

Proxy

by Paul Juhasz

A father is the world writ small

On a cold, clear winter weekend morning, of the kind pictured on postcards and calendars, Derrick called to see if I had any plans.

I didn't.

"Why don't you come over and bring your bike. There's a park near me with some trails and a pond. There's usually someone playing pond hockey, so bring your skates and stick."

"Sounds great. See you in a bit."

I hung up and went to ask my father for a ride.

He was, as always, lukewarm about any plan involving Derrick. To counteract these nascent reservations, I told him we planned on playing hockey, assuming his love for the sport would trump any misgivings he might have.

This turned out to be a tactical miscalculation on my part.

Fixing me with a piercing stare, he asked, "What are you *really* going to do?"

Puzzled, I repeated the plans Derrick and I had made.

"Yeah, right," my father scoffed. "Try again."

"What?" I asked, spreading my hands in the universal sign of befuddlement.

"I don't think *hockey* is Derrick's sport," he dismissed.

In the summer of 1985, it was decided by whomever decides such things that it was no longer financially feasible for the small borough next to my town to operate a junior and senior high school. Thus, the borough was subsumed into the surrounding school districts and as a result, the North Haven class of 1989, as it entered its eighth-grade year, ballooned by about two dozen students.

The only ones I really interacted with was a somewhat shady triumvirate named Paul, Jason, and Derrick. All three boys hailed from a section of town that bordered on New Haven, and thus they had the exotic appeal of inner city kids to the student body, while being tainted with a suspect (for a middle class, predominantly white, demographic) urban past for the faculty.

I quickly made friends with Paul, who insisted we shared a bond as “name brothers.” Unfortunately, he was the first to confirm the fears and suspicions of the faculty. On a weekend school trip to Martha’s Vineyard, he was caught shoplifting and, in a desperate attempt to escape, punched a police officer. A rumor (later confirmed) quickly circulated amongst the rest of us that this was not his first run-in with the cops, and thus Paul faded out of my story to seek the educational merits of the Lincoln Academy for Wayward Boys.

Jason was clearly headed down the same path. He would regale us with accounts of his half-dozen or so sexual conquests (most of them confirmed directly or indirectly by the other party), some of which I now recognize toyed with the definition of date rape. He was in no less than four fights and had been suspended twice. He narrowly avoided getting busted for selling weed in the boys’ locker room, and to impress some girls (or perhaps because word got back to him that it was my big mouth that started a chain of events that led to him nearly getting busted for selling weed in the boys’ locker room), he reenacted a scene from some horror movie by dragging his plastic unbreakable comb across my throat, drawing blood and leaving a gash that was visible for days after.

And this was all in the first two months of the school year.

Even though he had been friends with the other two since first grade, Derrick was different. He rarely got in trouble (although he was not in the least adverse to some illicit alcohol or a bag of Jason’s wares). While not terribly successful academically, he at least seemed to understand what school expected of him. Perhaps because his father and both older brothers had spent years working the night shifts at local factories, he had a matter-of-fact worldliness and maturity about him, as if he knew what his niche in life was fated to be, had accepted it, and was simply waiting until it was his time to grab a punch card and begin a life of hard labor. While most of us rode the adolescent wave

of emotional turmoil and soaring dreams, Derrick kept us grounded with his stoical pragmatism. Many interpreted this as pessimism and found Derrick depressing; I found it comforting, as if when around Derrick, I was excused from having the goals and future plans adults expected me to have. With Derrick, I could just be.

My father, however, while never outright blocking me from it, preferred that I not hang out with Derrick or invite him over to our house.

“Why don’t you call someone else instead,” he would frequently respond when I would ask if Derrick could come over, “like Jason.”

“I like Jason,” he would respond to my unasked question. “He plays baseball. I remember him from last season.”

So the fact that he supplemented his income by dealing pot, that he was a burgeoning rapist, or that he tried to slit my throat with a comb, all of this, in my father’s mind, was trumped by the fact that he played baseball.

