

## IN ALL INNOCENCE

Four weeks left of school, a stab of regret wrenched me awake. I was supposed to have memorized the Presidents Wilson through Johnson. A string crawled in my gut. I'd screwed around all Sunday losing at Donkey Kong to my half-bro Hank. The string bunched into a hot knot. If I failed the test I'd be roadkill. I hated Social Studies, double hated Mrs. Metcalf. After she'd assigned Kent State I'd asked why not the murders at S.C. and Jackson State. I got fist bumps from Horace and Reggie. Two rows in front of us Toby left his seat, got in my face, called me a "suck up" and "an inside out Oreo." I head butted him, split his lip. Class exploded. Mrs. Metcalf went ape shit. I saw JJ's eyes bouncing away from mine. The room emptied. I got detention.

I rubbed sleep out of my eyes, figured I'd plead sick. One hand on my stomach I crept downstairs. The house was empty. The whole house completely empty. Mom's Volvo gone. Hank's dinged up Toyota gone. Only Dad's brand spanking new, shiny pickup left in the driveway. He was away on business in Chicago. My horrible day turned miraculous. Straight from the carton, I gulped some milk

went back upstairs, did a little air guitar with Hank's forbidden graphite racquet. Mom had given it to him for his birthday or for acing his Chem test or for I don't know what. She was into trying to make up to him. Hank, a senior, tennis star thought she was a joke, a bad one, and I was another, an innocent one. Knuckle burrowing into my bicep he'd snarled if I so much as breathed near his new racquet he'd eat my liver raw. I laid the racquet back on his pillow, smirked, crept back in bed. If school noticed, if they called, all I'd have to say was I'd been sick.

The TV woke me. I plodded back down. Buella dark curls cinched down under her kerchief was dusting. Behind her the TV showed flames, smoke, loud popping, *Rioting in Miami*. Buella's chocolate brown face tightened, "Oh, honey, I didn't know you was home. Did I wake you? Not feeling well?" She tucked the dust cloth in her apron. "Can I make you something?" She glanced back at the T.V. "Sorry. Those knob headed boys are making an awful mess." She snapped the TV off. "Come morning they gonna be sorry."

I thanked her said I'd help myself, got a bowl of cereal. Over the weekend I'd followed news about the Miami police, a Black motorcyclist and a trial. The door bell chimed. I flashed on a truant officer, eased the door open. JJ in cut offs and a Bitch Be Me purple

T blinked, took a step back. “Where's Hank?”

I shrugged, “No idea.” JJ and I went back to from before time. Adjacent blankets in pre-school, we'd learned our letters together, played together, fled together squealing in terror from Hank's threats. Two years ago end of the eighth grade party she'd given me my first kiss. It was on my cheek. We never said a word about it. Last month, her mom had been taken away leaving JJ home alone with her stepdad a flag pin wearing vet we called Majormajor. Her blond hair was streaked with blue and tied up off her neck. She'd used makeup on a bruise on her cheek. I said, “Aren't you supposed to be in school?”

She chewed on a blade of grass. “Hank told me to stop by.” She spat the grass out. “What are you doing home?”

“Sick.” I shrugged.

“Like, short a dozen presidents sick, huh?” She shot me a snotty, older sister look. “How stupid on me, I learned 'em. I'm screwed, cutting for nothing.” She brushed at her bangs. “You got anything cold, a Pepsi?” I nodded. She began, “Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding,” grinned.

I returned with her Pepsi.

She finished, “John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Lyndon Baines Johnson.” mocked a curtsy.

“Found this.” I handed her a note in Hank's scrawl, 'If JJ shows, tell her tomorrow.' Before bed I remembered he'd said something about senior skip day and Sheila.

JJ scrunched the note up, popped the can open. “For fuck's sake I can't cut again.”

“Yeh, like total Hank.” I tried to catch her eye.

She pointed at the bruise on my arm. “Fraternal friction?”

I nodded, pointed at her cheek. “Family feud.”

“Not. You don't know shit.” She sipped her Pepsi. “Maybe I'll plead Mrs. Wilson into a make up test and not waste all my good learning.”

“Go for it.” I grinned. “I'll sit next to you. You write extra big.”

“Not even funny. It's enough half the time I carry your homework.” JJ folded herself down, sat cross legged in the shade next to her bike. “Now what?” She tugged her socks up to below her knees. They had little, purple hearts. “Sure as hell fire can't go home at this hour.”

“Buella's cleaning inside.” I sat facing her. “Just you and me in the shade babe.”

She shrugged. “Is that a plan?”

“Could be. Wanna swim?”

“No can. Grounded. No suit. Not till two weeks by which time

I'll be broiled.”

“Skinny dipping”

“In your dreams.”

“Tennis?”

