

## **Pauly**

The day Ms. Aretha took my best friend Timmie away was possibly the worst day of my entire childhood. Since my mother and Mrs. Aretha had been best friends all their lives, Timmie and I, were destined to be best buds also. We did everything together. We shared each other's toys. We shared our peanut butter and Cheetos sandwiches. We even wore the same clothes sometimes.

Since we were born just a few days apart, we were both looking forward to turning seven. We thought we'd be real men then. One of the neighborhood bullies was seven and his mother let him play in the road. Our mothers wouldn't even let us think about venturing out the yard—we could barely leave the porch. But we made the best of what little freedom we had.

Our favorite game was cops and robbers, but sometimes we would play cowboys and Indians. Most of the time I had to be the bad guy. Timmie got a kick out of my death scenes as I would cough several times before falling to the ground and convulsing before I would finally die. Timmie, on the other hand, hated to be the bad guy. When I would get fed up and threaten not to play with him anymore, he would cry, and if that didn't make me change my mind, he would say, "OK, stupid head, I'll be the bad guy, but I won't like it."

Sometimes Timmie would spend the night over my house. We would put on our He-man pajamas and tell each other ghost stories to see which one of us got scared first. Timmie was good at telling ghost stories, but he wasn't as good as I was. Nor did he know all the places in my room where I could hide in the dark and leap out at him when

he least expected it. One time, we took the game too far and Timmie got so scared that he wouldn't go to the bathroom and he peed all in my bed. Since my bed was so small and we had been hugging, I was pissed—literally.

One day Timmie came over and told me some bad news. “Nate,” he said tearfully, “my mom said we have to move to Florida because my Granny is sick.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Her cancer has come out of intermission,” he said. I later learned that the word he meant to use was remission.

“When are you moving?” I said as tears welled up in my eyes.

“Tomorrow morning,” he said. He picked up my newest toy, a GI Joe doll that could talk.

“Can you stay here tonight?” I pleaded.

“My mom said I have to say goodbye and then we have to go pack.”

“His mother yelled out from the front room, “Timothy, we have to go.”

“Ok, momma,” he yelled back. I went to hug him, but he stopped me. “We can’t hug.”

“Why not?” I said.

“Daddy says big boys don’t hug other boys.”

“Then what do they do?”

“They shake hands,” he said as he spit into his right hand.

“Now what?” I said.

“You do it too, then we shake,” he said. And we did. He then turned and ran towards the living room without looking back.

The following morning I sat on the porch watching the cars go by. I had asked my mother to take me over to Timmie's house, but she said Timmie and his mother were busy packing and I would just be in the way. I assured her that I wouldn't, but she wouldn't listen.

After a few minutes, I decided to walk to the edge of the yard to get a better view of the road although I knew my mother would be upset if she caught me. It didn't take long before I saw the brown station wagon coming towards me slowly. There were several suitcases strapped down on top and Timmie's dog, Arnie, had his head out the window. Timmie's dad blew the horn twice as they went past. That was when I saw Timmie with his face pressed to the side window.

Once the car passed my yard, Timmie turned to look at me out the rear window. We locked eyes. He had my GI Joe doll in his hand. I was furious. All of a sudden, I found myself running behind the car as fast as I could. I could hear my mother screaming my name, but I kept running anyway. I yelled out several times, but the car didn't stop. A few tears streamed down my face as I realized that I wasn't going to catch up with the car. My little legs gave out and I fell just as the car reached a turn in the road and sped out of sight. I skinned both my knees and the right side of my face on the gravel. I screamed, not from the pain, but from the thought that Timmie and my GI Joe doll was gone forever.

I spent the next few weeks sulking. Nothing excited me anymore. Not even peanut butter and ice cream sandwiches. Everything reminded me of Timmie. My mom tried to do things with me to keep my mind occupied, but that didn't work too well. She tried to play ball with me, but I kept getting frustrated because she couldn't catch. On top

of that, she didn't like running after the ball. Oftentimes, when the ball would go into the woods, she would make me go get it. Timmie never used to do that.

