

Old-Time Justice

Revised and expanded

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Disclaimer: *The events described below will be disturbing to some readers. Discretion is advised.*

They say that life in the old days was more simple. I'll say it was different, but I wouldn't say it was less complicated.

Introduction

This story was related to me by a friend. He's assured me that it's 100% truthful and accurate and I believe he was telling me the truth. He was visibly shaken while relating some of the events. When he told me this story the events were some 46 years in the past. He waited that long before he told anyone because he wanted to be sure that all parties involved in the illegal act(s) depicted had passed away. I will do my utmost to present the story as closely as I can to how it was related to me. All names used are purely fictitious and the location is intentionally vague.

This story was related to me in two sessions. My friend, Paul, wanted me to have as much background on the participants as possible. He wanted me to feel like I knew these men. Knowing I was a city-girl he wanted me to understand a little bit about country life and living. He also stressed, more than a few times, that even though the acts that I'll be describing took place in the Fall of 1969, the setting, the people, and the way of life had changed very little since the Great Depression.

Part One

Paul grew up in a rural area of one of the Mid-Atlantic states. Farming and mining were the major industries and the farmers sometimes worked in the mines to keep their farms going. These farmers and miners were not educated men by traditional standards. Few of them had gone farther in school than the fourth grade. Most, by that age, were capable of being valuable farmhands and were needed at home. Paul stressed, to me, that the knowledge these men possessed, knowledge gained through hard work and necessity, was not accurately represented by the number of years they had spent in a classroom. He was quite proud of one particular example of their extraordinary abilities.

One of the farmers owned two adjoining farms and lived on one of them. The barn was much better where he lived but the other house was far superior to the one he lived in so, one fine day, he got the idea that he wanted to move the better house to the farm he lived on. The magnitude of this project increases when you know that the houses were slightly more than a half mile apart and the one to be moved was on a hillside that approached a 30-degree grade. Don't forget that the average education of this group was the fourth grade.

These gentlemen had a habit of gathering, every weekday evening, at the local general store to socialize but, now they were on a mission. As soon as the problem was outlined it was assumed that everyone in attendance was going to be part of the crew. That's simply the way it had always been. For as long as any of them could remember they had pitched in to help each other anytime help was needed. This time they were collaborating to move a two-story farmhouse 2,500 feet around a steep hillside. Paul was about ten years old at this time and, knowing his rightful place around the adults, he sat quietly and took in every word. He made sure that I realized this happened in 1963, when he was in the fifth grade. He had already attained more of an education than most of these men plotting to defy the laws of physics, if not time and space, as well. He was still not surprised when they didn't seek his guidance. Most of the knowledge and necessary skills were either learned out of necessity or had been passed onto them by either their fathers or grandfathers. Paul seemed proud of the fact that all of the older men in the group had known a Civil War veteran or two.

At their disposal, this crew of self-declared engineers had a pair of small tracked vehicles, a handful of farm tractors, hay wagons, jacks, ropes, chains, and the normal assortment of tools found on a farm, plus a few simple machines. When I say simple machines, I mean items such as pulleys, rollers, levers, and fulcrums. They spent about a week and a half colluding, conspiring, planning, and preparing for the upcoming event. Paul managed to talk his parents into allowing him to stay home from school on Friday, the first day of the move. He used the argument, successfully, that this event would be more educational than anything they would ever do in school. Many years later, when he was telling me this story he told me one of his biggest regrets was not being able to photograph this entire operation from start to finish. Before he finished I was also regretting the same thing.

As soon as the dew was gone from the grass, on the appointed day, the owner of the house being moved called everyone together. Paul told me he said something like "Nobody dies here; nobody gets hurt here. It's my house and it's not even my only house. If it gets away from us, run like Hell." At that point Paul was banished to a location way up the hill from the house. He was safe unless the wayward structure, somehow, managed to roll uphill.

Utilizing the system of tractors and other devices, the crew, by the end of the first day, had moved the house more than half the distance to the new location. They had, however, reached a point and a problem they hadn't planned on and didn't know how to deal with. The general store was open late that night selling Pepsi and potato chips to the brain trust. By midnight, a plan had been hatched.

First thing the next morning they began the newest phase of the operation. They were going to construct an immovable object in an open field, on the side of a hill. I feel the necessity to point out that in this case the definition of "immovable object" is a free-standing point that can withstand the entire weight of a two-story house trying to rip it out of the ground. By now, it should surprise no one that these amateur geniuses accomplished the task and, at the same time, made it appear to be easy.

By dark, the two houses sat side by side at the new location. The worst was over. The general store, that night, was a Pepsi and potato chip bash the likes of which had never been seen before and probably not since. A week or so later the old house had been torn down, the foundation adapted to accept the new house, and the new house installed on its new footings.

The task wasn't accomplished without some damage being incurred by the dwelling. All doors and windows functioned normally but one pane of one window had been cracked, not broken, just cracked. The task been successfully accomplished. There was no boasting or bravado. Everyone who participated was offered a heart-felt "thank you" and were assured, even though it went without saying, that when they needed help, they would get it. Everyone went home. After all, it wasn't *that* much of a big deal.

