

Friends from Gainesville

By Bradley Lloyd

The first time he remembered crying, he was six years old, and his sister was only three.

Jenny was standing on the lawn, wearing a flowered sundress. Her bare toes squished around in the grass, as if they tentatively anchored something newly sprung from the earth. Her head was tilted slightly to the side, so that the blue, marble-like balls on the rubber band holding one of her pigtails, being turned up in the air, glinted in the sun like a pair of crystal orbs. Even though her hair had been combed that morning, sole strands along the back of her neck reached out and turned from blond to white, partly because of the light, partly because they lacked company.

Her expression wasn't sad, only puzzled. She looked a bit like a newly-birthing farm animal, her eyes blue and wide.

He turned from her to look at his friend Nolan. "Why not?" he asked Nolan.

"Because, it's my sandbox. I'm the boss. I'm the boss of my sandbox."

The boy lowered his eyes. His cheeks began to tense up. He could see Nolan's knees dusted brown from the sand—a stain you could only partially brush away until you washed them clean.

"But she's my sister," he said.

"You can come in. But not her."

Nolan stood in the middle of his domain, surrounded by expanses of sand. New sand. New sand for the largest sandbox in the land. It was back behind the garage, where no adults could see them. It was a private ocean of sand, surrounded by planks that were painted red, like a barn.

"Please," he breathed.

"No." Nolan lifted his dirty, white T-shirt up over his hips and thrust them from side to side. "I . . . am . . . the . . . boss . . . of . . . my . . . sandbox." It was almost a tune. "Hmm . . . hmm . . . hmm . . . hmm . . . hmm . . . hmm . . . hmm . . . hmm . . . hmm." He repeated the tune without the words.

The boy clenched his fist at his side, but Nolan continued his dance, now rocking his head from side to side. His whole body moved out in different directions, but not his hair. His hair was stuck to his forehead, in dark, triangular strands that framed his face like an overturned crown, or upside-down horns.

"It's big enough for everyone."

"Not for her."

Nolan ceased his dance, and plopped down into the sand. He grabbed an overturned matchbox car, and started wheeling it over the mountains of brown sand. There was a slight grating sound as the sand caught in the tiny wheels. Nolan didn't look up, but called out, "C'mon, we can build stuff."

Nolan's sandbox was a sandbox that could hold roads. The boy thought of what it would be like to go home and get the rubber cement that he knew his mom kept in the closet. They could build roads with cement. Highways and intersections. He could bring his cars over, too.

He turned around to look at Jenny. Her toes were still wiggling, as if she were already in the sandbox. She clutched the bottom of her sundress, wringing it between her hands. She was silent. Looking at him.

Then, he was running through the yard, running away from Nolan. He ran through the neighbor's yard, and into his own. He passed his own sandbox, which was just a horizontal tractor tire. He passed the swing set—Nolan didn't have a swing set. Nolan played on theirs.

He was at his back door. His arms reached up to the latch, to open it, and already through the screen he could see his mom coming. The latch was too hard to open. His vision was blurry from tears. The door seemed very heavy, like he couldn't push it aside, even though it was just a screen door.

His mom opened the door, and was immediately on her knees, holding him.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He could barely talk through his sobs.

"What's wrong?" she asked again.

He tried to breathe in, but it was pinched off. Slowly, the words came out. "Nolan won't let Jenny play in his sandbox."

His tears were soaked up in the shoulder of his mother's blouse.

He was in seventh grade.

Recess was a fishbowl in that small school—just the bowl, with no castle, or rocks, and no fake plastic weeds. Nothing that you could hide behind.

So, they played kickball on the pavement of the parking lot.

He looked from his position at shortstop over to Nolan, who was playing second base. Nolan had gotten very large, and would always sweat out there in the noon sun. Sometimes, he felt sorry for Nolan. When Nolan would run the bases, his jeans would make a "swooshing" sound, and sometimes even a little "snap," because the denim on the inside of his thighs would rub together, and occasionally the seams would get caught. His sweaty hair was plastered to his forehead, except it always stuck up after he ran, which must have been from the wind resistance even though Nolan couldn't run fast.

Nolan could punch hard, though, and he knew Nolan was going to hit Karl. At shortstop, the boy would have a real good view of second base. He was looking forward to the show.

Karl knew he was going to get hit, too. Nolan let him know, by pounding his fist into his hand, and looking over at Karl. Karl probably wished he hadn't made it to first base, after all, because now he'd have to run right past Nolan.

Today, Karl even dared to say something. “Nolan, you better not.” His voice sounded guttural and squeaky at the same time, sort of like the horn on a kid’s bike. It also had a strange fluctuation, like the sound effect of a toy space gun the boy had as a kid. Plus, Karl couldn’t pronounce his r’s right. “Better” was more like “bettah.” They were brave words for a fifth-grader, thought the boy—too brave for someone who ate boogers, ate them in front of everyone, ate them so much that the little kids believed it when the boy told them that eating bookers turned Karl’s skin that sickly yellow color.

