

Scott Tinley

A Killing Tale

*“People who are not buried in a field, they are buried in the heart.”
Anonymous (Rwandan Adage)*

Johnny’s eyes locked on mine, holding me, not down, not up, just holding me in one place; in effect, keeping me from changing the subject.

“How’d you feel after you shot her?” he asked, with enough *laissez-faire* in his voice to hide the underlying jolt.

“How’d I feel?” I was stalling. But I should have known the talk would eventually get around to something deeper than the amount of chocolate Johnny’s wife puts in her cookies or how many waterbeds he expected to sell this month.

More often than not though, it gets that way with Johnny and me, especially when he senses that I might be thinking about leaving again soon. After all these years of knowing Johnny Cobb, all the times I’d come and gone, I still couldn’t figure out how he did it, how he might suggest a few beers and suck me into an all night tequila conversation about stuff like the nature of our country’s educational system or the difference between Maslow’s theory of self-actualization and Cooley’s ideas as discussed in “The Looking Glass Self.” Oh, we might start off with how to stuff a 350 c.i. straight block motor into a ’65 Mustang but somehow he’d loop it all around and when the five syllable words flowed, the other guys around the bar would look at us like they didn’t know us and get up to shoot a little pool maybe, leaving us “book freaks” to figure it all out, whatever it was, we were figuring out.

I really ought to spend a week holed-up in some big city library getting ready for one of my trips to see Johnny; at least I've have a fighting chance of keeping up with his brain, which seemed equal parts Swiss watch and 60's mainframe computer. But I always felt like I was preparing for one of those game shows where the players just seem to know the damndest facts. Like how the hell do you walk around knowing the average depth of Lake Erie, let alone whether the lake has gotten deeper or shallower in the past 50 years?

Right then, Johnny had me once again speaking words that I hadn't expected. I was talking about something that lived on some deeper level inside me, maybe the same as Lake Erie, just allowing the whole thing to come back up, like when you know puking up too much whiskey is what's good for you, even with the understanding that you might wake up with your face in a pool of vomit.

I walked over to the corner of the parking lot out behind the bar and sat down on the tailgate of Johnny's truck. The red neon sign out front read "The Bar Non_"; the letter on the end having burnt out years ago. Next door in the little strip mall was the Piggly Wiggly Market and next to that the Slim-Me-Down Health Club. The stores seemed to deserve each other.

I was telling him the whole damn story, the one he wanted more for me to tell than for him to know, sometimes using those words that hung and lingered just below the oily surface of some things in my life; my sister, my Ma and war and books and dogs and even some of my old friends from home.

"I was 17 that summer, a testosterone-fueled man-child testing anything and everything that I came in contact with. I would argue with a tree, maybe think about hacking it down if one of its branches scraped my arm as I walked by. That was the summer that everything was true. But nothing was true. I remember having this sense that, like every other human being, I had been born clean, but now I was getting dirty. My mind swirled and jumbled and black became white and suddenly Alice in Wonderland and the lyrics from Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" all made sense to me.

"The only living thing that wasn't a regular party to my rebellion was my older sister. She'd known me better than all of them. She'd wiped my ass when she was seven and I only three months long in the world.

"One time I had come home from a party, a bit liquored up and on the North side of midnight. Ma, who had worried some and waited up a spell, asked me why I hadn't called to let her know I was OK. I got a little belligerent and told Ma it was none of her business.

"Well, Sis she heard the confrontation from the tiny bedroom in the back of the trailer and came out in her big fluffy lime green bath robe that made her look like an entrant into the Macy's Thanksgiving Day

Parade. She asked me if I could come outside to look at her car for a moment, which seemed an odd request at one in the morning. But I went. And when we got some fifty feet from the trailer, she hit me.

“Not the kind of girl slap that surprises more than pains, she just nailed me with a balled fist, square in the jaw, knocking me back over the hood of the rusty Ford Pinto that I had just tuned for her yesterday.

“Then she picked up a piece of rebar from the concrete block fence daddy had been working on since I was in sixth grade and held it over her head like a samurai. I lay back against the hood, rubbing my jaw, looking at a young woman I didn’t know at that moment. I watched in silent awe as some foreign largeness drove the passion in her words. And then they came, softly, sweetly, with a razor’s edge that was more foreboding than the 4 ft. sword of metal perched over my head like a guillotine.

