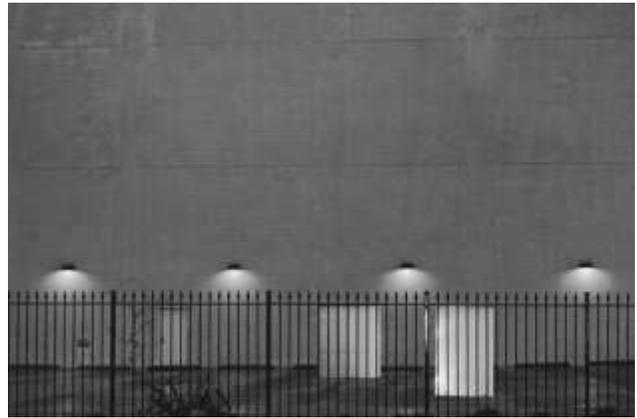


The UnCivil War



I had too many scars and too many badges to be surprised when the call came. Did I want to go to the prison or the funeral home?

I should have chosen the wake. Over the years I had grown too familiar with his name. It was the other name that I didn't immediately recognize. I should have. I knew most of these kids since they entered the school system. I had to see his folder to remember anything about him at all.

He was a good student but a loner. Never spoke in class. C but everyone felt he just didn't care. Scores OK but lots of absences. Some unexplained injuries too, right when he transferred into the district at 5th grade. He won a History Fair in 7th grade, with a Civil War diorama. That's it.

"Thanks," he said when they opened the cell and I handed him his textbooks. He immediately sat back down on his cot with them and hugged them to his lap.

"Can I help you..."

"No, it's alright. Really." He was looking past his knees to the concrete floor.

"Are your parents..."

"Mr. Gagliano, really. I just want to be left alone. Please. I know what I did. I'm Ok with it. They promised me everyone would leave me alone."

So I stepped back out of the cell and the guard slammed it closed. In seconds the books were opened and he was leaning back against the wall, lost in the pages. It was more like he locked the world out than was locked in.

When I asked his teachers, they said he fit in fine. Most said they never knew he was there. But the kids knew. When they hunt as a pack, they can smell weakness. Middle school was one bully after the other. Food would land on his shirt during lunch and the table would explode in laughter. In gym, on the days he couldn't cut, he would wind up on the floor. In high school, word got around that his house had dirt floors. Then his father went to jail and the gossip painted the target on his back. Forever.

Now schools cannot be the answer to every challenge. We can't incarcerate and educate. We're not hospitals and as for churches, there are too few miracles. But we are the last best hope. In

this case, too many teachers didn't want to see either the aggressive taunts or the cowering withdrawals. It wasn't that the bully went too far, it was that the victim was too close to the edge.

Expectations are so different than hopes. In one we know what is going to happen. We expect one kid in the crowd to act out, egged on his own lack of self confidence and by bored children looking for anything to be amused. They give him attention, gratification and he gives them a show.

We have seen it all before. But not really. We don't want to see it. A scuffle in the courtyard didn't happen if the paperwork isn't done and who has the time? No blood, no foul. Pretty soon behavior we would never tolerate becomes a daily occurrence.

Our schools operate on hope. We hope nothing bad will happen. But it does, especially when you have your eyes closed. The last words of the blind man who fell out of the building were "I'm doing good, so far."

Once the bully has chosen his victim, certainties should replace expectations and hope. Parents, grandparents, teachers, social workers and principals must become involved, to isolate the bully and cease all harm. His removal from the scene will drain his power, no longer pumped up by his cheerleaders. Those with a stake in the problem have to be part of the solution. Counseling. Discipline. Respect for self and others.

The victim needs a safe environment with support, healing and respect. Most time the scars they have are hiding even deeper ones from a family or system that has repeatedly failed to cared.

He was walking home with a brown paper bag. He just bought a Civil War relic to add to his collection. It was about 6. Late, but not late enough for him to get hit, again. He didn't expect trouble and the way through the park was shorter. They were as surprised to see him turn the corner as he was to see them.

"What's in the bag Buckwheat?"

He winched with this name. Six years ago a teacher called him a blade of wheat, for his thin frame, chalky face and unruly white blond hair.

He kept walking.

"You! Wheat! You're kidding me, right." He could not believe he was being ignored. With that the bull hopped off the bench and blocked the way. In seconds the others were up, like a pack of hyenas behind him, already laughing



softly. They were hanging on every word.

"I don't want to die," he said to himself, "today."

"Give me the bag, you pale freak!"

Like a linebacker after a fumble, he lunged.

The civil war bayonet caught him mid stomach and ripped his chest cavity open to the heart. He was dead by the time he fell to the ground.

Vincent was just standing there. His arm raised. His fist clenching the short antique sword, soaked red with blood.

The trial did nothing more than supply the newspapers with some directions for their finger to point. The bully got a tombstone. Vincent is somewhere behind stone walls upstate. I hope there are books there.