I was always confused why he would prefer the nascent criminality of Jason to the calm, placidity of Derrick.

Of course, I understand it perfectly now.

Derrick, you see, was black.

I was able to overcome my father’s myopic, stereotype-fueled sense of what sports black people could play (although I did not recognize that this was the issue at the time) through a sustained program of wheedling and cajoling. But still, as we drove over to Derrick’s house, I could tell he wasn’t thrilled.

For all the inner-city associations Derrick had placed on him by others, his house was not actually inner city. He lived in a run-down and forgotten residential niche engulfed by an industrial complex separating North Haven from New Haven. But his neighborhood was far from the hygienic, well-maintained, and hermetically-sealed slice of suburbia most North Haven residents enjoyed. Chickens roamed the front yard at one neighbor’s place, while a screen door frantically clung to its frame by one hinge at another. In the midst of this disrepair, Derrick’s house stood out, an older home desperately struggling to maintain a noble decency amidst such advancing squalor.

I think this also upset my father. I believe he would have much rather preferred Derrick live at the chicken house or the house with the clichéd car on cinder blocks. If he was irresolute at the beginning of the drive over to Derrick's, he was downright grumpy as I left the car.

"I'll pick you up at 2:30," he yelled as I grabbed my bike, skates, and stick from the backseat.

I stopped for a moment and gave him a confused look. This was another strange development. He never gave me hard deadlines when he drove me to other friends' houses. Typically, I got a cursory "Call me when you want to be picked up," before he drove off, already mentally engaged in whatever activity he had lined up next.

Perhaps I should have collected, pieced together, and heeded these early warning signs, but I didn't. Instead, I rode through the brisk winter air with Derrick across backyards, service roads, and scraps of evergreen woods until we reached the park. There was indeed a pick-up hockey game, so we laced up and played. My father's racial assumptions notwithstanding, Derrick proved a perfectly adequate hockey player. After a few games, Derrick smoked a cigarette on the pond's frozen banks with a few other kids, then we rode over to a nearby Cumberland Farms for a post-game meal of Honey Buns, Bugles, and Mountain Dew, with the now-extinct Bubble Burger for dessert. Then we rode back to Derrick's house.

We were so frozen by the time we got back that the tepid water with which I washed my hands was scalding. Derrick's older brother, Donnie, insisted we have some hot chocolate to warm up. As we were alternately drinking and using the mugs as hand-warmers, Donnie turned to me and asked, "What was your name again?"

After I responded, he continued, "I think someone was here asking for you."

I looked over at the clock on the kitchen range and noted that it was 3:45. Muttering a mildly annoyed "Ah, crap," I asked to use the phone and called my father, not looking forward to the lecture I assumed was coming.

I barely got out a, "Hey, Dad," when he cut me off with a growled "I'll be right there." Before I could say anything else, he hung up.

Still, I wasn't too concerned. I had been late before and had been forced to listen to lectures on the importance of responsibility and punctuality, so I figured that that was what was in store for me this time too.

The first indication that this was something different, that what was coming my way was not a product of my father's annoyance but of his fury, was the fact that when he arrived at Derrick's house, he did not come to the door. Eschewing the driveway to pull up at the curb instead, he sat in the car, both hands gripping the wheel as he stared straight out the windshield. My bike was jammed in across the back seat, so he had clearly gotten out of the car, but for whatever reason, he chose not to come to the front door to get me. In fact, I don't really know how long he was waiting there; only a serendipitous glance outside by Donnie let me know he was there at all.

"Is that your dad?" he asked.

After glancing over his shoulder, I confirmed it was.

We all watched him for a few moments, expecting something, a wave or a honk, some indication that this was a normal adult picking up a normal son at a normal friend's house. When it seemed clear that nothing of the sort was likely to happen, I headed for my shoes and then the front door.

