



NO MATTER

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3rd Place Winner, *BOULD** Awards
2020 Short Story Anthology
(**Bizarre, Outrageous, Unfettered, Limitless, Daring*)

It's not that I lean one way or the other when it comes to those nasty things that folks argue about all the time. Church, gender, politics, tomato-tomatoe. I'm not gonna get my ass in a roar over any of those D



F things. No, I don't say the whole words. D F, figure it out. Hell, if I said it out loud my momma would'a kick the shit out of me. Truth is, I leaned one way when it came to what my momma said. Hers weren't no other way.

Thing is, though, I did get to go my way about the world when I had to let her go. Likes and dislikes you know. Sort'a like beef rare or well done. And, truth be told, I know a few folks just like me. We just sort'a blow our honkers in our own hankies if you know what I mean.

Last winter a few of us fellers got together. Damn good time. Drinks, a bite or two to eat. We don't do drugs. Hell no. Taught by my momma don't play with things that scramble your brain. Damn near fried a dope-o in my school. That was back in the day. Ass hole just shot up a load and never got to the bathroom on time ever again. Burned that part of the brain that told him when to go and when to tuck it back in. From that day on he couldn't be around us normal people. What with the drips and the farts... never knowing if it were the real thing or not. Course, no one would marry him and after a while his momma and poppa said ta hell with this. Put him in a home where he just curled up in a ball. But so what? He wasn't talking no more. Couldn't remember his name. Couldn't even smile.

Who wants to live like that? Me and the other fellers decided to do him a favor that winter. Small one at that. Our first as a team. Didn't matter no how. Life wasn't worth shit to him. Not a good way for any human to live. First visitors he had in six months. Nobody even looked in on him at night. Easy enough. Pillow worked just fine. And then we all went and had a beer for the sorry bastard.

Could be that a few somes-a-bitches would be upset. But that's their business, not mine. No matter their church, gender, politics, tomato or tomatoes.

When I lived with my momma, we did a lot of things that somes-a-bitches didn't like. But my momma and me have our rights, too. Didn't have what those kids down the block had. No fancy station wagons, what them smarties call SUVs now. We walked all over. Took our time. Gathered up what them people tossed in the trash. Crazy people, they were. Threw out pillows, chairs, half bottles of ketchup, half

loaf of bread. All the time, things not good enough for them. Heck, meal after meal, just tossed like garbage. Never could figure out what they were thinking. Guess they had more money than brains. We looked for money, too. Never got lucky. Only pop cans, ten cents a piece in our town for turn ins. Shows you can make a decent living off people that don't give a damn. We watched those ones who had parties and when. Just took our time, waited till the lights went out and made our dash. Could have our own party on those nights. Me and momma.

It took me a while to figure out how to live on my own. Strange watching TV by myself. Worse was when it got cold. She used to warm the blankets before we went to bed. Sit on them, her wide butt and my long skinny legs folded on her lap, in front of the TV. All dark, that spooky gray blue screen in our face. Watching any damn thing till our eyes crossed. Hell, those blankets were like toast on the bed. Fast under them and, hell, you'd think it was summer.

Ain't the same toasting my own blanket. But what the hell, I have other fish to fry. Like a real job now. That's why time with my buddies, those fellers I told you about, is a little short, not enough lone nights on my own. They got me working this late shift, till eleven that is. No TV time. Oh, they got CNN going in the back but hell, that ain't what you call a steady supply of entertainment. And I figured out those slicked heads and painted eyes don't tell you what you need to know anyhow. Just the same ole thing. If you don't hate the pres-dent after listening to one hour of bla-bla-bla then your hearing aid needs a battery. They would make a sinning preacher into a shifty senator if that was their intention. But no, they got this hate rag going on a guy who set out to fix things broken by fools. No damn reason to hate the man. And that's another reason I don't give a rat's ass about church, gender or politics, tomato or tomatoe.

No matter. I don't plan on turning into any crazy protester or goody-two-shoes or getting me elected. Not that I'm a D F but I mind my own business and take a notion to do the right thing when it's gotta be done, no matter.

That's what the fellers and me said at the last meeting. Do the right thing. A couple pitchers and we were throwing out ideas like curve balls at the ole Wrigley. See, one feller, confidential his name, had a green wad shoot at him by some new D F wandered in here. A nasty thing to do considering all them bugs and viruses going round. There should be laws, but under the circumstances says the person acting in our behalf, the administer he calls himself, said the D F didn't mean to do it and *therefore* we had to mind our own business. Well, the fellers and me thought that was just plain wrong and stupid. A green wad doesn't fall out of your M Fing mouth and land on an innocent feller minding his own business.

So since I work the late shift, it's easy enough to stop those nasty snores, close that big mouth. Grab a pillow on the empty cot and settle the score. No matter, church, gender, politics, tomato or tomatoe. What you got in your mouth better stay in your mouth or someone will see fit to shut your trap. Forever.

Times like this don't come too often. One of our fellers, name confidential, said 'not often enough'. But he gets in a dander more than me or some others. Got a trigger finger I kind'a think. So I just watch

out for him, sort'a take him under my wing on the late shift. People you meet on the street are just like you and me, I said, only they got this bug up their ass to be somebody while's we already know who we are.

Calms him when I say that, but I keep an eye out. I got more to lose than he does. This late shift has its rewards.

Three squares if you're in the right place at the right time. No fussing. Just don't step out of line. Like the D F at the front door who cussed at this June Bug who snuck in. He didn't care she had three kids to feed. Hell, what D F would let a kid go hungry? He said, No. She ain't registered, he said. Thing is, those potatoes had been watered down near to a soup and plenty of meatloaf filled with oatmeal but what would a kid know. So I let June Bug in the back door. When she walked down the line, I gived her three scoops more. At the table, I put my red jello on her tray. The D F guy on the end tried to grab it. How could he be so stupid? Jello is for kids.

