

Kneeling in the Arena

Ten in the morning and it was hot!

A lanky, light-skinned boy with a mess of an Afro took shelter under a patch of trees using a sunken-in hay bale as his seat. The oasis sat like an island in the middle of the dried yellow field. With his thumbnail, Jordan dug into a tiny glass pipe scraping vigorously at the black resin caked along the sides. Slapping the bowl twice against his palm, he turned to glance behind him in case anyone was watching before loading it again. Every few minutes when a car rounded the bend, he was on his feet, flag in hand, waving them forward.

Counting the minutes, he felt perspiration trickles down his sides and back. Periodically, he sucked in his bottom lip, all flecked and cracked, with barely enough saliva to coax the irritation. He paced back, twirling the little orange flag, to pass the time. A headphone dangled around his belly while the other played in his ear, so he could hear for anyone calling him. Staff came around regularly to refill water bottles.

“Yo,” a voice cooed from his side. “You Jordan?”

Foggy, Jordan spun around.

“This way,” a man laughed.

“Ah, hey,” Jordan spun back in the opposite direction.

“Hi. *Jordan?*” asked the young man. He was a few inches shorter, long face, goatee, short brown spiked hair and icy blue retinas.

“What up?” Jordan nodded with mild apprehension.

“Hi, Aaron,” he extended his hand. “They've got me paired up with you for the last bit of the shift.”

“Cool,” Jordan shook hands and silently rued the loss of solitude.

“You look familiar, man,” Aaron observed. He stepped even closer, comfortably within Jordan's bubble. As though making a study of his face, he eyes searched as he continued, “I saw you at the registration table, earlier. This is a wild stab in the dark, but are you from Phoenix?”

“I pretty much grew up there,” replied Jordan with curiosity.

“Yeah!” shouted Aaron.

The mystery began to annoy Jordan.

“It's Aaron from Best Buy. *Like six years ago.*”

After a few seconds, Jordan exclaimed, “*No way.*” A few more seconds passed. “What you doing up here?” he asked, catching a flick of disappointment in Aaron's eyes.

“I came up here for teaching jobs,” said Aaron. “Well, actually, I visited a friend in Vancouver about a year ago and we drove down and spent a few days in Portland. I loved it and plus there are way more positions open up here than in Arizona.” Wasting no time, he asked, “How long have you been up here?”

“’Bout a year, now.”

“*Why Oregon?*” asked Aaron. Despite his previous enthusiasm, something in his tone suggested it was an odd choice.

“Family. Some cousins,” Jordan stuffed his hands into his pocket. After a second, he added, “Couldn't do another Phoenix summer, ya know?”

“Fuck if I'll go through that again,” Aaron squinted, side stepping into the shade. “We'll gonna burn our tits off out here today.”

With that bit of crassness, a host of memories came back into focus. This was the Aaron he remembered. The kid who took every opportunity to throw up the 'shocker' hand sign. Back then he was outspoken, often to the point of obnoxiousness. It was usually a diatribe on

organized religion or a pitch for the Ron Paul revolution.

Around that time, they often found themselves at the same house parties and gaming nights. They had a few mutual friends but rarely spoke while out and even less at work. When they did it was about anime which both had an affinity for.

“Who are you excited for?” asked Aaron.

“Huh?” hummed Jordan, gulping down the remains of his water.

“Which artists?” Aaron pointed over the trees toward the main stage.

“Leon Bridges, Ty Segall, Flaming Lips.”

“Yeah,” Aaron grinned. “Seen the Lips twice before.”

“Dope,” Jordan nodded. “My second shift on Saturday night, though, so who knows if I’ll be able to catch any of those sets. They got me on from four-to-nine.”

Aaron wiped the sweat from his eyes. “Aw dude, that sucks.”

“No kiddin’. I signed up to volunteer back in March when they first put the call out.”

“I didn’t sign up ‘til June,” Aaron mumbled. “Just go ask the coordinator. What’s her name, Tara? Teresa? I can’t remember.”

“Tammy,” said Jordan.

“Yeah, she’s real chill,” Aaron shrugged. “She cut my Friday night shift in half. Just told her how psyched I am for the lineup. Ask her about switching.”

Jordan considered the idea for a few, wondering if they were thinking of same Tammy. Earlier while assigning volunteer posts, she zipped around like an over-stressed hummingbird, clutching a green plastic clipboard so tightly he expected it crack in two. She wore an earpiece which made it look like she was constantly muttering to herself.

“Cool,” Jordan brushed his nose across his right shoulder. “I’ll keep an eye out for her.”

Be back in a few, I gotta pee.”

