

Training the Problem

Stories and a Novella

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A man came into a forest and asked the Trees to provide him a handle for his axe. The Trees consented to his request and gave him a young ash tree. No sooner had the man fitted a new handle to his axe from it, than he began to use it and quickly felled with his strokes the noblest giants of the forest. An old oak, lamenting when too late the destruction of his companions, said to a neighboring cedar, "The first step has lost us all. If we had not given up the rights of the ash, we might yet have retained our own privileges and have stood for ages."

--*The Trees and The Ax*
From *Aesop's Fables*

Sin Insurance

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It’s been...shit, how long has it been?”

“Excuse me?!” he says, half-alarmed. Like he’s never heard somebody curse before.

“Eight weeks-ish? Yeah...it’s been about eight weeks since my last confession.”

“It’s been a bit longer than eight weeks, Ricky.”

“Crap.”

“You didn’t think I’d recognize your voice?” There’s a laugh at the end of his sentence. A small one.

“Well, no, not really.”

“Well, you’re a retard,” he reminds me. “What’s on your mind?”

“I think I kind of did something bad, but I don’t know if it’s bad, so I wanted to come here and pass it through you. You know, cover my bases.”

“Cover your bases?” he asks. His Irish accent is so thick that it borders on cliché.

“Yeah,” I tell him. “Thought I’d get it off my chest. That way you assign me a few Hail Marys and then I’m covered just in case what I did was actually wrong.”

“The hell is the matter with you?” His voice doesn’t sound angry; it sounds more confused and annoyed. “You’re using my church for back-up insurance?”

“Yeah,” I say, “like, ‘sin insurance.’ So I don’t have to worry about Hell or anything.”

“Honestly! What the hell is the matter with you?”

“What?”

“Have a shred of reverence, will ya?”

“I’m plenty reverent.”

“Plenty reverent? This is my church, Ricky!”

“And?” My knees are starting to hurt. Why do we have to kneel in these things? I think the Catholic Church has gotten liberal enough to spring for chairs. And do they honestly want young men kneeling in front of priests these days? It’s a PR nightmare waiting to happen.

“...and then I’ll ‘plenty’ whoop you upside the bottom part of your chin, how would you like that?” Crap, he’s been talking this whole time? I have to stop zoning out.

“Hey, Father Bill?”

“What?”

“Have a shred of reverence, will ya?” I hear him sighing with frustration over my snickering.

“What the hell do you want?”

“Like I said, I think I did something bad...”

“We’ve been over this,” he says, rushing me forward. “Tell me what you did, and I’ll decide if it was all that bad.”

“Isn’t that, um...you know...God’s job to decide?” He doesn’t say anything. He just groans. “Okay, well I cheated on Vicky.”

“Your girlfriend?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’d say that’s pretty bad.”

“How bad?”

“Commandment-breaking bad.”

“They have a commandment for that?”

“Are you kiddin’ me, boy?” he yells. I hope nobody is outside of these tiny pine boxes. “Thou shall not commit adultery!”

“Oh, it’s nothing that serious. Trust me, we didn’t fuck.” I hear a hard bang come from his side of the wood.

“This is your last warning, Ricky!”

“Yeah, sorry. No more f-bombs.”

“Continue.”

“Yeah, anyway, I didn’t really sleep with the other person or anything. We just kinda...fooled around. Is that bad?”

“Well,” he breathes out slowly. “It’s wrong to betray the trust of any loved one, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Yeah, but I really don’t *love* Vicky. To be honest with you, I don’t really even like her. She’s kind of a b-word.”

“B-word?” he asks. “You mean a bitch?”

“I thought we weren’t allowed to curse in here.”

“My church, my rules.”

“But I thought your rules said I couldn’t curse.”

“You can’t curse. I’m excused.”

“Why?”

“When you live a life devoted to chastity we’ll talk.”

“I don’t know how you can live like that,” I tell him.

“I don’t know how you can live like you do: atop your father’s pile of money, betraying good women who care about you.”

“Well, that’s the glory of being a trust fund baby, Father. It’s like an invitation to act immoral.”

