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Escapades on Third Street: Chapters 2-4

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Escapades on Third Street

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Chapter 2

At 7:02 a.m., Ben had already leaped out of bed, slammed his thin legs into some old denim cut-offs and the rest of himself into a faded Dallas Cowboy’s jersey, and raced—as quietly as the squeaky wooden floor would allow and just because he could, his routine—down the hall past Miss Thomas’ room and Anne’s room, which she never used since she slept with Miss Thomas every night she didn’t sleep with Vira, and down the stairs into the kitchen, where he proceeded to happily open and slam cabinets, rumble pots and pans, clink silverware, and generally cause an unholy commotion while whistling and singing intermittently. Vira’s room, which was the only bedroom downstairs, sat adjacent to the kitchen, and was thus susceptible to kitchen activity. As the owner of the only bedroom downstairs, Vira practically had a monopoly on the bathroom located next to her room. Ben, out of spite, took every opportunity presented him to make sure she paid for the luxury, although his first choice, which he got, was the room farthest from the stairs and closest to the upper-level front porch, with its rocking chairs, coffee table, balustrade, and relatively delightful perch overlooking Third Street and into the rising sun. Since he’d moved into his room, which had been his grandfather’s sitting room, and as such had some antique items his mother wouldn’t let him touch, Ben had taken to sneaking out at least two or three nights a week to toss small pebbles and acorns at passers by and then duck, squealing in delight with his hand clamped over his mouth as his quarry took a hit and spit their anger.

“Ouch! Goddammit! What the—“ Perplexed as they rubbed the fresh wound, the victim’s searching eyes would rake the night, and inevitably alight upon Ben’s Porch—since Ben’s room was so close to it, he’d annexed it like Texas, and dubbed it his own—drift away, return, and then linger.

“Somebody . . . GODdammit! Come out!” Standing around turning, but looking mostly at Ben’s Porch, the victim would work into a frenzy, not really willing to bet that someone from the Thomas’ porch threw at them and rap on a darkened house at 11 p.m. or later, no decent hour for family, not to mention a complete stranger. This fact
would enrage and frustrate the victim even more. "I ain’t going no DAMN where until somebody . . . Goddammit!"

Accustomed after years of practice to this routine, Ben had long ago learned to wait out the heat. With his little flashlight and battery, he’d entertain himself by practicing his Morse code up against the solid wooden railing, softly whistling some ditty. Eventually, the angry adults would move on, their curses accompanying them down the street, letting Ben know it was safe to slither upwards to wait for his next target. He particularly loved to hit drunks, who’d react pretty much the way sober folks did, but used such colorful expletives at such an high volume and for such a lengthy period of time, lights hours dormant would start to come back on, and yelling would shoot from an angry adult’s mouth who had to get up early in the morning.

“What’s wrong wit you, you drunk fool?” one of Ben’s neighbors once said as he stood in the doorway in a white T-shirt, boxers, and black socks. “Can’t you see you wakin’ up the whole damn neighborhood? We got to get some rest, so you better get on way from here, now. Go on!”

“Sombodee hit me wit—goddamit! shit!—a, uh, fuckin’ brick!” the drunk said between hiccups and his listing.

“Lissen here,” the tired and angry adult warned as his eyes saw no evidence of a brick, “I ain’t gon’ tell you no mo to get on, else ah’ma come out there and hit you with a brick sho nuff and drag yo drunk ass down the street!”

“B-but, motherfuck,—man, I got hit—“

"Git on, now!” he said, stepping half way out of the door.

"YOU ain’t gon’ do nuthin’ to me, goddam cock-sucking motherfucking bitch! Cause I’m my own . . . “ the drunk had said, his mouth and spirit remaining steadfast to challenge, but his feet carried him onward nevertheless as his whisky-shortened attention span drifted elsewhere.

Still smarting from Ben’s pebble through his intoxicated haze, the drunk would usually waft on, profanity slipping from his tongue like spittle, and a door would slam as the sleepy adult would return to his bed with a final sleepy curse. The first time that happened, Ben laughed all night and into the morning. His bloodshot eyes puffy from lack of sleep the next day, every time someone asked him what was wrong,
he’d laugh some more. It was a private joke, to be shared with no one except for his best friends, who laughed with him, and even participated when Ben could convince his mother to let one of them sleep over. Most surely, there’d be two sets of puffy eyes and giggly boys in the morning.

By 7:03 a.m., Ben rummaged himself a hefty plastic bowl, poured himself nearly a quarter of the box of Cheerios into it, heaped 7 or 8 tablespoons of Dixie sugar on them, sloshed in, and over onto the kitchen counter, enough milk so that the Cheerios bubbled over the top at the slightest undulation, and plopped himself squarely on the floor in front of the television, less than a foot away, to watch cartoons.

This is how a summer day morning was supposed to be, he thought to himself: a big bowl of cereal, cartoons, and no threat of school following the weekend. Ben would have smiled if he could have managed it between his fixation with the television fare and his milk-rimmed mouth full of Cheerios. As it stood, he allowed the constant shoving of tablespoons of sugar-laden Cheerios into his mouth to express all of his gratitude.

The living room, an elongated shape extending from the front door and ending at the kitchen, was comprised of a three-sectioned sofa and a matching chair and coffee table facing the front door, and an old stereo, all antiques prized by Miss Thomas and forbidden to her children, who jumped, bounced, and gleefully plopped... onto the huge pillows Miss Thomas bought just for them. The television, which Ben and his sisters could use, rested on a small, two-tiered, antique oak stand with hand-carved design that fronted the small section of wall marking the divide between the two rooms used exclusively for Miss Thomas’ office. Most of the time when they weren’t outside, Ben and his sisters, along with their pillows, circled the front of the television. The living room also doubled, on occasion, as a waiting area for Miss Thomas’ patients, and Ben and his sisters as unofficial staff supporters for the various persons visiting to give birth or have Miss Thomas address swollen feet, a spotted face, the runs, hiccups, the grip, bedwetting, fevers and chills and cuts from spills, balding, greying, migraines, insomnia, alcoholism, loss of appetite, infertility, or some physical malady no black person had money to give to a white doctor.
to cure. People had been visiting their family at weird hours and with all sorts of ailments and whimpers and moans of pain for as long as each Thomas child could remember, so they managed quite well to make themselves comfortable no matter who sat in the family room, unless Miss Thomas pressed one or more of them into service, which always happened during a delivery: not enough water, towels too cool, Epsom salt almost gone, smelling salt for the passed out father, brandy to deaden the pain, or not enough this, or enough of that.

“Ben!” Miss Thomas once barked a command in an urgent tone shaking him down to the marrow and sending tinkles into his toes, “I need some more water, towels, and Epsom salt, right now!”

“Yes, mam!” he’d said on the first occasion, and for the next few months afterward, his pride at his imminent adulthood snapping him to alacrity, even though he fainted that first time after walking in and seeing the gore of his first delivery. He’d heard the screams and moans of child birth—sometimes lasting for hours and hours at all times of the night, waking him up even since his room was directly above—but his mother had kept the door closed to protect the privacy of her patients.

Ben, loving his status when his mother first began calling on him, quickly tired of being a page-on-call, and learned to remove himself to the outdoors, upstairs, or anywhere when she was on-duty to escape the responsibility. Vira and Anne, though, loved their mother’s importance, and dutifully kept themselves at their mother’s beck and call.

The living room decor was sparse, but tasteful. One potted plant with long green vines hung just to the left of Miss Thomas’ office door from a cross-beam marking where the front porch ended before Miss Thomas’ father, at the request—insistence really—of her stepmother, years earlier had converted it into an extended portion of the living room so that he could build the second level of their home. Miss Thomas had to re-locate one of the several potted plants, her favorite, above ground level because her first three efforts to decorate with flora met the untimely ends of being trampled or knocked over by her children in one of their many moments of youthful exuberance: wrestling in the house—which she strictly forbade now; running or jumping therein; and, the bolt-for-the-door maneuver whereby Ben, Vira, or Anne, or any combination of the three, would race from any where and every where in the house through the living room, for
whatever reason but usually not a good one, to spring to liberty through the screen door, which flew open and slammed into the house and then slammed back into place with a resounding whack like the peal of lightning, followed immediately by the laughter, or fleeing whimper, of an excited Thomas youth and the thunderous rumbling of reproach from Miss Thomas.

“Ben! Vira!” Miss Thomas would frequently exclaim as she rushed to the screen door to identify the culprit and almost mechanically intone every time while standing there and glaring: “Y’all know better ‘n that, runnin’ through this house like y’all crazy and slammin’ my door! Donletmetellyanomo, here!” Often she would then return to her office to apologize to her patient, and much less frequently to someone waiting in the living room, who was shaken with the entire experience. One elderly lady, Miss Geraldine Winters, there to get something for her nerves, left immediately after witnessing the three Thomas twins blitz by her like shrieking banshees, her nerves wrecked. Weeks elapsed before Miss Thomas could coax Miss Winters back. She marched all three of her children to apologize to her personally, called on her regularly, if not daily, and sent over some of her peaches n’ dumplin’s. Facing Miss Winter’s intractability and at her wit’s end, Miss Thomas succeeded by promising Miss Winters her children would be long gone for the duration of her visit. Miss Winters was the first person in the next morning, and Ben and his sisters sat with their Uncle Ted, a happy go-lucky who always smelled of whiskey and never seemed to have a job, as he knocked down cocktails and the children ate their fill of the best doughnuts in town, all courtesy of Miss Thomas.

At 7:10 a.m. the bowl of cereal was gone and Ben debated whether he should stealthily try for a second bowl at the risk of being heard by his mother, who usually did not miss a beat although lying in bed upstairs with her bedroom door partially closed. Like many women of Miss Thomas’ make, she had an extended sense perception reaching, almost mystically, to every portion of the interior, and had caught Ben more than once on the very same mission. Ben rocked back with a smile to languor over the possible scenarios, and looked around lazily. The living room was still mostly dark because of the thick curtains
retarding most of the light from a sun breaking the horizon, except for
the bluish-gray sheen cast by the black and white television and caught
by Ben’s forehead as he peered up into its screen. Ben sat squarely in
the middle of the floor, having pulled his sisters’ two pillows together
for his own comfort from the cold, wooden floor. With a portion of the
sofa fronting the television, Ben’s position significantly reduced the
available lanes with which to travel from the front of the house to
anything beyond the sofa and living room. Like any place or thing in
the house considered of premium worth, it was a position often sought
after by the siblings and hence the source of incessant bickering.

