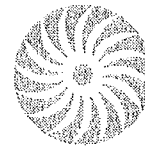




The Catchee

by Avery



When I was six years old, my brother Orville was twelve. Orville was a schoolboy patrol. He wore a day-glo red hat and a day-glo red strap that zagged across his chest and carried a pole with a day-glo red flag at the end of it. There was probably nothing doing at school that Orville enjoyed more than schoolboy patrolling. He would stand at the corner and wait for the light to change, and when it did, he would walk out into the street and hold out the pole until everyone who should have crossed the street had. That was his duty. I would stand on the curb and wait for him. That was my duty. My mother had put Orville in charge of my transportation to and from school. Our transportation then was walking, and I wasn't allowed to cross the street without him.

Sometimes Orville stood on the corner long after everyone had emptied from the school building, and he'd walk home with me and with his pole with the day-glo red flag on the end of it. He'd walk over to the big industrial park that was growing up behind where we lived. Orville would pick a building and direct the people coming out.

There were no red lights in the industrial park. There were signs that had eight sides and some that had three. Orville would line up with one of the eight sides, and he'd lower his pole with the day-glo red flag at the end of it and allow people to cross the street in front of him. They'd come out like popcorn: nothing for a long time, then one and two at a time and then they'd come out a whole hopperful at a time. Most of the people coming out of the office buildings were girls. A lot of them smiled at Orville, and next to schoolboy patrolling, Orville liked those smiles best. He was twelve; he had begun liking girls when he was eleven. I would stand on the curb and wait for Orville.

Orville had tried most of the buildings in the industrial park. Remington became his favorite, and he always went back to it.

One day Orville was waiting outside the Remington. There was a little breeze that day, and that

was another thing Orville liked a lot because the breezes would blow the girls' skirts up, and when I asked Orville why he enjoyed that so much, he answered that he could see Schenectady. I didn't understand what he meant then, when Orville was already twelve, and I was still six.

Orville was at the best part of his patrolling that day, the part where the girls came out in twoses and threeses, that being the part where he got the most smiles, when he told me that he had to go to the bathroom. I was surprised. Because Orville didn't usually have to do ordinary things at inconvenient times. He told me to step off the curb and hold the pole with the day-glo red flag while he visited the bathroom in the Remington.

"You can't go in there," I said.

"Well, I sure can't go out here," he answered.

So Orville marched into the Remington, and for the first time I stood off the curb all by myself. I held the pole across the street, and the cars stopped, and the people crossed. I began to see why Orville enjoyed schoolboy patrolling so much. I was enjoying it pretty much myself. Although it didn't matter to me whether it was boys crossing or girls.

I had raised the pole once and let it down again when I felt someone tap me on my shoulder. I thought Orville was finished and wanted me to give him back his

pole. I wouldn't turn around. I felt the poke on my shoulder again. I lowered the pole and stiffened my shoulders. "Listen," I snarled, "I'll give it back to you after the next batch crosses."

A voice, a voice that wore a uniform, answered, "Don't you know that it's illegal to impersonate a traffic officer?"

I turned around and saw that not only the voice but also the man who owned it wore a uniform. He took the pole with the day-glo red flag from me and, with his arm over my shoulder, walked me and the pole to the exit of the industrial park. As he guided me out, he told me how lucky I was that none of the cars had chosen to ride right through my flag. I could have gotten run over, standing off the curb like that, he said. In between everything else he said was the message: Don't do it anymore. Ever. Again.

I waited for Orville on the sidewalk just outside the industrial park. Orville wasn't long in coming. He had gone to the bathroom just before the policeman came, and he finished just after the policeman took me with him.

While I waited, I figured out my life. I realized that the world is made up of two kinds of people: the catchers and the catchees. I was a catchee.

