

Town Store Caught on Fire

by Blaise Weller

I'm not sure why Brooks enlisted me, he just did. He stole candy bars and cokes from the grocer, two blocks from school. He decided I should accompany him for his daily lift, be the lookout, and he would teach me the ropes. But I don't think it was all just for kicks. He did it to eat. He had it far worse than most of us.

The first time I went, I couldn't do it. I felt sorry for Old Man Granger.

"You did a fine job as lookout, Padwick, a fine job. Hell you even distracted him good, talking to him and all."

"Yeah."

Each time we went, I talked less and less. I saw Old Man Granger getting more and more distracted. His lower teeth and jaw stuck out further with age and shook, his head of white hair became more and more disheveled, and his deli apron got more and more dirty. I figured people wouldn't buy so much deli meat from him if they knew he wore that same apron while tending and feeding his pigeons.

He lived above the store and kept pigeons in his back yard, in his garage that he converted into a pigeon coop. He even built a dormer for them to fly in and out of. I saw him out there in his apron all the time, sometimes wandering out in the middle of the day, leaving his stock boy to tend the deli and the register up front that he deserted for the pigeons. That's where I first ran into Brooks running out the front of the store as I turned the corner, his shirt full of loot. I used to watch Granger talk to his pigeons through the spaces between his fence, then make my way inside for whatever my grandma needed that day, or just to see what might be good to have: wax teeth, Jaw Breakers, Lemon Heads or Charleston Chews.

After one day seeing my best friend Bastly, lift a Marathon Bar, I decided to give it a go. Bastly was nearly six-feet tall and the star basketball player in our town. He barely said a word unless he needed to, and I never saw him do anything wrong. When he did say something, he sounded like a gangster who wasn't afraid to go to the chair if that's what it took. I didn't play basketball on account of the shoes were too expensive and we couldn't afford them. I didn't ask. I knew my grandparents were having a real go of it just keeping me fed.

I couldn't think of anything to steal, so I stole a Marathon Bar too, but bought some Gobstoppers. Brooks bought nothing. He just robbed the place blind. He didn't play basketball either. He said he didn't have the time for it, but I know he couldn't afford the shoes either. Still, I don't know if he would have been any good. I never saw him play anything. He was pretty goofy and gangly. He was pretty thin and he walked

funny, like his knees bent too far and his butt came too close to the ground or something. Anyway, after each run, Brooks inspected the loot and took inventory, giving me lessons. Advising me I was ill-advised for stealing such a long candy bar.

“Not bad for your first steal, but don’t go for quantity Paul, go for quality and ease.”

“Whadaya mean?”

“Well, how hard was that to put in your waist and then cover with your shirt? Plus it’s sticking out of your shirt. A sure give-away. Don’t ever go for Marathon unless you got on long pants.” He demonstrated. “You shove it in your sock and then pull your pants leg over the top. See?” He lifted up his pants leg and there was even more loot. “Socks are good for everything. Even still, it takes too much time to shove the Marathon Bar down in there and then loop your pants over the top. Besides, you nearly destroy the damn thing, bending it and all, and then all that chewy caramel gets on the inside of your pants and all over your leg. Now the easiest and best thing to steal is Snickers, Milkyway, and Charleston Chews. They conform and are silent, see?” He demonstrated, bending a Milkyway back and forth right in front of his face, staring at it cross-eyed as he bent it. “The worse thing to steal is Jawbreakers and Lemon Heads, they make too much goddamn noise, unless of course you stuff tissue in the top, but that takes too goddamn long and besides they got no nutritional value.” Nutritional value? I wondered if his parents had taught him to steal. “Now the only time you steal something other than the easies is when you got a hunkerin’ and can’t get over it. But you gotta weigh the risks. You come outta there with those Lemon Heads rollin’ and clatterin’ around everywhere then you’re bound to get caught. Weigh the risks, Padwick. Weigh the risks.”

Every day it was like that. Bastly at practice, me and Brooks making the rounds.

Then one day, watching Granger through the fence, waiting for Brooks, I decided I was bored with all of this stealing business.

“Come on, Padwick. Let’s hurry before he makes it back inside. Besides, I think he’s onto us.”

“I don’t know, Tony.”

He stopped and stood facing me.

“Whadaya mean, you don’t know?”

“I mean what’s the point? Every day we do the same thing. To tell you the truth, I’m getting pretty sick of it.”

“Uh huh. I see what you’re saying.” He turned his head to the side and scratched his belly. Then he looked past me, to the other side of the street. “It has gotten too easy hasn’t it? Maybe it’s time we expand our horizons.”

I turned my head to look behind me and see if I could figure out what he was looking at when he was already on the move, passing me.

We crossed the street, then headed west. Before I knew what was happening, Brooks ducked into the doorway of the local pharmacy. When I caught up, he leaned out into the sidewalk, his hand on the door knob, grinning, his left eyebrow raised.

