Everything Must Go

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Extract

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Chapter one

2001

Five-fifteen p.m. Henry pushes open the door, drops his keys on the front hall table. "Mom?"

He turns into the living room, shut up and dark, the curtain drawn against the brightness of the fall day. His shrunken mother is on the couch balancing a highball in one hand, a cigarette burning out in the other, in clothes that once fit properly but now swallow her up. Her thinning brown hair is flecked with gray and hanging loose from a swirl of a bun.

"David?" she asks, not yet pulling her stare from the television set.

"No, Mom. It's me," he says, "Henry."

She looks over and sees that yes, it is Henry. He can see the disappointment in her eyes, glazed over from the glow of the TV.

He takes the cigarette from her, stubs it out in the overflowing

ashtray on the coffee table and makes a mental note to clean up all the drink rings and ashes.

He opens the curtains with the string pulley and when he turns back to her she is shading her eyes against the light, but then her hand drops back down to the couch.

"How are you?" he asks.

She does not answer him, but he is used to that and so has not waited for a reply.

In the kitchen he opens the refrigerator to see what he'll need to pick up at the grocery store.

Over the din of squealing contestants spinning large dials, Henry asks, "How're you feeling?"

"Are you just home from football?" she asks. "How was practice?"

"I'm home from *work,* Mom," he says, taking a deep breath and leaning down to scoop her up. "Remember?"

She clasps her hands behind his neck, holding on, bumping along in his arms with each step up the stairs.

Henry is gentle placing her into her bed. Moving through the room, he picks up a *Ladies' Home Journal* that has fallen to the floor from her nightstand, and replaces it within reach, right side up. On top of the *Readers' Digest*.

"How was work?" she asks, pulling the covers up.

He pauses on his way out of the master bedroom to answer her.

"You know what? It was a hard day," he says. He sighs the kind of sigh that carries a weight. "Bye, Mom. I'm going out for a while but I'll be back later, okay? I'll check on you later."

She is already sleeping when he leaves.

It was not always this way.

1967

"Henry, pass the baked beans, please," his mother says. She rests her cigarette in the notch of the ashtray and reaches across the picnic table toward him.

The clay container feels heavy to seven-year-old Henry and he concentrates very hard to make sure it does not tip on its way over the deviled eggs with the paprika sprinkled on top. Black flies scatter.

"*Thank* you," she says. She is making a point by emphasizing the *please* and *thank you* and waits with an expectation of *you're welcome* from Henry. He stops chewing and with split-second reasoning decides the greater offense would be to talk with his mouth full so he nods his *you're welcome* and hopes his mother will accept this as the best he can do under the circumstances. Did you see I did the right thing right you looked at me like it was good so maybe I did, he thinks, in one jumbled seven-year-old thought process.

"Can I be excused?" Henry's older brother, Brad, asks.

"You haven't finished your hot dog yet," she says. Henry races to finish his own, to escape into the sunny day, away from the fragments of adult conversation floating over his head: Detroit riots. Sergeant Pepper and The Downfall of The Beatles. The Smothers Brothers, which he had indeed watched with his parents one night when they let Henry and Brad stay up past their bedtime, but Henry had not really liked the show and fell asleep before it finished so all he really wanted right now was to be released from the table.

Brad crams the rest of the hot dog into his mouth and says, "Now can I?" Wonder bread bun flicks out of his mouth.

Their mother sighs at Brad and looks away so their father, Edgar Powell, says, "Yes."

Henry's father has a spot of ketchup on the front of his madras shirt, and Henry can tell this is bothering him because he keeps wiping it with his paper napkin and sighing in disgust when it refuses to disappear.

"Can I, too?" Henry asks. The dinner is cutting into the July twilight that won't hold its breath for long. So they squirm to be released because even hot dogs don't make up for lost time in summer light, a conch-shell call to the young boys.

"I swear it's impossible to keep these children in one place for more than five minutes," Henry's mother says to the two other mothers on her side of the bench, who nod sympathetically, yes, yes it is hard to keep them in line so why even try just let them go boys will be boys after all.

"Yes, you may both be excused," she says, leaning across the table so her husband can light her next cigarette with his Zippo lighter.

Henry notices she has not completely stubbed out her last cigarette. He looks up to see if this bothers her as much as it does him, and determining it does not appear to bother her in the least, he finger-stops the Coke in his straw and releases it over the smoking remains of cigarette. Gulping the last of his drink he sighs "aah" like in the commercial but is disappointed nobody notices his attempt at humor so he races off after Brad. On the way he picks up a stick because they'd agreed to play cowboys and Indians and he remembers he is supposed to be an Indian and Indians used sticks not guns to fight the cowboys so he'd better get a good one because Brad is tough competition.

"Wait up," Henry calls out.

Back at the table all are laughing at a joke one of the men makes

and the women are shaking their heads at its silliness. All except Edgar Powell.

Edgar Powell is the sort of man who only says "God bless you" after the first sneeze. If multiple sneezes follow he pointedly ignores them. For Edgar Powell this is a pragmatic choice, a studied economy of words, not a malicious wish that the sneezer be condemned to damnation. He is equally frugal with his laughter.

