

Joy Castro

Liking it Rough

I was not a wicked kid. Mischievous, yeah—or mischeev-yus, as the folks said it in any number of little East Texas towns where we lived. I liked to set chickens free, to hide Pa’s Tabasco sauce bottle behind other stuff in the icebox (which was bad because he used it nightly, shaking it over everything Ma cooked), to coax some kid’s hesitating pony up the porch steps and on into our living room.

Ma was a half-hearted whipper. She laughed too easy, and laughing took the strength out of her. Besides, I was her only child, her boy, her baby. “My Elvis,” she would say, nuzzling my hair, her arms around me, “my king.” If I could surprise her good, I wasn’t likely to get beat. One time, the muffler and some pipe fell clean off our pickup when Ma was driving. She pulled off into the dirt and went back and picked it up, threw it in the bed and stood there, leaning on the truck, laughing hard at a thing would piss most people off, maybe ruin their day. Pa could laugh, too, till his eyes were wet. They were good folks to have.

Once we moved to a town about as big as a spit-ring in the dust, just some one- and two-story buildings clustered together at a crossroads and thinning out fast as the roads split from each other and went their own ways. There was a post office, a feed store, a little grocery store with milk we bought often, tired vegetables, food in dusty cans, and comic books and candy. There were glass bottles of grape Nehi, Coca-Cola, and root beer stacked on their sides in a silver-lidded cooler that hummed hot air at your feet. There was a barber shop and a couple of other buildings I can’t really recall because I never went into them.

But the most amazing part of this town was set away from the buildings and away from the crossroads, up a little hill and back in the pines, in a clearing you couldn’t even see when you stood down on the feed store porch. It was a genuine gallows from the olden days, with a drop you could work.

Well, on me and on the kids who’d always lived there, it exerted a powerful draw. Our folks didn’t bother telling

us to keep off it; there was no point. Might as well tell kids not to swim in a quarry. We'd run up the wooden stairs with objects in our hands—rocks, branches, someone's sister's doll—which we'd set on the drop and then, with a quick swish of the arm, let fall. We'd enact hangings with the slow ascent up the stairs, the blindfold, the noose knotted around each other's necks but the rope's free end dangling, which ruined the effect some but we weren't stupid.

It was fun and terrible to stand there in the blindfold, in the noose, the world black and all its sounds loud around you, some other kid saying our made-up semblance of last rites, and then waiting for the second—and they'd make you wait, too, the tight excited feeling in your stomach like when a tickling uncle suspends his hands just over your ribs and grins—and then you'd hear the wooden lever's clunk and you'd fall through black space, hit the ground in a heap of banged bones. It gave me that carnival thrill. It was good to be the hanged man, and it was good to be the one who let him drop, making the condemned stand there tied, blind, nervous excitement quivering his mouth corners. I could see why the grown-ups had liked it.

Sometimes we lay under the ground beneath it for its good shade, there in the sparse grass, talking, telling what jokes we knew over and over, making them better with additions and tweaks until they were our own jokes, jokes by kid-committee, and we'd laugh ourselves hysterical. Sometimes we'd smell the dirt to see if we could smell where the come had gone, but all the dirt smelled the same and we figured either the come had stayed in the pants or it had all been way too long ago. From a distance we must have looked crazy, a pack of boys crawling on our bellies, sniffing at the tufts of grass.

I never got up to mischief to be cruel. We'd lived in a lot of farm towns, and I'd seen cruel. I've seen kids play basketball with newborn kittens, smack them off the backboards of their graying barns and let them fall through a stringless hoop to the dirt. I've seen them wedge knife tips under the edge of a caught fish's eyeball and gouge it out while the thing was still flopping. I've seen them tie their little brothers to a handmade cross and leave them in the backyard to cry and yell all afternoon while we went elsewhere, or chop a snake to bits, working from the tail forward so it felt it, as

they said, till the last possible minute, its small desperate eye like a black jewel.

I was not, as my Mama said, that kind of kid. I liked folks, and I liked animals, liked to just watch them do their different animal things, and I liked to laugh with my parents. Little kids always made me feel like helping them, reading to them or showing them how to do something. I wasn't like the ones who used their daddies' lighters to melt the cats' whiskers so they'd walk funny like drunks. But I watched—I just didn't interfere. I *observed*, like watching another kind of animal at its ways. To avoid being the target of an experiment, I followed simple rules. Hang out with kids my own size or smaller. Be good to everybody, so if things went bad, no one saw it as a chance to get back at you. You didn't want to be at the mercy of more than one.