**BABOOM.** Vira was awake, as the resonating thud of a small
body landing feet-first on the wood floor from the top bed on the bunk
bed—sometimes shared by Anne—indicated. Within seconds, Vira
strode into the living room followed by the dutifully marching, waist-
high Anne, who’d apparently called on her sister. Both girls wearing
knee-length semi-transparent nightgowns, their plats stood at attention
at divers and sundry angles. It was a scene Ben had seen hundreds of
times and so he did not even so much as flinch as they approached,
Vira directly toward his perch. Ben’s bowl, empty except for the
tablespoon and less than a teaspoon of milk he didn’t slurp, sat in front
of his Indian-style crossed legs. Vira stepped directly over it and
languorously in front of Ben who, having acted as if he was unaware
of her approach, suddenly slapped at her legs with his right hand as she
leaped to elude the attack with a little giggle. Ben missed and was
furious.

“Ahma tell mamma on you, jumpin’ ovuh people’s food!” Ben
said quickly, glowering at Vira through slitted eyes and clenched teeth
and fists.

And just as quickly and sassily, “You ain’t had no business sittin’
in the middle of the flo, nappy head! This ain’t yo house!” Vira stood
just out of Ben’s reach with her hands on her hips and rolling her eyes,
head, and shoulders in sass-speak. Ben hated it. Finding no words of
retort, Ben lunged at her from his cross-legged position, causing Vira
to scramble for and into the distant corner of the sofa nearest the front
doors.

“Mamma!” Vira yelled, loud enough to wake up the occupants of
the nearest homes, and then some.
“Don’ go callin’ mamma now, you devil—“ Ben began.

“What ya’ll doin’ down there,” Miss Thomas said sleepily, words she often uttered less as a question, more as an accusation when she knew wrongdoing was afoot. “It’s too early in the mornin’ for all that racket.” Miss Thomas was upstairs, her bedroom door was closed, and she was still in bed, but there was no mistaking those words. The siblings had heard them many-a-time. Ben broke in first.

“Mamma, Vira jumped ovuh me and ovuh my cereal bowl,” he said in a partially supplicating, partially accusatory tone. “And I wasn’t doin’ nothin’ eithuh,” he added innocently.

“Ahn-ahhhn,” Vira bellowed. “You was sittin’ right in the middle of the flo an’ ain’t nobody could get ’round yo fat head!” Anne laughed as Vira reached in and grabbed her pillow while Ben looked away, the sudden loss of leverage causing him to roll over onto his back. Ben was losing and he was getting angrier. He did not like how his first Friday off—and his summer for that matter—was beginning. But he was just getting started, he thought, when Miss Thomas cut off his notions of retaliation.

“Ben, you know you aren’t s’pposed to sit in the middle of the floor. I done told you about that,” Miss Thomas said diplomatically, but firmly, with a clearer voice. Apparently, she was being dragged from sleep rather quickly to address the early morning crisis, and it sounded to Ben as if she was already out of bed. “And you ought to know better, Ben, as an example to your sisters. I don’t want to hear no more noise outta you two, hear me!”

“Okay,” Vira said with a Napoleonic smirk.

“Yes, mamma.” Resigned to defeat, Ben snatched up his bowl, almost losing the tablespoon in mid-lift, and stomped into the kitchen.

And that was it. Miss Thomas had pulled the you’re-the-oldest-and-you-ought-to-know-better routine, which meant to Ben that he had to take the blame for most of the conflict Vira instigated. It was not fair he thought, as he clunked the plastic bowl into the kitchen sink. And worse, when he turned, Vira was now sitting in the position he’d just vacated, his pillow pushed aside. Irate, Ben waited in the kitchen in the dark until he could figure out what to do, or until his composure returned, his mother’s humming softly penetrating the blare of the television. Unable to think of anything, Ben returned without looking
at Vira, snatched his pillow, and sat down on the floor between the couch and the heater, squirreling himself as far away from Vira as he could get and still have a prime television viewing lane. Ben did not even acknowledge Anne as he gathered his long legs in an armlock and placed his chin on top of his knees and, the very image of the sulking and tortured boy, watched cartoons. It was, after all, still Friday morning...
At 9:30 a.m. the last good cartoon ended, and a slightly foul mood settled over Ben, as it always did, as loony toons now danced across the grayish screen. Miss Thomas was out back hanging up laundry, humming to one of her Mahalia Jackson records, and Vira and Anne were in the process of changing into their play clothes. Even though Ben and Vira were not exactly on conversational terms, if ever they were, the tension had long subsided and now they could look at one another, say a few words, and even laugh together without feeling awkward or conciliatory. The ease of tension had brought to fore more filial emotions, and just in time for Vira and Anne, as Ben prepared for his foray into the unknown moments of a brand new summer’s day. Ben, although frequently at odds with Vira over secondary authority in the household, led all expeditions, sanctioned and unsanctioned, to the domains of his fiends, The Park, Piney Forest, the candy store, Miller’s Market, and other places of interest. This was so not only because he had more fiends and had achieved some notoriety in the neighborhood, but also because Miss Thomas mandated that he look after his sisters and allow them to follow him: you’re-the-oldest principle at work again, raw and unbridled.

Ben had just washed his face, barely, and decided not to spoil his summer’s day by combing his hair or brushing his teeth, if he could get away with it, when Ernest Brown arrived, nappy headed and unbrushed, and barefoot, too. Ben joined Ernest outside on the step while he waited on his sisters. Squinting in the bright sunshine, and as surreptitiously as possible, Ben could make out the stolid figure of Mr. Thomason holding his rifle, and the dim silhouettes of the Shiplett twins on their porch rockers, leaning forward and giving him the evil eye, their heads bobbing together to whisper conspiratorially.

“Hey,” Ben said gruffly as he plopped down next to Ernest, his best friend, on the front step.

“Whatcha wanna do today,” Ernest replied plaintively, knowing as well as Ben the litany of activities that confronted them and those that were unacceptable. Nevertheless, by rote, he went through them. “How ’bout some hot wheels?” Ernest had a formidable collection by
all standards: Trans Ams, corvettes, Ferraris, Porsches, and a collection of less exotic cars of various types.

“Nah.”

Ben lazily drew figures in the sand and then erased them with his foot to start anew. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched as person after person walking down Third Street turned off just before reaching the Thomason and the Shipletts residences, only to reappear minutes later farther down the street.

“How ’bout some cowboys ‘n Injuns?” Ernest’s plastic figure collection of blue Calvary men and Native-American figures of variegated colors was the largest in the neighborhood, too, although Ben had the best quality of figures and a metallic fort Miss Thomas bought him for Christmas 4 or 5 years earlier. Because of the difficulty of keeping his plastic men together with two sisters in the house, Ben had lost a good portion of his men, which made Ben spitting mad every time he really thought about it.

“Nah.”


“—an sissies, which you two is,” said Bernard Johnson, Ben’s other best friend, as he leaped from his eavesdropping place behind the evergreen tree in the Thomas yard with one of his exaggerated, goofy looks on his face, his head tilted, eyes mischievously mirthful, mouth puckered and poked out. His matching expressions and manners were Bernie’s most endearing characteristics, and had made him popular with many of his older brothers’ friends. Bernie’s family lived several blocks south across the railroad track and outside of Rogers Project, where his family’s Blues club sat next door to their home. When Bernie wasn’t with Ben, he was usually at the 801 Blues and Liquor Club, which his mother owned and his brothers staffed as bouncers.

Bernie, who wore a simple T-shirt and cut-offs, also hadn’t combed his hair or brushed his teeth either, and wore no shoes. “Move ovuh.” He sat directly between Ben and Ernest, forcing them to scoot apart.
A skinny, mangy dog walked from around the side of the Thomas residence, and plopped down in the far right corner of the Thomas’ yard. Bernie poked Ben in the side and nodded toward the mutt.

“Look at dhat mutt, man, jus’ sittin’ in y’all yard like it don’t care none, the nasty flea bag!”

“Go on!” Ben shouted as he stood up, threw his stick at it, and waved his hand. The dog looked at the three nappy headed, scrawny black boys, sighed heavily as if he couldn’t believe God gave such power to such a sorry lot, and then willed himself up. He squatted to relieve himself, but Ben and Bernie raised even more ruckus, so he just gave up. His tail drooping and his head hanging so low his tongue just missed the ground, the mutt walked out of the Thomas’ yard into the Shipletts’ domain, where he again squatted to do his business.

Ben started counting backwards from five immediately. Five, four, three, two—

“I’LL BE GOD DAMNED! LOOK AT THAT SORRY ASS—“

”GIT YO NASTY ASS OUTTA MY YARD FO I SKIN YO NO GOOD MANGY MOUTH ASS!”

“AH’MA SHOOT ME A DAMN DOG TODAY, ALL THESE DAMN NO GOOD FLEA BAGS SHITTIN’ IN MY YARD!”

“I AIN’T TAKIN’ NO MO OF THIS!”

As a pair, the Shipletts slammed the screen door open and charged the poor mutt, which had just started relieving himself. Frightened stiff, panic held the dog for an instant before his reflex-flight impulse caused him to scramble and lose his balance on the dew-slick grass. The mutt’s hindquarters slipped from beneath him and he fell flat on his belly into his own waste, and then stepped into the same as he screeched pathetically and raced away like a grey hound, pieces of feces dropping from his belly and flying from his rear legs as he scampered for his dear life, whimpering into the distance. In less time than it took for Ben to blink twice, the mutt had raced around the corner as the Shipletts, in their sleeping gowns and slippers, gave chase into the street to continue yelling profanity and threats.

“BRING YO ASS BACK HERE AGAIN, AND I’LL SHONUFF KILL YO DAMN SORRY ASS!”

“DAMN DOGS! DAMN SORRY ASS DOGS! TWO THINGS ON THIS EARTH AIN’T NO DAMN GOOD: DOGS AND MEN!”

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ESCAPADES ON THIRD STREET

Ben and his friends were laughing—at the dog, at the Shipleetts, at the dog doing his business in the Shipleetts’ yard, at the Shipleetts scaring the dog into his own fecal matter, at the fecal matter flying off as he raced away, at the Shipleetts’ bellicose profanity and threats on a Friday morning in broad day light in their nightgowns and slippers. Ben and his friends couldn’t take their eyes off the Shipleetts.

“What you damn nappy head ass young’uns laughing at?”

The laughing choked to an automatic stop as the boys all looked away in different directions, and Ben jumped up and slipped into the house and hid inside the door. Giving Mr. Thomason, who sat as if he hadn’t heard a thing since the D-Day attack, a death glare, the Shipleetts eventually went back to their darkened porch. His mom shaking her head with Ben and his sisters standing next to him, normalcy slowly returned and Ben slipped back out. Quiet held the boys as each assessed his naked terror in the face of the Shipleetts. It wasn’t a pretty sight, so the boys let the episode fade away quickly.

