

Don Johnson

I never really knew Don. I only knew of Don from seeing him all over Noetown. When last I saw him I was a teenager of 17. I know that I always felt sad for him. In recalling this from across the span of many years I'll attempt to be as accurate as is possible but regardless of what I may write please consider that it is with the deepest sympathy and understanding of how I saw Don.

Jack was attempting to refurbish Gordon Turner's old Sport Center at the mouth of Bean's Fork. Jack married Mrs. Bingham one of my high school English teachers but I cannot recall his last name. I do recall that it was in the summer of 1964 when I last saw Don in the little store Jack had opened. A short while later the building burned due to spontaneous combustion from some stored building materials.

It was nighttime as I recall when I walked the few yards to the store. While Jack and I were talking Don came in really agitated for some of the bullies had been bothering him yet again. I have a blurred memory that one of the bullies also came in and Jack got on his case a bit. All the while Don kind of cowered in a darkened corner with absolute fear in his eyes.

Once the bully had gone Don made his slow shuffle into the weak light. You see Don had multiple physical and mental handicaps. Don was slow. We considered him to be retarded. I know that I was never able to have a conversation with him and know of no one else who did. Usually people just talked at Don who would very thickly mumble an unintelligible response. Don was slow. There was something I never quite understood wrong on his right side. It affected both his arm and his leg. His arm was always carried at an odd angle that made it appear his hand was unusable. His leg was oddly turned so that he always walked kind of sideways. His foot also seemed to be misaligned. So Don had a shuffle to his gait but walked wherever he wanted to go in the bib overalls that were the only fashion he knew. Somehow Don had acquired a claw hammer. This was his only means of fending off the dogs of nature and the dogs of Man. With his good hand he was proficient in handling either task.

I never knew where Don lived and didn't particularly care to find out. Someone cared for him. Someone had to have cared for Don wasn't exactly capable of caring for himself. Don could never control any situation but could only react. Most of the time that reaction was an immediate brandishing of the claw hammer so I steered far from his path.

Over the years I've had the opportunity to live and work with many people who were handicapped in various ways. None so completely as I remember Don was. On occasion flashes of memory have caused me to consider Don and what his world might have been like. His could never have been the same world as the one most of us inhabit.

Don's world must have been the perpetual daydream of a child. In it he had learned that a smile brings good things. So Don smiled a lot in an awkward kind of way. It worked for him and brought many opportunities for people to offer him many small kindnesses. Don also had a nightmare existence. On his meanderings I'm sure the dogs were his worst natural encounter. His only means of dealing with them was the claw hammer. He also had the nightmare that for a while I shared. We had the bullies. I could escape into the mountains. Don had no such avenue available to him. I've never come to an understanding of the motivation that those devilish dogs of Hell itself have in taunting and teasing someone who obviously does not understand and cannot, or won't, otherwise defend them self.

As a result Don did not look at anyone straight on. He either cast his eyes aside or lowered his head in submission. I saw in him a man backed into the farthest corner of a very small place that he could in no way fathom. I had pity for him.

A day ago I received a photo of Don as a much older man. Wow! He had white hair like mine. He seemed to be at peace within himself. His expression had none of the agitation I once saw there. This now old child appeared to be really happy. Otherwise Don seemed not to have changed. In the photo I could still see the way that he held his right torso as well as the odd twist of his right leg. It matched nothing of the ideal of human anatomy I had learned in my university art classes. I also read into where he was in the photo what I had observed over forty years ago. He was still in that very small world of a child but he had grown older beautifully in it. He was still backed into a corner but it was no longer a dark place. His smile was more natural and less effected. Dang it but he had even changed his taste in fashion. He had added a baseball cap to the bib overalls. He was a Kentucky fan just like I am. Go Cats!

Don, wherever you are, you cost me the better part of two days. From my safety behind my easel, with paper mounted and charcoal in my hand, I could finally deal with you. It still wasn't easy but you were never easy. I wanted to show my appreciation to you for unconsciously teaching me so long ago yet another lesson in how all peoples should be treated. My task was much easier than yours must have always been.

Bill Sturdivant, in the year 2009