

“Two Dead Boys”
An old folk rhyme

Back in the 1960s, the kids in my foster home often sung or skipped rope to this children’s’ folk rhyme. We saw this as our anthem, and a reflection of our lives.

*Ladies and gentlemen, hoboes and tramps,
Cross-eyed mosquitoes and bow-legged ants,
I come before you to stand behind you,
To tell you something I know nothing about.*

*One bright day in the middle of the night,
Two dead boys got up to fight.
Back-to-back they faced one another,
Drew their swords and shot each other.
Boom-boom, what a crazy world, crazy...
Boom-boom, what a crazy world, CRAZY!*

*One was blind and the other couldn't see,
So they chose a dummy for a referee.
A blind man went to see fair play,
A dumb man went to shout “hooray!”
Boom-boom, what a crazy world, crazy...
Boom-boom, what a crazy world, CRAZY!*

*A deaf policeman heard the noise,
And came and shot the two dead boys.
A paralyzed donkey walking on by,
Kicked the copper right in the eye,
Boom-boom, what a crazy world, crazy...
Boom-boom, what a crazy world, CRAZY!*

*Sent him through a rubber wall,
Into a dry ditch and drowned them all.
Now, if you don't believe this lie is true,
Just ask the blind man -- he saw it, too!
Boom-boom, what a crazy world, crazy...
Boom-boom, what a crazy world, CRAZY!*

Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* [1959, Oxford. Oxford University Press, pp. 24-29].

The British Columbia Folklore Society, Mike Ballantyne, “*One Fine Day in the Middle of the Night*” “*Two Dead Boys*”, folk rhyme,
<http://www.folklore.bc.ca/Onefineday.htm>

“How Love is Learned”

By; Charlie Bissett

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I stood on the porch of the cottage reminiscing. For three and a half years this foster home, had been my home and family, one of the few peaceful moments in my turbulent childhood. Back in the late 1960s, this institution provided long term foster home care, to forty some odd children who were wards of the court. Being here felt more like coming home than that day my mother picked me up.

Watching the children play in the dayroom, I remembered when I used to play in the dayroom just like them. It had been almost fifteen years since the court had returned me to my parents. This was the first time I had found a chance to stop back by here in all those years.

I remembered one particular Friday afternoon a long time ago. Almost everyone was gathered in front of the television watching cartoons. Back then this was the Junior Boy's cottage for six to eleven year old boys. Friday was a special day. It was allowance day. Those who were under ten years old would receive 45 cents. The older kids got 75 cents. Those were the days when 25 cents bought you a comic book, and 15 cents got you an ice cream cone with two scoops of real ice cream. Oh, that was a long time ago.

In the dayroom eight little boys sat in front of the television waiting for the promised return of their cottage counselor.

In the houseparent's lounge, Larry found Teddy looking out the window. Larry walked up behind him and sat down on the arm of the sofa next to the window. “Are you okay today, Teddy?” Larry asked.

Teddy was leaning against the window ledge with his head resting in his folded arms. Tears slowly moved down his face. “Oh, I'm okay,” Teddy answered.

Larry pretended not to notice that Teddy had been crying again. Turning away from Teddy, Larry stared out the window to watch some of the kids from the other cottages play volleyball on the court below.

Larry,” said Teddy, “how long have you been here?”

About a year and a half,” he answered.

Is this your first foster home?”

No, I've been in two others,” said Larry without looking at Teddy.

“Is it all right if I ask you how you got here?”

“It's no big deal,” began Larry. “A few years ago my father left my mother. She tried to take care of me and my sister, but it was too much for her. Finally she cracked up and they had to put her in the hospital. We've been in the system every since.”

Do you ever get to see your mom and dad?” asked Teddy.

“My mom is still in the hospital,” said Larry. “My father can rot in hell. I'll kill him if I ever find him.”

Larry turned and looked at Teddy. "How'd you get here?" Larry asked.

Teddy looked at Larry a moment, shrugged his shoulders, and then turned to watch the court below. "Well, mom and dad were having a party about two weeks ago. The Pigs busted the party and found the drugs. They took my mom and dad to jail, and sent me here."