The previous summer I had worked in my father's factory. He had long since left a cushy job at a scrap metal conglomerate and, bit by the American entrepreneur spirit, used most of his retirement fund to start up his own precious metals recovery plant, and he hired me to work on the factory floor pouring various compounds of molten metals into fifty or 100-pound ingots.

The air was opaque with the fumes given off by the smelting metals, and temperatures at the furnaces frequently passed 120 degrees, making for a day of sweltering, physically-draining labor. The other factory workers were all Jamaican immigrants with varying levels of English fluency, and their amalgamated cacophony of Creole and broken English completed the picture of what I imagine one of the levels of Hell looks and feels like.

After my first day at work, my father called me into his office perched above the factory floor, which granted him a god-like view of his impish, dark-skinned factory hands. He told me to sit and I gladly did, completely used up from the day's work, muscles aching where I did not know I had muscles. As I was trying to recover from the physical cost of the day, my father said, "I want to show you something."

He then called out to the floor below.

"Ernie! Come up here!"

Almost before the order faded, Ernie was standing in the office. He must have run across the floor and up the stairs to get here that quickly; no easy task after a ten-hour shift on the factory floor.

"Ernie, take off your shirt," my father directed him.

"Sir?" a confused Ernie replied.

"Take off your shirt," my father repeated. "I want to show Paul something."

As if suddenly in on the plan, Ernie replied with an enthusiastic "Oh, yes sir," and complied, revealing a staggeringly developed chest, carved with canyons and mesas of muscle mass. It was as if his chest was chiseled out of the very material he spent his days pouring into ingots. The smile on Ernie's face left little doubt that he was fully aware of the impression this muscularity had.

My father walked around Ernie, beaming with pride.

"You see this?" he asked. "Impressive, isn't it? Ernie, tell him how old you are."

"I'm sixty-two, sir."

"Sixty-two, Paul! Sixty-two," my father could barely contain the satisfaction the entire scene was giving him. "Look at those pecs," he added, slapping his hand against the solidity of Ernie's chest. Ernie's smile, impossibly, grew even wider.

"OK, Ernie, that's it. You can go."

"Hey, Dad," I began, sliding into the passenger seat.

"Don't you say a word!"

Still not believing he was seriously angry, I ignored this initial piece of advice.

"But Dad . . ." I countered.

Through gritted teeth, he once again cut me off.

“Not. One. Fucking. Word.”

And so, I didn’t say a word.

He, however, said many.

“Do you know what it’s like,” he asked, “to knock on a strange door and be told by the man who answers that not only are you not there, but he doesn’t even know who you are? I had to stand there and be told ‘I don’t know your boy.’! Do you have any idea what that’s like? To be told by that kind of man that he doesn’t know my son? I had no idea where you were, if you were okay, which house you were even in.”

While I could not say so, I found these positions rather ridiculous. He knew which house I was in because he dropped me off. Why should he fear for my safety when he knew where we planned to go and what we planned to do? If he was so worried about me, why didn’t he drive over to the park and try to find us? And I could only assume “the strange man” in question was either Donnie or Derrick’s father, and since both were still sleeping when Derrick and I left, it made perfect sense that they did not know who I was. All of this, I thought, should have been quite apparent to my father.

But enjoined to silence as I was, there was no way to interrupt the diarrhetic flow of logically questionable rhetoric, I did the next best thing—I zoned out, escaping into a world where I was vaguely aware that things resembling words were being spewed at me while I occupied my mind with more interesting matters. I started, inspired no doubt by the day’s pursuits, with a quick review of the current roster of my beloved Philadelphia Flyers, identifying whom I would trade if I was in control of the team. I then moved on to an impromptu list of words that sound dirty, but really aren’t (“pumpnickel,” “bumper pool,” “English muffin”), before closing with a quick assessment of what I thought some of the hotter girls in my school probably looked like naked.

I was interrupted by a particularly loaded phrase of my father’s: “So, this is what we’re going to do.”

