

John Sullivan

Ponytail

No one was happier than my mother when they started to build a playground across the street. I was six and making a mess of the house. Now I would seek and destroy slabs of concrete and rip up turf instead of family heirlooms. There was one porcelain figurine she fretted over in particular, having twice caught Billy Blastoff and me interrogating her. The delicate, pale-faced lady wore a ruffled green gown and lace bonnet; her parasol was held elegantly. She had a hole underneath her; being hollow was her secret, a place where she could stuff notes. Billy and I held her prisoner. Her jail cell was the Dust Corral behind my bedroom door. Her crimes were spying and murder, among others.

But now, with the playground in direct eye-line, my mother would have a dumping hatch for me; whenever I got that look in my eye, that revenge on reality look, my mother could point me outside. I could launch Billy Blastoff from the jungle gym until his batteries wore down and his warning 'Code Red! Code Red!' got slower and scarier and finally quit. Her antiques would be protected.

It was supposed to be called the Steven F Turkington Memorial Playground.

But my Uncle Bobby and his buddies protested it.

Steve Turkington was a local hero, an average kid who'd graduated on time and got sent off to Vietnam. The dispute was whether he was dead or merely missing. Some vets got together and planted themselves in the playground, discouraged Mayor Pappas from cutting the ribbon. They wore their combat clothes. They had a bullhorn and raised a general ruckus. So as not to ruffle feathers, the mayor agreed to postpone the

christening until more research was done to make Steve Turkington's status conclusive. The place had been built in a week, an instant sprouting of colorful iron tubing, interlocking rubber mats and marshmallowy buffers. I knew the delay was for something important, so I waited to play. My mother strategically moved her figurines to higher ground.

I spent a good chunk of each day that summer watching the protesters. I'd rest my chin in one of the little diamond-shaped front door windows, breathing onto the glass, sucking the foggy stain back into my lungs. My mother would tell me to get away, to go play in my room, but it was half-hearted advice; she allowed me to watch. She probably thought it educational and better than TV. Her little brother the conscientious protester. His black eyes so sharp and kind, the walrus moustache that flittered in the wind, who drank a lot of milk and drove a tank in the war because he was too tall to be a foot soldier. They would have shot him over the grass, he would have fallen in the rice paddies and blocked the path.

I was kept fairly sheltered from Vietnam. They never once mentioned it on the Brady Bunch. They tackled other moral issues: selfishness, lying, tattle-taling, there was even an episode on pot smoking (cigarettes used as metaphor, but the whole Mike speech took place in Greg's room complete with lava lamp so we got the connection). But no peace stance, no anti-Cong stance for the Bradies. Anyway, my mother had her own philosophy. Don't talk about it and it doesn't exist.

They still make me sad, those old newsreels. Our boys hurrying across the field. I try grabbing them all back. Impending loss is one of the earliest feelings I can remember having. Not that I called it that then, it was more of a creepy crawly panic that had two focal points—one that I might get sent there myself if the thing didn't end soon, and two, that the rules would change to make my father eligible. I used to sit in the back seat on the floor, wedging my body down, pretending to sleep, pretending to drive the car, preparing for the day I'd have to. The road hummed by under the synthetic rug. Jim Morrison sang into the ceiling. There's a killer on the road, his brain is squirming like a toad. Unde Bobby was over there. When my mother let me watch the news, I'd try to catch a glimpse of Bobby on one of those tippy canvas stretchers. Elephant grass was flattened by the chopper blades, making a path for the medics. Stumps and burnt mounds of cloth were piled on the stretchers; the carriers had their hands on their helmets and ducked so their heads didn't get chopped off. "You won't see him," my mother would yell from the kitchen. "He's in a tank."

My father died anyway, of drunk driving.

So they all came back from the war, and because they had nothing else to do, they stood in protest across the street. They were the ones who were saved, and out of danger for good. It was all a lottery crapshoot. My father would have called them bums. He had to tuck his shirt in every day and they didn't have to.

