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Mudslides

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MATT GREENE

MUDSLIDES

NINE-TO-FIVE I was co-teacher of the “Forest Kids,” and we pretty much did nothing at all. In fact, when Miss Sally and I tried to plan a big activity, the kids would get mad, call us names, whine, scream, throw chairs and rocks, knife our tires. I admired them for their spunk, their honesty, and hated them all the same. Because for all their strength they were also weak, quick to cry, to whine, to turn against each other over a touchdown or missing Pokémon card.

Miss Sally, my co-teacher, was an alcoholic. Her twenties had just escaped her and soon mine would too. We clung to our youth like cadavers, hustled the kids at Monopoly, ate seconds and thirds of special snack when they weren’t looking. We made for a good pair, except on the days when both of us showed up hungover.

One day a child took a piece of broccoli and flung it at the girl who talked to her stuffed animals.

“Go sit in the corner,” Miss Sally said. She never needed to raise her voice. When she spoke, they trembled. They listened.

Mostly we’d pass the time riding the mudslides. It was easy money. The

bus driver would leave us at the drop point and the kids would jump right in. We'd slide all day, the kiddos rolling around in the muck, picking Band-Aids and cigarette butts out of their teeth, until we reached the pickup spot and headed home. The sliding required little to no supervision.

As the landscape changed from basalt crags to piney bluffs to small, cookie-cutter developments, I'd tell Miss Sally about what I'd been up to lately with Hal at the phone booths next to the Chevron/McDonald's combo, where we'd drink tall boys and nod to the folks who passed us on their way to and from the tree by the overpass, with their BMX bikes and backpacks, a certain quality of affectionate desperation as they nodded back hello. Miss Sally would tell me about whatever dive she'd been to last, about how many she put back, about who she had to punch, about who she had to kiss.

I'm not sure how she felt, but I needed the conversation. If I watched the churning mud too long I got the feeling the mud was stripping away my consciousness.

Most of the kids loved the trips, although a few hadn't gotten their mud legs yet.

Milton was such a kid. He'd shown up midsummer like a castaway. Maybe he'd been chewed up and spit out by another day camp. Maybe he was new to town. Milton raced his Hot Wheels when the other kids were busy playing girls-versus-boys tag.

When it came time for Milton's first mudslide, it didn't take.

"I can't do it," he said. The other kids had shot out of the school bus and

straight into the mud. It was like a commercial for outdoor wear except all of the children were uglier.

“Oh, you *totally* can,” I said.

“No,” he said. He kept his head down and rubbed his hands together.

“It’s simple,” I said. “You just slide on the mud.”

“I don’t know, Mr. Mike.”

“Yes you do.”

I wanted to swear, to watch his face as the word *bullshit* carried through the air.

“Would you hold my hand?”

“No.”

Miss Sally and the other kids had to be miles ahead by now, surging on the slapping channels of brown mud.

“We *have* to go. Now.”

“I don’t know, Mr. Mike.”

I could feel the rage beginning to simmer.

“*Milton!*”

Milton began to cry. His face became pathetic. He needed a hug. In fact, I felt the urge to hug him, to pat his back, say it was OK, but we had a company policy of no physical contact from male staff (except for high fives) that I hid behind as an excuse to be detached from my work.

“High five?” I said.

And then, just like that, I took off. The mudslide had changed path and taken me with it. It was electric. I could feel it tingle as I zipped past felled

homes, great buttes and pinnacles of stone.

I thought Milton was swept up with me, but when I looked back he was nowhere to be seen.

When I caught up with Miss Sally, she had the Forest Kids backed into a cave. She chucked tree limbs at them when they tried to creep out.

“One of us will have to go look for Milton,” I said.

“I can hold down the fort,” she said, smacking a pine limb against her open palm like a switch.

I found a countercurrent and slid back to where I’d left Milton, only he wasn’t there. I kept sliding, watched the landscape transform from scabland to Palouse hills and fields of wheat as my ass and legs scraped against chimneys and tree tops.

Eventually I got hungry and stopped at Billy Burger in Wilbur for a quick bite.

“You seen Milton?” I asked the cashier. She looked like she might’ve been his age.

“Who’s asking?” she said.

“I’m his co-teacher.”

“I seen lots of Miltons. Blue ones. Red ones. Survivalist ones. Socialist ones. Ones who didn’t look like they were from around these parts.”