She wasn't very good at tag, or hide and seek either. Our games kept getting interrupted because the phone would ring, or she would have to do a load of laundry. Whenever we did have a few minutes to play tag uninterrupted, I would tag her and then she'd be 'it' all day because she could never catch me. Timmie had learned all my tricks so he knew how to catch me most of the time. Sometimes I let him catch me because it was fun to hear him scream and get upset whenever it was my turn to chase him.

One day I found myself sitting on the porch with nothing to do. Momma was inside watching the soaps and had told me to make myself busy. I was just about to pee on an anthill when I heard a rustling in the woods. I stayed completely still so that I could listen and try to figure out what was making the sound. It didn't make a lot of noise, so I knew it wasn't a bear, or a lion, or something—although it would have been cool if it were. All of a sudden, it peered its little head out the edge of the woods. It was a squirrel.

Normally Timmie and I chased squirrels or threw rocks at them. This time, I just sat there and watched as it made its way across the yard. It appeared to be looking for something so I yelled, "What do you want?" The squirrel leapt up into the air in fright and ran back off into the woods. Apparently, at the same time, my mother had been calling me from inside the house. She appeared on the porch with a broom scolding me about the way I had answered her. I tried to explain that I hadn't answered her, but of course she didn't believe me. Needless to say, my backside was sore for the rest of the week and I got a long lecture about being disrespectful. After she finished yelling at me,

she sent me to my room to write ‘I will not answer my mother with what do you want when she calls my name because it is disrespectful and she will not tolerate it.’ 100 times.

Once I had finished writing, she allowed me to go back outside but she made me stay on the porch. The squirrel was back in the yard. I immediately looked for something to throw at it for getting me into trouble. Luckily for the squirrel, the only things in reach were my mother’s potted plants. There was no way I was going to mess with any of those. I would have never heard the end of it. I also thought it best not to yell at the squirrel this time. My mother was already upset with me, so I figured I’d be as quiet as I could. I sat there on the top step defeated while letting the squirrel have free rein of the yard.

A few days later, and after several more encounters with the squirrel, my mother allowed me to call Timmie. I had asked her if I could call him every day since he’d left, but she’d told me that he and his family needed to get settled and that I had to wait. I was so excited when I heard his voice that I’d forgotten that he had stolen my doll.

“Hey fart-head,” I said.

“What’s up, Nate?”

“What’s up? What does that mean?” I said as I scratched my head. I was baffled. I had never heard that before.

“It means how are you,” he said

“Oh, who told you that?”

“All the cool kids are saying it.”

“What have you been doing?” I said.

“Playing with my friends?”

“What friends?”

“Stevie, Mark and Katie. They are my new friends from down the block.”

“You’re friends with a girl?”

“Yeah, she’s cool.”

“Girls aren’t cool! They’re yucky!” I said.

“No they aren’t!”

“They are cry babies, and they play with dolls.”

“Nuh-uh, she don’t play with dolls. She plays with my trucks,” he said before bursting out into a fit of laughter. Then I heard a door slam and then muffled screaming in the background.

Once he settled down I asked, “What happened?”

“Stevie was tickling me, but I locked him in the closet,” Timmie said.

“What’s he doing there?”

“He’s spending the night. We’re going to tell ghost stories.”

Just then I heard Timmie’s mother asking him what all the noise was before she realized that Stevie was trapped in the closet. She told Timmie that he had to get off the phone to tend to his company.

“My mom said I have to go,” he said.

I went to say goodbye but Timmie had already hung up. I heard him make a high pitched squeal right before I got the dial tone. Obviously, Stevie was getting Timmie back for locking him in the closet.

That night at dinner, I decided to talk to my mom about it. “Momma, Timmie has new friends,” I said.