The next time it happened was a week later or maybe a month. When you can't tell time, it's hard to

measure it. I was still in the first grade, and I had not yet learned all the short vowel sounds. It was after school, and Orville had given me money for a limeade from the Minute Market on the corner on the same side of the street as the school. Orville was schoolboy patrolling and doing it and doing it. I finished the limeade and slurped all the ice from the bottom. I held onto the paper cap for three red lights' worth of crossings after that, and the cup began to get mushy. I walked back to the corner where the Minute Market was, and I put the empty limeade in a container. The next thing I knew, I was being dragged by the back of my collar to the principal's office. The sixth grade teacher, Miss Elkins, was dragging me. She was also yelling at me, telling me that I had committed a federal offense. It wasn't until I got to the principal's office that I learned that I had mailed the lime cup. What I had thought had said *litters* had said *letters*. I explained to the principal that I didn't think that it was a federal offense to be only halfway through the short vowel sounds. The principal agreed, and Miss Elkins, realizing that it wasn't my fault that I was only halfway, agreed, too. But she wasn't too happy about it. She said that her birthday card to someone special was probably blurred to where it couldn't be delivered. She looked sideways at the principal when she said "someone special."

Orville was waiting for me when I came out of the principal's office. That was the first time he had had to wait for me instead of vice versa.

"What kept you, Avery?" he asked.

"I put a lime cup through the United States Mail," I said. Then I explained to him what had happened.

Miss Elkins was Orville's teacher then. He put his arm around my shoulder as we began to walk home and he said, "You know, Avery, if Miss Elkins were walking out of the Remington and a breeze blew her skirts way up past Schenectady, I wouldn't bother to look past New Rochelle."

There was only one spot where Orville's arm touched my shoulder that afternoon, and it was there for only three blocks and that was many years ago, but to this day I could still point to exactly where it was.

By the time I got into Miss Elkin's sixth grade myself, the industrial park had bulldozed its way over our old neighborhood of small houses. With the money my folks got for selling our old house, they had bought a new one. Not exactly new. It was middle-aged. It was also middle-sized, and the middle house on the block. We were now on the edge of rows of bigger houses. We knew there wouldn't be an industrial park moving up on us again because behind us was the old Talmadge estate

that had been sold to developers. They were building houses on it. The new houses got bigger and bigger, row after row, the farther back from us you went. On the river row, they were as big as motels and had about that many bathrooms.

I was a schoolboy patrol in the sixth grade, but we were bused. We never took our flag poles home. They still had day-glo red, but they were locked up every night. Schoolboy patrolling wasn't what it had been when Orville had been it. And now it was called *school patrol*, not *schoolboy patrol*, because girls did it, too.

Orville had moved on to high school. All the girls that he had discovered now discovered him. He divided his spare time between talking on the telephone and working as a bag boy at the A & P. He never put his arm around my shoulder, and he made jokes all the time, out of everything.

I had managed to live a pretty normal life for a catchee. I had learned that the teacher would call on me for the *other* math problem, the one I had not done. In the fourth grade I was the only kid in my class who got lice, athlete's foot, and poison ivy. I was probably the only kid in history who got them all at the same time. The only parts of me that didn't itch were my fingernails and, every now and then, the roof of my mouth.

"Cooties, crud, and creeping eruption," Orville said. He did a little shuffle with his feet and snapped his fingers to give it rhythm. I didn't think Orville was funny.

By the sixth grade I had learned that when they let people through seven at a time, I would be eighth. And that in the supermarket I would get the one cart out of seventy-five that had a stuck left rear wheel. And in the sixth grade I resumed my career as a police catchee.

After we moved, I had a lot of odd jobs. Some of my steady lawn mowing customers were hand-me-downs from Orville. He had to give them up to become a bag boy because there wasn't enough daylight when he got home. A lot of my piece work was for people who lived in the big houses along the river. I would feed and care for their parakeets when they went out of town. I would walk and brush their dogs; a lot of miniature poodles live in big houses. I was also hired to keep wild bird seed in the feeder and water in the bird bath. But the worst job I had was babysitting with some azaleas.

Mrs. Wilkie had hired me. Mrs. Wilkie was a very worried lady who was going to Europe for three weeks. She was worried that her infant azaleas would die. Her house was so new that all the wall space around the light switches was spotless and the air inside it smelled fresh-

sawed. And it was so big that if you put up a sign that said EMERGENCY, it could be mistaken for a hospital.

