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Crerand: The Legend of Dutchy the Chicken

THE LEGEND OF DUTCHY THE CHICKEN

Patrick Crerand

Everyone knew Dutchy skipped school the day the big tornado hit Xenia. He holed up in his closet, hiding from a truancy officer who never showed. Across town, the funnel cloud sucked air from the Warner Junior High gymnasium windows and collapsed the ceiling onto Dutchy's seventh grade class. The coroner's office had blown off, so they stored the bodies of all the dead in the bank vault to keep the smell away from the dogs.

That summer, Dutchy rode his dirt bike around my neighborhood in brown pleather cowboy boots with his undershirt wrapped around his head. His skin never tanned, and we weaker boys of the block treated him as if he had been reincarnated, the bottom half from Texas, the top half from Siam. "Who wants to fight?" he'd shout from his bike seat, pointing to us with a dead glare. "I dare you. Dutchy ain't no chicken."

We trailed in the wake of his threats like light debris. We watched him smoke Winstons and throw penknives into stumps. Once he stood vigil on his roof for an entire afternoon, straddling the television antenna and mooning the homebound mothers. When he stole my Lionel train set, my father negotiated its return with Dutchy's father, but not before Dutchy bit off and swallowed the tiny white man who popped out the side door of the milk car. No one put a hand on him. Even his father had a hard time looking at him for longer than a glance out of fear those freckles on his cheek would turn as gray as those classmates buried in lunchbox caskets. Still Dutchy begged every afternoon from his bike: "Who wants to fight? Dutchy ain't no chicken." But there were no takers.

The summer before I left for good, Dutchy stopped coming out. We saw his silhouette pass behind the shades, but he did not ride. The school board had held him back until he was nearly a man. His glare had long since lost its sheen and his threats too low to duck under even for us. When his parents moved away the next fall, there were only two of them in the cab of the moving van. They set Dutchy's bike against the curb.

They say that same tornado hit a glass factory after the gymnasium fell. The wind drove green shards into the skin of the pavement all over Xenia so at night there are two skies if the moon shines right. Now they say Dutchy tracks them both after midnight. Europa, Cancer, Sirius, a whole other set of constellations lights under the pedals of his black BMX. On stormy nights, the neighbors open their windows and listen. "Is it the driving hum of Dutchy's rubber tread or just a steady rain?" they ask their children, who look out, wide-eyed, onto the empty street. There Dutchy rides on, shouting to the sky, untouched in the gray haze of lightning, as if the world had no ceiling.