For a few moments the two boys sat quietly looking out the window. Then tears reappeared in Teddy's eyes, and he began sobbing quietly. Larry reached over to the younger boy and pulled him close, gently rocking Teddy in his arms. "Larry," cried Teddy, "I want to go home...I don't want to stay here...I want my mommy and daddy..."

It's okay. You'll be with your folks again. "Larry said, trying to console the six year old child. "It's okay. We're all going to be your new friends. And, after a while you'll get to go back to your mom and dad."

Teddy sat next to Larry as he held him. After Teddy got his crying under control, he got up from the sofa and walked back to his room. At that time, only God knew how that little boy would have to grow up beyond his years during the next year and a half. The innocence of youth died when a child became a foster child. It did not matter if the child was placed in an institution like this or with a family setting, he would still face his nightmares alone.

Back in the day room the rest of us still sat in front of the television.

Hey Pat, look what I got," said Doug. Out of his pocket Doug pulled a glass marble and handed it to the boy that sat next to him at the end of the sofa.

Pat held the marble up to the light and stared into the little ball watching the colors that danced within it. "Man this is groovy," Pat said slowly. "Where did you get this?"

I won it from a guy at school today," answered Doug, then suddenly he blurted out, "Let me have my marble back!"

"Ah, come on Doug. Can't I finish looking at it?" pleaded Pat.

"No! That's my special marble," said Doug. "I don't want no one to lose it."

As Pat handed the marble back to Doug, Dennis walked over from the kitchenette with a glass of water in his hand. Dennis sat down on the armrest of the sofa next to Timmy. "Hey, Timmy," said Dennis. "Is your dad going to visit you and Pat this weekend?"

"Yup." answered Timmy, without taking his eyes off the television.

Dennis bent his head over Timmy in an effort to get Timmy's attention. When Timmy noticed what Dennis was doing he jerked his head back and swatted at Dennis, as if shooing a fly away. "Would you go sit somewhere else," Timmy said indignantly.

Dennis ran around the sofa to where Pat was sitting and plopped down on the seat, bumping Doug out of the way. The marble that Doug had, went bouncing out of his hand and on to the floor. "You Fink!" Doug yelled as he went scrambling to retrieve his runaway prize.

“Where's your dad taking you this weekend?” Dennis asked.

“I don't know,” answered Pat.

“Can I go with you? Would you ask your dad if I can go with you?”

“I don't know,” said Pat. “It depends on if he's got enough money this time.”

Just then Larry came running out of the counselor's lounge, yelling, “Linda is coming! Linda is coming, and she's got a car.”

Our foster home had a small fleet of three cars and two buses. The buses were too big for only a hand full of kids to be running off to the store in. Yet, it was not possible for everyone to use the cars at the same time. So, when Friday came, one cottage or another ended up not going out. Larry's news meant that we were probably going out for the night.

Friday night held special value because it was the only weekend night where we were all together. Many of us would be going out with one of our parents for Saturday and Sunday. So especially for the loners like Dennis, whose parents never visited on weekends, Friday night was a special night of youthful fun and comradery.

Larry stood on the porch steps, holding Teddy by the shoulders as Linda drove the big station wagon up the driveway. The rest of us boys came pouring out of the cottage just as the car came to a stop.

Linda stepped out of the car and walked up on to the porch carrying the big manila envelope that held our allowances. In spite of Linda's being twenty-one years of age, she looked like another one of the kids. She was a petite woman who stood only four foot six inches tall; an attractive woman with a cute round face and a big warm smile.

Standing on the porch, Linda reached into the envelope and pulled out the smaller envelopes that held our allowances. In her heavy Liverpool, English accent she called each of our names and handed us our money.

“Are we going to a movie tonight?” asked Roger.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” she answered, “The Senior Boys have the car reserved for tonight. But, I thought you boys would like to go shopping. So, I asked the kitchen to hold a late dinner for us. That way we can have the car for a few hours before I return the car to the Senior Boys. How would you boys like that?”