“He does. That’s good,” she said as she scooped some macaroni onto her plate.

“No it’s not.”

“Why not?”

“Because, he’s my friend,” I said as I forced down my last spoonful of peas.

“He can still be your friend and have other friends too.”

“But he likes Stevie better.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t, baby. As a matter of fact, I’ll let you talk to him the next time I speak to his mother. OK?” she said as she patted me on the head and took up my dinner plate.

The following day I was sitting on the porch eating crackers when the squirrel peeped his head out of the woods again. It slowly came towards me. I wanted nothing to do with the critter so I threw one of my crackers at it. To my surprise, it didn’t run from the cracker. Instead, it ate it. At first I was upset that the thing had eaten my cracker. I only had four of them. But then, after seeing it chomping on the cracker and enjoying it just as much as I was, I found it kind of funny.

From then on, I was a lot smarter about tossing edible things at the squirrel. The next time I saw it, I threw a small piece of the bread I’d broken off my ham and cheese sandwich at it. I think it enjoyed the bread just as much as it did the cracker. Next, I threw a lima bean at it. It ran over to the bean, but it didn’t eat it. I laughed out loud because I never liked lima beans either. Next, I tried nuts. It seemed to love those. It had gotten so used to me feeding it my snacks that whenever it was done, it would stand up on its hind legs a few feet away from me and stare at me until I tossed it another treat. I didn’t like the thing at first, but I had to admit that it was kind of growing on me.

After a few weeks of me tossing the squirrel my snacks, I had finally gotten it to come up on the porch instead of me throwing the food to it. It would never get close enough for me to touch it, but I could tell that it was no longer scared of me. It appeared that we were becoming friends. I fed it snacks, and it kept me company. With him around, I rarely thought about Timmie. I had never seen anyone with a pet squirrel before, so in a way, I thought he was better than Timmie.

After a few months of me feeding the squirrel, it was clear that we had bonded. I had even given it a name, Pauly. Pauly had gotten so comfortable with me that not only was he eating out of my hand, he would also climb up my arm and sit on my shoulder to nibble on his treats. A few times when I tried to eat my snacks, he nipped them out of my hand before I could put them in my mouth. He never bit me though.

While I was developing my new friendship with the squirrel, my mother was developing a new friendship of her own. She had met a guy named Mr. Boatman one day while she was shopping at the supermarket. Mr. Boatman hunted for a living. At first, I hardly saw him at all, but after a while, he was at my house every day. He would bring over something that he had killed with his shotgun and momma would cook it and serve it for dinner. Since he'd come into our lives, we'd had quail, fox, deer, rabbit and a whole assortment of other animals he'd come across in the woods.

One day Mr. Boatman asked my mother if he and could go for a walk. He said we needed to have a man-to-man talk. I was excited. I had never had a man-to-man talk before. He grabbed a beer for him and a bag of pretzels for me and we headed out the front door.

“Nate,” he said, “how are the pretzels?” He wasn't sure how to begin.



“They are good,” I said, chomping away.

“So, let’s talk, Nate.”

“About what?” I said.

“About me, you and your mother. I want us to be a family.”

“A family! Like you being my new dad?” I said.

“Well, I can be, but only if you want me too.”

“But what about my real dad? Will he still call me on my birthday?”

“I’m sure he will, Nate. But I’m not trying to replace your dad. I know he means a lot to you. Me, you and your mother being a family will make you extra special.”

“Why?”

“Because, then you will have two dads.”

“Two dads!” I yelled. I had gotten so excited about the idea of having two dads that I choked on one of my pretzels. Mr. Boatman let me have a few swallows of his beer. It was nasty.

“Can you keep a secret, Nate?”

“I think so,” I said.

“Since you are a little man now, let’s keep the beer thing between me and you.”

“You mean don’t tell momma?”

“Exactly,”

“Ok, I won’t.”

“You promise?” he said.