“Ricky,” his voice is considerably calmer. “Your father is a good man. I married him and your mother, you know.”

“So?”

“He’s a rich man because he’s an important man. Not important by celebrity, but important by value. He’s made his money by being good and helping people. Haven’t you ever thought about that? Haven’t you ever thought about doing that? Haven’t you thought about doing something other than fighting, drinking, gambling or lusting?”

“I’m not my father,” I tell him, “and you’re not my probation officer, so don’t lecture me over my mistakes.” The calm, quiet air around us is abrupt. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be giving you a hard time. I’m the one who came to you.”

“Aye,” he says. “But I’ll respect your privacy.” His voice stops, and all I can hear is some fiddling on the other side of the thin pine partition, some rustling while he gets adjusted.

“You’re right though: I haven’t earned a buck I have. I spend my dad’s cash getting into trouble and then paying lawyers to keep me out of jail.” A small, purging feeling cleanses the back of my mind after I say that, then the reality sits in. I never asked for forgiveness for anything serious. I never asked for God’s help, even when I’ve done the most

horrible things. That woman last week. I nearly killed her. I nearly killed her because she wouldn't fuck me. All this while I have a girlfriend who worries about me every night while she cries in and out of sleep. And my parents, my father. All I've put him through. All the pain of watching his only son fuck up again and again, spending his righteously earned cash just to keep me out of a cage one more week before I fuck up again.

"Are you okay, Ricky?"

"Yeah," I say. "Father Bill?"

"Aye?"

"That girl I cheated on Vicky with. There's more." He's quiet aside from some more rustling. His silence begs me to talk. "I attacked her. It started with kissing, and then I attacked her when she said 'No' to me." I say it, expecting my eyes to faucet, rushing icy tears. They stay dry, and my heart crumbles in half while I finish. "I attacked her, and then paid off all the right people not to tell after I sent her to the hospital."

His voice is sterile and surprisingly calm. "And you don't know if that is wrong or not?"

"I know it's wrong. I just wasn't sure if it was wrong to tell you about it or not."

It stays quiet until I ask what to do.

Silence expands the next 30 seconds into infinity before Father Bill finally talks again.

"Pray," he says. "Pray before God for forgiveness."

I stay humbled on my knees, waiting for forgiveness, but I get something else instead.

"So you paid off evil men to keep a dirty secret? You, Richard Jameson, son of industrialist and philanthropist Connor Jameson, paid off these men to hide the fact that you attacked an innocent women for staying chaste?" He's creepy and calm as he says it, nothing like before.

"Yes, Father." I hear nothing in response, so I call out again. "Yes, Father. I did it. I paid them off."

The pine door shoots open, Father Bill—his long shoulders and arms intersecting perfectly with his thin legs and torso to make him appear like a human cross covered in black cloth. He's wrinkled only slightly for his age; his skin still tight along his mouth and jaw while he stands over me, throwing down a grim smile. A tape recorder clicks in his hand as his stern smile turns to a grin.

“And how much would you be willing to pay me to keep it a secret, lad?”

Letters from the Emotionally Retarded

Letter 1: Busted Purity

My shrink told me that writing a letter can help you solve almost any problem. I asked him if I could fix the economy or get the Cubs a World Series ring with my letters, and he just squinted his eyes and shook his head before encouraging me, again, to write these letters. The catch of writing these letters, unfortunately, is that I'm not supposed to send them to you.

Since you're reading this, I guess you know that I didn't listen very well.

I guess the best way to figure out my problem and where I went wrong would be for me to take it from the top and start at the beginning.

For me, that would be the night I popped more than just my cherry.

Like most people, the first time I had sex screwed me up a lot more than it helped me, and ultimately, screwed things up for you as well.

It was June 1999. I was a "late bloomer." That's the term they reserve for guys like me. I didn't lose my virginity until I was 18 years old—a bit older than the average, even in my time. I think when I was growing up, the norm was some-

where around 16 or 17. But what can I say? I was drowning in the depths of my own post-adolescent playground, grasping desperately to the days where it was socially considered normal for a guy to be completely immersed in his collection of action movies and *X-Men* comics.

