

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/4

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The Great God Shove

I awakened slowly and the first reality that hit me was not the chill in the small bedroom of the cold water flat, not the faded and dingy surroundings, not the fact that there was no school for the day. I shivered. Reality was my arch tormentor, Shove, waiting in the sunshine of a new day, waiting to tease, pester, and plague me. Charlestown, MA and Shove, in 1935 when I was seven, were hard realities.

I shivered again. Shove the bully was relentless as well as real.

So was EAP.

The fire in the kitchen stove was out. A bag of coal was needed from the store. As I popped down the tenement stairs from the second floor I was aware of the closed-in odors of urine nearly alive, cabbage cooking leftovers that met at your eyes, and damp plaster explaining a background of life. There was my father the robust Marine, my mother the iron of the family, and five children. I was the oldest.

And there was Shove.

In a side-saddle, bouncing gait I hit the bottom landing and burst out into the Saturday sunshine trying to warm the cobblestones of Bunker Hill Ave. I'd have to dare Shove again this day as all days. There always had to be some kind of display. It had been that way since the beginning.

A crisp and cool breeze, a late October breeze, whistled in from the Mystic River and the Charlestown Navy Yard where my father's Marine Barracks loomed over the wall. It nipped at my ears. Pennies and nickels for a 25 pound bag of coal jingled in my pocket. I thought how soon the stovetop would be a mickey-brick red. And I could smell the cocoa my mother would make and the toast set on the stovetop for mere seconds. Burnt was the way I liked it. Well done and filling the air with its burnt aroma. Aromas, in Charlestown, in 1935, had a strong place in the order of things. Especially aromas of food and distinct if minor creature comforts.

Charlestown itself was a yardstick for those who cared to calculate the measure of a thing. For me, at my seven years and a little wiser for my time than I should have been, it presented size and a kind of solid geometry that could not be shaken off too lightly. Perception of things for me began with the three- or four-decker tenements walling up around me and my little haunts. They hung over me sheer as cliffs. Often they closed in with their drab time-eaten gray paint, and a few revolutionary attempts by neighbors to spruce up. Now and then a corncob yellow or a pale green façade came into being. And passed just as quickly. We knew daydreams on a daily basis, an opiate in the air.

A drunk shivered and smelled in the doorway of No.2 Bunker Hill Ave. For him, I knew, there was no place to go. Locked into Charlestown gave you a certain grace for survival or a slow death. But it did not give great promise of escape. Escape came in the books I read. Escape was over the iron fence of the Navy Yard, high, iron wrist-thick and pointed at its top, and the harbor beyond. Like a medieval wall it was, that fence.

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Before I turned the corner I looked behind me up the length of Bunker Hill Ave., past the cubic blocks of the tenements, the Bond Bread factory made wholly of red mickeys and square as a prison face, and St. Catherine's Church as gigantic and ugly as any structure could be. I saw Hobie's little beanery stuck in between two tenements as if it were an afterthought, a stall for a pony in a Clydesdales' barn. The Ave. ran uphill and disappeared over the horizon. Out there the subway ran two ways out of Sullivan Square. One way went deep into downtown. The other headed off on a third-rail run to Everett and the places beyond, where trees grew in great clusters and fields leaped and the wind sang a different tune. Here upon me it shrieked around clapboard corners and up the slim alleys across which neighbors could touch each other.

The chill wind penetrated my felt jacket. Even before I looked I knew Shove was there in front of Halsey's Market on the corner of Chelsea and Ferrin Streets. I would have to run the gauntlet again, pass by him. Taunts there would be and perhaps more small pains he might inflict on me. Shove was nothing more than a bully. A seventeen year-old bully and I was his favorite target. To me it was surprising he didn't have a sloped forehead or a bulging jaw or a strange look in his eyes. I never heard that he was dropped on his head as a baby. Nothing said anything about him except what he did. And he bullied.

Hatless, blond, hands stuffed into dungaree pockets, wearing a denim jacket, he leaned against a brick wall. He was like a firecracker ready to go off, which is what I thought about him. Why he picked on me so much only he and I knew, a sort of mutual understanding that Shove would get as much of me as he could until the day of revenge came.

Shove thought it would never come. But I knew different. It also was in the air.

