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*Peter at the Stake*

On that day, we used an old rope that Hermann's father had given him to practice tying sailor knots. Why Hermann's father believed so strongly in the knowledge of knots and then marched off to die of pneumonia on the way to Moscow, his body loose, unbound on the snow, I don't know. But it was the most precious thing Hermann owned and that afternoon he loaned it to our game of scouts and Indians.

The Indians were winning. The lone scout was tied to the stake. His name was Peter and with the easy complicity of children, we all hated him because he was proud and irritating and had a father.

The town needed Peter's Papa, the doctor, to set broken bones, to tend the aches of rheumatism, and deliver babies. We needed his son to be our enemy and scapegoat. He was just strong enough to bear it, a skinny, blond-haired boy with a face like a fox. His mother still dressed him in neat-fitting suspenders while the rest of us held up our greasy, outgrown lederhosen with string and jutting hipbones.

In the vacant lot outside Hermann's house, we played our game, ready to be pulled inside by a mother's call or the waning light of evening. Peter stared blandly at us while we yelled and kicked up dust. He had an insufferable way of being present

and distant at the same time, as if half of him stood there in the yard, and half was far off, waging his own private games. But when Hermann added an umpteenth knot, yanking Peter's shoulders back against the stake, Peter protested shrilly.

"That's not fair," he said. "I'm supposed to escape now."

Peter was the one who had told us the story to begin with. It had come from a book he'd read about a German who went to America and became a great buffalo hunter and scout and was captured by the Indians. Miraculously, the German used his wits and skill to make friends with the Indians, eventually becoming a blood brother to an Apache prince. The story filled us with yearning. We devoted weeks to it, reenacting its triumphs and defeats, and every night I had the same dream of my father riding far ahead of me on America's golden plains.

For a while we all had traded off as the German, but with little twists of the plot Hermann had made it more fun to play Apaches, so we started forcing Peter to be the scout. We were at the part where he was supposed to save himself.

"What kind of scout are you, then?" said Hermann, who dominated the big lot where we could convene unchaperoned because it belonged to his often absent aunt. Hermann was afraid of

nothing and he loved bullying. He treated it like an art. With his hair combed dark and flatly back like a man's, his long jaw working, he stared at his victims until he decided how best to hurt them, a punch, an insult, a banishment. I feared this measuring more than anything, so I avoided his eyes.

"It doesn't matter," Peter said. "The Indians never win."

"We're winning now." Hermann admired his tomahawk, a lumpy weapon made from two sticks trussed together.

"But you always lose in the end. That's what the book says. It's a tragedy," Peter said. He clearly relished the sound of the word in his mouth, tra-ged-y, like a loud train coming to a shuddering halt.

"Who cares about the book," said Hermann. He raised his hands, calling for the Indians to gather. We stopped our dance, jostling one another.

"War paint," Hermann announced in a solemn tone. "And then a tomahawk-throwing contest."

Before I could stop myself, I blurted, "But in the book he escapes now and then we try to chase him."

I realized my mistake too late. Hermann's blue eyes narrowed as he gazed at me. His jaw clenched silently, the temples flaring.

"I said who cares about the book," said Hermann. Cold stones piled on my shoulders and my knees grew weak.

"Never mind—" I began.

"Uli's right," Peter broke in. "Besides, I'm not supposed to be tied up for the tomahawk

contest."

Hermann continued to evaluate my reddening face. I felt the other boys shift away from me.

I lunged at Peter. "Scout be silent or he taste my fist," I said in my best Indian-chief voice.

"Taste my tomahawk," said Hermann, releasing me from disfavor. He swung at Peter's cheek, just missing it. The great buffalo hunter flinched and some of the smaller boys laughed. My head swam with relief.

As we dabbed our cheeks with mud, I thought I heard my mother calling me. She had a hoarse alto voice that could carry for a mile, and each time she cried my name my heart hammered with the hope that my father had come home.

Hermann jabbed me in the shoulder. "Hurry up," he said. "You're first."

This was his punishment. He knew that I was the best javelin thrower at school. He expected me to hit Peter and make him afraid. I stood and listened again for my mother's call, but I heard nothing except the distant drone of a plane.

The town we lived in stretched from horizon to horizon. Last winter, I had been to its farmland edge with my mother to trade her jewelry for firewood and potatoes, but part of me did not really believe it had an end. Since my father had been reported missing, I'd begun to imagine that he'd somehow crept back and was hiding, waiting for me to find him on a secret avenue. On many afternoons I roamed through the alleys and walled gardens, searching for the right gate.

I didn't hate Peter. It was worse than that, an ugly mixture of shame and recognition. We

resembled each other, both small, pale, and smart, the sons of intellectuals, my Papa the Latin teacher friends with his Papa the doctor. Once, when we were toddlers, our fathers had taken us to a fair together and bought us each pieces of plum cake. I couldn't look at Peter without remembering how we had eaten our sweet fill, then ridden high on our Papas' shoulders, owning a now-lost world.

Hermann handed me the tomahawk and the boys formed a ring around us. Something glinted in the tip. He had embedded a long shard of glass there, transforming it from toy to weapon. I could easily draw blood. This was my punishment.

"Each brave gets three chance to hit yellow coward," Hermann said, echoing my stilted voice from before. He had mud smudges running from ear to nose.

"Three?" I said, stalling. Hermann nodded.

