

SWITCHBLADE

by

Sandra de Helen

Wham! Right in the heart. The pearl-handled switchblade felt like an extension of my left hand. The desire to peg it exactly where I wanted it grew out my own heart, up my chest, down my left arm, into my hand and then flew straight out through my middle finger as I let go of the knife. I was good at this game! Better than any of the boys, even Kansas, the softball pitcher.

Well, it was my basement after all. I practiced just about every day. Ever since Vince built the closet and left that white cedar wall standing there just begging to be a target for mumblety-peg. Kansas had been our model -- he was the biggest one, full man size. We stood him up against the closet wall and outlined him in ball-point pen. Then I drew in the heart, and we paced off eight feet and drew a toe mark in white chalk on the floor.

The first throws went all over the place. That cedar wall had as many knife marks outside our "man" as in, but we developed our skills rapidly and after a week or so, we were calling our shots.

Always hitting the heart was no fun though. We would soon have it carved out of the closet if we didn't come up with something else, so we drew in eyes, nose, mouth, throat, and kneecaps and became more creative in our aim.

I had the best knife by far. My mom kept it in her blue metal safety box with the tiny brass padlock. She kept the key in the spice drawer though, so the box's secrets were mine anytime I took the notion. Mom wouldn't say where she got the switchblade, so I imagined it had been my dad's and anything that had been his was rightfully mine, in my eyes. It fit my hand so perfectly, I could work the button with the muscle at the base of my thumb. Flick! and the blade lay against my third finger, extending beyond it, sharp, glistening steel that followed my will exactly. My thumb and fingertips grasped the sharp end of the blade and flipped the knife end over end directly where I aimed. Every time. It was a magic I had never known before.

I was waiting for the boys to come over and play. My sister and her friend were outside playing on the swingset. The garage door stood wide open for best light. I alternated between practicing hitting our man's left eye and pacing the length of the basement watching for the boys.

Don, Dwayne, and Kansas were out doing something, probably throwing a softball and catching it, but they said they would be over after lunch to play mumblety-peg.

Thunk! Right in the eyeball. I was so good at this I should be bored. But I wasn't. It gave me such a feeling of power. As if I could really hurt somebody if they were coming at me. As long as I had my knife on me I was in control.

"Hey Diana May," Kansas's soft voice scared me. I whirled, knife in hand. He stood alone in the garage door blocking a good portion of the light. The knife lay in my palm, fresh from killing our man by piercing his brain through his left eye. My palm itched. Just make one false move and I'll take you down, I thought.

"Diana May? You all right?" This time Kansas's soft voice brought me back to the real world where I was a thirteen year old girl and this giant boy was my friend.

"Hey Kansas. Whatcha doin'?"

He looked at his shoes. Kansas was the shyest boy I knew. This was the first time I had ever

seen him unaccompanied. Usually, he ran with a pack.

"Where are Don and Dwayne?" I asked.

"Up at Don's. They're helping his mom clean out the shed."

"Oh." I said.

"Yeah."

"Wanna play?" I asked.

He did, so we threw our knives into our man a few dozen times. I beat Kansas's pants off. After awhile I felt sorry for him. At least with Don and Dwayne around he could beat them. With me it was glaringly obvious he was getting stomped by a mere girl. A girl half his size at that.

I offered him some lemonade and we went out and sat on the picnic table. I wanted to tell him I was sorry I was better with a knife than he was, but I didn't feel sorry, and I didn't want to lie. I thought about playing catch so he could beat me, but I wasn't very good at it, and it had been my experience that boys would rather not play if you couldn't at least catch the ball. Anyway I didn't feel like chasing some stupid ball around just to make some stupid boy feel better. Where did he get off being upset just because I could throw a knife better than he could? Couldn't he do every other sport in the whole world better than I could? Jeez Louise.

We sat in silence. Kansas sat there like a big lump, feet on the ground, head hanging down, like he was ashamed of himself for losing to a girl. I sat, swinging my legs, feet eighteen inches from the ground, fuming with anger at this hulk of a boy who could throw me across the lawn with one finger, but dared to sit on my picnic table drinking my lemonade and feeling embarrassed that I had beat him at my game.

I jumped down off the table, threw my bright blue aluminum glass to the ground and stood in front of him, my face flaming red, my chest tight with fury. He looked up.

"Why don't you just go away and leave me alone?" I yelled in his face, my voice a shrill squeak.

"Yeah? Well, I will!" he yelled back, his face even redder than mine. He stood up and lumbered off, an injured bear. He muttered to himself and flung angry words over his shoulder as he headed up the hill to Don's house.

"Stupid girl!" I caught that one. Right in the heart. His aim was as straight and true as my own. He was right. Who was I trying to kid? I was a girl, I would always be a girl, and beating boys at mumblety-peg didn't make me one of them. I didn't get invited to play catch, I was "a stupid girl." I didn't get invited to run footraces, I ran "like a girl." I didn't even get invited to help clean out the shed. I was just a stupid girl.

I went back in the basement and killed our man one hundred times in a row.