This group of men were accustomed to banding together and doing whatever had to be done even if they had never before done anything remotely similar. Unbeknownst to them, their next challenge would not be as easy as this one. Paul never knew anything about these planning sessions. He wasn't allowed to be anywhere near those events this time. He wasn't even aware anything was being planned.

Part Two

Since Paul lived in a rural area, he rode a school bus to and from school every day, and the same bus picked up all the students from grades 1 to 12. The first day of this particular school year Paul noticed a tiny little boy named Sammy who had just started first grade. Because he was so small and meek, he quickly became the object of scorn, ridicule and sometimes physical abuse from a local bully who rode the same bus. Paul took Sammy under his wing and shared his seat with him because it was the only way he could protect little Sammy.

The previous year Paul had attempted to solve the problem, with this same bully, the way he had always been taught; to knock the bully on his ass. The problem was that Paul made one simple mistake. Since the bully's attack had occurred at school that's where Paul applied his solution. Unluckily, there had been witnesses to the fight. Paul was suspended from school for three days and was promised that if anything similar happened again he would be permanently expelled. Somehow, the school officials found it fitting to punish the winner of the fight rather than the instigator.

It wasn't long before a genuine friendship developed between Sammy and Paul despite the difference in their ages. Paul told me that Sammy was smarter than friends his own age and was capable of holding up his end of a conversation extremely well. He truly was an amazing little boy and Paul began thinking of him as something close to a little brother. It was more than obvious, to everyone, that Sammy felt the same. The fact that both Paul and Sammy were only-children strengthened the bond.

The local community was tightly knit and had been for many years. Everyone knew everyone else's business and their ancestry. It was rare when anyone left the community and even more rare when an outsider joined. Around the time of the beginning of the school year a stranger appeared at the general store. He purchased a small amount of food, a few packs of cigarettes and some plumbing supplies. When questioned the only thing he revealed was that he was renting a dilapidated, old farmhouse that hadn't been occupied in years and was known, to the locals, as the "Jones place." He also offered that his name was George. As the weeks went by, he encountered several local farmers who offered him part-time jobs, more to fill their own needs than to help George out in any way. He always declined and not necessarily politely. In general, the community thought of George as an unfriendly, undesirable type of man. Any efforts to find out information about George's past failed.

One Saturday Paul's mother, Mary, received a phone call from Sammy's mother, Sarah. Sarah was trying to hide that fact that she was close to panic, but her efforts were failing. She wanted to know if, by some chance, Sammy was with Paul. She quickly explained that she never thought Paul would take Sammy anywhere without asking permission and she knew for a fact that Sammy wouldn't leave home without asking first. Still, Sammy was nowhere to be found and he had been missing for at least a couple of hours.

In this area, at this point in time, it wasn't unusual for boys, twelve years old or older, to make a few sandwiches, grab a rifle and disappear for the day, either alone or with a group of friends. Sammy, however, was only six and had never disappeared on his own. There was genuine reason for concern; not the type of concern one would feel today when a small child was missing but concern, nonetheless. Sammy was highly allergic to bee stings and there were several old, abandoned mine entrances close to Sammy's home and sinkholes, the result of mine subsidence, sometimes appeared without warning. These were just a few of the dangerous possibilities to be considered.

It appears to be nearly universal response that the disappearance of a small child triggers a high level of anxiety and an immediate effort to locate the missing child. Paul, within a matter of minutes, was in the family car and was off to talk to Sarah to see how he could help. By the time he arrived Sarah was in full-blown panic mode. Mary and Paul had been the only people she had been able to contact. It would be many years before everyone had a phone on their person nearly all the time. Since Sarah was all but incoherent, Paul made the decision to start a one man search for Sammy and he began scouring the maze of dirt roads in the immediate area where Sammy lived.

Within ten minutes he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Sammy alternately walking and running down one of the dirt roads; in the wrong direction. He stopped the car and scooped up little Sammy who was sobbing uncontrollably. All Sammy was able to do was hug Paul. He was crying too hard to speak. Paul had Sammy back home in a matter of minutes and Sarah was reunited with her son. Paul had noted something that disturbed him, but he had no idea what to make of what he saw. Paul lived at a place, in a time, where perversions were either nonexistent or were highly suppressed. When Sammy got out of the car there was a sizable stain on the passenger seat; a stain that closely resembled blood.

Inside Sammy's home Paul noticed that the seat of Sammy's jeans were, indeed, soaked in blood. He pointed it out to Sarah who took his jeans down and saw that the back of his underwear was also soaked. He hadn't sat in blood; the blood was coming from him. Then Sammy started crying and said, "George hurt my bum." When asked who George was, he answered, "The man with the green truck with the pink fender." He was a smart boy; more than smart enough to identify who had hurt him.

