

BILL BEVERLY

A Good Man

He was a good man, said my mother, why I can't say: she was always judging people like that, without much fuss of a trial. She said his name as *Warma* or *Wamoe*, something like: I wondered if that could be it really, no one said it the same way nor would guess how it spelled. Mr. Whammo's misfortune was owning the large house and yard next to the double-vacant lot with its carefully staked-in surveyor's posts we took for swords. He had a split-rail fence, and bushes and fruit trees, like the trees in the double-vacant, except Mr. Whammo's trees gave real apples and cherries he climbed up to harvest, while the double-vacant's trees gave crab apples [2 words] knotting with worms and tiny flies that we three would throw at each other, a point a hit, unless in the head, which counted two.

It was me, Derrick, and Michael that summer, and outside of playing and fighting in the double-vacant lot, we were waiting to go to the mountains with Derrick's family. The trip at first was him and his dad, his mom being far from the picture, but he persuaded we all should come: he thought he'd get a better deal off his dad if Mike and me were along. I said, "Shoot, why I want to go on vacation with you guys?" He said, "Come on. It's the mountains. The mountains." I said, "What we going to do in the mountains?"

He said, "Honky, don't tell me you never been to the mountains before." That summer we were calling everyone *honky*—each other, persons riding in every car, teachers of ours past and future, till something made us stop.

Derrick said to me: "Forget you then." To Michael he said, "Then forget him. Let's you and me go to the mountains and we'll leave this sorry honky back here."

"Fine with me," said Michael to Derrick. "We won't miss him."

"All right hold on hold on a minute," I said, then we all jiggered our parents and soon we were all booked to the mountains too, for what dates it was not sure—"Couple weeks" was all his dad said, and he really didn't like talking about it, so we didn't ask.

The double-vacant lot was deep and shady and not too far for yelling by any of our parents from the step. The people owning it lived in town, but one or two times each week Michael's father mowed it, instead of being indoors with Michael's mom, and then next door was Mr. Whammo with his fence and trees and his fenceline shed just as good as a goal or backstop, with the windowpanes that caved in for balls and rocks and what crab

apples have you, and his steel mesh he'd set over to protect the panes there [don't understand syntax; ok?] replacing, and the aluminum sides looking more and more like certain craters of the moon. I mean, if you'd told us first that damage would be done, we'd have backed off perhaps, but once we had begun our work on that shed, we were wont to finish.

And furthermore: if someone kicked a ball over the shed or foul-tipped a baseball out of the yard, then someone would need give chase, hopping the fence of Mr. Whammo's or squeezing by, by and by the tenons clean splitting off and falling out of the mortises, one or more posts themselves clean splitting north-south and dropping the rails, and quickly, within a few weeks of pardonable trespass, his fence giving out on everyone. Nothing we could to stop it, either, as lumber is not what it used to be, Derrick's dad says, and surely one must fetch back one's ball.

None of this did Mr. Whammo ever cuss us over—in fact he did not cuss at all—but he did come out and say words one night. We had been seeing could we launch a better crab apple if we pinched them into Michael's sisters' tennis racquets, and answering that you sometimes could, it was in how you stretched the gut to open up a little sweet spot for apple-slinging. And then I, aiming at Derrick, swiped Michael in his face with the racquet and near broke his nose. I mean his nose started spouting like the Holy Moses, I mean his blood on his hands and down his shirt and in the air when he shivered his head, and as it was getting darker, right about nine, his blood was not red, it was black, and I said *Sorry!* but to Michael's being angry this meant nothing at all, he said: "You were trying for that, that was your fault, I should not have let you use the racquets, this ain't what they're for!" I had said *sorry* two or three more times, and Michael said, "Remind me why I hang out with you guys, you guys are damned."

It was not the first time I had heard this, especially in Derrick's company. But still I did not relish the verdict.

I said "Shut up, honky," and cocked the racquet of his sister's again.

"You were *trying* to hit me, you can't tell me you weren't," he exclaimed.

So I swung at him a second time, this time trying. I missed his head by an inch when he jerked it, and he cut me back sideways and crushed me on the cheekbone, below the eye. I swung my racquet again, a bloodaxe swing, and he picked his up to parry and my racquet split off head from handle, while his flattened out into the shape of an anvil and all strings snapped loose at once. "Cool," exclaimed Derrick, and Michael exclaimed, "Quit you *bastard*," and I exclaimed, "I'll kill you now, you son of a God dang it," and that was the moment Mr. Whammo came [comma?] coming out of the darkness with his skinny red gas can, startling us with the sound of his voice.