As soon as we walked in, the bell on the door rang, and a man in a white coat appeared at the register, staring at us over his glasses which hung real low, resting at the very tip of his nose. It was Mr. Wheeler, the pharmacist and owner. He crossed his arms, looked at Brooks, then at me, his eyes right on mine, then following downward, from head to toe, taking a long hard look at my shoes before he looked back to Brooks.

It was then I understood why we were there and what Brooks intended to do.

But Wheeler’s wasn’t like Granger’s Grocery. It was smaller, and each item was

neat and tidy and had a place of its own, stacked and shelved nicely, with nothing on the floor. It was brighter too. There were rows and rows of fluorescent lights above that made your eyes hurt, making everything glow real bright and white, looking like how tv shows depict someone up in heaven outside of the pearly gates waiting to answer questions first before they could get in or like how God looks whenever he comes down and speaks, how you never get to see what he looks like, it's just that light representing him. You got the feeling real quick you didn't belong and you sure as shit knew you weren't supposed to touch anything. It was an impossible situation. He had all the candy in the very back of the store along with the register, which were both way up high on a platform. Besides this, Mr. Wheeler was wise to Brooks. Also, it smelled like medicine and vitamins. Granger's smelled like old fruit and wood.

"Good morning, Mr. Wheeler." I almost jumped out of my shoes, not expecting Brooks to open his mouth. "And how are you doing today?"

Mr. Wheeler didn't say a word. He just stared at Brooks.

Brooks looked around a bit, picked up a giant bottle of cough syrup, and seemed to be looking for something in the ingredients. He began to sweat something fierce. It started at his temples and began to roll down around his ears, making the outline of his hair and the sides of his face wet. Brooks didn't wash too often, either. You could see where the sweat was streaking away the dirt. Mr. Wheeler didn't move. He just stood there watching with his arms crossed.

"Well, I guess that will be all. Thank you, Mr. Wheeler. I was just checking the price for my mother." Brooks began to lift up other items, then gently return them to where they belonged. Still, Mr. Wheeler didn't move. Then we walked out, the bell ringing again when we opened and closed the door.

"Goddamn bell. If it wasn't for that bell always clangin' and bangin' all over the place, we'd a had him," Brooks said. He sat down on the stoop in front of the store, looking down at the sidewalk. He looked across the street, then just like that, he jumped up and said, "Come on. I know another place where there ain't no goddamn bells to give us away." I didn't know of any other places in town, but Brooks just walked across the street and into Granger's we went.

Brooks perked up again once we got inside Granger's. He immediately set to work, stuffing his pants and then his socks, kneeling down on the floor, making like he was tying his shoe—another one of his favorite tricks. He showed me the best place was in the back of the pants and then to pull your shirt over the top of the goods. Over the top of the booty. He didn't use his pockets; he'd been made to show them one too many times.

I looked at Old Man Granger behind the register. I wondered why Brooks wasn't always stopped. He was in Granger's all the time and yet he never bought a damn thing.

I looked up at the door. It had a bell on it too, but Granger always had it propped wide open with a wooden block jammed underneath to keep it in place. I stared at the all the marks and scrapes, the cracked and chipped wood at the bottom of the door. He didn't have air conditioning like Wheeler's Pharmacy did, so he kept it open. Granger was busy adding and re-adding, crossing out and then erasing and starting over again, his jaw moving rapidly as he went. He was losing it for sure. I could tell. Brooks whispered to me while I was staring at Granger's jaw, "And it doesn't hurt to give a goodbye and a wave, always facing Old Man Granger as you go. That way, you can stuff a whole goddamn loaf of bread and some lunch meat to go if you need to. Get what I'm saying?"

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“He’s turning cool, Bastly. Real cool,” Brooks said.

Bastly just looked at him.

“Well, I gotta be going.”

Bastly stood still and waited until Brooks was at the top of the street. Brooks turned around and looked at us once more before he turned the corner and disappeared.

“I ain’t about to tell you who to hang around with,” Bastly said, “but that guy’s got more than one screw loose.” He kept looking up the street like he could still see Brooks through the building on the corner, and then he added, “Word travels fast in this town. I wouldn’t get too friendly with him, if you know what I mean.” Bastly still sounded right out of the movies, but he also sounded like an adult now. But what he said, he said in earnest. He didn’t care about the stealing. He was talking about something else.

I didn’t know what he meant, but I knew I always felt strange around Brooks, like he wanted something from me I couldn’t give him. I nodded to Bastly like I knew what was up. I knew one thing, Bastly seemed to know what was what. He was more honest than any kid and certainly more honest than any adult I’d ever known, my grandparents being the exception.

