

Anarchy
By Hugh Sheehy

Waiting by the school doors, we saw overnight rain had turned the spirit banners on Good Shepherd's walls to waxy streaks of purple and red paint. It was too cold to care, but a girl in a pink coat sniffled among her friends, letting those ten afternoons of hard work rinse away with the runoff in the sewers.

I would have laughed, but I was watching Dale Specht, an underfed, older boy who crouched near the street, where he'd set up his folded science fair posterboard and a battered briefcase against the wind. He bent over his open backpack, appearing to pet something small within. He looked up in alarm, scanned the crowd of shivering students, and missed me because I was in the fifth grade, three years behind him, still invisible to teenagers. Satisfied he was unnoticed, he returned to handling the object in his pack.

Dale was a picture of endless confusion: tight army-green jacket, discount glasses, deerstalker hat. His snarl of uneven teeth attested to his friendlessness, even among the lower grades, where other pariahs stalked for companions. His last school expelled him, he claimed for fighting, but it was rumored he'd sabotaged his class's recorder recital by plugging the instruments with glue. Our struggling Catholic institution accepted him on the condition that he behaved himself and maintained a C average. Since Dale was in my brother's grade—one of twenty-three students whose personal lives were as public as the brands of their shoes—I knew he flunked classes. His graduation in June was unlikely, a return in the fall less so. Children like him were regular phantoms in our school, like infatuations and slang, destined for forgetting so we could recall them when conversations died. That morning Dale looked determined for disaster, scowling at the bas relief crosses engraved in the school walls as he zipped up his backpack.

He did not see Hovey creeping up on him until the taller boy picked up his briefcase. Hovey, a tall rawboned kid with acne, lived in Dale's trailer park, and bullied him to win the favor of the eighth grade boys. I'd seen this exchange before.

"No, that's my dad's," said Dale. "It's very expensive!"

"Yeah, sure," said Hovey. "Expensive' meaning 'not on sale.'"

Dale protested too fervently. If he ignored Hovey and the other guys who pitched him into the urinal trough each afternoon (my brother did this), he might have been let alone to enjoy the daydreams he entered in plain view of all of us.

Instead, he cried out, and Hovey gladly thumped him with the briefcase's broad side, not violently, but with enough enthusiasm to make the eighth grade boys laugh, a sound that called to mind my mother, with her Virginia Slim and her gimlet. Dale crossed his arms over his head and tried half-hearted kicks at Hovey's crotch. My brother Jack, king of eighth grade, already most of a man in his blazer, laughed loudest. He also tired of the spectacle first. I was relieved when he turned away, because his friends, wanting to mimic him, turned away too. Having lost the only audience that mattered, Hovey dropped the briefcase on the ground and walked off, leaving Dale to collect his glasses from the pavement and put his science project back in order.

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Despite Dale Specht's unpopularity, I secretly liked him. He was clearly an anarchist, befuddling all with his army-green jacket, his tight khakis and his ridiculous hat. He had a way of prancing across the parking lot bearing a gimmicky object, his father's briefcase or a nunchuckus that cost five dollars at a flea market. His classmates, not knowing what to make of him, ridiculed him. I, too, was an anarchist, but a secret one, preferring to keep my friends. In class, while lessons drifted overhead like passenger planes, I imagined gun-bearing criminals poised to crash through the door and murder the teacher. My classmates' future would depend on the plan emerging from my eleven year-old mind. In dreams I led them through bloody upheaval after bloody upheaval, toward a new social order. I made approximate love to this or that girl in the aftermath of the carnage, among the bodies of teachers and marauders like a Roman fornicating while tongues of fire lapped at his palace walls. I knew the thoughts of the boys around me through their doodles, team logos and sparkling block-print names and barbarian battlefields, and understood that my personal gory thoughts were the only ones in the room. I never drew pictures in class. I was too discreet for that. When I first laid eyes on Dale Specht, I saw in his outfit and his aloofness myself turned inside out.