There were so many new houses in the neighborhood that things that should automatically go on were going off. Even on our edge, where the houses weren't as big as hospitals, we had our convenience problems: water for one thing and electricity for another. When it got very hot outside, and the air conditioners were set to switch on, they didn't. The power was so low that there wasn't enough of it in the wires to throw the switches. Walk past any box of circuit breakers at supertime, and you could hear them moaning.

It sometimes took so long to fill the tub for a bath that you could turn the faucet on full force and go draw a map of the entire United States, marking the state capitals, Schenectady and New Rochelle, five major rivers, and still have the tub only half-full when you were finished. My mother was so pleased with her new-to-us middle-aged house that she never complained about its modern inconveniences or about having to wait until midnight to have enough water pressure to wash the dishes.

The first Saturday that Mrs. Wilkie was gone, I wandered over to her house to water. It was hot September. The electricity had been quaking in our house all day.

When I got to the Wilkies', I saw that there was no garden hose outside. I walked around back and didn't find one there either. It would be a hot walk back to our house to get ours. I saw her sliding glass doors leading to her bedroom, and with just a little extra tug—about what you'd give to a lawn mower going uphill—I could open them. I figured that I would go through the house to her garage and get the hose. I never thought of it as breaking in.

I was halfway across the living room when the alarm went off. If you've never been inside an empty house with a burglar alarm going off inside it, I can only tell you that your head feels like a giant sinus cavity with an air raid alert inside.

I ran over to the entrance hall and threw every switch within sight, but the alarm wouldn't quit. Then I went into the hall closet and found the box of circuit breakers and threw every one there. The house went quiet. Everything suddenly sounded so hushed that I felt it necessary to tiptoe into the garage.

While I was in the garage, trying to uncoil one hundred and fifty feet of green garden hose from one hundred and twenty-five feet of black garden hose, I heard a voice come over the loud speaker, "All right, come on out." I paid no attention. I went on with my work. The voice came again. Closer and louder, and in

uniform this time. "All right, come on out: we've got the house surrounded."

I realized they wanted me. So I came out. My hands were up from lifting the garage door, and the policemen told me to keep them exactly that way.

I walked down the driveway to the waiting police car. Mrs. Wilkie's neighbors saw me and said, "Why, it's Avery Basford." The cops asked if I would mind telling them what I was doing in there. I told them that I wouldn't mind telling them, and I didn't. But it took me thirty-five minutes to do it.

It seems that Mrs. Wilkie had been as worried about her house as she had been about her azaleas. She had asked her neighbors to listen for the alarm and to call the police if they heard it go off. Now, ordinarily, the minute that I pushed on the sliding glass door, the alarm would have gone off, and the neighbors would have found me outside, and ordinarily I could have explained to them. Ordinarily, I would never have been trapped inside. Ordinarily, Mrs. Wilkie's neighbors would not have reasoned that only a professional burglar would know how to enter a house and shut off an alarm. Ordinarily.

Ordinarily.

If everything had happened ordinarily, I would have found some other way to get trapped. For I was a catchee.

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I became a police catchee again a little later that year, and it happened because of my Christmas spirit.

My mother was not only pleased with our new house, she was also proud of it. She hardly believed me when I told her that our whole house would fit inside the Wilkies' living room and dining room. "Bigger," she said, "isn't necessarily prettier." To her, there was nothing prettier in this whole world than our middle-sized picture window with our big Christmas tree just behind it.

She invited the ladies from our old neighborhood over for a party. Everyone from our old neighborhood had scattered to different middle-sized houses. She called it a class reunion.

"What class?" I asked

"Low-income class," she answered.

I arrived home from school just as the ladies were opening the gifts that they were exchanging with each other. Sister Arnetta gave my mother a pair of underpants. My mother wouldn't stop raving about them. She called them panties, not underpants, and she said they were precious. She said that the only thing that Sister Arnetta could have done nicer would have been to give her a pair in each color of the rainbow.

That solved my problem about what to get my mother for Christmas.

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I went to her room that night and I took the underpants from the box they came in. The box was from Eaton's, so I supposed that the panties were too. I put them in a plain brown paper bag from the grocery store, and I layered the bag between my math and social studies books. I decided that I would go to town straight from school and buy my mother those same precious panties in as many colors of the rainbow as I could afford.

