

What Day Is It?

‘You give me back! You give me back!’

Harry had him by the collar. ‘Give *what* back?’

‘Give me back! You give me back right now!’

Harry looked around for the others. ‘I don’t know,’ he said to Jem.

Jem shook his head.

When Harry turned back, the boy hit him in the lip.

‘Jesus!’ someone said.

‘You give me back!’ the boy screamed.

Harry swallowed. He held the boy out at arm’s length. ‘You’re crazy,’ he said.

‘You okay?’ Jem called. He was standing off to the side a little, his feet dancing.

‘He’s crazy,’ Harry said over his shoulder.

The boy swung again and missed and then again and caught Harry on the lip.

‘Get him,’ Jem said.

Harry felt himself go a little. He was shouting something and spitting blood onto the sidewalk. Then he was back there with it. He had the boy good and solid by the collar.

Just then Jem came in from behind and kicked the boy in the back, but the boy didn’t seem to notice, and Jem limped back to where Dick and Sandy stood by the ATM.

Dick was holding his empty Sprite cup.

Sandy was crying.

All around, people were stopping in the street to watch.

‘You give me back!’ the boy kept screaming.

‘I don’t have anything,’ Harry said. He didn’t know what to do. He wasn’t frightened, just confused. He found things were going very slowly and quickly at the same time. He noted the boy’s dark-rimmed reading glasses, and how he kept pulling his lips back from his teeth the way a horse does. ‘What the hell are you doing?’ he said. Then he saw what looked like blood in the boy’s teeth. ‘You hurt?’ he said. ‘What’s wrong with you?’

The boy swung hard and Harry, already leaning back, caught it in the lip and felt it pop. ‘Take those glasses off,’ he said. ‘You better take those glasses off.’ He was going away somewhere, he wasn’t sure.

‘Get him,’ Jem said again. ‘Just get him down.’ His feet weren’t dancing anymore.

All the time the boy was screaming, ‘Give me back! You give me back!’ He was crazy in his eyes, swinging his head and crying, and when he hit Harry a fourth time, Harry felt himself go completely and he pulled the boy in close and moved his hand up. ‘Stop fucking doing that,’ he said into the boy’s face. His glasses were gone now, and Harry smelled something hot and sour and awful. ‘You try it,’ he said, squeezing. ‘Go and try it.’ But the boy’s eyes just rolled and wandered like he was somewhere

else entirely and the next thing Harry knew, somebody was walking the boy off by the shoulders and he was back over with the others.

Jem was talking.

‘What?’ Harry said.

‘I said, are you dizzy?’

Harry was looking around.

‘Harry?’

‘Where’d he go?’

‘He’s gone,’ Jem said. ‘Forget him.’

Dick came up. ‘You alright, Bird?’

Harry bent over and spat more blood onto the sidewalk and nodded. There wasn’t any pain yet and he rolled his tongue over the wide smoothness of the split, already fat like a grape, and it was bright and sweet tasting. ‘You?’ he asked Dick.

Dick turned his empty cup upside down and shook his head. ‘That crazy prick,’ he said.

Harry blinked. ‘Man,’ he said. He was still coming back from wherever he’d gone. He looked over at Sandy with her big wet eyes and looked away. By now the crowd was breaking up. ‘They were all watching?’ he said.

‘Yeah,’ Dick said.

‘We should go,’ Jem said.

Dick made a show of throwing his cup in the bin.

‘Come on,’ Jem said.

Walking back to the car, Dick kept talking. ‘I mean, he was nuts.’

‘You can keep saying it,’ Jem said.

‘Well, wasn’t he?’

‘Of course he was. No one’s arguing with you.’

‘Well why the hell’d he have to push me?’ Dick said. ‘You see him push me, Bird?’

‘I grabbed him, didn’t I?’ Harry felt funny.

‘That goddamn crazy prick,’ Dick said again.

Harry sat down on the curb.

‘Whoa,’ Jem said. He squatted on his heels and looked Harry in the eyes. ‘You okay?’

