

AFTERNOON STROLL

by

DAMOND FUDGE

Jarrold James looked out the crystal clear window over the kitchen sink. If there was one thing he could always say about Marie it was that she kept the house immaculate. Thanks to her almost obsessive cleaning, he could practically feel the temperature outside on this beautiful spring day. He couldn't ask for a better day to go for a walk with the boys. He finished rinsing the plate in his hands and then placed it carefully in the bottom rack of the dishwasher.

He walked down the hall and stopped at the bottom of the stairs. He knew the answer, but he had to call out and ask, "Are you ready yet?"

"Nooooooo," the boys responded in singsong unison. It was all Jarrod could do to keep from laughing. Their ages were eleven and eight, but they might as well be twins as far as anyone in town was concerned. They were known to all of the adults as The James Boys, and if you asked them which was Bobby and which was Davey most would get it wrong. Jarrod and

Marie had done them a favor by not giving them names starting with the same letter, especially a ‘J’ as his father had done to him and Jacob. That was one of the earliest requests he made to Marie after he’d asked her to be his wife. He had never let her know that he secretly wished they would never have more than one child or, at the very least, only one boy.

Jarrood looked out the storm door, down the path to the sidewalk. This was the same house in which he grew up, with the same cobblestone walkway leading up to the front porch where a new porch swing hung, the original having years ago been deemed too dangerous by Marie. This was also the same walkway that his father had led him and Jacob down back when Jarrod was seven. Even though he liked these kinds of beautiful spring days, a part of him wished it was as cold and drizzly today as it had been that day. He shook his head to clear it and tried to focus on something else. It was soon going to be time to change out the storm door for the screen door, something he actually looked forward to doing every year.

“You’ll have to do this yourself one day,” his father’s voice chided him across the years. Jarrod shook his head again, hoping to clear it completely.

The calamity that was the boys bounding down the stairs brought Jarrod back to reality. Davey had gotten the edge over his older brother at some point in the race and was poised to win. As he got close to the bottom of the stairs, Davey jumped in order to skip the last couple. In a feat of unrepeatable dexterity Bobby grabbed the back of Davey’s shirt, pulled him backward in mid-leap and shot past his brother for the victory. Bobby danced around with his fists in the air while simulating the sound of the cheers from his adoring fans.

“No fair,” complained Davey. “You cheated.”

Bobby stopped basking in his imaginary glory. “No, I took advantage of a situation in order to win. It’s completely different.” He resumed his celebration dance.

“Cheater.”

“OK, you two, that’s enough.” Bobby stopped for good. “Grab your light coats. It’s still a little chilly out there, especially in the shade.”

They did what he asked, the wire hangers in the closet jangling loudly as they yanked their jackets free. Jarrod had told them over and over not to pull on the coats like that, but kids will be kids. Besides, today was not the day to bring up petty concerns.

He held the storm door open for the boys as they tumbled onto the porch, both still trying to put on their jackets as they walked. Jarrod shut and locked the solid oak front door as he exited the house. Marie was at her mother’s, helping her reorganize her attic. Her mother, in turn, was helping Marie keep her mind occupied.

The boys got to the sidewalk and started to head left, wanting to go south. “Hold up, guys,” Jarrod called out. “We’re not going that way today.”

“I thought we were going to the park,” Bobby said.

“Yeah. They were supposed to’ve oiled the swings this week,” Davey added.

Jarrod smiled to himself. Davey took after him with his love for those old swings. “Tell you what. We’ll circle around and hit the park on our way back. OK?”

The boys looked at each other before they reluctantly agreed to their dad’s proposal. “Great,” Jarrod said. “Because I have a special route I want to show you guys. A secret path your grandfather took me on when I was around your ages.”

That had them. Their eyes went all wide and they were almost trembling with excitement, now.

“Secret path? Cool,” Davey exclaimed.

“Where is it?” Bobby asked.

“I can’t tell you that. It’s a secret, isn’t it? You’ll just have to follow me.”

Even as he said the words, Jarrod knew how lame they sounded. Luckily, even though he was almost twelve, Bobby had yet to develop that natural skepticism that would manifest during his teen years. His level of excitement remained at its current state, and he was almost hopping as he said, “Let’s go. C’mon.”

“OK. OK. It’s this way,” Jarrod said, pointing to the north. “It’s pretty far away, though. I don’t know if you guys are ready for that long of a hike.”

Davey was jumping out of his skin. “No, we’re ready. Aren’t we Bobby?”

“Yeah. We can make it.”