“You’re my brother Phineas, blood-fuckin’ kin. Top of my head, cain’t think of anything I love more. But you mouth off to Ma or Pa one more time, I’ll kill you. I swear to it. They don’t deserve what it does to them now and you don’t want what it will do to you later on.

“Then she swung that big ol’ piece of steel down onto the windshield of that ’74 Pinto and exploded the world all around me, the sky raining chips and shards of glass like biting snowflakes that fell onto my face.

“I don’t think I moved for some time, just slumped down onto the ground, leaning into the right front tire, thinking that there was some aesthetic purity to her words, the way her tongue must have felt up against the truth. I recall the surrealism of the moment and believed that she would have killed me; not a doubt at all.

“In the morning, in those few ordinary hours of life while she made us French toast like she always did on Sundays before church, I knew our private transaction had changed things. And right then, if I would have loved her any harder, I would have broken something inside me.”

I got up from the tailgate of Johnny’s truck to take a piss in the bushes. Johnny was sitting in the old wicker chair that he had screwed down to the bed of the truck, listening to the night and my tale of the killing unfold. The bushes reeked of a thousand drunken men who had pissed and puked here in this crumbling seedy parking lot. And I told myself that if I ever owned a bar I would line the asphalt with a moat and fill it with Johnny Cat.

Feeling like the box was open again, I just let the words keep flowing at some mutually decided upon rate, an agreement between the heart and the mind to release the tale. But not all at once.

That's how it is with some stories; they have a mind of their own, separate from the one who's telling it. Right spills over into wrong, love into hate and back into love again. The stories objectify things, even if you have to make some shit up to help clarify what's real and what's not.

Never coming when you expect them, they can be like a slow-thinking neighbor who stops by to show you his new tractor just when you're starting to get amorous with your girl. But you take the time to chat with the man because not too many people will and even though you miss out on some lovin', you're glad you did because it's the right thing to do and you feel better for having taken the time.

Same goes for telling stories that need telling. I reckon that's why psychiatrists have people sitting in their waiting rooms—some tales don't take too kindly to being held in that box forever. They're not the ones you get up and tell to the polyester'd Kiwanis Club or American Gothic Elk's Club members. It's not so much the content that matters, but what it means to you.

The worse thing you can do is keeping that kind of story from getting told. Same as a bad staph boil that never gets cut open to let bleed the bad shit out. Sure it's gonna leave an ugly scar on the outside, but what you need is things working well on the inside. Far as I'm concerned, it's hard to trust a person with smooth pretty skin. It means they never had to deal with the stuff that teaches us the things that ain't a part of regular schooling.

I sure hadn't planned on coming here tonight with Johnny and talking about killing. We were just going to fetch a few beers to wash the sawdust down our throats. We are of the same mind that if wood chips from cutting "hippy-bed" frames find their way into your body, they're best washed into your stomach for the night and dealt with in the morning instead of slowly absorbed into your lungs and dealt with over the rest of your life. Besides, of all the things that Johnny and I could talk about, killing was my least favorite.

I came back from the bushes and smiled as I thought about Johnny sitting up there in that big old wicker chair bolted to the bed of his '73 Ford F-350. (Lafayette is a Ford County. Louisiana is split like that. Some counties you drive Ford trucks, others it's Chevys. Don't ask me why). He was packing his pipe with a bowl of fresh tobacco.

"Johnny", I asked him, while settling back into the spot on the steel tailgate my ass had already warmed up and fiddling with the edge of a

God Bless Stevie Ray bumper sticker, “why did you want to hear the story about the killing again?”

Johnny pulled out the Zippo lighter I had brought back from 'Nam for him and lit his pipe, taking extra time to get the deeper tobacco ignited and to formulate his answer.

“Phin, first of all, get your damn honky hands off of my *Stevie* sticker; only white man deserved to be black. Second, something ain't sitting right with you. I sensed it the day you pulled that oil-leaking VW bus of yours into my driveway, what, the 4 weeks ago you got here this time? Most people wouldn't notice it but I seen it in the way you spoke to your dogs and the way that edge was out of your step. I figured you had something on your mind. Problem is, you didn't know it and wouldn't talk about it if you did. Funnier thing is, you been talking about it non-stop in other ways a man can't always say.