“You’d know this Milton if you saw him. He wears a fanny pack full of Hot Wheels.”

“Oh yeah? What kind of Hot Wheels we talkin’?”

“Well let’s see, there’s Blue Goose and Red Racer and Wheat Baron

and Mike Peddy and the Revvverend and RX5 and Mad Mike and Trolley Dodger and Big Bumper and Tex LV and maybe Smith Rock.”

“You eating or just talking?” she said.

I ordered a Billy Basket and she told me to sit down and wait ‘cuz it might take a while.

Behind the cashier was a girl who might have been the cashier’s sister, younger, chopping white onions with a knife big enough to pop a truck tire. A woman with heavy bags under her eyes haunted the back.

I took a seat in the dining area. The tables were spread with plastic gingham tablecloths. Nearby a man in jean overalls read the paper. His wife stared at me. When I stared back, she didn’t smile, or grimace, or even flinch.

I grabbed a copy of the paper from a rack by the door. The paper was sloppy like it’d been laid out by a child. On page four the county assessor had penned an article in support of the county auditor.

Those things you’ve heard are bunch of malarkey, it said. *In my twelve years as assessor I’ve never once seen the auditor fudge a number, not once.*

When I’d finished my burger, I asked everyone if they’d seen Milton, but they hadn’t. If the wife of the man in overalls had seen him, she wouldn’t say.

I left through the saloon doors and into the open air. Mudslides surged across wheat fields. The mud looked about ready to wash away the restaurant.

Poking my head back in, I said, “Hey, you might wanna look out. Mudslide headed this way.”

The man flipped the page and his wife stared at the tablecloth and the

family in the back shuffled as if asleep.

If they didn't want to get out the way, well, then they deserved it. They all deserved it.

Mud overtook Billy's neon mug flickering at the curb of Highway 2 and I dove in with a butterfly stroke then flipped onto my back to enjoy the ride. It was about five when I rolled back to day camp, told Miss Sally that Milton was a goner, and punched out.

Hal couldn't believe it.

"Fucking children these days," he said, and he finished his tall boy and placed it on a ledge in the phone booth. He grabbed another and cracked it. I could never get over the satisfaction of opening a beer can, the fizzle, pop, froth. "Fucking people. I bet they voted for Trump too."

"Hey look," I said.

I could see mud coming down the interstate and spilling over the sides of the elevated roadway.

"Never thought it would come to this," Hal said.

"You hear about these things, but they feel so distant."

We ran up to folks under the tree, but they weren't budging. They didn't seem to listen, not even when we shook them by the shoulders and sprayed cold beer in their faces.

"Opioids," I said.

"I bet they voted for Trump," Hal said.

"What matters is, they voted."

The mud came and leveled the tree but the Chevron/McDonald's with

its gas pumps and phone booths was lifted whole and deposited in a much more scenic location east of the city. I bought us a couple more tall boys, Modelos. When I came back out, Hal had one of the phones up to his ear.

“No signal,” he said.

The next day at work Milton’s mother said it was all Milton’s fault and they didn’t see any reason to press charges, but could we please keep an eye out for him?

“I guess so,” Miss Sally said. “But it’s your fault you raised a little chick afraid to leave the nest while the iceberg is melting.”

“Pardon?” Milton’s mother said. She intimidated me in her sharp business casual.

“It’s just a turn of phrase,” I said.

The mother nodded slowly as if she understood, but she didn’t seem to. I wasn’t sure I did either.

We went out to the mudslides again and rode and rode.

“Wooooeee!” the kids said.

“Howdy doody!” I said, feeling enthusiastic.

Just then I felt a sharp poke on my leg and found the Blue Goose all slicked up with mud. Mud had gotten so lodged in the ball bearings that the wheels wouldn’t roll.

“*Milton*,” I said, holding the Goose up for Miss Sally to see.

We decided to ride the mud to a fire lookout so the kids could use their young, untaxed eyes to try and spot him.

“Milton!” they shouted.

“Here, Milton, here!” they said.

Just as we were getting ready to leave, the girl who talked to her stuffed animals found Big Bumper. She held it up over her head and the other kids gathered around her.

“*Milton,*” she said.