“You are a f-ing genius, no racquet, no place to play and no way to get there.” She drained her can, crushed it, tossed it toward the garbage. It almost hit Dad's truck.

“There's the way.” I pointed at the truck which I'd been forbidden to drive. “I'll use Hank's new racquet.” I shrugged. “You can use mine.”

“Two for three. Not bad. But where?”

“Doc Connors.”

“Brilliant.” JJ tipped her head back laughed. Her hair shook loose. “Gated, fenced, locked, patrolled by the IRA. Why not? You are a genius.”

“You got a dumber idea?”

The odd thing it all worked. The truck key was under the floor mat. I gave JJ my old Wilson. The Connor place was deserted. We climbed the chain link fence. After an hour, three games a piece, we took a break, sprawled in the one corner of shade. I stripped off my shirt, stretched out on my back. JJ sat close. I could hear her breathing. She lifted her T, wiped her face. Her middle looked

tanned.

“Ooh wee do that again.” I said.

She flushed, reached under, held a scrunched up joint to her nose.

I said, “You can do that and finish the set?”

“Just watch me.” She smoothed the joint out on her bare knee, lit it, giggled, “I’ll smoke you.”

“Well, I can’t.” I shook my head. “Can’t and drive.”

She stretched out next to me, took a long pull, held it up, waved it over my head. A thin line of grayish smoke snaked between white, puff ball clouds. She took another toke. Held her breath. I propped up on one elbow, leaned over. She exhaled. I gulped her breath, mumbled, “Second hand smoke.” We both laughed. It felt kind of sexy. I took the stub, started to inhale, coughed.

“Newbie.” She took it back.

I tried to snatch it away. She let me have another toke.

Above us in the empty blue sky, little white clouds expanded and contracted as if breathing. I heard birds. The tree leaves sparkled in the sun. “Shit. Shit.” I said, “Where’d you get this?” A slash of red, a cardinal, landed in the nearest tree. We’d been like this a year ago at Lake Sanford. JJ in a white bikini made me blink.

On our backs, inches apart, closer than I'd ever been to anyone and at the same time light years away. I edged closer, leaned down as she exhaled.

Her wide, dark eyes caught mine. She cracked up, choked laughing, “Mouth to mouth resuscification. Mouth to mouth.” She could not stop laughing.

I thought of what I'd seen on T.V. about Miami. I thought of telling about Sheila. I sat up.

JJ's chin rested on her knees. Behind her the clouds shifted into little sail boats. I felt adrift. My voice came from across an ocean. “You know how mom dotes on Hank. It happened again last night. Dad out of town. Half-bro's late for supper. Mom hops up, fixes a whole plate for him, doesn't ask him nothing. Doesn't ask where's he's been, why he's late.” I stopped. Couldn't remember why I'd started. I'd been grounded for being late to dinner but that wasn't it. I thought I knew where Hank had been but wasn't going to go there with JJ. “Hank sneers at the mac-n-cheese, pushes it aside, says, I want a steak, a big one. Mom hops right back up. Can you beat that shit?”

“She loves you, too.” JJ said. “You can't forget that.”

I remembered her mom, shut myself up, wondered if what she said was therapy talk. “Tell me.” I waved at the drifting clouds,

“What do you see in Hank?”

“Maybe someone's just a wee, tiny bit stoned. Listen to you like competing?”

“Not competing.” I closed my eyes. “Hank says in tennis love is nothing.”

“I don't play tennis.”

I smiled. “You just played me.”

“You're you.”

“Not always. Not always.” I felt like I was sinking below the ground. “Worse, don't know if I wish I were more me or less me.”

“You can open your eyes now. You look like you're at sea.”

“Can you remember all your prezes?”

“Woodrow Wilson, Woodrow Harding, Woodrow Coolidge.”

She grinned, “How stoned is we?”

“We is.” I opened my eyes, saw the clouds flirting with wisps of her hair. “Is we is” if I'd had a thought it dissolved in laughter. I reached up, watched my hand move slow, slower than it had ever moved. I touched her bruised cheek.

She leaned into my hand.

“Where'd this come from?” I wasn't sure I'd said it aloud.

“Shit.” JJ said, “Now, you're sounding like Majormajor.”

I didn't say I thought it was Majormajor.



JJ stood, brushed herself off. "More tennis time."

"No. No. Not yet. Can't rush me. Red lights, brake time." I chuckled. "That's almost clever." I rolled to my side, heard JJ whack a ball against the fence. I patted the ground. "Come back to earth. Watch more ant races with me."

"Shit, you gotta grow up." She crouched down, sounded sober. "Last week, why'd you pull that stunt in Mrs. Metcalf's class? Hank says you've gone ghetto."