A chorus of consenting voices sang from the boys.

“I've got shotgun!” called Roger. That was our way of claiming the front passenger seat next to the window.

“Fine,” said Linda. “Larry, take Teddy and put a sweater on him. Right now, let us wait a bit for Joshua. He has not gotten his allowance yet, and he will probably want to come.”

Having said that, the boys broke up the gathering on the porch, and went running back into the cottage. Several boys went back to watching television. Others went to get their sweaters and jackets. All we could do not was wait for Joshua.

Linda seemed to be always watching out for Joshua. If he was depressed, she would console him. If he was having problems with his homework, she would sit with him and help him work it out. If he got into a fight, she would take him aside and settle him down. It was not that she liked him more than the rest of us. No, she loved us all just the same. But, she spent a lot of time on Joshua.

About five or ten minutes later Larry came running into the day room, "Joshua's coming! Joshua's coming, let's go to the store."

"Wait a second boys," said Linda from the kitchenette were she and Ben were washing the dishes. "Give me a few moments to get out Joshua's allowance. You have got time to finish your cartoon." Linda dried her hands off and walked into the House Parents office to retrieve the envelope with Joshua's allowance.

As Linda walked out of the cottage she told the boys, "Don't forget your sweaters. It is going to get cold tonight. And, someone turn the TV off."

"Linda, I've got shotgun. You remember, right?" yelled Roger from the sofa.

"Yes Roger, I have not forgotten," she said as she stepped out the door.

As Linda stepped out on the porch, Doug was out there showing his new marble to Jack. "I won it today at school." Doug said to Jack.

"That's a Boss marble." Jack said casually.

"I won it fair and square. I took eight of his marbles and his shooter, here." Doug continued. "Give me my marble back! It's mine, and I don't want nothing happening to it."

Joshua came strolling up the road that lead to our cottage, where Linda waited for him in the driveway behind the car. As he walked his head danced from side to side while he whistled a popular mid-1960's radio tune of that time.

Joshua was the biggest of all of us assigned to the Junior Boy's cottage. He was a stocky five foot two inches tall. Pat might have been taller, but he was not bigger. Joshua was always chosen first when we had to pick teams to play football,

When Joshua reached the driveway Linda held out the envelope with his allowance. "Here is your allowance, Joshua," she said, just as Larry, Teddy and Roger came out the door.

Joshua opened the envelope and peeked into it, just as Timmy, Dennis and Pat walked out of the cottage.

With a smile, Joshua put the envelope into his pocket.

Ben was the last person out of the cottage. "Stand still a second." Larry said as he helped Teddy button up his sweater. Pat turned to Dennis and asked, "Do you want to sit

in the back with me?” Slowly the crowd of boys made themselves ready and began moving off the porch toward the car.

When Joshua looked back up at Linda, she said, “We are going to the store, Joshua. Would you like to go with us? You can sit next to me and control the radio.”

Joshua’s face tightened up, and he screamed, “Why do you do that to me!”

Suddenly, Joshua straight punched Linda in the face, sending her flying against the back of the car.

All the boys had seen it, and were stunned motionless for a moment. Who could believe that anyone would ever hit Linda? Especially Joshua?

“Get Joshua!” Jack yelled as he took off down the steps.

Together as one, screaming and yelling they ran after Jack to take down Joshua. Maybe one on one Joshua could best any of them, but he could never withstand all of them. Linda was sacred. No one was going to hurt her while her boys were around.

“STOP!” Linda ordered, “Do not move!” Linda had come around the side of the car to face the boys. With her right hand she braced herself against the car. Her left hand covered her face where Joshua had hit her. But, her voice was firm, “You boys are to go back up on to the porch. Do not come off the porch! Do as I say! Now!” Slowly the boys moved back up on the porch.

Linda turned to face Joshua, once again. “Joshua, I just wanted to know if you wanted to go for a ride with us,” she said gently. “What is wrong, Joshua?”

With a roundhouse punch, Joshua hit Linda in the side of the face. Linda bounced off the back of the car and cart wheeled on to the lawn beside the car.

