

**“THE MONGREL”**  
by  
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I have three blood uncles and an aunt. Like most people they have several names. My Uncle Rudolph goes by Rudy. Uncle Arliss Joseph goes by A.J. sometimes, and Uncle Richmond is Ritchie. We all share the same last name of Owen. Oh yeah, Aunt Virginia is Vi, but her last name has changed to Lawrence.

My father was Theodore, but he died as Ted. So I live with my mother Alice in mortal fear she'll change my name from Ronald (Ron) Owen to something attached to another man. I know she wants to get married because she tells me all the time. Other people tell her to get married; and when all the uncles and Aunt Vi get together like today, they also keep insisting that she try some new fellow they know. Only Ritchie leaves her be.

Everybody calls Ritchie the troublemaker, but I think he's the only one that has a clue. So for safety's sake, I laugh at his jokes and shut my mouth when the sparks fly.

When families unite they fight. They fight about the same things over and over again. There is the “shout and flail.” The “cold shoulder.” The “I can't make eye contact because I have the backbone of a snake.” There is the slight of hand misdirection of arguing over money, in-laws, politics, football and, god forbid, religion.

My uncles absent Ritchie fight over the lowest common denominator -- throw some intelligence into the mix and they go to the “shout and flail.” No one admits ignorance, but I've learned in my short life that clearly some people got more brains than others. Uncle Richmond got it all in the Owen Clan. He made a haul with the IQ points, and he uses it in small doses 'cause too much just gets lost in the “shout and

flail.”

Still they persist. Families still feel obligated to risk the inevitable. Go away mad. Learn very little from the exchange and then make plans to do it again. It kinda’ makes me want to avoid having one, but being twelve I’m forced to believe the family way descends upon you like the night time. Everything goes black and the streetlights come on and suddenly you’re married and sitting in front of the TV watching in a stupor until you belch and fall asleep.

It sounds so real, so permanent. I guess that’s what I like so much about Uncle Ritchie. He seems to go his own way. He lives far away or at least farther than Vi, Rudy and Arliss do. Shoot, they never made it farther than a few blocks away from grandma’s house. I never thought about what kept them here until Ritchie started making waves. Actually he started nothin’. The others just stay upset with him because he ain’t like them at all.

So here we are again under one roof waiting for the exchange to begin.

My cousins don’t even seem to notice the emotional riot. Maybe they’re just that stupid. Their folks call ‘em stupid. They act stupid, but I’m forced to carry out the charade of the family spirit. A little tossing the ball, some pushing and shoving and laying the foundation of fussing around the kitchen table.

I always bring my dog to these get togethers. Grandma calls him a mongrel and swats at him with her broom. It never bothered me until Ritchie took her broom away and told her, “No need to hit Ron’s pup.” He said, “Let’s teach the boy some love and mercy, Mama.” He smiled at me and said, “You might want to keep an eye on your friend there. A good friend like that shouldn’t be in people’s way.”

I remembered that.

So my dog, that I called "Potato," learned to stick close to me and I protected him. In turn he protected me. Ritchie was right. Potato was my friend.

Grandma stopped swinging the broom at him and only once did one of my stupid cousins throw a rock at Potato. I went berserk. I had never punched someone in the face before. But punch I did.

"Uncle Rudy, Ronnie's beating up Danny" was the charge.

Aunts and uncles came flying.

"Mom, Danny hit Potato with a rock."

"That right, Danny?" his father Arliss asked.

"Well, I didn't think I'd hit him."

Stupid reply.

Arliss looked at me kind of mad, but he turned back to Danny.

"Say you're sorry."

Nothing but silence.

Aunt Vi chimed in with, "I don't know why Ron has to bring that mangy hound with him. This is supposed to be our family. Mama's right. It's just a mongrel.

There would be no apology from Danny.

Potato was an outsider, and it was okay to throw rocks at an outsider that had been tagged a mongrel. But from the doorway came the voice that always spoke to the injustice of family loyalty giving way to prejudice.

"Any friend of Ron's should be welcomed, don't you think, Vi?" Ritchie walked on out to the front porch where the mock trial of who threw the rock and who got punched

was in session.

“It’s just an old dog, Richmond,” Vi shuffled to a rigid stance. The sparks were ready to light and fly. All it would take would be a little more friction.

“Are you gonna’ come out here and protect Ronnie’s stupid dog and try to lay your uppity crap on us?” Vi was ready to scrap.

“Well, Vi, who’s stupid -- the dog playing in the yard or the bright young man throwin’ rocks at him.” Ritchie could hit ground zero faster than the Enola Gay.

