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**Stupid
Rich
Bastards**

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Johnson
Black**

Sunday morning, six o'clock. Dad knocks on my door and in a stage whisper tells me to get up and get going. Trying not to wake up my sister, I crawl out of bed into the chilly Massachusetts air and pull on jeans, a T-shirt, a sweatshirt, and sneakers. Nothing that can't get dirty. This isn't church, but it might as well be, an education full of rituals, its own language, its mystery and rewards, its punishments for falling away.

Every Sunday, each child in turn went with Dad to the flea markets, the yard sales, the junk yards, the little stores with names like "Bob's Salvage," "Junk n Stuff," or "The Treasure House." Even in winter, when the outdoor flea markets closed down and leaves spun with litter in circles in the yards, the salvage stores stood waiting for us, bleak and weathered, paint hanging in little flaps from the concrete-block walls, and our breath hanging in the still, frigid air surrounding the old desks and radio tubes, the file cabinets and chandeliers. In each place the man behind the counter would grab the lapels of his old wool coat and pull them tighter around him, saying how one day he'd like to heat the joint. Dad would tell him about the great buy we just saw at the last place but had to pass up this time and then ask him what was new. And each time the answer was, "In heayah? Nothin's evah new! But I got some stuff I didn't have befoah!" They'd laugh with one another, and I would trace my initials next to someone else's in the dust on the display cabinet.

In summer, we passed by the vendors who hawked T-shirts, socks, perfume, or cheap jewelry and walked to the tables covered with stuff from home, tables full of things that someone had

wanted and needed for a long time until they needed money more, to pay their rent, fix their car, or feed the next child. Wall hangings, little plaques, beverage glasses with superheroes on them, ashtrays, bedspreads, tricycles, lawn mowers, table lamps, kitchen pots and pans, picture frames, shoes, a spice rack. Always behind one of these tables stood an older man, deeply tanned and showing muscles from long years of hard work, gray-haired and with a cigarette and a hopeful smile, always willing to come down a little on an item, even though it meant a lot to him. Sometimes his wife would also be there, heavy, quiet, holding a styrofoam cup of coffee, sitting in a webbed lawn chair set back a little from the table, judging those who would judge the things she had loved and used for so long.

We touched these items carefully, with respect, because we were that child who needed to be fed, because we knew what it felt like to have your things laid on such a table, touched by many hands and turned over and over while the dew burned off and the pavement heated up and people began to move as though through water, their legs lost in the shimmering heat that slipped sticky arms around buyers, sellers, lookers, and dreamers. And the language of these people behind the tables, and those who respected them and understood why they were there, filled the air like the smell of French fries from the dirty little restaurant next door and hung in my mind and sifted down into my heart.

This is not an essay. This is a story. My life is not an essay. We don't live essays or tell them to each other on the front steps on hot nights with beer or iced coffee and pretzels or pass them on to our children or dream them. This is a story, one about love and fear. It's about every child's nightmare of losing her family and the ways in which the world I now tentatively live in tries to make that nightmare come true, to make it not a nightmare but a dream, a goal.

There are a lot of holes in this story that get filled in, as with all stories, differently depending upon who's listening, depending on how I need to fill them in. There's a plot, a very simple one: a young woman goes from poverty to the middle class using education to move closer and closer to the stupid rich bastards she has heard about all her life. She finds ever larger contexts into which she can place everything, can get perspective. ("Perspective"—a word her father used to describe why he kept driving away, a word her mother told her meant to make things seem small and unimportant.) Until someone says "Fuck you!" and it all collapses. Then she pulls it back together like a quilt she had as a child, one she hid under rather than take her medicine, one she gasped under in the stifling heat rather than run through her room with the hornet circling in it. This is a story about war and injury,

about stuffing the holes blown in hearts and brains and tongues with words, with the batting of anger and desire. It's about language.

Language for me has always been inseparable from what I am, from what and who people are. My house was filled with the language I associate with the working class and the poor, people who haven't the means to physically keep all the "dirty" parts of life at bay and who see no reason to do so with words. Shouting to each other across the yards in the old mill town where I grew up, my mother and her friends Pat and Barbara kept up their friendship and shared gossip and complaints about their lives. They wove their voices into the fabric of words and life I knew. As we played after school in the stand of woods along the river down behind the factory, we heard our names called for supper. The more time we took to get home to the table, the sharper the tone became and the longer the wonderful string of curses stretched out, echoing off the brick walls.

