

HITTER
AND BLUE

D.C. Schulze

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Hitter and Blue is a work of fiction. The names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either products of my imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events are coincidental.

To Cindy, Katie, and Kyle, my home team.

And to the dogs.

“SPIKE”

The abandoned property at 730 Paxton Avenue has been many types of houses over the past nine years. It has been, in no particular order: a party house, a flop house, a drug house, a house of ill repute, a gambling house, and, most recently, a dogfighting house. What the property has not been for a long time is a home.

After Miss Ida Pangley passed away in her sleep one unusually cold night in May 1970, her prized pink one-story structure had been boarded up tight. Now, dark and crumbling, Miss Ida's place looks much like a dozen other houses on the same city block.

Every padlocked door, each shuttered window, serves as a reminder of the hard times that have befallen the good people of Paxton Ave.

Long ago, the city had placed a large red sticker on Miss Ida's front door reading: “PROPERTY

UNINHABITABLE—KEEP OUT!” At the moment, however, there is one lone inhabitant. Spike, a three-year-old pit bull terrier, moves wearily through the house’s gloomy hallways.

Starved by his owner to a “fighting weight” of forty-five pounds, the dog is jet-black—almost blue—with patches of white on his front paws and chest. His head and shoulders carry the half-healed scars of a dozen deadly fights. Shallow breaths show as frosty puffs in the cool night air.

Searching for a way out of the house, Spike claws yet again at the front and rear doors, without success. In the kitchen, he licks a few drops of condensation from a rusted water pipe beneath the sink. At the basement stairs, he stops to peer into the blackness below. Shivering with cold and fear, the fighting-dog considers his choices.

Perhaps there’s a leftover scrap of food down those stairs, or a half-filled water bowl, or maybe an unlatched window, and beyond that freedom and a warm place to spend the night, and . . . No.

Nothing, no power on earth can force him back into that basement. Memories of fights and beatings and angry men with sharp needles and sharper voices swirl in the dog’s exhausted mind.

Feeling faint and needing rest, Spike turns for the back bedroom and the tattered old mattress that has become his sanctuary. There, he will curl himself into the filthy fabric that provides a bit of warmth and sleep—or dream of sleep—and wait. There, he will freeze to death, or starve to death, or some combination of the two, and not a living soul will know or care what happens there.

There, on an unusually cold May night, on the floor of Miss Ida Pangle's bedroom, at 730 Paxton Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

“SPENCER”

“Your father used to surprise you by making pancakes on Sunday mornings.”

My mother tells us this and waits for our reaction.

I don't remember it. My sister, Kyla, two years younger than me, remembers everything, and doesn't remember it either. The only surprises I remember from my father are bruises, fist-sized holes in the walls of our trailer, and broken furniture. Those happen so often that they're not surprises anymore. A real surprise would be if he suddenly stopped raging on my mother, my sister, and me.

My mother made up that story to make us feel better, I think. Or herself. Or maybe it really happened, who knows? Either way, it's her way of saying, “He wasn't always like this, I swear.”

I hope she made it up, though, because I don't want to believe my father might, possibly, have once been a good man. Now that I have a plan, I don't want to change my mind about him.

Especially today.

It's early, just before eight in the morning, and my sister's getting ready for school. I should be sitting in first-period English, but instead I'm at our kitchen table, the one with the wobbly leg that I keep tightening into place. Why am I at home instead of school?

That's a story for another time; I can't talk about it right now.

With no classes to go to, I have to fill up my day—also part of the plan. Staying busy keeps me from thinking too much. If I stop to think, I might change my mind. Whenever I think of changing my mind, I picture my mother and sister huddled together on the couch while my father shouts and breaks up the place. That gets me right back on track.

I've learned a few things from my father through the years. Things like how to hit, and how to take a hit, and even how to feel trouble coming by that electric tingle in the air when something bad is about to happen. I'm feeling that electricity now.

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Meaning—tonight my father is going to learn something from me.

But I can't talk about it right now. It's a surprise.

ONE

Four hours later I've got a cramp in my writing hand but don't stop to stretch it out. For most of the morning, I've: stared at a blank sheet of paper, read my comic books, watched a little TV, and walked laps around our house trailer.

Now I'm working like a madman to finish my essay, which I absolutely have to have to get back into school next Monday.

It's a Friday morning in May. It's also day three of my three-day suspension from Halvdale Junior High, and I've got to be out of here by noon. My mother's cleaning up the kitchen. She's offering "helpful" advice that I don't really hear as I finish groveling on paper.

If I grovel enough, I'll be allowed back in class for the remainder of the school year.

“Just take your time and do it right,” she says, followed by, “You know, if you didn’t get into so many fights, you wouldn’t be suspended in the first place.” To make sure I’m listening, she asks, “Are you listening, Spence?”

Either her voice is beginning to get through or my conscience is catching up with me. “I want to finish it so it’s not hanging over my head all weekend,” I say.

Am I the type of student who finishes assignments ahead of time so they’re “not hanging over my head”? In a word, no. I’m the type of student who doesn’t finish assignments.

But I’m motivated. After meeting Monday morning with my guidance counselor, Mr. Schmink, and the principal, Ms. Lepton, I’ll have fourteen days of classes until graduation. If I make it through with no missed days and no infractions, I won’t have to repeat eighth grade.

Fourteen days versus another year. A deal I’ll take anytime.

There are strings attached, I know. Summer school, for sure. And there’s the essay, telling how I’ve learned from my mistakes, and how I’ll never get in another fight in junior high, cross my heart and hope to die, et cetera, et cetera.

In most places, and most times, staying out of a fight for a couple of weeks sounds pretty easy. But that wouldn't apply to this place and time.

