

Squish-Squash

by Robert J. Cyr

Dan leaned back on his haunches and smoked. He was a massive man, not the type to sit like that. But he did. He sat like that, smoking and he said:

“I feel like this kid I went to school with. Everybody called him Squish-Squash.”

We asked him how the kid got the name. Squish-Squash was in special education -a sloppy beast of a boy with a hard case of autism. He was twice the size of the biggest kids in school, but dumb as a sack of hammers, Dan said.

“Was he bigger than *you*?” I asked. Dan is almost seven feet tall. One of his legs is the size of my waist. Dan is smart but in a slow, smiling kind of way. We often make fun of him. He thinks very hard about something before he says it. He does not speak often, nor does he anger easily...and this is why he feels like Squish-Squash, he says. People made fun of Squish-Squash because they thought he was stupid, too.

“Squish-Squash was my size *now* when he was in *tenth* grade,” Dan said. “It was incredible.”

Dan put out his cigarette and we went inside.

Who were we? We were all cooks at a busy Italian restaurant. We were treated badly, paid poorly and worked like dogs. We felt slighted all the time, like some joke had been played on us.

There was Dan, two men from Peru who made pizzas, and me. Instead of going crazy or quitting we told each other funny stories. Like the story about Squish-Squash.

He told more of it at the next cigarette break, after Juancho did a shot of sugar cane hooch and I nearly cut my finger off with a cheese grater.

“Everyone made fun of Squish-Squash, every day, all the time. He never said anything or got mad about it,” Dan said. “He was so big and fat he had a hard time finding shoes.

“So he had these old sneakers with air soles, but the soles deflated and he walked on them like that. When he walked down the hall, the air would come out and make this sound like they were wet — *squish-squash, squish squash*. That's where his name came from.”

But that wasn't the real story, Dan said.

One day the sound of Squish-Squash's shoes vanished. People were alarmed by this, he said. There was no warning sound to announce the approach of the brute, who often collided with people and walls and drinking fountains. People wanted the old Squish-Squash back.

It turns out his mother finally special-ordered her massive son a custom pair of air-soled sneakers that allowed him to walk relatively normal. The only one who liked the new shoes was SS, who didn't hear the taunting “squish-squash, squish-squash” for a whole week, until some seniors from the football team decided they wanted the old SS back.

While SS was showering after gym, the football players found his locker and took out the shoes, marveling at their size. One boy took a pen and popped the air chambers. They put the shoes backs, giggling. No one saw SS for the rest of the day.

The next day the sound was back again. Squish-squash, squish-squash. He walked around like that, miserable for hours. No one taunted him, only stifled laughter as he passed. He went to the bathroom for some quiet. There were two boys in there smoking cigarettes and laughing. Squish-Squash pissed and looked at the wall.

The boys couldn't help themselves anymore. They started snorting and giggling. They pointed and roared. But this time, instead of calling out Squish-Squash, they made the noise with their mouths, a spit-filled, grotesque noise. That was what did it to SS. That really got to him.

Squish Squash grabbed the side of bathroom stall door and tugged it straight down, clear off its hinges. He beat the boys with it. He beat them badly. One teacher went in after he heard the screams. Then another. And another. It finally took six adults, including the football coach, to subdue Squish-Squash. The two boys spent weeks in the hospital with broken jaws and concussions.

No one saw Squish Squash for a month after that. No one knows if the kids' parents pressed charges. The rumor was that nothing happened because of the incident, and that the administration figured penalizing Squish Squash for the outburst would be like punishing a rattle snake for biting you.

"Were you one of the kids that got beat up?" Juancho asked.

"No," Dan said.

"Were you Squish-Squash?" I asked.

"No," he said. "But here's the thing: I was walking past the music room one day after school, after football practice, and I heard the most beautiful piano music coming from in there. It was really perfect, not like a student would play.

"I went inside and saw a big man sitting at a grand piano. A small woman, a music teacher, sat next to him and turned the pages of music. The man playing the piano was Squish-Squash. I think I'm the only one who knows that about him."

Dan was a quiet person so we enjoyed his story that much more. No one asked what Squish-Squash's real name was. Dan said he saw examples of explosive rage like that when he was in the Marines. He saw it in Iraq with men who never spoke and read all day. He saw it happening someday to himself, he said.

"You know who he reminds me of? He reminds me of *Dim*," Dan said. We looked at each other.

"You know, that character from *Of Mice and Men*," Dan said. "The big strong guy who has a pet mouse in his pocket and pets it with his thumb. And the mouse is dead the whole time, or something like that."

Dan put out his cigarette and went inside. After a minute we followed him. Like I said, we were cooks. Even Dan.

And it was dinnertime.

