Runaway

Tim Tomlinson

I ran away when I was seven years old. I'd had it. My mother's rages, followed by days of silence. My father's yard chores, followed by more yard chores, and still more yard chores. I hopped the backyard fence and double-timed the path through the scrap pine and scrub oak till I reached the hump in the path at the woods end. The firehouse on Route 25A loomed white through the vines and scrub behind me. Beyond that, the whirr of traffic.

From where he worked in the backyard, my father could barely see me. I must have appeared as a small plaid blur in the midst of the narrow sickly new- growth woods. It took him a few minutes to put down the hedge clippers, hop the fence, and follow me out to the hump. He seemed to make it out much faster than I had, even though, from the way he walked, he was taking his time.

"Can I sit down?" he asked.

I was free now, a runaway. I'd busted out, flown the coop, shaken off the chains. I wasn't under anyone's control. And I could talk the way escaped men talk.

"It's a free country," I told him.

That made him smile.

He sat, crossed his legs, stretched his boondockers out into the path.

"So what's the score?" he said. "You running away?"

I refused to meet his eyes.

With a stick I scratched undecipherable messages into the soil beneath the pine needles. False clues, red herrings, Maguffins. They could come looking for me, they could get the whole block for a posse, and these clues would lead them every which way but right.

"Looks that way," I said.

He agreed. He said it looked that way all the way from the backyard where we'd just been trimming the hedges and planting new shrubs.

"It can get bad sometimes," he said, "can't it?"

I said it could.

"Intolerable," he said.

"What's intolerable?"

"Worse than bad," he said.

And I said, "Intolerable, yeah," even though I wasn't allowed to say *yeah* to my father. *Yeah*, he always said, was disrespectful. But escaped men, they make up their own rules.

He said, "I hear you."

He shook a cigarette from a pack of Parliament. He held the pack out to me.

"You smoke?" he said.

I shook my head.

"Good," he said. "It's a terrible habit." He stuck a cigarette in his lips and struck a match.

"If it's a terrible habit, how come you do it?"

"That's a good question." He talked and blew out smoke at the same time. One day I would do that, too. I imagined kids watching me the way I watched him, talking normal while smoke poured from his nostrils. "In the Marines," he said, "I guess it just seemed like the thing to do. Everybody smoked." He shook his head, on his face a wistful grin. He pointed to the tattoos on his arms and the one on the calf muscle of his left leg. "Everybody smoked and got these damn things."

The tattoos on his arms he was OK showing. One said "USMC" in a banner below the eagle-over-globe emblem. The other said "Mom" in the midst of what looked like a floral wreath. His friends joked that the wreath looked like the kind you'd send to a funeral. He didn't tell them they were

wrong. The one on his leg that ran from ankle to knee, that one he didn't like to show, at least not in public. A half-naked lady, wearing only a towel around her waist, held her hair up in her hands, and her breasts stuck out so convincingly they were almost like 3-D. That one embarrassed him. When we went to the beach, he shaved the hair on his calf and applied opaque masking tape over that tattoo. The tape might last for a swim or two and then peel off. He'd go wait in the car with the doors open in the hot parking lot. He slept in there with the seat back, his hands behind his head, his feet sticking through the open window, until Mom was ready to take us home.

We sat quietly for a few moments. Blue jays flitted from pine to pine. From other backyards we could hear the whine of lawn mowers, the scratching of bamboo rakes.

"This your first time?" he asked. "Running away, I mean."

I told him, no. I'd done it before, half a dozen times.

"But nobody knew?" he said.

I said I didn't really get that far, or stay away so long. But one day I would.

I told him how in *My Side of the Mountain*, Sam Gribley survived alone in the woods with only the animals for friends. Nobody yelling at him, telling him to do chores, telling him that the way he did the chores was wrong. I was going to find out if I could survive like Sam Gribley. I was going to make friends with the animals.

"I'll have to read that book," he said. "Think you can get it for me, from the library?"

