

IN ALL INNOCENCE

My mom gave my half bro, Hank, a graphite racquet, cost four times as much as my skateboard, for his birthday or for acing his Chem test or for I don't know what. She's into feeling guilty or trying to make up to him. Hank, a senior, two years ahead of me, thought she was a joke, a bad one, and I was another, an innocent one. He was the tennis star. I played, if getting hammered by him, was play. I preferred basketball, hanging out with my new homies, Horace and Reggie. Hank grabbed the back of my neck, squeezed, said if I so much as breathed on his racquet he'd eat my liver raw. He wormed his knuckle into my bicep, didn't let up until I cried out.

Monday, five weeks of school left, a dark wedge of regret upended my sleep. I was supposed to have memorized the Presidents, Wilson through Johnson. My mind balked. I felt a string in my gut. All day Sunday, I'd screwed around losing at Donkey Kong to Hank. I hated Social Studies, double hated Mrs. Wilson. The string in my gut bunched into a hot knot. I wouldn't survive failing the test. Worse, last week, Mrs. Wilson had given me three days of detention. I'd said, if she was assigning Kent State why not the murders at S.C. State and Jackson State. Next to me, in the back row, Horace gave Reggie a fist bump. Two rows in front of us, Toby left his seat, got in my face, called me a “suck up” and “an inside out Oreo.” I head butted him, split his lip. What saved my ass, Dad was in Cleveland on business. Mom said she'd speak to Mrs. Wilson. Hank smirked like only he knew how much it was going to cost me.

I rubbed sleep out of my eyes, edged out of bed. One hand on my stomach, I crept downstairs, figured I'd plead sick. The house was empty. The whole house, completely empty. Mom's Volvo gone. Hank's dinged up Toyota gone. Only Dad's brand, spanking new, shiny pickup in the driveway. My horrible day turned miraculoso. Straight from the carton, I gulped some milk, went back upstairs, smiled at Hank's new graphite on his pillow, crept under the sheet, fell asleep. If school noticed, if they called, all I had to say was I'd been sick.

The TV woke me. I pulled on shorts and a shirt plodded down. Buella, dark curls cinched down under her kerchief was dusting. Behind her the TV was blaring; flames, smoke, loud popping, *Rioting in Miami*. Buella saw me. Her chocolate brown face tightened, “Oh, honey, I didn't know you was home. Did I wake you? Not feeling well?” She tucked the dust cloth in her apron. “Can I make you something?” She glanced back at the T.V. “Sorry. Those knob headed young boys are making an awful mess.” She snapped the TV off. “Come morning they gonna be sorry. All their foolishness, burning down all the same places they like hanging at. Lord knows what's gonna save 'em from

themselves.”

I thanked her, said, I'd help myself, got a bowl of cereal, poured in milk, took it back upstairs. Over the weekend, I'd heard something about a trial and the Miami police and a Black motorcyclist.

Half an hour later, the back bell rang. JJ in cut offs and a purple T reading Bitch Be Me blinked in surprise.

“Where's Hank?”

I said, “No idea.” She'd been a classmate from before time. We'd learned our letters together, played together, fled together, squealing in terror, from Hank's threats. Two years ago, end of eighth grade party, she gave me my first kiss, on my cheek. We never said a word about it. Her blond hair, streaked with blue, was tied up off her neck. She'd used makeup on a bruise on her cheek. Last month, her mom had been taken away leaving JJ home with her step dad, a flag pin wearing vet, we called Majormajor. I added, “Aren't you supposed to be in school?”

She plucked a grass blade, chewed on it, blushed. “Hank told me to stop by.” She spat the grass out. “What are you doing home?”

“Sick.” I shrugged.

“Like, short a dozen presidents sick, huh?” She shot me a snotty older sis look. “How stupid on me, I learned 'em. I'm screwed, cutting for nothing.” She brushed at her bangs. “You got anything cold, a Pepsi?” She began, “Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding,” grinned. She was finishing, “Lyndon Baines Johnson, and J.F.K.” when I returned. She mocked a curtsy. I handed her the Pepsi and a note in Hank's scrawl. 'If JJ shows, tell her tomorrow.' I remembered before bed, he'd said something about senior skip day and Regina.