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Pickathon was hosted by the Pendarvis Farm located just outside Portland. The music festival touted itself as a sustainable, communal-minded event. Tents blanketed the forest as most attendees camped throughout the weekend. The main stage was positioned at the bottom of a short hill at the edge of the forest. White sails like diamonds were strung overhead providing shade. Their checkered formation captured the eye like a science-fiction aesthetic. The Wood Stage was nestled deep in the thickets. Its structure was constructed with interwoven tree branches and limbs. The performances Jordan would later see were sincere and beautiful. He sat with the hundreds watching from hammocks, hay bales, and the sturdy branches overlooking the amphitheater. Performers and audience alike awed their surroundings. The notion that collectively they were part of something unique, was contagious.

Lines formed outside the row of Honey Buckets. “Funny name for a urinal,” he thought. The discrepancy between their name and their interior was painfully apparent, even in the low traffic hours.

Attendees slowly trickled in, as crew members erected scaffolding and lighting. They came in tank tops and fluorescent sunglasses. They came strapped with hefty North Face gear; in long scraggly beards gripping micro brews. At this point, Jordan had counted eight other black individuals. This was Oregon, so no huge surprise, though it was still unusual for him. He felt it in the looks they gave him. He saw whenever he entered a room, *that look*, which begged the oh-so-passive question: *What are you doing here?*

Jordan didn't have to look far for Tammy, she found him. As he parted the bushes back out to the parking section, she waved him in her direction. She charged toward him, as though

flames roared behind her.

“Which section do I have you in?” Tammy pressed the keyboard into her breast.

“I’m out in the field,” Jordan pointed, on guard.

“Have them store the cases near the loading area,” she ordered sharply.

“*Me?*” Jordan looked behind him with his hand on his chest.

“I need you to hurry,” she commanded to her feet. Her sunglasses were wide and wrapped around the side of her face, making it impossible to spot her gaze.

Jordan put one awkward foot forward before she waved at him. “The cases?” he asked.

Tammy, facing away, waved her hand at him. “Who are you partnered with?” she turned to him.

“Aaron.”

“Great. Do you need me to send someone around with water?” she asked, suddenly attentive.

“Yeah, I’m getting’ low. And one more thing while I’ve got you,” he called as she paced away.

“What’s up?” she turned, already twenty paces away.

“Is there any way I could swap my Saturday evening shift for an earlier one? Most of the acts I want to see play that night.”

Tammy’s lips contorted into a less than promising expression. “Yeah, that’s gonna be difficult since all the assignments are already made. They assigned priority shifts to volunteers who signed up late.”

“That’s the thing, I signed up as soon as they put the call out. Back in April.”

“*I’m sorry,*” she shrugged as she kept moving. “All the scheduling is final.”

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“Eh, I'm still watching but I lost a lot of interest after season four,” said Aaron, referring to everyone's favorite fantasy drama.

“*Really?* That's when they finally picked up the pace.”

“I don't want to say it jumped the shark but now that they've killed off everyone they could cut loose; all the suspense went away. And I hate what they've done with Danny's character. Like why's she gotta bang every dude she comes across? She's supposed to be a queen.”

“That's most of the characters,” he shrugged.

“Yeah, but she's a *queen*,” Aaron repeated her title sourly.

“Isn't that the main perk of royalty?” Jordan chuckled. “Doing whatever the hell you want?”

“She used to be my favorite,” Aaron lamented. Quickly his expression shifted. “What are you doing for work these days?”

“Catering, mostly. I volunteer for some political action groups like *Fight For \$15*.”

“The minimum wage increases?”

“Yeah, I canvas mostly. There are some protests here and there, but it's mostly going out and trying to talk to folks.”

There was a short pause. “You think it'll really pass?” asked Aaron.

“I'm hopeful, yes. We've had some successes in New York and Oakland”

“Aren't you worried about inflation?” Aaron appeared concerned. “The minimum wage goes up and so do the prices on everything else.”

“Prices have gone up. On everything,” Jordan responded.

“Fifteen dollars an hour just doesn't make sense,” Jordan shifted uncomfortably. “I started my first job at seven dollars an hour. And it was manual labor.”

Jordan answered in softer tone. “I hear ya, man,” he nodded. “But folks need to feed their families, they're trying to get out from under debt, and the current rate ain't cuttin' it.”

“So, are you Seahawks fan yet or are you still rooting for the Cardinals?” Aaron changed the subject.

“Ah man, I haven't been keeping up much this season,” Jordan replied. “Their roster any good, this year.”

“Easily got a shot at the play-offs,” Aaron delighted. Then after a moment, he added, “You've been missing all the outrage out of San Francisco. You've probably seen the news though.”