I didn't think of them, the kitten-killers, as bullies, though I'd heard the word. They were just kids, crueller but of the same species. Even though we moved a lot, there were ways you could tell who was likely to be a kitten-killer—if he was more gaunt than the other kids, but not always. Sometimes the skinniest, poorest ones were sweet and meek. If his daddy was known to be a drunk or brawler. If his ma slapped or yelled at him in public. If he smelled of urine and his hair stuck up in unwashed twigs all over his head. Or if his sister was mean. That was a guarantee—you met a mean girl, it was a surefire thing her brothers were mean, too.

My pa had a rifle, like most folks, but he was unique in that he had a Colt .45 as well. He'd lived in Dallas after the Army—and before he'd met the prettiest, sweetest girl on God's green Earth, as he said—and Dallas folks were none too kind to a country boy. Hence the .45. He kept it under his side of the bed. He'd shown me how to clean it a couple times, but the rifle was the only gun I'd fired.

We'd been living outside the gallows town in a little rented house—we were there for harvest, Pa said, and if we liked it we'd stay—for only a couple of weeks when I began to draw the curiosity of one Tanner Keady. Tall, bony, with black hair cropped so close to his bullet-head it looked more like a shadow, and pale blue eyes, and arm muscles like walnuts rippling against ropes, he did not stink like urine, but there was a smell that came off him, a smell

of something hot and bitter—maybe just his sweat, since he was older, fourteen, starting to get grown. I was ten. I laughed a lot, made friends fast, could fish and drive a tractor and do a perfect swan dive off the bluff above the river, and I had that shine on me of affection and plenty of food, that shine that drove some bullies nuts. Because of an operation my ma'd had and sometimes cried about, I was an only child and guaranteed to stay one, which was a rare thing to be in East Texas, and everyone said my ma was a tender woman and my father a good man. In church I sat between them and my father's arm rested on the pew behind me, and they'd smile at me and at each other when the preacher talked on love.

It was natural for someone like Tanner to hate me.

It started in the feed store. It was blistering hot and bright outside, and I was plunged wrist-deep in a barrel of cool nails in the shady bowels of the store, when suddenly he was there, too close, standing right in next to me like he was going to kiss me or something.

"You ain't from around here," he said, leaning in, taller than me.

It sounded like something in a cowboy movie, and I made the mistake of laughing.

He put his hand between my shoulders, shoved my own hands deeper in the nails, and held me there.

"Something funny?"

There were no grown-ups close by. If I hollered, Tanner would be long slithered away before Mr. Hollifield got back to our corner of the store. I could just answer no, play humble. And so I did. But giving in, I could tell, wouldn't make him go away. He'd just get his appetite whetted for more.

But the thing about a bully: he's always already picked on a bunch of other kids, so he's got a whole lot of ill will going against him. While none of them is going to take him on alone, there's strength in numbers, and all they want is someone with a plan who's willing to go first.

The biggest twelve-year-old in town was called Flounder, and he was packed with meat and muscle and a little soft belly he liked to feed, and my ma would hand us generous plates through the back door of the diner and we'd sit on the steps and eat and talk. He liked to hear about other places I'd lived. He'd been to the county seat once but

couldn't remember it. He was my best friend there, I guess you could say, and there were other boys that sometimes hung around with us.

In adulthood I have met men who knew and played with girls as children, and women who claim to have played with boys, but in the East Texas towns where I grew up, the girls were like another tribe, conducting their business on the same soil but having no dealings with us. It's true that if you liked a particular girl, she would then become visible and meaningful for the duration of your interest. Otherwise and as a mass, they were irrelevant. But if you looked, you could see them.

Tanner Keady had a sister, Liz Ann, and she was not mean. She was practically dead. She was his little sister, about eight, and she walked around like a sleeping person, placid. She'd obey anything a grown-up or older kid told her to do. She was not a troublemaker; she was not an anything-maker. She was skinny and wore her dresses old and her black hair in two sharp pigtails, and I don't know if her eyes were blue like Tanner's or not because they were mostly on the ground. She worked hard to be invisible and pretty much succeeded. You could see where she would have been a pretty girl, if she'd plumped up a little and learned to smile, so it was a shame. Maybe Tanner had done it, or maybe whatever his folks did had turned her quiet.

Little kids, like I said, always made me want to be nice to them, and one day Liz Ann walked alone past the back of the diner when me and Flounder were sitting back there talking, over our second lunches of the day.

"Hey," I called to her, but she kept her head down and walked faster, her shoulders curling in. "Hey, you want some tomato?" She slowed, stopped, and turned toward us, looked us over as though looking for a trap. I hate tomato. "For real," I said, "you can have it," holding up the two slices I'd taken off my sandwich. She came closer, and Flounder smiled at me. He opened his own sandwich and pulled out the cheese.