JJ popped her can open. “For fuck's sake. I can't cut again.” She scrunched up the note.

“Yeh, like total Hank.” I tried to catch her eye.

She pointed at the bruise on my arm. “Fraternal friction?”

I nodded, pointed at her cheek. “Family feud.”

“Not. You don't know shit.” She sipped her Pepsi. “Maybe I'll be bold, plead Mrs. Wilson into a make up test. Not waste all my good learning.”

“Go for it.” I nodded. “I'll sit next to you. You write extra big.”

“Not even funny. It's enough half the time I carry your homework.” JJ folded herself down, sat cross legged, next to her bike in the shade. “Now what?” She tugged her socks up to below her knees. They had little purple hearts. “Sure as hell fire, can't go home at this hour.”

“Buella's cleaning inside.” I sat facing her. “Just you and me, in the shade, babe.”

She shrugged. “Is that a plan?”

“Could be. Wanna swim?”

“No can. Grounded. No suit. Not till two weeks, by which time I'll be broiled.”

“Skinny dipping”

“In your dreams.”

“Tennis?”

“You are a f-ing genius, no racquet, no place to play and no way to get there.” She laughed, drained her can, crushed it, tossed it toward the garbage. It almost hit Dad's truck.

“There's the way.” I pointed at the truck, which I'd been forbidden to drive. “I'll use Hank's new racquet, you can use mine.”

“Two for three. Not bad. But where?”

“Doc Connors”

“Brilliant.” JJ tipped her head back, her hair shook loose, laughed. “Gated, fenced, locked, patrolled by the IRA. Why not? You are a genius.”

“You got a dumber idea?”

The odd thing, it all worked. The truck key was under the floor mat. Hanks' graphite was light as a wand. I gave JJ my old Wilson. The Connor place was deserted. We climbed the chain link fence. Played for an hour, tied three games a piece, took a break, sprawled in the one corner of shade on the court. I stripped off, my shirt, stretched out on my back. JJ sat close. I could hear her breathing. She lifted her T, wiped her face. Her middle looked tanned.

“Ooh wee do that again.” I said.

She flushed, reached under, held a crunched up joint to her nose.

I said, “You can do that and finish the set?”

“Just watch me.” She smoothed the joint out on her bare knee, lit it, giggled, “I'll smoke you.”

“Well, I can't.” I shook my head. “Can't and drive.”

She stretched out next to me. Took a long pull. Held it up, waved it over my head. A thin line of grayish smoke snaked between white, puff ball clouds. She took another toke. Held her breath. I propped up on one elbow, leaned over. She exhaled. I gulped her breath. Lips closed, I mumbled, “Second hand smoke.” We both laughed. It felt kind of sexy.

Her eyes widened. “Easy baby blue.” She put the joint back between her lips, sucked, held her breath. I took the stub, put it between mine, felt the wetness, coughed.

“Newbie.” She took it back.

I tried to snatch it away. She let me have another toke.

Above us in an empty blue sky, the little white clouds expanded and contracted as if breathing. I

heard birds. The tree leaves sparkled in the sun. “Shit. Shit.” I said, “Where'd you get this?” A slash of red, a cardinal, landed in the nearest tree. We'd been like this a year ago at Lake Sanford. JJ in a white bikini, made me blink each time I looked, me in blue trunks, on our backs, inches apart closer than I'd ever been to anyone and at the same time light years away. I edged closer, leaned down as she exhaled.

Her wide, dark eyes caught mine. She cracked up. Choked laughing, “Mouth to mouth resuscification. Mouth to mouth.” She could not stop laughing.

I snatched the stub took a long toke.

“Damn, don't be hogging. How will you drive?”

“It's all downhill.” I said, “We don't all crawl the face of this earth blind.”

“Speak for yourself.”

I thought of what I'd seen in Miami on T.V. I thought of telling about Regina. I sat up.