But, like all good things, those days of pubescent escapism had to end at one point. And they ended with Angela.

Angela was pure and honest. I met her my senior year of high school. Catholic high school, that is. Now, if you have ever heard the phrase “catholic high school” muttered into your ear, you have one of two stereotypes banging against your eardrums with it. Either: A) You think all catholic school kids are simple goody-goodies, relishing in their own healthy, suburban moral ways, lavishing in nothing more than the Halloween-candy-sweet existence of their perfect, mall-influenced lifestyle, or, B) you know them for the repressed, sex-craved, hormone-driven, “I’ll fuck simply because my parents and society urges me toward chastity” ways. Angela fit into the latter better than a dancer fits into a slinky leotard.

Angela became a quick, quintessential cardboard cutout for the high-school sweetheart we all either have or wish we knew. We made out everywhere on every occasion and said the kind of romantic shit to one another that you barely see outside of an Aaron Spelling drama. Time went by, our hands got frisky, and on a murky summer night in my adopted guardians’ basement we expressed our misconceived concept of teenaged love by fucking the virginity out of each other.

All was well the next morning, until I got the call.

“Hello?” She was humbled when I answered the phone, shaking from the nervous quakes erupting through her body. I responded with a groggy, “What’s up?” and that was all it took for her to unzip and spill her tragedy to me. “Remember how last night after...you know...”

“We fucked?” I finished for her.

“Yeah,” she confirmed. “Remember how I was bleeding and...stuff.” Ahh, the busted hymen. A truly physical rite of passage. “Well,” she eked out slowly, “I haven’t stopped bleeding yet.”

That was all it took for me to drop the phone, lift my pants to my waist and haul ass to her parents’ house. Unfiltered teenage passion—it makes you do strong, crazy things until you’re old enough to realize it’s just your hormones screwing with your head.

Her parents’ house was guarded by Brad, her citadel of a brother. He stood at the front door, staring at my piece-of-crap, 92 Ford Taurus as it slipped next to the curb. He didn’t stop staring at the car, even as I walked up to him.

“What happened?” He was more concerned than angry, but I wasn’t going to push my luck by telling this big, Samoan-warrior-looking type that I popped his sister’s sex hole the night before.

Instead, I dodged the question with some legitimate concern. “She alright?” I asked. Mindy—Angela’s standard-issue best friend that grew up with her—came out to alleviate me and to tame Brad.

“She’s not screaming as much, but I think she’s still in a lot of pain. There’s still a lot of blood.” Well, she tried to alleviate me, anyway.

“Alright,” Brad said. He was kind of calm. His hand pressed against my back, and I had no choice but to follow its will inside, where he, Mindy and I crashed into the soft couches in the sticky, air conditioner-less house. Brad had a reputation. Built like an extra from the movie *Gladiator*, the guy was known for a lot of things, most of which were violent. One story said he apparently crushed a guy’s hand during an ice hockey game just because he called him a cocksucker. Another claimed he got mugged by a bunch of angry Puerto Rican’s and they ended up in the hospital. But most of them pertained to the protection of Angela from douche bags who were unfortunate enough to be caught making a public display of affection with her. So needless to say, I was

shitting the proverbial bricks when he cleared his throat, brushed away the awkward silence and finally said, “OK. So you had sex with my sister. Then what happened?”

I told him that she started bleeding. “A lot?” Mindy chimed in.

I nodded. “All over the blankets. That normal?”

“I think so?” Mindy asked more than confirmed. “I think it’s supposed to bleed...”

“You think?” I asked.

“I don’t know!” she flipped slightly. “I’m still a virgin, why are you asking me?”

“Girls typically bleed when they lose their virginity,” chimed Brad, an immediate expert at destroying hymens with three confirmed kills under his belt, or so the locker room had stories told. “But they eventually stop. Was she bleeding when you left last night?”

