

## Main Menu



- ▶ [Home](#)
- ▶ [Media](#)
- ▶ [Publishing](#)
- ▶ [Diversity](#)
- ▶ [Links](#)

## Story: Roughie



Written by Stewart David Ikeda

Tuesday, 12 August 2008 22:33

**It's a TV voice replaying in your mind saying a life don't matter, as you watch Little Man hiding from a service revolver. And what's one more or less dog's life anyway?**

Little Man bent over behind a reeking Dumpster, crying. Just home from school—still wearing his knapsack, his Turtles bag, still holding the clay candlestick holder he made in Pottery—to find his father in the pen out back with Roughie, pistol in one hand, other trying to lock the gate behind with an old, tied-up electric cord. And Little Man's stepsisters crying too, faces pressed up against the storm fence like at the zoo.

Sound of backfire on the street. His father usually says, That's just a car backfiring, Little Man. Maybe firecrackers. Just take the girls down the basement and finish your homework. But now, Little Man hears the boom and jumps anyway.

Get back! his father tells the girls, in his big bullhorn cop's voice. GET BACK NOW!

They just go on. He slaps the fence, knocks them on their butts. Tama staying down, holding her head, but crying on and on, not missing a beat. Singing out, don't do it, don't do it—and Maddy as usual saying nothing.

Little Man collects himself, breathing trash, old chicken from the Dumpster, mourning Roughie. 'Til he can't stand it. 'Til best thing's to get it done, fast, clean, over and out. Makes him leave his cave, to watch, maybe help—but swearing aloud he won't shoot her himself.

Roughie looking electrocuted, shaking like an old dying woman. Growling, like she knows a magnum got a bead on her. Glazey-eyed, drooling, like Little Man seen on that old junkie booting on the stoop yesterday. Only, old junkie felt no pain. Roughie, she'd beg for it herself if she could speak. She'd be brave, say, Right between the eyes, and hold her breath to make an easier target. But here she's not in her right mind, hurting with rat fever.

Do it, Daddy, Little Man says, hopping the fence. He's a rare boy that way—so sharp and stubborn—just views a situation and right off knows what time it is, makes the decision, sticks to it like Krazy Glue. 'S why he's in that school gifted program—got that hard-headed sticking power, like now, with his little heart breaking, he sticks solid with his father. Says, I'll get the gate—she won't get out. Make the pain stop, Daddy.

Little Man's father eyeballs the boy. Red-eyed, clear as day he's been chugging a few hard ones. Feeling painless himself, or anyways won't remember it. Stink-breath and wobbly, his gun hand waves up and down in slo-mo like a palm tree on *Hawaii Five-O*. Tells Little Man, Fuck off outta here now, boy. Take your sisters in the house.

I gotta stay with Roughie. She'll be scared if I ain't with her.

When his father whops him, Little Man's nose starts spilling over his white shirt, but he don't back off one milli-inch. Just standing, not even crying. In this miserable, man-sized voice too big for his small body, he says, You heard Daddy, you girls get in the house now, quick. Roughie won't stop hurting 'til you go. Please.

Like she's been possessed all sudden, Tama stops bawling, blinks her big eyes, and gets up off the ground, still holding her head. Maddy follows—scared to be two feet away from Tama. Door slams behind, and you hear Tama shout inside, He ain't *our* daddy. And Little Man's father, dark as a storm, shouts, You just wait, you little bitch! You're in my goddammed house now! But Little Man digs in next to his father and waits, just waiting like Buddha. Soft as a park pigeon, he says, Roughie—Daddy, please.

His father looks at the gun stupidly, then raises it at Roughie, zombie-like, like since he don't know what to do he decides better just shoot something. But then, Daddy's all shaky, got the quivers, and there's a click, then a pop, just like that. Flame from around the barrel, just like when you first stick a match in the oven pilot that's been off for a while. Shot's not so loud itself, but keeps going and going on, bouncing like a Super Ball up and down the backs of the yards and houses.

You wait for it to stop and all to quiet down, but then hear a terrible, terrible whine, like a sick baby crying at night, but it's Roughie. See her caved down in front, ass hung high in the air, shivering like she's in Alaska without an igloo. The most beautiful dog ever. Makes you wanna cry yourself, seeing her chest, all sexy and hairy white and gold, with a big red chunk out of it, and she down begging on her front paws with the side of her face and nose in the dirt. That son of a bitch...old, drunk, shaky son of a bitch missed from no feet, only took a fat piece outta her heart, but didn't finish the job. You wonder how this sorry shot, always strutting around big Mister John Wayne policeman, ever killed a man before.