He leaned against the wall in the superior way he had of imposing himself over most things around him. But a strange mixture he was to say the least. Shove was the neighborhood hero athlete, tall, lean in the middle, a super first baseman and long-ball hitter, a driving high-knee action tailback that smelled the end zone, who cracked into daylight so often it was rote. They said he was a vicious tackler, had speed and punching power in each fist, could arc a horseshoe into the air with the expectancy of hearing metal at its other end. Out of town, they said, Shove would have been a ringer in any game.

It was me he hated for a special reason. And that's why he always picked on me. It wasn't that he didn't pick on others, younger or older, but he made me out special.

The catalyst for all of this was my father, a striking figure in his dress blues, three stripes up and three stripes down. Six feet of leathered Marine was he with crayon-red hair even the wind deigned not move. Before Shove my father had been the athlete of most renown, a tough catcher who owned every pitcher he ever caught, a blocking back with the skills of a mercenary, a clutch candlepin bowler who excelled at Hi-Lo- Jack, a seventeen letter high school athlete who had twisted the fate of many a gambler.

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And Shove was afraid of him. Shove and I shared that knowledge. It made him the bully he was and me his special consideration.

Few people contested Shove's position as king of the hill. He had produced. In a big game with one leg near useless he dragged himself and two tacklers into the end zone with the clock running down. Hadn't he driven home the winning run in eleven straight games? Weren't the Braves interested in him? Didn't he stand back to back with a pal against a whole Jamaica Plain gang at a wedding once and beat some of them to a pulp?

Yet years before my father had done the same things, to this day being spoken of with awe, with reverence. Shove, most likely, went out of his way to taunt and tease me, to speak to my father in that most unlikely fashion. I was seven years old and Shove was seventeen, but the disparity in age never entered his mind. Penny or nickel bottles he religiously kicked out of my hands, punched bags of groceries I carried from the store, intimidated me every way he could to dispel the mirrored image that existed between my father and him. At times he was so brutal that I cried in my bed at night.

But, in Charlestown in 1935, survival was a matter of self; that knowledge was all about me. As a result I told my father but once about the situation. "He's always pushing at me, dad. He trips me and knocks me over the barrels. He's always breaking my bottles outside the store and throws my comic books into Halsey's garbage bag. Once he grabbed my back pockets and yanked on them and split my pants right down the seam and laughed at me all the way home."

For righteous indignation I waited. For explosion I waited, awaited the crimson anger that could fill his face, his eyes. Waited the reality of him pounding Shove into unconsciousness, for the Irish to come out of the depths. My father, I knew, had the fists Harry Greb had.

That explosion lay like some quiet volcano, a mere simmer on the face of life. He looked down at me, eyes blue and warm, nose unbent and clean as if thugs had never gotten within his left jab, the hair as red as bricks. The stiff collar of his dress blues blouse was opened as it was only at home. The hair on his chest peaked through. Those strong hands reached for me and what I was alert to were the veins sticking out on the backs of those hands and one singularly bulbous vein arching down into one eyebrow, a throwback, he called it, to the Nicaraguan Campaign.

His voice then was contradictory, at once steeled, and yet tender in its delivery. "Sonny, I'll never chase him. I'll not disgrace the uniform. I'll never go looking for him, but if I ever turn a corner and he's there, he'll never belly up to you again." Firm and ominous finality to those words, and they came with the one bulbous vein arching into the eyebrow, echoing all that I wanted to hear. I wanted to count again the ribbons on his chest.

In the same tone he continued to speak, aware of my understanding, sensing a nodding to each other had already taken place. "What you have at hand is a problem." He said you with the same firmness. It was not the first time I had been challenged, nor the first time my father had challenged me. "You're only seven and he's seventeen. That's a pretty big dif-

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ference, isn't it?" The spider webs of lines running outward from his eyes seemed to ripple against one another.

I nodded a yes.

His eyes never wavered from mine for a second, but that vein was a still contradiction to the tone of his voice. "You have every right in the world to protect yourself from him. I don't care if you use a bat or rock or a hunk of iron pipe, but don't get hurt by him. You've got half again as many smarts as most kids your age, so use them."

There it was! In the seven years of my life that had to be the greatest challenge thrown at me. My toes tingled. My ears buzzed. Ripples of an unknown charge surged through my fingertips, and a chill went up my back as if my shirt had been torn open on that backside. Half aloud I whispered, "Amontillado." I pronounced the word the way I figured old Georgio Rendici would pronounce it sitting on his milk crate in front of No. 7 Bunker Hill Ave. selling crabs for a nickel. The As in it were broad and thick.

