

HOLLIBAUGH

BY NATHAN DALE



Ricky Hollibaugh was the toughest guy I ever knew.

And he was scared of only one thing.

His dad.

Anything else he handled.

I can't remember when we met but it feels like I'd known him my entire life. He was three years older than me.

When you're twelve, three years might as well have been ten. He was in the major leagues. I was his bat boy.

He didn't lift weights. Never trained. And rarely wore a shirt. He had a permanent six-pack.

He was competitive and mean in that shit talkin' country boy way. He'd only go around once or twice before throwin' blows.

He was fast. But clumsy.

Flattest feet I ever saw. But brute strength usually made up for whatever his clumsiness broke. That's how he moved through the world.

Ricky liked to show off.

Especially below the belt.

Ricky already looked like a full-grown man and treated it like a third arm. He was proud of it.

Any day of the week, he'd drop his pants in broad daylight and do what he called the Weenie Whop as a vulgar performance. Thrusting so it slapped all the way up to his belly button and back down against his knee. Your amazement and head shaking would give him the reaction he needed. He'd bellow out a grinding and guttural laugh.

And when you laughed, you made sure it was with him and never at him, knowing what a reckless liability he could be.

If somebody said do it
Ricky did it.

If somebody said nobody would
Ricky would.

He wasn't the kind of friend you brought with you everywhere. Too risky.

When he showed up, your show stopped and his started. Then you just stood there, hijacked,

waiting to see what he'd wreck next.

Most kids his age were trying to hide themselves.

Ricky didn't hide a thing.

Loud.

Crass.

Certain.

Ricky was Joe Buck before Ratso got hold of him.

Not many people liked him. The few friends he had were older. Maybe that's why he ended up hanging around with a younger kid like me.

He showed me the world early. Not the world of boys. The world of men.

He worked demolition with his dad. Carried scrap. Tore things apart.

That built him in ways school couldn't.

To me he was an older brother I never asked for. That three-year difference between us was a badge and a gun, and I liked to use 'em.

If anybody stepped toward me sideways, Ricky would straighten them out.

No speeches.

No warnings.

Just violence, clean and fast, like somebody tracing a line with a ruler.

I saw him punch a kid once so hard it looked like somebody pulled the plug on him.

When Ricky fought it was already over.

We lived in Rio Linda.

And that meant something back then.

Everybody had a story.

None of them were good.

Last names carried weight. Some of them you avoided whether you knew why or not.

Peacock was one of those names.

Everybody knew Peacock.

Nobody wanted Peacock.

One afternoon we were out at the BMX field. Dirt packed hard by our bike tires year after year.

Nobody new ever showed up there. That was our ground.

Then three kids rolled in.

Started talking right away.

Wrong tone. The kind that says they didn't come to ride.

Usually Ricky would already be smiling by then.

He wasn't.

He kept hitting jumps like he didn't hear them.

Which meant he heard everything.

They started jawing at me first.

I said something right back, figuring Ricky would step in any second like he always did.

That was the usual order of things.

Then the ginger kid said it.

"My name's Dwight Peacock."

Everything changed right there.

It was like somebody dropped cold water down your back.

Ricky rolled over slow after that.

No mouth. No swagger. No fireworks.

Just watching.

Dwight swung first.

Hit Ricky clean in the mouth.

Ricky stood there still on his brand new Redline, the one his dad had bought him that March for his birthday. Expensive bike. Above their means.

Blood showed at the corner of his lip.

He didn't even flinch.

That was the strangest thing I'd ever seen.

Dwight started bobbing around like a discount boxer in a mirror.

Ricky just stood there.

Still.

Like he was solving something nobody else could see.

Then he dropped the bike.

Just let it fall sideways in the dirt.

That was the moment everything was supposed to start.

Dwight backed up.

Talking shit.

Baiting Ricky forward.

But Ricky was like a motorcycle with a clogged carburetor.

Plenty of engine.

Just no go.

Then one of the other kids slipped off behind Ricky and me.

And suddenly they were gone.

Just like that.

I didn't notice.

Ricky blinked once. Almost relieved.

"That was Terry's little brother."

Terry Peacock had already done time. Ricky knew that.

Then he looked around.

Lost his mind.

"OH MY GOD! WHERE'S MY BIKE?!"

Gone. The Redline.

One of the little bastards slipped away with it while Dwight kept running his mouth.

Ricky looked at me like I should have stopped it.

"You let them steal my bike?!"

"I didn't see him take it."

It was the truth.

I still couldn't understand why he hadn't swung.

"WE HAVE TO FIND MY BIKE!"

We hustled to the high school a couple blocks away. That was where our part of town stopped.

We'd never seen those kids before.

We didn't know where they came from.

We had no idea where the Peacocks lived.

They existed only in name.

So when they left our field they were gone.

Like they'd never been there.

After a while Ricky stopped running.

Didn't say a thing.

Just stood there breathing hard like he was trying to find a question for something he already knew the answer to.

It was getting dark.

I could tell he didn't want to go home.

Eventually he climbed onto my handlebars and I pedaled him back toward his place.

Soon as we turned the corner his dad was already standing in the yard.

"Oh fuck," he said to himself.

That slowed my pace.

"RICKY, WHERE'S YOUR BIKE!?"

Ricky didn't answer.

His dad started walking toward us.

"I SAID WHERE IS YOUR BIKE!!?"

"These kids jumped me and stole it."

Orin was half the size of Ricky. Maybe five-five. Small frame. Loud voice. The kind of man who didn't need to be big.

He didn't hesitate.

Didn't think.

Just right-crossed Ricky in the face right there in the yard.

Fast.

Hard.

This time Ricky flinched.

I left immediately.

As I sped away I heard Ricky squealing.

"I didn't want to beat him up, dad. He was a Peacock!"

And his dad shouting,

"WELL NOW YOU'RE GETTING AN ASS BEATING FROM ME BOY!"

Door slammed.

Many years later they found him slumped over the wheel of his waste management truck on the shoulder of I-5 in Madera.

Forty-six.

Heart attack.

Christmas Eve.

Guys like Ricky feel permanent when you're young.
Like a railroad spike hammered into the ground.

Seeing his name in the obituary didn't look right to me.

Hollibaugh.

I'd said it for years and never seen it written down.

In my head it was a sound.

Not an ending.

But I still remember that day in the field.

The blood on his lip.

Him standing there quiet.

Not swinging back.

Saying he didn't want to beat him up.

Because he was a Peacock.

And that Redline.

A gift from his dad.

That meant more to him than winning any fight
ever could.



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