“What we gonna do today?” Bernie asked as he pulled out his pocket knife and began, with a flick of his wrist, snapping the blade open and then slowly closing it. You could count on Bernie to move things back toward center.

“We was tryin’ to figure that out when you opened yo’ big mouth,” Ernest said matter-of-factly, but with a hint of reproach as he cast quick glances at the Shipleetts to make sure they were still bound. Ernest, the most tight-lipped of Ben’s best friends, seldom spoke long sentences, and tended, as if he was constantly searching for valuable baubles or money, to keep his eyes toward the ground and speak beneath his breath. Even with this sudden, uncharacteristic outburst, in what one would have to consider a Shakespearean soliloquy for Ernest, he hadn’t looked up, instead focusing intently into the contents of his candy bag.

Without letting Bernie retort, Ben suddenly proposed that they go to David’s house. David was David Stanley, the newest, best mannered, best dressed, best groomed, and chubbiest of Ben’s best friends. He also lived the farthest away, a little too close to, and surrounded too much by, Piney Forest. But just by living there so close to Piney Forest, which really became a horror at night, David earned points. Ben and David had met just a year earlier in middle school and
had become fast friends, best friends eventually, in a matter of weeks. Wanting to share his new best friend with his other established best friends, Ben had then sought to integrate David into his coterie. Ernest, easy going as always, found little difficulty with David and soon treated him almost as well as he treated Ben. Bernie, on the other hand, quick to make use of another’s shortcoming, was difficult from the start as he made frequent references, often within David’s earshot, to his weight. Ben gathered that David’s good fortunes, so at odds with the circumstances of the others, served to anger Bernie. Ben really suspected David’s and Bernie’s older brothers to be a source of anger for Bernie, whose brothers had often run afoul of the law while David’s older brother was the only black police officer in town. As far as Ben knew, Officer Stanley had never even seen or heard of Bernie’s brothers, but Bernie’s brothers, and Bernie, never had a good thing to say about him. Never. However, despite David’s brother, and David’s staid appearance and demeanor, his wide knowledge of tricks and hiding places put Bernie to shame, and often provided hours of entertainment beyond anything any of them could imagine. But when Bernie gave him a look of disgust, Ben let it drop for no real reason. He just did.

Alternatively: “Why don’t we go to JC’s house so we can have four and play some ball at the park?” asked Ben, knowing it was as good as accepted since all they wanted to do all day, week, month, and year (if not for confounded school and parents) was play ball. JC was Jason Carter McPherson, who lived north of, and just around the corner from, Ben. JC, known as such since Ben had first met him years ago at church, was the youngest—a few months younger than Ernest—of Ben’s best friends. Like any kid, JC was quick to play ball when presented with the opportunity, but coaxing Mrs. McPherson, a cleaning woman at Bradentown Middle School, into allowing him to play was not, at times, any less arduous than restoring peace in the Middle East. JC was light-skinned, and Mrs. McPherson naturally considered her son the superior, intellectually and physically, of the other “young’uns” that “roamed” the “streets” like “wild animals,” she was often heard to say. But at the same time, JC, the prized apple of her fruit bowl, had long learned how to ingratiating and sulk and mope
to effectuate his parole. Among JC and his friends, it was an inside joke: for men only.

Ben looked expectantly from Ernest’s face, then Bernie’s, and when neither showed any reason to object, Ben heaved himself to his feet suddenly and sauntered off without waiting for the others. In short order, Bernie and Ernest caught up—with Vira and Anne trailing a good twenty paces behind, picking at the three boys between themselves—and the trio became a laughing, pushing, kicking, insult-tossing tangle of brown, long arms, scarred legs, and bare feet. Ben pushed Ernest, for no good reason except that he was there for the pushing, and Ernest’s candy fell in the middle of Third Street just before they reached JC’s street, Thirteenth Avenue West, which was perpendicular to and ran into Third Street. Ernest mumbled something incoherent and, with a bark of laughter, set out after Ben. Just then, a car came from around the corner and ran squarely over Ernest’s candy bag, flattening it and good. The car had barely hit the candy before Bernie, who had witnessed the entire event from push to smash, fell to his back howling with glee. Ben just kind of stood where the chase had ended as Ernest forlornly walked toward the smashed paper bag that once was his candy. He stood there just looking at the smashed bag as if he’d witnessed a murder, swaybacked, mouth agape, his face cloudy like it always was when something was wrong. Bernie kept laughing as he pulled himself to his feet, pointing at Ernest and mimicking his posture and stupefied look, and drunkenly continued around the corner to JC’s house. Ben spared one look back at Ernest, who now walked toward the smashed candy, and followed Bernie. Ernest pried the paper bag, with it’s clearly visible tread marks and squashed candy oozing from its sides, off of the asphalt and carried it with him, gingerly picking at the bag in an effort to open it.

Moments later all three boys and Ben’s two sisters, who were just a little ways off, stood in front of JC’s house. Mrs. McPherson was on her screened-in porch in her rocking chair, paying the raggedy collection no mind at all and doing her best to pretend she didn’t even see them. JC was no where in sight. For several long, agonizing minutes there was no change in the circumstances, the trepidation being of too much singular force for anyone to say or do anything except suddenly find ants, birds, dirt, clouds, trees, and everything else
of zoological and cosmological nature exciting. Feeling the weight of
the stand-off and knowing that if courage didn’t come soon JC would
never have an habeas corpus petitioner that day, Ben strode—I always
do, he thought a little bitterly—across the street and rapped on Mrs.
McPherson’s door lightly.

“M-Mrs. McPherson,” he began, stammering a little while
looking straight into the back of the house, where he could see JC
sitting on the sofa in front of the television eagerly waiting his
opportunity. “Can JC come out and play?” Ben saw JC rise and reach
for his glove when he heard a big whump, which meant the rocking
chair Mrs. McPherson favored was no longer occupied, and then his
vision was blocked by the huge form of Mrs. McPherson, who was
wearing a big, olive-green dress with no decorations and cheap flip-
flops and standing in the doorway looking down on Ben’s timid frame.
Ben steeled himself and looked up into Mrs. McPherson’s face, out of
politeness and respect for an adult, and nearly had the starch scared out
of him when he discovered that she had some kind of blue, clay-like
stuff covering her entire big face. Ben’s head snapped down and his
eyes fixed themselves squarely on his toes, which was the only way he
could keep from running and ruining JC’s chances for the day and
perhaps the entire weekend. He heard some whispering and giggling
behind him, but he was petrified and dared not laugh. With his arms
clasped behind his back and his feet kicking at imaginary vexations on
the steps, Mrs. McPherson studied him a bit, then said with mock—oh,
yes, Ben could detect the insincerity like a Geiger counter at Los
Alamos—kindness:

“What y’all won’t with JC?”

Ben, fidgeting under the intense gaze, which he felt with each of
her heavy, almost accusatory, words, said to his toes, “W-We was just
wonderin’ if’n he c-can come out and play some ball. We gon’ go to
The Park.” And feeling that it was not enough, Ben added: “We just
gon’ play some ball at The Park . . . by ourselves.” Ben felt Mrs.
McPherson’s gaze shift to his best friends and his sisters and back
when she derisively grunted. Ben had exhausted his repertoire and
possessed nothing further to fish out in support of JC, but his
performance was good, if he must say so himself. It was now JC’s turn,
and he took up where Ben left off with practiced deftness and assurance.

"Can I, mamma? Can I?" JC asked from a position just behind Mrs. McPherson, purring in his supplication. Ben could almost see the puppy-dog eyes and the slumped shoulders—a paragon of innocence. "We ain’t gonna get in no trouble, mamma. We’ll stay in The Park . . . I promise." And with that, the Warden relented.

"Alright . . ." she began, and JC was already springing by his mother and out the door and racing with Ben toward the angelic troupe, which had scarcely breathed in the last five minutes of the rich drama.

But then: "JC!" Uh-oh. Everyone’s sunshiny day sank under the rumble of thunder, and fear froze them all into ebony statuettes.

"What have I told you ‘bout wearin’ no shoes? Git back in this house and put on some shoes! I don’t wanna have to come down that street and get you ‘cause you cuttin’ a fool! And come home for lunch!" she barked, and then returned to her rocking chair after casting one last, distrustful look at Ben and his sisters and friends. JC moped back into the house for his shoes, careful not to run, or appear over-excited, for fear of getting himself in trouble. It was, after all, a precarious situation, and Mrs. McPherson was known to take offense very easily.

Now that the tension was broken, Bernie kicked in. He’d noticed that during the last five minutes or so, Ernest had done nothing but poke and pry at the brown paper bag and its smashed contents, while occasionally licking the sticky candy from his hands and arms after he extracted them from the sack. Bernie, at his comedic best, feigned disgust and pointed at Ernest.

"Bo-eh, ain’t nobody don’ told you nuthin’? You ain’t s’posed to eat no candy after it’s been hit by a car, all nast-ee an’ filth-ee! Jus like," Bernie lowered his voice so that Mrs. McPherson wouldn’t overhear, “a niggah—a’n’t yo mammy taughtcha nuthin’?" Ernest looked at Bernie a second, intensely, and resumed his fascination with his candy.

Relieved now that the tension was over, Ben added for no real reason: "It was his mammy that ran ovuh his candy." With that, the group burst into laughter, except Ernest of course, who hadn’t heard a word Ben said.

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As soon as the group distanced itself from Mrs. McPherson’s line of vision, they doubled back around away from The Park, strolling aimlessly as they pushed and shoved one another, joking at Ernest, and trying to figure out what happened at JC’s home.

“JC, man,” Bernie observed, “I ain’t nevuh seen nuthin so ugly in all my days!”

“Me neither,” JC returned. “She got that stuff—it’s called ‘mast’ or something—from some white people she know: s’posed to make ya face look younger, or somethin’.”

“It was a mud pack,” Vira said importantly. “Y’all boys wouldn’t know nuthin’ ’bout dhat.”

“You ain’t lyin’,” Bernie said. “If’n I gotta put mud on my face to look gooder, I wouldn’t be comin’ outta the house no way, scarin’ folks like dhat. That don’t make no sense. Women don’t make no sense.”

“Hmph.”

“You won’t have any women anyway, so you won’t have to worry,” David said coming up on the group from behind. He had a brown paper bag in his hand. Ernest saw it, and began to wonder. He looked from his bag to David’s and back.

“I got yo mamma, an’ dhats all the women I need.”

David ignored the cut-down after directing toward Bernie a wry look and a dismissive wave to indicate he had more important things. A few curses rolled in Bernie’s throat not quite distinct enough for anyone to care.

“Ben, I found something we could do y’all won’t ever guess!”