Reaching out tenderly my father patted me on the head. There were times when words did not have to pass between us, but I was sure he had not understood that portentous word. Off into the busy kitchen he walked, into an aura of hamburgers and mashed potatoes and stewed tomatoes that I sucked into my nostrils as sweet as any honey or candy. Revenge's delicious air came on stronger than the promised meal, even as my father stirred fried onions into the mix.

After the meal we had a glass of root beer. He ladled up a pint of beer from an open crock, told us stories about Paris Island, Quantico, Nicaragua, Philadelphia, and his younger days in Charlestown. Entranced as usual, we sat in the kitchen of the second floor flat, the stovetop a dull red. Oblivious it seemed we were of the prison we were in, of the structure of the walls around us. Nested and happy we were for the grip of the moment, smiling and nodding to each other at an old story told anew. I did not know the strains of the dominant male were working their way across the face of my soul.

Later, going to bed, the image of Shove intruded in my last wakeful moments. The deep blue eyes leaped into mine, his open mouth full of roar, his fist assuming monstrous proportions as it came sweeping at me in a huge arc from an endless orbit.

Then, with gravy and all the fixings, I dreamed of punishing him. Had I not been given license? Had not my father actually commissioned me to get Shove by any measure possible? Was I not the oldest of the brood? Would Shove, in his hatred and fear, next move toward my sisters? The dread things of survival in Charlestown I dreamed; the near misses, the near escapes, the vultures that floated about us, the Great God Shove kicking at me from some imperial throne with his mute cohorts standing tall as laughing columns.

The last moments told me I would get him. E. A. Poe had moved his spirit into mine. The mechanic of arch evil had given me some of his graces, had infused me. The God Shove, it was apparent, would bow before me. It was only right. Mean and evil things passed through me. He

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was dismembered at wrist and ankle. A Machiavellian enterprise crushed his eyes bloodless, made him a laughing stock of that triangle running from City Square to Sullivan Square to the Mystic Bridge and back to City Square along Chelsea Street and the huge black iron fence of the Navy Yard. Inside that triangle, long on one side, I would fix The Great God Shove forever.

The dreams were still with me as I approached Shove and his cronies sitting on Halsey's steps. I pulled the collar up around my neck to ward off the cold wind, knowing it was also producing ear defenders against the slurs and taunts soon to head my way. He held court with his young giants and I had to pass the gauntlet. In a superior and muscular grace they lounged, and I felt my own stature diminish. Shove's big hands pressed down on the granite step and he drew his heels in, the muscles bubbling at his thighs. Onto my eyes fell his eyes, the deeper blue taking on another hue, a telltale hue. I set my eyes back on his. The shared knowledge passed between us as secret as a note; the only person in the world Shove was afraid of was my father. Though his shoulders were wide, his jacket full at the chest, his waist thin as a pole, his hair blond from an Olympus touch, the knowledge touched us, a short spark of rubbed electricity.

It burned me; it must have burned him.

"Well, look it now," he said, "it's the Jarhead's kid coming to do mommy's errands. Need to get another nipple for the growing family, baby Jarhead? Mommy and daddy got nothing else to do?"

Only when he laughed did his pals laugh. I went closer, my heart pounding, the last pain remembered. Closer I went for the purchase of the bag of coal; the pennies and nickels grasped in my fist still balled in my pocket.

"If you ain't the picture of the sweet little errand boy, I never seen one. Got your pennies locked up there in your hand, 'fraid the bogey man's going to take them?"

He guffawed loudly when he said, "Nipples are a dime a dozen this week for hot-pants Marines." One of his pals slapped him on the back. Another pushed his finger into Shove's chest. It was like a celebration.

Shove saw the redness pushing in my face. "Jeezzus," he said loudly and with feigned puzzlement, "Wouldn't you think a Jarhead with all them goddam kids running around the house would take his time coming home at night? But not his old man. The old redhead does the hundred in ten flat to get from that gate to that house." He pointed to the Main Gate of the Navy Yard and the tenement where we lived, No. 3 Bunker Hill Ave. It wasn't much more than a hundred yards.

