

Creatures

Dunbridge Way, being a ring of townhouses with a central community island of sad trees and scorched grass, was a quiet circle except at the hours when children arrived home from school, sugared up from unfettered access to samples of soda produced by the town's primary employer, JupiterPop, and handed out by men in purple and green and orange uniforms that resembled space-age onesies every kid believed we'd all be wearing some glorious day in the future, when candy would be medicine, adults would only be chauffeurs and laundromat owners, every inch of land would be designed for barefoot excursions, and school would be as historic a notion as dinosaurs.

When the Village Mall opened – anchored by a 36-hole putt-putt course in the north parking lot and Guns A' Poppin' as the facility's signature store and visible from the main street – all of the town and most of Dunbridge Way's families spent the weekend bouncing between mini-golf, cradling rifles, eating stacks of pizza at Mario's in the center of the mall, and ending with a milkshake made at the gleaming malt shop counter of the People's Drugstore where all the town knew the Pharmacist-Maltmaker, Mr. Henry “Fudge” Henry.

The bb-gun I got that weekend was a sleek little Daisy I'd coveted since I couldn't remember when and it wasn't long before I established a reputation as a crack shot, called upon by all the other boy's parents (only boys got the guns in those days) to give marksmanship lessons. My tenth or eleventh student was a boy named Kirk, who lived in a house on Dunbridge Way many had deemed the jail because of how many times the police had visited. But by the time Kirk's dad enlisted me to show Kirk the expertise I'd gained with the Daisy, the police hadn't been by in months. I learned later that the primary root of these calls – Kirk's brother Raymond – had been sentenced to half a dozen years in jail for growing hydroponic marijuana in his bedroom closet. Every time I went to pick up Kirk for, at first, lessons then, later, middle-

of-the-night capers, I could feel the darkness ooze out the door and see his mother lingering in the background in a progressively tattered fleece robe because of the guilt she'd held over turning in her own son. She believed the police would just confiscate the grass, but it turns out they needed an example in our community as the drug war heated up.

Kirk's house was directly across ours over the center island of Dunbridge Way, so when I sat at my window long into every night, I could clearly see everything going on at his house. Their townhouse seemed to pulse with life – unlike my own, occupied only by me and my father, an engineer so devoted to living uncontroversially that he didn't even crack a smile at jokes so anodyne they made me, a 10-year old boy, groan and would be safe to tell at a gathering of Every Nun On Earth.

My primary objective in eventually chatting Kirk up one honey-sticky summer day while most of the Dunbridge Way kids were gathering on the island and enjoying the temporary pool that all the neighborhood parents had pitched in for to keep us all out of their hair for at least a few hours a day was to find out more about Kirk's sister, Sandra, a 16-year old girl for whom I'd spend an entire day with my eyes clamped to a pair of binoculars so I could see her emerge from her shower in her room behind the window on the second story, a window that became a kaleidoscope for me that summer, with Sandra's blossoming body and thick, brunette hair providing innumerable images and stoking an onanistic furor that turned me into a boy with only one thought on his brain.

Within a week, Kirk and I ended up making a list of all the creatures and objects we wanted to shoot with the Daisy. The list eventually numbered 43 targets – caterpillars to crows, car doors to school windows, neighborhood bullies' asses to the JupiterPop sign – and we spent a glorious summer meeting inside the trunk of a massive dead tree where we'd made a makeshift fort and written down on the inside walls each and every target.

When we tagged our #1 kill – a tiny stained-glass window just below the door knocker of Mr. Ructer’s front door and taken at 2 AM on a full-moon night that allowed us to see the window glinting perfectly in the night and inviting us to shoot it – we celebrated the next day in the way any two 10-year old boys would on such an auspicious occasion: we went to the People’s Drug Store soda counter and ordered two hot fudge sundaes with five scoops each, one of every type of ice cream they had. We finished every last spoonful of the sundaes and walked home, bloated and happy as mutts who’d been let loose in a dog food factory.

As we laid on Kirk’s bed and ruminated about what was to be our next target, Sandra came into his room and told us the police had stopped by while we are at People’s and asked after Kirk.

“What’d they want?” Kirk asked her.

I just stared at her lips as she answered.

“Didn’t say,” she said. “But maybe they should be after you, huh, David? For spying on people with your binoculars.”

She smiled right through me and winked, before turning around and purposefully walking as slow as I’d ever seen anyone walk in my life so that I’d think about her walking away from me every night for months until in December of that year Sandra gave me a Christmas gift that I still recall with the same flushed joy I had then of a boy turning into a man.