When Bobby came inside for lunch he told my mother there were hundreds of guys being held prisoner, still alive, he was sure, he could feel it in his bones, they'd been led away, marched off to cages and caves and swamps, he said they walked at first on their own two feet, but then they got tortured and they weakened and started collapsing, and now they were just holding onto hope that someone was coming back to save them. When Bobby read the In-Memoriam for Steve Turkington in the paper, he spilled tea on it on purpose. There was an article called 'Not in Vain' and he drew caricatures of Nixon on it. Nixon was the evil master. My mother stood and stared. Bobby said Stevie Turk was a captive, they were in the same unit, he'd seen Stevie Turk three days before he supposedly died, they hadn't done a decent job of looking for him, a bunch of guys got taken that day, taken, not killed. Stevie Turk deserved more than a casual write-off. Bobby's black eyes shrank whenever he said 'Stevie Turk'; they got hard and crystalline, like mica chips. He hyperventilated and got a hooked, pinhole look. It was like Stevie Turk's whereabouts were right at the center of something, the proof of something, the meaning of which was revealed in the mere saying of his name. Bobby sat down with us at lunch while Billy Blastoff hid under the sink spying. Bobby ate like a thing aroused, his jaw in battle with his face, wolfing down Fluffernutters and swallowing quarts of milk and flapping his beefy thighs under the table.

The name Stevie Turk became like Jesus Christ or Bob Dylan or something.

Bobby stood in the kitchen in his fatigues. "Still fit me sis," he said to my mother. She'd let him change in the bedroom. "I don't see why you have to change here," she'd say. "I don't agree with this you know" Bobby brushed imaginary dandruff off his collar and walked toward the door trying to fit his big hair under his cap. He'd always throw a last comment over his shoulder. "I can't wear this stuff on the bus. I'll scare people."

The protesters became like a band. Bobby in the sunlight, his mouth moving wide, like he was singing the vocals bouncing off the window, where I didn't think they could see me because it was brighter outside. "Get away from there. It'll just come to no good," my mother blurted absent-mindedly from another room.

I'd been watching news about Phnom Penh when the cops had called about my father. He'd hit a parked car; at least no one else had been hurt and he'd felt no pain.

Bobby's moustache shivered like an overgrown centipede, and his mouth hung open in verse. All their signs were hand-painted. STEVE IS

MIA. COME HOME SOON. The one I liked most was EXHUME HIM. Steven F. Turkington Memorial was already engraved on the playground placard; but someone had scribbled over it with chalk. A flag with a veteran's emblem hung on the fence. Cigarette smoke hovered over the proceedings. All day Bobby and his pals joked it up in the sunlight.

He showed up at our house around ten thirty in the morning, got changed, pranced around outside with his buddies, came over for lunch, went out for the second half, came back in with the shadows, chatted with my mom in whispers in the front hall, had tea with heavy cream, went home, came back, even did it on Sundays. Mr. Radcliff, the old guy down the street drove by and yelled, "Get a job!" Bobby had a big white man's Afro to go with his droopy moustache. His small black eyes moved like ants. Even protesting he looked friendly. His moustache flipped like furry calendar pages through the breezy summer days.

They didn't want the playground to open but they weren't really angry, I don't think. Bobby got wound up when he talked to my mother, but she sort of provoked him by not being 100% supportive. She took me aside to explain. "You should be able to play. I just want you to play. You need to get out of the house more." She didn't even realize that since the protest had started, I'd stopped ruining her things. She was kind of slow to notice. But I was rapt. Especially when the girl started showing up.

Bobby was the only one allowed in the house. My mother made that clear. "This is not Army headquarters." There was no talking to her. She was against all visible signs of war—soldiers, camouflage pants, looks of hatred and fear, she'd have none of it. She was anti-war to the extreme—she wished it had never started, and she wished it would all go away. Before my father died she was calling herself a conscientious protestor, meaning she would never resort to rioting, but would quietly disagree. My father called her a flake.

"Get away from that window." She said it automatically, especially after Gail joined them, the girl hippie.