That was that. I stopped going on runs. I never really liked ripping off Old Man Granger like that. I wasn’t ever really that hungry or anything. I avoided Brooks for some time. I made myself scarce. I practiced shooting basketball to give Bastly a good game. I went down to the tracks and into the woods, following the creek beds. I investigated every inch of the hills and gorges between my grandparents land and town. I hunted with or helped my grandfather in the fields. I waited until Bastly was done playing ball and then I’d walk home or hang out with him, always keeping one eye out for Brooks. As long as I stayed clear of town, I could stay clear of Brooks.

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Summer was almost over. Basketball camp had ended. Bastly and I were walking the streets casually, feeling cool together, hardly saying a word when Brooks came running down the street. He had a case of Barq’s Crème Soda, a box of baseball cards, a box of 5th Avenues, and loaves and loaves of white bread stacked on top. His arms were straight stiff from handling the load; the bottles clinked and shook while he ran side to side like a penguin, struggling with the loot.

“Granger’s grocery caught on fire! It’s a goldmine, I tell ya. A goldmine! I gotta get home and tell my brothers. Boy, wait’ll they find out!” Then he ran past us, the sound of the bottles lifting up, hitting one another, then settling back down got less and less, until he turned the corner and it disappeared all together.

We walked up the street and around the corner and there it was. Thick black smoke came billowing up and out the front door. It looked like the smoke was alive the way it swirled out the front door, like it was a small tornado, black and angry, and growing. There were two large windows in the store front where Old Man Granger advertised sales. Cherry tomatoes were \$1.99 a quart and a half gallon of milk was 99¢. Everything behind the ads, where you could usually see shelves stacked with cans, was black. We stood directly across the street, amongst a crowd that had gathered and watched. Old Man Granger kept running in and out of the store, carrying as much as he could, then going back into that black smoke again. It smelled just like when the railroad burned

their old ties full of tar. Old, old wood and terrible burnt cookies all mixed together. No one budged or moved an inch to help Granger. We all just watched.

Flames began to burst from the top of the building, shooting ten, twenty feet high; inside, the black smoke sank lower and lower until it got to his waist. Still we watched. Men with hands in their pockets or smoking cigarettes, the ladies with their arms folded in front, pressing their dresses with their palms flat, or holding a purse before them or the hand of their child. Finally, someone's dad grabbed Old Man Granger and wouldn't let him go back in. He carried him off to the opposite corner where everyone's eyes returned back and forth, intermittently, to gape at Granger and then back to his building.

Old Man Granger and his building were one and the same. The two were inseparable. Before that day I don't think I ever saw Old Man Granger outside of that store other than to sweep up or out back to tend to his pigeons. It just wasn't right seeing him on the opposite corner like that; his jaw stuck out extra far and shook extra hard and his eyes turned red in the corners from the tears welling up.

Then the strangest thing occurred. Tony Brooks arrived with his brothers. They ran past us, full sprint, a job at hand. They began grabbing cases of soda stacked in front of the building, dragging bags of potatoes, as many bananas as they could carry from the bins, right in front of the crowd. One of the oldest, while stacking cases of oranges, spotted Old Man Granger across the street. He stopped and stood still while his brothers continued stacking and loading up their arms. Then we looked to Granger, all of us, the whole damn crowd. He nodded his head. "It's okay Tom. Take what you can get." Then Tom Brooks returned to his task with an even greater fervor. But I saw through him. He had a haggard look to his brow, his face looked painful. It was painful to look at him.

Some of the other bystanders joined in, ducking under the smoke to retrieve the left over soft drinks and fruit, whatever they could get their hands on, whatever was left outside in front of the store, the smoke sinking lower, catching and billowing out from under the front awning, covering the entire store front and the second story where Granger lived. One of the Brooks brothers continued crawling inside for more, getting packaged donuts and candies from right inside the door. He looked like a lizard crawling in like that, coming out with his arms full and going back in, even using his teeth to carry bags of bread. Me and six-foot tall Rick Bastly didn't move. We kept watching while others around us ran across the street and began to frantically grab what they could. No one stopped the Brooks kid from crawling in and out of the store.

Then Tom Brooks grabbed his brother and wouldn't let him crawl in again. They gathered up what loot they had into a big pile, and they let the lizard brother, the one crawling in and out, sit on the sidewalk, catch his breath and guard what they had stacked up two doors down, far enough away from the fire and the smoke. He sat on the curb, his face black with soot and smoke, his feet in the street, coughing and spitting between his legs. He looked up and saw me watching him. He nodded. I nodded back, but only half-way, because in the middle of the nod, I remembered the circumstances and didn't feel like it any more.

