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THE SUMMER I RUINED

Mord McGhee

In August 1980, ten dollars was a fortune to me, and it was during that summer that I inadvertently brought about ruin. My intentions were never malicious, yet the outcome was inevitable. Compounding the situation, our family teetered on the brink of financial collapse.

Despite our parents' tireless efforts, they often reminded us of the three jobs our father juggled to meet the high costs of raising us. Among the most cherished household items were batteries, essential for powering remote controls, calculators, smokeless ashtrays, cassette players, radios, answering machines, and a myriad of other vital gadgets. At nine years old, I believed I understood their worth. But was I correct?

That morning, I was roused from sleep by the sound of Dad returning from his grueling night shift. His rotating schedule was a cruel routine, depriving him of baseball games and school events. As he trudged up the stairs, Mom descended, clutching the battery-powered fan that Dad kept by his bedside.

The summer months of June, July, and August were sweltering, and we all relied on fans to keep cool. At my immature age, I had little understanding of the toll shift work

took on the human mind and body. Reflecting on it now, I shudder at the thought of what my father endured, always striving to remain even-tempered.

After hastily pulling my sheet over the bed in a semblance of tidiness, I grabbed my baseball mitt and ball and headed for the door.

"Wait, Reeno."

I looked back at Mom, blurting out what was on my mind. "Does Dad have to work on my birthday again?"

"What? He has no choice." It was no secret. August was also shutdown month at the plant. Fourteen days with no paycheck. "He doesn't want to miss your birthday," she said.

"Mom . . . Jimbo's waiting."

Jimbo, my friend from across the street, was my age, while his younger brother matched the age of my own sibling. Though three years our junior, the four of us often reenacted Saturday night professional wrestling matchups in the backyard. We had mastered all the signature finishing moves. Jimbo and I took on the roles of the heels, Andre and Hulk, while our little brothers embodied the world champions, Backlund and Superfly. They weren't specifically waiting for me, but the odds were high that they were out there, ready for action.

"He can wait a little longer," she said. "Need you to do something."

"Me? Why me? J.P.'s home."

"Need you to go to Halboth's," she said, naming the drugstore at the top of the road. Too far for my brother to go alone.

"Aww, why?"

"Here," she said. "This is important."

"What for?" I asked, whining a little.

"Batteries."

"Batteries?"

She exhaled a stream of cigarette smoke from those menthols, then carefully placed it onto the lip of her smokeless ashtray, which was not running. "Your father's fan needs batteries. So does the ashtray. And we're just going to need them. You know."

"Sure."

Mom did all the cooking and cleaning, and we didn't have air conditioning. Therefore, she occupied her regular spot on the couch beneath a large window. Here the sun shined, and a gold haze of smoke dispersed to a rotating floor fan. There used to be another house blocking the light, but it burned down when I was five, and Dad borrowed money to buy the empty lot.

"Here's the list," she said, handing me a slip of yellow paper. Then she opened a cigarette case, a sequin bag with a metal clasp, pulling something out from it. She dragged another stream of smoke, and into my hand she placed an Alexander Hamilton. "Come right home after. Don't tell your father about the money or the batteries. Got it?"

"Okay." My answer was mechanical, and I didn't want to do it. I read her list and a breath caught in my throat.

"What?" she asked.

"It's a lot," I said.

The list included AA batteries, Triple As, Bs, Cs, nine-volt squares, and even the granddaddy of batteries, Ds! Deep inside, something sparked because I knew that toys required Ds. Toys, and with my birthday arriving soon! The sudden feeling that this mission had more at stake excited me.

She picked up her beer and sipped, eyeing me curiously. "And don't buy any baseball cards," she said. "Mean it."

"No, right," I replied. Hurt she would think such a thing! I liked baseball stickers. I collected the books, the stickers, and the stick gum. I had a drawer filled with the stuff.

"Just bring the batteries right back," she said. "You'll need the change for lunch."

Ugh. I didn't want school lunches. Even so, my obsession with foil images of ballfield heroes had to rest. But my birthday was coming! Think . . . with all the batteries on her list, there wouldn't be much change from a ten anyway. "Of course," I said. "Wouldn't ever." And I stuffed the bill into a pocket and started toward the door.

"Reeno?"

"Huh?" I turned.

She again had the money in her hand.

"How did you . . . "

"Use the pocket that has no hole," she said with a worried frown.

Next, the only thing that lay between me and victory was a short walk. I went for my portable cassette player, and ironically, its batteries were dead. "Aww, man." Without the comfort of ACDC, I went out the door.

Bentwood Avenue. The street I grew up on. At the border of the city of Pittsburgh and Aldwin Township. A small town in America with its own mayor, its own police, its own emergency medical services. We lived on the farthest street yet within the borough limits, which not only meant I had to walk a long distance everywhere I had to go, but also that I had to face city kids. You know . . . city kids.