Gail had a ponytail that was the opposite kind of hair of Bobby's moustache. His you could sum up as funny and dry, almost stuck on. Her ponytail was serious and sexy, it was well tended to. Bobby never altered his moustache, never trimmed it up, never added a beard or stubble even, he stuck by his look faithfully, as though it made him whole. Gail's ponytail was its own separate being. It was combed secretly and electri-

cally for hours, her hair was for others, she was giving it away, probably leaving strands behind. She grew her ponytail for the masses.

“Who’s that girl with Uncle Bobby?”

“Just get away from there.”

“Where’s Aunt Noreen?”

“Christopher...”

“Is she MIA?”

Gail wore puffy shirts with elastics around the biceps. The kind of shirt that made it hard to tell if she was wearing a bra or not, it puffed so much. It stopped just above her lowest rib and made an awning for her belly-button, her jeans were roped around her hips and flared out over bare feet, nails unpolished but clipped nice. Her ponytail waved. It bobbed with her every movement and bobbed on its own. Out there with all the guys, her ponytail was swinging like a pendulum. She was their mascot.

I was draped under the rough burlappy curtain, watching her. She hung upside down from the monkey bars, her shirt clung miraculously to her torso, there must have been another elastic band around the ribcage. The vets pumped their protest signs. It was hard knowing what to watch, or what it all meant; it all seemed so clean and complete. It all seemed so justified.

Gail brought a joy to the proceedings, then quick as a flash she’d get surly. She’d sneer at a curious passer-by. She’d pump a sign with venom. MISSING IS NOT DEAD. She’d kiss Bobby on the cheek and duck behind the playground storage shed, send a puff of smoke up over the little shingled roof and skip back to the swing-set. Her mouth was wide in song. Push me Bobby push me. Her melodies hummed into the pane on which my nose rested. Bobby’s eyes gleamed. He looked healthy and happy. He was never a foot soldier; maybe he’d seen less tragedy. He’d push her once, twice, get her going good and high, then walk off to his buddies, watch her heave herself away.

We had a small kitchen table, a little spackled blue linoleum number with a leaf that somewhere had got misplaced. Bobby downed tons of Chunky soup and Fluffemutters. He did it with a glaze; he abandoned his cause for lunch. Bobby was suckled like all of us, on milk, but he never managed to break the bond. His moustache dunked down into the glass and swam around like seaweed in the foamy surf, then emerged in a flurry as though he’d been holding his breath the whole time. His moustache was like a thing that had gone Arctic swimming and was now looking around for a towel. After he was done, he wiped it with his hairy wrist. He had fulfilled a needy infancy. He’d fit a sandwich into his mouth and argue politics

with my mother. He had an ability to get her wound up, even though she was apolitical.

And then one day he brought Gail over. I couldn't believe it from the window. She looked both ways before she crossed the street, put her hand to her brow to block the sun, even though it was cloudy. She gave her ponytail a Tarzan-meet-Jane toss. It swung the way she intended and sped up; it had a power of its own. I met them at the door.

"Hey man," she said, pulling on her cigarette with a squint. "Hey little man."

She worked her jaw continuously and sent a dull stare down the slide of her nose, a dullness that would coagulate and spark when she caught hold of a thought. She'd burst into a laugh and return to her muddy stare. She had, my father would've said, "a real willing turn." Bobby was all a twinkle. He ate sandwiches in whole swallows and protected over his soup like a grizzly at a bloody kill. His big old thighs flapped open and shut under the table. Too big to be a foot soldier thighs. Bobby cudded peanut butter in his cheek and watched Gail. She spun around the kitchen before she sat, a tipsy ballerina checking the set, touching things on each twirl. The sugar can, the cookie jar, the oven mitts on their peg. She whirled and glowed; her beads made a clacky lasso, her ponytail a horizontal geyser, a lead looking for the horse. Gail was a natural phenomenon. You could've charged admission to her.

My mother kept one eye on Gail's flimsy blouse, the other on the protestors outside. Made sure they weren't advancing, using this pixie as some kind of diversion.

I got a glance, just happen-chance, when Gail leaned forward to touch the butter dish, lowered her paisley puff-out across the table, ballooned it a tinge, created a gorge for me to peer into. The dark freckles raining down her collarbone, orbiting in there, running to dusk.