“Fat bo-eh, we don’t want no mo green guavas, man!” Bernie spat. David found out from his older brother, who, as the only black Bradentown police officer, took repeated racial insults from the sergeant immediately over him, that this sergeant had a guava tree. David, who saw that the sergeant lived near the Bradentown police station when riding with his brother one day, suggested they “integrate” his guava fruit, and led three or four successful raids in several successive seasons. Frustrated, the sergeant waited until just before the guavas ripened and injected bad guava juice into many of the unripened fruit with a syringe. The bad juice caused many of the guavas to retain some of the greenness, but the marauders ate their trove anyway. For
the next several days, all of them were sick with the worse case of the runs Miss Thomas had ever seen. David later found out the cause of illness from his brother, who’d himself appreciated the sergeant’s tactic, not knowing his own brother was involved, when the sergeant bragged about his success in the locker room. Even armed with such knowledge, Sauce Bernaise Syndrome nevertheless kept all of them far from anything even looking like a guava.

“Nah, man. This is a whole lot better, and we can get that sergeant back!”

Unable to wait longer, Ernest spoke up. “What’s in the bag, David?”

“If you wanna see, then follow me.” Eager for revenge, the group trailed after David on their mission of retaliation. Weaving through the neighborhood along the shortcuts David knew, the group worked up Third Street north of the Thomas residence, across 9th Avenue, through old Major Adams’ cemetery, and then took a shortcut just on the outskirts of Piney Forest, to Manatee Avenue, where they were just a block away from the Bradentown PD.

“Now, we haveta be real quiet and careful from here. We can’t let anybody see us, and we gotta hurry because we don’t have a lot of time,” David whispered. The eager, serious faces, Bernie’s included, nodded.

“What’re we doin’?” JC asked, expressing everyone’s overpowering curiosity.

“You’ll see.”

Slipping across Manatee Avenue when no cars were coming and no one was in sight, David went between and behind the narrow channels formed by various businesses.

“EEE-yewww!” Anne said a little too loudly, proving she still didn’t fully understand the concept of whispering.

“SHHHH!” David hissed.

“Well, it is stinkin’ somethin’ awful bad,” Ben said. “We bettuuh get where—“

Words caught in Ben’s mouth as the next turn brought them into a little parking lot where several police cars sat unattended.

“We’re here,” David said softly, looking back at the others with satisfaction as their faces lit up.
“OOOOHHHH,” they all said collectively.

“What we gonna do? Who showed you this place? How’d you know how ta get heah behind dhose buildin’s?” Bernie asked. Hating police officers as he did, he felt giddy with the possibilities.

“I’ll show you. See that police car?” Everyone nodded. “That’s the sergeant’s.”

“Whatcha gon’ do, whatcha gon’ do?!” Bernie asked excitedly.

“Is dhat safe? Dhat don’t look safe. We gon’ get in trouble,” Vira said.

David, ignoring them both, looked to his left and right to make sure he saw no one. Then, keeping low, he ran over to the driver’s side of the sergeant’s car. Peeping to make sure no one was inside, he then pulled on the door, and it opened. He looked back at the others, their mouths wide open in excitement, and beckoned for them to come over. Taking a quick look as had David, the four other boys ran over and slipped into the sergeant’s car. Ben, sitting behind David, waved his sisters over, but Vira wouldn’t budge as she stood with an arm around Anne.

“Ahhh, fo’get them,” JC said. “They ain’t nuthin’ but girls, an’ girls is always gonna be chicken.” Ernest nodded vigorously in agreement.

“This is Chief of Police, David Stanley, reporting—over,” David said into the handset as the others played around with everything they could find.

“This is police headquarters—over. There’s a robbery going on at the, uh, er, bank downtown,” Bernie said into his imaginary dispatch radio handset.

“Where’s the robbery, Officer Johnson?”

“It’s at the—uh, ahm . . . “

“—at the Bradentown Savings & Trust Bank,” Ben finished. “The robbers are armed and dangerous, sir!”

“Roger that, Officer Thomas. All units, I repeat, all units, this is a one-niner, I repeat, there is a one-niner at the Bradentown Savings & Trust Bank! Use all caution! These men are armed and dangerous! Over!”

“Roger,” Ben, JC, Ernest, and Bernie said, and then all of them broke into complete laughter.
"Lemme be the chief, lemme be the chief, David!" Bernie pleaded, and the boys switched places, each time playing out some kind of robbery, shoot out with the bad guys, or high-speed chase. They laughed harder each time.

Ben had just gotten into the driver’s seat, the only one who hadn’t, when a door closed somewhere with a thud, and all boys fell to their knees, terrified.

"Damn!" Bernie said. "What we gonna do, David?"

"Shut up befo’ somebody hears us!" JC hissed.

Ben’s stomach knotted up as two men’s voices moved closer and closer, bringing all the boys close to bolting. The voices closed some more.

"Yeah, we’re on alert. Sarge thinks the Negros ‘round here might start ta thinkin’ foolishness like those crazy colored in Jacksonville and Georgia.

"All this ‘cause some smart-ass nigger school boy got plugged in a riot!"

"I tell ya, I’m ready for their black asses. Other white folks is gettin’ scared, but I’m not. I’ll string every last one of ‘em up if I haveta, including our Officer Darkie."

"As long as you save me a few of those wenches, you can string ‘em, tar ‘em, and cook ‘em as far as I’m concerned."

There was some heavy laughter and the jangle of keys, and then two doors closed. A few seconds later, they heard one of the police cars back up and drive away.

"Racist cops!" Bernie spat, furious.

"Yeah, that was too close!" Ben said. "That bo-eh’s father lives just down the street from me, but ain’t nobody seen him since he was killed, I heard my mamma say. C’mon, those honkies are gone. It’s my turn to be chief."

"Nobody’s gonna be chief because we gotta go!" David said nervously as he glanced at his watch. "It’s almost time for the sergeant to come on, and I gotta leave my surprise for him." David held up the bag, and patted the bottom softly.

"But I ain’t had my turn," Ben pleaded to David and the others, ignoring the bag.
“Ahh, bo-eh, don’t start cryin’. You want some of ‘Sarge’s boys’ to catch us in his car? What you think they gonna do wit us? Give us a spankin’?” Bernie said in disgust.

“But I ain’t had my turn,” Ben softly repeated to no one in particular.

David opened the bag as Ernest, Bernie, and JC looked on like vultures, and Ben looked out of sheer curiosity even though he was mad. David pulled out a clear plastic bag holding a can of spray paint, took one whiff of the brown bag, and then smiled. “Smell this.”

Bernie, Ernest, and David took one sniff each, and each of them recoiled fiercely, and then smiled with sinister gleams in their eyes. Ben watched, still mad, as David dumped the contents over the driver’s seat, the dashboard, the back seat, and over the windows as Bernie spray painted profanity, threats, and racial epithets—albeit grossly misspelled—over the freshly painted black and white exterior. When they finished, the boys sprinted past the girls, and re-traced their steps back to the street, where their angelic miens returned. They could almost hear the sergeant’s rage when he found his car spray painted in red and his car’s interior coated in moist, fetid dog feces.

“Man, I wish I could see his face!” JC said.

“Dhat’ll teach dhat ole honky sergeant not to mess wit us no mo!” Bernie added as the others nodded.

“I still didn’t git my turn,” Ben lamented.

“Ah, shut up,” his friends said in unison, and then laughed at Ben.

The boys, and even Vira and Anne, hung on David like he was their hero, or the Braves’ Hank Aaron, David’s favorite ballplayer ever. Thus when he suggested they sneak into McKechnie Field to see the Pirates and the Braves, there was complete accord. First, though, they stopped to wander into Piney Forest, using a trail through the forest discovered by and known only to them, and pulled some mangoes and bananas off their personal trees about twenty yards in. When the summer heat reached its zenith, usually in late July or August, Ben and the others would pick the trees clean and set up a fruit stand outside of the Thomas residence, sell all their produce, and then go blow it over the next couple of days on juleps, sodas, ice cream,
snow cones, and about anything cold. The little entrepreneurs even decided to raise their prices to keep up with the inflation David kept telling them about. For now, though, Ernest, JC, and Bernie delighted in scrambling up the trees to free the mangoes and bananas, which Ben, his sisters, and David caught below.

Filled with the adventure always attendant with conquering Piney Forest, no matter how slight and familiar the encroachment, and with the mangoes and bananas cradled in their shirts, Ben and the others, led by David, snuck into the baseball game they entered through a loose aluminum slat in the outer wall between McKechnie Field and the Bradenton Boys Club, a well-known unofficial entrance for many of the boys. Once in, a matter of a few sticky minutes of squeezed bodies, quick glances, and watchful eyes, they settled in to watch the game from beneath the left field bleachers with the ten or so other boys of various ages, most known to Ben and the others. Ben and his best friends not only watched the game, but also the legs and undergarments of the ladies who wore dresses. They feasted on produce, watched a professional baseball game, and took advantage of a peep show, all for free except the encumbrance of silence imposed on their illegal license. They couldn’t have everything, and the Braves lost, but Aaron did hit a home run, which thrilled David nevertheless. Bernie and JC took out their hidden stash of baseballs they’d collected from McKechnie Field, forged Hank Aaron’s signature, and then went to other sides of the park to sell official Hank Aaron home run balls for a buck fifty apiece to the White spectators, some who even tipped the ragamuffins out of charity, making Ben and the others laugh all the harder as they walked away from the field. They sold all of the balls, as usual, and made an extra dollar seventy-five in tips, which made the group delirious with success.

Ben, now rolling in the spirit again, felt better, too, and decided to up the ante.

“Let’s go play some basketball at the U-center,” he proposed.

“It’s the YOUth Center,” David corrected. Ben gave him a mean glare. He still blamed David for not letting him get his turn as police chief.
The others looked at one another, their faces, arms, and shoulder gestures saying, "I don’t really care. If it’s alright with you, it’s alright with me. It’s okay with you? Alright, then let’s do it!"

As they immediately set out, with Ben and the other boys collaborating on the intricate plan to get to the Youth Center, the group detoured slightly to slide a delegate beneath the U.S. Steel fence surrounding the Tropicana orange grove several blocks southeast of McKechnie Field, where they pilfered some oranges, two or three of them for each one. Ben, who did the delegated sliding, came back with his white shirt nearly grey with dirt in the front, the sticky mango juice holding on to every grain of sand. Bits of grass stuck to his woolly head and his naked feet looked like charcoal grey church socks so filth-crusted were they. Having this pointed out to him by Vira, who indicated the whipping he was gonna get once Miss Thomas saw him, Ben merely shrugged. He’d not been this dirty, and this free since, well, last summer, and not even the threat of the whipping of his life could deter him. Don’t trouble me with a child’s concerns, he would have said if he wasn’t too busy plotting their approach to the Youth Center, an ecclesiastical conundrum no papal encyclum could fully address.

