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Jackboy and the bean stalk

by *Stephon Senegal*

Riding bikes or foot races. Measures of men pretending to be boys. A sandbox. Makeshift castles of wood. Cardboard treasures. Kitchen knives. Tucked. Duck taped for grip. Front yard fresh. A sprinkling of the green dust. Olive knee pads and swash buckles. Rattle of chains. Swoosh. No white lines. Traps. To be knights. Fancying that our grit was enough. Our imaginations saved us then. Kept by the trickery of illusion. Youth. The elementary and middle school kind. Not that night though. A year from twenty we were. Aged enough for war. The five. Give or take. None were family. I had fought with one of them before. We were not enemies. More hotheaded than anything. Thought him a worthy rival, but he would prove differently that night.

High schools Friday night lights. Red and blue warm southern darkness. The brightness. Fooled more than its share. To believe they were enough. A weeks reprieve from the offense of adolescence. Those content with feebleness. Gifts for no effort. Skinned and deboned. The sparkle was intoxicating. Suited for the game. The play was the normal mix of reward and punishment. This was a scrimmage I think. A simulation of worth. Do not press for more. I have only this moment for you. I hit him. Grabbing my helmets cage as I launched into the ball carrier. His only transgression was participation. The bodies were piled. The smell of dirt. The weight of strangers. Arbitrary kicks and pinches. Oh its sweetness. The tackle pile was the stuff of relief. Whether pioneer or carpetbagger. You soaked in the conclusion of one, and the beginning of another. Play. The green dust covered us. I raised from. Satisfied with the damage. Feeling it worth what it cost. Dislocated. The hand had been caught between my helmet and his. I played free safety. I hit whomever made sense. To me. I ran to the side lines peering at the disfigured hand. Slighting confounded. Taking in the reality of this treasure. It was proof. And somehow, I wanted more. The coach came to. With a half measure of testiness he asked, "Whats the issue". I showed him. He asked if I wished to continue. I thought it a silly question. Alas, we are here to please. To be enough. The cheers. No pain would keep from. For glory. He grabbed my shoulder and then hand. He pulled. I do not recall much else. Crossing the white line. I ran back to the huddle.

The pretty colors roused me that humid evening. Under the lights. A familiar shine. I awoke to a glistening countenance. Fresh from a vision of my high school exploits four years before. Dark and damp with sparkles of blues and rouge. I kept silent. The driver noticed next. We were not speeding. This I know. The five often berated the driver for his slow trickle through the streets. Him included. Their faces got brighter with the scent of slop. A mixture of sweat. The taste of food enhances with smell. Entrances upon sight. The odor of fear. Shades of orange and some peach. Bewildered the driver continued. His speed decreased, assuming there was "no way they want us". Another one. Now there were two. "pull over". Bellowed from their speakers. No Nascar tonight. Mulling to a slow a crawl. Perplexed by the notion of the phrase "pull over" what does that mean anyway. I imagine that "stop your vehicle" would be more precise. They berate us for our revisions. Yet they seem unable to adopt sensible catchphrases. Anyways. There was a parking area nearby. One amongst us suggested we pull in.

As we stopped. I instructed them to put their hands out front and away from their bodies. One asked why. I informed him that bullets. Funny undiscerning things that they are. Do not discriminate. If only they somehow had a nose for stupidity. He complied. Begrudgingly. They came in fast like they had a grudge. To correct a previous wrong. First two, then two more times two. Guns drawn. Yelling that we get our hands up. The barrels felt cold. Eight inches from. *We doing headshots tonight*, I thought. There were so many. "officer, why did..." A passengers question interrupted with another command to remain quiet and comply. And so. We complied. Our hands to the ceiling of the car. Pushing up its hanging cloth. A pale blue. The drivers car was a bit older. The ceiling fabric was no longer taut but hung a bit. It would graze our heads as we drove. Flapping in the wind. Even with his slow cautious driving. We found moments to pretend. We held it up that night. Lazy cloth. Static. Tired. A dizzying fear. Frantic glares to those near. Heavier still. Their arms began to tremble. The weight of wind. A tear. The biggest amongst us. It was him that pleaded. It was his grit we questioned that night. His arms began to shake as we pushed against the car roof. The windows were down. A cold night. A command to keep our hands raised. The pale faces had no mercy available. Bullet fret no flesh. No strongman. One of the crew nudged closer to support the shakers arm. Putting his head down. He wore his shame. One by one, they had us exit the car. Slowly, they commanded. Hands on head. Bow or bob. They kept their distance. We were instructed to kneel. Lay flat. Belly down. Arms outstretched. The breeze was colder. Calm. Quiet. An hour later. Car searched. Hands frigid and unable to close. Our bodies ached. There had been a robbery nearby. We had fit the description and they let us go.

Protection. She was there. I knew things were missing. As a young boy. Maybe eight. I would talk to my mother often. Late night therapy. Fondly remembering the naps of yesteryear. Wondering why. Discontinued. I would have accepted at least a quarter nap. A little weaning would have been proper. But they cut them. Siestas would have come in handy for my third grade compatriots. Late nights and long days. There were things she needed though. And I was honored to keep her afloat. We would turn the carport light on when we heard the car. I would normally get to it before my grandmother. The sound of tires. Hitting the driveway bump. That was the key. She would return those nights. Head bowed. Another evening of hurt. In search of the comforts that had alluded her. I made sure not to interrupt her opportunities. Her suitors. Met some. They were mostly okay. Her happiness was the point. Me and Grandma were a team. We would do what we could to make those date nights go easy. I would spend evenings playing with my toys. Concocting and layering the stories of my small polymer army. I relished those evenings, uninterrupted. I liked having people around though. Preoccupied and unconcerned. I kept my secrets easier that way. Avoiding discovery. Learning *their* stealth. The otherworldly. Some nights Grandma would make smothered sausage and rice. She would make it with corn or sometimes a side of string beans. Olive colored. Southern perfection et. A side of koolaid. The blue one was a treat. Sweeter than candy. Softer than cotton. The hardest flavor to find. I would search for at the store when we went. Picking up the pile of packets. Sifting through. Barely the height of the register. It was my contribution. Somewhat selfless oui. A treat for all. Blue koolaid and clear glass.

