

## 10 - "Fight the Power"

The houses here were bright and welcoming and looked nothing like the block where Liam's own home suffered its outward jaundice from mildewing asbestos shingles with paint that had long ago gone to powder. Inside, tar sullied the topmost of the drywall, and in the evenings the ochreous living room glowed with the stain of Ionicera on amber lamp shades. But these houses were different. Different with lawns trimmed so sharp the edges cut a long brown strip separating the lushness from the grey curb. Their bright vinyl hinted at convivial interiors with console color tv's and vibrant shag carpets. And the stoops were not stoops but were porches. Real porches that had 2 or 3 chairs and small tables for glass jugs of Kool Aid or iced tea with sliced lemons floating. Liam could scarcely imagine the idea of what was possible only blocks from home once his parents were through with their plan. We'll move one day. To the north end, they'd say.

Kent took the lead and sister was right behind him. He stopped at the four-way and waited for the boys to catch up. He sat his bike, one foot still on its pedal and turned slightly to the side to see how far back Liam and John were. Sister mirrored his position. He stood a full head taller, and his tanned arms and legs in a white t-shirt and cutoff jeans were a stark contrast to her freckled skin and canary softball uniform.

Liam's sister was close on Kent's back wheel and Liam and John were lagging back, zigzagging the road slowly down to the stop sign.

“You need to keep up.” Liam looked up at her. He had been watching the shadow of his front wheel fold in on itself and merge into a solid line before blossoming once more into a fattening ellipse.

“Keep up.”

John crisscrossed behind and in front of Liam making a constant figure eight and smiling at his choreographed pull at the handlebars. Their course was filled with the savor of weekend barbecues and the vibration of the west end drawing a deep and steadying breath before the start of school. In a matter of days, summer would be all but over, and school would be back in session. The eight-block trek from Yorkshire to the Westgate Shopping Center on Micanopy Bluff would be more than an adventure through foreign neighborhoods; it would be this summer’s zenith.

Liam was the one who had invited John along. Kent had a plan: They needed to make a downhill flyer. “It’ll be a birthday ride you ain’t never had,” he told Liam.

“Ain’t til Saturday.”

“You’ll dig it,” he said. “Just bring all your skates and the keys.”

The parking lot was full of shoppers. The boiled peanut man’s truck and small canvass canopy was in its usual spot on the eastside of the lot and today he had company. The store managers were doing their own grilling of burgers and dogs and selling co-colas under a large red stripe tent. The kids stayed on Micanopy and rode past the parking lot until they were at the last turn-in where they wheeled with all insouciance, slowly down the far side alley where the pavement turned to potted chunks.

The back of the Sunbeam Bakery Store had stacks of bread crates and soda crates and spilling over from the back of the Winn Dixie adjacent to the bread store were stacks of pallets,

cardboard and wooden produce boxes, and even more soda crates. But it was the oversized bread crates they were there for.

John and Liam were corner watchers: it was their job to holler if they saw anyone. Kent would go through the crate piles at the opposite end of the store where sister would be lookout and watch the back doors of the grocery and the bread store.

It wasn't long before John grew bored of staring from the corner of the cinderblock building and wandered toward the train tracks where he found the remnants of a fire. Liam offered it was probably just hobos, so they dug around in the scar at the charred fragments with the heels of their sneakers. A Vienna sausage can with the bottom well scorched, a plastic tube that was fun to put their thumbs in and pull out with a round pop, an empty bottle with a purple label and gold lettering, hostess pie wrappers, chicken bones, and couple of cool-looking spoons with their handles curled under almost to the bowl. They crooked their fingers in the looped handles and spun them in the air like the gun-twirling cowboy they'd seen on the *Rifleman*.

On the back of the No Gates sign was a drawing of a circle with an arrow coming out of it. It was unusual and the boys were drawn to wonder at it. They wondered how tall a guy would have to be to draw it. They wondered if the black and jagged lines were made with coal from the same fire scar. They wondered if it might even be some secret language for train engineers who might have been coming from the wrong direction.

"Lookit!" John was between the dumpster and the store now. On the back of the blue metal was the same circle and arrow and a drawing of a stick figure lady in her triangle dress with little triangles trailing beside her. They thought a bit on the meaning of the drawings.

