

- PROMOTE LANGUAGE ARTS SKILLS •
- RAISE DISABILITY AWARENESS •
- STIMULATE DIALOGUE •

## **Stone Strong**

by Stephen Kuusisto

I'm an old man nowadays but don't let that fool you—I'm a bit of a rascal. I always was a rascal. When I was a kid and bullies sometimes made fun of me because I was blind I'd really work them over. One day for instance, on the playground behind the school a huge kid named Grundy went after me. Nobody knew what Grundy's full name was. He was just "Mean Grundy." The rumor was that he was mean because his father made him work all day digging a cellar under their house—it was just Grundy down there with a shovel and a flashlight. When he came out, he was crazy and everybody tried like hell to stay away from him.

Anyway, I was a tough blind kid. I rode a bike just to see what it was like and once I walked across the railing of a railroad bridge to show my friends that a blind person could really do things. I wasn't scared of much.

But as I say I was a bit of a rascal. I suppose that's because my mother was Boston Irish. I always loved to tell stories and from my earliest days I could talk to anyone. Let's be honest: if you're blind it really helps if you can talk to people—especially by being bold, not waiting for others to talk to you first. You can't be a wallflower and go places in this world and that's particularly true if you can't see. When I

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- How are the two words in the title similar? What literary device is represented here and how does it call attention to the meaning of the title?
  - From what point of view is the story told?
  - What does being a "rascal" mean? Have you ever felt like a "rascal" yourself?

catch a train I don't stand around the station waiting for someone to tell me where to go. I just ask the invisible people around me where the train to Poughkeepsie is. You can't be shy if you have a disability—any kind of disability. Anyway, a rascal is someone who likes to talk and occasionally he'll even stretch the truth if he has to. That's just how it is.

After all these years I still remember Grundy on the playground. He must have been bored that day, or maybe there weren't enough kids to beat up. I'm sure that's why he decided to pick on me.

The first thing you should know about Grundy was that he smelled like wet earth. He spent so much time under his house that he stank like a wet construction site and because his parents didn't care how he looked or smelled, he was essentially a moving mound of dirt. Back in those days no one paid much attention to things like that. Nowadays the school would probably send somebody to Grundy's house to talk to his parents but not back then. I used to sit next to a kid who smelled like manure and he had hay sticking out of his socks. That's the way it was. Lots of kids had patches on their jeans and hand-me-down shoes.

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- What does this idiom "stretch the truth" mean?
  - What does the narrator's statement that a person with a disability "can't be shy" mean? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
  - Did the author use formal or informal diction? Use examples from the text to support your answer.
  - There have already been a number of times that the author addressed you, the reader, directly. What is the effect in shifting the point of view in the story? How does the point of view affect your understanding of the story?
  - What are some of the similes in the second paragraph?

Oh, but poor Grundy! Now that I think about it I can see that he was more miserable than I was. My only real problem was that I couldn't see. But I had friends and a great family. My dad didn't make me dig a basement. In fact, my dad would read to me every night from smart, funny books like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. He'd do the different voices. My dad could do all the characters, even Becky Thatcher. Now, all these years later I suspect that Grundy's parents might not have been able to read. Being old has its advantages. I can feel sorry for Grundy.

But, anyway, he did go after me on that playground by the abandoned swings. I recall thinking that it was strange no one else was around. But, of course, that's the way it always is with bullies—they know how to pick their spots.

"Hey, Blindo!" Grundy said. He leaned close and his breath smelled like Juicy Fruit gum. (To this day I can't stand the smell of Juicy Fruit.)

"Hey, Grundy," I said. "To what do I owe this inestimable pleasure?" (I was always using words like "inestimable" even in the second grade. Let's be honest: rascals love lingo.)

Grundy grabbed my coat. He said something that I can't repeat and spit a wad of Juicy Fruit in my face.

"I'm going to make you eat this dirt!" he said.

(Grundy always carried mud in his pockets so he could force kids to eat it whenever he found the right victim.)

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- The author mentions that his only real problem was that he could not see? Did he intend for this statement to be ironic? Why or why not?
  - "*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*" is a classic American novel. Why is the allusion to "*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*" significant in terms of our ability to understand the narrator? If you read "*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*," what do you think the author has in common with Tom Sawyer?
  - What adjective would you use to describe the narrator in response to Grundy?

We were on a playground in Durham, New Hampshire. The year was 1960. I was seven years old. I had thick glasses and I was smaller than my classmates. Grundy was as big as a barn.

“You will eat this,” he said.

“It looks good,” I said. “Hey, Grundy, have you ever eaten an acorn?”

Grundy held his dirt carefully before him like a little pillow.

“An acorn?” he said.

“Yeah, they’re just like peanuts, really good, that’s why squirrels like them. You want one?”

“Sure,” he said. He held out his other hand and I dropped a neatly shelled acorn into his palm.

“Go on Grundy, it’s yummy!”

Grundy ate it. Then he turned red, and I mean red, not beet red or fire engine red—he was red as an unkind boy with his mouth swollen shut. Acorns are among the bitterest things on earth. And of course I only knew this because I’d tried one. I was a solitary kid. I spent a lot of time in the woods. Those were the days when kids could still go to the woods.

Grundy was incapacitated. I don’t think he ever bothered me after that.

I still recall the thrill of my discovery. That language could render a nemesis harmless was rousing.

I didn’t do a little dance. I didn’t brag about the matter. But I was a more powerful boy after that. Other kids could tell that I was different, not just because I couldn’t see but because I could talk. I was fast. I loved words. I laughed a lot. Kids are smart: they can tell who has the power of invention within their group.

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- Are there any similes on this page? Why do you think the author uses so many similes?
  - How did I know what Grundy looked like after he ate the acorn?