It was easy after that, like coaxing a cat out from under a barn. She sat down and ate the tomatoes, Flounder's cheese, and all four of our slices of bread, and then we let her scoop the mayonnaise blobs off our plates with her finger. She stared at us, eyes wide, her finger popped in her mouth like a baby,

and didn't interrupt while we talked about stuff. After that she came by every day, and sometimes I'd tell stories my pa had read me, just this and that, Arabian Nights and Goldilocks and suchlike. Flounder liked to hear them, too. But that was the only time we'd see her, and when we got up to go play at the gallows or swim or go fishing, she went her own way.

One day the three of us were there, Liz Ann perched on the bottom stair eating peach slices from the plate my ma had made up just for her, looking up and smiling as I told Little Red Riding Hood. I was at the part when she opens the door and sees the wolf in her grandma's bed, when Tanner Keady rounded the corner. He wasn't a whistler, and he walked with a quiet tread, so we didn't see him until he was almost upon us, and he came on us loud.

"Liz Ann Keady, what the hell you doing?" He grabbed her by the hair and yanked her up. The plate fell and cracked into two white half-ovals, the food scattering everywhere on the steps and in the dirt.

"You gonna pay for that, now? Are you? Look what you done," he yelled, and then they were moving fast away from us, him dragging her, her feet scrambling to keep her upright.

"You stay away from my sister," he yelled, "or I'll kill you. I'll goddamn kill you both."

Flounder and I were still sitting, shocked, our plates on our knees, our hands frozen in position where they'd been when he appeared. Liz Ann didn't even try to glance our way, just got herself hauled and yelled out of sight. We looked at each other then, and I picked up the food and put it on the stacked halves of the plate.

I wasn't worried. "Aw, shit," my ma would say and laugh with her hands on her hips. "There goes part of my pay." And she'd ruffle my hair and tell me to get on out of there. I'd never been yanked to my feet like that, and my hand crept up and pulled, hard, to see how it felt. It didn't feel so good, and it wasn't even with my whole weight hanging on it.

"You think she's going to get into trouble at home, too? With her folks?" Flounder asked. It hadn't occurred to me, but she had been eating secret food from the diner.

Maybe she wasn't allowed.

"I don't know. Maybe."

“Maybe we ought to go out there to her house and see.”

“You’re crazy.” Getting between some girl and her daddy’s belt was nothing I wanted to do.

“But he might tell them she stole it,” Flounder said, scratching his scabbed and pillowy brown knee. “You could tell them your ma gave it to her.” He had a point.

“I don’t know.”

“But, Jakey,” he said in a low voice, not looking at me, “she’s so little.”

I sighed and stood up.

“Okay.”

Flounder knew where the Keadys lived, a long way out a dirt road. The trees thinned out and disappeared, and it was just fields and pastureland and scrub. The day was fever-bright, and I wished we were swimming instead. The Keadys had about six kids and their own farm, and we could see as we got close that their horses and cows weren’t any more filled out than Tanner and Liz Ann. The livestock lifted their heads dully to stare at us as we passed. Close to the unpainted wood house, there were chickens wandering around, and about a dozen outbuildings of gray boards and metal roofs rusted orange, with as many pieces of farm equipment, balers and so on, rusted and lying on their sides. Rusted lengths of chicken wire and barbed wire lay twisted in the grass like sculpture. It looked like a lot of farms, but there was something eerie about it. It was hot and quiet and eye-squintingly bright, with just the hot rise and fall of cicadas as the only waves of sound. I didn’t hear anyone yelling, or anyone crying, or the sound of a belt.

“It’s all right. Let’s go,” I said.

“Wait.” Flounder held up a hand, and then I heard it, faintly: the splash of water and a muttering voice. Suddenly, without warning, my heavy, slow, good-natured buddy suddenly fell into a crouch like some Army guy doing reconnaissance, then started running fast toward an outbuilding. Ten yards from me, he paused and looked back to where I still stood, astonished. He shrugged, like *What the hell are you waiting for?* and crooked his hand impatiently at me, waving me over. As if loosed from the soil by his certainty, my feet moved fast in his path. When we got to the building,

he slowed, put a finger on his lips, and sidled up next to it. We listened, panting as silently as we could in the heat.

“On three,” Flounder mouthed, holding up three fingers, but then he picked up a rock, and I picked up one, too, and he nodded. We could hear Tanner’s bitter voice as Flounder’s fingers slowly folded down.