JJ's chin rested on her knees. She smiled. Behind her the clouds shifted into little sail boats. I felt lost like I was adrift in the sea. I heard myself talking, “You know how mom dotes on Hank. It happened again last night. Dad out of town. Half-bro's late for supper. Mom hops up, fixes a whole plate for him, doesn't ask him nothing. Doesn't ask where's he's been, why he's late.” I stopped. Couldn't remember why I'd started. I'd been grounded for being late to dinner but that wasn't it. I thought I knew where Hank had been but wasn't going to go there with JJ. “Hank sneers at the mac-n-cheese, pushes it aside, says, I want a steak, a big one. Mom hops right back up. Can you beat that shit?”

“She loves you, too.” JJ said. “You can't forget that.”

I remembered her mom, shut myself up, wondered if what she said was therapy talk. I knew she went. “Tell me.” I waved at the sailing clouds, “What do you see in Hank?”

“Maybe someone's just a wee, tiny bit stoned. Listen to you like competing?”

“Not competing.” I closed my eyes. “Hank says in tennis love is nothing.”

“I don't play tennis.”

I laughed. “You just played me.”

“You're you.”

“Not always. Not always.” I felt like I was sinking below the ground. “Worse, don't know if I wish I were more me or not.”

“You can open your eyes now. You look like you're two solar systems out. How stoned is we?”

“We is. Is we is.” I opened my eyes, saw the clouds flirting with wisps of her hair. If I'd had a thought it dissolved in laughter. I reached up, watched my hand move slow, slower than it had ever

moved. I touched her bruised cheek.

She leaned into my hand.

“Where'd this come from?” I wasn't sure I'd said it aloud.

“Shit.” JJ said, “Now, you're sounding like Majormajor.”

I didn't say I thought it was Majormajor. She put a finger to her lips, reached down, touched mine. I inhaled, held my breath.

JJ stood, brushed herself off. “More tennis time.”

“No. No. Not yet. Can't rush me. I see red lights. Brake time.” I laughed. “That's almost clever.” I rolled to my side, heard JJ whack a ball against the fence. “Come back to earth.” I patted the ground. “Watch more ant races with me.”

“Shit, you gotta grow up.” She crouched down, sounded sober. “Last week, why'd you pull that stunt in Mrs. Wilson's class? Hank says, you've gone ghetto.”

“Yeh and he's gone rogue.” I thought of Regina's flame red hair. I twirled Hank's racquet. “What stunt?”

“You know about South Carolina and Mississippi?”

“You ought to come sit in back with Horace, Reggie and me. I'll save you a seat. Horace laughs at all her bullshit.”

“Hank says Horace is an idiot.”

“You know him?” I studied the racquet strings. “You don't have a clue. Nobody does. Sure, Horace clowns around. He's pretty damn funny too.”

“If you like snark.” JJ leaned back on her elbows. Tips of her hair brushed the court. I watched the pulse in her neck.

“Snark? I'll tell you snark. Take my word on this. I've seen it. We get a quiz back and for the same answer, the exact same answer, I'll get a check and he'll get half credit. You tell me. I've even seen it where I'll get full credit and for the same answer he gets a zero.”

“Have you ever done anything about it?”

“Horace didn't want to. He says don't go there. I'm doing good.”

“So?”

“So, before midterms, I dragged Horace up to see her. I've got both papers and I show them to Mrs. Wilson and I say, excuse me, or please would you look at something. I'm nice as blue cornflowers.”

“Wish I'd been there. I like blue.”

“Horace stands there doesn't say or do anything, just looking stone sober, like he can be. You

know what she does? She glances at the papers, says looks like someone's been copying. Says to me, you'd better guard your paper. Points at Horace, says let this be a warning to you. I'll not have any cheating in my class. And Horace says, word for word, No mam. Mrs. Wilson, I don't cheat." I swished Hank's racquet back and forth. "Wanna know what's sick. I couldn't have said the same thing."

JJ hugged her knees. "If I ever did and I'm not saying one way or the other, Majormajor would kill me." She shrugged, "So then you'd never really know."

"I'd miss you."

"Two tokes turn you sappy." She braced her hands flat on the court, shook her head. "But that's totally unfair."