“OK. If you’re sure...” The boys’ heads bobbed like caffeinated puppies. “Then, what are you waiting for?” He gestured and they began their trek.

It was not very long before his sons were well ahead of him. Within the first few seconds, Davey had found a long, thin stick to swing around and Bobby had found a large enough rock to kick around like a soccer ball. As Jarrod watched them go, it brought to mind the opening to the old *Andy Griffith Show*. It brought Jacob back to mind, as well. He picked up his pace a bit so he didn’t fall behind his far more energetic offspring.

“There’s no way they are real,” Bobby was saying as Jarrod got back within earshot.

“Are so. Kit told me they exist. He’s seen ‘em.”

“Where?”

“I dunno. He just has.”

“Kit Mason is so full of it. There is no way he’s seen a vampire in any form. He wouldn’t be alive to tell you if he did.”

“Has, too. It was in bat form, so it couldn’t eat him.”

Bobby was not buying any of this. “Dad,” he called out.

“I hate to tell you this, buddy, but Kit probably saw what he says he did.”

“What?! No way!”

“Way. There is such a thing as a vampire bat.”

“See, I toll’ya,” Davey chastised his brother.

“Not so fast, Davey. They aren’t bats that turn into vampires. They got their name from their feeding habits. They mostly come out at night and drink a small amount of blood from cows and horses. Usually. Though they have been known to attack humans, too, but it’s rare.”

Bobby looked genuinely interested. God bless his will to learn. “Cool,” he said. “Where do they live?”

“Mostly in South America. Maybe Central America, too. I can’t quite remember. Let me guess, though, Kit said he saw it when he was in St. Louis, right?”

“Yeah,” Davey replied.

“I happen to know that the Masons went to the huge zoo they have there. I would bet dollars to donuts that is where he saw one. Probably a bunch, actually.”

“Aww, man.”

“Sorry, pal. As far as I know there is no such thing as vampires.”

“But werewolves are real,” Bobby said in a menacing voice.

“Really?” Davey looked to his dad for confirmation. Jarrod laughed and shook his head. “Geez.”

Jarrod mussed up Davey’s hair. “It’s OK, Davey. If you want to know the honest truth, there are plenty of things out there in the world which are much scarier than vampires or werewolves.”

The ever-inquisitive Davey wanted more. “Like what, Dad?”

Jarrod became slightly pensive, not enough for the kids to notice, but too much for his comfort while around them. He looked past them, in the direction of their destination. “Just trust me. There is.”

Bobby could tell his dad wanted to change topics. He had always been intuitive that way. “See, brat, I told you Kit was full of it.”

“I am not a brat.”

“Are, too.”

“Am not.”

“Are, too.”

“Boys, boys,” Jarrod interrupted. “That’s enough. You’re both brats.” The boys could not believe what they just heard, and from their own dad, nonetheless. Their jaws simultaneously dropped. Jarrod laughed out loud. “Gotcha both.” He scooped them both into his arms and hugged them. They started giggling. He kissed them both on the tops of their heads before he let them go.

They went along their merry way for another forty-five minutes, lost in random conversations ranging from collectible card game-based cartoon shows to comic book hero fights, before Jarrod realized they were coming to the turn-off. “Guess what, guys. We’re getting close to the secret path.”

They both looked ahead with extreme eagerness. “Where?” Davey asked.

“Just up ahead, there. See where it looks like an unused road goes between those two trees?”

“I can’t see it. Where?” Davey inquired, a little disappointment seeping into his voice.

“Me neither,” Bobby added.

“There is a lot of underbrush, I admit. But don’t worry, you’ll see it soon enough. You know, I’ve never told you about my brother.”

“You don’t have a brother, Dad,” Bobby challenged.

“No, you’re right. I don’t anymore. He died when we were kids. Not much younger than you two are, in fact.”

“Really?” Davey asked.

“Really.”

“How did he die?” Bobby inquired.

“He was attacked by an animal.”

Davey looked up at his dad and saw him rub at his right eye. “What was his name, Daddy?”

“Jacob. His name was Jacob.”

“Your names both started with the same letter? Cool,” Bobby exclaimed.

“Yeah, cool,” Davey agreed. “Why didn’t you and Mom do that with us?”

Jarrold let a small laugh escape. Different generations, he thought. “Oh, here we are.”

The path was flanked by two large trees, and covered with an almost unnatural amount of brush. The only indicator there was a path leading into the woods was the gap in the gravel at the side of the road and the pitch-black dirt.

“Almost missed it. Let’s clear some of this away.”

