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Lord of the Ralphs

Abstract

It was 1979, the last week of May with only five days of eighth grade to go, when I saw Ralph at the opposite corner of the blacktop talking to a group of boys he normally never spoke to. Some of them, like Joey Rizzo and Pete Jones, were also in eighth grade, but others looked like they were in only third or fourth. One kid might have been a first-grader.

Keywords

maturity, school, conversation



September 28, 2012

Lord of the Ralphs

A Short Story by John McNally

It was 1979, the last week of May with only five days of eighth grade to go, when I saw Ralph at the opposite corner of the blacktop talking to a group of boys he normally never spoke to. Some of them, like Joey Rizzo and Pete Jones, were also in eighth grade, but others looked like they were in only third or fourth. One kid might have been a first-grader.

Ralph, who'd failed both third and fifth grades at Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Grade School, was able to command attention and fear from any of our classmates, especially those he usually ignored, so I wasn't surprised to see a platoon of kids gathering around to hear what he had to say. But Ralph and I were friends, so why wasn't I there with him? Why hadn't he called me over?

Ralph's meetings weren't the only odd thing happening. Our teachers had quit teaching us. It was as though they'd given up. And if that wasn't enough, our principal smiled at us now instead of yelling while the janitor, an old man who normally *did* smile at us, had begun to glare and nod slowly whenever he passed us, as though silently letting us know, now that it was all coming to an end, that he was going to beat us up. Strangest of all, however, was that girls had started wearing tube-tops to school.

The tube-tops were the most disturbing change, not because I didn't like them – I did – but because now I walked around all day with a boner unlike anything mankind had ever witnessed. It lasted from seven-thirty in the morning, when I first arrived on the

blacktop and saw Lisa Sadowski smooshed into her yellow tube-top, until the three o'clock bell rang, when I stood behind Gina Roush, whose ever-so-slight pudge bunched up where the tube-top squeezed the hardest. The tube-tops presented the girls I knew – girls I had known for eight years now – in an entirely new light. I saw how soon, very soon, they would be dating guys much older than me, guys with cars and jobs, guys with beards and gold chains, maybe even guys with wives and kids. My boner was like an accusatory finger, always pointing: “Hey, *you!* That’s right. *You!*”

On Monday of that last week of classes, Mr. Lawrence – our Algebra teacher – kept shuffling off to the bathroom to smoke. Our class was held in one of the three mobile units outside, and there was one bathroom in each unit. He, too, had quit teaching, so when he wasn’t borrowing one of my issues of *Mad* magazine to read, he would lock himself inside the john for a cigarette break. Smoke would roll out from the vents, as though the mobile unit were on fire, and then the toilet would flush and Mr. Lawrence would appear, coughing and spraying the classroom with Lysol.

Ralph wasn’t in my Algebra class. His status was such that he spent all day with a teacher none of us even knew. What sorts of things did Ralph do with his special teacher? Nobody dared to ask him. Lisa Sadowski, however, was in my Algebra class – she sat in front of me – and during those last few weeks, she wore her yellow tube-top every day, like a uniform. I caught Mr. Lawrence staring at her once, until he saw me watching him, and then he coughed into his fist and disappeared into the bathroom again.

“Psssst,” I said to Lisa that final Monday of eighth grade, after smoke started pouring through the bathroom vent. “Hey. What’re your plans for the summer?”

Lisa turned to face me, looked me up and down, and said, “Do I know you?”

“Ha-ha,” I said flatly.

“No, really,” Lisa said. “Who are you?”

For a moment, I was thinking that maybe she didn’t remember me, even though we had been in at least one class together every year since first grade, but then she poked me in the chest and said, “I’m going to spend it with *you*, Hank.”

I smiled.

“So you *do* remember me,” I said.