“But that’s not gonna work, man!” Ben said in frustration to David’s suggestion.

“Why not?!” David demanded.

“—cause the Muslims cawt a bo-eh doin’ dhat just last week, ain’t that right Bernie?”

Bernie nodded, and JC added, “Yeah, `cause I was dhere when they caught him.”

“Oh.”

“W-we could try dressin’ up like dhem–an’ jus’ walkin’ in,” Ernest ventured.

Vira, who had no intention of allowing herself or Anne to try this fool mission either, shot down this idea as she and Anne rose to leave. It was almost 5 p.m.

“Dhat’s stupid,” she said, walking away. “Wheah you gon’ git some suits, or those black caps, hunh? An’ how you gon’ look walkin’ into the U-center dressed like dhat? Y’all bettuh off jus’ goin’ to The Park,” she said, hesitating, hoping the boys would follow. When the
resolve of Ben and the others showed no chinks, she and Anne started walking away.

“You gon’ git in trouble, Ben Thomas. Mamma gon’ be mad wit you.”

“Awwh, go on home, girl! Ain’t nobody studdin’ you!” he said, and then added just to have the last word, “—and I ain’t gon’ git in no trouble, lessin’ you go tellin’ on me, which you ain’t gon’ do since you would be in trouble, too!”

“That’s right, girl!” Bernie said in confirmation. “Won’tcha jus’ go on somewhere an’ leave us men alone.”

“I would if I saw some.”

Bernie was going to say something in retort, but Ben cut him short.

“Man, don’t worry ’bout her. She ain’t gon’ do nuthin’.” He glared at Vira as she turned and rolled her eyes at him. Anne stuck out her tongue and made an ugly face at Ben. Ben turned away and fell back into the huddle. “Are we gon’ play ball in the U-center, or are we gon’ let a girl take all of our time?”

“But how we gon’ git by all them church folks?” JC asked, and the boys furrowed their brows to confront the oddity of small-town life the local newspaper and informal media found perennially intriguing: Mt. Sinai.

Mt. Sinai wasn’t a mountain, or even a hill, but was the name given to the Youth Center and that block of Second Street on which it sat. After the Youth Center was first constructed in 1965 by the city, the city it then tried to generate income to pay for it by selling the surrounding land. A Jehovah’s Witness, who sat on the Center’s Board of Directors, managed to get two of the parcels purchased for a church and a school, which were immediately across the street from one another and just down at the end of the block from the Youth Center, which sat in the middle of the block on the west side of the street. Not to be outdone, the other churches galvanized—and lobbied and protested when the city seemed bound to other potential vendors—themselves into action, and purchased their own lots to lose no ground in the war of souls. In months, a Nation of Islam Mosque appeared and the Seventh Day Adventists, the Holiness denomination, A.M.E., and the Baptists had all founded churches, church schools, and
outreach offices on the same block, and, in the aggressive spirit of proselytizing that followed, imported some of their most aggressive, faithful, and stout missionaries to net all the lambs and fishes they could get. Almost immediately, youths heading to the Center for a little basketball, tennis, softball, ping pong, or just to hang out found themselves plied hard at each step as soon as they turned onto that block. Ben and this same group of boys, in fact, had wandered into the then-new Mt. Sinai spiritual war zone, and after escaping the Muslims, who really frightened them with the papers and pies, and the Caribbean accents of the Seventh Day Adventists, found themselves stuck for three whole hours in the clutches of the Baptists.

Not so easily daunted, the interested youths took to the fox holes of back paths, trespassing on the adjacent landowner’s properties with foxy expertise, and soon the traffic returned to normal, which baffled the religious sects until they infiltrated the fox holes by buying off a kid, who told all he could for the brand new pair of Dr. J Converse sneakers they bought for him. Ironically, it was this same kid who was caught using the path the following week, and made to participate in five hours of a Jehovah Witness course entitled, “Thou Shalt Not Be Covetous.” Thus started, the crack down on the fox-hole network again proved massively successful, and Ben and his same group of friends found themselves, after slipping by the Baptist and A.M.E. nets, caught in the marching band liturgy of the Holiness church. An hour and five sets of ringing ears later, Ben and the others had had their fill of the Youth Center. Months had passed since they’d even given the matter a second thought. The Youth Center had stood practically empty for weeks. That is, until David’s coup d’ grace on the racist sergeant blew the lid off all circumspection.

“I got it! I got it!” Ben announced suddenly, breaking the fifteen-minute silence violently and startling his best friends.

“What!” they exclaimed eagerly in the face of looming tactical defeat.

“Gather ‘round, bo-ehs, an’ I’ll tell ya!”

Huddled together once more to protect the secret, Ben shared his epiphany. It was crazy, they agreed, but worth the try. En route to the Youth Center, Ben and the others converted a dollar into nickels, and tore from a telephone directory the phone numbers for each of the
religious orders represented on Mt. Sinai. They also split up temporarily and told everybody they saw to be at Mt. Sinai if they wanted to get into the Youth Center. Ben gave David the nickels, and David snuck well behind the A.M.E. church located where Second Street formed a T with 13th Avenue, and stationed himself at the public telephone booth at the gas station of the corner. Ben, at great risk to his First Amendment—and physical—freedom, slipped next to the A.M.E. church, where he had a view of the entire street. Yards down either side of the street were Bernie, JC, and Ernest, who kept the mobs of interested kids at a safe distance. Everything was in place. Ernest, the expert whistler, sounded a shrill alert carrying well beyond David’s range of perception.

Ben tensed, but none of the spiritual martinets he saw gave any indication this whistle was perceived to be any different from the ones often piercing the neighborhood silence. He gave a quick thumbs up, which JC saw.

“Alright,” he whispered back to Ernest. “It’s clear!”

By now, a group of kids had gathered on both ends. The drama was near-boil, and the younger kids were getting jittery: too many young bodies (more then Ben and the others had thought), and too much energy in too close quarters; something just might give if they didn’t hurry.

At the second whistle, David picked up the telephone and then dialed the number for the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

“You’ve reached the Jehovah Witness Worship Center, Second Street. How may I help you?” a pleasant female voice chimed.

“Mam, is this the Jehovah Witness Worship Center down the street from the Youth Center?” he asked, trying to instill a little urgency in his voice.

“It sure is. How can we help you? Would you like to come in for service, or a consultation? We are always open to help young Christians like yourself.”

“It’s not me, mam,” David said. “I’m alright, but I’m worried about some kid—I believe he’s a Jehovah witness—down the street at The Park.”

“The City of Bradentown Park?” she asked hurriedly.
“Yes, mam. Some kids started by calling him names, but are now beating him up even as we speak. I think they belong to Second Street Baptist Church. I would help, and I tried, but those kids are big, and he’s getting hurt pretty badly!”

“Oh, God, oh, God!” she said, panicking. “Thank you, son! God bless you!” and she slammed the receiver in her hurry.

Ben smiled thirty seconds later as he saw a woman run out of the Jehovah Witness center, say something to the Witnesses standing and talking outside, and then run off with them north toward The Park.

About forty-five seconds later, David called the Baptist church. “Second Street Baptist Church,” an elderly woman’s voice answered, not unpleasantly.

“Mam, is this the Second Street Baptist Church down the street from the Youth Center?”

In just under five minutes, David had called each house of worship, and had uttered the same spiel. The reaction had been uniform each time, outrage driving them to abandon their post to help a brother in spirit, until the last, the Holiness worshippers, jogged off with the same determined look shared by the others. *This was too beautiful and easy!* Ben said softly to himself as he stepped from his perch onto the sidewalk and gave the all-clear signal to JC and Bernie. They turned as they started running, shouted to the mass of energy-wired youths, and then raced to the Youth Center as a rabid horde of un-Centered children followed. Ben grabbed a basketball, JC a whiffle football, Bernie some ping pong paddles, and Ernest a bat and ball for their use as the children stormed in, overwhelming the staff, breaking chairs, pulling down the chalkboard, starting fist fights, pushing, shoving, cursing, screaming, crying, and generally unleashing months of maelstrom on the Center in just minutes.

“This IS GREAT, AIN’T IT!” Ben shouted over the din to David, who’d just come into to a high-five with Bernie, JC, and Ernest.

The others agreed as the Youth Center bulged with excitement. The money David held from McKechnie Field was stolen, Ernest’s smashed bag of candy hit the floor, was trampled some more, and then disappeared in the sea of shiny black foreheads, and Ben was pushed so hard into the water fountain, which caught his shirt, that it was nearly torn clear off him.
But Ben laughed as he, freed from the wave of children, stood with his shredded shirt just flapping loosely against his sides. Neither he nor his best friends in all the world cared one lick as they moved with reckless abandon from ping pong, basketball, some softball, and then whiffle football as the day darkened beyond dusk to nightfall, and the Youth Center fell quiet. As one, knowing they all had overstayed their passes with their parents, the boys rolled out laughing, safe from Mt. Sinai, which had closed its doors for the day.

"Man, this was great!" Ernest exclaimed in his drunken revelry. Neither he nor the others had ever had so much fun in one day of their short lives. The others, caught up in the same thing as they stumbled, loudly, away from Mt. Sinai, didn’t even notice who’d spoken.

"Yeah," Ben said as he pushed Bernie into David just because he could, and then jumped into the air with a whoop. "This is going to be the best summer of our lives, man!"

"You got that right, man!" JC added.

"But you gon’ git a whippin’!" Bernie laughed.

"We’re all in trouble," David said, soberly assessing the situation. As one, they all let his words digest for a second, before laughing again, their slapstick returning.

"I don’t care!" Ben said.

"Me neither!" confirmed Ernest.

"This is gonna be the best summer ever, man!" JC thirded officially as he held his arm, palm down, out. The others joined him in the circle. "The best ever," he repeated.

"The best ever!" They said as one, solemnly, and then started their antics again with recrudescent zeal.

Minutes later, the boys parted along their own darkened paths toward the sanctity of their respective homes. Each one of them, except Bernie, who was the only one home when he arrived, got an A+ spanking and lecture that brought tears, and hurt pride and limbs, to each one of them. Still, when sleep came, early to David and JC, who were sent to bed without dinner, their smiles couldn’t have been larger.

Ben had also been sent to bed without supper, but the excitement overrode any sense of fatigue he felt. Late into the night, he slipped onto Ben’s Porch, armed with acorns and small pebbles. Only when he had hit two drunks, a woman in a blond wig, and a middle-aged couple,
all of them throwing a rage, did he feel satisfied with his day. Ben went to sleep and had dreams of the baseball game and an enraged police officer searching the town all over as he sat in McKechnie Field's dugout waiting to hit after Hank Aaron.
Chapter 4

Saturday, June 5th

Herald Wire Services

BRADENTOWN—Has Bradentown, a longtime bedroom community and refuge for vacationers known for its peaceful race relations, joined cities like Jacksonville and Columbus, GA, in racial conflict? That’s the question the city mayor, the city council, and police sergeant Jethro Clipper, better known as Sgt. Jet, now ask themselves.