I experienced a growth spurt that day, a facts-of-life prefix.

Twenty minutes later I found her in the bathroom. Folded up on the floor, almost demure without an audience. One arm up on the toilet bowl, she seemed a defeated fairy. Ponytail tucked safely behind her. Her own thumb dug deep in her twisted side, trying to get at a pain there. Lazily her eyes found me. "Little man. Perfect timing. Go get my purse for me like a soldier huh?" The bag was slung over the back of my mother's chair, my mother was screaming whispers at Bobby, who looked right at me and winked as though he knew about my mission—and as I lifted the bag silently over the knobby top, he didn't miss a beat in his nodding acknowledgment of my mother's predicament. He normally would've made a com-

ment: “You look awful cute with that pocketbook.” Or, “You goin shoppin? Pick me up some milk.” But this time he just winked in secret and when I brought it to Gail she gave me a stick of Juicy Fruit. She started rummaging and got panicky. “Shit!” She got extra tense then and began seriously rummaging, ramming stuff around, hoping to prod whatever it was loose through sheer havoc. Then she stopped, a little teary-eyed, and looked up. “Thank God.” She gave me another stick of gum and I left her there, and when she got back to the table she paid no attention to the bickering between my mother and Bobby and finally asked me, “You goin’ to Nam little man?”

The ponytail hung over her shoulder like a pet.

Later she wandered out of the house without even saying goodbye and across the street she began punching one of the vets in the arm over and over. She’d forgotten her purse again.

Bobby and my mother had a scene. Bobby left the house with the purse slung over his shoulder and gave the window a fey wave as he got into his car, the last to leave, the crickets a hot jell of noise around him.

Gail didn’t come to lunch again. After a bit she stopped showing up altogether. Summer got short and the protesters disappeared one-by-one, until Bobby was coming by alone, once a week tops, just to have tea. By November the first frost had hit and we neighborhood kids had the playground to ourselves. When I asked my mother about Stevie Turk, she said he was presumed dead. She was doing the dishes and flipped some suds away.

I dangled from the jungle gym at dusk. My mother waved from the lit front window and I waved back upside down.

A city bus landed in the living room this afternoon. Crashed smack center through the bay windows and stayed propped up there, stuck straight out, front wheels spinning. I’d been flipping through a yellow-edged, 1971 Good-House-keeping (my mother was a pack-rat) when I heard an ominous rush, and with a kind of instinctual auditory physics, I turned my head to an exact spot, and obliteration of plaster, I’ve suddenly got the mounted head of metallic Moby Dick suspended above the couch. Tires whinnying, a sharp black blur, driver with his foot still on the accelerator, unconsciously pressing to get back on route.

This is the same house where I grew up.

My mother had left no formal will or anything, just a simple note saying ‘take what you like’. So I’d been browsing, ambling from room to room, fingering familiar objects. The amber and bamboo coasters, the long Irish clay pipe. I plopped down in the overstuffed rocker (the one

that spun) its pattern half Scottish plaid, half tattered clown, and opened the old magazine. Pretty young models prancing about the parks and sidewalks of thirty years ago.

I've never fought in a war, but this was like something I'd imagine of battle. The hot rush of air. The impossible, immediate renting. Protecting my face and genitalia with bent and feeble arms. But once the thing busted through, that was it, there was no extra drama, no fiery explosion. A big, dud torpedo. The beast heaved once, it creaked and hissed, the wheels spun for a few more seconds, then stopped with a shudder.

Instantaneously, the bus door cranked open, as though nothing was wrong, as though this was a scheduled stop. I heard decidedly calm chatter coming from inside, church basement chatter, chatter of organization. A few moments passed, and then a man's face poked out of the door. Sixtyish and fit. He peeked out and looked both ways, as though watching for traffic before stepping out. He glanced backwards and made a motion to wait, then extended his arms apologetically toward me. He wanted a lift. Two more faces appeared behind him, both older ladies. They called me 'boy' and I finally snapped out of it and came forward. I helped them get off. One by one, stooped figures in rumpled suits and dresses. All needing help—the drop to the floor from the hovering bus was a good four feet. I grasped them tightly under the arms, old orangutan arms with loose, slide-up skin. In the swirling drywall dust, I prayed they would stand when I placed them on the floor. There was mostly silence about the scene, just the occasional tinkling of broken window glass.

