

In the Parking Lot

by Gary V. Powell

They gathered in the parking lot between the little, white Church of Christ and the Quonset hut where us kids attended Sunday school—a couple of toothless grandpas, my old man, the Hooley boy, who wasn't quite right, and Billy Cantrell's daddy. They smoked cigarettes and waited for their families to finish worshipping. Maybe they considered themselves beyond redemption, or maybe they couldn't sit for that long. They never attended the service.

We passed the men on our way to final prayers. Mr. Cantrell nodded to our teacher Miss Wenger, pretty and blonde, her behind twitching beneath the fabric of her green dress like flanks on a horse. She flashed him a smile before looking away.

My old man said something I couldn't make out. The grandpas laughed, but Mr. Cantrell didn't think it funny. He threw his cigarette to the ground and ground it out with the toe of his shoe like a man trying to kill a snake. He told my old man to mind his own damn business.

Inside, the sudden warmth and out-of-tune singing enveloped us—the Church of Christ didn't believe in choirs or accompaniment by musical instruments.

Billy, that little shit, tweaked my ear from behind. I stole my sister's crayon, and she pinched my leg. My mother slipped us Juicy Fruit. *Hush up, or I'll wear ya'll out when we get home.*

After we finished singing, Preacher Waters, thin and pale as a birch sapling, stood behind the pulpit. He began his prayer, the one that bucked us up to face down worldly temptation in the week ahead, only to be interrupted by the Hooley boy. He stood at the back of the church, framed by the doorway. *Fight. Fight in the parking lot.*

Outside, the men circled. Mr. Cantrell lowered his head and charged. My old man sidestepped and clipped him with a left as he rushed by. Mr. Cantrell spun and danced. My old man raised his

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fists. Mr. Cantrell charged again, this time tackling my old man and forcing him onto his back. My old man blocked a right and caught Mr. Cantrell flush in the face with his own right.

When Preacher Waters tried to step in, one of the grandpas grabbed him by the arm. My mother and Mrs. Cantrell called for the men to quit, but they would not.

They fought for maybe a minute.

Mr. Cantrell had better moves, but my old man's blows opened cuts. In the end, both eyes swollen shut, Mr. Cantrell couldn't rise from his hands and knees. My old man stood over him, swaying.

One of the deacons, Mr. Harris, said that was that, and everyone should go home. The congregation began to drift away and my old man went to the bathroom to wash up.

Mrs. Cantrell, Billy, and Preacher Waters knelt beside Mr. Cantrell. The grandpas smoked and snickered. The Hooley boy ogled Miss Wenger.

She stood alone, off to the side, her face pale.

My mother called out, *hussy*, a word I'd never heard.

Miss Wenger turned on her heel and strutted away.

My old man, his knuckles skinned, took my mother by the elbow.

What did you say? my mother asked.

I didn't say anything. Get in the car.

Neither of them spoke on the ride home. They stared straight ahead, my mother behind the wheel.

My sister pinched me again.

I squealed and called her *hussy*.

My mother's left hand never left the wheel, but in one swift motion she backhanded me with her right, catching me on the cheek and bringing tears to my eyes.

Ya'll settle, she said.

And we did.