“Yeah, I think so.” I tried to be sure and truthful. Maybe too truthful. “To be honest, we were so freaking high that I can barely remember anything other than throwing out the bloody blankets afterwards.” Something struck anger into his eyes, something made them melt from brown to red. My money is on the fact that I indirectly just told him that not only did I bust his sister’s purity, but that it was all a byproduct of some half-baked heavy petting.

Mindy and I watched the steam seep from his pores and into the air while collecting everything inside his gut to stop his fists from crashing into me. “OK,” he finally said, smooth and collected. “We need to take her to the hospital.” He jumped up, but only stood, staring at me. I could physically see him repressing his anger into a tiny bottle set to pop at a later date, most likely turning my nose bloodier than his sister’s busted hymen. It took a minute, but he paced around the home, scribbled a note to the effect of “Mom, Dad, took Angela to the Emergency Room,” and commanded the loyal Mindy to collect his now-impure sister. We were off to fix the vagina I somehow destroyed.

* * *

Brad wasn't afraid of me, but like all mature young adults, he could respect his fear of awkward silence. That's probably why he insisted that I drove Angela to the emergency room in my car while he and Mindy drove in his. Got to respect a guy with that kind of foresight. I also respected him for not beating the sex drive out of me, but not as much as I respected him for sparing me from what could have been the most uncomfortable car ride in the entire span of America's automotive history.

By the time we got to the emergency room, it was 11:30 a.m. on a Friday, and somehow the place still had a wait. The nurses were amused by the story, but not amused enough to let Angela in right away. An hour went by before they admitted her, and that hour was made up of a simple chain reaction of hostile/awkward gestures. The formula went as follows: Angela would moan in dull pain as her vagina chirped out more blood, which caused Brad to drill angry glares in my direction while cracking his knuckles, which made Mindy (who harbored a small crush on Brad) no doubt randy, which caused me to squirm uncomfortably, which caused an air of uneasiness in the entire room until Angela would finally break the chain by alternating her catalytic moans with a trip to the ladies room to change her over-drenched maxi pad.

Good times.

It didn't start getting really uncomfortable until Angela was finally admitted. That's when I got to spend a whole three hours in the waiting room watching Brad crack his knuckles at me while Mindy smiled from a pool of her own juvenile, lusty wetness. I tried to ignore it, digging into the limited escapism of outdated magazines provided by the waiting room coffee tables. I killed some time by arguing with my boss about how I couldn't come in to work that day because I literally decimated my girlfriend's vagina into

bloody tatters the night before. He got screwed out of my missing manpower that day, but at least he had an interesting piece of gossip for his smoke breaks.

“We need the boyfriend. Which one of you is the boyfriend?” a stubby, older nurse said, coming out from the ER’s swinging double doors.

“Is she OK?” I asked as we walked back, twisting and turning through the intestines of the ER. I had legitimate concern for Angela out of my misguided sense of teenage, puppy-dog affection. I guess it’s kind of admirable in hindsight.

“Oh, she’s fine,” the nurse said, her voice charged with some sass. “The doctor’s stitching her up now.”

“Stitching her up?” We stopped short in front of a door left slightly open. Angela’s moans vibrated through the hallway.

“That’s right.”

“What happened?”

“She was torn up. Most girls, as they get closer to the age of sexual activity, their vaginas grow,” the nurse explained with hand motions. “Some girls grow bigger than others, some girls don’t grow as much. Your girl didn’t grow as much.”

“So when we had sex...”

“Her vagina wasn’t big enough for your penis, and she got torn up,” she cut me off. “That’s what caused the bleeding.”

“I tore her up...?” It was all I could think about. My penis. My once flaccid and virgin penis had the power to tear a girl up.

“We stopped the bleeding, but there was a blood clot the size of a fist in there that needed to be removed! You’re lucky you brought her in when you did before it did some damage.”

“I tore her up...” The nurse kept talking, but I wasn’t listening, just smiling. I tore her up! With my penis! That little toy I’ve been using to pleasure myself tore a girl up! It was

like the nurse was telling an 8-year-old boy that his plastic toy sword was suddenly Excalibur.