Through a press release, the Bradentown Police Department officially acknowledge that Sergeant Jet’s new cruiser was vandalized yesterday, late evening. However, at approximately the same time, another act of vandalism occurred at the public library, where someone spray painted Kason Lives in red on the entrance after hours.

Thus far, the police department refuses to say whether the incidents are linked. However, Sgt. Jet would say in both matters that they have “hard prints and some solid leads. Lawlessness will not be tolerated in Bradentown, not from the black community, or any community as long as I’m around. Whoever’s behind these riots, vandalism, or whatever, they won’t get too far ‘round here.”

Meanwhile, rioting continues in Jacksonville and Columbus, Georgia, and the mayors in both cities have consulted the states’ governors regarding mobilizing their National Guards. Meanwhile, police still have no leads on the mysterious disappearance of Kason Elijah Marshal, Sr., father of the youth whose death has sparked rioting throughout the South . . .

The Grapevine Gazette shook the vines of communication early the next morning (although not as early as Mr. Thomason reached his post), fertilized by the front-page story running in the Bradenton Herald about Sergeant Jethro (“Jet”) Clipper’s vandalized police car, Sgt. Jet himself intimating his belief in a connection between the previous riots, the mysterious absence of Kason Elijah Marshal, Sr. from his home on Third Street, and the unrest in the lawless sector of the Negro community.
ESCAPADES ON THIRD STREET

The Black community didn’t take kindly to Sgt. Jet’s words for sure. Long known for his perceived racist leanings, community leaders saw it as yet another affront from him and insensitivity from the Bradentown PD and the media.

But even more prevalent was the fact of Marshal’s complete disappearance following his son’s death. Speculation ran the gamut, from him having participation in and orchestration of the riots, to a conspiracy by the Bradentown leadership to hide his murder by the white community.

At 8 a.m. sharp, the news reached the Thomas residence.

“Yooo-hoooo, Lyyy-nnnnn, are ya there?” Ben rolled from his left side to his right. “Helllllooooonnn, Lyyyyyyyynn!” Ben, dreaming of the biggest, juiciest mango he’d ever seen in his life, just sitting and beckoning him with a teasing dip of a peel, rolled one more time to his left, and fell out of bed with a crunch. The giant mango disappeared as his head clonked the floor along with the rest of him. Still sleepy and confused, and a dull ache in his head and a big ache in his empty stomach, Ben was immediately grouchy.

“Dammit,” he huffed, rubbing his head and trying to untwist himself from his sheets and blanket and not even alert enough to care whether someone overheard him. Below the waist he was secured as well as a mummy. With his other hand, he began rubbing his stomach, and he complained some more. “Who makin’ all that fuss so early!” He was mad at being woken, mad that he was woken hungry, mad that he was tangled up, mad that his head hurt from hitting the floor, mad that his giant mango didn’t exist, and just mad.

“This is Marsha, girl. We gotta talk!” Marsha Lane, also a midwife, was Miss Thomas’ closest friend and confidante. They’d been friends since childhood, and had shared their dreams since then, hence the similar occupation. If Lynn Thomas could ever be giddy, it was with Marsha.

“Comminnnng, Marrrrshaaaal!” Ben heard his mother pipe amid the flush of a toilet. The early-morning light slipping through his window curtains just then bounced off the mirror and right into Ben’s face, making him mad with the sun, too.

“Dammit!” he huffed again as he violently kicked his linen away while shielding the reflected sun from his eyes. The linen crumpled up...
near the front of his bed, Ben just sat on the floor leaning up against his nightstand. He couldn’t remember being so tired. His eyes closed, Ben heard more faint voices below.

“Mamma, can we come?”

“No, git back in that house like I done told ya! This ain’t none of your business!” The front door whumped shut and the vibration tinkled the antique kerosene lamp on Ben’s dresser. Before the last tinkle could die, Ben’s eyes had popped open and he immediately scampered to his porch. Nothing passed between his mother and “Auntie” Marsha out of the earshot of his sisters unless it was something not meant for children. That’s just what Ben wanted to hear. Dancing like a supple nymph around the creaking boards and indentations he knew even in pitch dark, Ben slithered from his bedroom with the door just inches open and onto the porch. In the scant seconds it took for him to press himself up against the balustrade and focus on every word he could hear, Ben was already all awake. Marsha’s controlled voice, which even sounded like his mother’s, though a bit less husky, carried clearly over the rusty squeak of the porch swing on the lower level. It was already stiflingly hot, and he wiped his perspiration mustache away with his hand.

“. . . and I’m glad Sgt. Jet got his. I don’t care what they say about professionalism, but if that man ever came near my children, I might jus’ kill him myself!” Marsha was saying.

“Calm down, Marsha,” Ben’s mother cooed, as comforting as a dove.

“Lawless’ he said,” Marsha continued, surely loud enough for Vira and Anne to hear, too, if they were right next to the front door, as Ben knew them to be, “right here in the Bradentown Herald on the front page! I’ll show him ‘lawless’ for sure!” Marsha was also the more demonstrative of the two, and excitable.

“Let me see that for myself.” Ben heard the newspaper ruffle as it exchanged hands.

“I wish to God I knew who vandalized his car, ‘cause I’d give them a kiss and dinner for a whole month jus’ for showing him! They’re heroes as far as I’m concerned,” Marsha said. Ben smiled broadly, but didn’t believe one word of it. Oh, she probably meant it, but the Unwritten Code was such that had he—a mere child—told
Auntie Marsha in confidence, he’d not only get a spanking from her, no matter how appreciative she really was, but he’d still get a whoopin’ twice as bad from his mother once she violated their sacred confidence.

“Says here they got’hard prints and have some solid leads,”” Ben’s mother quoted from Sgt. Jet. Ben stiffened with concern. He’d not thought about fingerprints, an investigation, big, black Dobermans chasing him, running from men with shotguns, handcuffs, jail, a big trial, cell bars, bread and water . . .

“When don’t they say that, Lynn? I don’t believe they have a single clue. And Officer Stanley, that real cute—and black—officer, told a friend of a friend I spoke to this morning already that they don’t know who did it because they don’t have any matches with those fingerprints.”

“You’re probably right. It later says they are lookin’ for a group of homeless men since Sgt. Jet’s been kinda harsh with the vagrancy-law enforcement.”

Ben resumed breathing.

“But what really worries me,” Miss Thomas continued, “is the disappearance of Kason Elijah Marshal, Sr., and how folks is all jittery round here. I don’t care whether you like that Sergeant Jet or not, he is right about one thing: black and white folks are nervous right now like they ain’t been in a while, and I feel somethin’ in the air whenever I’m downtown or anywhere where I see a few white people. And almost every other sermon I hear about is about that riot and how mad church folks are, and how some folks talkin’ about rioting round here, too!”

“You got that right, Lynn. I don’t know what happened to that man—although it’d be a shame if somebody hurt him because he sho’ll is a fine thing—but almost all the men folks I know been checking their guns or talking about movin’ to see family till all the tension blew over, especially since talk of rioting is growin’ in the air.”

“It ain’t a bad idea, if you ask me, but it ain’t all that bad yet.”

“Yeah, it is a bit premature to be talkin’ riots and all kinds of foolishness, but I ain’t gonna get caught with my guard down, you hear me? I got family to protect, a husband and two boys and a girl, and a home, and nobody’s gonna take it away from me. God knows, if that had been my boy who’d been shot like that, I don’t know if I wouldn’t be riotin’, too, especially when white folks don’t even feel they got
anything to apologize for! That boy was a straight-A student! He had a bright future ahead of him, but look at him now: dead. I hear his poor mother’s nearly had a breakdown from all this, that poor woman."

"Hmmm . . . " Ben heard his mother muse before his thoughts drifted away and their conversation fell to more banal concerns. Ben didn’t really know what it meant, and he hadn’t himself seen any tension or heard of riots. He had only the vaguest notion of what a riot was, but it meant nothing to him, and thus it presented no big concern. No longer than it took for him to slink back into his room, change clothes, and bounce down stairs to attack the kitchen did it take for the only remaining piece of conversation he still carried with him to tell his friends to filter down to their “attack,” as he would later call it, on Sgt. Jet. Imagine his surprise when he reached the kitchen and found himself still on punishment, and he had to eat dinner from the previous night: blackeye peas, greens, and hamhocks, his least favorite meal. He wanted to say “dammit” again and again as his sisters laughed at him, but he couldn’t do anything but eat and fill his knot-sized stomach.

At 10:50 a.m. The Park was teeming with screaming black kids of all ages, all who had arrived after Ben and his group just in time to be caught up in the vortex of running, jumping, screeching, and laughing children playing fumble. The Park was a new construct owned by the City of Bradentown. It sat directly west of Ben’s church, St. Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church, which Ben and the other kids always found kind of odd and an imposition on their play, since they could hardly act with unconcerned abandon and debauchery right next to a church. Still, they were kids, and their play would have been no less enthusiastic if Alcatraz sat in St. Ebenezer’s stead. The Park consisted of a playground with two separate wooden jungle gyms—often dubbed hostile pirate or space “ships” by Ben and his friends—that each had slides, secret tunnels, monkey bars, and nets into which the children could climb. On the other side of the largest “ship” and closest to the church were a couple of swings. The jungle gyms and swings sat in white sand rimmed by wooden logs and newly laid grass, like a giant, elaborate sandbox. There were marble benches with grids on top of them for checkers or chess, a water fountain, and newly planted trees. Next to the church sat a single-goal basketball
ESCAPADES ON THIRD STREET

court, with a slightly crooked backboard, flanked by two grass-covered lots where all of the ball games were played. Sidewalks allowed access from three different places, although most of the boys felt macho if they simply discarded the entrances and hopped over—and sometimes walked—the wooden fence that bordered the entire park. The Park had a name after some benefactor to the city, or something, but no kid knew or cared. All they knew and cared was that it was theirs.

The Park was nice, but the adults whose homes were adjacent to The Park—and none of them was happy about it since a park meant kids and noise, which caused a few adults to become churlish and jealous guardians of their property against another’s young’uns and their balls—knew that the hordes that had descended on it from day one would soon annihilate the structures and qualities that made The Park a recreational retreat. And so it seemed, if one could only see kids running into trees, jumping off benches, climbing up on the basketball goal, and leaving garbage about, just to name a few things.

