

MAKF. A WISH on it,” Lamar said.

“You can’t,” I said. “You wish upon shooting stars—meteors—not comets. Besides, it’s all superstition.”

Lamar had spotted the comet first. I had refused to look, knowing for sure that he would say “April fools” the moment I glanced up, but he gesticulated with such sincerity that I risked a look and saw the faint streak above the eastern horizon. We had met at Center Street School to assemble and deliver the *Birmingham Herald*. The morning was clear and warm enough that we were comfortable in our light jackets. Above us, the stars glittered, and we were trying to place them in constellations when Lamar saw the comet.

He gave me a look that dismissed my opinion. He closed his eyes tightly.

“What did you wish for?” I asked.

“I’m not telling since it’s superstition.”

“Don’t tell then.” I went back to rolling the papers, but secretly I had made a wish, too. Like so many boys our age, I wanted to be an astronaut.

While we rolled and banded the papers, Lamar kept up an entertaining chatter about the comet. At first he said it was the Christmas star come a little late—or maybe it was a NASA experiment, some kind of new rocket that was in orbit around the Earth—“Or a Russian rocket,” I interjected.

Lamar considered and dismissed the thought. “If it was a Russian rocket, we would have destroyed it by now. If that’s man-made, it’s American. Waltie, you know what? One day, we are going to fly up there, too. You wait and see. It doesn’t matter if you’re colored. My mama said if they fly monkeys up there, they can—you remember the big cake?” I remembered because we had made such a to-do about it. As a part of the celebration for John Glenn’s return, he was presented with a giant cake, as tall as a person, in the flask shape of *Friendship 7*. Lamar had talked for hours about how it must have tasted and how he wished he could have gotten a piece of it. Then my father said that probably no Negro in the country had gotten to taste it. A Negro might have helped to bake it, but he didn’t get to taste it. Offhand though it was, the remark resonated with Lamar and me. If no Negro could even taste the cake, how much more difficult would it be for a Negro to become an astronaut? The realization didn’t discourage us. We decided we would be the first Negroes on the moon.

“But, oh—it couldn’t be—but, noooo—a flying saucer.” Lamar mocked fear. “Suppose it was coming to take the Earth away from white people and to give it to the colored so we could run things for a while.”

“That,” I said, using my father’s phrase, “is highly unscientific.”

AS WITH MOST of our ventures, getting a paper route had been Lamar’s idea. He had heard that the regular route boy, a teenager, had taken a job at TCI, Tennessee Coal and Iron, the largest of Birmingham’s steel mills. “That’s a mighty rough place for a teenager,” my father had said when I told him why the route had opened up. Lamar knew the teenager since they both lived in Loveman’s Village, and he assured my father that the boy was “as big as a man.” He had gotten a girl “you, know’ —as Lamar put it—so he needed to quit school and take the higher-paying job so he could meet his responsibility. “What a shame,” my father said noncommitted and fiddled with an album cover. It had been a Sunday afternoon, after church, and my father was in the living room listening to jazz. His feet were propped on an ottoman and crossed at the ankles. He soaked in the opening bars of Nat “King” Cole’s “Unforgettable.” It was going to be a romantic afternoon. Already his breath was sweet with bourbon. Soon he would be grabbing my mother around the waist and making her dance in his imaginary jazz room. He deterred my request to my mother, who was in the kitchen basting a pot roast. She was not easy to convince. She said that she did not want me riding around Birmingham at the crack of dawn, especially with the KKK running loose. Recently a

store on the periphery of the neighborhood had been blown up, and black people blamed it on the KKK or the police, if they made that distinction.

“Well,” my father said lazily from the entrance to the kitchen, “when aren’t the KKK running loose? We wouldn’t cross the street if we worried all day about the KKK.”

“You’d better worry,” Mother snapped.