Lisa leaned toward me. "I'll *always* remember you, Hank," she said dramatically and then laughed. "*Always!*"

I tried not to look at her tube-top, but I couldn't help it. It was like being told not to look at a solar eclipse, that it would burn holes through your retinas and cause you to go blind, but how could you not? I looked. Just a fast look down, but Lisa caught me, cocked an eyebrow, as if to say, "I know what you *really* want, Hank," and then spun back around. She reached behind her, slipping a finger under her tube-top to readjust it, and when she ran the tip of her finger between the elastic band and her skin, my boner piped up. "Hey, *you!*" it said. "That's right. *You!*"

*

Ralph scratched the few wispy whiskers on his chin when I approached him after school, and then his minions scattered like flies, as though scratching were a signal. Ralph yawned and said, "Hey, Hank."

"What's new?" I asked.

Ralph frowned and shook his head. "Same ol', same ol'."

I was weak in my knees, knowing that Ralph was planning something without me, but I kept quiet. The harder I pressed Ralph, the more he'd pretend nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

We started walking home now, just the two of us, like old times.

"The teachers quit teaching," I said. "What do you think about that?"

"Probably taught us everything they know," Ralph said. "If we learn one more thing, we'd be smarter than them. They don't want that to happen."

"I bet you're right."

"I *know* I'm right," Ralph said and punched my arm, hard. "But I've got a different arrangement than you do, so I don't have that problem."

This was the first time Ralph had ever mentioned his own unique situation, so I decided to inch ahead.

“Your teacher hasn’t stopped teaching yet?” I asked.

“Nuh-uh,” Ralph said. “In fact, we passed the rest of you up three years ago.”

“Really?” My impression was that Ralph had been assigned a special teacher because he’d failed two grades. The possibility that he was a genius who’d flunked those two years out of boredom had never crossed my mind. “Hey, have you noticed how many girls are wearing tube-tops?” I asked.

“Tube socks?”

“*Tops. Tube-tops!*”

“What’s a tube-top?”

“What’s a *tube-top*?” I repeated. “Are you kidding me? What’s a *tube-top*?”

“Oh, hey,” Ralph said. “I’ve been meaning to tell you. I’m starting a club. You’re welcome to join, but I didn’t think you’d be interested.”

So, this was it. A club!

“How would I know if I’m interested,” I said, “if I don’t know anything about it?”

“Good point,” Ralph said. I waited for him to tell me more, but he didn’t. He knew he had me on the hook. He could toy with me now, reeling me closer or flinging me out to sea. “Tube-tops,” he said. “You mean those things the girls are wearing?”

“Exactly,” I said.

“Wasn’t someone in your class wearing a yellow one?” he asked. “What’s her name?”

“Lisa,” I said, nodding enthusiastically. “Yup.”

“And the teachers aren’t teaching anymore?”

“Mr. Lawrence goes to the bathroom and smokes every couple of minutes,” I said.

“It’s anarchy,” Ralph said. “Just as I predicted to the boys.”

“I guess,” I said. I shrugged. I didn’t know what anarchy was.

Ralph said, “You’ve heard of Skylab, right?”

I collected postage stamps and was in possession of a mint condition Skylab stamp from 1974. For a while, stamp collecting took over my life. I owned a dozen stockbooks, thousands of stamp hinges for stamps I hadn’t yet found, four different magnifying glasses, and a pair of stamp tongs that were actually my sister Kelly’s tweezers for plucking her eyebrows. Of all the stamps I owned, from countries all around the world, the ten-cent Skylab postage stamp was my favorite.

I told none of this to Ralph, though. I merely grunted and nodded.

“Well, it’s coming back to earth,” Ralph said, “and it ain’t gonna be pretty.”

And then he told me how Skylab might hit a major city and set the entire place on fire, burning it the way Chicago had burned a hundred years earlier, or how it might just kill a family after they’d sat down to eat macaroni and cheese, or how it might hit the earth so hard it would knock us off our axis, causing dramatic changes to the weather. The polar caps might even melt, he told me.

