

## Weird Words: “THE STICK BOY: A True Story”

Written by Rod Labbe  
Saturday, 09 July 2011 09:03

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### FANGORIA

They say magic is all around us during childhood. It can be found on a glorious Christmas morning, under your pillow once the tooth fairy has claimed her prize, or at the seaside, as rolling waves crash and silver blue sailing birds fly.

Sometimes, though, magic takes us down darker roads... and what we find there clings to our dreams, even when sunshine is at its brightest.

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We lived at the top of Franklin Street hill in Waterville, Maine, back then. The street, unfinished to this day, dropped precipitously into a wooded gully, with dense forestland and fields that seemed to stretch on and on (alas, short-sighted developers eventually cleared much of it—but the gully has remained untouched). Our house, #40—an orange Cape—was last on the left, directly across from #39—home of my absolute best friends, Peggy, Sue and Sally McGowan.

Oh, how I loved that gully and especially the woods. I'd oftentimes lean out of my bedroom window, watching treetops bend and sway, feeling as if I could fly—if I just had nerve enough to

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take an extra step into pure Infinity. The wind’s mournful whisperings spoke to something inside me. A spark of the primeval, perhaps? An untamed part of my psyche, living free beneath the surface of skin, Civilization, and sensibility?

In August of 1961, I was 8 years old and knew each neighborhood kid, dog and cat by name. Summers were long, lazy affairs, with raucous outside play lasting into the night. When not riding my bike and doing typical kid things, like begging mom for 10 cents to buy an orange Popsicle from the “ding-ding man,” I hung with the McGowans.

Sue and Sally were a year older than me and twins. Peggy was exactly my age and cute as a button—blonde hair in pigtails, blue eyes, a wonderfully effervescent personality. I could always depend on them for a fun time, whether it be climbing trees, flying kites, trick or treating or catching caterpillars and another assorted creepy-crawlers.

This particular hot August afternoon, I craved adventure. So, I traipsed across the street to the McGowan’s. Maybe we’d explore the fields behind my house. Plenty of good stuff there—garden spiders, monarch butterflies, blueberries, choke cherries, and wildflowers. Our moms would love a bouquet of daisies, and if enough berries were picked, my mother promised to bake us a pie!

I skipped up the gravel driveway and climbed onto their back porch. No one was outside, but they were home, I could tell. Pepper, Peggy’s annoying rat terrier, yapped from within when I knocked on the door. Pepper liked to bite and scratch, which meant I didn’t like Pepper!

Mrs. McGowan answered. “Hello, Rodney,” she said, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. “What can I do for you?”

“Is it ok if Sue and Sally and Peggy come out and play?” I asked.

“Not right now, no. They’ve just finished eating and are taking naps. Come back in a half an hour.”

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“Ok. Can I swing on the swings?”

“Sure. Just be careful.”

“Thanks!” I jumped off the porch and headed straight for their state-of-the-art jungle gym. Our own swings, an ancient contraption of metal and rope, belonged to my older sister in the late 1940s. Nothing at all like this glitzy confection! Teeter-totter, balancing rings, a slippery slide wrapped up in 60s day-glow colors—the whole shebang. Wow.

Of course, I was well-versed in the kid art of swinging, pumping air to achieve maximum height. My feet went up, then down, and up, up, uupppp, pointing toward a blue, cloud-spotted sky. With every swoop, the entire thing moved slightly, anchors pulling out of the ground and thudding back again. If I pumped really, really hard, could I swing in a complete circle?

Well, I tried and tried but only went so far. The thrill quickly dissipated, and I dragged my toes in the dirt, sighing. Here it was, a gorgeous day in August, and Mrs. McGowan made her kids take naps. This struck me as strange, despite Peggy’s solemn assertion that stomachs needed to digest meals by “resting.” My dad slept in the daytime, but he worked the night shift. Regular people were up and about when the sun shone and adventures beckoned.

Yep, a sorry situation, indeed.

Ho-hum. Now what? I had nuthin’ to do! Bored, disillusioned, I spied four child-sized folding chairs along the lawn’s edge, where woods met grass. Hmm. If I sat in one of them, I’d be able to gaze at Sue and Sally’s bedroom, somehow mentally infiltrate their dreams and cut the unnecessary sleepy-time short. Eh, worth a try!

Before going any further, let me tell you that the woods on this side of Franklin Street were and are significantly different. No gully, for one—and the land’s flatter. Birches, fir and ash trees hold sentry there, thinner adjacent to the McGowan property, and the ground’s covered with

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underbrush, leaves and weird yellow flowers on long stalks. “Man eating plants,” Sally used to say, a tone of fearfulness in her voice. I didn’t believe her, though they did remind me of creatures from a scary movie.

I chose the first chair, sat down, and crossed my legs.

A mosquito droned nearby, buzzing dangerously closer whenever I wasn’t looking. In the distance, a dog barked, a car horn honked.

Far away, summery sounds—comfortable, reassuring, and totally normal.