The trio pulled and tore at the growth until they had created a hole through which they could all fit. The black dirt path stretched deep into the forest at a slight incline. Despite how dark it was right there next to the road, the way appeared to get brighter as it progressed. The boys stared down the path with looks that conveyed a mixture of awe and trepidation.

“This is it. The secret path.”

“Where does it go?” Bobby wondered.

“Way down this path, over the rise, is one of the most beautiful fields you will ever see in your life. The grass is a shade of green that emeralds envy. The flowers have every color of the

rainbow in them and more. It is a patch of nature that has gone untouched by society's progress since our founders first decided to stop here and make a town."

Jarrold knew that they probably didn't understand half of what he just said. All he knew is inflection was the key to selling it. One look told him that the tide had shifted from trepidation to full blown awe. If this had been any other situation he would have been proud of his parental manipulation abilities. Jarrod stepped past his sons and started up the path. He turned around and discovered the boys still standing at the entrance.

"Are you two coming, or what?" he prodded. That was all it took, and soon they were at his side. Without saying a word, both boys slid a hand into each of his.

As the incline became steeper, Jarrod's breathing slowly became labored. Not terribly, just enough for the kids to notice. Then he saw it: The Stump. He let the boys' hands slip free and slowed his pace just enough to allow them to get ahead of him. Oh, God. This is exactly what his father did. Was this all just second nature? No. This was different.

His gaze locked onto The Stump. The rumor had always been that there never had been a tree, that The Stump had forever been a stump. Jarrod found it easy to believe due to its sheer size. All three of them could probably fit on it together and be comfortable. Then there was the hole in its side, the hole that was just the right size.

He made is breathing heavier. "Boys, I...I need to take a break here. I'm just going to sit here for a moment, but you two keep going. I'll catch up to you in a moment."

"Are you OK, Dad?" Bobby asked. He started to step toward Jarrod.

Jarrold quickly held up his hand. “Yeah. No. I’m good.” Bobby stopped. “Just need to catch my breath. Go on ahead.”

Bobby still looked like he was going to come back, but that only lasted a second. Davey grabbed Bobby’s arm and pulled. “C’mon, Bobby. I want to see the emerald flowers.”

Jarrold watched them walk away from him, filled with a fragile innocence that was minutes away from being shattered. Tears filled his eyes, and just before he blinked them away they changed Bobby and Davey into Jacob and Jarrold. He wiped his cheeks and steeled himself. He also dropped his hand down into the hole.

He heard the sound sooner than he expected. It started as a rustling in the trees that could easily be mistaken for a strong breeze. Then came the flapping, a slow and rhythmic beating to announce its presence. As far as Jarrold could tell, the boys had yet to acknowledge either of these noises. That all changed with the shriek.

The boys froze. “Dad?” Bobby called out, fear dripping from his words.

Jarrold’s hand closed around the object inside The Stump. “Boys, run.” Their feet remained glued to the ground. “Run, kids! Hide!”

The day after the town meeting where their name was drawn, Jarrold made it his mission to end this nightmare. A nightmare designed to insure the town's prosperity through sacrifice. He found the perfect item at a shop in a nearby city. He knew it needed to be silent so as not to alert the whole town. He waited until late last night to hide it in case someone was to stumble across it and figure out his plan. He also couldn’t make his move too soon and tip his hand.

The fact that his sons had yet to move made it even more difficult to just sit there. “Jesus, Boys! Fucking run!” The creature broke through the canopy of branches above them before the boys had time to find any cover.

It was worse than Jarrod remembered. With its dark, leathery wings and tentacle appendages it looked like the unholy union of pterodactyl and squid. The eyes glowed red from their perch at the ends of two short stalks, while the fleshy beak opened wide, wider than should naturally have been allowed, to expose the rows of sharp teeth. From this opening came another of those horrible shrieks.

Bobby made it to the bushes at the side of the path, but the sound from the creature brought Davey to a halt. Jarrod’s grip around his surprise tightened as tears welled up once more, but he was helpless. He needed it to get closer, even though he hated himself deep into his core for letting his youngest be bait. Davey turned around and finally looked at his attacker. The scream his son made melted in frightening harmony with the creature’s screech.

Jarrod’s brain yelled at him: *Now!*

He leaped from The Stump, smoothly pulling the sword from its hiding place. He made a sound he had never heard himself make before as he ran forward, a yell that came from years of love and frustration. Davey looked back at Jarrod and cried out for him. Just before Jarrod could reach him, one of the creature’s tentacles shot out and wrapped around Davey and the force of it hitting his chest knocked the wind out of him.