Finish your story Phin. Just get out of the way and let it tell itself.”

I nodded his way because it was all I could do and picked up where I had left off.

“Like I said, I was 17 that summer. And a few days after I had replaced the window on the Pinto with a similar one from a '72 Gremlin, I asked my Pa if I could go hunting with him and Uncle Larry. It was Friday and he was just getting home from the dock where he had been prepping the boat for next week when he was taking her Southwest past the 90th parallel to look for Bonita and big sea bass. I knew we were short on cash money and Pa was hoping this last trip before hurricane season would give us an edge up before those gifts from the devil kept all the fisherman closer to home waters.

“As was usual for a Friday in April, Pa had stopped and picked wildflowers for Ma. He once told me that the look on her face when he came through that screen door on a Friday afternoon, her knowing he wouldn't fish on Saturday or Sunday “to give the city folks a fighting chance,” him trying to hide the bunch of wildflowers behind his back inside that gnarled old sea mitt of a hand, well... it was worth more to him than all that he owned, which materially speaking, was the boat, the hundred and six acres and a double wide trailer with non-slip linoleum floors.

“The land was left over from his father and his father's father. The boat he had bought with money saved since he was a 12-year-old with a paper route. The floors Pa and I had put in for Ma on their 30th wedding anniversary.

“Anyways, I'd never shown any interest in hunting. Pa and Uncle Larry stopped asking me to go along a few years ago after something inside made me ask them if

they ever felt bad about shooting deer and elk and rabbit. And even though regular old bodily hunger had resolved me to being OK with eating the critters when Ma put them on a plate and set them in front of me, I still wrestled with the thought my being the cause of something no longer alive, something dying with its blood on my hands.

“Well, Pa he cocked his head from right to left and then back again like the motion would give him to the answer why his only son would ask to go along hunting with him after years of his being convinced that the boy’s spiritual texture had more Buddhist than Baptist.

“Truth be known, I had a feeling that what was happening inside of me, all this rebellious confusion and disrespect for things that needed respecting, would one day have a reason, maybe get aimed at a target that could use some legitimate shaking up. I felt bad about the way I had treated Pa and damn if I didn’t find myself missing the man, same as I did when I was 8 years old and he would be out at sea for weeks at a time.

“I knew how much he loved to hunt, how tall and straight he walked when he came home with a 12-point buck roped to the back of the truck. Hell, least I could do was to go along once before I went off to college in Mobile on that track scholarship or got drafted or knocked up my girlfriend and had to get a job down at the mill. What harm could it do? I’d just carry along his old 30 aught 6, pretend to be interested, keep my mouth shut and maybe fire off a round or two so I could trade lies with my uncle about the one that got away.”

I paused for a second and looked up at Johnny, whose 240-pound frame had settled into a rocking motion in the chair, moving the entire truck just enough to squeak the leaf springs, reminding me of the time I had snuck Mary Lou Canicki into my bedroom and we were banging away on each other but still trying to keep my noisy bedsprings from waking the family.

Johnny, big a man as he was, had an eighty grit gentleness to him. Not like Santa Claus or Burl Ives. More like Orson Wells or Sasquatch. Maybe even King Kong when he tries to shoo away the attacking planes without knocking them down. Even when he tried to get angry, most people who knew him, or maybe didn’t know him, would smile and Johnny would end up saying something like, “Ah, shit. Just try and do a little better next time. Would you?”

He was closing in fast on 60 but told everybody he’d started to count his birthdays backwards at 50, (my own plateau for the moment), so, according to his skewed count, he was somewhere around 41, give or take a few years.

He stopped his rocking for a moment and looked down at me, speaking first as a father, then as an uncle and finally as a man who had witnessed things so elemental and raw that they had yet to be named. As a black man who grew up in the 50's South, he had earned his wisdom born of pain. He sometimes said he had premonitions, not déjà vu or clairvoyance, more like reading a story before it happens and knowing that you are either in collision or sync with every thought you ever had, every stone or kiss you ever threw.

