

Rascal

This is the story of my dog Rascal. It is not entirely the story of my dog Rascal, but he has a significant role in it. I was a child aged 13. Rascal and I did almost everything together except for going to school. Which was sad, for I hated school. I was a good student, and I got good grades. But I hated school because I feared that I would be punished by being paddled. Students were beaten with a paddle for the least little infraction. I remember one girl, a sister of a friend of mine, was paddled simply for chewing gum while she was playing her flute. Another friend of mine was paddled for not doing his homework. Thus, I always did my homework, and I would hate to have been beaten for not being willing to learn something. Anyway, I will say more about school later; for now, let me say more about Rascal.

Rascal was a mutt. He was a small dog, but not too small. Rascal weighed about 20 pounds and had light brown or tan fur that lightened in color on his belly until it was entirely white. And he had brown eyes, as most mutts do. Rascal and I would go fishing in the spring of 6th grade in school. I recall that we went on two separate occasions. I will tell you of both in what follows. The first trip was on a Saturday in May. Rascal and I got up at 5 a.m. and set off on a two-mile walk north of my parent's house. It was after 6 a.m. when we arrived at the creek where I was to fish. The creek was called Fool's Creek because of all the pyrite or "fool's gold," as it is called. Thus, it was called Fool's Creek.

Rascal and I made our way down Fool's Creek, fishing a hole and then wandering the woods on its periphery. At about noon or so, I was feeling tired, so I found a patch of ground covered in moss, laid down in the sunlight, and took a nap. Rascal lay beside me and kept watch. I drifted off a little but not too much until I heard my Papa holler my name, along with my Dad and Uncles. Two men had murdered two other men and had fled and abandoned their truck north of where I was fishing.

Learning this, my family came looking for me. Upon their finding me, I told them that I was taking a nap and had seen no one. Scared for my safety, my Dad told me it was not the best idea to nap in the woods, but I assured him that Rascal would have alerted me of any danger. That was one fishing trip I went on that spring with Rascal, and I felt he had guarded my life from then on out.

The next trip I went on was with my band director from school. I took Rascal along. The band director was not expecting that I would bring a dog, but he put up little resistance when he saw that I had brought Rascal. I introduced him to Rascal and the band director, Mr. Toots. We called him, but never to his face. His real name was Mr. Black, but we called him Mr. Toots because he was known for his flatulence.

Well, we went to a creek north of Washitall, USA, where I was from, and I had never been to it before. Rascal and I explored a little and found a nice water hole to fish. Several children went on the trip. Preps," they were called. The fact was that they were children of wealth, "rich kids," I called them. The

Preps finally made it up the creek to where Rascal and I were. They were fishing with crickets and caught only perch. I was fishing with lures and caught several small-mouth or brown bass.

One of the Preps, Cuss, didn't like that I was catching small bass, and he was only catching measly little perch. He asked me why I was catching them, and he was not. I told him.

"Cause you ain't got a lure," I told him.

"Well, let me use your lure," Cuss said.

"No, then I won't be able to catch any fish," I told him.

"Can't you use another lure?" Cuss asked.

"No, they're not biting on the other lures, just this one."

Cuss demanded I give him the lure, but I refused. We were standing on a large rock over the creek's water. Cuss reached for my pole, and I stepped to the side. He pushed me, and I lost my balance, so I reached out and grabbed him. I pulled myself back upright, and in doing so, Cuss lost his balance and fell backward off the rock into the water.

All the other children laughed at him as he returned to me, reached out, took my fishing pole from me, and broke it. This caused me to lose my temper, and I punched him in the chest; he swung back at me and started punching me in the face. Rascal tore into Cuss, and Cuss tried to escape the gnashing of the teeth. I attacked Cuss as well, as he was kicking Rascal. Mr. Toots pulled me off Cuss. He told me to get my dog, so I did. I felt victorious.

Mr. Toots demanded to know what was happening, and Cuss told him I pushed into the water for no reason. The other children didn't come to my defense. I felt defeated. I explained my case. Mr. Toots said there would be "licks for both of you!" This meant we were to get paddled when we got back to town.

We would have stayed a while longer, but Mr. Toots said, considering the circumstances, we should go ahead and return. We loaded it into the van we had come in. Rascal seemed unaffected by the whole situation. I was in fear. I had never been paddled before and was in terror. My uncle had told me horror stories about electric paddles and paddles with holes in them so that it hurt so bad you died.

As it was called, we got back to the band hall, and Mr. Toots led Cuss and me into the band room.