“And then you know what would happen?” Ralph asked.

I shook my head. I had no idea.

Ralph leaned in close. “The end of life as we know it.”

“So, this group,” I said. “Are you protesters?”

“Nuh-uh,” Ralph said. “Scavengers. I heard about this newspaper – I can’t tell you which one – that’ll offer ten thousand big ones for a piece of Skylab when it crashes to earth. I’ll pay five hundred bucks to whoever finds it.”

“And you keep the rest?”

Ralph shrugged. “I know which newspaper has the dough, and I’ve got the means to get the piece there.” He smiled and said, “I knew you wouldn’t be interested.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Count me out.”

“I’m also teaching them survival skills,” he said. “You ever read *Lord of the Flies*?”

I shook my head.

“Oh yeah, I forgot,” Ralph said. “Your teachers quit teaching. Anyway, I had to read it. It’s got some great survival tips in there.”

“Survival tips?” I said. “*Lord of the Flies*? Really?”

We had reached Ralph’s street. Ralph, walking backwards but still talking, said, “Don’t come to me when a solar panel smashes through your parents’ roof. Insurance won’t pay for it. I already checked.”

“You’ve got all the angles covered, don’t you?”

“All of them!” Ralph said, tipping an imaginary hat to me and then turning around just in time to step over a child on a Big Wheel.

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September 28, 2012

Lord of the Ralphs

When I got home, I looked up “anarchy.” *A state of lawlessness or political disorder due to the absence of governmental authority.* I looked at other words on the page, like “anamnesis.” *A remembering, especially of a supposed life before this life.* Or “anan.” *Eh? What? What is it?* The longer I studied the dictionary, the more I realized that my teachers hadn’t taught me anything. I hadn’t even seen most of the words in there, let alone knew how to pronounce them or what they meant.

As the week wound down, I had a harder and harder time imagining my years of grade school coming to an end. It must have been how prisoners felt when they were about to be set free. Even though I hadn’t even graduated yet from eighth grade, I bought a T-shirt with an iron-on decal. “Class of 1983,” it read, optimistically. I wanted everyone to know that I was already thinking about my release from high school. I wanted people to see me and think, *Now, that’s a kid with his eye on the future!*

Meanwhile, Ralph’s group tripled in size. There were even girls in the group now, including a pudgy-kneed first-grader whose eyes, like a kitten’s, barely focused on whatever she stared at. The entire time Ralph talked, he made wild hand gestures, and more than once I saw him reprimand a child for not paying close enough attention.

Normally, a recess monitor would have broken up the meeting and escorted Ralph to our principal’s office to explain his suspicious behavior, but even the recess monitor didn’t care what we did anymore. She sat on the hood of her Gran Torino, eating Ding Dongs from a box, one after the other, while one kid pulled another kid’s hair.

Ralph was right. Everything was up for grabs now. I was looking directly in the face of anarchy, and it was as ugly as Ralph predicted.

I escorted a small boy who'd wet his pants into the school. I delivered him to the front desk of the main office, where Mrs. Lurch, who normally smiled at me and asked about my mother, was busy filing her nails and reading a copy of *Man, Myth, & Magic*. On the cover was some kind of man-beast. "The most unusual magazine ever published," it proclaimed at the bottom of the cover.

I took the boy back outside and told him to go home.

"Go on," I said. When he hesitated, I said, "Come back when you've got clean clothes on. You're not going to get in trouble. Nobody cares anymore," I said.

The boy ran away, and I never saw him again.

*

"Hey, *you!* That's right. *You!*"

My boner was like a ventriloquist doll that had come alive. On the one hand, it needed me for its own survival. On the other hand, it didn't care what I thought or how I felt. Most frighteningly, it wanted to run the show. It pushed against my pants, straining, trying to break loose. On one occasion, while standing in front of three girls wearing tube-tops the colors of Easter eggs, I was certain I'd been busted because one girl blushed and turned away while the others looked at each other and giggled.