A number of adults occasionally took interest in curbing the destructive frolic, especially when they caught their own child committing a wrong, but all the children knew of, and feared, Mrs. Preene, an elderly woman whose property abutted The Park on two sides. Mrs. Preene—secretly called Mrs. Prune, although no one remembered the connection but thought it was fitting anyway since she was mean and stingy and prunes were disgusting—had confiscated many-a-ball that had unintentionally found itself in her possession and beyond rescue. She had given more than a few intrepid little trespassers trying to recover errant balls a heart-stopping scare when she surprised them with her shrill voice and sudden appearance. On one day, just a few weeks gone, Ben had courted prune-ish disaster . . .

“Ah, man, Ben!” Ernest had wailed as Ben’s errant punt went wildly astray, bouncing on top of Mrs. Prune’s patio roof with a dead thud, and then onto her station wagon with a reverberating thud, and finally into her vegetable garden with a crunching thud. The kids closest to her yard scattered for cover. Some even left, but most were too interested in seeing what happened next.

“OOHHH,” Bernie lamented loudly, bringing both hands to his face. “Look what you done did, bo-eh. We ain’t nevuh gonna git dhat ball.”
"Shaddup, punk!" Ben snapped angrily, although he was angrier with himself. Ben glanced from Bernie, to Ernest, and then to the place of transgression. Ernest looked absolutely shattered, on the verge of tears even, because surely his ball, after creating a private nuisance and THEN smashing her vegetables, was a goner.

"Whatcha gon' do?" JC asked, setting off a chorus of similar questions.

"Ain't nuthin' he gon' do 'cept buy dhat bo-eh a new ball," Bernie said smugly, and he was probably right. No one had ever seen a ball land in Mrs. Prune’s yard with such a ruckus and escape alive. Ben stood in limbo.

"Ain'tcha gon' git Ernest's ball?" Anne asked innocently, more a statement than a question.

Ben looked at Ernest and then weighed his chances. No one actually HAD seen her today . . . and it’s jus’ ovuh dhe fence . . . an’ surely she can’t catch me. Convinced, but scared stiff, Ben suddenly sprinted toward the fences separating The Park and Mrs. Prune’s yard, which had its own wooden fence about the same height as The Park’s fence and standing next to it. His back hunched, Ben slid up to the fence like a commando scouting the enemy perimeter in Laos. It was deathly quiet as all the kids, including Bernie, held bated breaths in suspense and likewise stooped under the ominous moment . . . except Anne.

"Hey, Ben, why you hunmfff—" she began, jarring the silence and sending a coronary attack through Ben’s chest before Vira clamped her hand over Anne’s mouth. Ben had to rest a second as his heart slowed and his concentration returned.

Commando Ben having returned to action, he peeped over the fence, spying no one. All was as it had been. Could Mrs. Prune be away, leaving her posterior flanks unguarded?

"Psst. Hurry up, Ben." It was Bernie, but Ben just ignored him. HIS life was at stake, and it was the only one he had, so no one was going to rush him right then.

Ben peeped again. Still no one. Maybe she wasn’t home. If I run in, git it, an’ then run out, she won’t nevuh know I was heah, Ben thought to himself. I just gotta do it now!
Ben sucked in one deep, quick breath and then scrambled deftly up The Park fence and bounced down lightly inside Mrs. Prune’s territory, hidden by the laundry hanging out to dry. The ball was off to the right and next to the house. He couldn’t see it, but Ben knew the garden’s location, and so he crouched as low and moved as swiftly as he could. Yep, the ball was right in the middle of the small garden, and had smashed several tomatoes good and now rested on some green stuff Ben had never seen before. Since there was no time for delicacy, Ben placed his bare foot squarely into the garden, crunching yet more green stuff and, feeling the exhilaration of his successful Odyssey, turned and ran blindly . . . into Mrs. Preene! Disaster! Her empty laundry basket went flying and both Ben and Mrs. Preene bounced backward a few steps. Every bone in his body screamed for him to flee, but Ben’s respect for his elders held him stupidly in check, his eyes dilated, mouth agape.

“Run, Ben! Run!” Ben heard a distant voice shouting. Ben couldn’t tell if it was his sense of self-preservation or a friend or sister shouting at him.

As soon as Mrs. Preene regained her balance, which was pretty good for an old prune, Ben wished he had taken that advice. Her face contorted and arms outstretched, Mrs. Preene grabbed for Ben. Although he stood a good six feet distant, Ben recoiled as if a snake had fallen on him; his whole body convulsed in fear.

“AHHH!” Ben blurted involuntarily as he ran toward the fence, his life flashing before him as he knew he’d never make it. Mamma, mamma, mamma, mamma repeated itself violently as the womb instinct suppressed all cognition. All Ben could see were the too-distant fences right then, and suddenly nothing else mattered.

When he was still three feet from the fences, Ben leaped with all his might, preternatural just then, and landed on top of Mrs. Preene’s fence and then slipped onto The Park fence, giving his thigh a nasty scrape in the process, and then rolled on over and crashed into the grass on his elbow. But even that didn’t stop Ben, who got up and ran all the way across The Park, across the basketball court, through an opening in The Park fence, and into the parking lot of St. Ebenezer, a full fifty-five yards, before he turned around.
Mrs. Preene, standing at the wooden fence, was shaking her fist in fury and shouting, but Ben's ears heard not a single word because his heart and head were pounding so hard that he could barely think. Standing there limply, Ben only knew that he was alive and safe; he didn't know that he was still clutching Ernest's football, somehow. It was a testament to Ben's grid-iron prowess: a scamper for his dear life and yet, after crashing over two fences, scraping his inner thigh viciously, and twisting his elbow, both of which he'd feel when his senses returned, he still didn't fumble the football.

"Man, I ain't nevuh seen nuthin' like that befo'," JC said admiringly a few seconds later.

Ben, flanked by his two sisters and surrounded by a circle of hero-worshippers, was basking in glory.

"She almost had him!" Some toothless kid exclaimed, "but he got away!"

"Ah, man, that was bad!"

"Betcha she ain't gon' mess wit you no mo'!" Ernest asserted, now clutching his football proudly under one arm and holding his candy bag in the other.

"He ain't did nuthin' but jump a fence like a scared ole rabbit!" Bernie grumbled, hating the adulation heaped on Ben.

"Are you okay, Ben?" David asked, pointing to Ben's bleeding thigh.

And that did it. Ben had entirely forgotten, but at David's solicitude, the battle wounds flared brutally and Ben winced with pain and staggered. Nevertheless, he smiled broadly all the way home, and even bore the stinging hot water and alcohol with heroic poise.

Stiff and injured, Ben was nevertheless back at The Park the very next day.

During the course of "normal" recreational activity, the physical condition of The Park gradually suffered. Some high school kid on a bike, a football jock named Goff Roberts, came flying through The Park's sidewalks one day like a cannonball. Cannonballs aren't known for their mobility, so when a little toddler bounced from behind a water fountain onto the sidewalk, all Goff had time to do was reflex himself left or right. Choosing the former, and having no time to make other
course changes, he tried to stop with the breaks, but was thrown clear from the bike into the target he tried to avoid: the wooden railing. With a terrific whack heard for a block away like a gunshot, one whole section of the railing broke under his two hundred and fifty odd pounds as he went clear through it and fell into the street. Surprised himself that he was uninjured, Goff got back on his bike and resumed his reckless speed. He’d go on to play professional football for the New Orleans Saints with the same abandon.

Ben and his friends, playing fumble one cold winter day, had added their mark of destruction by running into one of The Park’s newly planted saplings as they tried to bring down David, who was running with the football. With Bernie and Ben clutching his waist, JC at his legs, and Ernest in front fighting off a stiff-arm to the face, David, himself blinded by one of Ernest’s arms to his face, ran squarely into the young oak, Ernest first. Ernest screeched like a massive parrot as the full weight of all the boys, for an instant, squashed him into the rubbery oak. Maybe serious injury would have ensued, but the sapling could not handle the weight, and gave way, its infantile roots ripping up with the bulk of it, sending clumps of dirt and a dust cloud thirty feet into the air with a big WHOOFF! When the dust cleared, all the boys were dirt pastries looking around and wondering what had happened. Except for Ernest, who was rubbing his back with both hands. From them on, when anyone tried to tackle David, they all went for his legs, and had decent success at that.

Other things happened at The Park, too, but generally more vandalistic, like the secretive spray painting beginning to randomly appear, the whiff of urination in the white sand, broken bottles, branches snapped from the adult trees and left sitting on the sidewalk, the bending of the backboard of the basketball goal, which was only about 7'5" high, a love dunk for too many big kids, and the regular scattering of apparel showing up at least once a week: a black lace brazier and matching panties once; a man’s 10 ½” Carlton black dress hat with a pink ostrich feather on the right hand side and the inside inscribed “To Tiger”; the left side of a pair of white Converse All-stars, brand new, with Julius Erving’s signature and one black sock; a pair of child’s crutches; an unpackaged 13th Street Youth Center extra large T-shirt with the letters KOACH across the shoulder blades in the back;
about ten different single socks in all colors, sizes, patterns, and dress purposes; and, a black pipe Ben found and then put into his mouth, earning him a spanking when he walked into the household with it, not so much because Miss Thomas didn’t want him to pick up any notions of smoking so soon, but because he knew better, Miss Thomas berated, for sticking something like that in his mouth when he didn’t know where it could have been.

But the carnage being inflicted on The Park was not all; the children suffered as well in their vivacious play—bruises, scrapes, sprains, jammed fingers, bloody noises. So far, this particular summer Saturday morning was no exception. Not fifteen minutes into fumble, Ben had hit the ball, a hummer, from one end of The Park to the other, with Bernie leading the chase. Bernie, the fastest of Ben and his best friends, had rocketed off, dodging a concrete light pole, leap-frogging a bench, hurdling the water fountain, and then as he closed on the ball, oblivious to almost everything with it just a hop away, had run straight into the wooden fence under which the ball had rolled. The whump was heard from one end of The Park to the other, and everyone streaked to see the dying kid when Bernie didn’t pop right back up after a minute or two.

"Ooh, did y’all see that, heh-heh, he went, he went, BAM! right into that fence," Ben laughed, taking advantage of Bernie’s mishap to rub it in. "You okay, Berr-nee? Hee-hee!"

"I don’t think this so funny, Ben," JC rebuked. "He don’t look so good. Bernie? You okay?"

Bernie, lying on his back, moaned softly in answer, his legs moving back and forth slowly.

"Ah, he okay," Ben diagnosed. "He just fakin’. Git up boy!" Ben commanded. "Bernie?" he said, concern and fear creeping into his voice.

"Whatcha think, David?" JC asked. Kids had gathered around thickly. Where was an adult when you needed one? Everyone was too scared to get help for fear of getting in trouble if Bernie died, and so he just lie there wasting away.