‘Fine.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Jem said. ‘What day is it?’

‘Friday.’

‘It’s Sunday.’

‘I was kidding.’

Sandy said, 'We should call someone. We should call an ambulance.' It was the first thing she'd said since the boy had come out of nowhere and pushed Dick into the glass front of the bank and Harry had grabbed him by the collar.

Harry looked up at her now and saw her sad, frightened eyes and said, 'What?'

'You're hurt,' she said.

Harry shook his head. 'No,' he said.

They waited with him a minute. A few streets over, a siren started wailing.

'You reckon they got him?' Dick said.

Harry stood up. 'That's a fire truck.'

At the car, Jem offered to drive.

'You hurt your foot,' Harry said.

'I don't think with my foot.'

'No,' Harry said. 'You drive with it.'

Harry climbed in the back with Sandy and wound the window down. He had never ridden in the back of his own car before. He rested his head on the sill and thought about getting in under a cool shower.

Pretty soon, Dick was talking again. 'I mean, did you see his eyes?' he was saying to Jem.

'I saw them,' Jem said.

'He was someplace else,' Dick said. 'You know I bet he was on something. Ice or meth or whatever. And what was that shit he was screaming?'

'"Give me back,"' Jem said.

'Ha ha, yeah—"You give me back! You give me back right now!"'

Sandy said something then, but Dick didn't hear.

'Huh?'

'I said I don't think it was drugs.'

'Yeah? What then?'

'I don't know.'

Dick leaned around. 'You mean he was schizo?'

'I don't know,' Sandy said. She was looking out the window.

'Well?'

Sandy was quiet and Dick sat forward.

'Either way,' Harry said, 'it doesn't explain the blood in his mouth.'

'What blood?'

'In his teeth.'

'But you didn't hit him?' Jem said. 'Did you hit him?'

Harry looked at the backs of his hands. 'No.'

‘Why the hell not?’ Dick said.

‘Oh yeah?’

Dick shifted in his seat. ‘No one asked you to grab him.’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘And anyway,’ Dick said triumphantly, ‘I threw my drink on him.’

Harry laughed. ‘Yeah, my hands are sticky.’

‘That goddamn crazy prick!’

‘But what about you, Jem?’ Harry said. ‘Where’d you get him?’

‘Nowhere,’ Jem said. ‘The arse.’

They were all laughing except for Sandy.

Harry wasn’t thinking about that. He was feeling better. In fact, he had never really felt bad. There had been the initial shock, and then the coming down into the washed-out soggy feeling. But he had never felt low or frightened about any of it, and now there was just the dull throbbing in his lip to let him know something had really happened and they were far enough away from it to be joking it out and he was happy. ‘Hey,’ he said, ‘how ’bout we go somewhere?’

Jem looked in the mirror. ‘Huh?’

‘Go somewhere,’ Harry said. ‘I’m all wired or something.’

‘Like where?’

‘I don’t know. The beach?’

‘Yeah,’ Dick said. ‘Too hot for the city.’

‘You’re not too busted up?’ Jem said.

‘Pfft,’ Harry said.

‘I want to go home,’ Sandy said.

Dick swung around. ‘What?’

‘I want to go home.’

‘But come on, babe, Bird’s fine. Aren’t you, Bird?’

‘Yeah,’ Harry said.

‘You enjoyed it,’ Sandy said suddenly, and then she was crying again.

Harry didn’t say anything.

‘Jesus, Sand,’ said Dick.

‘I saw him,’ she said through her sobbing. ‘You enjoyed it and now you’re all laughing—that poor boy.’ She was really crying now and pulling away from Dick reaching for her through the seats.

Dick gave Harry a look like he was sorry, but Harry didn’t care one way or the other.

Jem dropped the others off at Sandy’s mother’s place, and Harry climbed into the front seat.

‘I’m getting the hang of this,’ Jem said, shifting into third.

‘Pig of a thing.’