Buddha-like, Halsey sat behind the counter, his face gray, his eyes a pale and tired green, his cheeks smooth. The paunch of a belly hung over his belt like a comma out of place, distorting his skinny frame. Never once had I seen him outside the store. Bologna and cheese and mustard and quick sandwich smells filled the small room. Two bottle caps lay in the middle of the floor, checker pieces left over from a bigger game. I kicked one of them under the counter.

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Halsey spoke a gutter dialect that said his name really wasn't Halsey. "Wuzzit?" He looked out the door at Shove looking in.

The pennies and nickels spread across the counter. "A bag of coal," I said, and pushed the coins at him. He counted each one and pointed to the back room. A bag hefted to my shoulder smelled like a gas pipe or as strong as the area of the railroad tracks on the other side of City Square. A film of coal dust sifted lightly onto my jacket.

Halsey hadn't moved at all, yet the pennies and nickels were out of sight. Very slowly his eyes moved toward the door where Shove's shadow loomed. He whispered, "Wunza time he getz catcha."

I looked at him from under the bag of coal. "I getz him catcha."

He motioned to the floor in front of the counter. "Wantza bazkid?" He shrugged his shoulders. It was a Charlestown shrug.

I grabbed a basket, stepped out the door and Shove punched the bag off my shoulder. It split on the sidewalk and spilled into the gutter.

"Damned if the Gyrene ain't got a butter-finger kid for an errand boy." He picked up a handful of anthracite pea coal and fired them, one by one, across the street. Four out of five hit the curbing and dropped onto the grating of the sewer drain.

I put the basket down and placed the half-empty bag in it and picked up the rest of the coal from the walk and the gutter. Halsey stared out the window at me. When they weren't looking he held up one finger, then hid it quickly. E.A. Poe had another fan.

Shove and his pals were hysterical with laughter. I ran to the corner with the basket and stepped into the hallway of No. 3 Bunker Hill Ave. Again, swift as a signature, the smell of cabbage and urine and wet plaster assailed me. I was overwhelmed for a moment. I hated cabbage. I hated drunks. I hated the landlord. But most of all, I hated Shove. "Edgar," I said, "be my friend."

My hand fingered the pile of coal in the basket and found the one I wanted. It was good sized, round, grippable. It was rock-hard also. Into the street I stepped and went to the corner. They were still laughing. The piece of coal flew from my hand. Gracefully and easily, as if he were on the end of a super double play, Shove caught the hunk of coal in his hand and shouted back, "Shit on you, kid. You and your father are both assholes!" He tossed the piece of coal across Chelsea Street. It hit the curbing and fell into the mesh of the sewer drain. The laughter still echoes.

Up the long flight of stairs I lugged the coal, buried in a vault of misery, seeing no way out of all of it. Was there a way to get at Shove? The odors still came at me. Nausea came with it for a moment. It was a fate. We came into a place and would die in that place. All of it was prearranged. Karma called and done. Ashes unto ashes, dust unto dust.

And then it hit me!

Right then, in the middle of the long climb of stairs, it hit me. The whole grand and glorious scheme hit me right down to the last detail. I sat on the middle of the stairs with the basket of coal in my lap and drained

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off a large mystical draught of Amontillado. The As were still broad. I felt giddy. I felt glorious. I was akin to the gods of revenge. At the top of my voice I screamed, "I getz catcha, Shove! I getz catcha!"

The words ran up the walls of the hallway, went to the second floor and on up to the landing on the third deck. Just as swiftly they came echoing back from the gray ribbed metallic ceiling all touched by rust. I patted the cover of the trash can on the second floor landing, entered our flat, set about making a new fire, rolling Globes and Heralds and Posts, knotting them, laying on kindling.

Early next morning, after my father had left for the Barracks and a few others stirred in the building, I shook the ashes down from the stove grates. They gathered smoky in the coal hod, and the hod I carried carefully to the cellar. The law of the land, the code of the building, said that no ashes, hot or cold, were to be placed in the trash barrels on any upper floor. Fire, among the other dangers that faced us, presented a constant peril. Fire could leap up these stairs quick as any athlete, blocking off escape routes, forcing people to windows and long falls. Fire could leap from one building to the next in thin tongues of flame, seeking out dry rot and years of dust. Fire could crack and explode its ignition in a thousand places in every tenement building. A whole block could go up in minutes, a whole Fourth of July. Once I had seen a monumental fire engulf buildings in City Square. In a panic I had rushed home to warn my family when flames routed themselves along electrical overhead wires down Chelsea Street. The flames threatened to run their way right to our house, the burning insulation smoky and black and evil. For days afterward I remembered the hysteria that had filled me.