We called Milton’s mother and told her we believed her boy to be lost forever in the mud. We believed her son to have become the very earth and soil, and that as such he could be a force for change, not positive or negative change, mind you, merely the wrath of the land, the cost of rapid development.

“That’s all well and good,” she said, her voice cracking over the phone booth speaker, “but could you please keep an eye out for him?”

That night I dreamed Milton had become the king of France. He wandered the shoreline of the Riviera, asking where the whales were.

“You know,” I said.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Yes you do.”

“Mr. Mike. Mr. Mike! I don’t know!”

When I got to day camp, Milton was there. The camp director said he’d been waiting outside when she’d arrived in the morning. Milton didn’t look so hot. He was pale and wore an empty fanny pack.

“Where are your Hot Wheels?” I asked him.

He turned away and began to walk toward the board game shelf, but stopped after three steps. He stayed in that spot for nearly an hour until one

of the kids poked him and he fell over.

“You feeling alright?” I said.

He didn’t say anything.

“You want an ice pack?”

He didn’t respond but I got him one anyway. I put it in his hand, then put his hand on his head, but the ice pack fell to the floor. After a couple tries, I balanced the ice pack on the other side of his head, along with Blue Goose and Big Bumper.

“See? No biggie. We’ll find your Hot Wheels.”

Miss Sally was busy playing beach-themed bingo with the other Forest Kids.

“Milton isn’t doing so well,” I said.

“Not my problem,” she said.

When his mom came, she was on the same page as Miss Sally.

“I’m not taking him,” Milton’s mother said. “He’s broken. See?” She lifted one of his arms and then released, allowing the arm to flop down to his side. He teetered a bit then came to a stop.

I decided to take care of Milton. He wasn’t so bad. He just didn’t know sometimes.

We went out to the Valley, east of town, to the Chevron/McDonald’s and our newly relocated phone booths. Milton was about as interested in his tall boy as the ice pack.

“Let’s find him some Hot Wheels,” Hal said.

They didn’t sell Hot Wheels at the Chevron/McDonald’s, nor the City

Market n' Gas, nor the Conoco. The Shell station did, but the guy said they were out of stock.

"When will they be back in stock?" I asked.

"Listen, mister, don't get smart with me."

"Guy probably voted for fucking Trump," Hal said. We stole the Shell station guy's car and told Milton it was the world's biggest Hot Wheel. Still, Milton didn't speak. He just rolled around the back seat, pale and sick-looking.

"He probably has to eat," I said.

"And drink," Hal said.

We bought him McDonald's, but he wouldn't touch it, so we forced the fries into his mouth and moved his jaw with our hands to affect chewing. He coughed up the fries in chunks.

"Poor kid," Hal said.

"I think he's broken."

The next day the boss lady told me that if Milton was to keep coming to day camp I'd have to start paying the bill. The bill was about equal to my salary.

"Fine," I said. "Whatever."

Milton *had* become a lot better at riding the mudslides. He'd sit there, stiff as a board, as the current carried him.

"Yay!" the kids said.

"Hullabaloo!" Miss Sally said.

Of course, Milton said nothing.

Things had changed between Miss Sally and I. She wouldn't say it, but I don't think she liked that I had taken Milton in. I'd crossed some line and there was no going back. When I asked her about her night or weekend she'd say it was fine. No longer did she tell about breaking a barstool to make a point or dancing the mambo at a tavern on the edge of the city. She didn't ask about the phone booths anymore. I think it bugged her that I cared. About my job, about what happened to Milton. Only, I wasn't sure that I *did* care. It was more obligation, a nagging anxiety I felt in my stomach when I thought about the kid. Maybe that was caring.

I did have my doubts, though. Did it make any difference what I did? Would Milton be any worse off if I left him next to the dumpster behind Target?

As the weeks passed, we found all his Hot Wheels in the mud. But Milton still wouldn't talk. Remembering my own gloomy teen years, I couldn't help but wonder if this wasn't a normal phase for a boy. I imagined buying him Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, which I'd read in ninth grade English, to help him process the pain of growing, and then realized it was an idea so terrible I better not tell anyone, ever.

That night at the phone booths, I told Hal and Milton about my high school English teacher, Mr. Nicholson, who'd come to class ten minutes late on the first day of school. He busted in like ball lightning and smacked the table while he recited Blake's "Tyger, Tyger."

"Burning bright, in the forest of the night..." I said.

