

The Magic Marble

When it was announced that a marble tournament was to be held and that the champion would go on to the regional competition, and if he advanced, then on to the state finals, my friends and I sat in the ditch away from the others and dreamed ourselves the marble champs.

We crushed dry leaves and rolled them in comic book paper into cigarettes and smoked them. We were big guys even at seven, a month or so from being adults. It was either Peanut Head or Big Noodle who came up with a plan on how to achieve our dream.

In short, we figured Cavalo's glass eye would do it for us; that is, we simply had to direct it into the ring and it would knock the marbles out of the circle. We thought the glass eye could see the marbles and so would never miss. We would not only win, we would make history and the Guinness Book of World Records for the most marbles ever hit without a miss.

But how to get the eye from Cavalo?

Cavalo was a medieval dragon of a man. There were four brand-new dorms recently built, 100s for the toddlers and infants; 200s for the slightly older, 300 and 400s for older boys. My friends and I were in the 300s, and Cavalo also slept in this dorm.

He got up earlier than us kids, trudged like one of Solzhenitsyn's Russian peasant prisoners in the semidark to the subterranean boiler room and stoked the fires to get the radiators knocking to warm the classrooms before school. Sometimes I would pass the boiler room and catch a glimpse of him below—a grizzly ogre, with Popeye

forearms, hair stiff and bristly as barbed wire, a permanent scowl on his face, and a perennial stream of yellowish mucus dripping from the glass eye socket.

Last time he glowered when he glanced up at me, and it scared me enough that I made it a point to avoid passing the boiler room for months.

Every night, Cavalo took his glass eye out and placed it in a glass of water on his bed stand next to his cot. With his eye out, he looked fierce, the eyelids of his socket shrunken back into tight whorls of flesh seamed with mucus.

But we did have to get that eye and the marble tournament was drawing near.

We decided that we would wait until he went to sleep and crawl over to his bed and pluck the glass eye from the water. He could always get another glass eye and we would win the tournament and, as they say, all's well that ends well.

The kids in the dorms finally went to bed and the nun who had her own enclosed room in a corner of the dorm said good night and turned off the lights. We waited a good hour until we could hear kids snoring, farting, and moaning.

Big Noodle and Coo-Coo Clock crept over to my bunk. Soon Peanut Head arrived and they all took their stations as planned. Coo-Coo Clock was posted at Sister Juanita's room and ready to alert us if he heard her moving about. Big Noodle and Peanut Head stationed themselves at the head of the bunk rows as lookouts.

I crawled over to Cavalo's cot, dipped my fingers into the glass, and scooped out the magic glass eye. I turned and saw a blurred object sailing past me and attributed the blue, dark object to my own imagination. As everyone knows, your sight plays tricks on you in the dark.

Anyway, it wasn't my imagination, it was a boot that someone had hurled through the air and it hit Cavalo in the head. He roused from his sleep and rose out of bed in a mean roar, growling for his eye. Sister Juanita awoke and came out and turned on the dorm light, and I froze as Cavalo loomed over me like a mythic one-eyed giant.

He bent down and his face came within inches of mine. "WHERE'S MY EYE?!" he bellowed.

Just before the lights had gone on I had managed, as much as I was repulsed by it, to put the eye in my mouth. I had no choice. I intended to spit it out later but it didn't work out that way.

Cavalo scared me so much, I swallowed it.

Sister Juanita pulled me by the ear into the bathroom where for the next hour she made me swallow saltwater and puke, puke at least a hundred times, until the marble came rolling out onto the floor.

So much for the marble tournament. As punishment we had to wash all five hundred windows in the buildings, and we missed the tournament. I still wonder from time to time who threw that boot.