ROLLING THE PAPERS, Lamar and I took only the slightest notice of the headlines a bus strike was threatened to begin that day. Later I learned that there were other matters afoot, matters in which we children would soon find ourselves at the very center. However, I did notice one small ad. It featured the face of a big-jowled, bespeckled white man, Bull Connor, who was the city’s public safety commissioner, in charge of the police and firemen. To us children he was the boogeyman. I had heard my great uncle, Uncle Reed, rail against him. He said Bull Connor was a grand dragon in the Ku Klux Klan and his responsibility for public safety meant keeping the public “safe *from* Negroes.” He accused Connor of having lynched colored men in his jails. He said Connor not only stood by while colored people’s houses burned, but he even ordered his firemen to burn the houses.

I probably wouldn’t have noticed the ad, busy as I was glancing at the comet before the sunrise washed it out, but the ad was repeated throughout the paper. Everywhere a reader turned in the paper, he came face to face with the pip-eyed Bull Connor. I pointed out the ad to Lamar, who made a sour face when he saw it. We held the paper in the light coming from inside the school. The ad complained about an editor of an Atlanta newspaper, and said that the “quisling Ralph McGill, who had integrated Atlanta” was “brainwashing you.” The “you,” followed by an exclamation point, was further defined as “the people of Birmingham.” Even then, we realized that “you” did not include us—nor did the phrase “people of Birmingham.” Lamar laughed at the banner at the foot of the front page that read, “Your vote could decide the outcome of tomorrow’s election.”

I wondered aloud what “quisling” meant, and Lamar answered without missing a beat that it meant “midget.” He had learned the word in Mrs. Griffin’s spelling bee, he said. I was not a speller, and did not participate in the competitions. “Yes, you see, this Ralph guy is a midget and if there’s anything Bull Connor hates worse than colored, it’s midgets.”

“Why would he call the guy a midget in the newspaper?”

“He didn’t call him a ‘midget,’ he called him a ‘quisling,’ which is a bad word for midget. It’s a fighting word.”

I took a deep breath and put an armful of papers in my bicycle rack. When I turned back to Lamar, I saw him struggling to keep a straight face. “You a lie.”

“A-pril fools!” He rolled on the pavement laughing, and pointing at me as I coolly gathered more papers. I knew that this would be just the first of Lamar’s pranks. At every chance, right up until a bedtime telephone call, he would try to fool me. Looking back on it, I’m ashamed to admit that he was too often successful. I was not naive in those days, nor particularly gullible, but I did have a wide-eyed openness to things, especially things wondrous. Lamar played my curiosity: Mrs. Griffin was wearing a wig; Joe Brown had a pet monkey; Arlene Spencer’s father was decapitated in a car wreck; Mr. Edwards, the vice principal, found a rattler by the swing set. I knew I shouldn’t have believed him, but I wanted to. I studied Mrs. Griffin’s hairline for some clue of a skull cap; asked the hulking Joe if I could play with his monkey; dipped my head in sympathy and morbid fascination every time Arlene passed me in the hail; and sneaked out to the swing set to look for the four-foot diamond back with its crushed head and six-inch rattle.

With our route marked out on a paper, we set off on our bikes through the neighborhood. We both had Sears Flyers, simple three-speeds, and both geared to the hilt with handlebar tassels, front baskets, and trumpet-shaped horns. Lamar took one side of the street, and I the other, and we paced each other. This arrangement took us a few minutes longer than dividing the route, but it suited Lamar to a tee. He loved being able to talk as we flung the papers toward the door stoops, or slipped them into paper boxes that some of our clients had affixed to their mailbox

posts. Though there were a good mix of professions from doctors and lawyers to factory workers, the most common profession in Tittusville was schoolteacher. Next door to where I stayed on Tenth Avenue were the Jeterses, both retired from teaching. Across the street was Mrs. Rucker who taught at Center Street. Her reputation for surliness and hard work made us grateful she was not our teacher. Next to her, the Dobsons—he, a factory worker and she, a high school teacher; and, across from them, the Mannings, another teaching couple. My father, too, was a teacher. He taught science at Ullman High School. He could teach any branch of science and so was called on to teach the ninth grade general courses, but his specialty was biology. Father had studied a year at Meharry Medical College, the only medical college for Negroes in the country, and so he garnered great respect from his students and fellow teachers. He had dropped out of college in order to support his family; I was well on the way by the time my parents married. If my father regretted leaving medical school, he never said it.