During second period we heard Sheila Jaksetic scream. The rising sound of it put an end to Math. Sheila swung a pretty voice, pure glass, and though it had to go a flight

of stairs from the science fair in the basement, I recognized it immediately. She was my brother's girlfriend, and often screamed this way in our living room when he threatened her with his large boogers. Though I knew her scream, this one had a different fabric, of pure fright, and like the heat of a bomb it drove sharp fragments into me. Hearing the fathoms of her passion, I knew why I lost the ability to speak when she smiled at me and spoke my name. I felt a brief and absurd desire for terrorists to burst through the door, then started to wonder whether something had happened. Maybe my brother had set himself on fire, for part of his project was to burn a cigarette, and draw its smoke into an empty milk gallon.

Mrs. Keckstein abandoned the subject of Poisson Distributions and went to the door, where she peered into the hallway at the concerned faces of other teachers and held back a staying hand. When she glanced back she looked directly at me. "I'll be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail," she said solemnly. "Stay in your seats."

Once she closed the door my classmates tried to guess what had happened. Since the scream came from the science fair, the possibilities seemed infinite. A popular theory included an explosion, but after a silence we admitted that we had heard no concussion before Sheila's scream. No one cared for Julie Zackal's supposition that Sheila had smudged her new shoes; it was common knowledge that Julie Zackal envied older girls. Kevin Sheehan suggested that a flesh-eating virus had escaped its container, was devouring the science teachers and the eighth grade, and would devour anyone who investigated the scream. This possibility enjoyed warm consideration until Michael Poskarbowiecz went to the blackboard and drew a large picture of hairy male genitals. He did this whenever the class was left alone and he felt it could be having a better time. His drawings were immensely popular, as we all looked forward to puberty. Yet to start myself, I felt safely within the majority to enjoy the older redhead's subversive cartoons without calling attention to my child's body.

Mrs. Keckstein returned to the classroom, blinking and swallowing. Since she took no note of me I knew my brother was okay. She looked blankly at us, then turned to the blackboard, where she saw the work of our class clown and began to growl. As we tried to hide our amusement she pointed a hooked finger at Michael Poskarbowiecz, who

sat up straight with his hands folded in front of him, and shouted, “Go down the principal’s office this instant!”

Michael Poskarbowiecz had been through this often enough to know his shtick. “Why are you blaming me?” he asked. “Can you prove I drew that picture?”

“This instant!” Spittle flew from Mrs. Keckstein’s lips.

Michael Poskarbowiecz rose and shuffled out the door. A sense of injustice and fear settled over the class. No one dared to ask about Sheila’s scream as Mrs. Keckstein looked for her place in the lesson plan. She momentarily forgot the offensive sketch on the blackboard behind her so that when she faced it again, she leaned back, snatched an eraser and turned it to dust.

I feared for my friend Michael Poskarbowiecz, who spent too many days in the principal’s office, but he came back to us near the end of recess. We abandoned a game of kickball and formed a circle around him and he, in a tone both awed and sad, told us what he had overheard while waiting to see the principal. Dale Specht’s briefcase had been filled with dead sparrows, each stuck with dissection pins to the felt above a scrap of paper telling how long it had taken the bird to die. For the sake of demonstration, Dale had brought a live rubber-banded sparrow in his backpack. He placed it inside a mason jar while the judges evaluated the other science projects. Beside a timer, the little bird smothered, while Dale patiently stood by.

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“What I don’t get is how the little shit caught the dang thing.” Jack wanted Sheila and me to know he was angry about the dead sparrows. School was over and we sat on the front porch of our house, having removed our winter coats. The weather that time of year was unstable, freezing in the morning, hot enough in the afternoon to open the neighborhood windows and make us crave cold beverages. We had dug up a can of powdered lemonade in the pantry, and Sheila and I had finished our glasses. We caught one another eyeing Jack’s, which was still full. The sparrow-catching question and plentiful range made him forget his drink. “I tried to catch sparrows when I was a kid, bet your fucking ass. I could never get my hands on the little fuckers.”