They arranged themselves around the living room, orderly, in concentration-camp acceptance. Dignified. They paused and started looking for the best seats, as though this were an event or lecture, a concert they'd arrived early for. The ceiling fan was going. They ducked when they passed under it.

Electrocutions of silver hair. Exhaust smeared foreheads. Axle grease lopped cheekbones. Hats frayed, buttons popped, long necklaces half in, half out. Amulets hanging like cheap tags. Hair all flung down, bobby pins dangling by a wisp. An exposed teat or two, a shoulder torn, peeled back in baby-pink surprise. That caught me off guard—old people have pink flesh. Maybe I expected gray. Splotchy and transparent on the surface, meaty as salmon underneath. The skin is a great preserver.

I'd gotten most everyone comfortable in the sun-streaked living room (sharp streaks bent around the bus) using every flat surface for seating, asking the more limber and younger to plop on the floor. I'd called 911 and was fetching a pitcher of Kool-Aid, when my neck hitched involuntarily. Gail. Sitting there on the piano bench. The ponytail down her

back. I watched as she gave up her seat to a woman twenty years older and then shuffled across the room to claim the camel-hide ottoman. Her ponytail was now pearl white. In the mayhem of the room, it kept time, ticking shoulder to shoulder as she walked, earlobe to earlobe when she sat. It still ran on some kind of pendulum power, something in the earth's core kept it going. She smiled at me and raised her hand for Kool-Aid. I went to get it.

She touched my knee when I sat down beside her. She was wearing a subdued green shirt under an unbuttoned maroon jacket, her head popped out of a runny rainbow rayon scarf. She was a bustling watercolor. Her shoes looked too tight. She had a cut on her lip and she bit at it.

"You're Gail," I said. Her scent was still the same and it shot up my nostrils and curled in my temples. A slightly wet scent, easily parted. Never switched from her Breck or Prell. I glanced behind her to see the ponytail, where it hung like a servant's cord. "You probably don't remember me, but you knew my Uncle Bobby..." She sipped her drink and shrugged, like nothing really mattered, she had all kinds of time, time to discuss poor bus drivers, rate new flavors of Kool-Aid, pick up a conversation from thirty years ago, whatever.

It used to be a silk rope shot through with brown bits of smeared perfume, a slick tendon you wanted to push your thumb against. Now it was fossilized.

After the last passenger had made it down to my mother's short blue shag, the driver stepped off the bus and closed the door behind him. He came over to where Gail and I were sitting and took off his cap. He acted as though the incident were minor. "I'm sorry mister, but a kid darted out in front of me. I had to swerve. I don't even know what happened to him. He ran out of the playground for a ball and I had to swerve or I would've hit him. I would've killed him, Christ...I gotta call the company...." And he wandered away.

I expected Gail to mention my mother, to say how sorry she was for my loss. I at least figured she'd bring up Bobby, ask how he was doing down in South Carolina. I thought she'd twinkle back about the war, the protests, or ask how I'd managed to turn out. But she just kept shrugging like a person no one ever listened to, like she couldn't explain things anymore, couldn't partake. "They should put a higher curb there," she said. "Or something, so the bus won't jump it so easily. I mean don't ask me, I don't know these things...I'm not a city planner. But I take that bus every day and I know that turn is dangerous. They need a metal barrier there, like they have on mountain roads. To keep the cars on."

Then she asked me for more Kool-Aid, and when I came back from the kitchen she was staring straight ahead and sitting perfectly still.

John Sullivan was raised in Maine and graduated from Harvard with a degree in Psychology. He currently lives in Laguna Beach, California. His fiction has most recently appeared in *The Journal*, *Sycamore Review*, and *Thema*. He was nominated for a 2000 Pushcart Prize.