

## 1978

I turned ten years old in the summer of 1978, what felt like the hottest summer ever in Memphis. I can't say for certain what the average temperature might have been, but to a ten-year-old it was a hundred degrees every day. What I do know is that when I left the artificial, conditioned air of our house in the mornings and jumped feet first into that humid pool of sunshine, I was better equipped for such temperatures than I am now as a middle-aged man.

Where would I end up those mornings? Where would the tepid breeze and my bare feet find me as the hours melted away to noon when my mother would call me inside for lunch? Up a tree, usually. Either the magnificent magnolia in our front yard or its smaller neighbor, a dwarfish, yet sturdy, dogwood with limbs that could hold me to the top before they began to bow ever so slightly. Or, if I were on my bike, almost anywhere within five or six nearby blocks. Many times, though, I'd wind up across the street at my friend Melissa's house. She had pine trees in her backyard that weren't good for climbing, but provided a shade in one corner that made the heat almost tolerable. The air that summer was charged with electricity, like when a fuse would blow in our utility closet, a slight whiff of metallic smoke filling the kitchen, or that tingle on the back of your neck when there's danger nearby. I didn't know much about danger at the beginning of that summer, but I did by the time my birthday rolled around in late August, when it felt like the thermometer had to be jumping up over one-hundred.

I went to a Catholic school not a mile from my house and had just finished the fifth grade with horrible old Mrs. Kitchen. That wasn't really her name, but that's what we called her. Her name sounded like "kitchen" and we weren't yet mean enough to

come up with anything really nasty. The closest I'd come to fear by then was to be caught talking when I shouldn't've by Mrs. Kitchen – she didn't abide talking out of turn – and the closest to danger, other than my mother warning me not to take candy or get in the white van of a stranger, and other than the stunts I pulled on my bike and only now, as an adult, see as foolish, was in the lessons of religion and God we learned in church and school. The stories of the martyrs and a graphic painting in church of St. Peter being crucified upside down scared me to death. That summer, though, in 1978, the city of Memphis was gripped by fear and I would come to know well that tingle of danger.

There was a doghouse in one corner of Melissa's yard. She didn't have a dog, but the little house sat on a patch of dirt left cool and infertile in the shade of those pines. After we climbed the trees in my yard, rode bikes half a mile out and back twice, entered the still and sterile kitchen of her grandmother's house (Melissa and her mother lived with her mother's parents) for a tall drink of water before we were chased outdoors with the accusation of being sweaty and dirty (we were), Melissa and I would sit on the peaked roof of that doghouse like Snoopy and Woodstock.

"My armpits are sweaty," Melissa said one day. She'd been tending to a scab on her shin.

"Mine, too."

"That'll make you stink," she said, and it was then that I noticed the light, downy hair on her shin. I looked at my own, but they were as void of hair as the rest of my body below my neck.

"You too," I said defensively, self-conscious about my odor, about my body there on that doghouse as though it had suddenly become solid, displacing the air around

Melissa; as though it had just then become a part of this world. I shifted where I sat, feeling the warm, tar paper shingles rough through my shorts.

“Girls don’t smell.” Melissa’s mom was studying to be a doctor back then. Melissa and I had surreptitiously looked through one of her medical textbooks one day after school and there we saw grotesque skin fungi, amputees, melanoma spreading like an oil spill and one full-frontal photo of a single mastectomy. My juvenile brain was confused by what, even in pre-puberty, I knew to be the natural beauty of a full breast with rosy nipple side-by-side to a scar and a flatness that only accentuated its neighbor’s delicate curve. Good sat with bad; safety beside danger. There was a solid rectangle, a swath of black over her eyes to protect her anonymity, though I assumed at the time that she must have been ashamed of her body. Because of her mother’s med school status, and such books at her disposal, Melissa, I was sure, knew all there was to know about the human body – female and male. I rubbed my fingers in the moist pocket of my pit and smelled them when I was sure she wasn’t looking. I did stink.

Melissa didn’t have a father, not that I knew. Her parents had been divorced, a concept that had just begun to bleed into my field of knowing, and he had left Memphis for another life, someplace in California or Nevada, someplace as remote to me as divorce was then.

“Jesse’s coming to get me later, he says he got a new dirt bike and that I could ride it with him.” Jesse was Melissa’s mom’s boyfriend. I prayed then that she wouldn’t ask if I wanted to go with them. Not because I knew my mother wouldn’t let me – my mom hated motorcycles and forbade me to ever ride on one – but because the idea terrified me as well. Melissa was always doing things that terrified me – climbing higher

than I would, standing on the cross bar of her boy's bike as we coasted down our street gaining speed with every passing driveway, finding the short cut through a ditch I wasn't supposed to go down into. She could also out run me, out swim me, pin me in arm wrestling and throw a baseball farther. Being friends with Melissa could be humiliating for a ten-year-old boy.