“Poor Dale,” said Sheila. “He’s obviously a brilliant boy with awful psychological issues.” She wore the trace of a smile on her lips, and gave Jack a sidelong glance as he glowered in disbelief at her. “Clearly.”

“Where did you pick up that bullshit? Donahue?”

Though Jack loomed over us both in his seated position, Sheila showed no fear of him. She blinked and said plainly, “You heard the stuff he was saying about the Age of Enlightenment. He’s obviously very smart.”

“What’s your fucking problem?” said Jack. “He made you fucking *cry*. He made you *scream*. I’m going to kill him.”

“What do geniuses care about feelings?” she asked. She worked hard not to smile. “Admit it. You don’t know what he was thinking. What do you know about the Age of Enlightenment?”

“You’re a fucking moron,” said Jack, loudly enough that a woman walking her dog looked up and frowned. Forgotten in my chair, I was the only one to notice, and I gave her a shrug meant to say, What can you expect from people like these?

“I’m a fucking moron?” said Sheila. No longer teasing my brother, she grew angry herself. She did not tolerate assaults on her intellect. “You’re the fucking moron. You can’t even catch a sparrow.”

“You try it,” said Jack. “You try to catch a fucking sparrow, then come and tell me who’s the goddamn moron.”

“I’ll tell you who’s the goddamn moron.” But she was tongue-tied. She grabbed her book bag and ran up the street in the direction of her house. Jack watched her go, drinking his lemonade in a few slow gulps. When he finished he slumped and dangled the glass at his side. He was massive, athletically gifted, and handsome with his wild black hair. He pulled A’s in school. Failure, being difficult and rare, troubled him. “What the fuck, Victor?” he asked me. “How come girls are bitches sometimes?”

Since I didn’t blame her as much as he did, I shrugged, hoping he would calm down. Jack could lose control of himself in anger. The way it would happen, he would first forget that his anger made him lose control. Then he grew angrier and angrier until he went mad like a Mongol who has ridden a thousand miles to his first Russian village. It was as if, behind his composed persona, he longed to destroy randomly. It was

frightening, but I knew how to calm him down. The summer before, he attacked an older boy for slapping the teenaged girl who lived in the house beside ours. She had grown up with us, and actually introduced Jack to sex when he was a very mature thirteen. She meant so much to him that when the older boy swung and knocked her into the grass, Jack jumped from our porch and tackled the guy onto the sidewalk. No one realized that he had lost his mind until the older boy was unconscious and Jack continued to mash his fist into the guy's bloody face. No shouting or tugging could stop him, until I called his name, which had been always been my safety-word when the two of us wrestled, and he began to tear me apart. Jack returned to his senses, blinked at the people surrounding him, and stared down at his bruised hand. One of the guy's front teeth had lodged in his knuckle. He didn't remember any detail of the fight. Our mother drove us to the emergency room, where a nurse poured a frothing disinfectant on his cut hand. Hours later, the adrenaline still gave him the shivers.

Now, powerless, Jack stared up the street after Sheila. "Did you hear her scream, Victor?"

"Yes," I said. "I knew it was her."

"She has a very distinct scream." He looked at me in total seriousness. "But have ever heard her scream like *that*?"

"I thought you got hurt," I said.

"Please. I've never heard anything so clean before. How did he do that to her? I've never gotten to her like that."

At fourteen Jack's girlfriend was intent on saving herself for marriage. Sometimes she would give him hand-jobs or let him remove her shirt and touch her breasts through her bra. He told me these things in strict fraternal confidence. He told me that, contrary to what our theology teacher told us, sex purified a person. I guess he'd heard exactly what I'd heard in Sheila's scream. My brother was jealous, there on the porch where we sat, not knowing what to say, green straining out of the trees all around us. "I'm going to kill him," he said, sweating, certain of his perception. "That's the way it's got to be."