"If it's in," I told him.

"Good," he said. "So you're coming back, then? You're not gonna stay run away?"

I said I'd have to think about it.

"Right," he said, "You think it over. It's a big decision, you know that, right?"

I told him yeah.

"Your mother, you know, you run away, it'll break her heart."

I said, "Yeah, sure."

He said, "No, listen, Cliff. Your mother, sometimes she may do

things, crazy things, even mean things. Things you can't understand. That don't mean she don't love you, is that clear?"

I said, "No."

"I know," he said. "But it will be. Some day it will. Do you believe me?"

I shrugged.

He said, "Think about that, too."

I said, "Fine."

"Really," he said.

I told him OK.

In the next backyard, Mrs Larkin was pulling the cover off the Larkin's pool. It was time to get ready for summer. We didn't like Mrs Larkin, and she didn't like us. Neither did her son Jim, who was always telling on me.

"Remember that song I taught you?" he asked.

I did, but I said I didn't. I didn't want to let on. I didn't want to let him make me laugh.

He started singing.

Mrs Larkin had a baby,
she named him Sonny Jim.
She put him in the piss pot
to learn him how to swim.

I started laughing. He laughed, too. Then my chest was shaking, and he roughed up my hair.

"Hey," he said. "It's all right." He said, "How'd you like it if you were her kid? Then it would really be intolerable, right."

I agreed.

He said, "Maybe I'll run away with you. Where you want to go? Africa?"

I said I didn't know.

He sang, "*Bingo bango bongo, I don't want to leave the Congo, oh no-oh-oh-oh.*"

I wiped my eyes with my sleeves.

He said, "Hey, I ever tell you about the first time I ran away?"

I said, "You ran away?"

He said, "Did I run away? Once a week, every week, until I ran away for good."

"You ran away for good?"

"I joined the U.S. Marines, killer. I called home from Parris Island. And Cliff, you know what hurt?"

I shook my head.

"What hurt the most—they didn't even know I was gone."

"Nana didn't know you were gone? Poppy?"

He shook his head.

"Only my sisters ever watched out for me, and by the time I was fourteen, fifteen, well …"

He stuck his cigarette under the heel of a boondocker and crushed it into bits.

"See what I'm doing here with this butt? Now don't you ever smoke, you hear me? I forbid you. But just in case you do, you make sure you crush out the butt all the way, especially in the woods. What did I just say?"

"Crush it out all the way."

"Good," he said. He crossed his legs, leaned forward, and stood up without using his hands to push off. He never used his hands.

"Wait," I said, "what about your sisters?"

"What about them?"

"You said they watched out for you, and then …"

"Ah," he said, "I'll tell you when you come back."

"If I come back."

"If you come back," he said, "right. But one more thing, Cliffy. See, here's the difference between me and you, right? You run away, we know it. We care. We love you no matter what, and no matter what we do sometimes. You understand?"

I said "Yeah."

"And remember, OK, if you don't come back, this time or some other time, remember, no matter where you go, no matter where you are, no matter what you do, you hear me? No matter what, you'll always be my boy. Will you remember that?"

I told him OK.

"OK," he said.

He proceeded up the woods path, vaulted the split rail fence, retrieved the hedge clippers. The clack-clack-clack of their blades made sharp reports in the woods. He was working the scraggly wall of hemlocks that edged the sides of our property. There was a good time to trim hemlock hedges, a time that would generate strong new growth. And there was a time not to trim hemlock hedges, a time that would stunt growth and promote decay and invite the red spider. And in a month, sometimes less, the red spider could turn a thriving evergreen hemlock dead rust-brown. He never knew which time was the right time. And some of our hemlocks were fir-green, and some were dead and brittle as rust. It was just yard work that he loved doing.

I hopped back over the fence.

"How's that look?" he asked, stepping back from the hedgerow. No matter how straight he got it, he always wanted me to inspect and verify.

I leaned against the last hemlock in the row and closed one eye.