

The Truth

A Short Story By Sheelagh Russell

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It wasn't me, not me. and it wasn't Egg, and I wouldn't say it was Jesse James Butterman, because he's my friend and I wouldn't rat on him even if it was true. But still, I wish - I wish it hadn't happened. This, then, is the truth.

My name is Kitty O'Connell. Katherine Louise to the Claw, whose real name is Olive Tidiman, but Kitty to Jesse James Butterman, who says I bite scratch like a tiger, besides climbing trees and terrorizing dogs.

Dogs and Egg Feinberg. But you'll find out soon enough.

I don't know when it really began. I guess the day I walked into the Claw's grade three class, and saw Egg sitting at his desk, looking as though one jab with a pencil would deflate him. No, that's not right, it started when we first moved to Victoria Street. Or maybe Mom's right; it started the day I was born.

Victoria Street is the kind of street you read about in the grade one reader, the kind of street your father talks about growing up on. The Happy Hollisters and the Hardy Boys would have lived there. There were fences and neighbours just like before, but the fences weren't the kind you had to climb, because the backyards were big enough for living; and the neighbours had children, not just grandchildren visiting them. And Jesse James Butterman was the best of all.

Jesse James Butterman is skinny and blond, with curly hair like steel wool. I'd never seen curly hair before, and the day I saw him peeking through the high fence I told him how dumb he looked, just like a girl. He told me his name, and I said it was funny, and he couldn't hit me through the wire, so he said my name was stupid too. So now I'm Kitty O'Connell, and we went to see them burn the grass in the vacant lot, and maybe that's where it all began.

I'd never seen grass burning before. The smoke makes your eyes water and your throat burn, and you're likely to get skinned if you come home with soot on your clothes, but the worst thing in the world is to have to sit on the screened porch in your clean clothes and watch Jesse James Butterman laughing under that sweet smell of ashes.

Old Gwendolyn Tapley never went to the fires. She never played cars in Jesse James Butterman's ash driveway or cowboys under our willow tree or even sat on our steps and squished honeysuckle berries and laughed at our own jokes. But I played with her any way. I had to. She had long brown ringlets, and wore dresses even on Saturday, and Mom said I should play with her. "But, my God, Mary, she's a Holy Roller!" was what Pop would say. I guess that meant that the whole family looked alike, with wavy hair, even the baby, and when we went swimming her swimsuit covered her arms and

her knees. Jesse James Butterman told me lots of other things about them; I don't believe him. He's not a liar but he stretches the truth. But I didn't like her because she was a girl.

She had dolls. Well, so did I, but mine were real. Penny had always had only one arm and I can't remember even getting her, and Nancy's dresses were all too big. They were the kind of dolls that even Jesse James Butterman wasn't ashamed to play with, though he'd give me another black eye if he knew I was saying it. Old Gwendolyn's dolls were all the same in the

is a rose. - Gertrude Stein

same frilly dresses, and we dressed and undressed them, washed and fed them, never taking them out of their boxes. And I was always doing something wrong, like cutting Jennifer's hair, (I didn't know she was bald in the middle) and she'd start that cying and tell me to go home, but the next day she'd be back again.

I used to go and hide in Jesse James Butterman's shed, behind the patched rubber swimming pool, choking on the smell of innertubes, old moldy swimsuits and fertilizer, the pool's inflating valve scratching my cheek. I could hardly help laughing when I heard Jesse James Butterman in his serious voice tell old Gwendolyn that he didn't know where I was. It always worked until the time I screamed when I stepped on the end of a rake and hit my nose. Then old Gwendolyn started crying and told her father. Pop said, "It's just a phase," and the next day old Gwendolyn went to Bible School.



It was near the first of school when I saw old Gwendolyn sitting beside Egg Feinberg in front of the Claw's desk. The Claw has long white fingernails and she grabs your arm or your shoulder or your ear and you'd wish you were dead or at least numb and nerveless. I think one of my ears is longer than the other, the way she's pulled it, and she squeezed a mole on Jack Brillman's face, saying it was a filthy pimple, until he haulted off and swore at her, wiping the blood on his shirt. Jack Brillman is sixteen and stupid and all the girls have a crush on him. I'm always stuck with him in square-dancing class because Jesse James Butterman plays sick. I've tried it too sometimes, but the Claw checks up because "you and that Butterman boy are as thick as thieves, and I won't have you disrupting my class". To hear her talk, you'd think our both being away would be the best thing that could happen to her, but I guess you can't figure teachers.

I know now that you're going to say, "What a tomboy or some other name". But I'm not. Even Jesse James Butterman knows that. Pat Johnson is a tomboy; she pulls the wings off

flies and ties strings to them, and she beat up boy who wasn't even her brother. I'm not ashamed to be able to run fast and to not care much if the Claw just tolerates me, but I'm not afraid of wearing dresses either and making up stories about magic either. There's the difference.

Somehow it was right to have Egg next to old Gwendolyn Tapley. There was something wierd about them both. He was dull and round



and a flat white colour and looked as though one punch would break him. What wise could you call him but Egg; not Marvin? He didn't celebrate Christmas or Easter he said, which was bad enough, but he showed us his passover gifts and there was more than I'd ever seen. And he lived in the new subdivision up on the hill, which didn't help with us lower kids. Hill kids were snotty and stuck together. No Christmas, but he came back in January with a new leather binder and a shiny toboggan. Egg wouldn't let us use his shiny toboggan, he just brought it every day and propped it beside the door, and he wouldn't even slide on his binder. We were stuck with old cardboards. He was just plain funny.

But smart. The Claw never used her hands on him, and he and old Gwendolyn never rat on you; when you didn't have your spelling sentences done he would read them out loud as though you did. They were pretty terrible sentences and the Claw would know; but old Gwendolyn would rat on you even if the Claw didn't ask.

I'm not dumb either. I win the spelling bees, (Egg can't spell "introduction,") and I know the names of all the states in alphabetical order. I'm smarter than Jesse James Butterman, but he doesn't mind because he can hit harder and beats me in racing, but Egg acts as though he doesn't like being smart. You know, like he just might happen to know the answer, when he's dying to tell it, and he never shows his marks on tests.

Yes, I told Jesse James Butterman the poem. But it wasn't me and it wasn't him. Pop sings it sometimes when he's in the garden:

"Onward Christian bedbugs,
"Marching oer the sheet,
"With the cross of Jesus
"Tickling the old man's feet."

I thought it was funny. Jesse James Butterman's my friend, but he wrote it down. But it wasn't anybody's fault.

When the Claw saw old Gwendolyn turn pink and start whimpering, I guess I stopped breathing then. She picked up the paper from the desk, and then she turned pink and her nails blushed red and Egg was swallowing. But it wasn't him. Sacrilege, she said, I tried to think it was still funny, but even though Jesse James Butterman was poking me and trying to snicker, I could see the back of his next tighten and his eyes grow big. "I know just who did it," she said.

Egg's at St. Michaels now. He left the next day. Funny he seems to fit there I can see him, all white in a black suit, with the nuns. The only thing that separates him is his face. He doesn't go to Christian education class; but that expression on his face, sort of expectant and wise, as though he knows some secret.

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