"Less fair. Unfair. Bad fair." I raised both hands in surrender. "You don't maybe know the half of it. You sit up front with the A team, all your besties. You don't wanna know what Horace calls you and Carrie and Stacy. Know what you miss sitting up front and hearing every word first. In back, and I've seen it, Horace and I or even Reggie will raise a hand and she'll only call on me. Remember a month ago, she called on me and I said, Thanks. Horace has something he's been wanting to say."

JJ gasped. "OMG that was you? We thought it was Reggie. That's fucked up."

"Unfair and fucked up."

"Yeh, but, also totally fucked up, you gotta know this, your super aggravating annoying adding to our homework habit. You don't get it do you. Bringing up blacks getting shot. Ask Horace, go ahead. Blacks get shot every day. They shoot each other. We don't need Mrs Wilson piling that on." JJ tugged her socks up. "That's unfair like for those of us who actually do the homework."

I cracked my knuckles, watched the sun glint in her hair. "Just explaining what you can't see, no eyes in the back of your head." I wondered if I was too stoned to make sense.

"Don't be bullshitting yourself. You're not the only one with two eyes and a conscience. You're sounding like a righteous fool. You know Stacy went out with him in eighth."

I draped my shirt over my head. It smelled of me and grass. All, I knew was Horace had an after school job with his uncle. It grew quiet inside my head. I could feel the sun full on my back. From outside, I heard JJ say "Shit. What time is it? If I'm not back 3:15, Shit, latest 3:30."

"Shut up." I said. "I don't know what time it is. I'm innocent." Under my shirt, I took a deep breath. "Go ahead, if it helps, check my shadow, maybe I'm useful as a sundial."

"Not funny."

JJ started back up the fence. Straddling the top, she yelped. "Damn. Double damn. Fuck, I just sliced myself." She swung her other leg over, slithered down. Lips clamped, she wiped at her leg. I

could see blood. “Shit. Shit. There's rusty wire up there. Watch out.” She wiped again, winced. The cut was above her knee, bleeding freely.

I scrambled over, hopped down next to her. “Does it hurt?”

“Shit, yeh. About as much as it should, I guess.”

I stripped off my shirt, felt chill, no longer stoned. “Use this.” I held the shirt out.

“Gross. Got any worse ideas?”

“No. For real. Tie it around your knee.”

A mangy, yellow cat, low to the ground, streaked by. A gun metal Doberman, tongue out, ears pinched forward, trailing six feet of rope careened after it. JJ screamed. She was terrified of dogs. Majormajor kept a wolf halfbreed tied in their yard. It got Hank once. The Doberman snarled, changed directions, charged us. We broke for the truck, JJ limping. I opened the passenger door, stepped between her and the dog, raised Hank's racquet like an axe, caught the dog hard, knocked it sideways. The dog howled, snapped at the air, hurled itself at the door. JJ slammed it. The dog thudded, left claw marks down the door panel. I gaped. The jagged white lines of undercoat paralyzed me. There'd be no way to conceal what I'd done.

“Stupid.” JJ shouted. “Get in.”

Before I got to the driver's side, the dog, a blur of red eyes, white teeth was on me. I swung again. The dog clamped its jaw around the racquet. The force of my swing, the weight of the dog wrenched my arm. I let go of the racquet, scrambled in, slammed the door. The crazed dog, racquet jammed in its mouth, thrashed about. I heard a moan. The sound came from me. I glanced at JJ.

“You Ok?”

Pale faced, she grunted, “For fuck-sake, drive.”

“Hank's racquet.” My hands trembled.

“Are you f-ing crazy.”

The Doberman, racquet sticking out of its jaw, smashed against the truck.

“Go.” JJ barked. “Get us out of here.”

I started the truck. “I'm dead. Dead.”

“Me, too. Also bleeding.”

I peeled rubber. Half way down the drive, a GREEN's Yard Care pickup zipped by, Horace in the passenger seat. He nodded. I realized how late we were. At the bottom of the drive, I stopped.

“Where to? The hospital? Is it still bleeding?”

JJ bit her lip. “Don't really want to look.”

Blood had soaked through the shirt. I shivered. Felt like crying, for us both. “I'm fucked. Good

as dead, fucked.” I pounded the steering wheel. “Which way?” My hand hurt, shoulder ached. I started to turn left on Elm, “I’ll take you to the hospital.”