“Where?”

Melissa shrugged as though the subject already bored her; she was easily bored.

“River bottoms, I guess.”

“My mom said if anybody in the city got hurt, an ambulance might never show up.”

“Because of the strike?”

“Yeah.”

Again, she shrugged. “Who's going to get hurt?”

It was my turn to shrug and I wondered why I'd even thought to bring it up. “Are they going to get married?”

“I don't know. I hear my mom say ‘I love you’ when they talk on the phone. Maybe they will.”

I tried to remember ever hearing my mom say that to my dad on the phone when he was working nights at the newspaper. She must have, I thought, and maybe I just didn't hear it. Sometimes Melissa and her mom would go to Jesse's house and they'd take me along. Usually Melissa's mom and Jesse would go into Jesse's room so they could study; Jesse was going to be a doctor, too. Melissa and I would watch TV (Jesse

was one of the first people I knew with cable television) and drink Cokes from the endless supply of cans in the refrigerator.

“They kiss a lot, too,” Melissa said, her attention shifted from her scab to the long mane of blue-black hair she was pulling into a ponytail. Errant strands clung to the sweat at her forehead and temple. “Have you ever kissed?”

I shook my head and there it was: that tingle of danger like the priest’s prophetic homily full of sin and revelation walking up my neck. I rubbed at it as though I could wipe it away and rid myself of the thought of physical affection with someone not related to me. I dried my damp hand on the leg of my blue jean cut-offs. “Have you?”

“Not yet.”

I breathed a sigh of relief at something Melissa hadn’t yet conquered over me, and noted with admiration the promise of possibility even in her denial. That “yet” hung in the air like humidity.

She added, “We could.”

“What?”

“You could kiss me.”

We didn’t kiss that day. As I sat on the roof of the doghouse the following afternoon, barefoot, the collar of my red shirt wet with sweat, and with the heat of the day inching up and humidity like a mask of warm water across my face, I wondered if we would at all. My heart beat in my throat at the anticipation, at the prospect of life changing, for surely this was an occasion to be remembered, a hurdle cleared. How many of my peers had pressed their lips against another’s, how many had experienced the sweet

thrumming of expectation and fear and longing and dread all in one course to be swallowed whole, or not at all?

We hadn't kissed the day before because Melissa had intimated we weren't ready, as though she knew, in her femaleness or from her mother's medical textbooks perhaps, that this anticipation was all part of the experience and shouldn't be overlooked or rushed. Childhood is a game in itself and we'd spent the rest of that day coming up with our own intricate rules for this aspect of it. We would meet back there on the doghouse for our kiss, but only if the planets aligned, only if the signs we put in place were realized – the sun had to be out, but it had to have rained before (it had not rained in a month, we were hedging our bets, setting ourselves up for failure to prolong this leap into adolescence), we both had to be barefoot and at least one of us should be wearing a red shirt. It had to be a day that her grandfather hadn't set aside to mow the backyard, we wanted no audience and freshly-mown grass made Melissa sneeze. The event would happen – if it happened – only after noon. If these things came together then, Melissa said, we would kiss. Never has so much felt out of my control, even in adulthood, as the possibilities of that day.

On that eve, back at home, my mother cooked pork chops, the grease in the skillet sputtering and spattering over a Bee Gees record she'd put on for company. *Saturday Night Fever*, my mother's latest musical obsession; she and my aunt had been to see the movie three times in the past month. Music was a constant in our lives back then. Almost a year earlier I had watched as my mother sat curled on the couch crying her eyes out. Unsure of who Elvis Presley was, I sensed, even in my naiveté, that he had been someone important to the world and, somehow, to us. The radio that previous summer day had

played nothing but Elvis Presley and I tried, as we ate the pork chops, green beans and macaroni and cheese, to reconcile his rich, gospel voice with the nasal crescendos and rapid-fire beats of the Bee Gees. It could be soulful as well, though, as when “How Deep Is Your Love” came from beneath Jesse’s bedroom door to Melissa and me in the living room, mixing with the television show we watched to become the soundtrack to summer. My sisters liked it, too, and one, only two years younger than I, swayed with the easy beat of “Jive Talkin’” while the baby smeared macaroni across her bare torso.

It was an easy summer night and the easiness of it had put the matter of the kiss out of my mind for the time being. After dinner, after dishes and baths (I bathed that night like a boy on fire, dousing my armpits with copious amounts of water and soap), while lying on the carpet in the living room surrounded by *Star Wars* action figures and Legos, the easiness seeped out of the air in a slow leak as my mother watched the news on television. Memphis was burning. It wasn’t the heat, though the relentless temperatures did little to dampen the population’s temper and fear, but the fire department that had gone on strike, followed by the police department. Crime and fire raged equally across the city in the summer of 1978 as though in a foot race of their own. I listened, though I didn’t know quite what a strike was, imagining a sledgehammer pounding again and again against its anvil with sparks and splinters flying through the air. I wasn’t far off.