"You're gonna like high school," Hal told Milton, probably lying.

I slept in the Shell station guy's car those days because I couldn't afford rent after Milton's day camp fees. Milton got the back seat and I took the driver's. It was a good thing he never ate or drank, because I couldn't afford it.

That night I dreamt the mudslides carried the car away, all the way to Hong Kong. When I woke up, I realized it wasn't a dream.

"Look, Milton," I said. "Mong Kok!"

We walked the market and looked at the neon signs climbing the span of entire buildings. I found a phone booth, spacious, red and British-looking, and called Hal long distance and told him to join us, but our convo got interrupted by my boss calling to say I was fired for not showing up.

As much as I'd liked the phone booth back home, the ones in Hong Kong were even better.

I set up shop outside a Circle K at a phone booth with a big chamber to stand in. There was no front door for insulation, but the nights were warm. At Circle K they sold cheap premade sandwiches and even cheaper cans of pineapple that provided all the nutrition I needed. With several pineapple can lids and some rubber bands and scissors I borrowed from the clerk, I jerry-rigged the booth so I didn't have to pay.

Hal provided updates on life back home.

"The mud gets worse every day. Yesterday a Budweiser plant was wiped away, just like that."

"They just can't keep up with modern brewing trends."

"Same old phone booth!" he said. "Only, it's in Montana now."

I called my mom and dad, Hal, my boss, Milton's mom, all the folks in Wilbur. When we chatted I gave them updates on my day.

"Today I ate snake for the first time," I told the farmer from Wilbur.

"Well," he said. "What'd it taste like?"

"Like, I don't know, strength?"

"Today I drank Scotch on the top of the world's fourth-tallest building," I told the cashier.

"*Fourth*-tallest?" she said.

"Today I rode a minibus to Hap Mun Bay. They sold cans of beer and egg noodles and chicken legs, right on the beach," I told Milton's mom.

"That's all well and good, but can you keep an eye out for my son?" she said.

It was true that I'd lost him in all my excitement.

"I thought you didn't want him."

"Still," she said. "It'd be for the best."

I called Miss Sally but she never picked up.

When I ran out of money, I took a job teaching English. It was miserable work, exhausting. But life was generally good, tooling around Hong Kong, eating canned goods. Sometimes, riding the MTR back home, or sitting at a stall eating noodles while watching the Cantonese soaps, it would dawn on me that Milton was still missing, that I'd lost him. But I put it out of mind. Was it really my fault? What was I supposed to do? Cram more french fries in his mouth?

In the news, things back home were only getting worse. Wildfire season

was so bad that the air in the West was unbreathable. Fascists and Anti-Fascists beheaded each other in line at Panera. The icebergs were dissolving and unleashing the monstrous rot they'd kept frozen for eons. Great green clouds drifted over the continent raining acid and stink.

But in Hong Kong the trains ran on time, zipping across the city in texture and layers. If I had nothing better to do, I'd try a new train line and watch as new skyscrapers and megamalls dissolved into wet markets and fleets of junks. The city had a way of incorporating its dirt and dust. There was a feeling that everything had its place, that progress everywhere was imminent. Everyone knew that feeling was a lie, but it was so intoxicating in its shimmering verticality and gleam that you could wrap yourself in it and be taken away. Wasn't life itself a lie anyway?

I taught on the eighty-eighth floor of a gleaming new development at the Little Ducklings Tutoring Center. The walls were pastel with deranged smiling duck faces floating among pencils and erasers in the *mélange* of the wallpaper. Each room had a tiny window, big enough to give one a sense of time by the quality of light, but small enough that it was difficult to begin fantasizing about escape.

Thursdays were Show and Tell days. One of my students brought a model MTR train car.

"My dad works for MTR Corp," she said.

"What does he do?"

"He drives the train," she said.

There was a crack and then a sound like a whale song. Mud busted in

the windows. The room began to fill with brown muck, glass shards, and assorted debris: neon, a car tire, a fanny pack.

And there came spilling in Milton. Again he'd changed. He was bald, shirtless, tatted up with skulls and billiard balls and topless women. He carried knives and guns.

“Is this my fault?” I said.

“How should I know?” the little girl said.

The mud had reached chin level and was gaining fast. It surged forward at a speed I'd never felt before.

Where we were headed, I couldn't say.