"Boys, boys," he intervened, awkward and commanding at the same time. "Boys, please you stop."

Michael and I lowered our busted racquets and please we stopped. It was strangely almost a relief to have the good man talk to us after so long anxious about whether he ever would—especially when for once this time we hadn't been messing with his stuff.

"This language," Mr. Whammo said. "You cannot fight like this. You cannot fight yourselves with weapons. You cannot break them and break each other. This is not what you were made for."

Michael and I shook the broken racquets, agreeing that they were no use, but Derrick, who had been standing back laughing as we pummeled each other, stepped forward now. "Who are you talking to, old man," he said, "with your harelip and wooden teeth?"

"Why, I am talking to you," said Mr. Whammo.

Derrick brandished his racquet. "*You should stop*," he warned the good man.

And then there was a long moment where Mr. Whammo was standing there and we were standing here and something that before had seemed agreed was disagreeing.

We left the racquets in the double-vacant that night and told Michael's sisters it was too dark to find them. The next morning we said somebody must have come and broken two of the three of them in the night. Michael's sisters commenced sobbing but he said they would forget. That was the day that Derrick's cousin Marty Maine came, he who had been a punter in high school until expelled, and we got out the balls and fetched for him and played five hundred, which is a weak game kicking one to two but swell kicking a real high school [deleted hyphen] punter to three, and after I won the game and the fight about did you have to just get over five hundred or did you have to get there exact (you do not, five fifty wins just as surely), we asked Marty Maine how high he could kick, we'd count hang time for him on Michael's watch, and Marty Maine's first punt went straight and high as the highest maple in the double-vacant, stayed up by Michael's watch six or seven seconds, and Marty Maine's second punt went up not so well, and it cleared Mr. Whammo's broken split-rail fence and came down on the gas can that Mr. Whammo had just uncapped for filling his lawn mower, [2 words] and that gas can did then go spinning in midair, spraying out gas like a Fourth of July, and the next thing that football did was bounce up off that gas can and hit Mr. Whammo point in the nose.

We ran, except Derrick, who gave Mr. Whammo a hard look and then sauntered off in another direction. But soon we caught it from my mom in the usual way. "Timothy, you leave that man *alone*," she hissed. "*Alone*. Do you hear?"

"I hear you," answered I.

"That man is a good man," she grieved. "He don't want any trouble from the like of you."

"We'll give him none after this once," I assured her.

"You ain't getting any better," my mom said. "I got to talk to the three of you one more time, you ain't going to the mountains or nowhere."

Derrick opened his mouth but I said "Yes ma'am" before he could say anything. We lay low out back till she cleared the kitchen, then returned and made big PB sandwiches and drank some juice and ate a few bananas each. My mom could blow if you gave her a reason. But she did keep a good store of lunch on hand, and if you didn't interrupt her off her TV, she didn't mind your eating it.

We steered clear of the double-vacant that day, and we went to Michael's house in time to see Michael's dad gathering lunch and leaving back to work. He didn't mention the racquets, but maybe he hadn't heard it yet. "Look at the two of you," he said, checking out Michael's busted nose and my black-bruised cheekbone. "You do that to each other, I guess?"

"Yep," Michael told his dad.

Michael's dad snickered at us, and then he said, "Derrick, son, look like you turn out to be the angel of this bunch today."

"Yes, sir," agreed Derrick. They laughed together and he went out.

We ate a whole sack of peanuts at the table, piling up a mound of shells, and then Mary Clair, Michael's oldest sister, came to mix up a thing to give the baby. The baby got everything it wanted. "*Mary Clair*," Derrick said, "I hear you got a bush now."

"Who'd you hear that from?" said Mary Clair.

"Who didn't I hear it from," said Derrick.

"Let's stop beating around the bush," I said.

"How many birds you got in that bush?" said Derrick.

What Mary Clair wanted was in the refrigerator, I guess, but she stood flat against it as if a wind had blown her there.

"You like to go behind the bush with me?" said Derrick.

This made Michael and me burst out giggling I don't know why.

I heard Michael's mother rousing in the front room. "You all out there stop being crude," she said.

This gave Mary Clair her rights to open the refrigerator, and Michael stopped giggling.

"Michael," said Derrick, "you want me and Timmy to leave your sister alone, do you?"

"Hell no," said Michael, making no attempt to lower his voice. "I hate her," he exclaimed.