Damn you! I thought. *Damn you all to hell!*

I wasn't sure how to spend my school days anymore. By Tuesday, we could go to whatever classes we wanted, so long as we were still in school. The brightest and most promising students were now sitting in the same room with delinquents who farted at will and, using one finger and a nostril, played Boston's entire album on the nose harp. Some students spent the whole day in gym class throwing a medicine ball at each other while the teacher slept on an exercise mat on the gymnasium stage.

My science teacher, Mr. Gerke, showed the John Wayne movie *The Quiet Man* in his class. I wasn't sure why he chose that particular movie – maybe it was the only feature length sixteen-millimeter movie the school owned – but he put a sign on the door announcing that the movie would begin at one p.m. As it turned out, I was one of only

two students who showed up. Lisa Sadowski was the other.

At first we sat at desks, the way we normally would have, but then we moved to the floor at the back of the room, up against the cabinet that held the beakers and test tubes. Lisa kept scooting closer and closer to me. Light from the projector's lamp shot out from the seams, intermittently illuminating Lisa and her tube-top. There were goosepimples all along the skin that her tube-top didn't cover up, and I wanted to run my finger across them, every one of them, but I was afraid to touch her.

"I'm sleepy," Lisa said when she finally slid right up next to me. She lay down, resting her head in my lap. "Do you mind?" she asked, looking up at me.

"No," I said. "No, no."

She smiled and then turned her head, facing the movie again. My boner pressed against her ear, and I shut my eyes, praying that it wouldn't twitch. *Dear God*, I thought. *Please don't let my boner do what it wants to do.* But then it twitched, and Lisa's head actually moved. I wanted to kill myself. I wanted to break a beaker and slit my wrists. And then it happened again – another twitch. It was as though Lisa's head were on a tiny see-saw. It rose quickly then gently lowered, rose and lowered again. *Whooooooooooooooooo!!!*

I shifted this time, and Lisa, who hadn't complained about the mysterious twitches under her ear, said, "What's wrong, Hank? I was just getting comfortable."

"Oh," I said, willing myself to calm down. When John Wayne kissed Maureen O'Hara in a rainy, windblown cemetery, Lisa nuzzled closer, and I couldn't resist: I rested my hand on the soft, prickly flesh below her tube-top and left it there until Mr. Gerke flipped on the lights and, wiping tears from his eyes, said, "Damn fine movie, kids. *Damn fine.*"

*

On my way home, I noticed how many people littered. Scattered along the ground were crumpled bags and straws and Kayo cans and rubber gloves. Two cars had apparently crashed into each other, because in the middle of the intersection was a mound of broken glass. But why didn't anyone pick it up?

Anarchy had arrived, and not just at school. It was spreading across the entire city like a rash.

On Wednesday, students I didn't recognize at all sat in our classrooms and played cards.

Were these kids from other schools? Were they someone's cousins from Tennessee or Mississippi?

On Thursday, very few students showed up and those that did were reprimanded by Mr. Gerke.

"I don't want to have to babysit you," he said. "Why don't you go home, like the rest of your friends?"

One kid, Jimmy Gonzalez, gathered his belongings and left the room without saying a word. The remaining four of us, unable to do something wrong even when we were told it was okay, sat with our eyes averted, afraid Mr. Gerke would yell at us if we looked at him.

Mrs. Davis, my Reading teacher, flipped off the lights once we were all seated. I had brought along a paperback book titled *Beyond Belief: Eight Strange Tales of Otherworlds* with the hope that reading something, *anything*, would be encouraged, but it was too dark to see the teacher at the head of the room, let alone words on a page. I wondered if maybe we were all part of an experiment and if one day I would appear in a medical book as "The Boy Who Wouldn't Stop Going to School."

"Mrs. Davis?" I called out in the dark. "Mrs. Davis?"