Down in the cellar I soaked the ashes with water and returned up the stairs with a heavier hod. Quietly I dumped the wet ashes into the trash barrel on the second floor, then returned to the cellar. Four times I repeated the trip with ashes wet from the trash barrels, filling the barrel on the second floor to within eight inches of its top. That done I scattered papers over the ashes, replaced the cover, pushing it securely in place.

With Edgar in attendance I waited the interminable time until nine o'clock came. The wait was spent in reveries of ultimate satisfaction, letting loose of my worries, and letting that thing in me build by slow degrees. The great God Shove would soon know a formidable adversary.

At a quarter to nine, sisters primped for the day, toast and hot oats and sugar under my belt, I started up Chelsea Street toward City Square. Never had I stolen from Halsey's or from Abie's Market or from Hobie's little shed where he baked beans and brown bread in the crudest of brick ovens. They were not fair game for theft. The Bond Bread factory, with its pies and cakes and tons of goodies, was fair game. They could afford it. So could all of the merchants in City Square. Unlike Halsey or Abie or Hobie they never extended credit, never carried a family's lives on the books until the infrequent pay days came, often forgetting to charge for little items that were so important to survival.

I clattered a stick against the iron fence of the Navy Yard, looking up and down the street for Shove. He was not in sight. The smell of the harbor, the full mixture of a sea salad, came over the wall beside the Barracks.

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It was crisp and clean and smelled vaguely like a treated wound. Behind me the iron wings of the Mystic Bridge sprang up against a Chelsea background. Ahead of me, standing on the shoulders of uniform ranks of iron-clad stanchions, the lines of The El ran off to North Station and to Thompson Square, ran off to the outlands, other places with other dimensions. It was an escape route that someday I would take.

In the drug store in City Square I nosed around the magazine rack, feigning interest in a dozen covers, looking under piles for what I knew wasn't there. All I had to do was arouse a little suspicion.

The clerk watched me for a while and came over. "Looking for something special, kid?" He was almost nodding to himself, having spotted another "lifter." I knew he hated kids who stole and sailors who drank, and he had seen plenty of each.

"My father's looking for the last issue of G-8 and His Battle Aces, but it's not here. He's got this one." I pointed to the current issue. "But he doesn't have the last one. Said this was the only place I could find it."

He bit all the way. "Let me look out back. Wait a minute." He left and I wasted no time. I dipped my hands into the adhesive tape box and scooped eight rolls inside my jacket. Eight, I figured, was enough.

The clerk returned with the magazine in his hand. "It's ripped a little on the cover." He was apologizing to me.

"I'll give you a nickel for it."

Another customer came into the store. The clerk raised his voice and said, "Aw, you can have it, kid. Go ahead, take it." The magazine was thrust into my hands as he smiled at the new customer. The customer smiled at the clerk and patted me on the head.

I ran down Chelsea Street. The song of the streets was not the thundering click-clack of the Elevated cars leaning on the stanchions, or the ear-splitting shriek as metal wheels rode hard on curved rails, or the iron clad wheels of a milk wagon on the cobblestones, or a harbor whistle moaning far away. The new song beat its drums in my mind over and over again, and the simple words leaped upon my ears. "I getz catcha, Shove. I getz catcha. I getz catcha, Shove. I getz catcha." The drums beat faster and my heart beat with them, pounding in my chest, putting an inner pressure at my ears.

It was a glorious new day and Charlestown was a glorious place and the Great God Shove was coming down from his mighty throne!

Later in the morning all was ready for the final confrontation. The battle plan was drawn. Never once did I waver in the plan or my determination to bring the bully down. Consequences did not bother me. I had been given license, and, after all, I was only seven years old and Shove was seventeen. Surely the whole world would side with me. It was only just to do so, and survival, ultimately, was the responsibility of the individual. I never had pitied the drunks sleeping in doorways. Each of them, if he had wanted to, could have had a different life. Of that I was so sure.