Jack bolted to go after Joshua, when Dennis grabbed Jack. Roger step into Jack's path to further block him. “Jack, this is her call.” Dennis growled under his voice. “She said, stay out of it!” Jack stood leaning against Roger, as Dennis and Roger held him trying to get him to relax; all of them watching the scene on the lawn.

Timmy moved next to his brother Pat, and without touching his brother he watched from behind him.

Larry held on to his little friend Teddy. Under his voice Teddy pleaded, “Joshua, please don't hit Linda no more. Please, Joshua, don't hit her...” Tears rolled down Teddy's face as he stood clutching Larry, trembling.

Joshua stepped back and looked at Linda. She lay sprawled on the ground. With her right elbow she propped herself up. With her left hand she held the side of her mouth where she had been last hit. Blood oozed out from between her fingers and fell on her pretty yellow sweater.

It was quiet for a moment, until Joshua dropped his hands back to his sides.

“What are you trying to do to me?” Joshua yelled.

“Why do you always treat me so good?” Joshua was now crying. His voice held an edge of hysteria in it. “Are you trying to make me feel guilty or something...? What is it you are trying to make me to do...?”

Joshua stood quietly as tears rolled down his face. Slowly the tension in his face and muscles began to relax. But, in his face was an expression of complete defeat. He turned and started to walk away from Linda. After a few steps he turned and looked at Linda, “I’m going down to the Administration building and turn myself in to Mr. Franklin.” And with that said, Joshua walked away.

Joshua was never punished for what happened. I was surprised and confused by this course of events. I asked Mr. Franklin, the senior administrator at night and on weekends to explain it all to me.

“Joshua,” said Mr. Franklin “has been in the foster home system since he was three years old. This is the eighth home he has been in. Joshua’s mother has been sick for a very long time, and he has no father.

“In his whole life, no one has ever really loved Joshua for who he is. As far as Joshua can see, the only time anyone ever treated him good or gave him love was when they were trying to manipulate his behavior.

“Joshua does not understand love as most people do. So, when Linda was kind to him he thought it was another attempt by someone to manipulate him.”

“Understand son,” continued Mr. Franklin, “We all need to be loved. That is a natural hunger in every person's soul. But, the ability to give love and accept love is something we learn through our relationships with others.”

“So, you're not going to punish him?” I asked.

“No.” said Mr. Franklin, “He has already suffered enough. In his own way he loves Linda, and this has made him terribly confused and upset. He feels very badly about hitting Linda. If we punish him now, it would only confuse him more.”

Now as an adult, it felt strange to review these old lessons from my childhood. As I reminisced, my wanderings took me by the kitchen. Outside the doors I found an old friend, Captain the cat. He was a kitten when I first arrived at the foster home. Now he lay on the back steps lethargic and content in his old age.

“May I help you, sir?” a voice said behind me.

I turned to find a woman standing behind me. “I used to live here at one time.” I explained, “Back when Captain was a kitten.”

“Well hello, then. I'm Pamela Turner.”

I introduced myself. Then I paused as a memory came back to me. “You’re still here... after all these years?” Maybe I didn’t recognize her, but how could I have forgotten her? I had one of those secret adolescent crushes on her a long time ago.

“Oh, yes,” Pamela chuckled to herself. “My folks were never able to get it together enough to get me back. So I stayed here.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I said politely as we walked into the dining hall and poured ourselves some coffee.

“Don’t be sorry for me. I’m glad my mom never got me back. Once she started drinking all she wanted to do was pick fights with me and cut me down. No, I thank God I was sent here. These people really helped me out. Mom said she loved me, but I didn’t need that.”

“No, actually I envy you.” I said. “Thankfully mine didn’t drink, but I’ve seen enough of my mother’s poverty and the constant fighting with my father and step-mother to make me wish I had stayed here, or was born dead. My folks said they loved me too.”

“Never say, you wish you were dead.” she interjected. “You don’t realize how lucky you are.”

