

FROM

Welcome Thieves: Stories

BY SEAN BEAUDOIN



The Rescues

1995 Ford TraumaHawk SL Ambulance

The third game of the season Danny took a cheap shot in the crease, bled out like a pig. Time was called. His teammates put on a show, kicked at the dirt, and swore revenge without the sac to follow through. So he sat for forty-eight stitches with a fish hook and no anesthetic, sprinted from the locker room, and doled near-Balkan retribution. The Cornholers won by eleven. Even Coach was like, “Bring it down a notch, Danny. They’re gripping their pearls.” And it was true, the other team, full of guys with something better on the side, prelaw, premed, all of them suddenly asking, *Who needs this madness?*

Danny did.

Every second, minute, inch, foot.

Sweat and uniform and pads and stick.

The Cornholers rose in the standings, playoffs in sight for the first time in decades. Then the last game of the season a big-name Ivy rolled in, none of their players much except the midfielder, all jaw and shaved head. A towering Cossack with three-day stubble and yellow breath. His eyes were empty, lips flecked with blood.

“I’ve heard of you,” the Cossack said.

“No you haven’t.”

“I’ve seen you play.”

“No you didn’t.”

They danced and hacked and elbowed all the way across the field.

It hurt.

Danny watched as he clotheslined their forwards, dished cheap shots to the fullbacks, delivered pain with pro efficiency. With a radiant grin. There was no hesitation, no nuance. It was almost like being in the backyard with Dad again, running drills, pushing limits. Exploring the fine line between Just Doing It and puking a streak of Gatorade across the neighbor’s fence.

“You and me? We could be friends,” the Cossack whispered, as they chopped and muscled in front of goal. “Let’s hang out, go to dinner and a show.”

Danny knew he had to quip back. Be funny and casual. Arch and bold. But his shit talk was gone. The Clint stare, the Bruce smirk. He wanted to take off his spikes, feel his toes in the grass. He wanted to eat graham crackers dunked in milk, go home and lie under a quilt, watch something old and dumb like *Melrose Place*, the episode where Heather Locklear wears tight pants.

During timeouts the guys punched Danny’s arm and shouted encouragements, confused by the loss of their beautiful madman.

Smack him! Shut his mouth, Junk!

Even coach wadded an entire pack of Dentyne.

Christ on a stick, Danny. You waiting for an invite?

In the third quarter he stole a pass and raced up the left sideline. A break-away. Just the net and thirty open yards. The goalie waited, resigned. They both knew Danny was going to score and then pretend like he couldn’t control his momentum, feed the dude sixty pounds of marinated shoulder.

There was no sound, no sweat, no grass.

Just his feet, just his breath.

And the Cossack coming.

Fast and from behind.

A low giggle, the heavy tromp of cleat.

They connected with a slobber-crack that echoed across the field, rose through the stands, halted the game.

An hour later Danny woke up in the ambulance while a nurse with a

Kid 'n Play lid hooked him to a tube. It felt like he was wearing himself sideways.

“Did we win?”

“I doubt it.”

“There a problem?”

The nurse slipped Danny her phone number. “After the surgery? You decide you don’t need them leftover Oxys, you give me a call.”

That night the entire squad gathered around the bed, stared at his leg in traction, the pins in his hip, said all the things you say, relieved when the orderly finally kicked them out.

The article in the campus paper was intentionally vague, combed by a paralegal for liability.

A week went by, then three, then six.

Six teammates visited, then three, then none.

Some pimply kid cleaned out Danny’s locker, dropped off his gear jammed into two Ninja Turtles pillowcases. He was allowed to stay enrolled, but no more scholarship. “The good news is you can concentrate on your classes,” a counselor of some sort suggested. Friends stared at their onion rings while Danny limped through the caf. He’d pass the team on the quad, all the chill-axers and brohmen lowering their eyes, his torn gait evidence of something damning.

Maybe even contagious.

Transformation was, according to a textbook he’d partially read, inevitable.

The walker became crutches became a cane.

He dropped out, put on weight.

“Oh, wow!” people said in the produce aisle, at the movies. “You still in town?”

Danny found the ambulance chick’s number, called her up. The next day he got a job delivering pizza, put a deposit on an apartment off campus, right above a comic book shop. The owner tended to frown while he limped though the stacks, showed off his scars, winked at nerdy girls, lifted a few Green Lanterns.

Is the Fist of Power lost forever?!?!? the covers asked. Will a monarch emerge from within the Demon Chrysalis?!?!?

1983 Plymouth Scamp “Pizza Monster” Delivery Truck

It was nearly midnight on a rush order, window down, radio blaring. The classics. Verse, chorus, verse. *Bub-bub-bub Bennie and the Jets*. The DJ complained about the heat. The stink of pepperoni rose from the floorboards. Zeppelin was next, with their grunts and squeals, their Middle Earth routine. It was like, if the dude was such a Druid, why was he trying so hard to sound black?