“You mean all that with Kaepernick?”

Aaron nodded. “Media's freaking out, politicians are freaking out, fans are pissed.”

“I heard,” Jordan replied in a sour mumble.

“Talk about a shit storm,” Aaron sighed. “Some folks are calling him a traitor.”

“What do you think?” Jordan's mouth moved before he could think. A morbid curiosity in him had to know.

“Me?” asked Aaron, pleased with the consideration, though surprised. “I don't really care whether he protests or not. Like I said, I'm a Seahawks fan.”

Did he? Jordan wondered.

“Do I agree with him?” Aaron pursed his lips. “No,” his head shook.

“What don't you agree with?” Again, the words sprung from his lips before he could measure them. Did he *really* want to know *Aaron's opinion* on the matter? Jordan shuffling his

feet in the dirt, slipped his phone from his pocket. Still got another hour, he thought.

“Well,” Aaron started slow. Eye contact at that point was out of the question. “I just don't think professional sports are the place for politics. If you wanna protest the government, you gotta do it on your own time.”

“Do you disagree with what he's saying?” Jordan asked, feeling more deliberate. Might as well pick his brain, he thought. We're stuck out here, anyways.

Aaron hummed for a second. “To be honest, I didn't get exactly what his message was. I know he doesn't like cops and that it's about some of the shootings in the news.”

“Mostly it's too tell police to stop shooting black folks,” Jordan kicked a dirt clumped.

“That's a hard one for me,” Aaron scratched the back of his scalp. “Like, I have friends who are cops. They're out risking their lives every day to protect people. I hate seeing good guys like that getting dragged through the dirt by the media because of a couple crazy assholes.”

Wide eyed, Jordan drew a long, deep breath in and out of his nostrils. He wondered whether Aaron were trying to rile him or whether his comments were meant to be innocuous. There was a mild frustration in his tone, but mostly it was sympathetic.

Jordan opened his mouth to speak as a voice called out in the distance. Startled, both cocked their heads to the side.

“They calling your name?” Jordan asked.

Aaron looked puzzled.

Seconds later, two figures emerged from around the bend, out from under the tree shade. Each had three bags slung over their shoulders.

“Ay! What's good, fam?” Aaron shouted, oblivious to Jordan's side-eye.

“Ah, you know, we gearin' up for the weekend,” said the taller of the two. He reminded

Jordan of his Dominican cousin when he smiled.

“This is my homie Derek,” introduced Aaron. “We were in the same program together.”

“Nice to meet you,” Derek and Jordan shook hands.

“*Tariq*, Jordan.”

“Hey man,” Tariq solemnly extended his hand. He was shorter than Jordan with slim dreadlocks and thinning patches on top his head.

Self-consciously, Jordan rubbed his scalp.

“How long they got you out here?” Derek laughed. “Must be near a thousand degrees standing out in the open like this.”

Aaron checked his watch. “About an hour.”

“*An hour?*” Derek chuckled. “Ay, man, there ain't gone be anything left of you at this rate. We about to post up back in the forest,” he started walking.

“Ay!” Aaron called. “Hit me up later in the afternoon and let's grab a beer or something.”

“Alright, I'll get out you in a bit,” Derek threw up two fingers as he turned to walk away.

“You got your tent set up yet?” asked Aaron, whipping his head to the side til his neck produced a nauseating crack.

Jordan shook his head. “Got it stored at the event staff tent til we're finished.”

“Better head over right after we're through. I see a lot of folks coming in through the south entrance,” Aaron made a visor with one hand. “Spots will fill quickly.”

Jordan craned his neck, but he was far-sighted enough to begin with and his cheap green sunglasses weren't of much help. “I'm be alright,” he played unconcerned. His thoughts were still preoccupied with the previous topic. What began as mild curiosity grew to an irresistible itch.

Truthfully, Jordan had no intention of spending any more time with Aaron at Pickathon

than already designated. Their reunion was void of nostalgia and at times it was awkwardly apparent how little the two had to talk about. So, why the overwhelming urge to debate? Wondered Jordan. Perhaps, it was seeing Aaron and, once again, working with him that jogged his memory. He was timid back in those days. He wanted to be white; not consciously, not totally, but he wanted what came with the territory. All of his idols were white and so were his friends. By eighteen, he crafted an all-denim aesthetic from images of his favorite emaciated garage-rock bands, and dreamed of moving to Seattle after high school.

Paradoxically at the same time, when a white friend or classmate told Jordan he was a 'really white, black guy,' as did happen frequently, it hurt more than he was prepared for. Rather than protest and make a scene, he absorbed them with a humoring laughing and no protest. Something from his childhood, repeated through adolescence, something explicit without being spoken, made it clear he was not supposed to bring up race. Not around white people. Major faux-pas.