I became a kind of "Pied Piper" in our neighborhood. I talked kids into doing all kinds of stuff. My cousin rode his bicycle blindfolded and he was pretty good at it until he drove into a tree. He got up quickly and dusted himself off and tried it again. And one day we even got Grundy to try it. I asked him how tough he thought he was and he said, "Plenty," and we put the blindfold on him and yelled, "Go!"

He wobbled uncertainly, his front tire wildly skewing and for a moment it looked like he'd fall but then he straightened and pedaled with a beautiful sense of urgency as if by going fast he would defeat any unseen obstacles in his way. For a moment or two he was amazing. We cheered.

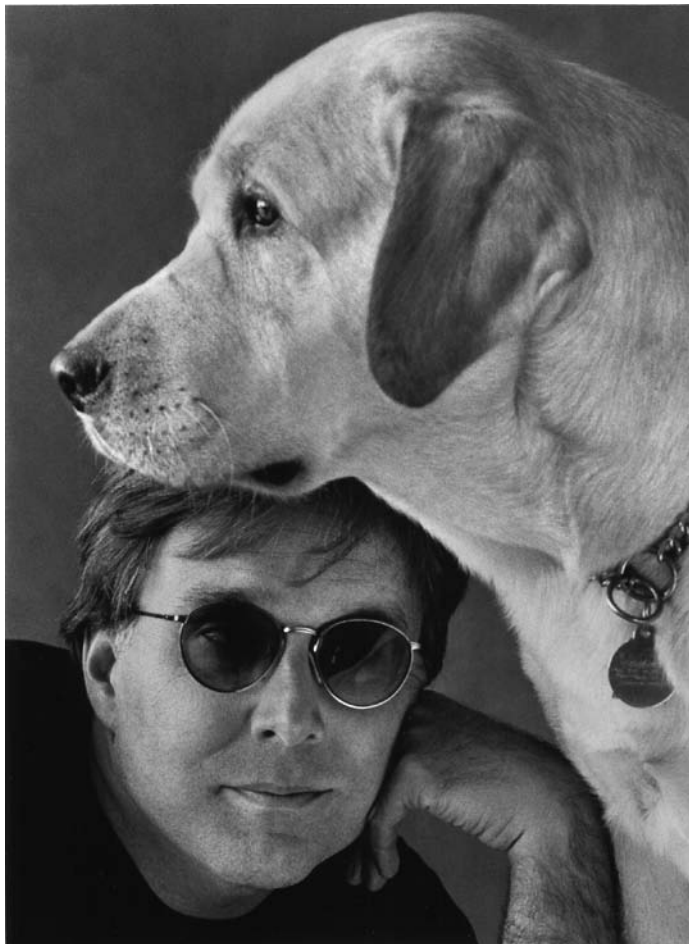
We saw that there was a remarkable improbability to the whole thing. The biggest bully in town was riding a bicycle while pretending to be blind. He was pedaling hard. I wondered if he was trying to ride right out of his customary life—I didn't know, of course, but it was a good guess.

Grundy rode blindly in big looping figure eights. He was absurdly upright. His elbows stuck out and because the bicycle was too small his knees pointed out and the whole thing looked precarious. Still Grundy went on and he never hit anything though he came close to an enormous rose bush and he barely cleared a bird bath. He rattled over the grass and displayed an ungainly superiority, for we could all see that he was afraid of nothing.

And that's of course how Grundy and I became friends. Appearances to the contrary, we saw that we were equally brave and we taught each other how to have some fun. One day Grundy convinced me that I could climb the tallest tree in our vicinity and I did and by God I felt richly alive up there where the leaves were all so close and you could hear the wind.

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- Have you ever heard of the Pied Piper? Is there anyone you know that you would call a Pied Piper?
  - Why did the narrator use the allusion of the Pied Piper to describe himself? How does it help characterize him?
  - Why is the "biggest bully in town...pretending to be blind" ironic?
  - What is the significance of the fact that at the end of the story the narrator climbs a tree?



## Stephen Kuusisto

Stephen Kuusisto teaches creative writing at The University of Iowa. He is the author of the award-winning memoir *Planet of the Blind* (a *New York Times* “Notable Book of the Year”) and of the memoir *Eavesdropping*. He is also a poet. His first book of poems, *Only Bread, Only Light*, was published by Copper Canyon Press. His new collection of poems, *Letters to Borges*, will be released in 2012.

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### **Pre-reading questions and writing activities:**

1. Brainstorm some moments when you have taken risks—either physical risks or social ones. What did you learn about yourself when you did take a risk?
2. Describe a time when you (or someone you know) were bullied. Describe how the incident made you feel. What senses did it affect? If neither you nor anyone you know has been bullied, write about an incident of bullying you have heard about on the news.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Now that you have read the story, what is the significance of the title? Does it relate to both the narrator and Grundy? Why or why not?
2. With which character do you sympathize most? Why?
3. How is this story a “coming of age” tale? What are the turning points in the story? Support your answer with quotes from the text.
4. Discuss the presence of irony in the story. Are we asked to reconsider statements/events we would usually consider “ironic”? Why or why not?
5. What is the theme of the story? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

## Writing Activities

- Write about a person who you thought was unpleasant at first but who you grew to understand and perhaps even like. How did this happen? What surprised you?
- Write a story in which you examine how the world as you know it has changed from the way it was when you were little--even just a few years can alter the world and the people in it.
- Look back at what you wrote prior to reading "Stone Strong." How did your opinion about bullying change (if at all) now that you have read this story? If your opinion remains the same, explain why. Describe how the bully in this story behaved and why. Draw conclusions about how bullying can be prevented.
- Choose a page in the story and develop your own questions to ask another reader.

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