“I promise. I won’t tell,” I assured him. I had one more question though. “Mr. Boatman,” I said.

“Yes, Nate.”

“Do I have to call you Dad now?”

“Not right away. Only when you’re ready,” he said. He gave me a dollar, patted me on my head and we began walking back towards the house.

The next day when I went outside, I was shocked to find that Pauly was nowhere to be found. I called his name several times, but he wouldn’t come. I threw snacks out into the yard, but he still didn’t come. After a few minutes of me waiting for Pauly to show up, I heard a noise coming from the woods. I got excited as the sound approached me. However, I was shocked and disappointed when I saw what was making the sound. It was Mr. Boatman! He came out carrying several furry animals in his hands. He’d gone around the back of the house before I had a chance to get a better look at what he had in his hand. Instead of me going in the house behind him, I sat on the top step and waited for Pauly. He never showed up.

That night my momma and Mr. Boatman were in a particularly good mood. My momma was singing as she cooked dinner and Mr. Boatman was drinking gin instead of his usual two or three beers. I didn’t know what he’d killed while hunting earlier that day, but he and my momma sure were happy about it. I was sitting in front of the TV when my nose caught whiff of an overwhelming scent that I had never smelled before. I wasn’t sure what it was, but I knew that it was some type of meat. It made my stomach growl and I made a mad dash towards the table when my momma finally called me for dinner. My momma had outdone herself. She had made candied yams, corn in butter and garlic sauce, hot rolls from scratch, mashed potatoes, green beans, gravy, and a meat that I had never laid eyes on before in my life.

My momma asked Mr. Boatman to say the prayer. While he was praying, I said my own silent prayer, “Dear God, thank you for this food. Please make Mr. Boatman hurry up so that I can eat. Thank you. Amen...oh, and praise Jesus.” When he finally finished praying, I asked my momma to load up my plate. To her surprise, I ate it all. I even asked for seconds of that wonderful meat with the gravy on top.

“Wow, Nathan, you must have been hungry,” my mother said as she started clearing off the table.

“I was. That meat was good mama,” I said.

“I’m glad you liked it, baby.”

“You keep eating like that and you’re going to be big like me,” Mr. Boatman said as he nudged me on the arm and made a muscle with his bicep.

“Yep,” I said before giving him a big smile and making an itty-bitty muscle with my own arm. I then asked, “Momma, what was that meat that you cooked?”

Before she could answer, Mr. Boatman said, “Guess.”

“Um, was it deer?”

“No, it wasn’t deer,” he said.

“Was it rabbit?” I asked.

“Nope, not rabbit,” he said before wiping his mouth with a napkin.

“I give up. I don’t know what it was”

“You want me to tell you?”

“Yes, please,” I said.

“It was ant,” he said.

“It was not!” I said. My momma could hardly hold back her laughter.

“Yes it was. While I was hunting, I found these huge, gigantic ants that I had to fight off me” he said as he began tickling me.

“Nuh-uh, that wasn’t ant.” I said.

“You’re right. It wasn’t ant.”

“Then what was it, Mr. Boatman?”

“It was squirrel.”

“Squirrel!” I shrieked. I could feel my stomach start to bubble. “You made me eat Pauly!” I said before I jumped up from the table and ran to the bathroom. I made it just in time before I started to throw up. I had never felt so horrible in my life.

My mother followed me into the bathroom and wiped my face with a cold rag. “Momma,” I said, “I don’t like Mr. Boatman anymore.” I had began to cry.

“Why not?” she asked.

“He killed Pauly?”

“Pauly? Who is Pauly?”

“He’s my squirrel. He’s my friend,” I whined.

“Natey, we didn’t know you had a little squirrel friend,” she said with a confused look on her face and rubbed her hand up and down my back.

“He’s gone. Pauly’s gone,” I said. At this point, I couldn’t stop the tears from falling.

