

Heaven Starts Here

By Larry Smith

***WHY WE LIKE IT:** We were smitten by this hard-hitting example of 'dirty realism' that isn't afraid to shoot from the hip. The author overcame two formidable challenges in writing this story: adept control of the volatile subject matter that many a writer wouldn't touch (no spoiler here, you gotta read it) and the conflicted voice of the young narrator with its necessary adolescent complications. The toned prose is rugged yet lyrically vital. The portentous mood assures the absence of sensationalism and the nuanced emotional shading broadens the spectrum of poignancy. When the title hits home, it's just a blow away. Quote: '...and one thing led to another and I don't really remember what I said but whatever it was one thing led to another and it led him to say they were going to run a train on somebody...'*

It was back in the day when Corona was still almost all white with a lot of Irish like me and a lot of Germans like her. For me it began behind Nicky's a few blocks off Roosevelt Avenue and on that little street where cars never go, which was catty-corner to the Woolworth's. DiMaio and Crawford said to meet them there on that street and then I'd go together with them to where they were going to do it but I wasn't sure I wanted to go at all. The thought of it made me very embarrassed and sort of scared too to tell you the truth. But I went anyway because it would have been awful to act like I was scared and I didn't have my wits about me enough to make something up about why I couldn't go. They'd scoff at me and they wouldn't believe me for a minute anyway and that would make it worse. For her it must have begun at the beauty parlor where she worked a block over from 108th Street, so which, I

guess, was really Corona Heights, but I wasn't that sure where exactly they were picking her up and I didn't have any real reason to ask. Stone and Sullivan would pick her up in the car, and when DiMaio and Crawford met me over by Nicky's they said, Let's go and oh by the way Bell and Gresto are going to be there too. That's seven, counting you, said DiMaio, the magnificent seven, he said, and he grinned. We started walking and I said, We gonna walk? What do you want, a limo? asked DiMaio, and I said, Why can't Stone and Sullivan pick us up, they got a car? I don't know why I asked because I didn't care one way or another. DeMaio said, Fuck that shit, but I don't know why he said that. But it was ok, because walking made me less nervous. We passed by the barber shop where I used to meet my uncle Ben but he died. Also, you know there must have been a half-dozen pizza parlors on those four, five blocks in those days and one very nice restaurant named Butterfly's, my mom told me because it was named after an opera that was a tragedy. So when we walked past it, I wondered why they would call a restaurant after a sad opera rather than a happy opera but looking back now I guess while we were walking I was just trying to distract my mind with anything I could think about rather than what was going to happen when we got to the grassy old yard behind Silver Hardware, which was gone out of business almost a year before and the building was still empty. I was really nervous about what I'd have to do when we got there and what might happen, and if I could even do what they'd want to see whether or not I could do. I felt ashamed one way or another and I even had trouble sleeping the night

before. I knew her to say hello to and I guess she was all right enough. She was pretty too in her way but I really wanted to be left alone and the only reason I got involved in the first place was because a week or so earlier I saw Crawford in study hall, he was the only one besides me still in school, and one thing led to another and I don't really remember what I said but whatever it was, one word led to another and it led to him saying they were going to run a train on somebody and he'd talk to DiMaio and Stone about my riding along if nobody else had any objections. I didn't know how to back out right there and then before it went any further and then he told me who she was and he grinned and I didn't say nothing, so there I was with one thing leading to another until there I was walking toward Silver Hardware where everybody else was going to be. Stone and Sullivan were there first, I don't know how much earlier than us, but they had the car so it made sense they'd be there first. Everybody walked to the back behind the store, she was like in a little semi-circle of the five of us. It was daylight savings time so it was getting dark already and before I knew it *was* dark. Where's Bell and Gresto? asked Crawford. They're coming, they're coming, said Sullivan, and DiMaio said, They're not coming yet, and the others laughed and I looked at her and she smiled a little. But it wasn't like what you might think, in fact, it was as if some part of her didn't deep down inside really want to be there, and she was nervous too, maybe not in the same way or for the same reasons as me, but she was nervous. Let's get started anyway, said Stone, and goes up behind her and lifts her sweater and pulls her brazier down and he feels up her

