

New Fiction: Three Flash Fiction Pieces from William Alton

Three Pieces of Flash Fiction

1. Things That Stood Out

There was a boy in Izard. A brave boy. Everyone knew him. Ricky Dunkle. The Dunkles were quiet people. They lived across from the school in a little blue house. The kind of blue house that made people shake their heads and mutter. Mrs. Dunkle raised sunflowers. They rose tall and spindly. They grew in knots throughout the yard. Mrs. Dunkle loved her sunflowers. She walked amongst them every day, caressing the petals, smelling them. She lifted their faces to her own, kissing their dark centers. Mrs. Dunkle always wore the same housecoat. A ratty, purple and orange thing. She wore slippers. Even in the yard. Even in the rain. Sometimes, she talked to herself.

Her husband worked out at the water treatment plant. A gnomish man, he stopped at the Squirrel's Hole every night and got the same thing. A burger for Ricky. Fish and Chips for Mrs. Dunkle. Mrs. Dunkle didn't cook. At night, he sat in his backyard with a telescope looking for things in the sky. Stars. Planets. Meteors rushing toward us. They were an off bunch, the Dunkles. People talked. That's what people in Izard did. They talked. But they talked sideways.

Every morning, Ricky walked from his folks' house to work. He owned the Dragons' Stop. A pool hall on the corner opposite the Post Office. The Dragons' Stop was a place for people to go. It was loud and dark and filled with cigarette smoke. Sometimes, on the weekends, they had dances. It was the

hangout for high school kids and people who didn't go to the bars. It was also where folks went to get weed and pills.

Ricky wore purple boots and black, satin pants tight as a condom. He wore pink rodeo shirts and a belt buckle the size of a salad plate. He dressed like an Easter egg. Black hair rose in a wave from a wide forehead. Rhinestones glittered from his fingers and collar.



People like Ricky Dunkle didn't fit in places like Izard. In Izard, people liked things simple and quiet. Things that stood out stood out. In Izard, everything had a place. Not Ricky Dunkle. Ricky Dunkle made his own place. He knew people. Men who wore leather and rode Harleys. Men who carried guns and knives and a history of using them. Not that it mattered.

Ricky was braver than all of us.

"Look at him," Uncle Mike said. "Asking for trouble."

"He's helpless," Mom said. If I could have, I would have turned to ash. I would have crumbled and disappeared.

"I saw him at the school the other day," Uncle Mike said.

"What're you afraid of?"

"Afraid?"

I went to my room. I closed the door and hid. Silent. Ashamed. They talked through the walls. Their glasses clinked against their teeth. I was the faggot in the corner wishing I had the guts to wear purple boots.

2. Civilized Behavior

In my family, we killed things. We hunted and trapped. Fathers taught sons and sons taught their sons. The women waited at home, preparing for the slaughter. They knew how to cut the carcasses into pleasing pieces. They knew how to wrap the meat in white paper and how to stack it just right in the freezer, oldest on top. In my family, killing was providing. Men provided. Women prepared and preserved. I was not yet ten but Grandpa was determined. "A man," he said. "A man does what's necessary."

It seems spilling blood was necessary.

*

We lived in the crotch of a small valley. All around fields and pastures. Barns and sheds. An old outhouse slumped in the backyard, unused and emptied. Chickens searched for seeds. At the edge of things, a forest rose and scratched at the sky, a

mix of oak and hemlock, spruce, pine and fir. Brambles lined the floor. Mast softened it all. The woods were always wet, except in the final weeks of summer when the sun shined hard enough and long enough to pull the moisture from the thick soil.

Grandpa and the uncles carried flashlights and they kept the beams on the ground. A narrow path cut through the meadow. Dew painted the weedy pasture a bit silver in the moonlight. Goody, the milk cow, lay in a patch of tall grass slowly chewing her cud.

The path ran rough and knotted under ancient limbs. I stumbled but didn't fall. Grandpa was a massive shadow in the dim morning. I was cold and tired. But I was scared too. Grandpa had something in mind and he didn't like questions.

We walked without words. We found the first trap. Empty. And the second. It held a raccoon. Grandpa shot it with his revolver. He skinned the carcass, gutted it and cut its head off. We moved the trap down the trail.

"This," Grandpa said. "This is how we live."

*

I learned young how to cope with violence, or the promise of violence. I was a small kid, scrawny and lean. I was often a target. People seemed to think I wouldn't fight back. "If you're going to fight," Mom said, "fight dirty. If you're going to fight, make sure someone goes to the hospital."

*

Becket Smite was a square headed boy and mean. Tall and thin, his eyes sat too far apart and his lips were thin as worms. His big hands made big fists. Everyone was afraid. I was afraid. He came to me in the lunch line. He came and cut between me and Lotti. Mostly, at school, no one bothered me. I

was a Neel. But Becket liked a challenge.

