The Old Man and the Booger

The old man sat outside the tackle shop, his gnarled forefinger inserted deep up his nostril.

_Something_ was working its way around in there, he could feel it. When he flared his nostrils so that they hissed, he could feel the chunk of _something_ get caressed by the air, tickled and moved into a position where capture seemed tantalizingly imminent. But the instant he shoved a finger up his nose, the chunk (chunk? Perhaps _gob_ would be a better word for it) would retreat back into the safety of the nasal passages, eluding picking for what seemed another eternity to the old man.

His daughter, Paula, emerged from the store, holding a handful of squirming worms in her hand. The old man stared at the teeming mass, watched the wiggles and blind motions of the nightcrawlers against the grime of her hands, searching for dark, wet earth in which to seek refuge and burrow. He wondered if perhaps this was the source of his own discomfort, if some stray piece of bait had escaped from its prison in the night, crawled into his room and squiggled its way into his head, into his nose. He wondered if it was heading for his brain, and if the worm knew that he was going to die.

"For god’s sakes," Paula snapped, weariness at her father for existing past his time creeping into her voice. "Dad, I’ve told you a thousand times not to be picking your nose like that. It scares away the customers. And what will Rudy think?"

The old man considered for a second refuting her argument, pointing out that the patrons of the family establishment were lifers, and that even if the building burned down there would still be customers for some three weeks after, and some old man who saw fit to poke around in his orifices in public on the front porch was not going to scare them off at all.

He also considered telling her that he couldn’t care less what Rudy thought of his grandfather; Paula had let the boy grow up wild and untamed, a young punk who ripped off cars and did drugs. A little nose picking made no reverberations on his grandson’s shit list. Besides, the old man was taking stuff _out_ of his nose; Lord only knew what the young punk was putting _in_ his.

Ah! There! The old man’s finger went back in, and this time closed in on _something_. He pulled it out, a satisfying, long tendril of _something_ that grabbed on to the inside membranes of his nostrils desperately before giving up the ghost. He twirled it on his finger for a closer look, then snorted with satisfaction.
But whoops! In snorting the old man discovered two things. One, the thing he held on his dry and cracked finger had either been a small piece of the *something* or an impostor altogether, for he still felt *something* in his nose. And two, the thing he had removed must have been important, for he felt the initial drops of blood fall from his nose.

“There! That’s what you get.” Paula turned away smugly, an I-told-you-so apparent in her body language as she took the worms back inside.

The old man harrumphed and reached for his handkerchief, well yellowed from years of use. He pressed the comforting cloth to his nose in order to sop up the bleeding and marveled not for the first time on the delicacy of man: pick the right booger and you’ve somehow broken yourself. Apply a little pressure and you’re healed until the next time. People never think about the next time, he figured, until the next time. In between, they go on as if nothing has happened.

Nostrils clear, he wiped his hands on his handkerchief, and then cursed. Forgot another one, lost in the creases of his cloth.

Punchy Joe pulled into the parking lot, red poking out of the bed of his drab-green truck, and pulled into the spot reserved for handicapped folks. He ambled across the lot, stole a smart-ass look at the old man and then strided inside as if he owned the place.

He would have liked to own it, the old man knew sure, or at the very least he would have liked to own Paula. In the year since her loser of a husband had taken off with the gas station attendant, many a man had come calling on his daughter, but only Punchy Joe seemed to have the edge. Sure, Paula still ran him off, but she ran him off in a different way than she did the other men. With the others, there was weariness, a lack of enthusiasm. But with Punchy Joe, she seemed exasperated and even a little charmed by his attentions, and would often resort to violence in order to remove him from the premises. The old man figured she figured she could afford to get a little louder and a little more obnoxious with this one; he would still be coming back.

The old man sighed and went back to rooting around in his nose. It wasn’t his business, he figured. Let them work it out their way; he would most likely be dead in a couple years and then the whole thing wouldn’t matter one way or another to him. Punchy Joe was an arrogant prick, sure, but he wasn’t anything the old man couldn’t handle. If Paula saw something there, well, more power to her.