Lisa Sadowski walked over to the exit and turned on the lights. Mrs. Davis wasn't even in the room. At some point she had slipped out, perhaps through the door that joined the library, which also remained dark.

During recess, I watched Ralph and his troops perform a battery of synchronized activities, many of which involved slowly approaching an invisible person and choking them. "Now *again!*" Ralph shouted, and they did it once more.

From behind, someone grabbed my neck and started choking me. I managed to break away, only to discover that it was Lisa Sadowski. She laughed and said, "You didn't think I was really going to choke you, did you?"

"How should I know?" I said. "Nothing else is making any sense."

Lisa shrugged. "I think I'd have liked school if it was always this way."

"What way?" I asked. "*This* way? With no rules?"

“I guess,” she said.

Until then, I’d admired the fact that Lisa had continued coming to classes, same as me, but I realized now that she was as crazy as everyone else.

“I kissed a girl last night,” I lied, hoping to hurt her. “We were in a closet, and when her father found us, he threatened to shoot me.” When Lisa didn’t say anything, I said, “He had a gun.”

Lisa stepped up close to me and kissed me on the lips.

“You have a wild imagination,” she said. “That’s why I like you.”

She kissed me again, longer this time.

“It was at an Amway party,” I whispered, although I had never been to an Amway party.

Lisa said, “You don’t stop, do you?”

“It’s true,” I said, still in Lisa’s grip, our mouths almost touching. “Amway is short for the American Way, and the girl I kissed was named Wycherley.”

“Now I *know* you’re not telling the truth,” Lisa said.

“Wycherly Wozniack,” I breathed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ralph watching us. Lisa kissed me once more and then backed up. Ralph yelled, “Now *again!*” and everyone took three creeping steps, reached out, and choked the air in front of them.

*

On our way home, I asked Ralph how his Skylab project was coming along, but Ralph wasn’t interested in talking about it. He said he was more interested these days in teaching survival skills to Ralph’s Raiders.

“Ralph’s Raiders?” I asked. “What the hell’s that?”

“You’ve seen them,” he said. “^{Booth, Vol. 4 [2012], Iss. 9, Art. 4}We train on the blacktop.” Ralph stopped walking and said, “Actually, you were looking right at us today when you were with...now, tell me her name again?”

“Anan?” I said, trying out my new vocabulary word.

“What?” Ralph asked.

“Eh?”

Ralph glared at me.

“What is it?” I said.

Ralph shook his head.

I started walking and said, “I used to take karate lessons with my dad.”

Walking beside me, Ralph snorted. “Karate’s a good way to pass an afternoon, I suppose, but I put my trust in the *U.S. Army Combat Skills Handbook*. Did you know that a nuclear blast can crush sealed objects like food cans and fuel tanks? Nuclear radiation hits, and there goes all your food and water. Tell me how a karate chop to the left shoulder blade is going to get you out of any of those pickles.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I guess I would just die then.”

“Not an option,” Ralph said. I couldn’t tell if he was the one crossing the line between mentally stable and mentally unstable, or if it was me. He must have noticed my expression because he smiled and said, “Don’t worry. I’ve got your back, buddy.”

“Good,” I said. “I appreciate it.”

“Oh, and don’t think I’ve given up on Skylab,” he said. “We’re going to find us a piece of that baby if it’s the last thing we do on this sad, doomed planet.”