"Michael, take those two rotten boys out your family's home this instant," said his mother.

"These boys are my family. We three are the same," Michael replied. We heard her coughing at us. But Michael's mom couldn't do anything. Michael and Mary Clair were only the first two. She had to stay and deal with the seven more.

WE TRIED TO COUNT THE days it was till we would go to the mountains with Derrick's dad. I asked him what need I bring, did I need food or money, would we camp or did I need a fishing rod. He just shrugged and said, "I'll get by one day and talk to your folks."

Without any knowing how many days of waiting were counted up, we could not rightly count them down. "What do you do in the mountains anyway," I inquired of Derrick.

"Anything you want, honky child," Derrick said.

WE TRIED TO AVOID THE double-vacant, but this made days hard. Every day it had to be something else. Then a week after the gas-can-football-face occasion, my mom was reading the newspaper, and all at once she held up the page like it had bit her and said, "Oh. My. Lord."

I had a mouthful of corn flakes: I said, *What.* [quote marks?]

"Look here," she said, "what it says, it says she died."

"Who?" I said, "Mom, who?"

"His wife," my mother said, "you know the man you boys are always giving trouble, his wife died. Madeleine. That's a pretty name," my mom judged, "I know why they don't make boys' names like that. Madeleine. Died on Thursday. She was an invalid but they were married fifty-two years. Oh!" she said, having like she sometimes did a small heart attack of feeling. I poured myself another bowl of corn flakes. It was Sunday morning, and Michael being to church meant for half the day it would be just me and Derrick, straight no chaser.

"You want me to say anything to him?"

"No," said my mom, "No, I didn't really know her. Funeral today, 3 p.m., Grant's, with a burial at Frankfort Ridge. *Oh!*" she said again, this one more vehement.

"Mom," I said. "Mom."

She blinked at me as if I'd screamed at her. "Timothy," she said, breathing, "What?"

"We're out of milk," I said.

Then she remembered that it was just a Sunday morning like any other, and her eyes passed me over, remembering me too. "All right," she said. "Leave the empty box in the sink where I'll see."

MICHAEL SAID IT MADE NO sense going in someone's house in broad daylight. Derrick scoffed in his face.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "How does it matter, the daylight. He'll be gone."

Michael objected, it having been decided without him present. "Yes," said Derrick, "you were eating your Sunday ham. Want a vote? *Then I vote no;* says Michael Oshay. Two yeses one no, you've lost."

We went in through the window over the bathtub. An apple tree covered for us. I bent the frame and Michael and Derrick plucked it out. We lifted Michael in—the smallest and most light—and he let us in the back door.

"It serves him right," said Derrick, fuming now we were in, as if being in brought Mr. Whammo's voice back through the air again, instructing us.

I was excited for I had never broken into a house before. Maybe, though I knew the thought ridiculous, we would find a stack of money, and in fact there in the good man's kitchen lay a spot of brownish rectangles of antique papers that got my hopes: like Confederate money, its rainy brown. But when I looked, the brown was just age spots such as skin will take, and the illustration was writing, in old black ink that flowed thick and thin like unspooled ribbon, and what it made was recipes, so much butter and corn and starch and lard. I had never heard of the things made by these recipes, not a single one.

I touched the papers, cool and dusty, smelling the dust to be flour, knowing the coolness to be death.

"Look what I found," exclaimed Michael. "This is it!"

I looked up. He was holding an envelope like he'd found the lucky ticket. "What is it?" I called. "Is it money?"

"Warmeaux," he said.

"What?"

"W-a-r-m-e-a-u-x. His name." The name as Michael said it sounded just like the good man's voice. "Warmeaux," he said again. "It's French."

I tried it. But it just sounded like Warm O.

Derrick came from the bedrooms. He had prised [correct word?] a jar of quarters, in it fifty dollars maybe. About whether we would share this amount of money he made no pronouncement, and at once I fell to envy. I went to check the good man's room myself but found nothing left, of course. Derrick had had the easy pickings.

Closets, dressers, a wooden chest at the bedside. We looked at the good man's things, but there was nothing in his life you would steal away. An old tin watch, a scattering of pennies beneath his socks, a little mirror with peeling gilt.

Then behind the kitchen, what I thought to be a pantry or a closet for brooms opened up to be a stairway down to a basement, eleven wooden steps. None of our homes had basements under them. "Boys," I called through the house. "You boys."