I found Eaton's department of underwear with no trouble at all, but I had not counted on how pastel it would be. In my black skin, blue jeans and maroon sweater, I felt like a walking exclamation point in a sea of whispers.

No one took my being there seriously. No one asked, "May I help you?" So I tried to help myself. I pulled a corner of the precious panties from the plain brown paper bag, and I tried to match them with the assortment that was on top of the counter. But I couldn't tell if they were the precious kind or some other. All the materials looked alike, and they were all basically the same shape. I needed to see the label for size and variety.

The label on women's underpants is on the inside. I figured that if I could get a hold on it, I could let it poke out of the bag. Then I would only have to match numbers. I reached into the bag to let my fingers do the

walking and was gazing over the counter and up at the ceiling as I concentrated on the touch system inside the bag.

I felt a tap on my shoulder.

The tap wore a uniform. So did the voice. "Better come along with me, sonny."

I turned around and saw a store security guard.

"What's the mater?" I asked.

"Where did you get those panties?" he asked looking at the bag.

"From my mother," I answered.

"Did she give them to you as an advance Christmas present?" His tone was sarcastic.

"These panties are not mine," I said.

"Oh, I believe that they're not yours. But it's your job to convince me that they're your mother's. Just show them to me, and if they've been worn, you won't have to say one more thing to me."

"They're brand new."

The guard smiled. "That's what I thought. Can you show me a receipt?"

"No. They were a gift. People never put receipts in with gifts."

"They never put them in with stolen goods either. Suppose you come along with me, sonny."

I knew it would get down to that.

He took me to an office where some manager sat behind a desk. "I found this young fellow shoplifting in ladies' bloomers," he said.

"No, you didn't," I explained quietly. "You only caught me feeling them."

The two men exchanged looks. "I brought these panties from home. *Bloomers*, if you want to call them that."

"To whom do you say they belong?" the manager asked.

"To my mother."

"Suppose we call her and check it out"

"Oh, please don't do that. She won't be at all surprised."

"You mean that you've been in trouble before?"

I could see that anything I said would be used against me. That was one of the problems of being a catchee. "Look," I said, "call my big brother, Orville. He works at the A and P." I looked at my watch. "He gets the car on Wednesdays because he brings the groceries home. If you get hold of him now, he'll stop here on his way home and straighten everything out."

I was left in the manager's outer office in my own custody until Orville came. We got it all straightened

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out. And the manager even walked us over to the department of underwear and introduced us to a saleslady who wore a badge saying MISS HENKEL. Miss Hinkel helped me find the underpants. I could afford one pink and one pale blue so I paid for them, and we left.

As we were driving home, I said to Orville, "You know, Orville, this never would have happened if I weren't a catchee. I've been a catchee all my life."

Orville understood what I meant by catchee because he had noticed it about me. Orville said that he had thought about it, and he thought, too, that it was time to talk to me about it.

"Avery," he said, "being a catchee can make you two things. It can make you very honest."

"I believe that, brother. I can see that. I don't stand a chance being anything but honest."

"And," Orville added taking a hand from the steering wheel to pat my knee, "it can make you very brave."

"How can it do that?" I asked.

"Well, Ave," he said, "it can make you brave this way. Most guys never know whether or not they're going to get caught. They just never know, and they live in fear of it. But you—you being a catchee—never have to worry about *whether*. You just don't know when. Don't you see, Ave? You are never afraid because you are always prepared

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for the worst. Like when the guy in the department store fingered you. You stayed calm. You didn't lose your temper. You didn't go crying to Momma and give your surprise away. You stayed cool. You are free of fear. And that, Avery, makes a guy very brave. Honest and brave. That's a great combination. I think you're going to be a leader of men, brother."

I liked what Orville said. A clarinet began playing inside me. I didn't even tell Orville thank you. I sat there holding that box of panties, pink and pale blue, Christmas wrapped, and the white ones in the plain brown bag. I sat there and listened to that clarinet; it was playing "honest and brave" inside me.

We came to the intersection of Heavener and Forsythe, and Orville drove right through a yellow light, yellow making it to red before we were all the way across.

Orville looked over at me. We smiled at each other. Both of us were glad that it wasn't me driving.