One side of the street stood high atop flights of stairs while the other was level to the curb, and no matter which way one walks along Bentwood Avenue, it's uphill. I didn't often go to Halboth's because technically, it was in Pittsburgh. The stretch up there had establishments my father frequented. Anjos Pizza, Isaly's, Papa Bear Restaurant, Hartman Realty. However, the

most common type of business was taverns. With terrible reputations too.

At the top of Bentwood Avenue lies Brownsville Road, an old route with a storied past going all the way back to colonial days. Behind it is an alley we kids called Red Dog. I don't know the origin, but my guess is that someone saw a red dog one day and the label stuck. One day I heard news of a fight that ended in a fatal stabbing, no doubt two people who had grown up city kids. Avoided it when I could, though with the battery mission this side road played no small role.

I reeled as soon as I heard a yell, and realized an older kid, a city kid, was coming at me on a bicycle. He slid sideways to a stop, a little too close to my feet. "Where you going?" he demanded. "You can't go this way. This is our turf."

"You're not from Bentwood," I said. Behind him, another older kid on a bike rolled into view. He stared at me without speaking. Then the two glanced at one another. The city kid in front of me chuckled menacingly.

"Do you have any money?" The boy's eyes flashed mischievously.

"No," I told him. "Where would I get money?"

"I don't know," the kid growled. "Allowance or whatever candyass shit you suburbanites get." The kid's lips curled.

"Come on," the other city kid said. "Let's go."

"See you around, dickweed," said the city kid in front of me, and he sped off through Red Dog Alley. At once I pounded the pavement. Passing across the intersection, four streets merged—Bentwood, Maytide, Brownsville Road, and Sankey. Halboth's was straight ahead. There was a lull in traffic, so I darted across the way and pushed inside.

Back then, drugstores weren't what they are today. You could find anything a kid could want. There were shelves and aisles narrow and overstocked, displaying games, puzzles, toys, candy, gum, and fireworks. At the front counter, there was an ice cream freezer and beside it a refrigerator with cans of cola. My eyes went to a row of trading cards and baseball stickers and, as I drew out the money, I also drew out the note with the list of batteries. Sighing, I plucked the first package off its hook.

A young woman approached from behind the counter. "Please don't touch the merchandise if you don't intend to buy it," she said.

"Mom sent me to buy these," I said, showing her the note. She scanned it and opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, I set the Hamilton on the counter, smoothing it clumsily.

"We keep the D batteries back here," she said, disappearing for a moment, placing four packs on the counter. "Go on get the rest yourself. Serious number of batteries."

I was proud and she could see it. Batteries assembling, the quest was at its penultimate moment. Triumph was at hand. She played with the register keys, and its cash drawer popped. A second later, she handed back four quarters, a dime, and a penny. "Unless you also want baseball stickers today," she said.

"No," I replied, though it pained me to do so.

She shrugged and I hurried out the door. The light was red, traffic buzzing past, so I waited, cradling the paper bag under my arm. Just then, I heard the last thing I wanted to hear, and it was coming from Red Dog, directly ahead. "Hey kid, come here!" It was them . . . city kids. They were waiting for me, watching too. I looked for a quick solution to my problem, and here it was that I slipped into the arcade—Future Games.

When a kid walked into an arcade in 1980, it was an intoxicating immersion into a dreamscape of magic and electronics. Bells, whistles, gaudy machines, teenagers across the range of social groups—punks, preps, jocks. Everywhere there was big hair and the fragrance of hairspray and smoke. Space Invaders, Lunar Lander, Asteroids, Galaxian, Gun Fight, Super Bug—every imaginable pinball.

Best of all, considering my circumstances, a harasser couldn't really follow me inside. Even if they tried, there was no way to pick me out of that dense crowd. It was the perfect plan if I could kill time until they grew bored. And there I was, surrounded by the glory that was the arcade. Right in front of me lay my absolute favorite game, Pac-Man.

A palm found the pocket change. "One game, stall a little," I said. "She wouldn't want me beat up either." And I patted the bag of batteries and strode forward. "What could be better than to use the time wisely?" I asked aloud.

Sure, I would be spending a quarter, but it meant I got to go home in one piece. Like my father and his rotating shifts, I was making the best out of a tricky situation. As I approached that magnificent machine, multiple players were waiting for a turn. Six quarters lined the edge of the screen, this the universal placement declaring a spot in queue.

A teenager with spiked red hair and leather gloves ran the helm, but he wasn't any good at the game so soon he stepped back in defeat. Next up was a girl about my age. She stepped in and glared at me. I backed up a step.

"Six plays, can't you count?" she said.

"No, I saw."

"Saw what?" she scowled.

"Six," I said, innocently.

"Going to be a while," she said. "Don't you have something to do other than breathe down my neck?"

"Sorry," I said. "Mind if I watch?"

Her eyes narrowed, and a smile slowly spread over her lips. Glossy lips . . .

"Don't talk, don't move," she said.

I offered a quarter. She glanced at it, brows crushing slightly.

"After you," I said.

"Sure, squirt," she laughed.