This was a phrase he had used for years to transition from the instructional portion of a lecture to the punishment phase. I think he adopted the first-person plural to gild whatever he had in mind with an *esprit de corps*, as if whatever punitive measures

he selected were a group decision and something, that while unpleasant and inconvenient, just had to be endured by the whole group, which, of course, was just me.

When I was six or so, my family took a trip to Disney World, and at the airport, I remained with my father after he dropped off the rest of our group at Departures, and then walked to the gate with him. As we negotiated the ever-shifting expanse of people and luggage, we were approached by a Hari Krishna. Much of what he said to my father was beyond me, but I do recall him saying he would like to present us with a flower and a gift, offering me a candy cane. Although my father did not stop, he politely slowed down his pace. "Keep the flower," I remember him saying, but he made no objection to the man handing me the candy cane.

As we left the spiritual proselytizer, I was in high spirits, having scored some free candy early in the morning. I was admittedly a tad bit uneasy about the fact that it was late spring and thus not exactly prime Christmas-themed treat season, but if my father was not concerned about a stranger with a straggly cat tail dangling from the back of his head handing me five-month-old candy, then I sure as hell wasn't either.

Before we got to our gate, we were hit by another solicitor, this one a well-dressed young black male.

"Excuse me, sir," he began, stepping in front of my father, who had no choice but to stop. "How are you today?"

Perhaps because we were within sight of the gate with ample time before our plane boarded, my father responded, with a slightly bemused "I am fine. Thank you."

"Wonderful. I am collecting donations for the United Negro College Fund today and . . ."

"N—," my father began.

Anticipating the coming rejection, the man quickly changed tactics. "And what a lovely young man you have with you. Here you are, young man," he said, handing me a beautiful, inviting, red paper-wrapped, cherry-flavored Tootsie Pop.

Two pieces of free candy, all before nine a.m.! I had no idea what to expect from the Magic Kingdom, but at this point the airport seemed magical to me.

The man turned his attention once again to my father.

“Now, sir, I know you want the very best for your son, and I’m sure that includes wanting the very best education he can get. And I know you feel, as so many other generous Americans do, that young boys and girls of color deserve the *very same* educational opportunities as your son.”

I glanced up at my father, expecting to see him confirm what the young man so clearly took as a self-evident truth. The bemused look was gone, replaced by one of pure malice. Grabbing the lollipop from my hand, he smashed it into the man’s chest, growling “Keep your fucking candy.” Seizing my hand, he pulled me toward the gate without a backward glance at how his “donation” was received.

Naturally, I asked why I couldn’t keep the lollipop. He grumbled something about how taking candy from strangers was dangerous.

“So, this is what we’re going to do. When we get home, you are to go directly to your room and take down your pants. I will be in there shortly to give you a spanking.”

Ignoring his earlier injunction for silence, I blurted out “A spanking? I’m fourteen years old!”

“I don’t give a shit if you’re fourteen or forty-two,” he replied. “If I want to give you a spanking, I’m for damn sure going to give you a spanking!”

Having now passed the age of forty-two, I realize this last claim is just silly. I’m quite confident that if he tried it now, I could take him. At the time, though, I just thought this was a bizarre idea. Not bizarre in the sense that he used the phrase “If I *want* to give you a spanking,”—a declaration that would cause any decent Freudian to reach for a notebook while nodding knowingly—but bizarre in the sense of “How in the hell did we get here?” The punishment, from my perspective, just did not seem to fit the crime.

The remainder of the drive was spent in deafening silence. Once we pulled into the driveway, my father said, “You go directly to your room and get ready; I’ll be in there shortly.”

Gradually recognizing that he fully intended to go through with this, I went to my room and waited.

And waited.

And waited some more.

While I was waiting, my phone rang. It was Derrick, calling to see if everything was “cool.”

“Your dad seemed to be acting weird,” he explained.

“Tell me about it. Do you know what . . .”