“Hey!” she yelled. “Now don’t go thinking all this is because you’re packin’ down there!”

“What do you mean?”

“I told you, this is cause she was super-tight, not because you’re super big. Don’t go getting a big head.”

Angela’s continuing moans helped me avoid the obvious pun in that sentence.

“But she’s going to be OK?”

“Should be once she’s stitched.”

“Can I go in and see her?”

“Hell no!” she erupted. “The hell would you wanna go in there for now anyway, while she’s getting all stitched up? Sick sonnuvabitch...”

“I thought that’s why you brought me back here...”

“I brought you back here to tell you the situation in privacy,” she was this close to shaking an angry finger at me. “I could have explained it out front, but I didn’t want you high-fiving anyone out there after I told you your dick split a tight white girl open.”

I was led back to the waiting room. Led back to Brad, Mindy and their broad, curious eyes that expected me to spill some brand of good news. So I did. I spent ten minutes explaining how my penis destroyed Angela’s super-tight vagina. In retrospect, I realize that this was one of the most dangerous scenarios I’ve ever walked away from. The realization now is not unlike the experience of drinking heavily and then realizing the next morning you should be dead when you’re not. That’s how I equate this story when I remember what I was explaining, who I was explaining it to and the size of Brad’s mouth-busting fists.

Another 45 minutes later, a pasty, blood-deprived Angela wobbled out of the ER. Brad and Mindy swarmed on her, covering her in some kind of group hug that to this day I’m convinced was really just a human shield to keep her away from me. Then again, they did let me drive her home, which

was really unfortunate for me because the afternoon that passed gave Angela's parents plenty of time to read the note Brad wrote and even more time to panic over the millions of fright-inducing possibilities that swim through a parent's head when he/she reads a miscellaneous note that claimed their only daughter had been rushed to the ER.

"Drive." That's all Angela said as she was getting out of my car when I dropped her back home, her parents charging out the front door to either greet her or kill me.

I didn't go back to her house too often after that. When I did, her dad made sure to pop quick and dirty glares in my direction and even "accidentally" bump into me when walking by. Every trip to my girlfriend's house felt like a trip to the high-school locker room to claim my bruises and swirlies. Then again, I physically destroyed his daughter's innocence. I guess at least a little bullying was in order.

Angela and I only dated for two more months after that. Two practically sex-less months that involved me hearing the phrase, "I'm not sure if I want to have sex again so soon," more times than I've flushed a toilet.

We both took off to start our freshman year at different colleges. Long-distance college relationships—that's always positive for high-school sweethearts, right? Oddly enough, she eventually found a renewed interest in sex again, but by the time she did, it was with guys who weren't me. For the first time, I experienced the spurn of a loose woman (figuratively, not literally) as she cheated on me with God knows who while I was helpless to do anything about it from my dorm, which clocked in at about 85 miles away from hers. The only real solace I had was telling myself that none of the guys she was having sex with while/after we were dating had messed her up with a penis like I did. But that kind of solace only gets you so far. And it doesn't help in the rebound department, as I learned that no matter how charming you may be, there's no way you can turn a story about your dick causing a super-tight vagina to split open and belch blood into a decent pick-up line.

*With Polite
Regards to
Writer/Director
John Singleton*

I really wish I had never let my dog, Yukon, watch *Boyz n the Hood*. As a pet owner, that may have been one of the worst mistakes I could have made. Even though I knew he was a black beagle-spaniel mix, I never realized that he considered himself African-American, and I had never imagined that a Friday night with a rented modern classic would have such an effect. But, man, that John Singleton-directed film really opened a world of racial tension to my dog.

He watched *Boyz n the Hood* twice more and then rented *Menace 2 Society*. He watched *New Jack City* and *Juice* after that. Then, he graduated onto other African-American-centric films, such as *Shaft* and *The Inkwell*.

He really likes Spike Lee joints.

His iTunes account last month totaled \$45.00 in charges, all songs by prominent rap, hip-hop and R&B artists.