“F-ing not possible. Get a grip. Majormajor will come shoot you before he kills me.”

“Somebody's got to look at it.”

“Take me home.” JJ said.

“I'm not going home.

“Not your house, stupid, mine.”

I said, “But, Major”

“But me nothing.”

“You keep saying he'll kill you.”

“Keeps the bad boys away.” Pale as she was, she grinned.

“Dad's truck. Hank's racquet. Never been so fucked in my life.”

“Stop shitting yourself. You were a hero. A real one. Saved my ass.”

I shook my head. No hero felt like I did. “OK, then. You save mine. My house. You'll make me innocent of everything; cutting, Dad's truck, Hank's racquet and Mom'll clean you up.”

The corners of her mouth turned up, “And the test?”

Her smile eased me. “The test. Oh, yeh, the test.” I laughed. The sound startled me. “That's on me.” I wasn't sure of going home or of anything. I knew Mom would help JJ. I prayed Hank wouldn't be there. Figured he'd at least stop at Regina's. A police car went howling by. I shivered. We passed an empty school bus. “Mom'll call majormajor.”

“I can get my bike.”

Two police cars were at my house. One, in the driveway, a girl in the back seat. The other, on the edge of the lawn, next to JJ's bike, driver's door open, red and blue lights flashing.

“Shit. Shit. Shit. I don't know.” I wanted to keep driving. “I don't think I can do this.”

“Stop.” JJ said. She opened her door, slid out. Before my feet touched the ground, Mom was coming straight at me, face white, sobbing. She threw her arms around me, hugged me tight, like she hadn't since childhood. Over her head, I saw JJ seated on the grass next to her bike, a policeman next to her. Mom's embrace absorbed my shakes. I didn't cry. I watched JJ. Mom, head buried in my neck, spoke a jumble of words; “School. Truck. JJ's bike. Kidnapped.” Holding my breath as if underwater, kidnapped broke the surface. I gasped. Mom stepped back. I saw the policeman with JJ pull on blue, medical gloves.

“And after the call from school and after I realized it was JJ's bike,” Mom began to make sense. “I just thought with the truck gone and all something terrible had happened. Something awful. And

Officer Thom, he brought Hank home with all that misunderstanding. He said he'd seen two Black men in a pickup and that just got us all thinking and it was dreadful. Terrible. You have no idea what a fright you gave us.”

The policeman helped JJ stand. She had a bright white bandage above her knee. She was holding my bloody shirt. She looked like a warrior princess, Bitch Be Me, in yellow on her purple T. Beyond her on the porch, a policeman was bending over Hank, writing something down.

“You're not hurt are you?” Mom asked. “You didn't get hurt? What happened to JJ?”

I shrugged, wanted to ask what misunderstanding, what happened to Hank. JJ limped over. The policeman said. “It's a scratch, Mam. She'll be fine. All cleaned up. Still you might want to get your daughter a tetanus shot.”

JJ, Mom and I all spoke at once. They were explaining. I spread my empty hands wide, figured the sooner the better. “Look, I lost.”

JJ cut me off. “He saved my life.”

A horn honked on the street. GREEN's Yard Care pick-up stopped behind dad's. Horace beckoned. I walked past the police car in the driveway. Regina was in the back, a dark bruise on her cheek. She looked away.

Horace laughed, “Should've called first. Didn't know you was having a party.” He cocked his head to the side. “Two cars, huh. Not bad. Don't really want an invite.” He winked. “Thought I saw you fleeing the scene. Thought this might be yours.” He reached down, handed me Hank's chewed up racquet.

I clutched it to my chest. “Thanks.” I steadied myself with a hand on his truck. “Thanks. You have no idea.”

“Oh, I might. Just didn't think it would take two of 'em.”

I laughed. “And the dog? The f-ing crazed Doberman?”

“You don't do lawn work without bringing dog treats. Maybe trespassing tennis players could learn something.”

“Yeh. Thanks and thanks again. I owe you big time. You've saved my life.” I gave him a fist bump. “How was the test?”

“Aced it. Knew 'em all. Maybe I'll get as high as an 85.”