‘I like it.’

‘Me too.’

Harry looked out the window. The breeze was good like that on his face. He rolled his tongue over his lip and smiled. ‘So what the hell was that?’ he said.

‘Sandy?’

‘Yeah.’

Jem shrugged. ‘She was pretty spooked.’

‘It was the only thing that got me was her crying.’

‘He got you plenty.’

‘I mean it. It just wasn’t necessary,’ Harry said. He was being pragmatic. ‘There was nothing ever really bad going on.’

‘It could have gone bad,’ said Jem. ‘It went a little bad.’

‘She said I enjoyed it.’

‘Well?’

Harry laughed. ‘Getting smacked around?’

‘That bit at the end, though.’

‘What bit?’

‘When you grabbed him.’

‘I grabbed him at the start. That’s how I got into it. I had him the whole time and I never hit him.’

‘At the end, you had him by the neck.’

‘No I didn’t.’

‘Yeah—and this big guy came up and walked him off. You were all funny. I was talking to you, but you never heard a word.’

‘I heard it.’

‘What’d I say?’

‘It’s Friday, it’s Friday.’

‘It’s Sunday.’

They were coming over the big hill by the shopping centre and Harry could see the ocean down beyond the dark-red tiled roofs of the houses. It was a deep, solid blue and there was a bright white haze where the sun shone down on it.

‘You know, he had these big thick glasses,’ he said. ‘Like reading glasses. I was thinking the whole time I wanted them gone ’cause I didn’t want to smash the lenses into his eyes. I kept seeing them breaking into his eyes and blood coming out.’

‘You threw them somewhere,’ Jem said.

Harry looked at him.

‘That was when you were crazy.’

‘Hey, he was crazy the whole time.’

‘But in the end—’

‘Well how many times did he hit you in the head?’

Jem shrugged his shoulders.

‘Or Sandy, while we’re still on it?’

Jem shrugged his shoulders and watched the road.

They were turning down Harry’s street. Neither had said anything about going home but that was where Jem had taken him and that was alright by Harry.

‘So how you want to do this?’ Jem said. ‘I can walk home or?’

‘Just take it and come back tomorrow.’

‘I got work tomorrow.’

‘Come after.’

‘You sure?’

‘If I need to go out, I’ll take Dad’s car.’

‘Alright, thanks.’

Harry got out and closed the door.

Backing into the street, Jem called through the window, ‘Hey, Bird.’

‘What?’

‘What day is it?’

Harry felt loose and heavy in his legs going down the drive. He went on through the garage and around the side to the sliding kitchen door. Inside he could see his father standing over the sink. He opened the door and went in.

‘Hi, Dad.’

Harry’s father, scrubbing a large, dirty, odd-shaped potato, turned and saw his son’s face. ‘What’s that?’ he said.

Harry smiled. ‘Some guy, crazy guy; he pushed Dick in the city.’

His father put the potato in the sink and took Harry’s head in his big hands and lifted his chin. ‘That doesn’t explain this.’

Harry told him about it while his father washed his hands carefully with the disinfectant soap, then took the bottle of iodine and a cotton ball from the jar in the cupboard. He unscrewed the cap on the iodine and, holding the cotton ball over the end, tipped the bottle up quickly and began to dab Harry’s lip with the cotton.

Harry sucked in through his teeth.

‘Were you dizzy?’ his father asked.

‘Uh uh.’

‘Do you have a headache?’

‘Not really. I felt kinda gross before, but not now.’

His father lifted Harry's hands and inspected his knuckles.

'I didn't hit him, Dad,' Harry said proudly. 'I didn't need to.'

His father looked at him, then screwed the cap back on the iodine and put the cotton in the bin and washed his hands again. 'Have you eaten?'

'We were going to when the guy pushed Dick. God, I had him and then he was swinging and screaming. He was nuts, Dad. I knew I could have got him. I just *knew* it, so I didn't. Does that make sense?'

'Go change your clothes and wash your hands and I'll make something. Wash them good,' he said.