"Yeh and he's gone rogue." I thought of Sheila's flame red hair. I twirled Hank's racquet. "What stunt?"

"You know about South Carolina State and Jackson?"

"This morning did you see Miami on T.V.?"

She shook her head.

"You ought to come sit in back with Horace, Reggie and me. I'll save you a seat. Horace laughs at all her bullshit."

"Hank says Horace is an idiot."

"You know him?" I studied the racquet strings. "You don't have a clue. Nobody does. Sure, Horace clowns around. He's pretty damn funny too."

"If you like snark." JJ leaned back on her elbows. The tips of her hair brushed the court.

I watched the pulse in her neck. "Snark? I'll tell you snark."

Take my word on this. I've seen it. We get a quiz back and for the same answer, the exact same answer, I'll get a check and he'll get half credit. You tell me. I've even seen it where I'll get full credit and for the same answer he gets a zero.”

“Have you ever done anything about it?”

“Horace didn't want to. He says don't go there. I'm doing good.”

“So?”

“So, before midterms, I dragged Horace up to see her. I've got both papers and I show them to Mrs. Metcalf and I say, excuse me. Totally natural, totally innocent.”

“Totally unnatural.”

“Horace stands there just looking stone sober like he can be. You know what she does? She glances at the papers, says looks like someone's been copying. Says to me, you'd better guard your paper. Points at Horace, says let this be a warning to you. I'll not have any cheating in my class. And Horace says, word for word, No mam. Mrs. Metcalf, I don't cheat.” I swished Hank's racquet back and forth. “Wanna know what's sick. I couldn't have said the same thing.”

JJ hugged her knees. “If I ever did and I'm not saying one way or the other, Majormajor would kill me.” She shrugged, “So then

you'd never really know.”

“I'd miss you.”

“Two tokes turn you sappy.” She braced her hands flat on the court, shook her head. “But that's totally unfair.”

“Less fair. Unfair. Bad fair.” I raised both hands in surrender. “You don't maybe know the half of it. You sit up front with the A team, all your besties. You don't wanna know what Horace calls you and Carrie and Stacy. Know what you miss sitting up front and hearing every word first. In back, and I've seen it, Horace and I or even Reggie will raise a hand and she'll only call on me. Unfair and fucked up.”

“Yeh, but, also totally fucked up, you gotta know this, your super aggravating annoying adding to our homework habit. You don't get it do you. Bringing up blacks getting shot. Ask Horace, go ahead. Blacks get shot every day. They shoot each other. We don't need Mrs. Metcalf piling that on.” JJ tugged her socks up. “That's unfair like for those of us who actually do the homework.”

I cracked my knuckles, watched the sun glint in her hair. “Just explaining what you can't see, no eyes in the back of your head.” I wondered if I was too stoned to make sense.

“Don't be bullshitting yourself. You're not the only one with two eyes and a conscience. You're sounding like a righteous fool.

You know Stacy went out with him in eighth.”

I draped my shirt over my head. It smelled of me and grass. All, I knew was Horace had an after school job with his uncle. It grew quiet inside my head. I could feel the sun full on my back. From outside, I heard JJ say “Shit. What time is it? If I'm not back 3:15, Shit, latest 3:30.”

“Shut up.” I said. “I don't know what time it is. I'm innocent.” Inside the tent of my shirt, I took a deep breath. “Go ahead if it helps, check my shadow maybe I'm useful as a sundial.”

“Not funny. It's past time.”

Half way to the truck, a mangy, yellow cat streaked by. A gun metal Doberman tongue out, ears back, trailing six feet of rope careened after it. JJ screamed. The Doberman snarled, changed directions, charged us. We broke for the truck. I opened the door, stepped between JJ and the dog, raised Hank's racquet like an axe, caught the dog hard, knocked it sideways. The dog howled, snapped at the air, hurled itself at the door. JJ slammed it. Claw marks marred the panel. I gaped. The jagged lines like white lightning paralyzed me. There'd be no way to conceal what I'd done.

“Stupid.” JJ shouted. “Get in.”

The dog, a blur of red eyes, white teeth went for me. I swung again. The dog clamped its jaws around the racquet. The force of

my swing, the weight of the dog wrenched my arm. I let go of the racquet, scrambled in. The crazed dog, racquet jammed in its mouth, thrashed about. I heard a moan. It came from me. I glanced at JJ.

“Holy shit. You're bleeding.”

She looked down, wiped at the blood. “Must've been the door.”

I handed her my T shirt “Use this.”

“Gross. Got any worse ideas?”

“No. For real. Tie it around your knee.”

Pale faced, she grunted, “For fuck-sake, drive.”

“Hank's racquet.” My hands trembled.

“Are you f-ing crazy.”

The Doberman, racquet sticking out of its jaw, smashed against the truck.