“Are you tough?” he asked.

“What?”

“Do you think you can take me?”

He put his hand in the center of my chest and pinned me to the wall. I told him to stop. My voice was stronger than I felt.

“Or what?”

“Just go away.”

Becket smiled.

“You sound tough,” he said. “Are you tough?”

I grabbed his wrist. He looked at me. This was it. This was how it was going to work. This was a fight I wasn't going to get out of. I swallowed. I swung the lunch tray. The crack was too loud. His nose broke. Becket dropped and howled. Blood. Things got thin and sharp. He held his face. But then got up and it was on. We punched and kicked. I lost track of my fingers. I lost track of everything.

*

Mr. Sawyer lectured us on civilized behavior. He called our folks. Mom came. Tired and bent. Unhappy. Days were her nights. She asked if I was hurt.

“I'm fine.”

“Is he?”

I remembered the crunch of bone and the blood. The whole thing left me sour and tangled. “I hope so.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.”

That’s how it worked in my family. Violence and regret. Shame kept just under the skin.

3. Back Then and Back There

There was this girl. Back when I was a kid. Rudeen. Only, no one called her Rudeen. Except her mom. We called her Ding Ding. Silly but back then and back there, silliness wasn’t always silly. Ding Ding lived across the road. Her people’s land bordered mine. Somewhere back in time, we were cousins. Generations removed. One of her greats married one of mine.

She was in my class at school. A pretty girl. Blond and small. She painted her nails blue and gold. Boys fluttered about her like crows. They flapped about and brought her shiny things. Bright things. They told her jokes that fell like stones to the floor and rolled about but she smiled because she was a good girl and, back then, back there, good girls smiled when boys told them jokes.

Terry Shaw, with his high and tight haircut and quarterback hands, knew how to talk to her. He knew how to get her to look at him. Terry Shaw sat with her every day at lunch. He lived in town. His dad was a banker or something. They were perfect. I hated him. I was a poor boy in hand me downs and re-soled boots. I was skinny, long haired and shy. I was not like the others. I preferred books to people. I preferred the library to the football field.

We had a deal. Back then and back there, good girls didn’t walk alone in public. Ding Ding was a good girl. Her mom talked to my mom. Because I was a good boy and back then, back there, good boys did what their moms said, I walked Ding Ding

to and from the bus stop. A mile. Maybe a little more. It was faster to cut through the fields, but there were snakes in the fields and gophers and traps. If you knew what you were doing, the fields were safe but our moms didn't like the fields and back then, back there, we didn't do things our moms didn't like.

But there were rules. We didn't talk. Ding Ding only talked to boys like Terry Shaw. We focused on walking. After school, we had chores and then there was dinner and then there was homework. She walked ahead of me, all pretty and bright in the sunlight. The road stretched on and on. Dirty and rutted. I counted my steps. One hundred. Two hundred. Three.

At our driveway, I stopped and watched her walk to the twin willows marking hers. She took her time. Ding Ding's home was loud sometimes. Her dad was known for meanness and drink. Saturday nights, he sat in the bar with my grandpa. They told stories and bought each other whiskeys. They stayed up too late and slept through Sunday mornings. She stopped that day, under the willows. She looked at me and nodded. Ding Ding never looked at me. She never nodded. I was a shadow. I followed her around but I didn't mean anything. We weren't friends. I stood there until I heard her screen door slam.

Later, when the sheriff came with the fire trucks and the county ambulance, no one knew what was what. People ran here and there. Mom stood on the porch with Grandma. Grandpa came from across the way in his jeans and sweat stained undershirt, one arm around Ding Ding. She wore a thin, green blanket. "Gas," he said. "Pilot light." Back then and back there, some folks cooked with gas. Sometimes, the pilot light went out. Sometimes, gas filled the house. Sometimes, people died.

The funeral was long and solemn. Mom made me wear a suit and tie. She made me polish my shoes and wear socks. Pastor talked about valleys of death and shepherds. Ding Ding wore a black dress and black sneakers. She sat up front with her

grandparents. Stone faced and pale. No tears though. Back then and back there, crying in public just wasn't done. Later, they shook hands and they tried to eat with rest of us. They thanked everyone face to face. I sat with Ding Ding for a bit. There were no words. We were thirteen. Back then and back there, we knew about death. We hunted and we raised our meat. But this was new. This was something all together different.

Her grandma came, a big woman with big hips and too many chins. "Rudeen," she said. "It's time." I blinked up at her. Rudeen? It seemed right. Yesterday, Ding Ding. Today, Rudeen. We knew when to leave things behind.