knockers. Come on, kid, he says to me, you do the honors next, but I sat there on my knees and said nothing and all of a sudden I just didn't care about them and there wasn't anything I could do or would do even if I did care about them. Besides, DiMaio isn't paying me any attention anyway, he's yanking her pants and panties down and soon she's standing there naked except for her white socks. DiMaio takes her arms and makes her cup her hands behind her head and he says to her, Put on a show. So she smiles a little, the same kind of smile as before, and she starts swaying and going her hips around in circles. Stone tells her to beg for cock and she does, I can still hear it. Then I see Bell and Gresto walking through a shaft of moonlight from the left side of Silver and they're smiling as they walk up almost as if they're dancing toward us, dancing in the moonlight and Gresto doesn't even stop walking but like in a single motion he gets her down on her knees. He goes first and I look away right away and I watch Bell watching and then Crawford does it, and then DiMaio puts his thing into her mouth while Crawford is still doing it. So then Crawford growls and smiles and takes it out of her. Then Sullivan does it and while he does it he spreads her fanny, and says, Watch it dance, I'm gonna make her asshole dance. DiMaio makes some kind of noise and he gives out a groan and then I hear her choking and Crawford says, Gulp it, gulp it down. Then he finishes and Stone turns her over and down on her back and keeps doing it and doing it and doing it until DiMaio says, Will you goddamn finish up, for Chrissakes? and now she starts

to make noises like she was in pain, and she says, Damn, damn, oh damn. She was so unhappy, I guess she was from the start, and why she was doing all of this at all I don't know, it didn't really matter and I didn't care, I don't know why it didn't matter and I didn't care, but I didn't except I felt bad for her. I watched and kept watching but I wasn't going to do nothing, nobody would make me do nothing, I don't care what they said or what stories they were going to tell on me later on. I shouldn't even have been watching, I should have just left and I wouldn't have cared what they thought if I had done that, I mean if I had just got up and left. But I sat there, I don't know why. Then Bell goes over and turns her over again and says, I like what I saw, and I guess from what I saw he put it in her rear end and she started hitting her hands on the ground and making some noises I don't want to talk about. When Bell finishes that, he has filth and blood on him, and I kept watching, I knew I had to stay there even though they might mock me out for not doing anything and there was no way in the world I would do anything, I didn't care what they said or thought, but the only thing anybody said right then was when Stone said, Man, that Bell just went ding-dong and Gresto laughed. I'll take a piece of that too, Crawford says, and goes and does it where Bell did it, only Crawford had just done it before the other way so he gets too tired or something to finish this time. Then Stone and Sullivan and Crawford yank their pants up, and Gresto and Bell do too after they clean themselves off with their own underpants which they throw away and leave on the ground next to the old store. It's funny how many details I remember,

and how even the smaller ones of all those details still make me sad. For an example, I remember the shade of green of her brazier, it was so pale green. I remember Gresto's glasses when he danced through the moonlight, Gresto wears glasses by the way, the rims were black as black, and the moonlight squinted off the lenses. I remember an old poster that was faded and filthy on the back wall of Silver, it said to come to a picnic at Transfiguration of Christ, which is a Greek Orthodox Church, I think it's on 98th Street, and I remember thinking even as I was watching Stone do it to her, which it seemed forever, that I didn't know anybody who had that religion, not a soul, I couldn't think of a single Greek or Russian I knew even in school. And I remember the ruby red polish on her toenails when her feet were up because Stone was doing it to her that way. It was funny when the guys left, they didn't mock me or anything, or tell me to do anything, they hardly minded me at all, only Crawford turned toward me as he walked away and asked, You coming? I just shook my head, I didn't even want to say no, because I was afraid of what my voice would sound like just saying that. So Crawford said, Later, and they all left. I was squatting on the ground, my trousers were good and dirt-stained, but then I got up and got over a little closer to where she lay there, and I squatted back on my knees. She was still naked, she seemed numb like she couldn't even figure to put her clothes back on. She didn't look at me or anything, she just stared straight ahead. I didn't look at her body, I looked at her face, and she was just staring straight ahead like

there was something in the dirt there in the yard that she was seeing and couldn't stop seeing. I don't know how long it was that we didn't say nothing. Finally I touched her on the elbow.

“Are you hurt, Sarah?” I asked.

“I'm ok, Danny,” she said.

I felt bad, so that was good to hear.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *'Heaven Starts Here' began as a kind of dialogue with another story, also about ganbanging: 'Tralala' the only story in Hubert Selby Jr's famous book Last Exit to Brooklyn that I found compelling. Very compelling, in fact, but wholly devoid of the slightest mitigation. So, I wondered, as I always wonder, if there are any crevices in hell through which a little light can meander. If so, how transformative can even that slightest light be? I'm basically a religious writer, I guess.*

BIO: Larry Smith's 'Heaven Starts Here' is from a collection called *Floodlands* to be published in October 2019 by Adelaide books which also just published his collection *A Shield in Paris*. Smith's novella, *Patrick Fitzmike and Mike Fitzpatrick*, was published by Outpost 19. His stories have appeared in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, *Serving House Journal*, *Sequestrum*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *The Collagist* and *{PANK}*, among numerous others. His poetry has appeared in *Descant* (Canada) and *Elimae* among others. Smith lives in New Jersey. Visit Larrysmithfiction.com