“Go.” JJ barked. “Get us out of here.”

I started the truck. “I'm dead. Dead.”

“Me, too. Also bleeding.”

I peeled rubber. Half way down the drive, a GREEN's Yard Care pickup zipped by, Horace in the passenger seat. He nodded. I realized how late we were. At the bottom of the drive, I stopped.

“Where to? The hospital? Is it still bleeding?”

JJ bit her lip. “Don't really want to look.”

Blood had soaked through my shirt. I shivered. Felt like

crying, for both of us. “I’m fucked. Good as dead, fucked.” I pounded the steering wheel. My hand hurt, shoulder ached. “Which way?” I started to turn left on Elm, “I’ll take you to the hospital.”

“F-ing not possible. Get a grip. Majormajor will come shoot you before he kills me.”

“Somebody’s got to look at it.”

“Take me home.” JJ said.

“I’m not going home.”

“Not your house, stupid, mine.”

“But, Major” I said.

“But me nothing.”

“You keep saying he’ll kill you.”

“Keeps the bad boys away.” Pale as she was, she grinned.

“Dad’s truck. Hank’s racquet. Never been so fucked in my life.”

“Stop shitting yourself. You were a hero. A real one. Saved my ass.”

I shook my head. No hero felt like I did. “OK, then. You save mine. My house. You’ll make me innocent of everything. Cutting, Dad’s truck, Hank’s racquet and Mom’ll clean you up.”

The corners of her mouth turned up, “And the test?”

Her smile eased me. “The test. Oh, yeh, the test.” I chuckled.

The sound startled me. “That's on me.” I wasn't sure of going home or of anything. I knew Mom would help JJ. I prayed Hank wouldn't be there. Figured he'd at least stop at Sheila's. We passed an empty school bus.

Two police cars were at my house, one in the driveway a girl in the back seat. The other car, on the edge of the lawn, next to JJ's bike, driver's door open, red and blue lights flashing.

“Shit. Shit. Shit. I don't know.” I wanted to keep driving. “I don't think I can do this.”

“Stop.” JJ said. She opened her door, slid out. I cracked my door, Mom was coming straight at me, face white, sobbing. She threw her arms around me, hugged me like she hadn't in a long time. Over her head I saw JJ next to her bike a policeman standing over her. Mom's embrace absorbed my shakes. I didn't cry. I watched JJ. Mom, head buried in my neck, spoke “School. Truck. JJ's bike. Kidnapped.” Holding my breath as if underwater kidnapped broke the surface. I gasped. Mom stepped back. I saw the policeman bending over JJ pull on blue, medical gloves.

“And after the call to school and after I realized it was JJ's bike,” Mom began to make sense. “I just thought with the truck gone and all something terrible had happened. Something awful. And Officer Thom, he brought Hank home with all that

misunderstanding. He said he'd seen two Black men in a pickup and that just got us all thinking and it was dreadful. Terrible. You have no idea what a fright you gave us.”

The policeman helped JJ stand. She had a bright white bandage above her sock. She held my bloody shirt in front of her Bitch Be Me, purple T. She looked like a warrior princess. Beyond her on the porch a policeman was standing over Hank writing something down.

“You're not hurt are you?” Mom asked. “You didn't get hurt? What happened to JJ?”

I shrugged, wanted to ask what misunderstanding, what happened to Hank. JJ limped over. The policeman said. “It's a scratch, Mam. She'll be fine. All cleaned up. Still you might want to get a tetanus shot for your daughter.”

JJ, Mom and I all spoke at once. They were explaining. I spread my empty hands wide, figured the sooner the better. “Look, I lost.”

JJ cut me off. “He saved my life.”

A horn honked on the street. GREEN's Yard Care pick-up stopped behind dad's. The passenger window rolled down. Horace waved. I walked past the police car in the driveway recognized Sheila's red hair. She had a dark bruise on her cheek. She looked



away.

Horace leaned out, laughed, “Should've called first. Didn't know you was having a party.” He cocked his head to the side. “Two blue light specials, huh. Not bad. Don't really want an invite.” He winked. “Thought I saw you fleeing the scene. Thought this might be yours.” He handed me Hank's racquet.

I clutched it to my chest. “Thanks.” I steadied myself with a hand on his truck. “Thanks. You have no idea.”

“Oh, I might. Just didn't think it would take two of 'em.”

I laughed. “And the dog? The f-ing crazed Doberman?”

“You don't do lawn work without bringing dog treats. Maybe trespassing tennis players could learn something.”

“Yeh. Thanks and thanks again. I owe you big time. You've saved my life.” I gave him a fist bump. “How was the test?”

“Aced it. Knew 'em all. Maybe I'll get as high as an eighty-five.”