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The next day, taking the scenic route back from the bathroom, I passed Dale Specht sitting in in-school suspension beside the principal's office. The modern day

equivalent of the pillory, Dale's in-school suspension required him to sit in a desk outside the door to the main office, in full view of the office secretary and anyone who passed through the corridor. The principal ordered him to sit silently and complete homework assignments for no credit. When I saw Dale dreaming away the hours, idly filling out a worthless worksheet, I wished to be suspended in-school.

I would have passed without saying a word, but he mouthed my name and waved both hands below the cyan window ledge. The secretary had turned her back, so I dropped to my hands and knees and crawled over to crouch beside him. Once there, I encountered a must I knew from the old bedrooms in my grandmother's house. Without his deerstalker hat his black curls shone with oil. I recalled his being sent home during the fall semester for coming to school with head lice. I didn't want to touch him.

"Hey, are you coming over this afternoon?" he hissed.

I frowned. "I don't know where you live. Also, we're not friends."

"It's cool," said Dale. "Your brother's going to hang out today. Hovey said so."

It didn't sound right, my brother planning to visit the eighth grade's biggest bully so that he could hang around with its biggest nerd. Jack thought Hovey was a joke, and I remembered his words about Dale. I quickly concluded that Jack intended to use Hovey to get to Dale, so that he could kill, or more probably, hurt him very badly.

"You should come with," Dale whispered. "I've got cool things for you guys."

I looked at him, this older boy so clearly doomed. His family had moved to Toledo from a small town in Tennessee. Before that they had lived in ten cities in six states. My brother told me that when their class made family trees Dale did not know his nationality or even where his family started out in this country. On the contrary, he suggested that they had always been wanderers. Perhaps he knew the fate that awaited him. Perhaps he went from town to town, inviting the hostility of stronger boys, and defined himself through pain. I was afraid of what might happen to him.

"I'll be there," I promised.

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It took a while to convince Jack to let me to go along. Our garage opened on an alley, and he straddled his bike in its shadow, scrutinizing me with the face of an expert on bicycling ability who doesn't think it's going to work out. I suspected that he had

other reasons to keep me from going. He had dressed differently than he usually did. Instead of jeans and a Browns jersey he wore black sweatpants and a black hooded sweatshirt. I guessed he wanted a disguise. He blushed and said, “You’re not even supposed to know that I’m going. No one is.”

“Why shouldn’t anyone know?”

He looked down at his sneakers. He really thought he would kill Dale Specht. Admitting it in broad daylight, he had second thoughts. “It was Hovey’s idea. He wants to do it. He’s got it all planned.”

“Hovey doesn’t really want to kill Dale. He wants to impress you.”

Jack shrugged and looked away. “Yeah, I don’t know. Maybe you’re right. I don’t know. He said he was going to do it anyway. It’s on his to-do list. He’ll probably do it without me.”

He saw no choice but to go, but conceded that I could go along. We bicycled out of our neighborhood, where Poles and Hungarians like us lived for more than a century by the Maumee River, and rode across Woodville Avenue to the old German village, and then proceeded along a busy street to the edge of the historic neighborhoods. We stopped our bikes at the top of a hill and looked down on a deserted gulch that doubled as a park. The ground sank to muddy bottoms and climbed to the edge of the abutting city, where the burning towers of the oil refinery turned the sky yellow. I had never ridden out here, because there had never been a reason to leave my neighborhood for this borderland, which belonged to winos. Wherever we were going, I sensed we would not return intact. My mouth dried up and I couldn’t stop smiling.

Jack felt it, too. The light turned his eyes sad, putting foot to pedal. “Ready?”

We flew down the hill at maximum speed, our hair and clothes flaring, fluid gathering in the corners of our eyes. We seemed to take a final breath that never ran out, and then, quickly, as if it had been what we were about all along, we became bicyclists and nothing else, Jack in front and me in the rear, watching for traffic. As we rode along the street became a very busy strip of restaurants, muffler shops, grocery stores, florists, hair salons, and cigarette outlets. We had traded the city’s skyline for a hundred desecrated storefronts. Bums on the sidewalk grumbled to themselves. Cars and trucks passed at forty miles an hour, honking when one of us pedaled out of the gutter.