"I-I dunno," David stammered. "Give him some room. Move back. He needs air."
“Why you doin’ that?” Vira asked, a bit miffed that David had commanded her so.

“That’s what they always do in the movies when someone gets hurt,” David replied weakly.

“Blow in his mouf,” a tall, skinny girl said, “and you might reshushate him.”

“YOU blow in his mouth!” David said. “Have you ever smelled HIS breath? He doesn’t brush his teeth!”

“I ain’t puttin’ my mouf on no strange boy’s! He yo friend,” she said in sass-speak.

“Hmpf.”

For five minutes Bernie lay on his back, moaning and holding his head. Another five minutes later, though, Bernie was up, with a huge black whelp across his forehead and walking about in a daze while everyone looked on at the miraculous recovery. In another five minutes, Bernie was running, albeit a little more timidly, at balls again.

Bernie’s mishap was just the beginning that day. Some 5-year-old boy that Ben didn’t know fell off the monkey bars after trying to hang upside down. His mother was there and she carried the wailing boy, scared more than hurt, away. Vira and Anne, chasing after a ball JC had hit, ran into one another, but they were just dazed. Terrence Washington, and his older brother, Wilson, who were both disliked by Ben since they were big bullies, were stung by wasps after they knocked the nest down out of one of The Park’s trees and it fell between them. When the group suddenly switched to Smildaquilt, David had stepped on Ben’s hand while he ran with the football and Ben tried to tackle him. Ben’s hand was numb for a while, but he was otherwise undeterred from action and scored a touchdown on the very next toss. There were a few other scrapes and bruises, but the final one of the morning came when Ben was running the football in Smildaquilt and JC dived in an effort to tackle the elusive Ben from behind. JC caught one of Ben’s elbows directly in the right eye, and he collapsed into a bawling heap.

“Oww-OOOhh—oww—OOhh,” JC cried in anguish, kids running to see the latest tragedy.

“What happened?”

“I dunno, but somethin’s happened.”
"Oww-OOOh-ow-ow-ow-OOhh-ow-ow-ow," JC continued. When it came to crying in agony, no one was better than JC. His years of practiced sorrow in his mother’s household had made him Broadway-ready on a moment’s notice.

"Ah, man, you HAD to knock his eyeball right out!" Bernie started.

"Oww-OOOhhh . . . "

"J-JC," Ben began but stopped as JC spasmed and curled into a ball. Ben tried again, as did David and a few others, but JC wasn’t having any of it, and seemed to howl even louder.

Anne noticed. "He jus’ cryin’ louduh an’ louduh like a big baby." And so JC did, apparently in response to Anne’s observation. Everyone stood around, but a few feet farther back, watching JC. Even if he wasn’t in that much pain, and about everyone knew JC enough to know that he wasn’t, you just couldn’t abandon a fallen comrade.

Anne’s comment seemed to do it. JC immediately set out on the road home, still crying, while everyone stood around innocently. Afterward, the interest in Smildaquilt seemed to just dry up and kids began to pick up their shoes, those that had worn them, and balls and other toys and began leaving. Ben took one last, apologetic look at the singular form of JC retreating toward home and decided he’d go home the other way. He couldn’t stomach the thought of seeing JC, who had already suffered enough, get another whipping for receiving the elbow. So, with just himself, Bernie, Ernest, and David, who had torn one of his best shirts, Ben set off for home with his sisters in tow.

After lunch, an affair in which Ben wolfed down six ketchup-mustard-relish-laden hot dogs, Ben and his sisters were so worn that, despite their best efforts, all three collapsed as fatigue stole over their tired, just-fed bodies. In forty-five minutes they were as good as new and out on the hot asphalt headed toward The Park, where Ben expected all of his friends to return. However, no one showed except a few younger kids, and so Ben hit the road again, kicking cans and throwing rocks at stop signs, squirrels, dogs, and his sisters. The sun was fierce, the Florida humidity was at its peak, and the road burned his bare feet, but Ben hardly noticed as he casually strode away from
The Park toward Bernie’s house across the railroad tracks. Bernie met them just about half way between The Park and his home.

“Where everybody done gone to?” Bernie asked from a distance of ten yards and closing, tossing his tennis ball toward Ben, who short-hopped it and side-armed it back. Bernie must have had hot dogs, too, or a hamburger, because he had a big ketchup blotch from the center of his stomach to his crotch. His fly was open, too. The bruise on Bernie’s head looked even worse than it did before lunch, but Bernie didn’t seem bothered by it.

“Dunno. Ain’t nobody at The Park. We done just come from there. Race ya to the Canal!” Ben raced off and Bernie leaped to the chase without a second thought. Vira and Anne did well in keeping up, although they knew where Ben intended to go since it was just a couple of blocks away on a street that crossed Third Street. The problem was that near the Canal there were dogs, BIG dogs, that barked at and almost always chased anyone, children and adults, at all hours of the day and night. It was one of the few risks one found in having freedom to roam throughout the neighborhood, and thus was accepted by the older kids as a sort of rite of passage. Fortunately, the dogs had other pressing business and gave the sandy headed children no troubles.

At the Canal, Bernie, Ben, and his two sisters, skipped rocks off of the ditch water and tossed rocks into the cement plant, listening carefully after they successfully tossed a rock in one of the many unscreened ports of the plant to hear it clank in confirmation of a hit.

“That wasn’t nothin’,” Anne said to Bernie after he tossed a large rock into one of the ports and hit something that boomed deeply.

Bernie and the others looked on as Anne became a blur of action that included a quick scoop of a rock, along with a handful of sand, that extended into her coil and release, sending Anne dangerously close to falling into the ditch and the rock to the base of the cemetery plant’s wall.

“REAL good throw. HA!” Bernie bellowed. “Jus’ like a girl. Can’t do nuthin’.”

Vira, standing directly behind Bemie, took a quick step forward and gave him a shove in the back as hard as she could. Bernie had good balance, cat-like balance, but not even Bastet would have been able to avert his fall into the ditch. Bernie spun, his arms grasping for any
hold, but that only worsened his balance as he fell backwards into the murk, going fully under before he could scrambled out.

“Girl!” Bernie yelled. He was soaking wet and hunched over in revulsion.

“Betcha won’t say we can’t do nothin’ no mo’!”

Bernie, laughed at by everyone as he plucked a slippery tadpole off his shirt, only fumed. The ditch water smelled awful, and soon no one could stand within two feet of him. To occupy himself, he threw rocks more vigorously, but nothing came close to getting in. Vira and Anne laughed at Bernie throughout; Ben laughed, too, but mostly kept his distance—Bernie smelled like a rotten skunk!

Ben later convinced Bernie to come with him to get David, who was outside sitting on the steps to his home lazily tossing a baseball into his glove when they arrived.

David popped up, called into the house for permission, and then bounded for the quartet, only to stop ten feet distant.

“What smells SO bad? PEE-UUU!”

Ben laughed. “Vira pushed Bernie into the ditch by the railroad tracks.”

“IHH-YEWW, yuck!” David said, his face contorting. “Smells like . . . like . . . a rotten skunk!” Everyone, including David, rolled in mirth. Not Bernie.

“Oh, shaddup!”

All three boys then headed back toward The Park, but allowed themselves the distractions of playing in the water spouting from an open fire hydrant, which cleaned up Bernie a bit and made his presence tolerable, if not exactly desirable. The boys also surreptitiously raided a few mango trees, stuffing themselves as the mangoes fell, and used their shirts to hold the extra-succulent fruits for later. Instead of The Park, they all ended up at Ben’s home perched in the big evergreen in the front yard, taking advantage of its protection from the unrelenting sun and humidity and eating their overfill of mangoes. Bernie and Ben had mango all over their shirts and around the outside of their mouths and on their hands and arms, which attracted flies by the barrel eager to suck them clean. And on they ate, oblivious to the harm to their stomachs and the flies, which were undaunted by the casual swats the boys aimed at them. Bernie was so full that, on one of those rare
places that were now covered with dirt from his rapid descent, and leap from, Ben’s tree into the dirt below.

To all three questions, Ernest merely shrugged and raised up his candy bag to show that it was full. Ben exploded toward Ernest and snatched the football from Ernest’s other hand, jumped the sidewalk, and raced for The Park. “Betcha can’t catch me,” he challenged the others as he sped away as swiftly as he could on the street paralleling JC’s, which was one block over. Although flanked by Mr. Thomason’s and the Shipletts’ residences, Ben and his sisters had lived there so long he was accustomed to the dangers posed by the two forces of nature. Nevertheless, he did double-pace whenever passing between them. Although preferring the other route in front of JC’s home, Ben still felt guilty and wanted nothing to do with JC’s anguish at all, although no degree of guilt short of dismemberment could hardly stop Ben from playing football, his favorite activity in the world, in The Park with his best friends. Nope, not even JC’s black eye.

Vira and Ann, grounded by Miss Thomas so that they wouldn’t ruin their Sunday hair, stood at the screen door looking longingly on as the boys raced around the corner whooping and hollering.
It's early summer, 1971, and school has just recessed. Benjamin Thomas, a typical eleven-year-old boy, has his hopes set on three months of escapades unchecked by the tedium of teachers and books and classrooms. The first few weeks of unadulterated storytelling, exuberant play at The Park, treasure hunting in Piney Forest, rescuing ripe fruit from neighbors' trees, and a host of deeds and misdeeds, send Ben, his sisters, and his best friends well on their way to an unforgettable summer of fun... But then Vincent Solomon comes to town, bringing with him the ideals and enthusiasm of the civil rights movement. And some very grown-up problems festering both outside and inside of Ben's community. Soon, Ben's summer escapades turn into a crusade, which then quickly spirals toward a double lynching with Ben and his family caught right in the middle...

Set in Bradentown, Florida, Escapades on Third Street takes readers on a journey filled with a memorable cast of African-American characters set against a backdrop of southern culture and conflict along racial, class, and generational lines. Escapades on Third Street delves into the rich heritage of one southern African-American community—probing the interdependence based on its shared faith, painful history, hopeful future, gritty humor, soulful music, and struggle for survival—to explore the conflicts seething just beneath the surface that forever change Ben Thomas' life.

Gregory Rutledge was born in Bradenton, Florida, and reared on Third Street. He is a graduate of Emory University (1989), where he studied English literature and philosophy, and the University of Florida Colleges of Law and Journalism & Communications (1992). Greg practiced law in Atlanta for about four years before returning to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he earned a Master of Arts degree in Afro-American Studies (1999) and is now pursuing a Ph.D. in English literature. Greg's plan to write a novel germinated while he was in law school, and became a work in progress in January, 1993. His family has lived on Third Street for several generations. Escapades on Third Street is his debut novel.

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