

Hard Knocks

Despite the many mishaps and dubious misadventures I experienced throughout my boyhood, I managed to survive it all without any broken bones or serious injuries. But I didn't emerge completely unscathed: for a few years I achieved some notoriety as the boy who was always getting hit on the head.

The first time was a day in late summer. Cousin Butch and I were fairly young then, and we were playing in the cornfield next to my grandparents' house. The corn had grown tall, far over our heads, and we were amusing ourselves by sitting about 50 feet apart from each other and tossing stones high into the air.

I guess the idea was to see how close we could get the stones to land to each other. A simple game, the consequences to which we had clearly given no great amount of thought. Butch lofted a stone high, and by mere luck it came down and hit me square on the top of my head with a hollow-sounding *Konk!*

I think the sound scared me more than the stone hurt me. I ran crying and bleeding out to the driveway where the grownups were standing. My father and my grandmother took me inside and patched me up, while Cousin Butch wisely stayed out of sight in the corn.

A few years later a bunch of us cousins were playing in the back yard after nightfall. Butch had built a new tree house and we all decided to climb up and see it. He went first, while I, ever the faithful sidekick, followed close behind. A group of various cousins waited their turn down below.

Butch reached the platform and started to heave himself up. But his hand knocked loose a claw hammer that was lying there, and down it came. It hit me hard on the right side of my head with that same hollow *Konk!* I had heard once before. It also knocked my glasses off and gashed the side of my face on its way down.

I fell to the ground, slightly stunned, and felt a river of warm blood streaming down my face. Terror swept through me in a chilling wave, and I jumped to my feet and set off at a run across the dark yard to my grandparents' house. By the time I reached their back door Butch was right behind me, panic-stricken, pleading in an agitated whisper, "Don't tell! Don't tell!"

I burst into the kitchen, looking like something out of a horror movie. There was a general confusion and babble of voices as uncles, aunts, and parents all jumped up from the table.

Meanwhile the kids still out in the yard had discovered a gory blood-spattered leaf curled up at the base of the tree. While my mother bathed my wounds in the kitchen sink and tried to calm my hysterics, they came running in with a wild story that one of my eyes had been knocked out.

Uncle Chet heard the uproar and came across the yard from his house, suspecting (incorrectly for once) that his mischief-prone son had been guilty of some devilry again. Cousin Butch had by now wisely hidden himself somewhere out in the night.

My head was bleeding badly, so my parents drove me to the emergency room in Newfane. A towel was kept pressed to my head on the way; by the time we got to the hospital the towel and my shirt were both soaked through. I remember how I startled a woman who was standing near the emergency entrance. When I came reeling through the door in my macabre shirt and towel, she quickly jumped backwards out of the way, her hand over her mouth, exclaiming “Oh my! Oh my!”

I was so afraid and tense that the doctor had trouble giving me a shot of painkiller. “Relax!” he cried, while the steady trickle of blood dripping into my ear tensed me up even more. Eight stitches later, and finally calmed down, I was taken home. It was a frightening episode: but on the plus side, I was given a doctor’s excuse to skip gym class for two weeks. I hated gym class, so that was a nice consolation.

Almost exactly a year later I was at my cousin Roy’s house on the North Ridge Road. As a small child Roy had been so hyperactive that occasionally his mother had to tie him to a chair to prevent him from running amok and hurting himself. There was nothing cruel or extreme about this: I had once watched from inside the house as Roy ran full speed down the sidewalk and slammed himself through a plate glass window. I remember very well the look of bewilderment on his face as his mother doctored his cuts.

Cousin Roy calmed down considerably as he grew older, and we had a lot of good times together, but he retained a bit of a wild mischievous streak. The prankster in him came out if you let down your guard too often.

For some reason only my mother and I were visiting on this particular day. But I had my bicycle with me, and Roy and I went riding out behind his house. A motorcycle club had their meetinghouse down a lane behind some gravel ponds, so we decided to first ride back there and check it out. I thought we were having a race so I started pedaling down the lane as fast as I could. I heard Roy holler something behind me but I paid no attention.

Suddenly a roaring noise filled my ears, and something big and black loomed up beside me. Startled, I shied off and tumbled into the weeds just in time to see two burly bikers on Harley-Davidsons rumble past. I looked back, and Roy was still standing at the head of the lane, grinning widely. He had seen the bikers appear just as we started pedaling, and hadn’t even moved from his spot.

After that adventure we went exploring around the ponds. These were shallow ponds dug out of the gravelly soil, and good places to catch turtles and tadpoles. We were each poking around on opposite sides of one pond when I saw a sudden movement from the corner of my eye. I looked up to see Roy flailing an arm and falling down the bank, as if he had suddenly lost his balance.

I only had time to be puzzled for a split second, when—*Konk!*—there was that old familiar sound. I clapped a hand to my head and felt the warm flow of blood. So that was it. The dratted boy had thrown a rock at me, probably aiming to hit the water in front of me and have a laugh while I got splashed. I think he was probably just as surprised as I was that the rock actually hit me squarely on the head.

I was getting to be a veteran at this by now, and I wasn’t very much afraid this time. But I was hopping mad, and I cursed Roy out with each breath as I ran to my bicycle and pedaled frantically up to the house, spraying droplets of blood in all directions. I earned myself another trip to the emergency room,

another set of stitches, and another two weeks' vacation from gym class. I remember some smart-aleck asking me: "Is this going to be an annual tradition with you?"

That was the end of it though. My streak of head-konking was over, much to my relief, and I managed to reach adulthood with no more than the usual amount of minor cuts and bruises.

But there was a sequel. I was working as a farm hand, about 15 years after that last incident, and one spring day I was unhitching a weed sprayer from an orchard tractor. Welded to the sprayer hitch was an upright metal post with a pressure gauge attached to the top.

I pulled the hitch pin and went to heave the sprayer clear of the tractor drawbar. I don't remember now if maybe the tractor rolled forward before I got hold of the sprayer hitch, or if I just absent-mindedly let go of it once I pulled it clear. Whatever the cause, the hitch dropped heavily to the ground, and that metal post came down on me like the Hammer of Doom: *Konk!*