“You callin’ my boy stupid Ritchie?” Arliss had called for an apology but didn’t possess the authority to get one, so now he would ride Virginia’s wave of “let’s get Ritchie.”

Ritchie and Potato were two of a kind. Mongrels.

Outsiders worthy of only throwing stones by insiders when they thought they could get away with it.

Ritchie needed no help, but Ron squirmed with the uneasy realization that you could never cross the barrier of insider to outsider and get back again. Twelve is a bad age to be on the outside.

“That’s what you call him A.J.” Ritchie looked Arliss straight in the eye and managed to say the words so they became fact, not accusation.

Arliss was tongue-tied with the word “stupid.” It seemed funny considering he called Danny “stupid “ so often it was practically part of his name. Ron could feel himself fighting the urge to grin.

Like father , like son, like cousin.

“Look here, folks, we’ve had this confrontation “slash “ conversation a thousand

times before.” Ritchie was here for the day knowing full well he didn’t have to; or maybe he knew he did have to. Either way, why let the whole familial ball of wax deteriorate so quickly? Just a few more hours and they could all go home proud of their family facade.

“Let the kids play and let’s all go back in the house.” Ritchie finalized the verdict of rock throwing, face punching, no apologizing, same ol’ same ol’. Grandma agreed.

“Let’s eat some pie and visit,” she motioned us back in the house with the spatula still in her hand.

Ritchie was not her favorite, but his leadership was undeniable. She tolerated his views on life like the rest. She gave it little value and thought he should get married and be normal like her good children had done.

They were rich with guilt. Did what they were told and showed so much respect as to be totally deferent. Ritchie realized that to gain wisdom one had to get older, but there was no guarantee that as one aged and wrinkled up that there would be granted undeniable wisdom. If the cousins were proclaimed stupid today, what made anyone think they could escape their awareness disorder by simply growing up. I’d heard Ritchie say the more he learned, the less he understood. Well, that stopped me cold in my tracks, but good words have a way of kinda’ soakin’ in.

There were days I could follow his sentences as he tried again and again to charge the Owen windmill, but so often I would get lost. I wanted him to myself sometimes, but usually the crowd descended on him like they did Grandma’s pie. There was nothing left.

So it was with Ritchie. For all my life the routine was arrive, play, eat, argue, watch Ritchie waving as he went out the door, eat some more, maybe TV and then go

home listening to my Mom's advice about my foolish loyalty to Uncle Richmond.

I would always try to follow him to the yard or to the peach orchard looking for his acknowledgment beyond being a potential stupid and knowing in my heart of hearts that I too was on the last train out of the inside of the Owen nest headed straight past hell to the world of being an outsider.

From the yard Grandma now had us around the table. It had taken me a long time to read the writing on the family wall that Grandma herself was the remaining elder who had shaped the Owen clan. Grandpa had not been dead long, and his role in this psychodrama was never discussed or swept under the rug; it was just dismissed as his memory faded.

I didn't think anyone thought to blame anyone for the sibling territorial, emotional or psychological mishap. Boy, was I wrong.

Everyone blamed everyone, and the current alliances were never easy to discern.

Had anyone even thought of it, a jersey for each team would have helped me a lot.

I guess Ritchie would have always had to fly his own colors. Even though I was ready to suit up on his team and risk a spanking with my Mom's infamous hairbrush, I just flat didn't know how yet.

As Grandma served her world class pie, the conversation had already begun. Today it was all started by Lucy and Ricky.

Virginia loved Fred and Ethel. I guess it's true that it takes one to know one. "Did anyone see Lucy last night?" To Vi it was a given.

Heads were bobbing up and down as the Owens of Mineola, Texas carved their way through Grandma's pie.

"I tell you those Ricardo's and Mertz's are the funniest people in the world," Vi gushed.

"Dontcha' think they're kinda' predictable, Vi?" Ritchie had baited the hook with blood bait.

"Richmond, leave her alone. It's her favorite show!"

Virginia's husband Tank was just standing up for his wife because he knew he'd better when it came to Ritchie.

"Predictable?" Vi's pie crumbs were spewing from her mouth.

"Honey, he's just messin' with you."

I'd bet you a dollar to a donut Tank didn't like Lucy that much. He loved wrestling, but he had seen every episode of "I Love Lucy" because his wife made him watch.