He bought an N.W.A. box set. I didn't even know they released a box set.

I was really proud of Yukon for going beyond the hobbies of a normal dog. Instead of chewing on my furniture and chasing around a Frisbee, he was blogging about the cultural relevance of hip-hop and the argument of whether it was a

decline or an ascension that brought it into the “gangsta rap” genre.

I was really proud of him for expanding his cultural mind. But then he started talking in slang. It was cute at first, especially when he taught me that on the “streets,” a twenty dollar bill is referred to as a “dub.”

But then he started saying a lot of odd things. He told me about the “rules of the street,” and started referring to me with a lot of racially charged nicknames, most often using the term “white boy.”

He began talking about resolving altercations small and large with really violent means, such as holding me at knife-point when I insisted on using a leash for his walks. He wouldn’t stop yelling “oppression.”

He used to get along really well with the neighbor’s white Shit-Tzu, Tink. We used to joke that they were doggy dating. Now Yukon refers to Tink as his “snow ho” and makes crude comments about her “narrow, white ass,” so the neighbors won’t let the two of them play together anymore.

Last week, I tried to get him to stop chasing and barking at the mailman. He responded by telling me he planned to “cap that pussy for getting up on his shit.” And even though the police—or “the po-po” as Yukon calls them—left a citation, I still thought it was cute.

But then, Yukon dropped the “N” word. You know, *that* “N” word. And I knew it was time to put my foot down.

I told him if he wanted to learn more about African-American culture and his roots, I would support it wholeheartedly, but I would not tolerate that kind of bigotry under my roof.

He screamed, once again, that he was being oppressed. He called Jesse Jackson. Things haven’t been the same since.

After that, he wasn’t just a black beagle-spaniel mix who happened to live in a white man’s home. Instead, he was a black dog living under “whitie’s” roof and “whitie’s” rules.

It has become really hard to discipline him. For instance, when he humped my girlfriend’s leg. He knew that was

wrong, so I gave him his punishment: a light smack with a rolled-up newspaper. He screamed “Rodney King” and called it a racist hate crime.

The tension has gone down a little since that incident, but I still have a few protestors sleeping on my yard.

I tried sitting Yukon down to explain that the African-American culture is one of beauty and charm with a resilient heritage that has already been tarnished by too many years of bigotry, hatred and tension. I told him his behavior was not that of a proud African-American, but that of a colorless hooligan. I informed him that the situation had become dire, and as a punishment I would stop buying his food at the gourmet pet food store in New Hope and instead save \$6 by purchasing Puppy Chow at Target.

Shortly after that discussion, I was ambushed into an interview with CNN’s Anderson Cooper. I was interviewed via satellite in response to the discrimination lawsuit Yukon filed against me. Also fed into the interview via satellite were Jesse Jackson (again) and the coach of the Rutgers women’s basketball team. They asked what I had against black people. I told them I didn’t have anything against black people, and that my best friend (Yukon) is black. I even told them that I own every season of *The Chappelle Show* on DVD, even the season where he left to go to Africa. It didn’t go very well.

I lost my job after that interview.

My girlfriend dumped me because her friends said I’m racist.

I’ve gotten a lot of nasty letters from Star Jones. I think Oprah prank called me once, too.

The rapper 50 Cent was asked about me during an interview on a radio show. He said I was demeaning and had no respect for an entire culture and its people. It was right before they aired his new song about paying a woman after ejaculating on her.

I received a really nice fruit basket with condolences from Don Imus.

And Yukon hasn't really stopped his behavior. Last week, VH1 offered him a reality show where he has to pick a potential wife from a group of 15 women, each of varying creeds and ethnicities. The show's called *Doggy Style: Finding a Ho fo' Sho'*. I was proud of him, so I decided to retract his punishment and pick up a bag of his favorite gourmet dog food.

I think he appreciated it. Even though he still calls me "white boy," he still asks to sleep at the foot of my bed, and still crawls up on my lap and naps while I pet him behind his ears.

In retrospect, I really wish I showed him *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* instead of *Boys n the Hood*.