In the very definition of “unfortunate timing,” that was the moment my father came into the room, preceded by the scent of Scotch.

“Who are you talking to?” he demanded.

I realize now that things would have been better for me if I said I had started calling the 1-900 phone sex numbers again (an issue I would really rather not discuss), but I wasn’t thinking fast enough for that at the moment.

“Derrick,” I blurted out.

His eyes seem to glaze over a bit and then he drawled, “Hang up the phone.”

I started to comply, but I feared taking my eyes off him. I wanted every nanosecond of advanced notice I could get to prepare for whatever he had in mind—for I now fully realized that this was for real. Because of this, the process of hanging up the phone was sloppy and, apparently, too slow for my father’s taste.

He helped by grabbing me by one shoulder and forcefully spinning me around, then pushing me over the edge of the bed in what is known worldwide as “assuming the position.”

And then the spanking began.

My dad only managed a few smacks before his arm got tired or his hand got too sore. Whichever the reason, he quickly decided the spanking was not going as well as he had hoped and called in the big guns. Even though he had never used it on me before, I intuited what the crackling sound of leather sliding over denim meant. And the subsequent slicing pain, followed immediately by a sharp, cracking sound, confirmed those intuitions.

When I was nine, my father and I were driving down the Merritt Parkway to a youth hockey game in some rich New York-wannabe western Connecticut town when he noticed he needed gas. He was already in a foul mood when we pulled into the next Mobil station.

I think his disgruntlement was mostly caused by the embarrassment of looking unprepared. My father liked to present (in front of me particularly) the image of complete control; he extolled the virtues of preparation and responsibility, and missing something as basic as making sure you had enough gas to get where you're going before you set off I'm sure caused a fair amount of mortification.

Usually in these situations, he would deflect any blame onto me, transferring his self-imposed humiliation into a lecture on how I was culpable for this unfortunate and regrettable lapse in preparation. But in this case, he had no such option, for even the most self-deluding excuse cannot be founded upon the idea that when a nine-year-old borrows the car, he needs to remember to return it with a full tank of gas.

In the early 1980s, the gas stations along the Merritt were still full service, so my father was able to channel some of his frustration at the situation by ignoring the humanity of the approaching attendant. Staring straight through the windshield, he barked a terse command of "Fill it" before the attendant even cleared the rear passenger door. Forced to cut off his routine greeting, the attendant could only get out a garbled "Goo—yassir" before spinning on his heels to begin the process of feeding the car. Something in the tone or style of the voice must have caught my father's attention, though, as he spent the filling process spying on the attendant through the side-view mirror, breaking his concentration only once to glance at the dashboard clock and complain about how long it was taking. This seemed unfair to me, as this pumping the car full of gas seemed to be taking as long as every other pumping the car full of gas, but I did not say anything, shamefully thankful that someone else was the target of his petty frustrations.

Then we heard the hollow thump indicating that the pump had shut itself off.

Then we heard it again.

And then, a few seconds later, again.

And then one more time.

I had had enough experience at gas stations to know what the attendant was doing; he was playing the game "Hit the number," when you try to coax the pump to stop on the bill amount you prefer, usually an even dollar amount, but sometimes to match the exact amount of cash you had on you at the time. My father played this game

quite frequently and I can recall vividly one time when he was caught without his wallet and euphorically matched the gas total to the \$3.27 he had in the change compartment.

So I was as surprised as the attendant when my father growled “Don’t ever fucking top-off my tank again” as he handed his credit card through the window.

“I didn’t mean anything by it, sir. I was just trying . . .”

“I know what you ‘were trying,’” my father cut him off, the last two words offered in a mocking impression of the halting speech pattern the attendant had.

“You were trying to run up the bill on me,” my father accused.

My father then violently shoved the clipboard and completed paperwork back at the attendant, adding, in lieu of gratuity, these parting words:

“You fucking nigger!”