Sure enough, after a few more frustrating attempts to clear his nostril came up empty, Punchy Joe emerged from the store at a rapid pace and barreled for his truck. He shouted a few choice profanities over his shoulder, aimed back into the store, and then turned the keys in his ignition. The engine roared to life, and Punchy Joe peeled out of the lot.

Paula came out of the store, sawed-off shotgun in hand. She raised a hand to over her eyes as she watched her inevitable paramour burn rubber into the distance. She snorted, a self-satisfied snort, than quickly glanced over at her father, sitting there in his beat-up old piece of
lawn furniture, a potential witness to her pleasure at this latest flirtation. She snorted again, scowled, and than disappeared back into the store, although the old man didn’t know why she didn’t come up with a better pretense to avoid and ignore him. Punchy Joe had been the only customer for the past couple days, which meant there had been no paying customers for the past couple days either.

Ah well, he sighed...

He twisted his finger upward into a hook-shape, and tried that approach. Something teased him, danced perilously close to his nail and then danced away again, a tango of snot-like proportions. The old man feared he would be driven crazy by this something; that he would fail this one time where he had succeeded all the other times. The piece of snot would hang there, just out of reach, imprinting itself on his mind, appearing before his eyes as he tried to sleep, writhing like a nightcrawler in bed in order to get the horrible image out of his imagination.

Maybe Paula would have been right to put him in a home, he thought, and then dismissed it. Ernie, his old fishing buddy, had gone into a home right after one last, glorious fishing trip and instantly become an old man. He remembered going to visit his old pal and being astounded at the transformation which had taken place, the way the years had suddenly appeared in Ernie’s sunken cheeks and in his chest, the way the clothes were baggy and his hair had yellowed and gone askew. The old man had felt like weeping, especially when Ernest had turned to him and whispered in a bewildered tone, “What day is it? They’re keeping me prisoner here, you know.”

The old man had tried to bring Ernie out of it, tried to recall some of their better fishing trips, like the one where they bagged a humungous King salmon, or the time they had eschewed a fishing trip for an entire weekend at one of the seedier watering holes, and how mad the wives would have been had they ever found out. But Ernie never registered on the old man, only asking and winking conspiratorially, “It’s time for my pills, you know. Isn’t it?”

My god, the old man said. They had stolen his brain. Gone was the intelligent, fiery friend who had roared across the hunting lodge at the discovery of an overturned container of salmon eggs in his sleeping bag, gone was the guy who had served as best man at his wedding to Verla, gone was the hard-nosed guy who had only wept once in the old man’s presence, at Verla’s funeral. Broke down and bawled like a baby, inexplicably to either the old man or Ernie’s wife.

When his own wife died six months later, Ernie never cried. Never shed a tear. The old man had turned this tidbit over in his head many a time since then, grousing upon the possibility of an affair, but then rejecting it. When he had not been with Verla, he had been with Ernie. And vice versa. There was simply no time for the two of them to carry on behind his back. And if they had? The old man was no saint himself, he had had affairs. More power to them, he thought, shifting his weight on the lime green lawn chair and wincing at the creaking sound its
legs (or were those his legs, he wondered) made in response. They almost should have. Perhaps that was what had made Ernie cry; the lost opportunity.

He coughed now, a great loose and phlegmy cough that rattled in his throat and sent mucus up into his mouth. He spat it out, purposely missing the old spittoon Paula had set out for just such an occasion, becoming more and more frequent as age traveled on. He liked to watch the loogie on the sidewalk, especially in the heat when it would sizzle and dance like frying bacon. Unfortunately, today was overcast and threatened to storm. It would be good for the nightcrawlers tomorrow, but loogies didn’t dance in the cooler temperatures. This one just sat there. He sat, staring at it until his eyes blurred and he couldn’t find it again after he wiped them.