Tank was just like his name sounded. Big, rough and designed to mow things down. He'd earned the football jersey Vi had worn every Friday when she was in high school. Tank gave Aunt Virginia credibility and Vi gave Tank babies. I don't think Tank thought he got the best end of the trade, but it was normal and safe in Mineola.

"Well, Vi, can't you anticipate what's going to happen every week?" Ritchie kept the gig going.

"They're funny, Ritchie! Don't you like to laugh anymore?"

"Sure I like to laugh, but I just don't think that corny stuff is funny. It's cheap entertainment that plays down to the audience." Ritchie winked at me.

“They think their audience is stupid, ol’ girl.”

Bulls eye.

Aunt Virginia was trapped by her chair and the dinner table or she would have gone through the roof.

“Richmond, why do you have to always think you’re better than other people?”

Grandma jumped in.

“Yeah.” Arliss had reached his articulate peak. “Ritchie thinks he’s so smart.”

I almost expected Arliss to stick his tongue out and give Uncle Ritchie the ol’ raspberry.

“Mama, you know better than that.”

“I most certainly do not. You’re always cuttin’ other folks down.”

“If you ask me . . . .”

“Well, we ain’t,” Arliss snuck in.

“If you ask me,” Ritchie started again, “there is a great gap between art and the art of humor and entertainers willing to do anything they can to get a laugh.”

“Milton Berle, Jerry Lewis -- they’re all pretty baseline lowbrow . . . ,” Uncle Richmond continued until he was interrupted by Aunt Virginia.

“Lowbrow? Where do you come up with these Jewboy terms?”

Ritchie tried to respond but could barely get out the phrase from his laughter.

“Where’d you come up with Jewboy? Ethel Mertz use that one?!”

Even Vi was a little perplexed at her characterization.

I glanced around the table and realized I was the only “kid’ left with the so-called adults. I also eyed the lone piece of pecan pie and decided I better make my move

before I was run out of the kitchen. Banished into the cousin wasteland.

I reached.

Tank saw me and slapped my hand to the mat like one of his wrestling idols.

As he served himself the final slice, that calming voice came rising from the end of the table.

“Tank, Ron’s a growing boy, and you’ve just about reached the point of no return in that belly of yours. Better give my nephew half of that slice.”

Tank was the meanest uncle-in-law in the world, and I’ve seen him spank my cousins -- so I wanted no part of this fight; but Ritchie simply reached across the table, put his fork in the middle of that final slice and mangled it into two very uneven pieces. Without a word he slid his fork under the largest piece and deftly engineered it all to my plate without spilling a crumb.

I didn’t dare look at Tank.

“Hey, Ron, keep your seat and be my second in this match. We need to educate these good folks about finesse and elevating the human condition.”

“Good God, Ritchie!” You’re nuttier than that pecan pie.” Rudy never said much, but he couldn’t sit by quietly while Ritchie sided with a boy. He too ruled my cousins with intimidation and “physical mismatch.”

“Well, Rudy, I think ol’ Ron here’s gonna’ surprise you all and master the virtue of living his life with his eyes open and compassion in his heart.” I stole a glance at my Mama and could only think of the sting of the hairbrush.

What was Uncle Ritchie doing to me? My dream was coming true, but it felt like I was going down with the ship.

True I wanted his attention, and true I wanted out of this circus of cousins; but never had the door been opened so widely and the landscape of the outside so visible.

Suddenly I spoke.

“I don’t like Lucy.”

“Ronnie!!” My mother like Virginia would have gone through the roof had she not been wedged between her chair and the dinner table.

Her voice was about a squeal and she was trying her best to rise. I could feel the hairbrush on my fanny. I had inadvertently, though innocently, called everyone at the table lowbrow by Uncle Richmond’s standards with my heartfelt admission. Lucy really wasn’t very good.

“Yes, spoken like a man of stature and good taste. Not to mention loyal and protective of his dear Potato.”

Ritchie was in heaven.

He could see my future.

The others had just washed their hands of me.

I could see my future passing before my eyes.

I’d not even finished my mangled pecan pie that had been finessed from Tank the Destroyer.

There we were -- lined up against the point of no return. Romantic legionnaires facing the firing squad of family hysteria. The mongrels.

Uncle Richmond.

Potato.

And me.

“Lord, Ritchie, here you go draggin’ poor late Teddy’s boy into a dim light. Makin’ him out to be one of your Communist ideas.” Rudy had one bent. It was simple. One-sided. Mean at heart. He acted tough, but like everybody else sittin’ ‘round this table he just was flat out scared to death of anything different. The thought of change made ‘em all mob-like.