“You go near them boys again, I’ll kill you.” There was a splash, and then silence, and then a splash again and a gasp, a girl’s gasp. “You hear me? I will fucking kill you.”

On three, we looked together, me crouched behind Flounder, and what I saw has never left me. Tanner’s back was to us, and he stood with his sister next to a homemade watering trough, half a steel drum propped on concrete blocks to catch the rain. The fingers of one hand were twined through her hair, and as we watched he forced her head down in the water again. But what clutched my vision and my gut was that her cotton dress was hiked up around her waist, and his other hand was dug inside her gray underpants, twisting and working.

“You hear me?” he muttered at her underwater head. Her bare legs shook.

“Jesus,” breathed Flounder, and then the rock was flying before I saw him move his arm, and I threw mine, and then Tanner was screaming, clutching at his face, and Liz Ann was scrambling away, and then he had turned and seen us and was moving toward us, wet blood coming from between his fingers down his neck, and we knew how fast and light he was so we didn’t look back until we were in the road, but then he was nowhere.

“Keep going,” I panted, but Flounder said to wait, so we hung there in the road for long seconds until we saw him reappear on the porch of the house with a shotgun cradled in his arms, and we spun and did not stop running as we heard the reports in the hot still air, once, twice, three, four times as we ran farther and farther away.

Tanner had made a lot of enemies in the twelve and under crowd, and some of them had their puberty upon them and were no longer small. And with Flounder’s newly revealed skills at my side, I was ready to think of a plan. I was angry. Something in my stomach had gone sick when

we'd looked around that corner, the sick of a kitten hitting barn wood. I knew that girl. She was a nice girl. She had looked up at us while we told stories, and she'd eaten her food and said *thank you* all quiet and sweet. I wanted to kill Tanner. And there was more to it, too, something other than the sick stomach or the anger, something I couldn't put a name to, something about the rusted-out machines and her little thin legs trembling, and the hot still air and no parents being home to stop it. Something forlorn, something about the green scum on the surface of the stagnant water and the line it left on her jaw and temple when he pulled her head out. I'd worn old graying underwear most of my life, sometimes even with holes in it. But somehow it was sadder on a girl.

The plan was easy. It relied on Tanner's own weakness, his desire to take from someone littler. We got Angel to be the bait. His name was Tommy, but he was eleven and looked eight, with big blue eyes and blond curling hair and a sweet innocent smile that no one who knew him believed in. Lucky for us, Tanner didn't know him except to beat him up. It was Angel's job to walk through the crossing roads of our town with a brand new beautiful watch, which was actually my father's good watch that had been his father's, which I was borrowing for the occasion from its nest in his sock drawer. It was Angel's job to show it to all and sundry and talk about how much he loved his beautiful new pocketwatch his grandma had sent him from Lake Charles, and then to say how he was going to spend the whole afternoon in the pines alone, watching squirrels and timing them with the second hand. And then once he had announced it, to wander slowly, slowly up the hillside path, *la dee da*, past the gallows, chasing a butterfly or two, and on into the woods. From our hiding places, we watched him wind aimlessly across the grass. It wasn't ten minutes before Tanner Keady loped up the hill, grinning his purposeful leer. From our various lookouts, we watched him enter the dark shade of the pines, and we moved in.

We knew that as soon as Angel had hit cover, he'd started to run, and he'd run until he came to the first big clearing, and we headed there and fanned out silently around it, crouching in position. He played it beautifully, stretched out on his belly in the pine needles, humming, my father's watch a full arm's length away on the ground, gleaming in what little sunlight

made it down to the forest floor. When Tanner found him, he looked up and smiled his cherubic smile.

“Hi, Tanner,” he chirped. “Whatcha doing?” And as Tanner snarled and bent for the watch, it was my pleasure to watch the intrepid Flounder slide up with his silent army tactics and bash a block of wood into the base of Tanner’s skull. Tanner dropped to the cushion of pine needles, and thirteen boys of varying ages emerged from the shadows, our eyes alight.

When Tanner Keady finally came to, he could not move. He was on his knees, his ankles bound with rope and his wrists tied behind him, and he had, from where he knelt on the gallows platform, a beautiful view of the town and, in the distance, the river. We had him on his knees so we’d seem taller and he’d be confused. Only six of us were there, which is as many Ku Klux Klan hoods and robes as we’d been able to rustle up from the high back shelves of our houses, where they lay folded with shame or secret pride. Though it felt bad to use them, we knew they’d be scary. The rest watched from the woods. Flounder was there under his hood, and me, and four other guys Tanner had personally tormented. We all used deep voices when we talked.