"Reckon I'm going to be on Social Security before you finish your story son. That's okay though, just so long as you tell it right and tell it whole, which is to say—truthful. You don't want any trite bit of puffery. You need, no...you demand truth because without it you're nothing, not even human, which is to say you don't exist. That's why so many of your fellow vets have offed themselves. They already died 'cuz the truth of war has become too painful and the regular business of living seems like just another lie. They reckon they're better off to the world dead, just stories in the living rooms of nieces and nephews who, when they get older, use those stories as a lesson on how to live, but not how to die.

"She was beautiful, wasn't she?" he asked.

"Yeah, Johnny." He had me talking again. "She was the most wondrous living creature I had ever seen. Tall, maybe 8 feet standing on her hind quarters, streaks of gold in her fur so rich you'd swear there were jewels woven in the fibers. And there was strength to her Johnny, the likes of which I had never felt and doubt will ever again, and an implacable godliness that seemed to float around her like a great ghostly aura.

"And Johnny, her teeth were white, just like the actors doing the toothpaste commercials, rows and rows of them that could rip a 10-pound trout in half or take an equal size chunk out of a man's shoulder. And the eyes, at first they had a look of unknowing, not pretty exactly, more astonishing, slowly filling with a fluid of moral indifference, like she was telling me that we don't get to pick our own wars.

"When I came around the sharp bend in the trail and saw her there off to the side, pawing at some type of berry bush, she only let out a low growl, like a dog will do if you pet them while they have their head in a feed bowl. And the sound had a sense of edgeless command to it, not a "don't fuck with me" scowl, but more like a friend who's playing hide and seek and warns you they'll count to 10 and you'd *better* be out of their sight."

My voice was cracking now but I didn't hear it. Johnny was rocking again and I sat there on the tailgate, swinging my boots in time with the rhythm of the truck and the night and the story.

"I froze, Johnny, fricking paralyzed by the awe and the beauty and my own fear. I opened my mouth to call to Pa and Uncle Larry but no sound came out, as they remained lost in their own Darwinian game of cat and mouse somewhere up the trail.

"But man, right after I failed to heed her warning sent in a voice understood by both man and beast, she rose up in all her splendor and I felt myself being sucked into the earth, unable to go forward or back. I had lost my sense of the definite, momentarily released and then sucked back in again.

"It was then, during one of those forever minutes that I saw her cub come out of the green shadows, ambling along close to the ground, innocent, just a stuffed teddy bear with a heartbeat and a 900-pound mommy between her and I, this real live mama bear born and bred to protect that cub with her own life, and then some.

"I tried to inch my way back slowly, averting her stare, just like I had read in a Boy Scout Handbook I had borrowed years ago to see what those badges some kids wore were all about. But in trying to go back I had gone forward, maybe by accident, maybe because I lacked experience in backing away from much of anything.

"In any case, that's when she came at me: a giant black and brown steam locomotive, slowly at first but gaining momentum. She was one of God's splendid species of grace and power, a great moving monolith of flesh and bone and fur and innately unbridled defensive anger.

"My own horror took control of me and I acted no different than she—on pure stupid instinct. I raised my gun against some shadowy concept of ideals that had been run roughshod by survival and pointed the weapon in the general direction of the raging beauty bound on killing me. She was smart and knew of nothing more dangerous than a two-legged creature with a gun. I was lying on my back, one eye shut, the other saucered, and slowly, painfully squeezed the trigger as a war waged inside my heart, a place it had no right to be. For they were fighting for the same thing: rightness of me and rightness of family. I deserved to live as did the bear and both our generations to come. I was raised up thinking there was no difference.

"And as the ground shook under her advancing charge, I pulled the trigger again, and again. Aim, squeeze the trigger, shoot. Aim, squeeze the trigger, shoot. Just like Uncle Larry had said.

"After three shots went off I opened my eyes to see her slowing but coming still. I fired one more time as my feet come up under me and I began moving in retreat, picking up speed as I imagined her warm breath

on the back of my neck, her sharp claws within inches of tearing deep gouges in my back all the way down to my soul.

“I had a funny thought of an old high school running coach who told me when you are leading a race and you look back, you are as good as dead.

“I never looked back.