The time is 1979. The place is Bent Oaks Mobile Home Village, just outside Halvdale, Illinois. Halvdale is two hundred miles south and a whole universe away from Chicago.

Around here everyone fights all the time. It's like a hobby for everyone from the parents on down. The fathers and stepfathers hit the kids, the bigger kids hit the smaller ones, and, in households like mine, the men hit the women too.

I'm wasting time daydreaming. It's 11:55 a.m. and I scoop up the essay and bring it to my room. Maybe I can revise it later. Right now I have to get out of here.

Working my way back to the kitchen, I open the fridge. My mother asks if I'm hungry. She tells me to stop by the diner later for a free meal, before the dinner rush. But I'm not looking for food. I'm checking my father's beer supply.

There, on the second shelf, is an ice-cold twelve-pack. Perfect. I may not be the kind of student who worries about his homework, but I am the kind of son who checks his father's beer count.

Today, more than ever.

Usually, I worry when I see too many cans blocking the little light at the back of the shelf. This time I just smile. A dozen should be more than enough.

Pulling on a sweatshirt, I ask my mother what shift she's working. "Three to closing," she says. "I'll be home by nine."

"And Kyla?" I ask, checking on my little sister.

"Going to Loraine's straight after school. She'll be home at nine, too."

"Good," I tell my mother, without saying why, because she already knows why.

Looking out the window of our trailer, I can see my father's station wagon kicking up dust on the road leading to our front door.

"I'll try to stop by for a bite," I say as I turn for the back door. Stopping for a moment, I almost blurt out what I'm thinking. Instead, I open the door and hurry down the four steps to my bike. I can hear the station wagon pulling to a stop in front of our trailer as I pedal away from the back.

"Spence, where are you going?" my mother calls after me.

But I'm already gone.

TWO

Two young men climb the rotting fence and approach the back door of 730 Paxton Avenue. Locked.

Tremaine Collins knows his mother has a vivid imagination. For years, she's pictured the old pink house across the alley as a center for all types of illegal activities. Now she swears she can hear a baby crying in the abandoned property. TC, as he's known in the neighborhood, can't convince his mother to ignore a crying baby. He does convince her, however, not to call the police. Those kinds of calls usually just bring trouble to the caller.

TC has more reliable backup in mind, his friend Michael, and they're soon crossing the backyard opposite his and looking for a way into the old pink house.

TC's mother vaguely remembers the old lady who lived at 730 years ago—Ida something or other.

But for most of TC's nineteen years, the house has sat vacant.

Vacant except when it isn't. At those times, the house hosts all manner of criminal activities, and TC's mother forbids her son from going anywhere near the place. Tonight, she gives him permission to investigate the sounds across the alley but to be "extra careful and get back quick."

Finding a loose basement window, Michael "convinces" it open with a couple of well-placed kicks. Soon, TC is sliding into the darkened space below. The gloomy cellar gives him the creeps, and he hurries two steps at a time up the narrow staircase.

In the living room, TC pulls a blanket from an old curtain rod, allowing a bit of light into the room. There are piles of debris everywhere but no unusual smells. No unusual smells is good. He tries all the windows, searching for one that might open.

On the porch, Michael finds the front door closed, but the padlock hanging open in its clasp. He steps inside where TC is hard at work on a window.

"Need any help?" he laughs.

Surprised, TC turns to face the open front door. "Maybe my mother's right. Somebody's got a key to this place."

“Yeah, and maybe they’ll be back soon. Let’s look around and get out of here,” Michael says.

Following the beam of his flashlight, TC studies his surroundings. The kitchen and bathroom are dirty but otherwise empty. The same with the first and second bedrooms off the hallway. An eerie feeling creeps up TC’s spine. He suddenly wants his mother to be dead wrong about this house.

More than the basement, more than the many bad things that have happened in these rooms, the thought of finding a baby here chills him to the bone.

He almost turns and runs. But another thought stops him. The thought of having to tell his mother that he hasn’t checked the entire house.

At the end of the hall, TC takes a deep breath outside the third bedroom. The feeling is stronger here, and before he enters the room, TC knows there is, or was, a living being here. With the flashlight gripped tightly in his left hand, he steps inside.

The light reflects the twin pinpoints of Spike’s eyes, gazing back from the mattress on the floor.

From the dog’s point of view, neither of the two figures in the doorway looks like “the bad man,” and that is good. Too weak to protest, Spike lets himself be carried from the room by the young men, through

the fence, and back across the alley to TC's mother's house.

Going to sleep sometime earlier that night, Spike had thought, hoped, that it might be for the last time. He knew he should hang on. His mother had taught him to never give up and to always hope. But in his three years of life, he's seen too much, felt too much pain, and simply wants to sleep.

Spike has known only one home in his short life, a harsh one. The man who owns that home, "the bad man," is Jeremiah Lime, who owns many dogs like Spike and treats them all cruelly. Sometimes, Lime brings the dogs to different locations, like this house, where they are forced to fight against other dogs. In that house or this one, men—and they are almost always men—laugh, cheer, and jeer while dogs often die. So it is remarkable for this dog, in this house, to simply trust these young men.

But trust he does because that is the nature of dogs.

TC's mother offers the dog a bite of meat loaf, which he refuses, and a few sips of water poured from a glass into her hand, which he sips slowly. Right now, the dog looks weak and scared. He's "the baby" TC's mother heard crying. TC knows that with a few days

of food, water, and rest, he'll be up and around. This dog, with those scars and muscles, doesn't look like his mother's idea of a house pet.

TC decides he had better get busy. He figures he has those same few days, maybe a week, to find a new home for the dog he's already named Blue.