His mahogany brown eyes, his coiled black ringlets, his big lips, these were the facets that made him 'ethnic,' as his classmates referred to him, but it was his skin from which he felt betrayed. It was dark enough to separate him from his white peers, and light enough to distance him from his black peers, who were skeptical of the way he spoke and dressed.

“I hope he keeps kneeling,” Jordan broke the silence.

Aaron cupped his wrists, rotating his hand until each cracked. “I don't really care,” he shrugged. “Just hope he thinks about most of the police out there every day protecting us, him included.” He paused perhaps for dramatic intent, then added, “And it's little disrespectful to those serving in the military.”

“*How?*” asked Jordan, eyebrow cocked.

Aaron looked puzzled, then stated matter-of-factly, "It's during the anthem."

Jordan rolled his eyes and muttered, "Anthem's racist anyways."

"Look, I'm not one of those flag waving asshole, and I'm *not* a conservative, I just think certain things should be respected."

"Kneeing is disrespectful?"

"Wasn't he sitting?" Aaron asked.

"For the first week, yeah. Now, he's kneeling."

"Yeah, man, I'm not trying to ruffle your feathers here," Aaron's face twisted. "I just think we should be politics out of professional sports."

"So when they unravel an American flag big enough to cover the field, that's not political?" he laughed.

"That's not politics," Aaron grew agitated. "That's patriotism. Overblown patriotism, yes, but not politics."

"I guess I'm asking if black and brown folks should just put up with the injustices because pointing them out hurts white people's feelings?"

"*Whoa,*" Aaron froze. His chin retracted into his neck and his eyes bulged. "*Did-not mean for it go there.*"

"It's a sincere question," said Jordan with frightening catharsis.

"Look man, I'm not trying to start anything. I didn't want this to get emotional."

"It's an uncomfortable topic, for sure. Believe me, I know. But it's very personal for me, as well. Obviously."

"This *isn't* about race. Not for me, at least," Aaron assured him. "Besides, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, these are personal heroes of mine."

“Wait, *what?*”

“I’m just saying,” Aaron put his palms out in protest.

“*Okay, then,*” Jordan turned and rolled his eyes, still trying to decipher whether he was annoyed or enthralled. “So, what is it about then?”

Aaron pursed his lips. “I don’t know,” he threw his hands up. “Doing the job they pay you millions for. Showing respect to the flag. I mean for what they make and what they have to do. *C’mon.*”

Jordan scoffed the premise. “You don’t care about respecting the flag or any of that crap.”

“Excuse me.”

“It’s fake,” Jordan shrugged. “It’s paid patriotism. And man, the league didn’t have players standing for the anthem until 2009. They only started pushing that after the National Guard dumped a bunch of money into their pockets. You say this isn’t politics, but I’d say it’s the very definition. And this isn’t about race? Let me ask you, what’s the makeup of the league? Of any professional sports league? And how often do we hear white players being chastised for being ungrateful? This is just another instance of black folks being silenced.”

“That’s... super unfair.” Aaron’s expression turned red and contorted., “You don’t have any idea what I think. *You don’t even know me,* so how can you make these claims.”

“I know you, Aaron,” he sighed. “You’re smart but you’re arrogant. You accept America as progressive by virtue of its might. You bring up MLK when it’s convenient, and forget him when it’s not. You think that by avoiding the dialogue you’re somehow being *sensible* and *objective*. And what’s worse, when pushed, you co-opt the conversation with crocodile tears and hollow patriotism.

“Aaron, you’re the type of dude who thinks that having a black friend means you ‘get it.’

You're also the dude who used to begin jokes with, *'I'm not racist but...'* You want it both ways and you don't the criticism.”

Finally, Aaron lunged forward until they were eye to eye. “You oughta watch what you say.”

He was so close Jordan could smell his breath. “I'm done,” he turned his head to the side. “Huh?” he pressed his chest against Jordan's, causing him to laugh.

“Back off, man!” Jordan put his arms up. The absurd display of ferocity must have been funnier from a distance. “This is childish.”

Aaron scowled, glanced away, then back at him. Clearing his throat, he took a step back, then another. “You should be ashamed of yourself. You're pissed off and you want everyone else pissed off with you.”

“*Yeah, that's it,*” he turned and started walking.

“God damn social justice warriors. You people are dividing this country!” Aaron shouted,

“Got it,” he waved without turning around. Dragging a palm across his oily face, he returned to the patch of trees, plopped down onto the haybale, and waited for the end of his shift.

The End