We gathered at the top and shushed. For going down the good man's stairs took a courage that breaking in had not. That had been something we *had* to do, seeing our chance. The stairs led onto a different level, as they always do.

"Move it, Timmy," said Derrick, "the funeral ain't all night."

I switched the light and crept along. The handrail was solid, anchored at every stud. Rubber mats didn't stop the steps creaking.

To the right, two light bulbs showed a furnace and a water heater, black cracks up the wall patted fast with white mortar, laundry and an ironing board, one card table in red vinyl with four flowery chairs. To the left, a rectangular shower rod was rigged to the rafters, and blocking the view beneath it was hanging a pink- or maybe purple-colored shower curtain, waving and dented, lank—a basement bathtub I took this to be, such where an old man, a good man, might bathe unmolested, might clean his tools or rinse his bushel of apples and then leave them on a towel to dry.

But as I stepped at last to the concrete floor whose clear hard cold did rise and pierce the air with a smell of concrete, of stone that came before the concrete, then I saw beyond the curtain the long green table to the left, where hung low were two caged lamps that glowed like headlights, and the eight feet of jewelry, rings, and gems and a raft of shining metals, all laid out on the green felt, sparkling like stones on a river's bank. Like a banquet it was, hidden there, at the very end of the house from us.

"Whoa," said Derrick, "what is this?"

Michael picked up a ring. "Gold," he breathed. "And a diamond."

"Is it real," I said. I knew from my mom that there were real jewels and there were fake, and those who didn't know the difference would be fools.

Strewn there on the table beneath the lights for picking through by someone just like us. We obliged, with our bandaged summer hands, rambling through pins, necklaces, earrings, strange little brooches, and beauty-queen crowns.

"What we need is a bag and then we can puzzle it out somewhere safe," said Derrick. He glanced about, his forehead bulging. "Michael, go and fetch a bag."

Michael froze. "What kind of bag?"

"Who cares what bag?" exclaimed Derrick. "Pick any bag you like."

"Should I go and get my duffel bag," said Michael, "right now it's full to take to the mountains."

“Not that,” Derrick exploded. “Find a bag upstairs. It can be a grocery bag. It can be a bag for trash.”

Michael looked troubled, maybe at lifting a grocery or trash bag from the good man’s house, maybe at something else.

I lifted one piece, a yellow brooch or pin in the shape of a giraffe. The dark of the giraffe’s spots and mane were hammered in, recessed and tawny, and the rest of his body shone bright. Its neck was tapered and majestic, its legs nimble points feeling almost magnetically for the ground, a tiny white stone inset glinting for its eye. I did not know if it was diamond, if the rest of the giraffe was gold, it was likely brass, likely junk. It was likely all junk, I told myself. But I knew this had it making somewhere far away or long ago: I knew it to be a mystery. About my life I knew enough that I would never see a giraffe. But on that day, between the recipes in their antique hand and the giraffe’s long hammered and glinting neck, I felt a safari’s thrill, that I had spotted something, a rare being living only in books, a rare land that I would never otherwise cross.

And then the plastic curtain moved.

An old gray woman had moved it—rustled it first, then pushed it aside with the barrel of the shotgun she held in her pointed, spotted hands. Against a mountain of grayish pillows she sat, in a narrow bed it was the curtain’s job to circle and darken. Her only clothing was a smock of old threadbare white with pinpoint roses, red as you could imagine. There was nothing old about that red.

“What would you say you’re doing, boys,” the woman inquired, and she left the plastic curtain swinging and wondered around across us with the double-barreled gaze of that gun. Her face was yellow and brown and the skin of it hung in little pouches like a dog’s teats. Her hair wasn’t much, but parted solemnly straight down the middle. I might have died a little right then. The gun was a big old thing, blackened steel. It surprised me like nothing I’d ever seen before, and like no gun I’ve looked at since—it shushed the room to where I heard my heart click and open—my blood, grasping, casting it away in mouthfuls.

I set down the giraffe and Derrick’s mouth jutted open but nothing wise fell out. Michael looked at each of us like things he could hide behind. But it was he standing nearest to the gun.

“I’ll have you three sit down, right there,” the old woman said. And she pointed the gun we wanted no part of to encircle the spot where she asked us to go. Like she was drawing on the wall, herding three white sheep.

We followed where she was pointing and down we slid within her sights, hiding if we might amongst each other, but there was no hiding. And I felt as I sat there on the cold damp floor like I had had at last some

explanation of the world. It was not right but I could understand it now. There would always be a gun, and you would always walk right into it. You could not hate the old woman for having the gun, no more than you could hate yourself for being there.

