he say anything?”

George turned and gave me a funny look. “Frank?”

“Bobby—before he died—did he say anything?”

“Why no. He didn’t say a word.”

I nodded, then stopped while George and his friend moved on. Most of the people were heading up Mason to the cemetery, while I stood there, making them walk around me.

THE END