

CHILLY LITTLE FINGERS

By Brian K. Day

Jim wrung the cap from the top of the Bottle of Rolling Rock with purposeful satisfaction, as he imagined little bones snapping within his grasp. He tossed the cap into the kitchen garbage can and took a long pull of the cool brew from within the green bottle.

"Ahhhhh..." he sighed, plopping down onto his worn living room couch, "What a stinking, lousy day!" Eighth grade would be a tolerable bunch to deal with if it weren't for those three little bastards that he'd had to keep for detention at the end of the day - Curt, Mark, and Benjamin - his three spoiled brats. Jim kept visualizing their twisted foolish expressions, recalling their insolent comments. He wondered how any of his students learned anything when their classes were constantly interrupted by this trio's childish antics.

Today, Curt had intentionally fallen out of his chair. In mock agony, he squalled like a car-struck deer, just to interrupt an important review session for an up-coming test. Jim had politely asked Curt to return to his seat, then waited patiently as the little performer crawled back into his chair in pantomimed pain. While this mini-drama was unfolding, sneaky, gutless, bushwhacking, Mark was quietly breaking up an entire

box of new pencils into one inch segments. He stealthily bounced these annoying projectiles off of the heads of the poor unfortunates who shared their math class with him. Jim eventually removed Mark from his place among the regular student seating, to an isolated chair in the front corner of the classroom.

Then there was Benjamin - ah Benjamin - the quiet, sullen instigator and orchestrator of it all. Benjamin would watch for a moment when Jim's back was turned, to direct some pre-planned mischief of his co-conspirators. Seldom participating openly in the pranks that he had envisioned for Curt and Mark to perform. Ben ran surveillance on the opposition - which was Jim. When the trio's trick was revealed, he acted as cheerleader for class support. When his partners were caught, he shouted out defenses and alibis on their behalf.

But Ben had been too bold today. When Jim had directed him to turn around and face the front instead of smirking to Mark and Curt, he had sassed back that he would look and sit any damn way he pleased. Jim would like to have slapped the smart-mouthed, little bastard so hard that the he could easily look down his own rubbery, serpentine spine to count the bumps, but public school policy no longer allowed such an old fashioned approach to behavior modification. One measly hour of detention was all that Jim could prescribe for Ben and Company.

Detention really meant nothing to these three hoodlums. It was just another opportunity to be obnoxious to an adult. Jim had suggested to his superior several times that they be suspended into the custody of their marvelous parents for a few days where the true nature of the boys' maturity might be evaluated and improved. But the school's spineless, molly-coddling principal would have no part of such a public display of discipline as out-of-school suspension. She believed that - with a rational talking-to from her - they would soon see the error of their ways and - as small adults - cease their childish behavior. She always finished these little tête-à-têtes by passing around the candy dish so there would be no hard feelings between her and her students.

"A good kick in the ass is what they need," Jim muttered to himself for the thousandth time, taking another chug from his Rolling Rock. "Just how long will it be before some college Prof. genius correlates the yearly deterioration of SAT scores with the gradual elimination of corporal punishment from public schools?" he mused to himself. "Probably never. Too many lawyers waiting in line to file the child abuse suits against the teachers and the schools." He slammed the rest of the beer down and went to the fridge for a second one. "To hell with all of um!" he growled as he slumped onto the couch again and flipped on the TV with the remote. Alex Trabeck was just

introducing his contestants for the evening; a lawyer, a stockbroker, and an insurance salesman. "There's a dirty joke in that combination somewhere," Jim thought idly. Somewhere, halfway through Double Jeopardy, he must have dozed off.

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Something was moving around in the room behind him, a little to his left - something he could feel but not quite see - something that made his soul recoil in primordial terror. The entity cast an aura of dread and despair from its tiny form, which crept across Jim's consciousness like mustard gas. But Jim had been through his full share of trauma in life and he knew how to choke down his own fear, even in slumber. He willed his dream-sight eyes to turn and behold the diminutive shape that his mortal soul knew was death. Only boots could be seen moving across the floor - a child's small, white, winter boots. Even though he understood that this ghost was a child, he felt he must know for certain. Forcing his dreading reluctant hand to reach and grasp, he clutched where the small invisible shoulder should be. Then he gently shook. For an instant, the child appeared. This was all the contact that Jim could force his dream flesh to endure. Mortal flesh cannot bear the caress of an unfettered spirit for long. Yet it was enough to inject him with a feeling of murderous tragedy about the child. Some hideous image of infant butchery momentarily splattered across

his mind. Hours of agony crushed their bruised thumbprints into his memory instantly, as if he had been the victim. A brutal scene of fatal torturous slaughter punctuated the phantom child's gift of misery with a gruesome finality. Jim now knew this child's tragic story. He also knew what the child wanted from him.