*

On Friday, the final day of classes, I put on my “Class of 1983” T-shirt and my favorite pair of Toughskins. I probably looked like someone from the future, already privy to what the next several years held for me. I wanted my teachers to say something about

what a good student I had been and how I would no doubt excel in high school. I wanted girls to see me and ask to touch the iron-on, which sparkled from some kind of glitter in the decal itself. Most of all, I wanted Lisa Sadowski to tell me how much fun we were going to have together in high school, the two of us. I was determined to make the first move today. I would hug her, the way John Wayne had hugged Maureen O'Hara in *The Quiet Man*, and I would pull her close to me and press my lips against hers. I wouldn't care who saw us, either. I was a man from the future, already sure of the moment that would mark the end of my shy years, ready to embark upon four glorious years of reckless abandon. When I showed up at school, no one was there except for a few teachers, and they hung out in the hallway and gossiped with each other, or they wandered off to the teacher's lounge for hours at a time. The only other kid at school was Roark Pile, whose hair never looked washed and who always smelled vaguely like meat on the brink of going bad.

Roark saw my shirt, pointed at the year, and laughed. "Good one," he said.

"It's not a joke," I said.

Roark squinted at my shirt, then looked up at me, and said, "Yeah, but..." He seemed hesitant to break the news to me. "We're, like, class of 1979?"

"I *know*," I said. I felt like weeping, but I didn't.

I left Roark alone in the art classroom, where he was considering putting his schoolbooks in the kiln and turning it on. I wandered the halls until I found Mrs. Dunphy, the school's nurse. She was a short, almost entirely round woman whose gums were black instead of pink.

"Excuse me," I said, "but do you know why Lisa Sadowski isn't in school today?"

I realized that my question was a preposterous one, since practically no one was in school today, but Mrs. Dunphy looked up to the ceiling, as though maybe Lisa Sadowski had passed on. "Lisa," she said finally, thinking. "Lisa Sadowski. She's got mono, I think."

"Mono?"

"The kissing disease," she said. She smiled, exposing her black gums.

My heart pounded.

“You didn’t kiss her, did you?” Mrs. Dunphy asked, raising her eyebrows expectantly.

“Me? No. Why?”

“Because it’s contagious,” she said. “If you kissed that girl, you should probably go home.”

“Is that why no one’s here?” I asked. “Did everyone kiss her?”

“It’s entirely possible,” Mrs. Dunphy said. “A lot of your classmates have mono.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Mrs. Dunphy placed her hand on my forehead, as if checking for a child’s fever were an instinct, and said, “My pleasure.”

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September 28, 2012

Lord of the Ralphs

I waited until two o'clock – one hour before the end of my grade school career – before calling it quits and heading home. I couldn't tell if my throat hurt or not, so I poked at my lymph nodes until they started growing, and then my throat started pulsing.

Outside, walking past all my old classrooms, I saw Roark Pile in the room where I had left him. Using a giant pair of tongs, he was pulling something burnt and flaking from the kiln. When he saw me, he opened a window and yelled, "Loser!"

I tried yelling something back, but a coughing fit overtook me, and I had to keep walking, half bent over, my hand over my mouth.

The next day, I stayed in bed. Twice, my sister, Kelly, looked in on me and said, "Yep, you're dying." She was two years older than me and had vowed long ago to outlive me. "You've got a week," she said. "Two weeks, tops." But the next day, I was up and about. Whatever I'd had, it was gone. I would live, after all, much to my sister's disappointment.

Graduation came and went in a blur of relatives, cake, and too-stiff shoes. I saw nearly everyone at the ceremony, including Ralph, despite his claim that graduation would be for him a private affair held in the principal's office, but most of the girls I saw, including Lisa Sadowski, were too busy getting their photos taken or squealing with their best friends to say hello to me.

It wasn't until July that I saw Lisa again. On that particular day, Thursday the twelfth, I was so bored I biked to Rice Park to watch a Little League game. For the past month, no matter where I went, I would hear "My Sharona" by The Knack playing on somebody's radio, and every time it came on, people stopped what they were doing to snarl and bob their heads super hard. Best of all was the sleeve for the 45, which featured a braless, pale, dark-haired girl whose nipples you could see right through her tight white undershirt, and whenever I heard the first notes of the song and thought of that girl, my boner would wake up from its summer slumber. And so when I heard "My Sharona" on some kid's boom-box at Rice Park, it was as though I were back at Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Grade School all over again, living in a state of never-ending frenzy.