After a while we came to the trailer park. I had passed it in cars but never examined it. Surrounded on three sides by busy streets and on the fourth by railroad tracks, a collection of fourteen dirty mobile homes lay beside a sparse wood on a flat parcel of land. This was a place where people did things to one another—Hovey knew adulterers, druggies, brawlers and thieves. Naturally, he would become one of them. I guessed the wood was where he planned to murder Dale. From the street I could see the bottles, plastic bags, and chunks of styrofoam left among the fallen leaves.

Hovey emerged from a white trailer near the front of the park. Descending the metal steps, he looked so sheepish that Jack and I told him that his trailer looked the cleanest and best of all of them.

“Yeah, my mom likes to keep it clean,” he said. He hadn’t known a father. “I’d invite you inside, but she locked the refrigerator.”

“Your refrigerator has a lock?” I asked, imagining a very chilly bank vault.

Jack gave me a look that said to shut up, but Hovey didn’t mind explaining. “So I won’t eat our food while she’s gone.” He pointed to a remarkably dirty trailer sitting at the foot of a massive blue spruce. “That’s Dale’s trailer.” Looking at it with us, a spirit of mischief animated him. He grinned at Jack, who looked away. “You want to go get him?”

We followed him to Dale’s trailer, where he pounded on the door so fiercely that I thought he would dent the light metal panel. Hovey wore a gaping smile. “You missed a pretty good fight. Dale’s dad came home and found his mom with Andy in Andy’s trailer. He chased Andy around and left in his truck.”

I had no idea who Andy was, and could only think of the sea lion of the same name at the downtown zoo. The thought of Dale’s father infuriated by the sight of his wife pitching a ball to a seal puzzled me, but I reproduced Jack’s disapproving look.

The trailer door opened a crack, locked from the inside with a chain, and Dale peered out at us. His face was so wide that just one lens of his glasses fit in the opening. “Hey dudes. I think today might not work. My mom’s pretty upset and my dad is, too.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“Bullshit,” said Hovey. “Get out here, you little pussy.” He grinned at my brother, who narrowly avoided making eye contact with him. “Come on, let’s go.”

“It’s no big deal,” Jack said quietly. He looked longingly at our bikes and the road. He dug in his pocket and took out a glamour shot of Sheila for a glance, put it away and, sighing, pulled on his black hood.

“Well okay, I’ll just come out for a little while,” said Dale. “And I’m not a pussy.”

“Yes you are.” Hovey leaned forward and put his mouth the opening. “Pussy.”

“Am not.” Dale closed the door before Hovey could say another word.

It was fine with me that we weren’t going into the trailer. I remembered Dale’s smell and head lice. The sky was yellow and foggy, and gave the raw tree trunks of the wood a haunted quality. As I gravitated towards the trees Jack followed me. A long way off, the dark shape of a train stretched across the horizon.

Dale emerged from the trailer in his army-green jacket and deerstalker hat and ran to join us. As soon as he reached us Hovey pushed him into the grass and laughed. Jack looked at me and frowned, but Hovey didn’t make another move. Laughing, he watched Dale get up and dust off his pants.

“Don’t, Hovey,” said Dale. “Or I’ll go inside.”

“Oh no,” said Hovey. He pushed Dale again, harder this time, and sent him for a tumble. Dale stood up, making tiny fists, ready to cry.

“Hovey,” said Jack, “forget it.”

“You’re not going to puss out on me,” said Hovey.

“Shut up or I’ll kick your fucking ass,” said Jack. “I said ‘forget it.’”

“I fucking heard you,” muttered Hovey.

I went over to Dale, whose chest heaved, and tried to comfort him. “So tell me about your science project,” I said. “I want to know how you caught those sparrows.”

He forgot his tears and nodded. He led us into the small wood. In a clearing under a low ceiling of branches and vines hung many wooden birdhouses, some rotten, their paint faded. I counted more than twenty.

“I filled them with birdseed,” Dale said. “When the birds climbed in, I shook them up. The roofs all come off.” He demonstrated with a steep green birdhouse.