Minutes passed, and my eyes dreamily took in familiar sights: the McGowan’s house, a Cape like ours, white shutters and bricked fireplace chimney, side lawn, bushes and shrubs, part of Franklin Street. For some reason, I started thinking about Archie comics and my uncle’s swimming pool (with fishes painted on the bottom)...and as I sat and observed and thought little boy thoughts, I noticed a peculiar stillness. And quiet. As if someone had turned down the volume knob on a cosmic radio.

This wasn’t the kind of stillness that comes from sitting alone in a kid-sized folding chair—but one affecting clouds, wind, mosquito, breathing. A complete, pervasive stillness. Even the shivery cicadas vibrating to one another from the trees had stopped. The mosquito was gone, the distant dog no longer barked.

What the heck?

Suddenly, a sense of unease, of genuine dread, overwhelmed me. The hairs on my arms stood up, and I trembled. Trembling when it’s hot? This just did *not* make sense.

*Turn around*, my mind screamed.

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I turned.

The woods were bright, a cacophony of greens and yellows and browns. Birches, ash, blackberry brambles, brush and firs. A few leaves funneled down, catching sunlight, twirling, dancing. The yellow flowers grew in magnificent abundance.

As my vision focused, I saw him. Approximately 25 feet away. A boy, no older than 10, standing beside an Oak tree. Our eyes met and locked, and my brain instantly took a mental snapshot, stamping an indelible memory—a clear, sharp, defined image: black sparse hair, bloodied lips, determined, penetrating expression. And sticks. Sticks growing out of his pale, wan face, tiny gnarled branches breaking off into several smaller branches.

In those indeterminate seconds, I realized he'd been sneaking up on me, through brush and dead leaves, from somewhere and nowhere.

Like an animal sensing certain doom, my feet instinctively took over. Down the McGowan's lawn, I ran—across the street, into my driveway, my garage, my kitchen. Safe from stick boys and whatever other horrors prowled the forest.

“My stars, what's gotten into you?” mom asked, when I pounded up the stairs. “You're white as a sheet!”

She was changing our beds, her usual chore for Mondays. It struck me as so odd, that she could go about her daily routine, while the world had opened up and released devils.

“Nothing,” I replied, not daring to tell her. “Gotta find my View Master. Peggy and me are gonna trade reels.”

“Don't you give away any of your new toys,” Ma warned.

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“I won’t, just what’s old and broken.”

Later, the McGowans came over, and I spilled my guts about the stillness, how everything had become muddy and sludgy, and—most importantly—about the Stick Boy. They wanted to check out this phenomenon for themselves. I reluctantly went along, figuring there was comfort—and safety—in numbers.

The chairs were lined up, except mine was now facing backwards!

“It wasn’t some dumb kid from the neighborhood wearin’ a mask?” Sally asked, peering intently at the spot where I’d seen him. “Billy Russakoff or Joel Merry? Bill has a werewolf mask that costed 10 whole dollars.”

“Not them. This kid was a stranger,” I replied. “He weren’t wearin’ no mask.”

“Spooky. A stick boy, huh?” She leaned on her toes but went no further. “Wonder who it might’ve been.”

“Or what,” added Sue.

“I know,” said Peggy, looking at us. “It was a wood sprite. And he wanted to snatch you away, Rodney, and bring you to another place. You’re lucky you saw him. Otherwise...”

We all nodded. Yes, I was *very* lucky.

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In 1962, Mr. McGowan had an opportunity with Ralston-Purina Company, and the family relocated to St. Louis, Missouri. I forlornly waved from my front lawn as they drove away, a big chunk of my childhood going with them. Sue, Sally and Peggy waved back, and thus, our friendship ended. Simple, clean, concise...and sad.

Life went on, and at the close of my freshman year, we also moved from Franklin Street. Our last week, flooded by nostalgia, I revisited familiar touchstones: exploring the berry-bursting fields, riding my bike, catching rays in the back yard. But I didn't go into the woods again, oh, no.

I graduated from high school and college, established a healthy writing career, and laugh lines dug themselves in around my eyes. Age granted me Reason, a logical outlook. Friends consider me rational, even pragmatic. No nonsense, you might say.

Their gullibility makes me laugh. Pragmatic? Hardly. Perpetually frightened? Hell, yes.

Memories are funny...good or bad, they drift like milkweed fluff... but for me, none have ever had the lasting impact of what was standing in the sun-dappled forest that sweltering August afternoon in long ago 1961.

My buddy Nate was particularly intrigued by the Stick Boy tale, since I've told it often. So intrigued, in fact, that last October—as a kind of Halloween excursion—he suggested a road trip to Waterville.

I didn't exactly relish the notion, but Nate was adamant. “C'mon, dude. You're a writer. It'll give you inspiration for a kick-ass horror story.”

“Or another nightmare,” I laughed, not really finding anything funny about it.