Bobby screamed for his brother.

Jarrod was kind of prepared for this. He had chosen this sword over the others at the strange little shop for its length. He hoped that would compensate for his lack of skill. He

gripped the hilt with both hands and swung. It was mostly a blind swing and he prayed to God in those tiny seconds that he would miss his son. Either God was listening or it was pure, dumb luck, but the very tip of the blade sliced the tentacle. The beast shrieked in pain and dropped Davey. The boy only had a few feet to fall, but he landed wrong and twisted his left foot, crying out in pain.

“Bobby, get your brother!”

Bobby didn’t need to be told twice as he ran from his cover and grabbed Davey. Since they were close to the same size, Bobby had to drag him to the bushes. Once there he hugged himself around his brother, clinging to him as much for comfort as to protect him.

Jarrold lost track of the creature in the confusion. He held onto the sword for dear life, knowing he would only get a couple more chances to kill the beast. He had played this over in his mind so much that he was certain he could kill it. Rationally, though, he knew if his boys had to live without a father, but *both* still got to live, then he would be fine with that outcome. He readjusted his grip to compensate for his sweaty palms.

He slowly moved in a tight circle. Every rustle from the branches above drew his attention. Suddenly there was a shriek from behind and to his left, immediately followed by a hard blow from a tentacle. Stars exploded in his peripheral vision as his upper body uncontrollably bent forward. He had to use the sword to steady himself and keep from ending up sprawled on the ground.

He rubbed the back of his neck, and a moment of panic rushed through him when he felt the wet patch. He was relieved to find that it was the black, watered down tar-like blood from the

wound on the creature and not his own. More rustling from the trees brought him back to his senses and he readied the sword once more.

The creature shot from the leaves at incredible speed, aimed straight at Jarrod's head. He ducked at the last moment and swung the large weapon, cleaving only air but saving his own skin. It disappeared back into the underbrush. The noise it made traveling through the foliage in order to circle around Jarrod allowed him to track its next attack move.

He thought he was ready when it emerged, but he had misjudged how fast the beast could fly. It was upon him so quickly, its tentacles and wings beating at his body. The smell alone almost brought him to his knees. Luckily for Jarrod, it had landed upon him too high for the snapping beak to do any damage. Unfortunately, at this angle, the best he could hope to do was smack the creature with the flat of the sword's blade. He either hurt it or annoyed it enough that the creature finally disengaged and flew back up toward the higher branches.

Jarrold watched it circle up toward the canopy. The unholy thing showed very little effects from any damage Jarrod had delivered. It flapped its wings lightly in order to hover directly above him. Watching it watch him, Jarrod realized how heavy the sword was. Did it know, too? Was it waiting for his arms to tire? The creature gave three strong flaps of its wings, backing up a touch farther before it headed straight at Jarrod.

He knew the sword's weight had worn on his arms and any attempt to swing it again would be fruitless. He changed his stance and braced himself. The creature screamed at him when it got closer, and Jarrod yelled right back. He had enough time during this attack to aim. He thrust the sword at that abomination, but it was still faster than him. It twisted its body to avoid the blade, yet the creature was not able to keep it from slicing through its wing.

The hellbeast tumbled through the air before smacking into the ground in a heap of confusion. It flapped around, shrieking horribly as it tried to figure out why it lost the ability to fly. Its eyes swung around in opposing directions in a vain attempt to see its wound. The two stalks finally settled down and focused on the human standing over it, sword held high with the point poised to pierce its skull. The blade falling toward the creature was the last sight it would ever see.

Bobby and Davey huddled together under the bushes while they watched their dad repeatedly stab whatever that thing was. When they would think back on this moment in the future they would both swear it went on forever. Truthfully, it only took Jarrod a couple minutes to turn the creature into a pulpy mass, its black blood soaking into the blacker soil beneath it. Once he had finished, Jarrod tossed the sword to ground, backed away from the carnage and ran his sleeve across his brow. He looked toward where he thought his sons were hiding.

“Boys? Are you OK?”

They crawled out of hiding about five feet to the right of where Jarrod was looking. He was upon them in an instant, kissing them and hugging them tighter than he ever had before and ever would again.

“Daddy, what was that thing?” Bobby asked.

“Something you both will never have to worry about.”

Jarrod knew he was going to have Hell to pay when they got back to town. He had no idea if the town would continue to prosper as well without the annual sacrifices, only time could answer that. All he knew was his boys were safe and Jacob could finally rest in peace.

The End