Slurpees at the gas station came in these large plastic cups. Cold fruity slushed ice. There was a bear on the side of those cups. A white bear. We typically had a couple hanging around. The slurpee bear was barely visible on some. Worn from years of Clorox and dish soap. They were big. We would fill them with ice. Topped off with koolaid, orange flavored, for suitors when they would come. The ice made them feel special. But there was a method. A little drink with your ice. The cabinet to the left. Above the sink. They were there. The plastic cups. I assumed he might get one of those. If he made it that far tonight. We were at my moms house. Me and her had moved before I started high school. I spent nights there now. Awaiting her return. Clandestine. I still played with my toys. I hid that from most. Past that point of acceptability. My peers had put down the toys long ago. My stories were even more involved now though. They had been building for years. I got my first toy figure at around eight. And one or two more each year after. Now fourteen, I had a decent number. The characters had been through many difficult experiences. They were contemplative. The plastic figurines. They had lives. And loves. They would talk to each other. For hours. I liked when she left. There was somehow less fighting between them on those quiet evenings. Even though they had more guns now, not to mention a plane and some tanks. Walkie-talkies, reconnaissance, from one room to the next. Had a base behind the bed. It stayed there since no one ever came to that side of the room. The jungle was in the laundry room. Had to reset that before she returned. Made use of the whole house. If I knew she would be gone for enough hours. I adored these nights. Grasslands and sugarcane were our neighbors. There was an empty field across the street. A mile deep.

I heard the tires. A skill honed since in elementary. I was up playing. The house was dark, save my room. I crawled to the front still enthralled by the theater of war I had just reenacted. Arriving to the window. A peek. I kept the lights off this night. No need to alert the budding couple. There was no rose bush in this yard. Only grass. It was fall. Late fall. The yard was light. Brown with patches of green. I sat near the window ledge. Kneeling, peering slyly through the window covering. Separating the blades slowly. They make a sound if you moved in haste. Stumbling a bit. He stammered to the passenger side door. A pseudo gentleman. This one seemed different. The suitor. Something seemed. Off. Reaching out to retrieve her. She paused. Then obliged. Her stagger was less pronounced. The discomfort in her face was there even in the dusk. A belabored exchange. The conversation was tense. Fear has a smell. Akin to a tot's sweat. Maybe a trace of yams. Cooked. Pronounced. He reached for her. She stepped back.

Gently. Sliding away from the window. I stepped into the hallway. Soundless. Swiftly into an adjacent room. There was a small dresser there. Opening. The white folded shirts shone through. Some less so from years of use. Moved aside. Feeling to make sure. The warmth of cold cotton was distinctive. As was the touch of cold steel. It had been dormant here. Waiting. Possibly for a moment like this. Stepping back. Crouching slightly in the turn to return. Coming through the hall. Passing the light under my now closed door. I stay to the left wall. Staying hidden. A slim fourteen. Aged for stealth. Left hand gently against for guidance. The other hidden behind my leg. Like a cold breeze. Steady. The window is different now. Hints of yellow shown through. They had flipped the carport light on. So she could see him. In the dark they quarreled. No courtroom and yet a judge stood near. I had had some practice in the dark. Settling into what may be. I go to the door for. Unlocking. A whimper of a creak drowned by voices of anger and distress. Pulling slowly to allow for. Well. A crack. Only enough. Easing back to the window. Posture. Brace. I take aim. A tedious shot. I have no intent of hitting him with this one. The first shot a warning.

The conversation unceasing. Twenty minutes like the ease of two. Both tense and otherwise. He pulls. An arm maybe. He is pushed. Her carefully teased hair bouncing from the force. I ready to pull. The steel. He rears his fist. Hammer cocking. Cocked. She dares him. An outstretched neck. The universal gesture of. I wish a nigga would. The steel is warmer now. It has settled. Finger in the hole but not on the trigger. I take aim to the rear of him slightly above his head. And pause. Pleading. One hand under the other. Damp from anticipation. The barrel separates the blades. He is against the car. Not many places to move. She has advanced. A step. He is hesitating. Sliding. The trigger has a chill. It had not been touched. In so long. The nostalgia of a cold spoon fresh from a cold treat. The taste of silver.

Backing away. A parked car interrupting his retreat. Pausing there. He stayed on the car for a bit longer. Basking in the silence for a couple minutes more. Walking slowly and turning towards his vehicle. Keeping distance. He gets in. The engine stutters but is keen not to delay. The lights glare. A flash as the rubber hits the roads bump in haste. Her glare prolonged into an uncharted distance. Uncocking slowly. She stayed in place. The tires shriek as he pulled off. I stood. Pointing away from the window. Carefully releasing the hammer. Leaning against the window ledge. Still cold. The steel hung. A castle of wood and brick. Watching her as she mumbled. A tearful dialogue. Slouching shoulders, as her straps fell. Leaving the door ajar. The night is cold. Merciful. Bountiful.