"Boys, watch out for your brother," their mother calls and Henry groans, watching his just barely two-year-old brother David toddle toward them, arms Frankenstein-extended. David David David, it's always *take care of your brother* and *watch out for your brother*. Brad's the oldest so he gets to do older-kid stuff, David's the baby so he gets all the attention, and then there's me, invisible me, he says to himself, kicking at a rock, waiting for Brad to shoot him like he always does. Henry's truth is that he is the one who does everything right. But this seems very little compared to David David David and Brad Brad Brad, and he wishes his parents saw the gut punches, the head locks or the Chinese water torture where Brad pins him down and lets the string of spit hang down almost to his face before sucking it back up. Then there was the time Brad made Henry eat dirt, which still humiliates him even though it happened last year. Thankfully Matt Rollins, who gave Brad the idea in the first place, moved to Baltimore not long after. At least I'm not a tattletale, he thinks. His best friend, Petey, had cautioned against tattling and had told of even worse big-brother tortures. Never ever tell on him, Petey had said in the fort they'd built in back of Henry's house.

Sometimes, though, it was easy not to tattle because Brad would unexpectedly stick up for him at school if the occasion presented itself. Or Brad would talk baseball with him—in a know-it-all way,

but still. Life was good when this happened. It made it all worthwhile when, say, the Yankees won and they shouted with joy and leaped into each other's arms and punched their fists into the air with happiness.

"David's a cowboy with you," he calls out to Brad.

"No, he's not," Brad yells, hiding somewhere out of Henry's sight.

"Yes, he is. There are more cowboys than Indians so he's on your team," he says. He turns to David, who has now reached him. "Davey, go over there, Brad's calling you. Go over there to Brad."

"Bad?" David has not yet mastered his *r*'s and Henry has encouraged this coincidental nickname.

"Yeah, *Bad,*" Henry says, gently pushing his brother toward the fringe of the park. "Go over there."

"Ha-ha," he calls out. "He's coming over."

"Yeah, well, you just got shot so you're dead," Brad says, standing up from not as far away as Henry had imagined.

Cowboys and Indians gives way to a makeshift series of sticks balanced across rocks at different heights so the boys can leap over them, taking turns being Evel Knievel. But Brad hurts his knee and starts a wrestling match that is incomplete as David repeatedly tries to take part and *boys, watch out for your brother* dots it and it is therefore far less satisfying than any of them had hoped. Henry's cousin, Tommy, at ten is bigger than both of them, and at one point has Brad pinned down requiring Henry to jump onto Tommy's back to peel him off.

"Get off," he says. "Get *off,*" because brothers innately stick together against outside foes even cousin foes.

It's two against one. The Powell boys against cousin Tommy carries on until that, too, is exhausted. They scatter then and

Henry wanders off into the wood to see what's what. *Let Brad watch David for once how come he always gets out of it anyway,* Henry thinks. *It's such a gyp.*

It is two or three yards into the thick, cool shade of trees when Henry happens on two birds. It's clear they are fighting and he stops to watch. They are well matched—the same breed, the same size. It does not occur to Henry that he has the power to put a stop to this. To intervene. To interrupt the natural course of events. He is frozen and spellbound. He finds it strange how silent they are, the pecking brutal, the feathers—the long ones on top—start peeling off. The bird on the bottom, the one being nailed over and over again by the beak, struggles slightly but Henry sees it is resigned. Horrified, Henry watches the weak one give in. The downy smaller feathers underneath floating in the air like dandelion fluff. The beak pecking pecking pecking red with blood. Henry is surprised at the brightness of the color, so much like his mother's lipstick or like the fake Dracula blood he had smeared on either side of his mouth last Halloween.

The dying bird finally manages a mournful squawk.

"Stop," he says out loud, finding his voice. "Stop it," he shouts, running forward, waving his arms. *"Stop."*

The bloody beak rises and the bird flaps off. Henry's spindly legs walk to the mess on the pine needles. He squats down next to the bird on its side, a beady eye finds his, locks and then shuts.

"It's okay," he whispers. "It's okay now." He is trying to soothe the bird but is sick at his stomach seeing he is too late.

Not so far away the stronger bird waits to finish what he had started.

"Go," Henry yells. Tears in his eyes he rushes at the bird. "Go away. Go."

He returns to the bird on the ground and kneels. This is the closest he has ever been to a bird. He reaches out, and with his index finger, he strokes the top of the bird's head. The only part that is not bloody. It is membrane-soft, smooth and still warm and Henry finds it the saddest thing he has ever ever seen in the whole wide universe.

There is no time to bury it; Brad will be looking for him, Henry thinks. Or Tommy. Or maybe his mother. If he is gone too long. And it feels like he's been gone too long.

"Sorry," he whispers. "Sorry, bird." On his haunches he allows the tears to fall.

It astounds him that he is only steps from his family, from all the picnic activity. He does not tell anyone about it. He keeps it for himself, feeling he alone was entrusted with the weight, the *responsibility* of being the only witness to this spectacularly rare event. It is fine with him that no one notices he is no longer playing. He takes a stick and hits random bushes at the edge of the clearing…mad at himself he had allowed it to happen. Come to think of it, he thinks, thank God Mom and Dad didn't find me, not that they really would have, but still—they would have asked why I let the bird die.

The boys are called back to help throw out soggy paper plates and clinking beer bottles. The mothers are stacking the Tupperware and drinking out of plastic cups, giggling at something one or the other has said before the boys reach the table in near darkness.

In the car ride home the boys are quiet, drunk with exhaustion. David has fallen asleep between them, his head bobbing with each bump in the road. In front of them their mother moves closer to their father, who is driving. The station wagon has one long con-

tinuous front seat and their father reaches out and drapes his arm across the top of the seat back, across their mother's shoulders, and their murmuring this and that about who said what mixes in with the sound of the engine and Henry next feels his father's arms scooping him up to carry him into the house. Brad trails them, his steps weaving in sleepiness.

Ahead of them on the front walk his mother is carrying David.

Henry dreamily reaches his first finger to his little brother's head he confuses with the bird's, so soft and smooth. But David's head just out of reach.