We talked about whatever touched us as we sat down to eat—who had stopped up the upstairs toilet, who had fought in the hallway at school, the girl who was stabbed in the head with a fork in the lunchroom, name calling on the bus, whether the home economics teacher was having an affair with the phys. ed. teacher, what my father saw in the house he'd just put a tub in, who we knew who'd been arrested. Bodily functions, secretions, garbage, crimes and delinquency, who got away with what were as much a part of our language as they were of our lives. They were part of the humor that filled my home. My father rising up from his chair to fart, shouting out in mock seriousness, "Repoah! from the reah!" the sahgent replied," set us off in hysterics, imitations, and stories of passed gas and the contexts that made them so funny. Swearing was also a part of our lives—among adults, among kids away from their parents, and in the bad kids' homes, everyone swore fluently before they were eighteen or out of school. "Damn" and "shit" were every other word and so became like "and" and "well" to us as we talked with each other.

I lived in a web of narrative, something I've missed in graduate school. My father was a storyteller and a traveler, a man who would go away for a week or two at a time on "business" of an undetermined nature. When he came back, he didn't bring presents but stories. Only a few years ago did I realize why the tale of Odysseus had seemed so familiar to me in the eighth grade and again as an undergraduate. He was a relative, or a friend, not just a character in an old story. In the tales told by my father and the men he bartered with, the "stupid rich bastards" almost always "got it" in the end, outwitted by the poor little guy. I learned that the stupid rich bastards always underestimated us, always thought we were as dumb as we were

poor, always mistook our silence for ignorance, our shabby clothes and rusted cars for lack of ambition or enterprise. And so they got taken, and sharing stories about winning these small battles made us feel better about losing the war.

My father knew all the regular merchants at the flea markets. As we wandered along the aisles he'd yell over to Tony, a heavy man with thinning black hair patted into an ugly, oily arc across his head, "Hey! Ya fat Guinea! Ya still sellin the same old junk? Huh? I've seen stuff move fasta in the toilets I unplug!" Tony would wave him off, turning a little away from him and throwing back over his shoulder, "What would you know about merchandise, ya stupid Swede? Huh? Shit for brains!" He'd touch his forehead with his middle finger, grin maliciously, and so would my father. As we worked our way closer to Tony, past the booth with old tools, past the book booth, Dad would ask, "So why haven't the cops bustid ya yet for alla this, Tony? What, you got a captain on ya payroll? This stuff is hot enough to burn ya hands off!" He'd blow on his fingers and wave them in the air, grinning. Tony grinned back at the compliment. "Naah, I buy this legit." He'd widen his eyes and look cherubic. "Really." They'd both laugh.

During the week, during my life, my father was a sometimes plumber, sometimes car salesman, sometimes junkman, sometimes something. My mother worked as a cook, a school crossing guard, at a McDonald's counter for a while. It was never enough. I remember one Saturday afternoon in August, my father was melting down old lead pipes. All afternoon he cut the soft pipes into small pieces and fed them into the heat of the kettle, then poured the liquid metal out into the little cupcake-shaped molds he'd set in the dirt of the driveway. Late in the afternoon, the heavy clouds broke and rain began spattering down on his back and shoulders. While I watched from the kitchen he kept working, the rain hissing and turning into steam as it struck the melting lead. Over and over, he reached forward to drop chunks of pipe in to melt, and his arms, then shoulders, then head disappeared in the fog of metal and mist. He became that man to me, the half-man in steam. He was the back I saw sometimes wearily climbing the stairs to sleep for a few hours. He was the chains rattling in the truck as it bounced down the pitted driveway and whined back up late at night as he came home. It wasn't enough. There was a stack of dunnings and notices that covered the end of the old stereo.

I remember when the man from the bank came to repossess our car. I had just broken my foot, and I hung onto the car door handle while my mother stood next to me talking to the man who wanted to take the car. Her

voice was high, and with one hand she opened and closed the metal clasp on her purse. Finally she opened the car door, pushing me in and sliding in next to me. The man from the bank stepped back as she started the engine, and she rolled up the window as he leaned over to say something to us. She gunned it, careening wildly backward across the yard out into the street, crying, "So this is what we've got," she said. "This is it."