And I would not ever scramble in the gutter in front of Shove again.

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At noon I was ready. I whiffed a great draught of Amontillado in the hallway and it killed all the odors I had come to hate so much. The sun hung out over Old Ironsides where my father had often baby-sat one or more of us. Shadows were short and square on Bunker Hill Ave. I prayed for Shove to be nearby. He was not on the Avenue. I could see way up past Abie's Market and he was not in sight. Time was important and I was worried. Around the corner I looked and my fingertips tingled. Shove was sitting in front of Halsey's with two of his pals. It was now or never, and the song began its drumbeat in my head.

Back inside the hallway, from behind the door I had set open with a stick, I retrieved five flat, smooth stones it had taken hours to find. Each was suitable for skipping across The Oily; the name we'd given to the Mystic River as it flowed its rainbows of colors out to sea. Each stone was balanced and true. David could have slung them.

At the corner I sucked in a huge gulp of air. Edgar and his Amontillado could not help me now. All the dreaming was done and the act of survival was at hand. I was alone on the corner.

I yelled. "Hey, Shove, you big bully." One stone was firmly gripped in the fingers of my right hand. The others were in my left fist. "Hey, Shove, you friggin' bully."

He moved off the steps and stood up. Like Goliath he looked. "Screw you, kid," he yelled back at me. In a high arc I heaved the first stone. Shove laughed as he easily caught it on the fly and heaved it back at me. It bounced on the sidewalk and skittered across the street. The arc of my second stone was not as high as the first one. He caught it, dropped it, picked it up and flung it back at me. I dodged it easily.

My third toss was a clothesliner. In its straight trajectory it flew at Shove's chest. He leaped sideways against the wall of the store and his pals jumped into the doorway out of sight. The stone smashed off the wall.

Fist raised, Shove screamed, "Why you scrawny little bastard you." And he started toward me, the fist still doubled. Ninety feet from me he started to walk faster, but his steps measured, as though he were ready to leap sideways again. My heart echoed in my ears. I gulped for a last shot of air and heaved a last perfect shot. It hit out in front of him, skipped on its backside and took off. It hit him square on the shin and I could hear the thunk of it, like an ax hitting a board. Then Shove came. He came at a dead run. In two steps he was at top speed, his knees popping high, his stride as long as Paul Bunyan's.

"You little bastard, I'll kick your ass all over town."

I darted around the corner, into the hallway and started up the stairs. Shove was screaming behind me, his steps getting closer, closing down the distance. In the middle of the long flight of steps I stumbled. My knees banged on the edge of the tread. The stab of pain took itself right into my hip. I still had time. Shove was not in the hall yet. Seventeen more steps and I was home. Fifteen more. Thirteen. Shove hit the wall in the hallway. He was right behind me! Nine more steps. Seven. Shove was on the steps! Five more steps. Three. He was pounding up behind me, still cursing and screaming. I leaped onto the second floor landing and over the barrel

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turned on its side. All the energy I ever wanted was in my arms and in my legs at that moment as I shoved the barrel off the landing and down the steps.

Eight complete rolls of adhesive tape were wrapped around the barrel, top to bottom, holding the cover in place. I was even able to make out the legend scrawled on one band of tape as the barrel started on its way. "I getz catcha!"

Both of us heard the barrel hit the first step in a dull, metallic and wooden thud. It hit the third step down a little sharper, the smashing sound crisper, and more metallic. Shove's eyes ballooned in the dim light. They popped bigger than silver dollars. His hands came out in front of him in a pitiful gesture, half-beseeching, half-protecting. The barrel hit the steps again and I thought the whole tenement building shook.

The Great God Shove and the barrel met in the middle of the stairs. There was a sickening crunch at the collision. Shove screamed in pain and the scream flew up the walls of the hallway, up into the upper landings, off the metallic ceiling.

Shove crumpled on the steps three-quarters of the way down. The barrel, turned by the collision, went end over end and hit the door jam and shook every flat in the building.

Above me a door opened and someone in a deep, demanding voice yelled out, "What was that? What the hell happened?"

Shove's two pals, framed in the doorway below, stood in a trance, their mouths open, their hands limp and helpless at their sides. Shove was crying. His leg was broken. When the police came he told them he was helping some kid carry the barrel and it had slipped.

I never saw Shove again.

At least not on my side of the street.