

The Petunia

God created the earth in seven days, and it was good. The snake slithered in, tempted free will with something sweet, and that was that -sin pillaged the world.

Man became designers of maps, yes, maps, to determine who conquered what, and how to get there. The industrial neighborhood of Chicago Lawn was a perfect square on the grid. Its street names were numbers, so you couldn't get lost, but you did anyway. Marquette Park was a squiggly shape within, three hundred acres-aesthetically pleasing, like a petunia blooming from a cement crack. Weeping willows bowed, akin to arches of a cathedral, and wildflowers tiptoed on prairie grass, as if in song -springing from pews, roused by the holy spirit. Islands accommodated a lagoon, bulging like a pseudopod expelled by an enormous amoeba, and nature existed as it should: above and beneath, splashing and exploring and hunting and multiplying.

Acquisition of the park commenced in 1878. Bull dozers arrived with brute force, at the pleasure of man. Soil was disrupted to design baseball fields and golf courses, running paths and footbridges. Trouble came to pass, maybe because there was so much room to hide.

A couple walked barefoot. A picnic basket swayed at the patched elbow of the young man presumed chivalrous, wine and honey, crackers and cheese. She reached for his hand, and he checked his pocket for the quaalude.

Dads and sons balanced fishing poles over their shoulders. The sons, at first squeamish, thought nothing of stabbing the squirming worm with the hook that baited the catfish, that cleansed the lagoon of sludge.

Slick businessmen sealed deals; caddies and putters a finger snap away, and they

celebrated at the 19th hole with a tippie and a toast. Boys rode bikes to the baseball field, and when they left as men, they'd acquired wisdom, but the sense of belonging- they never found it again, and so everything, moving forward, lacked something, even seduction, in its lure and climax, and maybe the belonging was the face of God.

Teen-agers played ice hockey when the lagoon froze over, and they toked from bongos, pretending it kept them warm, but really, it was numbness. Sure- as- shit, one of them fell through the ice, and so the park prohibited such things, as if pitched signs, weathered from the elements, did the trick.

In 1912, immigrants arrived in droves. Poles and Germans, Irish and Lithuanians, and they labored in Chicago Lawn's stockyards and factories. They saved hard-earned money, and like a master to clay, a neighborhood took form.

Men of calloused, able hands-similar in shape and size- turned storefronts into mom-and-pop restaurants. Like Macy's Christmas windows, those that strolled peeked into candles that glowed, encased in crystal cups upon white table clothes. Pretty waitresses, of pale skin and distinct jaw, presented steaming food from the homeland, scents of spice and spirits. The heirs of these secret recipes, strong women of build and heart, cried bitter tears beyond swinging kitchen doors, and those that strolled came in from the cold.

Butchers, born from good stock, touted the finest meat, specials of venison and sausage scribbled on the chalk board, and soup bones could be purchased for a song.

Fiddles and tin whistles lured barflies to Irish taverns, and they danced the jig with friends of more affable nicknames. Beer flowed, thick and dark from the spout, a perfect pour, and the barflies stayed until last call. The band played *Sbe Moved Through the Fair*, and the barflies sang along, crying about promises broken, although they never remembered.

Lithuanians, banished by Stalin, planned and constructed hospitals and convents, and who would know in their old age, they'd end up in ghettos.

Savings and loans secured investments; churches and schools were crowned with cross and bell tower. Brick by brick, the neighborhood became known as 'The Bungalow Belt', and in that, the descendants claimed territory.

In the 1960's, black folks from neighboring Englewood left their tenement houses, dressed in their Sunday's best. They crossed over the invisible demarcation line at the Norfolk Southern railroad tracks. They assessed real estate for purchase; interested in brown stones of two or three flats, they took care of their own. They entered the banks to invest in a better life, only to be redlined, and so it started.

Martin Luther King initiated Freedom Marches through Marquette Park. George Lincoln Rockwell and his henchmen were granted a headquarters, smack dab in the middle of the community, as if worthy of the welcome wagon and a casserole.

Prejudice, a thousand-fold, hurled bottles, pipe bombs, fists and hate. The white flight made a b-line to suburbia, and this went on for decades, changing the landscape of what should have stayed beautiful. As bedlam grew beyond the park, a tragedy occurred within.

In 1984, Paul McCue, a young man of great potential, drowned in a fraternity hazing gone amuck.

The fraternity pledges ran wild through Marquette Park. Dead, crusted leaves of October swirled down from sugar maples, and the full moon loomed cold over a blistery darkness. The pledges were in the thick of yet another ordeal, and between spit and pant, the boys convinced themselves that, this time around, the brothers would be impressed by the outcome.