Nolan only smirked at Karl. Karl smiled, as if it was all some big joke. Karl always smiled, but his eyes were always afraid.

They were familiar sounds: the ball skidding across the blacktop, the rebound of the rubber as it was kicked by Lisa, and more sporadic skidding as the ball bounced across the parking lot, this time rolling all the way back by the bike rack, where the younger grades played foursquare.

Karl took off from first base, running wide to round second base. Even the way he ran made one want to hit him. He seemed to flail, his overly large joints unable to properly control his limbs. His hair was parted, and the longer-haired side would flop up and down with every awkward lunge.

Someone was throwing in the ball from the outfield, but the boy wasn’t watching the ball. He was watching Nolan.

Nolan stuck out his fist just as Karl was rounding second, planting it square into the soft tissue of the stomach. Karl made a sound—somewhere between a cough and a choke—with his trademark guttural intonations. The boy smiled.

That wasn’t all, because Nolan was good at this. After the fist, Nolan stuck out his foot, a massive thigh betraying a somewhat dainty action. Nolan always wore high tops, loosely laced, as if his foot might pop out of the shoe seams like a sausage splitting its skin. The foot met its mark, and Karl toppled like a plank to the pavement.

He had never heard a body on pavement make a sound like that before. It was a slap, as if someone had done a belly flop into a pool.

Karl screamed in his own special bike-horn tones, “Ow, ow, ow!”—three times, each one a little louder than the previous. It was a comical refrain that made the boy turn around and put his hand over his mouth to hold back the laugh, but just for show. It was a refrain that was to be repeated in mocking tones by the whole class for the rest of the year, and the year following.

Karl rose from the pavement. Even when he was crying, his mouth was turned slightly upwards at the edges, as if he were really smiling. His lips turned outward, making them appear bigger, like clown lips. The tears ran into the corners of his mouth. Karl drank his own fluids.

Injured, he walked towards the school door, his hands splayed out in front of him, as if he were trying to stop traffic. After about twenty paces, he shook them a little, and tried to blow on them between his choked gasps. He wasn’t very successful.

The boy watched, as they all did. Then the boy looked at Nolan, and they smiled at each other, a silent congratulations understood between two best friends.

He also looked behind him to see who else had seen. His sister Jenny had been playing foursquare, but he saw that she now stood looking silently at the bike rack. She was looking at Nikki, her best friend and Karl's sister.

Nikki stood by the empty bike rack and watched without visible expression. The boy watched her until she went back to Jenny, and began to play foursquare again.

In eighth grade, he was with his sister. Since fifth through eighth grade were taught in the same room, they now shared a common domain.

For a little while.

"Hey, tell your sister to stop putting ketchup in her underwear," said the little, seventh-grade Lisa.

"And tell your sister that she's too young to have a boyfriend. Your sister is a slut," said the seventh-grade Laurie, Lisa's best friend. "There's no way she's playing with us."

He looked over at his sister, who was standing on the gray pavement, hands at her side, eyes glistening, but refusing to spill over.

He looked at the L twins, a strange pair, quite mismatched in size, hair color, and skin tone. "What's the problem? Better her than Karl."

"Hardly." It didn't matter which one of them spoke.

"She's my sister."

"Too bad she's not more like you."

He looked at the ball he had brought out for the kickball game, feeling the rubber dimples as he squeezed it together between his hands. He wanted to smash it like a melon. Instead, he spoke. "Nolan, I'm going to play four square. Do you want to play?"

Nolan looked at his friend, and then at Lisa and Laurie. "Um . . . I don't know."

"Nikki, what about you, do you want to play?" he asked his sister's best friend.

"Nikki is playing kickball with us, aren't you Nikki?" said the little L.

Nikki looked at Jenny, without visible expression. "Yeah, I'm playing kickball."

"Fine, be a traitor then. Are you coming or not, Nolan?"

"No, I guess I'll play kickball."

"Fine. You guys have fun. I'll play next time."

He started to walk away. "Give us the ball," said the little L.

He kept walking, turning only his head. "Get your own. This one is mine."

The eighth grade king took his sister and his ball over to the far end of the parking lot, by the bike racks, where the younger grades were playing four square. Some kindergartners were running circles around a sandbox consisting of an overturned tractor tire. No one ever played in the sandbox. There was barely any sand. What was there was all hard and full of cat turds.

“Hey guys,” he said to the little gathering of five-year-olds, “do you want to learn how to play four square?” The little kids were in awe, and had very little to say, but obeyed him as they would someone much older. He and Jenny took them to the smallest foursquare court, the one that no one ever used, because it looked like it was created for munchkins and painted with uneven lines by children.

