

The Healing Sting

By Marco Etheridge

When I was a boy, there was no cut or scrape, no abrasion or bloody gash, that I would not conceal from my Father. I hid the injury under a coating of mud, or a ragged shirtsleeve, before sneaking into the house with a stoic face. The possibilities of infection, blood poisoning, or tetanus, were as nothing when compared with the certainty of Satan's fire dispensed from a small glass vial.

My Father grew up a poor kid in Kansas City, in an era when the world was preparing to go to war a second time. He was an only child adrift in a sea of extended family, passed from household to household depending on the degree of strife in his own.

In my Father's view, the world was a harsh place, best inhabited by those who learned to endure, and learned quickly. To raise a child otherwise was to do the little tyke a disservice. Better to prepare them for the trials and tribulations that were to come. Life is suffering; he was clear on that single Buddhist tenet, if on none of the others. This belief encompassed his views on healing, as in all things.

I have an older brother, now grown to an old man. He was a passable brother, as I remember, but not as skilled in the ways of survival. Still, I am beholden to him. His screams taught me many valuable lessons.

One of my Father's oddities was his inability to remember the names of his sons—for he only had sons—except as a complete set. Thus, he would run through his list of known boy names until the child in front of him showed some sign of recognition. It was a rotating chant of

single-syllable names, a clicking wheel of fortune.

My brother was named Luke. Like all of our names, it did not need to be shortened to be used; another of my father's unshakable beliefs.

Luke was, as I said, not so skilled in the ways of parental deception. He would saunter blithely into our house, his bare arm displaying some small wound acquired on the ball-field, or in the Forest Preserve. My Father would lurch from his chair and seize the boy. A brief struggle would commence, but too little and too late to save Luke.

Then the words of the doom, always the same: Dammit, Kid, do you want to get The Lockjaw?

My boyhood brain did not know what The Lockjaw was, but I knew that whatever dangers it held, they were far preferable to the evil bite of Merthiolate. I knew this to the depths of my soul. I learned this from my brother's screams as my Father wrestled the squirming boy into submission. Once subdued, my Father would daub the wound with the red-dyed hell juice he swore by.

I grew out of the time when painting children with a scarlet concoction of sodium and mercury was considered acceptable, even beneficial. As the years passed, my own children came into the world. The first two, both girls, were adorned with polysyllabic names. Yet when my son was born, I found I could not break the weight of tradition. He goes through life bearing a name pre-shortened.

As I survived my childhood, more or less, so too did my brother Luke, and the rest of my Father's broods. The distant half-siblings of other mothers, we remember each other's names on the rare occasions that we meet.

The last of these was when we laid our mutual Father to his rest. My brother Luke was tapped to do the eulogy. He made a fair job of it, overall. In hindsight, I guess I wish he could have worked in something about the Old Man's healing sting. That would have gotten a laugh out of the front row.

Marco's short fiction has been featured at *Literally Stories*, *Dime Show Review*, *Five on the Fifth*, *Storgy Magazine*, *Castabout Art & Literature*, *The Manzano Mountain Review*, and *Every Day Fiction*. He is the author of "The Best Dark Rain" Series, and the stand-alone novel "Blood Rust Chains." Marco's third novel, "Breaking the Bundles," is now available at fine online booksellers world-wide.