Clad in diapers of oversized safety pins, the boys deemed mocking off limits, and they twitched their clown noses; part of the shit-show. Across each red button nose-- to add to the buffoonery--‘The Ringmaster’, when inspired, wrote a derogatory adjective. Pledges adhered to adhesive and application, and The Ringmaster bellowed: “This is now your name. See! It fits you.”

And birth names could not be uttered, and really, for some, it got in their heads. After-all, the Ringmaster, exquisite in tailcoat, top hat, and judge of character, was the Chapter President.

The theme ‘*ALL FOR ONE AND ONE FOR ALL*’ was written fancifully across an enormous banner, tied with a rope to parallel tree trunks. Pledges were dispersed into teams with the following names: ‘Wannabes’, ‘Keep Dreaming’, ‘Good Luck with That’, ‘Not’, ‘Yah, Don’t Think So’.

The sister sorority made an entrance, much like cheerleaders at half time, and the boys gyrated, as if pom poms were at arm’s length. The Ringleader placed the top hat into the hands of the squinting girl with the ghost light upon her, a pledge among sisters, and circuitries continued.

Bewildered, a Freddy mask was snapped to her face, and she jumped at the crack of the

whip, now at the will of the Ringmaster. She picked random names from the top hat for 'Promiscuous Pairings'. The frat boys watched in amazement as the sorority demanded the whip be used upon her, ever so gently, well, that was the claim; everything a contradiction.

The girl screamed, and her counterparts responded, "A small sacrifice." And then there was chanting. "All for one and one for all."

The girl shivered. "Then who the *fuck* is next?"

She was carried off, kicking and screaming, and the chant changed. "Who do you think you are? You won't go far."

The boys, entranced, were told to 'snap out of it', and relegated to the Cooch Tent and the Watering Hole and the Canon Ball of Psychedelics, spread far and wide.

Frat boys held clip boards at each 'venue', scoring members on agility in a myriad of objectives. There were mind-games and peer pressure, as boys vied for the highest score, but the master plan destined all to fail, so there was animus.

As punishment for a barfing incident at the Watering Hole, Team Wannabe lost points. Consequently, they were assigned to capture a fellow pledge who'd gone AWOL, leaving his clown nose in his wake, unnamed. The Ringleader smiled broadly, and, with a crack of his whip, he gloated. "He will be called Dereliction of Duty, and the nose will be super glued upon him. Finally! A proper name for this nobody." But that was a lie. In fact, the boy gleaned of perfection, and he had left The Ringleader at a loss. The Ringmaster pointed the team in the right direction. "You will find tiki torches on your journey, to shed light on the subject. Look for the World War 1 Monument, where the bronze globe hovers above you."

Team Wannabe, with the names Pudge-Face and Barf-Bag and 'ROID and Braggadocio-

followed a fork in a dirt road, and there'd be no return to what was.

Pudge-Face lagged. "I gotta pee like a racehorse."

Barf-Bag nodded. "I'll second that."

'Roid clenched his teeth. "You two want a punch in the face?" and he ventured ahead. "We ain't stopping."

Pudge-Face flinched. "Are you serious?"

"About the punch in the face?"

"No, about pissing!"

'Roid clenched his fists. A grunt escaped from his mouth, a mere slit atop a long jaw. and his head was square, so he was called Rock 'Em Sock 'Em among friends, which he found flattering. He talked slowly, as if Pudge-Face were foreign. "We....ain't...stopping."

Braggadocio breath escaped in a cloud. "Jesus! It's cold as a witch's tit out here. Keep walking: adrenaline helps. You snooze you lose; we have thirty minutes to present Paul...I mean, Dereliction of Duty, to the center ring. I'm not going down because of you two overactive bladder douchebags. I can't believe your scores effect mine. I'd be at the top of the list right now."

"Yah, and I have a bridge to sell you," Pudge-Face mumbled.

Braggadocio got in his face. "You didn't get the happy ending at the Cooch Tent, you faggot. That cost us ten points."

Pudge-Face lips trembled, and they were blue from the cold. "The girl, she refused to suck hard, she was crying."

"And that doesn't turn you on?"

Pudge-Face recoiled. “Fuck you.”

Braggadocio gave him a shove, and Pudge-Face whimpered. “I can’t help it if she doesn’t know what she’s doing.”

“Are you a man?” And he shoved him again.

“Leave him alone,” Barf-Bag whispered, but inside a twisted delight stirred, and he sneered, and Pudge-Face pointed at him. “What about Barf-Bag here? He cost us points too.”

Barf-Bag stood straighter. “Not as much as you. And you guys all puked in your mouths, be honest! I just got caught hurling.”