As he peeled out of the station in either anger or with the bravado that often masks fear, I looked through the rear-view mirror in time to see the attendant throw the clipboard down onto the pavement, sending the paperwork he would need to submit so the station’s owner could collect on the sale twirling out across the highway to be churned into irrelevance by an endless stream of automobiles.

I had always prided myself for the noble, if not heroic, manner in which I met the few, more age-appropriate, spankings I had received as a younger child, stoically accepting each whack of the hand while denying my father the satisfaction of seeing me try to squirm out of the way of the next blow.

But against the belt, no such stoicism was possible.

After the first two strikes, my father had to use his off-hand to hold down my thrashing body as he continued to lash out with the belt. My reptilian brain was on full-fledged escape mode and eventually I slid off the foot of the bed. My dad, consumed within the moment, used a foot to pin me down by the shoulder before continuing to strike. As I rolled about on the floor, I caught a glimpse of him in the floor length mirror I had hanging behind my bedroom door. He was twirling the belt above his head like some demented do Indiana Jones.

With me on the floor, the arrangement of the room furnishings now made my ass a more difficult target; that or my father was not satisfied with the force he could

generate with the altered arm angle necessary to whip the belt past the corner of the bed. After one last attempt, he tossed aside the belt.

But this did not mean my beating was over.

It just meant the kicking began.

As I desperately tried to find an orientation of the fetal position that would protect my battered ribs while not unduly exposing my impossibly sore ass to the unrelenting assault of my father's work boot, a most incongruous series of thoughts occurred to me.

I thought once again about the scene with Ernie.

Once he was dismissed from my father's office, an insinuation of an object lesson haunted the silence. Only, there didn't seem to be a clear lesson. My father didn't seem to be trying to make a point, or if he was, he was being far too subtle. In fact, the scene did not really even have the father-imparting-wisdom-to-his-son feel. The display didn't seem designed to imply, "Here's what happens when you work hard" nor did it seem a more generic lesson on the merits of physical exercise and its connection to aging well.

Instead, the whole episode was like a man proudly showing off one of his more prized possessions. Re-situating the principle characters into the 1850s, it would not have seemed out of place in the least if my father had me inspect Ernie's teeth.

As the blows continued, I thought of that gas station attendant and the lost credit card receipt.

I, of course, have no idea what, if anything, happened to him because of this (although, with the arbitrary significance that children frequently attach to random events, I did worry about it from time to time in the years that followed) but I do know what happened to me because of it:

Approximately four years later, while my father was savagely beating me, I would recall this moment and have an epiphany:

I think my father may be racist.

Of course, I realize now that the evidence was conclusive, but it hadn't registered until that moment. When my father had excused his bigotry by asserting that he "wasn't prejudiced against black people but against lazy people; it just happens that in my experience blacks tend to be lazy," or by insisting that "some of his friends were black," I

had accepted this as sage refutation of any charge of racism offered against him. It was only as I grew older, and gained a greater depth of life experience, that I realized just how pathetically cliché he was being with these feeble attempts to gild his intolerance.

Finally, I thought once again of that young man at the airport, and of my father grabbing the lollipop from my hands and forcibly slamming it into the man's chest.

The mistake the man made was, I think, similar to the one Ralph Ellison depicts in *Invisible Man*, where the narrator runs afoul of a group of white men when he dares suggest the goal for blacks is not just "social responsibility" (an idea with which his white audience does not seemingly have a problem) but "social equality" (an idea to which his white audience responds with much hostility). When the young man was simply asking for donations to help black students pay for college, my father found this a charmingly amusing topic; but as soon as he made the implication that there should be equal rights to equal opportunities, my father's sense of racial propriety was offended, and the young man's petition was dead on arrival.

I think something similar was driving my beating. My friendship with Derrick represented a threat to my father. By ignoring his passive aggressive efforts to steer me toward alternate friends, I was unknowingly rejecting the fundamental assumptions upon which he built a portion of his world. Since he styled himself a decent man (and his bigotry aside, he was), he did not outright forbid me from playing with him, nor did he directly challenge my innate view of Derrick as an equal.