So me and the fellers decided to fix things up. Someone take jello from a kid was worse than the ordinary D F. Something had to be done. Bedtime, I saw him grab someone else's pillow, too. Damn D F would steal the shirt off his mother if he had one. Didn't take much to put him to sleep. Put the pillow back on the other bed, tucked it nice and that there feller slept like a baby all night long. Working the late shift has it rewards.

Summer came and it got hotter and hotter. Food not fit for your likes? Well, on the street you try for a grub or two. Always someone gonna give you a 'save you' talk and then a green buck or a bag of their leftovers. Ain't too bad if you're not begging. Damn those D F's that beg and then complain. Most of me and the fellers take what we can get. Grateful you might say. But sometimes there pops up this do-gooder who starts his or her peaching and gets on your nerves. Not my cup of tea. Momma said, you want to go to church then go, but folks like us have to sit in the back. Couldn't figure that one out. Sit in the back if you are late. I ain't ever late to anything.

Figured I try it out. Cool inside. Time says nine and I'm at the door. But then this lady, have to say lady, don't know, she could have been a whore for all I know, took a look at me and shook her head. Dressed in Sunday clothes, those kind of dresses my momma said people wear to church and hang up as soon as they get home. I don't have no Sunday clothes, every day the same to me. God shouldn't care if you wear what you wear. Guess the lady had some other notion. But she said, no way, not here.

No matter church, gender, politics, tomato or tomatoe.

She had her reason and I guess if I had one, I'd point a finger at her, too, and say no way. Back row fine with me. But funny thing, when I told the fellers, they got all hooty and said, no way. Got no right to chase you away. Hard to figure out right and wrong when the fellers say one thing and I think the other.

But I got to wondering. Why she got that finger pointing at me. Next Sunday, nine o'clock, door open, I take my seat. No Sunday shirt but no matter. Damn, there she come in, same row. Eyes hot. Finger out. I'm thinking I got here in time. Nice place to sit, listen to nice music. She did that thing, pointed to the back. Them eyes like ice.

Back row ain't bad. Plenty of room. Hear the music, time to think. No matter.

Saw my fellers. Told them about the finger again. Back row music ain't so bad, I said. No way, they said. So over a beer, we got to talking. Didn't seem right, one story after the other. Always back row. Damn, maybe I should think some more. Some things got to be serious in this world, what other people do.

Next Sunday, back row for me. Nice music. That feller priest, he said go in peace and everyone darted for the door. Wide open, they rushed like the place was on fire. I saw her in that Sunday dress, fast as she could go. Seemed a shame to see her leave like there weren't no room for her any more. Like she had something important to do. Seemed the best thing was to slow her down a bit. Let her enjoy the place all to herself. Didn't take much to put a brake on her. Stumble out, like the drunk she figgered I was. Got to give everyone their place. Damn, she took a fall. People got to be careful. Nearly cut my feet out from under me, too. No matter church, gender, politics, tomato or tomatoe.

So me and the fellers got some talk time together that week and the next. Easy when the wind doesn't cut your nuts in two. No snow, walk, watch those people who are going someplace, one way, the other. Got benches along the Chicago River, boats go by. Pigeons look for bread crumbs.

Me and the fellers like the summer. So we talk and get some time to plan. World not fit for everyone. Hard for some. Those boys in suits, gals in shoes that make them walk like a board got stuck somewhere up their anny, they go by, don't say a word. Don't look at us as if we don't exist. Guess we don't. No matter.

So I went for a walk, down to the big lake park. People out, busy with nothing. Just like me but they don't let me play. This guy, he went so fast by me like passing an ant in the grass. Fast, hands, arms swinging. And dang, something fell out of his pocket. Caught my eye. He kept going like a buzz up his ass. I picked it up. Bills in a metal clip. Lots of um folded. I seen a ten, flipped, saw a twenty, bunch more. All tight in the shiny clip with them letters BMW.

I figure his name got to be Bob. So I says, "Bob, Bob, wait up." He lost what was his. He don't look around. I run a little, "Bob, Bob, got this." Reach out my hand.

He swings around, "Are you following me?" He shakes his fist. What the hell, I think. Just trying to give him what is his. Momma said if it's theirs, give it back. So I says, "Bob, you lost something."

"My name isn't Bob. Get away from me or I'll call the cops." His face all mean and crusty. I reach out. He starts to run again, looks back, "Get away from me you D F."

Well, I never thought me to be a D F. Knew some, not me. So no matter. I took that money out of the metal thing. Threw it on the ground. I put the green bills in my pocket. Guess who's the D F? Walked back to the underpass, meet my fellers. That D F gave me two hundred dollars. Lots of sandwiches at Subway for me and the fellers. Summer picnic.

Don't need to make a fuss bout right and wrong. When you know what goes around, comes around. No matter church, gender, politics, tomato or tomatoe. Those people at the lake park smiled at each other but they don't see their brother or sister. I listened to that priest guy who raised his hand and said we are all brothers. Damn, he's got it wrong.

People done come apart in the middle I think.

Momma gone. She didn't like one day that her boy had to be a man. Had to do what big god said to do. Go figure. She took to liquor after that. Not for me. Got the pillow. First time. No one but me to put me together again. No place to go now but with the fellers with no place to go. Not all bad. We fix things. Put our heads together. Some easy, some hard. Some rewards. If you treat your brother bad, then you got to be fixed.

No matter church, gender, politics, tomato or tomatoe.