“They refuse to work,” my mother said to me and my sisters, or to her lap full of crochet yarn.

“Why?”

“Money, working conditions, too many things that need to come together for it all to be resolved. They should give them whatever they want before they burn the city down if you ask me. This is just like the garbage strike.”

I didn't know who “they” were that my mom talked about and thought that maybe the police and the firemen, like two of the four horsemen, were to blame for the chaos. Again, I wasn't far off. Adulthood had its own set of rules and they were only beginning to make sense to me, though there were intricacies to it that I knew it would take years, decades, to fully understand. To add to my confusion, the news anchor spoke of people pouring into the city and through the ornamental gates that guarded Elvis Presley's house. Even as the city imploded, there was an allure to the music and a recently deceased king, and I saw that fear could be overcome, or at least overlooked, but only by love. It was simple, even as a kid, to see that there were needs at one end and fear at the other, and that most people were like pinballs ping-ponging around between the two.

The strike added to the heat and the nights, while I lay in bed unable to sleep, were eerily absent of any sirens at all. My body and brain exhausted from a day of play, I imagined a glow in the distance over the hedge in the back of our yard and past the five-block limit I was allowed to wander. It was a fire burning out of control, a yellow-orange dome like the sun rising at midnight. I worried that it would bear down on us, leave a path of embers and destruction before swallowing us whole. Then came a timpani of doom and I envisioned hordes and masses taking to the streets in a frenzy of lawlessness despite the city-wide curfew. It wasn't until the rain began, a hi-hat beating a disco rhythm on my bedroom window, that I realized it had been thunder I'd heard. Rain. It was all falling into place and it was only upon sensing the certainty I hadn't considered



real that the slow terror I'd known all along crept with the pinprick of danger up my spine to clamp down on my neck. There were things in the world that bespoke danger, and only so much my ten-year-old mind could handle in a single day. I slept.

“There was another fire last night,” Melissa said. She sat with her legs bent and hugged her knees tightly to her chest. She was barefoot like me and the last remnants of red polish to match her shirt flaked off her toenails. At times, I thought Melissa was more boy than I and I tried to conceive of a scenario in which she'd painted her nails. Where had she done it? In the crook of the mulberry tree trunk in her neighbor's yard? At the river bottoms? She picked distractedly at a fleck of paint.

“In the rain,” I said.

“Maybe the rain put it out since the firemen aren't working.”

“Yeah.”

It was idle chat, nervous talk. The thought of Melissa being nervous shot my anxiety level through the roof, past the pine tree boughs that were still limp from the night's storm. I carried anxiety around with me those days like a pocket knife, or the sling I'd made from two old shoe laces just like David in the Old Testament. Melissa, though, never seemed scared of anything; not motorcycles, not bicycles, not forbidden ditches or police strikes. That sitting on the doghouse with the promise (the threat?) of a kiss might make her nervous made me think there was something I hadn't factored into the equation. Perhaps I should have been even more terrified.

“Overton Park burned up last night.”

“No it didn’t,” I was quick to contradict, so rare was the opportunity for me to one-up Melissa. For me, this was a foot race finally won, as sweet a victory as a new height reached. “It was Overton Square, that’s different.”

So easily confused for children, these two landmarks only blocks apart from each other and not more than five miles from where we lived then; one a bucolic park, one of the oldest in the city, the other a district of shops, restaurants and bars. And it was the latter that had blazed the night before. “Some houses to the north of it, right along the edge there, and a shop to the south, a music store, guitars and drums and things,” my dad had said just that morning over coffee and with a mouth full of toast. “The firemen were there, not working of course, but they were there watching and some, not all of them, but some, laughed about it all and at those trying to put it out. It was an awful thing to see.”

“Well, Jesse said it was Overton *something*.” Jesse could do no wrong. The sun and moon rose and set by Jesse, the park would surely burn by him.

*Square*, I thought, and wanted to say it but I’d run out of adrenaline, the height had become dizzying, and I shut my eyes tight to Melissa’s painted nails, the soft, downy hair of her legs, the sweat spotting my shirt and the pine trees rising up and up into the cloudless blue of a summer day. There was a complete darkness behind my eyelids as though I had a swath of black across my eyes and what I felt then, as I closed my eyes into that darkness even darker than the soundless nights with their iridescent, far-off flames and hopeful grooves of harmonious brothers, was a peace like we hadn’t known that summer. I was ten and already tired of the heat and the humidity and the sweat and fear. I knew nothing of insufficient wages or unsafe working conditions; I knew nothing of dead idols or divorce or sex, so I let it all go away. I set it free into that darkness and it

was then that the whole world opened up to me and brushed against my brain with the breath and promise of autumn as I leaned in towards her lips.