Yet over the months of my friendship with Derrick, the tension was building. Whatever internal checks his basic goodness provided ultimately proved insufficient when he had to go humiliate himself in front of Derrick's father, for I have no doubt that to humble himself by asking a strange black man—a poor, working class black man at that—for help with something so personal as finding his son must have been a humiliation for him.

His internal checks overwhelmed, he had to have some type of release, and while, as a functioning member of a civilized society he couldn't get his release by beating Derrick or Derrick's father, he could find it by beating me in the privacy of my own bedroom.

I say in the privacy of my own bedroom, but that turned out not to be the case. Although neither of us noticed it at the time, when my father forcefully spun me around and pushed me down over the bed, I was unable to fully comply with his previous demand to hang up the phone; I only got the handset partially on the receiver.

As a result, Derrick heard the entire attack. At some point, he got his brother Donnie on the phone to listen in as well. I found this out a few moments after my father, his sense of ethnic hierarchy satisfied, had left the room. As I lay on the floor trying to catch my breath, wheezing through my bruised ribs, I heard Derrick's muffled voice call out, "Paul?"

He had to call out a couple more times before I was able to understand what was happening and pick up the receiver.

"Are you ok? Do you want me to call someone?"

"No, I'll be all right."

There followed a silence, as neither one of us knew how to address what had just happened.

Fortunately for us, Donnie did.

Piercing through our collective awkward silence, he did an impromptu impression of what he just heard.

"O, God, Dad, please stop beating me! I swear I'll hate the darkies, too, just please stop hitting me."

Using an exaggerated squawking voice for my role, Donnie went on. "O, dear Jesus, stop kicking me. I won't be friends wit da niggas; I swears I won't be friends wit da niggas."

Despite ourselves, and despite the pain it caused, both Derrick and I were soon rolling with laughter.

While Donnie used humor to address my pain and embarrassment, Derrick ultimately opted for a different tactic.

The next day seemed normal between us. He gave me a big smile when he saw me in homeroom, then told me that Donnie had decided, in light of my sacrifice for the cause, to make me an honorary black man.

Derrick said he planned to make up a T-shirt for me indicating such, but nothing ever came of that.

But in the days, weeks, and months that followed, Derrick subtly and gradually began to talk to me less and less until one day I discovered an unbridgeable divide had been constructed and that I had lost my friend.

For years, I assumed that Derrick rejected my friendship out of disgust or fear of my father's explosive form of racism.

But then, years later, re-enacting the traditional pilgrimage of all freshman in college, I ran into him at our high school's Thanksgiving's Day football game. After the scripted—and therefore comfortable—exchange of greetings and pleasantries, there was once again an awkward pause.

I decided to fill it by plunging right in.

“Hey, Derrick, I'm sorry my old man scared you off. But you know, just because he is what he is, that doesn't make me him.”

Derrick looked away, staring at the horizon silently for a few moments, before slightly shaking his head and responding,

“That's not what happened. I didn't stop talking to you because I thought you were like that too. But what I heard on the phone,” he trailed off, was silent again for a beat or two, before finishing “I didn't want you to ever go through that again. And I was afraid if I was your friend, you would.”

Life is funny; even when Derrick was no longer my friend, he was one of the best I ever had.

And he didn't even play baseball.



Paul Juhasz has presented at dozens of academic conferences before turning his hand to creative writing. His mock journal, *Fulfillment: Diary of an Amazonian Picker*, chronicling his seven-month term as a Picker at an Amazon Fulfillment Center, has been published in abridged form in *The Langdon Review of the Arts in Texas* and is currently being serialized in *Voices de la Luna*. Currently, he is working on *Daddy Issues*, a collection of short stories, and has just completed his first novel, *Junk*, based

on his experiences riding a truck for 1-800-GOT-JUNK the last eighteen months.