“How do you know that Mr. Boatman killed Pauly? Maybe they were different squirrels.”

“But Pauly wasn’t in the yard today. He’s always in the yard,” I said.

“Well, he still might be out there somewhere,” she said as she pulled the covers up over me.

“Can I look for him tomorrow?” I asked.

“You sure can. Don’t worry you’ll find him,” she said as she walked over to the door and turned off the light.

“I hope so,” I muttered before falling asleep.

The following morning, I was up bright and early to look for Pauly. Just as I had expected, he wasn’t in the yard when I went out the front door. I sat on the steps for a while and threw crackers towards the woods, but Pauly never came. I decided that I would have to go look for him.

I walked over to the edge of the woods and peaked my head in. There was no sign of Pauly. With a little hesitation, I glanced at the house to make sure my momma wasn’t watching me from the window before I headed in. The woods were a lot scarier than I had imagined them to be. There were all sorts of creatures in there. I ran into several spider webs before I could even begin looking for Pauly. I brushed them off as best I could before continuing with my search.

There were weird sounds that I couldn’t identify that seemed to come from every direction. I tried not to let that scare me. I just kept looking for Pauly. Before I knew it, I was lost. I had gone so far into the woods that everything looked the same. There were thick weeds, bushes and thorns each way I turned. I yelled for Pauly, then for my momma, but I got no response.

I began to cry, fearing that I would never find my way home. I imagine that I must have been out there for several hours before it began to get dark. I knew that my

momma and Mr. Boatman were probably looking for me. I called for her, but I got no answer. I called for help too, but no one ever came to save me. As the woods got darker, everything got creepier. The weird sounds were getting louder and there were more things rustling in nearby bushes than before. I quickened my pace and kept going.

My speeding up didn't help. The rustling kept getting closer and closer. I started running and screaming for my momma, but whatever was making the rustling sound had almost caught up with me. I was being smacked in the face by branches and leaves along the way, but I kept running. I could barely see because of how dark everything was and because my eyes were filled with tears. It wasn't long before I lost my footing, tripped over a huge rock and fell facedown into a bush.

Surprisingly, I wasn't hurt by the fall. I was just about to get up when the thing that was following me pounced on me. Figuring it was a wolverine or something, I screamed and covered my head. I closed my eyes tightly as I felt it poke the back of my neck with something wet a few times. Then, it tasted me. I must have tasted good because it kept on tasting my arm, then my hand. I forced myself to look up at it—it was my neighbor's dog, Elroy.

I followed Elroy out of the woods. He led me to my neighbor's house, then he stayed with me as I walked home where my mother and Mr. Boatman were waiting inside with the police. As soon as I walked in the front door, my mother ran over and hugged me before she started crying. She asked where I had been and I explained what had happened. The police hadn't pulled out of the yard good before she took off her belt. I knew right then that it would be a long night.

The following day, I stood on the front porch, mostly because I couldn't sit due to the previous night's events. I had a carton of raisins in one hand and two crackers in the other. I had just about eaten all the raisins when I heard a slight rustling coming from the woods. I figured that it was Elroy wandering the woods again. After a few seconds, a head poked out which caused me to scream—It was Pauly!

I threw a cracker over to him and he ate it. Then, like always, he ran over to the porch and up the steps. I kneeled down and he leapt on my arm and climbed up to my shoulder where he ate the remainder of the cracker. Just then my mother came to the front door to fuss about all the commotion I'd been making.

After seeing the squirrel on my shoulder she said, "So, you found Pauly."

"I sure did," I said as I went to sit on the top step. As soon as my butt touched the step, it started to tingle from the whopping I'd received the night before which made me jump back up quickly. Pauly lost his footing and fell to the porch. He wasn't hurt though. He just ran around my legs in a circle a couple times before I kneeled down and he re-climbed up my shoulder.

"I'm glad you found him," my mother said.

"Me too," I said. "Me too."

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