“And after what seemed like a marathon, I stopped feeling her great presence, rounded a corner and came up on Pa and Uncle Larry running towards me. I fell to the ground and mumbled something about when I was 3 years old and got lost at the beach while Ma had walked down to the sand to pick up a shell for me.

“Pa told Uncle Larry to stay with me and re-loaded both his and his brother’s rifles, slinging one over his left shoulder while holding the right out in front, pointed at the trail like a flashlight as he moved back in the direction of the shooting.”

I looked up at Johnny, his pipe long since gone out but dangling still from the corner of his gray bearded face. He was nodding his head, not quite smiling but showing enough curves in his lips to offer approval.

“And afterwards,” he nearly whispered, “How’d you feel about it all?”

I had opened a vein on this story, and somehow, as hard as it was to tell, something dark had been unsoldered into the light. I didn’t have to push because something was pulling me.

“After Pa came back and said she was nearly dead and he had to put her down with two more shots to the head, it was like I was watching a movie of myself. It was like my body had swallowed me and made me its own, which it already was and always had been, but would never be quite the same again.”

I sat there in the shade of an old oak tree, not even thinking about what would happen to the cub and felt engulfed by a thick layer of ambiguity. My pores opened and closed, my body trying to let old air out and breathe new at the same time. My skin felt like the mouths of baby birds searching for meaning, just a tiny worm of insight. I longed for a former innocence, ached for the way my world was, but could never be again. Nope. Not hardly. Not even once.

I thought about how hard we try to grow up, speeding right past adolescence, bound for the hidden fruits of being grown up. And then in a single moment we slam the brakes on so hard and fast that we are thrown right through the front windshield, taking that same view we had of the world from the front seat onto the hood and then into the streets of our lives. Only now we are cut and bloodied and scarred and nothing again is ever as pure as when you are a kid. It’s the same

as when you go off to boot camp as an 18-year-old punk with a pimply face, and after they put an M-16 in your hand and train you to kill, you never look at a swing set or a bicycle or a skateboard the same again.

“It was years later, Johnny, in one of those books you told me to read, when I came upon a sentence that I have carried as a crucifix-reminder, of what I am not sure, but a reminder still. ‘Some sins,’ the words say, ‘are forever fresh and original.’ ”

That is where I ended my story that night. And as Johnny and I drove through the darkened back streets of Lafayette, Louisiana, I recited the final part of the story in my head. It was the part that would come another time, another night with Johnny. Maybe in six months, maybe in six years. But come it would. Like most good blues men will tell you, it’s not the sound of the note played that gives the music its feeling, it’s the absence of noise between the fretted strings.

It would follow the real truth, and my spirit would move in the direction of that innocence to which it was born and belonged in the end.

I would tell Johnny everything, the truths he already knew but which had not been validated and clarified by virtue of me speaking them in the plainness of real life.

At the very end of the story I would say that some final truth comes over you like a catalytic vapor and envelops and surrounds you and smothers you. And then, on a spring day years from now, when the sunflowers are in full bloom and the smell of jasmine is thick in the air, and your little girl’s tiny soft hand is wrapped gently inside of your own... it lets you breathe again.

But you never know when the “killing” will return and knock you down and choke you like a serpent, or maybe like a malaria night sweat that creeps into your sleep after years of lying quietly.

Just before we pulled into Johnny’s long dirt driveway, the sun stretching its first few fingers over the red dirt hills to the east, Johnny said it one more time, “She was beautiful, wasn’t she?”

And I said, “Yes... with long silky black hair pulled behind her in a pony tail tied with a piece of reed, dangling out from under one of those big triangular straw hats they all wore when working out in the rice fields.

“And the little girl?” Johnny asked while shutting the truck door quiet as the sky to keep from waking the family.

“I could feel her small brown eyes on me,” I answered while moving away from the truck and toward what he had made me do. “Even behind the tiny slitted openings. They were... soft eyes, I imagined. Yes, soft eyes.”

The old bus started on the first try.

“Go on,” he said. And I was gone.

Scott Tinley is a former professional athlete, author of four books on the sport of triathlon and an MFA student at San Diego State University. His draft number in 1972 was 13 as he began his Conscientious Objector defense.