Little Man and his father froze-stiff, locked-up, like before they wasn't scared of no rabid dog, but a half-dead, miserable pile of bloody hair scare them into mummies. Hear Tama just inside the screen door, wailing louder than ever. Look around and notice heads popping out of neighbors' houses, the two Johnson boys opening and closing the blinds at their rear window, ducking back. See that giant, Octavius, bolt out into his yard, shirtless, rippling like Arnold Schwarzenegger, carrying his own piece and looking dizzy and blinded like he just woke up.

Oh shit, shit, he shot her. Devil shot Roughie. Po-lice bru-tal-i-ty!

Everybody buzzing and hushing each other and clucking their tongues, even weeping, because near everyone loved Roughie. They knew her, remember her hounding the grocer, stalking the subway, trucking after the Good Humor van, summertime, playing with kids in the sprinkler. Lotta folks think more of her than Little Man's father. Now he's scanning around looking trapped, shouting, Mind your own nosy businesses; there's nothing for you to see here. He starts swinging 'round with the pistol, pointed down a little, and you see the heads pop back into their houses like squirrels in a tree, except for Octavius. He just spits and yells, Yessir, Officer, and starts back in slow. But even Octavius loved that Roughie. Yells, She worth twenty of you, before disappearing.

Roughie's ass comes down finally, crumples over into the dirt in a heap. If anything on this earth worse than readying yourself to die, then getting only *half*-killed, only Jesus can tell you what that is.

Little Man's the first one of them to snap to. All four-foot-something of him jerks awake, and with those tiny brown hands he tries to take the pistol from his daddy. That wakes up Senior. Says, Get back, damn you, you'll get hurt, don't...

And Little Man: We can't leave her like that, Daddy. It's okay, I'll do it, I know you don't want to do it, I can do it.

See, a special boy—Little Man's no coward. He adjusts. He floats.

There's a blur and scuffle, and old Roughie lifts up her eyes like she'll pull the trigger herself with just willpower, then POP! and this time you wait for the bouncing to stop, Pop, pop, down the block, and it's all quiet and you hold your breath and pray for Roughie. 'Til she starts whimpering again.

Then you see Little Man. His expression all squirming brown pain; looking old, used, in his white button shirt and leather belt that wraps near twice around his skinny body, *strangling* that pistol. Got that bulging knapsack, half as big as he is, piled on him, like a midget soldier in a Vietnam movie. And camouflage eyes to match—frosted, into the North Pole, gone. You see his fingers start squeezing again.

It's the voice in your mind and on the TV that says a life don't matter. But a life's not nothin'. You're pissed. But you're outta there, fast as feet will take you. And you don't know how things ended up for Roughie.

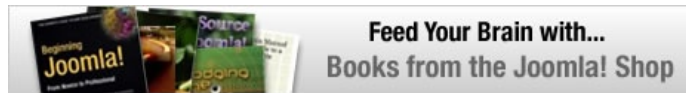
---

Originally published in *Glimmer Train Stories*, Summer 1993, Issue 7; reprinted in *Voices of the Xiled: a generation speaks for itself* (Doubleday/Main Street Books).

---

*Author's Note:* "Roughie" is not only the most widely reprinted piece of published fiction I ever birthed, but it was also the fastest to emerge. It was among those much-romanticized and *rare* visits from an actual Muse: just deposited in my head -- or fingers -- tonally, narratively, character-wise, whole she-bang. The Muse was angry (which, in my experience, is generally a pretty productive state for the Muse to be in). It started with a very good non-fiction piece I was reading in the *Hungry Mind Review*, whose precise subject I no longer recall. What set me off was my reflection on -- and finally distaste for, confusion over -- the then-new-ish euphemism "inner city". About 35 minutes immediate free-drafting followed by some two hours refinement. Yes, it took another year to determine that the first and last sentences detailing a next-door neighbor as the first-person narrator were unnecessary. Credit for correctly insisting that this editorial murder would change everything -- for the better, I think -- goes to the publishers of *Glimmer Train Stories*, to whom I am indebted.

 Last Updated ( Friday, 23 October 2009 19:44 )



Copyright © 2015 SDIkeda.com: New Media, Editorial, Diversity Consulting. All Rights Reserved.  
[Joomla!](#) is Free Software released under the [GNU/GPL License](#).