

Tales

—Michael Beatty

YOU CAN BE SO UNDERHANDED SOMETIMES.

Trying to help someone you care about from a tough spot, but sick of the spite and malice they're subjecting you to:

You say, "May you get everything you want."

A beatific insult if ever there was one.

You feel superior because you know it's an insult and you know they don't;

Ancient Chinese or gypsy or who knows what.

That's your thing; you collect clever the way a spider collects flies.

A Word here;

A phrase there;

A bit of someone's scientific inquiry. Never your word, your phrase, or your research; just a stream of ideas without foundations.

Clever without wit. Disembodied knowledge wrung free of its moorings. Details they call them, those important little things you aren't so good at.

Details.

You detailed a car once.

You even de-tailed a raccoon with a friend who shared your name...

Its lifeless body lay alongside the road. A puddle of blood was pooling beneath its grey mouth. The cracked skull and matted fur made it seem like it died slowly, you worried; your friend didn't share your concern.

This is the same friend who held a grasshopper and a garden spider by their haunches – one in each hand, to create his own version of bug-wars, 20 years before you'd ever seen the senseless brutality of two insects fighting for sport.

At the time you were ashamed for watching. Back then your self-disgust tasted like bile.

This friend was different than you,

but he seemed to accept you, and for you that was the only commodity that mattered those days. Goofy looks set you apart, and everyone always said you talked like a grown up.

The children ridiculed, and adults were always a bit astonished. The adults, sometimes they ridiculed too, and usually that hurt worse because your parents promised: "Things will be better when you get older."

You started to doubt the veracity of that.

Let's skin it he says.

Details: saying no will make you look weak, so you clench your trembling stomach and say yes. He drags it back to the woods on his house's large allotment and starts on it with a dull knife. Flakes of rust embedding themselves inside.

He skins one side... If you would call what a dull knife does to several-day-old meat "skinning."

He's laughing. Always fearful of rejection, and frozen stiff as your new friend – Rigor Mortis the Raccoon – your laughter comes out hollow and wooden.

Then he says you should skin the rest.

You say no.

He insists.

You say okay, but with a jittery voice you half-joke: "I've never done this before, so I'm not very good".

You clench your trembling stomach and sink the knife

into the stiff skin. One unforgiving black eye staring up at you as the knife wobbles up and through clammy – even stiffer than you'd imagined – flesh.

The smell of rot and maggots seeks to loosen your clenching stomach. After a minute of this, you've made exactly no headway, but your hands are slimy with something, yet without any visible blood.

You try to pass the knife back to the friend who shares your name.

You clench your stomach tighter, the knots are swallowing the half-digested ham and cheese Hot Pocket.

You've failed this test.

You're still the child while he is a blood-and-fur-soaked man, and you wonder if that is what it means to be a man...

Neither your first, nor last, nor your most magnificent failure.

He takes the bloody, fur-covered knife. You weakly laugh, and say, "I told you I wouldn't be any good at this."

He finishes skinning the side – then he de-tails the stinking, emaciated, grey animal. You remember once more that you were never good with details.

You figure you've got your own thing – being clever.

Maybe it's enough.

You remind yourself that sometimes it's easier to remember, if you pretend you're remembering for someone else.