

## Campfires

The Akrons lived four doors down the street from us. Clarence Akron—Mr. Akron to the kids in the neighborhood—was a slight man with thinning gray hair, light blue eyes, and wire-framed glasses. He repaired watches for a living. His wife, Dorothy, also slight, with curly black hair and brown eyes, was all but invisible. She almost never came out of the house, and I never heard her speak. Their only child, Brucie, was my brother's age, three years younger than I.

I was probably eight, and Brucie and Kenny five, the year Mr. Akron dug a fire pit in his backyard. He laid a circle of rocks for the fire ring, rocks he probably gathered from creeks in Anderson Township. He surrounded the ring with logs for seating and whittled sharp points on sticks likely gathered from the woods surrounding the creeks.

Some evenings when darkness crept through the neighborhood and lightening bugs blinked their tails, Mr. Akron sent Brucie to spread the word, "Campfire tonight!" Kids of all ages, and occasionally a curious parent or two, scrambled over to the Akrons' backyard. Mr. Akron gave us the pointed sticks he'd made, along with his be-careful-you-could-poke-someone's-eye-out speech. Other than this, Mr. Akron didn't talk much.

Sometimes a handful of kids settled onto the logs surrounding the firepit, sometimes a dozen or more. We held onto our sticks, anticipating the moment when Mr. Akron passed around the marshmallows. We watched the orange flames dance above the fire and minded the column of smoke that rose toward the sky, dodging it if a breeze sent it in our direction. We cheered when the fire produced big sparks or loud crackles. We looked up at the black sky, studded with endless stars, a perfect background for the red sparks that popped over the campfire.

On cold nights, we warmed our hands. On hot nights, we pushed the log-seats away from the fire. Sometimes we told ghost stories; other times we sang campfire songs. I wouldn't have traded places with Princess Elizabeth if it meant giving up our campfires.

The campfires continued for a couple of summers. Mr. Akron stopped making the campfires about the time parents on the street began to whisper, "What's the matter with Brucie?" Clearly, Brucie was not developing like the rest of the kids. He was pale and thin and less coordinated than other boys his age. He lunged when he walked, his shoulders rounded forward. Brucie had dark circles under his eyes. He was a mouth breather and often stared into the distance with vacant eyes.

Brucie picked a fight with my brother one Saturday afternoon. Kenny was bigger, stronger, and smarter than Brucie, but not smart enough to avoid the fight. Mr. Akron ran out of his house, separated the boys, wrestled Kenny to the ground, and pinned him down, yelling at him. Brucie ran home crying, where Mrs. Akron caught him in the doorway. When Mr. Akron finally let Kenny up, he ran home, shaken, and told Dad what had happened.

Dad, with his six-foot athletic frame, charged over to the Akrons' house and lifted the frail Mr. Akron off the ground. He threatened him within an inch of his life if he ever laid a hand on Kenny again, or any other kid in the neighborhood, for that matter.

After that, the Millses had nothing to do with the Akrons. The Akrons seemed to retreat deep into their house. I saw Mr. Akron walk to the bus stop mornings about seven, eyes glued to the ground; I also saw him trudge home about five-thirty in the afternoons, shoulders slumped, torso crumbled.

I felt ashamed of my dad and disappointed in him for assaulting Mr. Akron. *Why didn't he just go talk to him?* I was annoyed with Kenny for fighting. *Why do boys always have to fight?* And I was devastated that Mr. Akron, or any adult, would lay a hand on someone else's kid. I stewed alone with these thoughts and feelings, and with a sadness I did not understand.

I had to force myself to stop thinking about campfires.

According to his Ohio Death Certificate, Bruce Akron went to a special school for twelve years. He died in 1995. The occupation information on his death certificate reads, "Unemployed, never worked, disabled child, infant."

On hot summer evenings as dusk slips over the last smudge of sunset, I sometimes steal into the past. I hear echoes of Brucie spreading the word, "Campfire tonight!" and see him ambling from house to house in his awkward gait. I wiggle on my log as other antsy kids wiggle on theirs, settling in around the fire. I watch the orange flames dance and look up when red sparks shoot into the dark sky. I catch a glimpse of Brucie. He laughs as he leans forward to roast his marshmallow over the fire. He laughs because we are laughing, and he roasts his marshmallow just like we do. In the distance, Mr. Akron, sits in his lawn chair, warmed by the sight of his son, just another one of the boys, if only in this moment.

## The Dance Hall and the Possum

A friend and I ventured through the woods at the dead end of the street the summer of 1951. We were ten, about to start seventh grade. We passed the farmer's field, the ravine, and the pond we knew so well and forged ahead toward a field neither of us recognized. We pretended we were explorers on a grand adventure, off to make an important discovery. Before long, we spotted an abandoned building in the distance. The walls tilted. The roof sagged. Most of the windows were broken and doors hung loose on their hinges. I tingled with excitement as we hurried toward it.

"Let's go in," my friend said.

"Let's do!" I agreed.

We entered the ramshackle structure, stepping carefully on the floorboards. Light filtered into a large room through dirty windows and chinks in the walls. A long bar lined one wall. Behind it were empty bottles and glasses. I ran my fingers over the bar top and wrote my name in the dust.

Tables and chairs were strewn about the room, many of them overturned. Cobwebs laced the slats of the chair backs and legs. Careful to avoid spiders in the dim light, we righted some of the chairs and tables. We oriented them toward a stage that stretched across the far end of the room.

I stepped onto the stage and imagined a piano against one wall. I grabbed a pretend microphone and sang to the crowd I imagined in front of me. My friend laughed and applauded when I finished.

"Your turn," I said. She jumped on the stage, took the microphone, and crooned a melody. Only the spiders could hear us singing, we thought, until we heard a scratching noise.

"What's that?" I asked.

"I don't know," my friend replied.

"It doesn't sound like a person," I said, relieved.

"Let's go find out," my friend said, tiptoeing toward the sound. I followed.

The scratching sound led us to a side door and outdoors to a pile of rotting boards, the remnants of a large deck. I imagined a crowd of men and dance-hall girls sitting out here on a summer night a hundred years ago.

"Look," my friend said, pointing. A possum lay on the pile of old boards. Sensing us, the possum did what possums do; it played dead. I didn't know much about possums, and I wanted to get away from the strange-looking animal, so I turned to go back into the dance hall.

"Wait," my friend said.

"Okay," I answered, the last word I would speak that day.

She picked up a stick and poked the possum. I was afraid the animal might attack her, but it just lay still. I was afraid my friend would lose her footing, but she was agile and didn't fall. As she struck

the possum with the stick, I willed it to escape. *Get up and run. Go. Now.* But the possum only did what possums do. And I failed to speak.

She lifted the stick over her head and brought it down forcefully, plunging it into the possum's belly. Her guttural groan pierced the silence of the afternoon. I saw the possum's wound, its blood, its flesh. Still, it didn't fight back or try to flee. And, still, I failed to speak.

My friend drove the stick into the possum's belly again and again, grunting with each thrust. When she was sure the possum was dead, she threw down the stick, brushed her hands together and said, "There. Let's go!"

I walked behind her, no longer an adventuresome explorer, but a child who wished her footfalls belonged to someone else. When we reached the street, my friend mounted her bicycle and pedaled off toward Birney Lane. I never saw her again because her family moved.

The possum isn't the only thing that died that afternoon. My belief in a good and just world died. My assumption about the kindness of human nature faltered, and my admiration for my friend waned. A new reality set in: *Even on the best of sunny afternoons, dreadful, unexpected things can happen.*