“Tanner Keady, do you know why you are here?” I asked. The preacher’s son murmured stuff about Heaven and Hell and eternal rest; we thought it would be a good effect. “Tanner Keady, do you know why you are here?” I said again, trying to sound ominous, like the Ghost of Christmas Past.

He shook his head—we’d taped his mouth.

“You are here at the behest of the Tribe of Justice. In the matter of hurting Liz Ann Keady and beating up the kids of this town, you are hereby judged guilty.”

“Guilty,” echoed the five kids around me.

“Guilty!” came cries from the trees, and Tanner’s head jerked around, his eyes wild and scared.

Coup de grace is a phrase I’d learned from the books my pa read aloud about swordfighters and pirates and musketeers. I pulled ours out, the black gleaming Colt .45, and Tanner’s eyes grew huger than I’d ever seen human eyes get. The pupils got so big that the blue almost disappeared

for a second, and then he looked up at me, making anxious pleading sounds through the tape.

Those sounds froze me. I felt sick suddenly, seeing him like that, knowing I was doing it, feeling my own face in the hood. I couldn't, for a minute, go on, and my throat swelled, and I thought I was going to cry. I hadn't reckoned I'd go soft. I understood all of a sudden why executioners wore a hood, even when the person to be killed was definitely bad. I couldn't do it, and my hand with the Colt fell to my side. Tanner's wide eyes narrowed again, and as Flounder's familiar brown hand reached out to take the gun, I saw in them a flicker of triumph, that he knew as clear as if we'd been standing there regular that we were all just a bunch of little kids, and he'd get each of us alone and make us pay and pay. The kind of person Tanner Keady was, if you were going to let him live, you had to scare him bad. I pulled my hand away from Flounder's.

"And the wages of sin," I said, "is death." I rubbed the muzzle familiarly around his cheek, like a friendly nuzzling cat, and his eyes widened again, and I could see droplets spring out on his forehead that were not just from the heat. I put the end of it in his ear, then at his temple. "You'll never hurt anyone again." I cocked it. Tears rolled from his eyes, and terrible sounds came through the tape, but I saw like a photograph the picture of him shoving his sister's head down and the bunching sick movement under the gray cloth. "Good-bye, Tanner," I whispered, and I pulled the trigger. A quiet metallic click sounded in the air.

"Aw, shit," I said, as planned. Tanner had slumped over on his side at the sound of the gun not firing. He was trembling, and his eyelids were fluttering a bit. I felt a sad surge of pity again.

But Flounder, who'd suffered at his hands for years, had none of my qualms.

"Well, boys," he said in a low, tough voice, like he was talking to a posse, "I guess we're just gonna have to hang him."

Tanner shook his head wildly back and forth, moaning, and I felt sick again. The other boys fastened the noose around his neck and demonstrated how attached it was. They tied the blindfold on. They made quite a production of saying how the rope was attached right well to the scaffold,

though of course they undid it. Flounder tore the tape from Tanner's mouth.

"Any last words?"

"Please," the boy said, his voice a cracked whisper, and he was just a boy then, helpless and frightened and blind. Someone pulled the lever, and we let him drop.

It was a long fall, but we'd all fallen it ourselves. We waited to see that he was moving and that there was no blood, and then we hightailed it into the trees, stripping off our ancestral gear and running gleefully to the river where we swam and jumped off the highest rocks without hesitation, feeling invincible. In the evening, we went back to the deserted gallows and told and retold it in glorious detail.

By nightfall the robes and hoods and watch and Colt had all been stored away, and Tanner Keady had been spotted hobbling homeward. He was a shadowy presence after that. He left us alone.

It's a good thing for a boy to feel—like he's come to town and made a difference. One autumn evening, Pa announced that we'd be moving on.

I've been a cop in Houston for a lot of years now, enough years to know that what we did didn't save Liz Ann. I've seen the broken people, and they don't fix easy. At ten, I couldn't know that. At forty, I leave that part of the work to gentler people who have a gift for healing.

But we did stop Tanner Keady from hurting again, from hurting anyone else, and I'll admit I did acquire a taste for it, what they call rough justice, and let's just say there have been things I've done. Stuff I've seen on calls has made me cry afterwards, and stuff my buddies and I have done has sometimes avenged my fucking outraged sense of justice and sometimes made me laugh until my eyes were wet.

But I swear I have never in my life laughed as hard as I did lying under that gallows with my friends in the dusk, rolling in the grass, the bitter, satisfying stench of where we'd scared Tanner Keady pissless still rising from the dusty earth.

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