"All right", he agreed, "I can set you free. But please, do not show me the hideous face that you wear. If I must see you at all, show me the undamaged child only."

Thankfully, nothing more than the boots revealed itself, save perhaps a gossamer child shape in winter attire for an instant. Jim gathered his nerve again, then reached out to open the back door so that the spirit could escape to its pathless wanderings to where God only knew.

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Suddenly, that was it. The nightmare was over. Jim found himself sitting alone, with a half-empty beer clenched in his fist, blinking at Vanna White turning letters for Wheel of Fortune. "Enough of that shit!" he declared, as he strode to the kitchen and poured the warm beer into the sink. He nuked the last three slices of leftover pizza from two days ago for dinner, washed them down with a glass of milk, and then decided to turn in early. He would grade that stack of reports early in the morning before the kids arrived, instead of tonight. "No

more bad dreams," he ordered his subconscious as he set the alarm clock and turned out the light. "Let the ghosts of strangled children go rest their bony rumps down on the edges of Curt and Benjamin's bunks, instead of mine," he declared to the dark corners of his bedroom. "Let them sit in the small of Mark's back. Let them run their chilly little fingers up along his spine to the base of his knobby skull. Let them press his terrified white face deep into his pillow for a just a little while. Perhaps their unwelcome visits in the wee vulnerable hours of the night might provide some insight into the lives of the less privileged for these three spoiled, sheltered boys - instead of disturbing my precious sleep."

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The alarm jolted Jim to an upright position promptly at Six. One hour later, he sat at his desk in the Burlington Middle School grading the reports. At 8:05, the eighth graders bustled into his classroom and settled down into their seats. Jim noticed that Curt, Mark, and Benjamin led the parade. This was highly unusual, to say the least. He wondered what devilry they were planning that would require them to be first into their seats. Watching the boys carefully, Jim took his place at the front of the room. All three little demon heads turned in unison to follow him like robots, their eyes wide and unblinking.

"Open your books to page 165," he directed.

Three books snapped open simultaneously on three desks. Studying Ben closely, Jim noticed that he trembled slightly. All three boys looked pale with dark circles under their eyes. Using the excuse to help Josie the slow girl find her place in her text book, Jim walked past Ben and brushed the back of his hand against the boy's cheek to see if he had a fever. Ben shied away at the touch, then clung to the hand desperately.

"It's warm!" he moaned softly, "Thank God, it's warm."

Jim withdrew his hand gently.

"Feeling all right this morning, Ben?" he asked.

"Yes sir", Ben replied politely, "What are we studying today?"

Jim stared at the boy in shock.

"Is it the French Revolution?" Mark asked. "I got up early this morning before school to read that chapter, Mr. Bronson."

"I did the review questions at the end," Curt chimed in eagerly. "I hope that's all right. If you meant to go over them in class, I won't give any of the answers out unless you ask me to. I promise."

"That's fine Curt ... Mark," Jim answered incredulously.

"Yes it was the French Revolution chapter."

Jim decided to run with this miraculous good behavior for the rest of the class period or at least as long as it would

last - and it did indeed last. When the eighth graders filed out of the room at the end of the period, on a whim, Jim remarked to Curt as he passed, "Why don't you think about getting that hair trimmed out of your eyes? We'd all like to see what you really look like."

"I'll try to get to the barber tonight sir," Curt responded.

Later that day, Mark's mother called the school to see how her son was feeling. She said that he had not slept well the night before, plus he had risen early to do some Social Studies homework. She had commented to him that the homework could not have been that important, but he had assured her vehemently that it was. Jim told her that Mark seemed perfectly all right to him.

As a last minute thought, he added, "Mark mentioned that he would like to stop wearing those oversize baggy jeans and that he would like some nice corduroy slacks instead."

A poignant moment of dead silence welled up from the telephone earpiece, followed by, "Well he never mentioned that to me, Mr. Bronson."

"Oh yes," Jim continued, "Many of my students are starting a new trend. You know how these things are with kids. We can never predict what they may dream up next."