Fire started shooting out the front door. It was only then the fire trucks arrived. I wished my father were there to see it. It would have proved what he'd said all his life, "Never around when you need 'em." They pulled right up front, blocking our view of the fire. I didn't care. I was glad of it. It was fine. I was getting tired of looking anyway. I wished that truck would have blocked out all the people too. Standing around gaping, shaking their heads or looking like it figured, like it didn't surprise

them. Almost as if they were glad of it, that Granger somehow got what he deserved. I thought about my pop for a minute. He wouldn't have to say anything really. Just to have him stand next to me for a few seconds or something. I don't guess I missed him too much. But I did wish he was there then. Just for a couple of seconds.

We stood side by side, me and six-foot tall Bastly, our hands in our pockets, watching the firemen in their hats and coats, buzz around the red truck. They looked like bees—hooking up their hoses, climbing on the truck, and shouting out orders to one another. I made like I was watching, but I didn't want to watch any more. I kept sneaking peeks at Bastly instead. He kept sliding his thick rimmed glasses up his nose, making like something was in his eye. I saw him wipe his cheek. Still, I couldn't be sure. I mean it could've been sweat or a speck of dust, or an ash or something. I stared into the street, at the side of the fire truck, at the shiny chrome hinges where there was a door with a hose rolled up inside, and right next to it there were latches that held an ax; the ax-head and handle looked brand new, like it had never been used before. I kept staring at that ax and the shiny bolts on the hub of the wheel.

Bastly did the best thing he could think of. There was a phone booth near the corner. "Come on," he said. I stood outside the booth, still watching the crowd, looking at the backs of their pant legs and shoes. I couldn't watch the fire anymore or the people's faces. Neither could Rick. He got on the phone, his head low, his back facing me and the fire. He didn't have to turn around like that. The silver medal phone cord was plenty long. He could have kept looking, but he didn't want to either. I only heard part of what he said, he was talking to his dad.

He stayed inside the booth fiddling around with the change slot. So I sat down outside of it, leaning against it. I stared at my shoes on the sidewalk, but I could still see the backs of all the people.

And then, appearing as if they came out of the fire and smoke, a great puff of pigeons flew out from behind the store and circled around right above us, disappearing above the post office. I looked around to see if anyone else had seen it, but no one seemed to. They were all still looking straight ahead into the fire. I wished Bastly had seen it, and Brooks too, but Bastly was still in the booth with his head down, his back to the fire, and Brooks was busy carrying his loot home.

Then Bastly's dad came around the corner in his station wagon. He got out of the car and put his hands on our shoulders. "Come on, boys," he said. "Let's go home." We turned and got in the car, Bastly in the front seat and me in the back. His dad drove to a better part of town where Bastly lived. The in-between part of town. In between the houses falling apart with the lawns grown up to weeds, or tore up with holes all over from dogs digging, full of trash and dirty, broken down toys, nothing more than the leftover pieces of cracked plastic, broken bottles, deflated balls and rusted bikes without any tires, to a place where they cut the grass, picked up their trash and threw away their old toys, where there were no rusting, broken down cars—no cars on the street at all—they were all parked nice and neat in their driveways or inside their garages and the houses were painted all pretty-like, trim and all. Some of the houses were brick and a little newer it seemed, but all of them were kept up real nice. When I saw it, I wondered why I didn't ride my bike here more often or just walk it. It was pretty nice.

"Paul, do you have to be home for dinner?"

"No sir."

"Do you want to call home or stop by?"

"No sir. Dinner's on our own tonight." I didn't want him to know that we didn't

have a phone. That my mother had killed it, ripped it out of the wall and beat it to death one day. That I didn't live at home anymore. That I had run away and now lived with my grandparents. He looked at me in the rearview mirror. When he saw me looking back, he smiled, then nodded his head. A genuine smile often has a bit of understanding in it and often times something else, something other than happy. He nodded his head one more time while looking back out the windshield at the road in front of him. Then he looked back into the mirror again.

"All right, how about dinner with us then? How's that sound?"

"Okay."

Rick stared out his window, so I did the same. But it had always been one of my favorite things to do when my dad was able to keep a car or a truck from time to time.

I looked at the back of Bastly's head for a minute. When his dad came and got us, I saw him cry. He hid his face in his dad's jacket, into his daddy's side, but I know he cried. I saw him. I thought about calling him a sissy for crying and all. Telling him I saw it, but I thought better of it. I decided right then in the car I wouldn't ever mention it. Not ever. I looked out my window. I relived all the scenes I had seen over and over. The people's faces, the backs of their legs. I stared out my window, almost leaned out, making myself look at each house and the differences or similarities between them. I kept doing it until they all seemed their own. Until I forgot about the fire and Brooks and all the people staring.

Each house had a different feel. Some smiling, some waiting. They all seemed to be waiting for something. What they were waiting for, I wasn't sure. But almost all of them seemed to be waiting patiently for something. And almost all of them seemed to be doing this with their eyes closed. I don't why. They just looked that way. I kept on looking until I couldn't anymore and instead watched all the houses moving away from me.