After a few minutes, Nolan left the kickball game, and ventured to the four square court, taking a square with one of the kindergartners. “Without you, the teams aren’t very even,” he said. “The other team sucks.”

Gradually, one by one, the kickball players left their game behind, and took a spot in the line for foursquare. The last two were Lisa and Laurie. When they came, Nikki was in between them. They were all laughing together. They looked at Jenny, accomplishing with their eyes what no one could do with a fist.

Later that day, as he was stuffing papers in the sack for his paper route, he began to cry. Drops fell on the paper, running the ink and creating tiny ripples in the page. Kind of stupid for an eighth-grader to be crying, he thought. He brushed the water off the page, and watched the water spots dry up in mere moments like childhood friendships.

At first, it seemed almost natural for his dad to be crying. Because his dad was behind him in the canoe, he hadn’t even realized that it was happening. It was something he had thought about before, having never seen his dad cry. Now, as he ceased paddling to turn to his father, he saw that the red eyes, the tears behind the lenses of his dad’s glasses, seemed almost ordinary. His dad didn’t try to hide it, or to wipe them away—he just let them be.

For a moment, he was glad that he had made his dad cry. As far as he knew, his dad had only cried once before, and that was years ago, when Jenny was in sixth grade. She had tried to commit suicide. He had never asked how. How does a sixth grader commit suicide? But Jenny had told him that when dad found out, she had seen him cry. Now, his dad was crying again, but he was crying for him. He felt good, like he was finally worthy enough to make his dad cry.

His dad was still holding the paddle in his hands. It was the perfect masculine picture. The flannel shirt. The fishing vest. Out here, on the lake, with the early morning sun and the mist rising off the water. It was so manly and dignified. He had never been able to mentally create a picture of his dad crying, and now he thought that he must have been silly not to picture this.

“Do you know what my biggest fear is?” his dad asked him, his voice low but still his own.

“What?”

There was a long pause, so he turned around to face the front of the canoe to wait for his dad's answer. He didn't want to stare. But no answer came.

So he looked back again.

The picture changed. He saw his father's cheeks convulse, and his lips curl back in a tremor to reveal his teeth. Still there was no sound.

He looked away from his dad and down at the water, unsure of what to do or say.

Finally, he looked back again at his dad, in time to see the man put the paddle on his lap, and bury his head in his hands.

"I can't even get the words out." This time, his speech was choked and child-like.

He saw the tears spill onto the open fishing vest, where they sat on the water-resistant material, unable to be soaked up. He was grateful for the distance in the canoe. He said simply, "It's okay, dad. Take your time." His matter-of-fact tone surprised him.

After another pause, his father took a deep breath, and looked at him. "I'm afraid that I'll have to bury both of my children."

It seemed to the boy that his dad wanted to get it all out before he was again rendered mute. "Unless they make some amazing advances in diabetes, your sister will never live a full life. Even though it's always been under control—you don't know how many estates I've done for diabetics. She'll never live a full life."

He allowed for an appropriate moment of silence, and then responded, "I can understand that. That's something I've thought about, too."

Again, there was a long pause as the canoe drifted aimlessly on the lake.

Finally, he ventured. "And what about me? What are you afraid of?" His dad did not immediately respond, and so he ventured more: "That I'll die of AIDS?"

"AIDS." His dad said the word, and nothing more, so that he wasn't sure if it was a question or a statement.

He didn't know what to say. If he detailed specific sexual behavior to assuage his father's fear, it may increase his alarm and discomfort. Did his father think he was promiscuous? Or that guys like him were particularly prone to AIDS? Or had he made an error in even mentioning the word?

He looked at his father. "Look dad. I'm a smart guy. You raised me well. I don't take any unnecessary . . ." He stopped, and looked at the water. ". . . overly unnecessary risks."

That was probably the wrong thing to say. He kept his eyes down, unsure of what was to come next. He clutched the bottom of his T-shirt, wringing the hem between his two hands.

It was an old T-shirt, one that he hadn't taken with him when he moved away during college. He had found it early that morning, tucked away in the bottom of one of his old dresser drawers. His sister had given him the T-shirt over four years ago—he didn't even remember when exactly. It was a cheesy,

tourist shirt, much too big for him, with a blue slogan on the front, “Friends from Gainesville, FL,” and images of liquor bottles on the breast.

All he could think was that years ago, when he got this T-shirt, who would have ever thought he’d be wearing it on the day that he made his dad cry? That he’d be wearing it as he grabbed two donuts—one for himself and one for his dad—from the local grocery store that morning, only to see Karl stacking boxes? He’d pretended not to see Karl, but managed a long look, and saw that Karl had lost his smile.

He looked away now, too, but it didn’t matter, because the image of his father crying was imprinted on his mind.