A few minutes later Sammy's father, Bob, came home and he and Sarah took Sammy to their doctor. There was no "emergency room" available to them in those days. The doctor verified that little Sammy had been sexually assaulted; he had been sodomized. The doctor suggested he could call the State Police, but Bob refused to allow it. At that point in history there was no such thing as a rape kit or DNA evidence. Those, like cell phones, were many years in the future.

That evening, even though it was a weekend, the General Store regulars were all there, as was Paul. Since Paul was the main source of information, he didn't need to be told he should be there. He told everything he knew and was promptly dismissed; he was ordered to go home. Several minutes later Bob was also sent away. Many years later Paul was told there was a deadly serious mood that night. Matters were discussed, and decisions were made.

Paul had no idea what was going on, but he knew that if he was supposed to know he would have already been told. Suddenly he was an outsider to the group of men he'd known all his life and who were beginning to accept him as one of them. They avoided him and when they were talking, and he approached, they stopped. Once he heard something about hunting before they saw him and suddenly became quiet. He had been invited on all their hunting trips for several years but suddenly they wanted nothing to do with him, but he knew of nothing he'd done wrong yet none of the men would speak to him anymore. He wasn't aware of it, but Bob was receiving exactly the same treatment.

Paul assumed that their hunting trip had come and gone when the group slowly began to accept him again. Nobody offered any explanations and, again, Paul knew better than to ask. In a few weeks normality had almost returned and within a few more weeks it had truly returned but it wasn't the normality one would expect. It was the normality that existed before the day anyone had heard of or seen George. Neither George or his green and pink truck were ever seen again nor were they mentioned.

Sammy eventually recovered from both his physical and mental trauma, although his innocence was gone forever. In fact, the entire community lost its collective innocence.

Epilog

Through Paul's telling of his story, I have a better understanding of human nature or at least what human nature used to be. After many years had passed, Paul spoke with Clark who was the last surviving member of the group. Clark was dying of liver cancer and told more than anyone had previously.

Paul asked him, "What did you guys do?"

Clark answered, "Just what you think we did."

Paul said, "You killed him?"

Clark replied, "You always were a smart kid," and that was the end of the conversation.

That was when Paul realized that he and Bob had been excluded for their own protection. They weren't involved in either the planning or the execution itself. These men were smarter than their fourth-grade educations would suggest.

This was a group of men who would never consider stealing from you, cheating with someone else's wife, or harming an animal that wasn't food or a direct threat to their safety. These were men who would literally give you the shirt off their back or if you were temporarily down and out wouldn't hesitate to house and feed you and ask nothing in return. They worked together and constantly committed themselves to the common good of the community. They were the salt of the Earth.

However, when presented with one of the most evil, heinous, and unforgivable acts that can be perpetrated on a child, they quietly and efficiently tackled and solved the problem once and for all, in much the same way they would go about moving a house around a hillside. They studied the problem, assessed their options, and acted accordingly. They risked it all by conspiring to commit the premeditated murder of another, supposed, human being.

Final Thoughts

Since I first posted this story I've lost a very good friend, Paul, the man who related both of these stories to me. I took almost a month, right after the holidays and, along with the able assistance of my significant other, Charley, I buried Paul and settled his estate. He had an estranged family, but he didn't think they would want to be bothered. He was correct in his assumption, but they would have liked to have taken what they thought was theirs, all Paul's worldly possessions. He trusted I wouldn't allow that to happen. I didn't disappoint him.

Soon after the incident with Sammy, Paul enlisted in the U.S Army and did a tour in Vietnam as a clerk at the MACV, Military Assistance Command Vietnam, compound at Tan Son Nhut in Saigon. He never referred to himself as a Vietnam Veteran because he'd never been shot at. He believed that, somehow, that fact made him less of a soldier. He carried a lot more than his share of guilt for working in an air-conditioned office while others, often his friends, bled and died on mountain sides or in rice paddies all over the Republic of Vietnam.



I met Paul when I was ten and he was about thirty-six. I was in my adoptive grandparents back yard practicing a skill my uncle had taught me. I was tossing aspirin tablets into the air and shooting them with a BB gun. I had no idea I had an audience until I heard applause coming from behind me after I'd connected with, he claimed, ten in a row.

I heard, "Little girl, if you teach me how to do that I'll be your friend for life." We both kept our end of the bargain. I taught him to be a killer of aspirin tablets and he was my friend for the rest of his life.

Between his family life and his memories of Vietnam Paul lived a troubled existence. Shortly after the first of this year Paul did something that's happening to far too many Veterans. Paul took his own life.

The Real End

When I was going through Paul's papers I found a folder with my name on it. Among other things I found a copy of the original of this article. He must have downloaded and printed it. There was a note scrawled at the bottom. "Kimmie, don't forget all the other things you wanted to say."

That'll have to come next time. I finally managed to write a bit of a memorial to a dear friend. That wasn't easy to do. Even with practice it doesn't get easier. I don't care if I never hear "Taps," or "Amazing Grace," ever again.

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