Harry went out and cleaned up and then stood looking at himself in front of the bathroom mirror. There was a good amount of swelling, but the split wasn't so bad that he would need stitches and he was a little disappointed. He thought about Sandy and made a face in the mirror. Then he thought about the rest of it, and he felt only pride. He knew he could have taken much more, and that he could have given much, much more.

When Harry came back in, feeling strong and happy, his father had a toasted ham sandwich and a glass of orange juice waiting for him on the table.

'Can I have a beer?' Harry said.

'You want a beer?'

'Yeah.'

His father got him a beer.

'Aren't you gonna have one?' Harry said.

'Later.'

Harry sat down. 'Thanks.'

'Don't eat it if it hurts.'

Harry ate the sandwich slowly and gingerly and sipped at the cold beer while his father tidied up.

'So you never did anything to him?' his father said.

Harry swallowed. 'I didn't need to. I just held him out like this. He was crazy, Dad, I could *see* he was crazy. He had these small, weird eyes and he was crying. I felt like it would have been wrong to hit him like that. I kind of felt sorry for him.'

'Is Dick okay?'

'He's fine. He didn't do anything.'

'Nothing?'

'He threw his drink on him. But mostly he just stayed with Sandy.'

'Who's Sandy?'

'Dick's girlfriend.'

'And why did you grab him?'

Harry shrugged. 'He pushed Dick.' He looked around the kitchen. He felt like there was something else he wanted to say, but he didn't know what. Then he said, 'How about the time you hit that guy at the beach villa that Christmas?'

'What guy?'

'The one who fell on Mum in bed when he snuck in the window.'

'The drunk?'

'Was there another time?'

'I didn't hit him.'

'I saw you,' Harry said. 'I saw you take him outside. It was dark, but I saw.'

'I took him out, but I never hit him,' Harry's father said, coming over and taking the empty plate and the glass of juice back to the sink.

'I remember mum screaming,' Harry said. 'She woke me up, and for a second I thought it was 'cause you'd died.'

Harry's father drank off the orange juice and smiled. 'She wasn't very happy.'

'I remember you in your underwear—your long legs—dragging him down the hall by the collar, talking to him like you were gonna kill him.'

'You're telling stories now.'

Harry held the cool sweating can of beer against his lip and watched his father go back to washing the potatoes in the sink, scrubbing at them carefully with the sponge, his big shoulders working underneath his shirt.

'Why don't you buy the clean ones?' Harry said.

'I grew these.'

'Oh.'

His father held up the cleaned lumpy potato for Harry to see.

'Looks munted,' Harry said.

'Like that lip.'

Harry took a big sip. Then he said, 'So where's mum?'

'Lunch with the sisters.'

'They're not coming back here, are they?'

'No.'

'Good,' Harry said. He drummed his fingers on the table. 'That's good. Are you gonna tell her?'

'That you got hit?'

'Cause she'll go crazy.'

Harry's father looked over his shoulder.

'I mean, it's not that bad,' Harry said. 'I could just say I fell.'

'On your face?'

Harry laughed. 'I don't know.' He never spoke with his father this way. He finished his beer. He was feeling pretty good. Like nothing could really touch him. Not even the crying. 'Can I have another one?' he said.

'Wait for dinner.'

'What are we having?'

'I haven't decided.'

'I like the mash with the onions in it,' Harry said.

'I'll think about it,' said his father.

Harry held up the empty can and smiled. 'What if you have one too?'

Harry's father lowered his shoulders and dried his hands, then got two more beers from the fridge. He handed one to Harry.

'Do you think she'll be mad?' Harry asked.

'Not mad, no.'

'Upset?'

'I'm upset.'

'Really?'

His father took a drink.

'Well nothing happened pretty much,' said Harry.

'Something happened.'

'Nothing bad, but.'

Harry's father was looking at his son. 'For you,' he said.

Harry took a drink. Somewhere a long way off, a siren was wailing.