Danny spotted a glint of chrome on the side of the road, locked 'em up. In a clearing stood an ultimate Frisbee squad, coed, mud-flecked, ponytails, and orange slices. Their van steamed, hood propped with a Wiffle bat. He wanted to give them all a hug for thinking that ironic things had actual meaning, their discounted sneakers and sailor tattoos and patchy facial hair.

“Y’all need some help?”

They cheered.

He eased out of the cab, limped across the double yellows.

The cheering stopped.

“Holy shit,” someone said.

Danny tended to forget he was him. Broken. Looming. Might as well rock a leather apron and a chainsaw.

A girl in hot pants stepped forward, aimed something shiny and black.

“Shoot,” he said.

Her lighter illuminated the engine, a knot of rust and ticking heat. Danny leaned over and pretended to tighten a hose, spelled out his name in crank-case grease.

“Okay, fire it up.”

Hot Pants slid behind the wheel and jammed in the key. The van magically roared to life, air thick with ozone and the tang of high fives.

“Oh, fuck it,” Hot Pants said, and jumped into Danny’s arms.

Everyone laughed. Beers were retrieved from the cooler, the radio cranked. Bros danced with bros, whitely and without shame. Danny stood in the middle of it all, drinking in just the sort of love that can only come from an ultimate Frisbee team on the side of the road in the cricket-heavy dark.

2009 Black Acura “Sport Package” ZDX

By August he was resurrecting two cars a week. Sorority girls and math department heads. Adjuncts and transfers. The occasional rumpled provost. It was a small college town, dark country roads, way too easy to get stuck or stranded.

Word got back to Pizza Monster.

Mikey Atta spun dough on his middle finger, dared Danny to charge fifty a car. Hippie Tim buttoned his tweed jacket, said it was a lawsuit on a platter. Gail, sweaty-pink and nearly poured into her waitress uniform, said everyone had one important skill in life and Danny’s was to rescue people.

“You’re an automotive Saint Bernard.”

Mikey Atta leaned through the pass and air-wristed a blow job. The busboys fell out in hysterics. A woman looking at the menu frowned, took her son by the elbow, let the screen door slam.

“So what’s your one important skill?” Danny asked.

“Folding napkins,” Gail said, finishing another pile. She had short bangs and cat-eye glasses, spoke out of the corner of her mouth in a sardonic way that waitresses with advanced degrees now living off campus with a guy named Zach sometimes tended to. It was no secret that Danny wanted to spend entire shifts carnally entwined, locked in the walk-in while Gail’s hot breath and cries for mercy defrosted several flats of ricotta. It was also no secret to her boyfriend, Zach, who didn’t like it a bit, but got one look at Danny’s enormous shaved head and swollen knuckles and decided to be evolved about the whole thing.

“You got something for me?” she whispered.

Danny took the cash and slipped a baggie into her apron pocket.

“Incoming!” Hippie Tim yelled. It was his one important skill: radar. Ten seconds later a booth’s worth of sorority girls gaggled in, ordered a round of side salads, and then went to town on free breadsticks.

Mikey Atta flicked his tongue between two fingers.

Tom Petty oozed from the juke.

Danny stood out on the deck, where a black Acura circled the lot, laid a patch all the way down the street.

“Delivery up!” Hippie Tim yelled, sliding round glasses back up his nose. “You think you can you handle this one, Danny, or should I call in the National Guard?”

1993 Nissan Pulsar NX

A mile down the road a car was pulled over, hazards on. A girl stood embossed in brake light. Tall, Persian, smirking. Born to ruin teachers and preachers, mock family values on yards of thigh alone. Or maybe just really pretty.

“Need a hand?”

“Nice hat.”

Danny turned the purple cap around. Nothing to be done about the rest of the uniform, khakis and a polo shirt. Even the truck was purple, a graphic of Frankenstein on the hood going, “Grrr . . . Me no skimp on toppings!”

He rolled out jumper cables, trying not to limp.

“Hey, I recognize you.”

“*Texas Chainsaw*? That was someone else.”

The girl laughed. “No, I used to come to games. Up in the bleachers, a bunch of us with a jug of wine.”

“Cheering away?”

“Depended on the score.”

Danny clamped the batteries together, as always expecting a sudden jolt to fuse his teeth. Instead, the Nissan roared to life. Flowers swayed in the halogens. The radio kicked in, a dissonant trombone blaring out of speakers more expensive than the rest of the car put together.

“Who’s this?”

She cranked the knob, drowning out frogs and grasshoppers nestled in the weeds.

“Sun Ra.”

They faced each other, covered with sweat. Haze hung like a wet sheet above the oily grass and between the oaks.

“What’s your name?”

“Steak.”

Danny knew it was a test. If he made a dumb joke, like medium rare or

well done or grass fed, she'd immediately cross him off the list, the same method she'd erased four years' worth of frat boys with.

"Hey, Steak?"

"What?"

"Wanna go out sometime?"

She smiled, hair Nile black, swung it out of her face like a flag of victory.

"We're already out."

Danny watched as she folded herself back into the car, spun the wheel, fishtailed away.

The next day, he found her in an old student directory. Stalled for an hour then dialed.

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