Though it was just at the other end of Center Street, Loveman's Village was across busy Sixth Avenue from Tittusville. It was a complex made of rows of barrackslike brick buildings, two units per building, each marked with a concrete stoop in front and back. A narrow lane named for a president separated each row. Lamar lived on Wilson Way.

When I first made friends with Lamar, in the first grade, my mother wouldn't allow me to go to Loveman's Village. She said that the projects were dangerous. Too many drunks. Too many knife fights. After a year of Lamar visiting our house, she relinquished. Nothing ever happened to me at Loveman's Village. In those days, it was much like any other black neighborhood in Birmingham, though poorer than most. Sure, there were the drunks, and dope-heads, and a heroin addict or two, but all together they weren't so mean. If I went quickly by the corners where they congregated, they hardly noticed me.

Mother Thompson lived next door to Lamar. A wiry but grandmotherly woman, she was active in Reverend Shuttlesworth's church. Shuttlesworth was Birmingham's most outspoken civil rights activist. Mother Thompson dared to advertise the activism by placing posters on her front door, notifying people about mass meetings of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. As children we paid little attention to the posters or to the dozens of pamphlets we found at the bottom of the rank, damp garbage cans in her backyard.

One afternoon, the week before we started our paper route, Lamar's mother, Mrs. Burrell, and Mother Thompson had a confrontation that focused our attention on the civil rights movement. Lamar, Josie—my sister—and I were playing on the back stoop with a microscope Lamar had gotten for Christmas. Since it was a Wednesday, Mrs. Burrell's day off from domestic work, she was very dolled up. She wore a bright blue dress that pinched her waist and flared out below her hips. Her face was powdered and rouged and brightened with lipstick and she was holding her hands, wrist limp, in front of her and shaking them to dry her nails.

Mother Thompson greeted Mrs. Burrell with an approving grunt. "You looking sharp, gal. You must got a beau on the string tonight."

"Naw, Mother," Mrs. Burrell chuckled and dipped her head in an instant of mock embarrassment, "it ain't nothing like that. Just a friend."

"Must he a mighty good friend." Mother Thompson threw out wastewater from a pan into her square of lawn, and put the free hand on her hips. "Y'all young girls can..." she made a grinding motion with her hips, not meant to be witnessed by the children, though we were only a few feet away. I caught a glance of her, hut did not look up. "Y'all be wheeling them in!"

Mrs. Burrell protested by waving both hands, but she smiled in a way to show her pleasure at the compliment.

"I'm too old for that stuff, myself," Mother Thompson went on. "Naw, Mr. Thompson was one too many for me!" she said of her long-dead husband. "I only got two somebodies now, me and the Lord. Any man-fishing I be doing now, I be doing for the Lord." Then she turned serious. "There's fixing to be another mass meeting, now, Mrs. Burrell, and I want to extend an invite to you. Before you say no, I want you to think about what -e trying to do. You know, this time we got Reverend King coming in, and it's going to be different—"

"Now, now, Mother, you know I don't take no stock in all that mess."

Mother Thompson's silence was abrupt, and caused us children to look up. She had both hands on her hips, the pan dangling from one. "I sure get tired of triflin', Mrs. Burrell. This ain't no mess. This is serious business—and it's the Lord's work, too."

Mrs. Burrell forgot about her nails, put her hands on her hips, too, and dipped a hip, to boot. "It might be the Lord's work, but it's still a mess. Look around front, Miss Thompson. Now, I don't mean no disrespect—I was raised to respect—but when you got all them posters and signs tacked all over your front door, what am I supposed to think? That reflects on us all. Building look like a bulletin board! Now, I don't care what you do—but you got to keep it inside."

Mother Thompson took a step backward, stopped, and wagged her finger. "You *better* care what I do. I'm trying to help *you*. You got a child to raise. You ought to be doing it, too!"