He wondered if, like the something in his nose, the loogie had been a worm, one that had aimed for his brain or some other important body part (most of which, like the brain, were fading however) and had gotten caught up somehow in his rapidly failing immune system. He wondered if it had taken advantage of his blindness to crawl back into the ground — to die, perhaps, but more than likely plot revenge, another ambush.

Fingers sought out the nose once again, and this time he considered putting one finger to the other nostril, pinching it shut, and blowing out the offensive object with one good snort. But that would be cheating, and there was sportsmanship to be considered here, after all. He wouldn’t be able to keep it in good conscience, he knew from previous experience.

He wondered if he had already gone mad like Ernie; giving the things in his nose a fighting chance. Playing with them for sport. Hunting for boogers was a lot like fishing, he figured. A lot of casting out, a lot of waiting patiently, a hearty crow of success and delight when something was reeled in and taken out of the sea.

So he resumed his nosepicking, disgusting the lady from down the road as she walked by him. She came in every Tuesday for strawberries, despite the family’s continued insistence for fifty years that there had never been strawberries sold in their establishment. But still she went in, and still she insisted that there had been a basket of the red fruit on display in the front window only the week before.

The old man could hear his daughter’s monotone delivery of the line, long committed to memory and by now drained of all its passion and emotion: “Ma’am, this is and always has been a bait shop. There have never been strawberries on display of any kind in here.” It was only a partial lie; before the old man had inherited it, it had been an auto garage. But he doubted strawberries had ever been put on display then, with the mechanics and greasy wrench monkeys.

He had long been tempted to actually put a basket of strawberries on display, just to see what the woman would do. But both Verla and later Paula had forced this idea down, saying that if that happened, they would never be able to get rid of her.
Rudy pulled into the parking lot, in his too-low car (it matched his pants in that regard) and waved a wave of dismissal at the old man as he stormed into the store, no doubt intent on delivering yet another impassioned speech to Paula about yet another adolescent-sized tragedy. The old man watched for a bitter moment the disappearing purple dyed hair and the gold earring, then shook his head and set about spelunking again.

He dug and he dug, and set his nose to bleeding once again. But still the piece remained aloof and elusive, wily and clever. Coyote is to old man as roadrunner is to booger, he thought.

It wasn’t lodged up there, he could still breathe. He wondered again if it was a worm. They crawled in and out of the dead, he reasoned, and he was nearly there, so why not get started a little early? He remembered the old songs he had heard chanted on the playground. “The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out, the worms play pinochle in your snout.” Was there a worm playing pinochle in his snout at this very moment? What if he had broken it in two with his scratching and snuffing? Didn’t worms that were cut in half grow into two very large, very alive worms?

Rudy came out of the store now, crisis apparently averted for the moment. He sighed a deep, mournful sigh that can only be uttered by the very young and untouched, and then went to stand next to his grandfather, a rare display of familial awareness.

“Got another booger, Gramps?” How the old man hated that name; it reminded him of the word “cramp.”

He sighed, a deep mournful sigh that can only be uttered by the very old and experienced, and nodded in the affirmative. A-yep.

“A-yep.”

“Got the jar?”

“It’s nearby.”

Conversation ended to the young boy’s satisfaction, he pulled his keys from his black trenchcoat pocket and jingled them as he walked to the low rider. With another wave of dismissal, he too peeled out of the driveway like his car seats were on fire.

Paula emerged from the store with a tray in her hands. “Pilltime, Dad.” She set down the tray, consisting of a medicine cap with several horse pills of various neon colors in it, and a sandwich on a blue paper plate, then vanished into the store again. He downed the pills without water, only choking once, and then sniffed the sandwich. He made a face. Tuna. Again.

Charlie Van Dormer drove into the parking lot, and then ambled up to the porch, nodded at the old man and went inside. The old man liked Charlie, a portly middle-aged man who worked as a lawyer and always sat down to talk to him, remind the old man that he still existed. Sometimes late at night, the old man would see one of Charlie’s commercials for his law firm come on the television, and he would wish that he could have taken the young man fishing with Ernie and the guys. Would have been fun.
Charlie came out, a small plastic container of bait in hand and sat down on the wooden step to talk to the old man. They spoke of the weather, how it looked like it might rain and that was too bad because loogies don’t dance in cooler climates, and of how the fishing was.