“Richmond, Rudy’s right,” Mama chimed in. She had nothin’ against Uncle Ritchie, but she was my Mama; and her position in the group was directly tied to me, and I had suddenly become dead weight on her saddle.

“You know nothin’ about children.” Grandma tried to close the show. “Ain’t it time you fessed up to your duty as a man to get a job! Get a wife . . . . Make some more grand babies for me!!”

“You mean something that leaves grime under your fingernails?” Ritchie raised his hands and mocked cleaning under his fingernails for emphasis. I had never noticed how soft and beautiful his hands were before. They were huge but kept. Ritchie, too, was an Owen family star athlete; and sports require big soft beautiful hands to be a hero. The grunts always have paw-like clubs for hands; but the star . . . . Well, ya’ gotta’ catch it; and ya’ gotta’ throw it; and that takes hands from God.

“Now you’re gonna’ tell us you’re too good to work, aintcha’?” Rudy bellowed.

“Yeah!!” Arliss did his bit.

“Well, folks . . . .” Ritchie paused. “Let me tell you . . . .” He paused again.

People who have natural class can just control the room with their eyes and manner. The rest have to shout and flail.

Now, at Grandma’s dinner table in the presence of my Mother and blood Uncles

and Aunt Vi, not to mention my late father's ghost, Ritchie spoke.

"I do have a job."

The silence was weird. Maybe someday I could create that kind of drama with so few words.

"And Mama, you do have grand babies."

Thank the Lord we were all wedged under that dinner table. I felt something cold on my fingers. I looked down and it was Potato's nose.

Oh no, if they saw my buddy in the kitchen, they'd lynch the poor Potato.

I caught Danny and the other stupid's covering their mouths. They had done it. Let Potato in to cause trouble. Lowbrow trouble. But thanks to the real life drama that Uncle Richmond was providing, my dog was of little concern. The treachery would still get Danny punched in the nose. I'd done it once, and to tell the truth nothing had ever felt better. I looked at my hands and I imagined them to be beautiful and strong like Ritchie's, and they would smash Danny boy's scheming head.

"Anybody want to hear more?" Ritchie had their attention like a ring through their nose.

"Yeah." Arliss the articulate Owen was the only one who could speak. I looked at their faces. They looked like people I didn't know. They were trapped by Ritchie's confession and trapped by their fear of what would come next.

"You have a wife and children?" Grandma asked.

"A job, too, Mama!!"

"Where are they?" my mother asked.

No one had any less interest than any of the others at this point.

“Houston.” Ritchie focused his peaceful response on my mom.

“You have a family in Houston and no one in this family has ever met them?”

Rudy wasn’t incredulous, he was shocked.

“That’s right.” The cryptic Richmond was playing this out so precisely that it was almost a tangible game plan.

I took the last bite of my mangled pecan pie and jumped right in.

“Do you have a dog?” I’d lasted as the sole surviving kid, and now I’d been cast in the role of Ritchie’s partner, so why not ask!

“I sure do, Ronnie,” Ritchie smiled.

“What’s his name?”

“Her name is Minerva.”

“Minerva? I quizzed.

“You’d like her, my good friend, and so would Potato!!”

This distraction of man’s best friend didn’t last long.

Grandma had gone from aghast to downright hurt, but she could only act mad.

“Thank God Grandpa ain’t here to suffer this humiliation,” she groaned and pointed her eyes to the heavens.

“He knew!!” Ritchie was too much. He now owned the souls of all of us.

Grandpa knew. How awesome.

“I told ‘im in the hospital before he died. I owed him that much. I made him promise not to tell.” He paused that pause. “I want my life. I’ve always thought it would be too hard to bring outsiders of mine into this . . . . . family.”

Now I felt hurt. But only a little bit.

“So, now you know.”

Ritchie stood and walked straight to my side. He leaned down and rubbed Potato with those beautiful hands in such a loving way Potato moaned with delight. He placed his hands on my shoulders and put some of his weight on me. It felt good to bear the weight of being Uncle Ritchie’s friend, not just his nephew.

“I’ll bring them one of these days.” He paused again in that Richmond Owen style. “I want them to meet Ron.”

With that he turned and walked toward the back door and to his car and to Houston and to his family.

Ritchie’s family with a dog named Minerva. I was bustin’ with joy.

Like I said, the routine was arrive, play, eat, argue, watch Ritchie waving as he went out the back door, eat some more, maybe TV and then go home.

I guess we’d now done all that.

I’d had my pie.

Now Potato and I would just wait.