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Supposedly, facing old terrors is therapeutic. The past can be resolved, old issues eliminated, and happier futures assured. What doesn't kill you supposedly makes you stronger, right?

I understood the logic in that. I'm an adult, grown-up, a man. The 8-year-old kid no longer exists...and neither does the Stick Boy.

Ha. So much for Reason.

We drove to my home town early one Saturday. The morning was picture-perfect. New England's foliage was in full power. Balmy breezes gusted against Nate's Toyota, red and gold Maples dotted the highway, and houses and yards were decorated in Halloween finery. A pleasant ride, full of laughs and dirty jokes.

At the West River Road exit, major developments smacked hard against my scrapbook memories of Waterville: Wal-Mart, Staples, Home Depot and other big box stores blocked the horizon. Two McDonald's, a Taco Bell/KFC, dozens of gas stations, convenience markets and Rent-a-Centers spoiled what had once been pristine farm land. And there were more street lights, which meant more annoying delays.

But as we swung a right onto Collette Street, I felt myself traveling backwards through Time, a disquieting perception. There was Judge Poulin's stately house, with its front wall covered in ivy, and the corner where I used to wait for South Grammar's rickety school bus.

"Franklin Street, straight ahead," Nate said, and I saw the familiar sign, outlined against rolling

clouds.

He gave a signal, took a drag on his cigarette, and we were back in the hazy realm of my childhood.

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Franklin's post-World War II houses had been remarkably preserved, with new garages, decks, barbeque grilles, and other upper middle-class accoutrements. Mine would be last on the left.

Would I see ghosts of Sue, Sally and Peggy, running for a phantom ding-ding man, dimes held high? And me, following in their joyous wake?

We crested the hill, and I laid eyes on my old home. Words failed me. Aside from an amateurish paint job (an ugly gray), and our distinctive white fence now replaced by short pine trees, it was exactly as I'd remembered. The sky, for example—how it swept majestically over the yard. And those whispering trees, swaying in an October wind. Swaying and calling to me.

*You've come back, you're here. Stay with us. Never leave.*

"Is that where you saw the Stick Boy?" Nate asked. He'd braked and was pointing to the right.

"Yep."

"Awesome. Let's bail," he said, but I was reluctant to get out. This whole set-up struck me as strange. What were the chances that the McGowan's house would be uninhabited, a "for sale" sign hanging by their front walk?

The coast was clear, and Nate and I could actually set foot on the property without anyone questioning who we were and why we were there.

As if maneuvering through a dream, I followed Nate up the familiar driveway, growing younger,

years vanishing. Dead leaves skittered, swirled, and caught on my windbreaker.

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I couldn't believe it—the back porch was so much smaller and shabbier to my adult eyes. I studied the door, imagining Mrs. McGowan from all those years ago. What a strange sensation, returning to the place of your childhood!

Neither of us uttered a single word, until I mumbled, “This feels weird.”

“Weird, like that day?”

“Yeah. Wow. Just like that day.”

My heart began to thump, telling me to stop, retreat. Instead, I walked toward those mysterious Franklin Street woods.

“Right here. The chairs were right here, facing this side of their house,” I said, spreading my arms. “It was a beautiful sunny day.”

“Like today,” Nate added, grinning wickedly at me.

“Yeah, heh, like today.”

“And he was sneaking up on you from?”

I turned. Strange yellow flowers, thin birches, blackberry brambles.

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"There. Beyond the trees, before it gets dense. A fucked-up scene, bro. Quiet and still. Just...like...now."

And as those last words died on my lips, I stared hard into the forest. Leaves and twigs were tumbling down, lazily sailing through autumn air. And again, that pervasive stillness, creeping like a slowly encroaching wave...

A distant car horn. Archie comics and pumping my 8-year-old feet higher, higher. I'm going to swing in a circle!

"Dude," I heard Nate say. "Dude, what's happening?"

Through the branches and blackberry canes, standing just where forest grew into shadow, I saw him. He'd morphed out of the trees, face pale and wan, bloody lips twisted into a smile of recognition.

The Stick Boy.

Hands were on my shoulders. "Run," Nate shouted, or that's what I was thinking, pulse racing in my head. "Run, goddammit!"

Clouds and sky, the McGowan's house, bushes, a "for sale" sign, Nate's car...reach for the door. Don't look behind you.

"Get in, man! Get the fuck in!"

Safe and away from stick boys, the seat belt tightening across my waist, the strange miasma that had settled around me dissipated like vapor.

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We were peeling rubber, kicking up clouds of dust.

My tongue was thick. I needed a drink of water badly.

"Dude, oh, God," Nate gasped, flooring it. "Am I losing my fucking mind? That was a fuckin' wendigo, man. A cannibalistic Indian spirit!"

"Did he...touch me?" I managed to croak.

The question hung in the air. *He did, he touched you. And now, you're his. You've always been his.*

I put my head against the cool window pane.

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Sometimes, magic takes us down darker roads... even when sunshine is at its brightest.