We were working poor and so we were alternately afraid and ashamed and bold and angry. We prayed to nothing in particular that no one would notice our clothes or that the police wouldn't notice the car didn't have a valid inspection sticker. My mother had to decide between a tank of gas and an insurance payment. She had to decide whether or not we really needed a doctor. We shopped as a group so that if my new dress for the year cost two dollars less than we had thought it would, my sister could get one that cost two dollars more. We didn't say such things out loud, though we thought them all the time. Words are ideas, ways of believing, connected to desire and fear. If I ate seconds, maybe I was eating my sister's dress. If Susan was really sick, then maybe I couldn't get new shoes. But if anyone ever said those things, it would all come crashing in. All of it—the idea that working hard would get you some place better, that we were just as good as anyone else—would crash to the floor like some heirloom dish that would never be the same again, even if we could find all the shards.

At some point in my life, when I was very young, it had been decided that I would be the one who went on to college, who earned a lot of money, who pulled my family away from the edge of the pit, and who gave the stupid rich bastards what they had coming to them. I would speak like them but wouldn't be one of them. I would move among them, would spy on them, learn their ways, and explain them to my own people—a guerrilla fighter for the poor. My father had visions of litigation dancing in his head, his daughter in a suit, verbally slapping the hell out of some rich asshole in a courtroom.

As I was growing up, the most important people I knew, the ones I most respected, were my teachers. I wanted to be like them. They had made the supreme sacrifice, had gone away and succeeded, but had chosen to come back to help us. They drove cars I could imagine appearing occasionally in my father's lot. They wore scuffed shoes and shopped at K-Mart. They didn't belong to a country club, didn't refuse to teach us because we were poor, didn't treat us with pity or condescension. They often worked year round, teaching summer school or even, as with my history teacher, driving a beer truck from June through August.

They were the only people I knew and trusted who might be able to

teach me to speak like and understand the stupid rich bastards who held our lives in their hands and squeezed us until we couldn't breathe: doctors who refused to treat us without money up front; lawyers who wrote short, thick, nasty letters for credit companies who, in turn, spoke for someone else; insurance agents who talked in circles and held up payment; loan officers who disappeared into the backs of banks and didn't look at us when they told us we were too much of a risk; police and town selectmen who told us to get rid of our cars and clean up our disgraceful yards and lives—all the people who seemed always to be angry that they had to deal with us in any way. My teachers moved, I thought, with ease between my world and this other world. I hoped they would help me do the same.

My teachers tried to bridge the gap with speech. "In other words," they said, looking from the text to us, "what they're saying is . . ." They tried to bridge the gap with their bodies, one hand pointing to the board, the other hand stretched out palm up, fingers trying to tug words from mouths contorted with the effort to find the right speech. We were their college-bound students, the ones who might leave, might be them again, might even do better. They were like our parents in their desire to have us succeed, but they had skills and knowledge that counted to the white-shirted men who sat behind the glass windows at the savings and loan, to the woman who handled forms for free butter, cheese, and rice.

I wanted to be like my teachers, but I was afraid of standing up before a classroom filled with students like the ones who laughed in the back of the classroom. The only writing these students did was carving names and sexual slurs or boasts on their desks, and their dreams, I imagined, were of lives like they already knew. I was afraid, too, that when I had become like these teachers I admired so much, I would still drive down the main street of a rotting industrial town and go into the 7-Eleven and somehow I would be no different than I was now. The very ones I admired most I also most suspected: if my teachers were such successes, why were they back here? Why did they make so little money? Drive those cars? I was afraid I would have nothing to say or show to the students who sat in the back, afraid that if they actually asked what I only thought—"So what?"—I would have no answer.

I worked summers at a resort in Maine, making beds and scrubbing toilets, earning tips and room and board. During the school year, I worked as a cook in a nursing home and as a maid for rich women who made me change sheets, crawl out on window ledges to clean glass, and scrub their kitchen floors on my knees. I had saved about five hundred dollars. I sent in cards to request material from any college that would send it to me. Every day, stacks