And that's when I saw her – Lisa Sadowski, snarling and bobbing her head. She was wearing her yellow tube-top and blue jeans that had been made into shorts with a pair of scissors. A thousand white threads circled her tanned legs. She was wearing flip-flops and eating a corndog.

"Lisa!" I called out. "Over here!"

Lisa looked right at me, still snarling, her head bobbing, but it was as though she had no idea who I was.

"It's me!" I yelled. "Hank!"

She squinted, but the sun must have made it difficult for her to see me, or maybe her eyesight had weakened since graduation. Maybe she was blind now. I was about to yell her name again when a man with a mustache and a gold chain around his neck walked up beside her. He was holding two cans of Coke. She raised up on her tiptoes and kissed him, and then she tried to force-feed him the corndog. He laughed and backed up. His shirt was unbuttoned almost to his brass belt buckle, and he wore a pair of aviator sunglasses on top of his head, as if there were a second set of eyes peeking up through the hair on his scalp.

"Here, take this," I imagined him saying, handing her the Coke. "You're one crazy chick, you know that?"

That's when I noticed that all the other girls from eighth grade were with much older guys – guys smoking cigarettes, shirtless guys with mysterious scars across their chests or backs, guys with incredibly bad acne. Who were these guys, and where had they come from?

I said hello to some of the other girls as I biked away, girls who used to be happy to see me, but either they didn't recognize me or they were ignoring me. I wanted just then to get the hell away, so I stood up on my pedals, but before I pushed down to leave, I saw what appeared to be a small army approaching Rice Park from the dirt hills.

The hills were where tough kids went to race mini-bikes and make out with girls, a place my parents had warned me to stay away from. As the army approached, I saw Ralph at the front leading his soldiers toward the ballpark. Here were Ralph's Raiders, and they were carrying something long and shiny.

"We found it!" Ralph yelled, and all the girls who had ignored me, girls who were now hooked up with older men, rushed over to see what wonderful and glorious thing Ralph had found.

Ralph was happy, truly and undeniably happy, for the first time since I had known him. The Raiders marched in unison behind him, exhausted from their mission but clearly exhilarated. A few of the boys whose fathers worked construction wore hardhats, probably in case falling pieces of Skylab were to hit them.

The closer they came, the clearer I saw what they were holding. It was the bumper from a car and not a piece of the famous space station, which I'd heard had crashed into Australia the day before. At Ralph's command, his army raised the bumper triumphantly over their heads, as though it were an enormous trophy and they were the victors.

"Behold!" Ralph said to the approaching mob. "Skylab!" As more people rushed over, Ralph yelled, "Don't touch it! Back up! Don't crowd us!" but he was trying not to grin, and I figured he was imagining how to spend all the money he thought would be coming his way.

I wanted to tell everyone that it was just an old bumper, but who was I to take away their fleeting moment of joy? Who was I, of all people, to tell anyone what truth and happiness really were?

I walked over to Ralph to shake his hand, but he wrapped both arms around me instead. He whispered, "What a year, Hank. What a strange and wonderful year."

When Ralph let go, I saw in his eyes that he already knew the truth about the bumper but that it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was what people *thought* it was. And so I lifted my arms into the air to touch this shiny thing that had brought us all together. I stretched and stretched, hoping to feel the magnetic power of something ordinary while Ralph, raising his arms beside mine, yelled, "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

John McNally is author of seven books, most recently the novel AFTER THE WORKSHOP (2010) and VIVID AND CONTINUOUS: ESSAYS AND EXERCISES ON WRITING FICTION (2013). His novel-in-stories THE BOOK OF RALPH, which originally appeared by Free Press in 2004, will be reissued in an expanded ebook edition in 2013. "Lord of the Ralphs" is a new story from that edition. Originally from the Chicago area, John now lives and works in North Carolina.

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