"Who are you?" said Derrick. "I thought his old lady was dead."

"Madeleine died. But I am not Madeleine," said the old woman. "She was young, and she was weak. What are your names?"

"Michael Oshay," said Michael, but Derrick told her *David*, and I told her *Stephen*.

"Are you brothers?" Derrick said we were, and she laughed, or coughed. "I don't believe you," she replied.

Michael began to plead with the woman, like in a play at school. "Let us go," he begged. "Please let us go. Please." He showed her his hands. "See, I ain't got nothing." Derrick and me kept our mouths shut.

"I will not," said the old woman. "And now you boys and I will wait and hold still. I don't think we have anything else to say."

That was then for a time what we did. Waiting and holding still was not what it was easy for us to be doing that summer, but we sat, and we waited, and we held still, but for Michael squirming and crying. I could smell piss his way and I wondered had he gone and pissed himself or was he just sweating piss-sweat, breathing out piss-fear. He leaned against us and tried to nuzzle in behind and from time to time he ceased quivering, like he was trying to concentrate, or remember something he'd forgot.

Myself, I was numb, going cold and damp where my bottom and legs touched the cold floor.

I knew one thing. I didn't want to bet the old woman. She had already outlived one younger that week and she was ready to outlive us as well. She watched us over the spoke of the gun, fumbling with her mouth now and then like her gums inflamed her, and I can tell you: there is more mercy in a rabid dog than there was in what age had made of this woman.

Derrick, he was just sitting along the wall, his eyes closed, eyeballs twisting and jerking slightly behind the lids, the way they did when he took a test in school. Then he opened his eyes and he began singing to the old lady with her brown spotted hands and black-eyed shotgun.

He sang one song and, finishing, then sang another. Michael I don't know what he was thinking, but I was too surprised to do anything but listen. The songs were not rude school songs or songs off the radio. They were songs I used to hear sung, from the days when my father was there and played songs on the record player or even sang them with his own voice. The first one, it went, *Are you going to Scarborough Fair. Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme.* To my knowing, Derrick had never sung a song before: even when

people sang *Happy Birthday To You* he barely mouthed the words, and at the Christmas Recital every December he stood tight lipped [2 words] and head back, no matter the teacher's threats, near the middle of the highest riser, so everyone in the room might see he was damned.

But now Derrick tipped his chin up and out of him the song came, his voice faltering at the notes but then finding them, so that listening I could measure each sound, each word's length: *Remember me to one who lives there. She once was a true love of mine.*

Michael and I, we watched Derrick with awe. After the first song he began another: *What child is this who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping? Whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherds watch are keeping?* The old lady's eyes did not waver, but we watched her. We watched her mouth begin to soften and move along to the music.

How did he know these, know the words to these songs? Where had he stored them? On what long hidden green table in his mind?

Why lies he in such mean estate where ox and ass are feeding? Good Christians fear, for sinners here the silent Word is pleading. This verse she did not know, but she nodded, marking tempo with a little bounce of the gun.

Nails, spear may pierce him through, the cross be borne for me and you. And now her mouth twitched and closed, and the gun counted time no longer.

Before the second song ended, the good woman had let the barrel sag, and a moment later her chin dropped. Derrick kept his head tipped up, singing as they begged us to do in the choir. Behind his lids the eyeballs swiveled and strained, pushing the knobby blue veins out like vines up the bark of an old father tree. He finished his song before he opened his eyes. Across the basement, the woman's old head dropped toward her chest. He had caroled her down to sleep.

CAREFULLY, SILENTLY I ROLLED MY shoulders forward, braced my hands on the wall behind me. How sweet to feel my knees ache and go straight. We pulled each other up, climbed praying the stairs would keep their quiet, that when the snoring woman awoke she wouldn't remember, wouldn't be sure. It was, like everything, possible. By the kitchen door we departed.

We had been to the point of ripping the man's life away. Outside, the blue sky stretched forever. Was it the heat of the day that had made the cold so cold?

"My quarters," said Derrick, aggrieved, "I must have put them down. I must have left them." He looked back but did not turn. Me, I reached down to my pocket to feel the giraffe there. I had at least acquired that much to put by. We stepped over the fence we'd broken, back into the double-vacant lot, and Michael sighed.

"I never want to do anything like that again," he said. But the difference is, Michael, he never did.