Jack stood with his arms folded. “What was the point of your project? Why did you kill sparrows?”

Dale nodded quickly, like he'd expected the question. "In the eighteenth century it was how scientists proved that oxygen exists. They suffocated birds in glass bells. Before that time people believed in phlogiston. They thought fire was a liquid, and phlogiston made a thing flammable."

Jack grew irritated listening to Dale's encyclopedic spiel, as if Sheila's assertions about their comparative smarts came truer with each successive word. He dug his heel into the soft ground and waited for Dale to finish.

"It made a lot of women cry," said Dale, looking around, "but in those days that was a good thing. That was how you scored."

"But we know that oxygen exists," said Jack. "You killed a bunch of fucking sparrows for no good reason."

Dale looked at him plainly. "A lot of people think that."

"You don't believe it?" said Jack, preparing to laugh in the smaller boy's face.

Dale shrugged. "How do you know oxygen exists? You just know what somebody told you."

Jack had the choice of getting angry or thinking of a logical contradiction. He chose anger, getting crimson in the face, breathing quickly. This attracted the attention of Hovey, who had been standing by, peeling bark from a green maple branch.

Hovey's face was white with excitement. He smiled at Jack and me. "I can think of an experiment," he said, "that will prove that oxygen exists."

He grabbed Dale's throat with two hands and began to squeeze. He stood his legs back where no short kick could reach them, while Dale tried to pry away his big hands. Hovey looked at my brother, his mouth hanging open, and slowly nodded.

I knew Jack could stop Hovey, and I knew that I could make him stop Hovey by saying his name, but I wanted my brother to wake himself up. I wanted him back from the place he had gone to with these boys. I could set off a chain of events which would stop Hovey, but he would just kill Dale later. Someone would. In my brother's face I saw a fading resistance to the wrong thrill. In a speech he was currently writing for the eighth grade graduation he discussed his dream of world peace. He meant every word, and yet now he nodded with Hovey, as Dale choked.

"Jack," I said. I pointed at Dale's ashen face. "Stop him."

Jack blinked, took a deep breath, and grabbed Hovey's shirt. Instantly the bully released Dale to block my brother's punches. Jack just pushed him to the ground. Hovey sat there, scared of my brother, flashing contemptuous glances at him. Jack wouldn't look at me. He stepped back, as shocked by the amnesia as he was the first time, but now he didn't cry. Instead he mutely watched Dale recover his glasses rotten maple leaves.

He left then, and I followed him our bikes at Hovey's trailer. Above us massive clouds shifted in a strange pattern, like dinosaurs migrating after a drop in temperature. A woman I gathered was Dale's mother hung out the door of her trailer, shouting at us about the police. She had the ridden look of a person poor for life. And her threats lacked force. Jack ignored her, took his bike and rode for the street. I followed, looking back at her, a sad scarecrow of a woman with fake red hair and an overlong shirt, furious by how we'd treated her son. Nothing I could say would change that. Not that the police would come. I chased my brother home, where he refused to talk to me. He immediately telephoned Sheila and told her he was coming over. I watched him go from the front window, trying to sustain the dim understanding that I had begun to lose him.

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In the next few months I often saw Dale in the hallway, where he and Hovey walked together with lowered faces. Since the incident at the trailer park the two of them formed a friendship, or at least an alliance, against the other students.

Once when Dale was alone I had the urge to stop him as he slunk by with his battered briefcase, to tell him that it did no good to be an anarchist, but I knew he would not know what I was talking about. He would look at me as if I were the one who came to school in a tight army-green jacket and a deerstalker hat, as if I had filled a briefcase with dead birds to get attention.

I thought that such advice could make me a kind of hero. Instead, the school year ended. Jack gave his speech at graduation, and didn't see me looking through him. In our backyard, at the party given in his honor, he and Sheila discussed high school and held hands while the adults got drunk on beer. The next fall Dale Specht and Hovey were gone from Good Shepherd School. I never saw them again.