Cuss was to be paddled, too, for breaking my fishing pole. Mr. Toots got his paddle out. It was a board about three feet long, an inch thick, and about 6 inches wide. Mr. Toots told Cuss to "bend over and touch your toes." Cuss did, and Mr. Toots hit him with the paddle three times. Then it was my turn.

Mr. Toots told me to touch my toes, and I did. My heart was racing. The paddle hit me and stung, but it didn't hurt that bad. But somehow, in my fear, I forgot about Rascal. He had followed us into the band room, and after the second lick from the paddle, he tore into Mr. Toots. I did nothing, and Mr. Toots said: "Get that Goddamn dog off me."

Mr. Toots turned red and told me to bend over again. Mr. Toots raised the paddle, and Rascal tore into him again, seeing that he would hit me again. Mr. Toots tried to fend Rascal off with his foot, but Rascal just bit his leg. I again pulled Rascal off Mr. Toots. Mr. Toots was furious. About that time, my Dad stepped in between Rascal, me, and Mr. Toots and asked what was happening. Mr. Toots, defeated, said:

“Tell him, boy.”

I explained to my Dad. Mr. Toots walked away, and Cuss and the other children were watching. I told my Dad about the fishing hole incident and Cuss breaking my fishing pole, how he fell into the creek, and how it was not my fault. My Dad understood.

My Dad told me to get in the truck, our family vehicle. I went outside and got in the vehicle. My Dad spoke with Mr. Toots, and shortly, he came and got in the truck. He wasn't as angry with me as I thought he would be. Instead, he told me not to worry; he had told Mr. Toots what had happened and that Mr. Toots would talk to all the boys, especially Cuss, and let them know they were in the wrong. Whether this ever happened, I don't know. But that was the second fishing trip. Both are imprinted permanently into my memory for obvious reasons.

The point is that I formed a close bond with Rascal because of these two incidents, particularly the second incident with Mr. Toots. After that day, I swore that I would never let a teacher paddle me again, and I didn't. But that brings us to Mr. Yes, Sir, or Rod Stricter, my Science teacher.

Rod Stricter was a Christian man. It is ironic that he was a science teacher at Washitall Middle School. Washitall was a nobody-and-nothing town in the South. Here, people thought that the Earth was only 6,000 years old and that dinosaurs had been wiped out by the flood, from which Noah and his Ark saved the rest of the animals. The theory of Evolution was not true—we didn't come from apes! In the backwoods, you have authoritarian figures like old Rod Stricter who think that the adage "spare the rod and spoil the child" actually comes from the Bible. Nevertheless, Mr. Stricter was indeed a strict disciplinarian. His favorite saying was, "Break your jaw to say Yes, sir?" He uttered the fragmented sentence daily at Washitall Middle School. And that's why we called him Mr. Yes, Sir.

I had the displeasure of having Mr. Stricter for 8th-grade science. I noticed that Mr. Stricter made a point to say that when we went over the Earth's formation history and the introduction of animals – Mr. Stricter said you could "believe" this or how God had created the Earth and so on. I was fond of science. It's funny that I had a dictator for a science teacher.

Mr. Stricter was quick to paddle a student. He thought it was the way to show love to his students: through correction, that is. However, his form of correction was more of a tyranny over children, where learning was reduced to a fear of doing what was right or getting beaten. That is how we educate our children in the South, through fear. Fear of punishment, that is. But somehow, I learned science from that idiot.

And how Mr. Stricter ever reconciled science with his religion is beyond me. I supposed that was why he beat the students so frequently. Maintaining order is what he wishes to do. Absolute control is what he expected and desired. He was a poor excuse for a teacher. Learning is something that should be made fun of, not feared! I suspect old Rod merely feared knowledge because it contradicted his beliefs. And this is another matter entirely. But Mr. Stricter was quick to send you out into the hall. Take, for instance, Lacks. I remember the time when Lax turned in his homework half-finished. Mr. Stricter had us take up the papers and our science homework. Young Lacks took the papers, handed them to Mr. Stricter, and then went to his seat. Mr. Stricter looked through the papers and came to Lacks' paper. "You didn't finish the assignment, Lacks." Mr. Stricter told him.

"Yes. I did." Lacks said, not even realizing he had not done the last half of the assignment, as it was on another page.

"Break your jaw to say: Yes, sir?" Mr. Stricter asked in his usual condescending manner.

Lacks was a poor boy from a poor family. He had ragged clothes and didn't bathe, but I liked him. He was kind and wouldn't kill a fly, as they say. But he was embarrassed and got angry, as you could tell by his red face. But he was a passive child and simply said, "No." Mr. Stricter asked him again, wanting him to say, "Yes, sir." "Break your jaw to say: Yes, sir?" Mr. Stricter asked.