“Lucky, for what?” I said cynically. “After everything we’ve been through, I’m supposed to feel lucky?”

“In spite of everything we’ve been through, you’re still alive and have a career.” she retorted. “You might not know it but almost half of us never really made it after leaving here. I know, because every time a police request for background information comes through here, I have to type the response.”

We talked over old times and the friends we knew. It was sad to hear, but most of our friends did not fair very well.

Pamela was getting married in two months.

Joshua was shot by a police officer while trying to rob a liquor store. His gun was empty. He did not make it to his twenty-first birthday.

Larry blew his brains out with a pistol. His sister had a complete nervous breakdown, and was committed to a state mental hospital.

Linda married another counselor and moved up north.

Doug died of a heroin overdose. His sister became a drug addict with a police record; repeatedly being arrested for prostitution.

Out of all the people I knew and loved, half of them became social misfits with wasted lives. Their stories often came to tragic endings, one after another. Drugs and alcohol had crippled many. A lot had been incarcerated in hospitals or penal institutions. Almost one in ten had died before reaching thirty.

“If you have gotten this far in life without falling, then at least you must possess some type of inner strength that has kept you alive. And, for that you should be proud of yourself.” Pamela finished saying.

I had never thought very highly of myself. I was always the strange kid with the odd ways of doing things. I was the kid whose clothing didn’t fit right or colors clashed. I was the restless kid in the back of the room who drew attention to himself, even when he was trying to be anonymous. I was the one people called weird, nerd, freak, jerk, or if they were trying to be polite they said, “You’re strange.” I was always the outsider.

Although from within myself I could not see what made me different, I knew before I left the foster home that I would not be what people commonly was referred to as normal. Being malnourished for love has a strange affect on a child's behavior. So, I always found myself caught in a fight within myself against the labels, the stigmas that people dumped on me. But this fight against that cynical subconscious childhood conditioning was a cold lonely fight. I guess the others in some way must have given up the fight, and fell victim to their own self-destruction. It wasn't the foster home's fault; it began with our natural families.

The realization that I had managed to survive this experience, and even to a limited extent better myself over what my parents had offered me in life left me feeling surprised. Somehow, I had withstood this test of fire. I was a survivor.... And, even if no one else could see that, today I finally saw it, with understanding.

Later, as I drove away, I cried for my friends.

Epilogue:

About eleven or twelve years after the above story, I returned to my old foster home in Pasadena for another visit. This time, Mr. Hitchcock, the director took me on a tour of the 17 acre campus. Immediately, I noticed that the facility was caring for three times as many children as there had been in my time. Together, we walked up the slope to the small cottage where I used to live. Out front, a group of kids were playing.

Walking along the path to my old cottage, he asked me about how I came to be there as a foster child?

I told him that my family had become destitute. My father had more kids than his income as a commercial artist could support. When my parents divorced, they couldn't afford to regularly feed us, and the county stepped in.

He looked at me with a surprised expression, "Was that, all? You understand that today, you would not qualify for admission to this foster home."

"No," I said. "What is the criterion today for admission?"

As we approach my old cottage, the children ran over to see who the stranger was. From within the crowd, a precocious little girl challenged me. "Strangers aren't supposed to be here." She warned me.

"Oh, I'm not a stranger here," I mused back to her. "I used to live here, when I was a boy."

"No way," she pronounced. "You're too big to live here."

I stooped down so that I could look at the little girl eye to eye. "How old are you?"

"I'm seven," she answered.

"And, when you grow up to be an adult, are you still going to be as little as you are, today?"

"No," she said. Then a befuddled expression crossed her face as mild chuckles came from the rest of the crowd. Finally, it registered with them who I was.

"I lived here a long time ago... before you were even born. Now, I'm all grown up." At this point, the novelty of my being a stranger had worn off, and they ran back to playing.

Returning to my conversation with Mr. Hitchcock, I asked, "So, what's it take to get in here, today?"

He looked up in the air and sighed, and then looked at me. "You have to be within thirty days of being dead at the hands of your own parents.... Many of these kids here have already lost a sibling."