Braggadocio shrugged. “I can handle my liquor, light weight.”

“What can’t you do?” Barf-bag said sarcastically, and Braggadocio’s nose flared.

‘Roid grunted, as if lifting weights, and he sniffed maniacally, quick tempered. “Do I need to body slam all of you! We’re on a mission to find the bastard of their discontent.”

Braggadocio jeered. “You can drop the theatre ‘Roid, it’s just us.”

“Yah? You think so? They’re everywhere, dumb ass.”

Barf-bag looked up, as if frat boys were swinging from trees, and he complained of chaffing and the consequences of a wet diaper.

“Then hold it, you Pussy!” ‘Roid said. “Geez, what happened to you? You used to be bitchin’.”

“What happened to ‘All for one...”

“You can’t be that dumb!” He shoved Barf-bag at the back of his neck and Barf-Bag gagged, and his Adam’s apple vibrated, and he put his hands onto his knees because they buckled.

‘Roid cackled. “Now that’s theatre.”

Urine warmed Pudge-Face, the temperature had dropped like a medicine ball. He made the decision to act like a baby, based on the assumption that no one would notice. They proceeded through the thick foliage of Marquette Park, and he tagged along, afraid of the dark.

Team Wannabe secured the tiki torches, and Braggadocio pointed up to the bronze globe. “Look, it outlines the flight path those World War 1 Lithuanian pilots took. It was a mission of great ambition, but they crashed, hence the monument.”

“Sucks for them,” ‘Roid said, and he spotted a bottle of Jack Daniels at an adjacent Elm Tree. A lure, maybe a trap, but they raced to grab it, and it splashed at every turn, so there was bellyaching.

‘Roid, amid gulping, came upon a park bench. He curled into a fetal position, pointing up to the Victorian lamppost. It illuminated his face, sweaty and pasty, and he looked monstrous, like Rock ‘Em Sock ‘Em in the twelfth round. “Here we are! The beginning of Narnia.”

Braggadocio sighed. “Come on Lucy, we got shit to do.”

‘Roid folded his hands behind his head. “I’m gonna veg, man.”

Braggadocio objected. “You can sleep when you’re dead.”

“I need a pick me up,” and it took all of them to pull ‘Roid up, and he objected. “That’s not what I meant!”

Pudge-face scoffed. “If I couldn’t stop to piss, why should you get a nap?”

“Why don’t you shut the fuck up, Pudge-face with the saggy diaper?”

Pudge-face flinched, and he pointed to his diaper. “That’s all on you!”

‘Roid feigned punches, as if in a boxing ring. “You want some of this?”

Pudge-face cowered behind Braggadocio.

'Roid spit toward the grass. "That's what I thought!"

The boys stomped barefoot upon mountain mint, and it smelled like toothpaste, and purple cornflowers drooped like badminton shuttlecocks. Moths sucked the nectar of the cornflowers, and the boys griped about the trigger of allergy.

They reached a footbridge, and the lagoon swelled beneath them. They sneezed and sniffled, and in an act of dereliction, they tore off their clown noses, throwing them in the lagoon, and they watched them float away, like lily pads bleeding.

'Roid pounced to the end of the bridge. "Who's that tripping over my bridge?"

Braggadocio pitched his voice to a higher octave: "Oh, I'm skinny, I'm going over to graze, but...there's a Billie Goat of girth right behind me, and he will be a feast for you," and the lot of them pointed to Pudge-face, and he pouted, hence his name. They all gave him a shove, and Barf-Bag joined in, "Very well, be off with you!"

He avoided the wounded expression of his old friend Pudge-face but added. "Geez, Adam, we're just fucking around."

Braggadocio gasped. "You're not supposed to call him that! I'm telling!" Barf-bag countered. "You called Paul, Paul! Remember?"

"I did not!"

"You did."

"No, I didn't!"

Tedium echoed in the darkness, and they tripped and trapped. They heard a murmur, but it bounced from branch to sky, then back to nowhere. Wide-eyed, they laughed. "Who's fucking

with us?”

“Hazees. They spy and troll.”

Barf-bag looked to the moon, shrouded by a cloud the color of bronze. “Maybe it was a ghost.” They took a collective, trembling breath, and released it, smoky into the air.

‘Roid changed the subject. “Smells kinda like marshy shit, doesn’t it? Pudge- face, did you shit in your pants too?”

They likened the stench of the lagoon to hydrogen sulfide, revealed in chemistry class, via a test tube, but agreed the lagoon was not of the same intensity.

Braggadocio lit a Marlboro Light. “I read that the lagoon has a shortage of catfish now, so maybe that’s why it stinks so bad.”