"The Indians always lose," repeated Peter, as if reading a caption for a picture. "But not because they're bad people. Because their world gets destroyed. That's why it's a tragedy."

"Shut up," said Hermann.

Peter was the only one not painted with mud and his face shone like a newborn's.

The dried dirt tugged at my own skin, cracking when I blinked. I didn't want to do it. I didn't move.

After a few moments, I saw Hermann reach out, a slow, commanding fist opening to take the tomahawk back—

I raised my arm, intending to throw the weapon far over Peter's head into a neighboring garden. We would have to search for it and he would escape

like he was supposed to. I would be loyal to the story. It meant something to me.

In that moment, a high shriek split the sky. The sound was so loud it made my skull ache down into the brain and it did not seem entirely connected to the metal plane that came after, its shadow flickering over the town.

The bombs fell away like eggs. Everyone sprinted for the basement of Hermann's house, except me still holding the tomahawk and Peter knotted to the stake.

"Hermann! We have to untie him!" I shouted as an explosion lit up a neighborhood to the west.

Hermann was ushering the boys through the cellar door. He shook his head.

Peter's soft utterance rose over the ratcheting gunfire. "Can't you—"

A deafening crash cut off his last words. The yard shook and the last boy vanished into the cellar. Hermann started to swing the door after him.

At the sight of the threshold closing, a black fear clawed my heart. I shoved the tomahawk into Peter's hand. "Cut yourself free!" I yelled and made for the cellar, just barely squeezing into the cave before the metal gate clanged shut.

It was a long wait in total darkness. I don't know how many we were, less than a dozen probably, but it seemed as if the cellar were packed with bodies. Our breath warmed the air and we started to sweat. Clods of soil fell over us with every explosion, and Hermann had to shush the smaller kids by pulling them close and whispering that Apache braves never cry. I scrubbed the mud off my face and

listened for Peter's knock. It did not come and in its absence I imagined a thousand terrible things happening to him.

When the bombing ended, Hermann opened the door. We burst out in a flood of limbs, afraid and curious and eager to escape the close darkness. Our rickety legs stumbled on the even ground, and several of us fell to our knees.

Peter was standing against the stake. He had used the tomahawk to cut the rope. It piled around his ankles, shredded to bits, but he hadn't budged from the pole, staring straight ahead as if he were still bound and waiting for our contest to begin.

I didn't know what to say to him. No one did. We could not abandon the yard fast enough, running pell-mell toward our homes and mothers, and I thought he ran, too, his small body dodging through the wreckage.

All around me rooftops gaped like baby birds. The daylight was colored gray and black by fire. A balcony groaned and fell away from someone's house, flowerpots smashing on the cobblestone. Someone else's house was just a hole, a filthy absence, timbers stabbing the sky. People did not look like people, walking through dust, wearing the dust, rubbing their eyes.

After half a block, a strange high sound stopped me. I turned and looked back. It was Peter. He hadn't moved from the stake, but he was sniggering and grinning like a fool. He and Hermann were standing opposite each other, mirror reflections, except Hermann was looking down at his father's destroyed rope and Peter was focused on Hermann.

I went back.

"What are you laughing at?" Hermann was saying as he raised his head. When Peter continued to snicker, his face went pink. "Go away," Hermann screamed. His hair fell in his face now, limp and covered in dust. "Get away from my house," he repeated, a sob tearing through the last word so he couldn't finish saying it.

The snuffling stopped abruptly and Peter looked sad and empty. He took a slow, careful step away from the stake as if he still expected the earth to be shaking.

Hermann immediately bent down and began to pick up the bits of his father's rope, his shoulders shuddering. For every length Hermann reaped, another fell out his hands, sowing the dirt again. His fingers sped up, making it worse.

Peter should have kept going. For God's sake, why couldn't he have just gone home to his shelves of books, his Papa in his white coat waiting?

I felt a flake of hot ash glance across my cheek as he paused instead, watching Hermann down on his knees, the pathetic groveling. Peter lifted his chin. Suddenly I knew what he was going to say and I didn't want to hear it, not now, not after what we had done. I could see the words rising and I stumbled toward him.

"Leave him alone!" I said and shoved Peter. He staggered but stayed there in front me, panting, his brown eyes wide with disbelief. I had never really hit anyone before and I didn't know how to do it. My left fist kept opening when I punched and the fingers took too long to go back in a ball, so I hit at him with the slapping flat of that hand,

which sounded like sorrow, and the thudding fist of the other, which sounded like rage, Peter reeling, bowing, and trying to make a cage of his arms, my knuckles screaming as if someone had pounded nails into them. When I punched at his mouth, he finally wrenched himself free with an animal grunt. I tasted blood on my own tongue as he turned his back and limped wordlessly away from the yard. One of his suspenders had come fully unhitched and dragged on the ground behind him, a shiny glint sliding through the ash and filth and broken things until it faded completely.

I swung around, expecting Hermann behind

me, watching, but he was gone and the bits of rope along with him. Only the stake remained, an old roof beam we had plunged into the ground. I felt like I had not seen it before, and at the same time its brown-mottled and splintered surface looked ancient, as if some tribe had set it there at the dawn of time to point toward the sky.

We never used it again in our games. But when the next man came from above to destroy us, I wonder if that long, thin finger caught his eye, and if he had the time to decide whether it was accusing or beckoning him. 