

## Metamorphic Innocence

Thouter Place, a complex of 2 story “garden apartments” which amounted to a bunch of utilitarian boxy brick buildings. No one would categorize the housing as “luxury.” It was affordable, lower density than the projects, but higher than most neighborhoods on the north shore. Residents were working class. School teachers and hair product salesmen, librarians, retirees, grocery store clerks, single mothers who worked, some who didn’t.

There was the usual cast of characters on the block. There was Al and Chris who lived upstairs with their mom and two sisters, and a dad who was away a lot selling stuff door to door. There was Frankie and Gerald, not brothers, but both black and the nicest kids you would ever want to meet. Gerald had a smile that could light up a city block. Frankie was quiet and shy, but full of fun and goodness. And there was the kid everybody called “Lil Big Man” for his short stature and his overly gregarious personality.

Then there was the Cheater. If you were in any kind of game with him...he was cheating. It didn’t matter what; it seemed against his nature to play fair. Cards, monopoly, marbles, you name it. The kid Cheated to win. Rumor had it his older brothers and father ran numbers for the mob. Cheater wasn’t particularly threatening physically, but was bigger than most. He was wiry with thick black hair and an under bite like Jay Leno’s. His eye teeth looked like fangs.

It was 1971. The city crime rate high, but in those days, kids still went outside to play. They played the usual games; Army Tag, hide-and-go-seek, but had to go to the school yard to play a decent game of soft ball or football. Sometimes a group of four or five boys would play a game of tackle on a small swath of grass between two buildings. It was during one of these games where a life lesson was learned in a cruel hard way.

Now this game of football had a specific set of rules. No passes to the sidelines. This rule was necessary because on either side of the makeshift little stadium were basement apartments with windows which faced the grassy lawn. So to throw an errant pass in that direction was to court disaster. It was actually quite a mature rule for a bunch of 10 and 12 year old boys.

It was Lil Big Man and Gerald against the Cheater and Frankie. Lil Big Man was pretty good at football. Especially for one of such diminutive size. No way could the Cheater get a pass to Frankie without Lil Big Man breaking it up or intercepting it. And by the way, Lil Big Man did not like to lose. And he especially hated losing to the Cheater because, well, because he cheated.

So the game is going along, Frankie lines up opposite Lil Big Man. To the left are windows. Gerald was covering his man. The Cheater calls "HIKE" and starts to fade back as if he's freaking Roger Staubach or Terry Bradshaw or something. Gerald is counting, "one Mississippi, two Mississippi. Frankie breaks left. He's wide open and the Cheater lets the ball fly.

What happened next changed the neighborhood forever.

The pass wasn't even close. It was like the Cheater was aiming for the center top pane of glass. Direct hit. Smash!

Everyone was stunned and frozen in disbelief. The Cheater, Gerald and the other boys run like the wind. The lady who lived in the apartment came to see what the noise was. She saw Frankie who stood with his mouth wide open purely incredulous as to what was taking place.

“FRANKIE! YOU BROKE MY WINDOW! I’M GOING TO CALL YOUR MOTHER!”

Something came over Lil Big Man. A rage, a surge of righteous indignation at the injustice perpetrated before his eyes, because it was clear, immediately clear to him that the Cheater, once again, was going to get away with cheating. He was going to get away Scott free.

Before Lil Big Man realized what he was saying, the words rambled out of his mouth like a locomotive steaming down the tracks at full speed. He shouted:

“IT WASN’T FRANKIE MRS WALTERS! IT WAS THE CHEATER; HE LIVES IN BUILDING NUMBER...BLAH, BLAH, BLAH...APRTMENT...BLAH, BLAH, BLAH.”

There. That fixed him. How dare he go against the rules and get Frankie in trouble just to win a stupid game. Just because he could not *win*, fair and square.

The next day Lil Big Man went outside to play. It was the worst day of his young life, and many more would follow.

As he walked down the street, he approached the Cheaters building. There on the stoop sat the Cheater’s mother. The sun glinting off the towering spire of her bleached blond bee-hive hairdo. Her face was painted an inch thick with make- up and red lipstick. She smoked a Pall Mall and had a mole on her lip. I’m sure she thought she resembled Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot*, but she looked more like Bette Davis in *Whatever happened to Baby Jane?*

Just about every other boy in the neighborhood surrounded her. Guys who were not even involved in the game. Everybody was there except Frankie and Gerald. They, the boys, gathered around her as if she were the queen and they her knights. Of course, her son, the Cheater, sat almost incestuously on her satin robed lap.

“There he is!” she shouted with an accent straight out of *Saturday Night fever*. “You got a lotta nerve showin yer face around here after what you did, you...**YOU LITTLE RAT!**”

That was it. From then on boys who knew nothing of what really happened and probably didn’t care taunted Lil Big Man on his own block. (All except Frankie and Gerald. The two black kids who remained his friends.)

“Rat. RATSO. Rodent. Rodential.” They shouted at that kid whenever they saw him. At the top of their lungs.

Fortunately, he went to a different school than the rest, having moved to his neighborhood from a district not too far away. So his mother never changed him out of that public school to one his nemesis attended. He spent his days in the class room and afternoons, evenings and nights inside. But not before he had fought every kid on the block. All except Frankie and Gerald. One guy got a punch to the Adams Apple. Boom, right in the throat. He was too tall for Lil Big Man to reach his jaw.

Lil Big Man did get bested once. They ganged up on him with a sixteen year old thug playing ring leader of the younger boys. They all grabbed him and threw him into a trash dumpster at the back of the

parking lot. Fortunately, it was empty at the time. That prompted Lil Big man's mom to enlist the aid of an older cousin who slapped that sixteen year old silly. He just open palm bitch slapped him. They also had Lil Big Man join the Cub Scouts. That cousin would eventually make Eagle.

Time passed after the incident and Lil Big Man moved away from that place. His mom, a working, single mother in 1972, bought her own house. Later on, as young adults, many of the boys would become friends and forget the horrid name: rodent, along with the silly fist fights. However, Lil Big Man never fully trusted them, even one in particular whom he considered his best friend.

The last time Lil Big Man remembers seeing the Cheater was when he split his lip with his Cub Scout ring. The Cheater had the smaller boy pinned down on the ground, but Lil Big Man got his left hand free. And like David slinging a stone at Goliath, he struck his tormentor right in the mouth. The Cheater jumped up and ran away crying.

Injustice of more dire consequence swirled way above young heads that frosty day. Civil Rights, Viet Nam, Watergate, but of all the troubles on the nightly news one always stood out. It remains the most terrifying of situations: to be falsely accused of a crime for which you are not responsible. Were all boys complicit simply for being in the game? Were they to be blamed for wanting to play on grass instead of hard asphalt? They were luckier than most kids their age in similar economic situations. They had a choice. Was Frankie complicit with the sideline plan? Was Lil Big Man complicit because he refused to cover him against the sidelines? Perhaps. But they did not make the plan, nor launch the ball. They were duped. They trusted the Cheater, and the Cheater caused all the trouble.

How *does* one address injustice, expose cheaters, and cheating without becoming a pariah? Why do human beings make rules if there is such a chemical addiction to breaking them and getting away with it? It is maddeningly frustrating.