Mrs. Burrell turned her profile to Mrs. Thompson. The heat had passed. "I know that. I just can't do everything. I'm doing the best I can with what I got."

"Girl, you just need to get some more—and I mean *get*, 'cause Mr. Charlie and Miss Ann ain't giving." Mother Thompson went in and slammed the door behind her.

Mrs. Burrell remembered her nails, blew on them, looked a moment at Lamar. "She ain't going do nothing but get us blowed up." She went in and let her screen door slam, too.

When Mrs. Burrell mentioned bombing, Josie slipped her hand inside of mine and squeezed. She was nine; we liked to say nine going on ninety-nine. With her head full of thin, well-greased plaits, our mother's meticulous handiwork, she looked quite the little girl, but our Grandmother Pic sometimes referred to her as "an old soul." I took my hand away and patted her on the back and took my turn looking in the microscope.

The slide was simply labeled "blood." Lamar wondered if it could be human blood. I didn't think so. I said it was against the law to sell human blood.

"Not if it's in the interest of science." Lamar cocked his head confidently. "Besides, it ain't even a whole drop of blood. It's not enough to hurt anybody."

"That's easy to say, if it's not your blood," Josie said.

"I think they took it from animals," I said. "Probably from a cow. Probably they got it from the slaughterhouse. Besides, if a person gave enough blood for all the microscopes Sears sold in one year, it would bleed him to death."

Josie took her turn peering into the microscope. "It's pretty," she said. "Looks like the windows at a church."

"Does not," Lamar said and took his second look. "Looks like old lady Thompson's blood to me."

"Be quiet," Josie said.

"I'll sell Sears plenty of blood after I kick her ass."

I laughed, but Josie stood up. "That's mean."

Just then Mrs. Burrell called Lamar from inside the screen door. Her tone was scolding. He went in and a minute later came out and told us we had to go home.

THE PAPER ROUTE ended at Sixth Avenue, the thoroughfare between Tittusville and Loveman's Village and downtown. A few blocks from where the route ended was the burned-out shell of Williams's store, the neighborhood

grocery that had been bombed a few weeks earlier. We had not heard the blast, only heard about it the next morning when Mr. Jeters interrupted our Sunday breakfast. “Th-Th-They bombing in T-Tittusville, now,” he said. We children called him “Jittery Jeters” because of his stutter. True to his nature, my father invited Mr. Jeters to have a seat. If the news excited my father, he never showed it.

“Was anyone hurt?” my mother asked.

“J-just ruined the store.”

“Now, that’s a shame,” Father offered. “And just on the outskirts of Tittusville. I didn’t know Williams was doing anything political. Is he a race man?” “You don’t have to be a race man,” Mother interjected sharply, “you just have to be colored.”

After church, we took a family outing to survey the damage at the store. Mother wouldn’t let us get out of the car, so we drove around the block slowly, just one of several carloads of sightseers, black and white.

Already, my head was filled with images of bombings and lynchings from the stories I heard my uncles tell at family gatherings. Later, I would realize that those stories, as terrifying and brutal as I imagined them, could never describe real violence. Violence has odors, both loud and subtle as the heightened senses pick them out. The stories my uncles told about lynchings always happened at a great distance—in Tuscaloosa or in Albertville, or “over in Georgia”—but never in Birmingham. Birmingham’s stories were about bombings, but never in Tittusville, until the store bombing. It seemed the Birmingham Klan was too sophisticated to toss a rope over a tree limb. It preferred the blast and rumble of dynamite, or the flash of a gasoline bomb—so much so that Fountain Heights on the north side of the city, a white neighborhood where blacks were beginning to buy houses, had so many bombings and fires it was called Dynamite Hill. Bombings were so common that black people had nicknamed the city “Bombingham.”

But on that beautiful April Fools’ morning, with the wind whistling around my ears as I headed home from my first delivery, my first real job, what news those papers contained—the affairs of adults—were far from my mind. I was, for a moment, in a suspended time. Freewheeling down Center Street hill toward home, I could think of nothing but wonder in the world.

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