

FEUING DENNY

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“Accidents, try to change them—it’s impossible. The accidental reveals man.”

—J.B. Priestly

When the bubblegum flew from his mouth, all bets were off. Denny Kirkland made a slow turn and plucked the drooling, pinkish glob off the back of his orange-striped shirt, snarling. He threw the wad onto the concrete and looked over everybody before uttering, “I think I’m going to kill you, Chris.”

Chris Rebrovich’s face had been screwed into a comical recreation of John Wayne’s signature glare, and he wore it well for an eleven-year-old kid. We’d all been eleven or ten then; all but Denny. My parents said he’d never applied himself enough to reach middle school, but I just think his brain didn’t work so well, but nevertheless, he was nearing thirteen and picking fights with fifth graders. “Guess you’ll have to,” said Chris, still with the grimace that had been revealed to him on his grandpa’s TV set. “But that means my last words will be ‘Denny sucks!’ ” He ran forward, little legs pumping, and he brought his fist all the way back and at-level with his shoulder before throwing the whole right side of his body into the mass of flesh and dirty-blonde hair before him, but Denny was quick to react and seized the fist before shoving it away.

Chris stumbled back, but was able to catch himself on a piece of playground equipment. His face had lost a lot of its resolve, but he was able to regain it before anyone called it out. It’s hard to forget the half-second lock of the eyes we had—the wild uncertainty put a tremor in my chest.

Denny came at him, marching, menacing, faintly lowing, his arms wide-open, preparing to give Chris a bear hug. The fat bastard was easily seventy pounds heavier than Chris, and my friend knew that he would have no way to keep from succumbing to the tiers of folds once embraced. So, when Denny pounced forward, Chris used his advantage of being six inches shorter to skirt under the cross of the arms and give Denny a jab with his elbow into the ribs while he maneuvered. At this, Denny whipped around and found himself with his back to the playground equipment—a little merry-go-round with a waist-high metal bar marking the edge, painted an ancient and chipping crimson, the same Chris had bounced off of with a certain fluidity only seen in the physically meek. He brought his arms up like he was a boxer—like he was his own *dad*—and asked, “Wanna rethink your last words, dillweed?”

“How about we stop?”

A genuine question, veiled by a manufactured smartaleck tone to save any potential embarrassment. I understood him then, but now I only think, *Who would have laughed if he’d been serious?* And the only answer that comes back is *Denny*. And I think, *Who cares?*

After all, is pride not just another word for ignorance?

“Those are pretty shitty last words, dude.” When Denny began to run forward, Chris decided to use what little knowledge he kept from the summer we took karate between second and third grade, and he made a quick jab at the fat kid’s unguarded neck. Denny grasped at the red flesh

and choked out something that had the tone of a question, began to turn away with tears overflowing, and slipped on the concrete onto that same little merry-go-round.

The gargling he'd been perpetuating ended when the rung of metal on bone stung and hung up in the air. No one said anything until his leg started to make a weird twitching motion and he scuffed up the sides of his blue Sketchers. Then Chris asked, "Denny, are you okay?"

Blood began to pool and come out from under the kid, and in the distance we heard old Mrs. Medlock howling, "*You boys! You boys quit fighting! You all line up this instant and quit the ruckus! All you boys—*" The clomping of her sandals slowed and ceased when she came to the edge of the circle, her legs enshrouded by a dozen or so of us. "Oh my Lord," she breathed. "Denny? Denny Kirkland, son, are you—"

She broke through the crowd and fell to her knees, turning Denny over. Despite the massive gash above Denny's brow and the vacant stare in both eyes—matched with the uncaring, slack position of the mouth—the thing that shocked me—if not all of us—the most were Mrs. Medlock's last two words, "Oh, fuck."

That's about when everyone knew to freak out. Everyone around me began to wail and howl Mommy or Daddy or Denny Wake Up. Amidst all the chaos—multiplied tenfold by half the staff rushing out at Medlock's bawking calls—Chris found me and grabbed my shoulder. As Mr. Pederson began to shoo the lot of us towards the building, he reached down and grabbed my hand, firm. When I looked at him, he asked, "Do you think Denny will be okay?"

I could not answer, not then, but I did squeeze his hand tighter and kept it there. I did not speak, not once, but he filled the void between us while the sirens wailed and the rest of the class sat in the corner opposite with looks of fear and disgust, and the chief sentiment among these mitigations was that he wasn't in any trouble at all, and that Denny was okay, because what was the worst that could happen in a schoolyard scrap?

And when the cops took him out the room for questioning, and he let go of my hand, and he began to weep himself, I silently hoped they'd understand that: that they had just been boys, one of which now damned to eternal youth, the other cursed to grow up in an instant, and that it had just been a schoolyard scrap.

THE END