Then Charlie asked, “Got another booger?”

“A-yep.”

“Got the jar?”

“It’s around.”

Chuckling and shaking his head, Charlie got up with an “oomph!” said something about the old man being a character and ambled back to his car. Maybe that was what the old man liked about Charlie, he reasoned. Charlie always ambled. He wondered if Charlie ambled in the courtroom. The Amblin’ Lawyer, he figured they called Charlie behind his back. Or maybe they said it to his face, and Charlie just didn’t care.

He took a bite of the sandwich, which was starting to both dry out and become soggy, in places where it should have been the opposite. He made a face and chewed, and as he chewed, he felt something shift in his nostril.

The Willoughby triplets, Simon, Colin and Ava by name, were skipping up the block as he set down his sandwich, and they came running to his side as he furiously buried finger into nose for the umpteenth time today.

“Got another booger, Pops?” “Pops” was almost as bad as “Gramps,” but he didn’t really mind it coming from the Willoughbys. Their blond hair and inquisitive expressions reminded him of that horror movie he sometimes caught on basic cable, about the freak children who terrorized all the adults in town with mind control and supernatural powers, but the Willoughbys were sweet children at the moment. No doubt they’d grow up to be hellions like everyone else, but for the moment...

They asked him again. “Got another booger, Pops?” This time it was little Ava who asked, pronouncing it “BOO-gur.”

He merely grunted, so close to victory was he that he could not afford an “A-yep,” lest the worm inside his head use the opportunity to slink inside forever.

The Willoughbys watched enraptured as he dug and he dug, twirling his fingers like a magician now. The something inside his head twisted and turned and tangled and roared its rebellion, but in the end his finger touched down upon gold, and he began to slide it out.

Oh, and what a SENSATION it was! The old man’s nose seemed to collapse upon itself as he grabbed the something and pulled. The thing had wrested control of his innards, it seemed, and he felt tendrils and skin and membrane and nosehairs yanked loose as he pulled. The thing had a mighty grip, and for a second it seemed as though it might not come out.

The Willoughbys watched, jaws slack, as the old man worked magic within his nostrils. Their mother had reached the store now, took one look at the events unfolding on the store’s porch, shook her head in disgust and walked in to find Paula and gossip about the neighbors,
Punchy Joe and whatever else came across their minds. At least Colin would be occupied for a little while; maybe they would even avoid a tantrum of any kind this shopping trip, she hoped.

The old man wrestled, and pulled, and at one point yanked the thing almost clean out, so that it hung from his nose and reached down to his plaid, bloodspattered shirt. His audience of three “oohed” and then shrieked when the thing began to make efforts to crawl back up into his nose, frantically grabbing for whatever it could get its slimy paws on.

But one last little tug, and the thing was entirely out. It curled submissively into a massive heap on the old man’s finger, and the champion took in a gigantic sniff. Rain was in the air, he noticed.

His nose beginning to bleed, he reached under his chair and pulled out an old peanut butter jar, covered in rust and mucus and God knows what else as the Willoughbys cheered loud and long, declaring him their hero, their champion, their dragonslayer.

Inside the store, Paula and Mrs. Willoughby heard the commotion and shook their heads.

With a great flourish, the old man twisted open the plastic container and flung the booger in, where it instantly amassed with the decades-old boogers that had gone before it. He screwed the lid tight once again, amidst joyous cheers anew.

He returned the jar to its place beneath his seat, and simply sat there, a smug look of righteousness and justice on his face. This one had been tricky, but he had earned it. He deserved to keep this jar. In the past, he had cheated, and then had to overturn the entire jar into the lawn, for fear that the cheated booger would somehow taint the honest victories. But this one had been pure gold, a worthy addition to his collection. There would be others, but for now he could forget about it. Until next time...

There was a strawberry beneath his chair, next to his foot.

He didn’t see it.