"Probably don't mean nothing but some kids fooling about like us," John said.

Liam studied the two drawings noticing the two arrows pointed in the same direction toward Micanopy. “No, everything means something.”

Kent and sister were back with a big yellow Sunbeam crate with faded red lettering. “What’re are y’all doing?”

“Nothing.” Liam threw the plastic tube down and it landed next to its plunger.

“Do you know what that is?” she asked. He didn’t. “You shouldn’t be touching that shit. It’ll kill you.”

John dropped his popper behind his back.

As they rode, sister fussed about playing in glass and with dangerous stuff that don’t nobody oughta touch, and Kent did his best to sound like his old man and tell the boys how disappointed he was that they couldn’t be reliable lookouts. “Because when you agree to do something, it’s just gotta be.”

The mercury light began its purpling, the skates were rigged, and Kent worked steadily at the rope that would steer the go-cart at lightning speed down Yorkshire and into the void of unknown outside the cast light. Once the rope was taut on the trucks, the cart was ready for a test. I’ll do it, he said. They positioned the cart at western hillcrest just three houses up from theirs and cleared away all the gravel the asphalt had let go of. Kent took off with the boys pushing on his back. The 24 wheels doubled their speed midway down the hill before hitting the hump where new blacktop met old and one of the leather straps snapped with a skate breaking free. “Not bad. Who’s next,” he asked?

“I’ll go,” John raised a timid hand.

“No, I’ll go,” sister stepped in front of John, “but I’m not sure I can steer it.”

Kent unbuckled the mate of the thrown skate. “Sit up front and hold the rope for a minute.” She sat Indian-style and Kent climbed in behind her and reached alongside of her grabbing the reins. “All right, boys. Push like hell!”

Whether it was the added weight or the missing wheels, all was congruous: the cart sizzed down the center of Yorkshire, and the warm wind slid across their sweated foreheads. Sister leaned forward and turned her head low and looked back at the top of the hill just when the cart caught the hump, throwing the back end and Kent over. Her head hit first rolling her face on the pavement before the boy’s knees caught her hip and pulled her airborne. They came down again a hard rolling mass of sweat and skin. The cart tumbled beyond the violet cast into a darkened yard where it would stay until the next morning.

Liam lay in bed and listened to Momma tend to sister. “Y’all should’ve never been there.”

“But will it?”

“What?”

“Leave a scar?”

“Oh, I don’t know, she sighed. “Maybe a tiny one but it’ll be cute. Boys’ll like it.”

“I don’t like ‘em. People with scars are ugly.”

“Don’t touch. We’ll check the bandage in the morning.”

“I *won’t* have a scar.” Liam could feel her voice. “It was all a stupid waste of time. A stupid idea the boys got.”

He listened and thought about the trip to the ER, the blood against the VW’s beige backseat, the crash that was so quick, and the car ride through campus coming home. The

mercury light outside hummed its purple through the sides of the pulldown and spread across either side of the window's frame inching across the drywall. He should've ridden the cart, he thought. He should've said he wanted to go next. Tomorrow he'd be 10, double digits, and he still never ridden a homemade go-cart. She didn't have no reason to be mad. She done something, something big and now she had a story to tell. Through campus all she said was that we shouldn'ta done it. You boys have stupid ideas and just waste time." She's wrong, he thought. Doing nothing is all time is. And they did something. It's time that's truly wastin', and if she could see that then she might have fun.

He thought about the car ride home and the vast solemnity of the empty campus without people or cars moving about. He drifted off picturing the streetlamps that dotted the sidewalks through campus as they slipped along the thin college streets and snaked around and through angular brick buildings. The campus was serious and straight, like the edged grass of other lives where families sat on porches with small roofs and ceiling fans that kept them cool. The lights that had pulsed through the car window now flashed through his dreams a cautionary beacon, calling him to movement and to stillness, reminding him that everything does mean something. They enveloped him in a tunnel of white with scrawled signs begging his attention, but he held his stare to the road that twisted and fell in front of him, leaning and pulling at the rope with every turn and rise.