"Yes, mam." Lacks said with a smile of victory.

"Well, you know what that means?" Mr. Stricter said, beyond furious. "Out in the hall!"

Lacks drug himself out of the desk chair and walked outside the room with his head down. I could see him in the hall. He stood with his arms crossed while Mr. Stricter got a "witness." That was what was required by Law, that another teacher "witness" or watch the teacher giving the beating. I suppose this was so the student was beaten properly. But the point I want to make here is that I have come to understand that religion, that is, evangelical Christians, and corporal punishment go hand in hand. The two are intertwined. And out of them comes violence and poverty of thought. Anyhow, this is what I had to contend with as a youth. But Rascal and I tried to escape it all in the backwoods after school every day. I got Rascal when I was twelve in 6th grade. I had him through 8th grade dealing with Mr. Stricter. When I was a sophomore in 10th grade, at 16, I woke up one morning and let Rascal out to do his business.

I fell back asleep, and at noon, I woke again. My mom had made some macaroni and cheese. I got a bowl of it and was eating it when my brother came in and whispered something to my Dad. And Dad came over to me and told me the news: Rascal was dead. He got hit by a vehicle after I had let him out. I felt guilty. I let him out and went back to sleep. Rascal wandered out into the road and got killed, and it was my fault... so I thought.

I went and looked at Rascal. He didn't even look injured. The vehicle must have hit him in the head and broken his neck. That was good that he didn't suffer. I took it hard. Rascal and I had been through a lot together. I buried him in the woods behind our house.

A Myth

"There was a little boy who was about your age. Let's just say he was about twelve. This little boy was deer hunting with his Dad in the woods. His Dad instructed him to stay under a tree while he made a circle down through the bottoms. And if they were lucky, the Dad might jump a deer up for the boy to shoot. So, the little boy said he understood, and his Dad disappeared into the woods silently. The Sun began to shine on the little boy, and he got too hot, so he took his orange hat off, and his brown hair glistened in the sunlight. The boy's bottom began to get sore from the hard ground, so he removed his orange vest and made a cushion. Underneath, he wore a tan jacket. The boy kept sitting still just like his Dad had told him, and he was not used to sitting for such a long time, so after a while, the boy took off his thin, orange hunting pants. Underneath, he had brown corduroy pants that his father told him not to wear, but the boy had snuck them on while his father wasn't looking. So, the little boy sat there, brown hair blowing in the breeze as he sat on his orange vest and pants with his hat to the side. The boy was tired of waiting. What seemed hours to the boy was just about a half-hour. It's just that waiting on deer requires a lot of patience the boy had yet to learn. So, the little boy got up and looked for his Dad. The boy left his orange hunting clothes under the tree if his Dad came looking for him. He would know that the boy would be back for his clothes. The boy was clumsy in the woods and rustled through the leaves like a gray squirrel gathering acorns. The Dad was busy hunting in the bottoms and returning up the ridge to his son when he heard something. He froze still and waited. The Dad had been hunting a deer for about an hour and finally stalked up on it. And then -Boom! A shot rang out and scared the deer off. The Dad was confused when he squeezed off his shot and hit the boy, who was all dressed in brown.

The little boy was shot in the head, in that glistening brown hair, and died."

"The moral of this story is that you should never take off your orange when you are deer hunting, or something bad might happen to you just like it did to the little boy in the story." The principle told us.

"But isn't it the dad's fault for shooting his boy," I asked.

"Why... of course not, Jack. The boy disobeyed his father. First, he wore the brown corduroy pants, then he took off all the hunter orange he knew he wasn't supposed to do, and..."

"But his dad never told him to leave on his orange hunting clothes, did he?"

"I didn't tell it in my story, but I am sure the Dad would have told him this. And besides, the boy knew he was supposed to stay put."

"But my dad says that you should never shoot unless you can count the points on that deer's horns, and to never shoot at noises, and..."

"Out in the hall, Jack. I'll teach you a lesson one way or another."

“Now bend over. You’re gonna get a paddling for back-talking me.”

“No. My Dad says you can’t paddle me. He doesn’t believe in it. Here.” I gave him the note.

“Well, your dad isn’t here now, is he?”

And he ripped up my note from my Dad and gave me licks anyway. It didn’t hurt. I wanted to cry, though, but I didn’t. I laughed at the principal to make him mad. I hated him and his stupid story.