Barf-bag’s eyes narrowed. “Why would you read about this dumpy place? You wanna be a south-sider now?”

“Wanted to get a lay of the land. Strategic,” Braggadocio smiled, with great pride.

Barf-bag scoffed. “Doesn’t seem to be helping us much!”

“Yah? I knew exactly where the monument was.”

“A retard coulda done that.” Barf-bag sniffled, his nose in the air. “This place is trash compared to Lake Forest, now there’s some epic scenery, the water and the chicks. Right, Pudge-face? You remember the keg parties? Boss!”

Pudge-face spit. “They all have sticks up their asses.”

“You should know! Your dad the lake shore proctologist!”

They blazed up a joint, freed carefully from a diaper crease, and no one acknowledged its whereabouts, just that it was not from a diaper that sagged like the face of the perpetrator.

They greedily took deep hits, commenting on its stellar quality, and some inhaled twice, and

others objected.

‘Roid smiled. “Just the pick-me-up I needed. Strong shit, man.”

Braggadocio took credit. “Good strain, from Columbia, dude.”

And they nodded collectively, accepting fallacy as truth, and they had a knack for talking while they inhaled, for they were really, really, cool. They coughed and coughed, and gagged and gagged, and animals dashed to burrow and den.

Pudge-face motioned for a time-out. “Okay, we need to focus.”

Barf-bag replied. “I don’t even know what that means anymore.”

‘Roid roared. “I’ll tell you what it means: getting laid all the time as the end game, not just head, at the direction of some cocky Ringmaster!”

Pudge-face scratched inside his diaper, his skin crawling everywhere, and in his altered state, he brought up what injured him. “That girl left me hanging. It was a hostile act.”

“Do you blame her?” Barf-bag asked, and there was manic laughter, and the friendship would never be the same.

And then they yawned in the round, submitting, it’d been a hell of a week.

They leaned against the railing of the footbridge, and proceeded to light the tiki torches, initiating the ceremonious hunt for Paul McCue, and there was warmth.

Pudge-face took a gulp of Jack and they yelled when liquor spewed from his mouth, the fire close and a blue flame hovered and waned. “Are you a spaz?” “Shit, light him up!”

They hopped off the footbridge into the sand, and Braggadocio tumbled, and they giggled like little girls. The flames wiggled and hissed, and they spotted Paul’s shirtless body, face down at the shore of the lagoon.

They yelled and cursed to torment him, learning from those they

aspired to be, and they were jealous of Paul anyway; he was favored, and he attracted girls like honey, and to make matters worse, he was nice.

Moths, fueled by nectar, gather to the flames, and singed. The boys closed their eyes, red and bloodshot, in search of that crackling sound, back in the recesses. Yes! The zapper, that hung on the rafters of the porch, and the bugs, stuck in the grids, were electrocuted in a melody of quarter notes and sixteenth notes and rests, melodic like a song.

Ribs spit on the grill, highly anticipated, with that special sauce splashed in pickle juice. The transistor radio, plugged in by the screen door played Carly Simon, staticky, and this moment now was the line in the sand, from the good old days of lawn chairs and paper plates, and lumpy mosquito bites dabbled with salt and honey, and then the peck, by their mamas with aprons and pageboys.

The boys deemed Paul a sea creature; broad and muscular, lording over algae blooms and fluffy cattails, his arms spindly and herbaceous, his curly hair quivering, alive in the shallow water, and in that, Paul must be alive too.

‘Roid turned him over with great force, and Paul’s head bounced into dry sand. “Jesus! You’re gonna crack his skull,” but no one knew which one said it.

No matter. His eyes were dead, like smooth stones, the best kind for skipping, and his lips were purple, but they were still parted, as if to say something, so the prior murmur, dismissed earlier, would haunt them for the rest of their days.

Guttural noises spewed, involuntary, somewhere from inside their bodies. where they didn’t know sound occurred.

Bungalow lights, off in the distance, snapped on, like votive candles at an altar of despair. The sound wild, maybe an animal lost and hungry. But maybe not.

Robed shadows peeked through sheer draperies, new residents of color on night watch, afraid of lynching, although unlikely, but crosses of fire choked the life out of them too. Parents awaiting the prodigal son to come home, but he wouldn't, now a Latin King, prepping crack cocaine, learning the ropes. A single mom, juggling two jobs, whose daughter, fourteen years old, had snuck out the window. Lithuanian, tall and slim, blonde hair, blue-eyed, naive, jumping rope and playing hopscotch, or so her mother thought, but that had not been true for a year or so.

Had their little ones roared for them, out in this jungle land?