Squirt? How dare she? If she noticed my indignation, it didn't show. However long her gameplay, I hardly noticed time passing. I was absorbed in how she smelled—like strawberries. I found my eyes caressing the soft crease where her shirt wrapped her arm, longing to know what was behind the fabric.

Suddenly, she released the joystick and retrieved three unused quarters. "No sense in wasting," she said smugly, then backed away to reveal she made the high score. "Go on, squirt. You're up."

In I went, pleasantly surprised to find the joystick hot and slightly damp in hand. I wanted to tell her she was a talented player, and I wanted to tell her how pretty I thought she was. What I said went more like this: "Watch and learn."

She grinned, winked, then walked away.

Head floating, I turned to Pac-Man.

Had a decent play but nowhere near her level, and while I moved through the maze, the punker set a quarter on the edge. A ghost squashed my yellow semicircle, and I looked over my shoulder at a dozen unimpressed faces. "Quit hogging," the returning punker said to me. "They want to see me take the high score back."

"Let him have a turn, Rick. He isn't done."

Strawberry came back! I quickly produced another quarter and fed the slot. Unfortunately, the coin went down the drain to the shortest game session ever. The punk chuckled, and Strawberry said, "Better luck next time, squirt."

"Reeno," I muttered, and her eyes widened for a moment while she pinched my rump!

I was mortified. Frozen in place as she melted into the arcade-goers, laughing raucously. I made for the door with burning cheeks. From there I checked for bullies. Red Dog was clear, and I almost bolted before realizing I'd forgotten the most important reason I was there. "Aw shoot, the batteries!"

I'd hidden the bag next to Pac-Man, between machines. The punk was still at the controls, so I crept in without catching his attention. At least until I cursed, because the bag wasn't there.

I searched over those many faces convinced everyone was guilty, though nobody even acknowledged me. I almost said something to them but instead drove towards the front counter. "Excuse me," I asked a man sitting behind the counter where they kept Skee Ball prizes.

He shook his head and shrugged.

I was lost. I was dead! Mom was going to kill me. I ambled blankly for a while, all of them were laughing at me. Especially the punk. I sank to the floor in the corner, covering my head because I felt tears swelling. I hoped Strawberry would rescue me, but I never saw her again.

After I finally got home, Mom was sitting in her spot, waiting for delivery of the goods. She knew before I said a word, reading my face no doubt.

"I'm sorry!" I cried out, bawling now.

Her face lost all color, and her eyes flickered angrily. "Honest to God," she growled, "I ask you to do one simple task." And a minute later, I was on my way to my room, chased by the sting of a plastic spoon. Sobbing, I closed my bedroom door.

Forty years later, the gravity of foolishness and failure continues to punish me. Now, in my fifties, I'm lucky enough that Mom is still with me. Texted her just now, told her I was drafting stories from my childhood and sending them into magazines for consideration. Mentioned the day I lost ten dollars in batteries and sent a laughing emoji.

Even after all this time I'm afraid of that wicked spoon and thought it might suddenly come whacking right through the phone. My brother too; he told me over a beer one day not long ago. Anyway, Mom's reply to my text didn't relieve this anxiety—"We had lots of ups and downs," she wrote, followed by an angry emoji. It's where the conversation ended. That summer of 1980 ever ruined.

This led to some introspection about the *real* cost of losing the batteries that summer I ruined. It's not ten dollars, it's far more intangible, more enduring, more human. On the surface, the cash was substantial, yet the functional value outweighed this. These weren't luxuries; they powered items central to daily life in our struggling household. But that's just the toll's tip.

Emotionally, guilt and shame have plagued me since then, and oh how I've felt the full weight of parental disappointment. "I'm sorry!" has grown into a lifelong echo. And then there was the fear of discipline, her plastic spoon, which still haunts me decades later so that I will own nothing reminiscent of it in my own kitchen. I've even thrown away gifts because of this.

So, even forty years on our unresolved tension lingers, and a simple emoji from Mom reopened that old wound. Our relationship, though intact, remains shaded by unspoken hurt. All in all, I'd say it's the fracture in connection that's worst. That summer becomes *ever ruined*.

Not just a memory of a lost errand, but a metaphor for a time when fragility within our family—emotional, financial, even physical—was painfully exposed. And the child in me can't forget the simple grace that could've saved me. If only Strawberry had rescued me again, but I learned, instead, that sometimes people don't come back, and some mistakes aren't soothed with rescue.

Today, the event is no longer about batteries. It's a symbol of perceived failure and of moments none of us can take back. Especially me. Although, as odd as it sounds now, maybe the summer I ruined is a twisted badge of how deeply we care. Since even trying to laugh about it with a joking emoji doesn't erase its impact.

Mom's response shows that wounds from scarcity and exhaustion don't always fade with time. So the real cost? It's a lifetime of trying to make peace with a small mistake that carried the disproportionate burden of a family's hardship, a father's fatigue, and a mother's last nerve.

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