

Smoke

by John Riley

On his last day of high school Jackie York woke up to the smell of burning books. He didn't know it was his last day of high school. He did know the smoke coming through his rusty window screen was book smoke. His mom had told him the night before she would be burning all of her Frank Yerby books, and when she said she was going to do something, especially if it was a little bit insane, she did it.

Jackie pulled on his clothes. Maybe he could stop her before she burned the ones she hadn't read, or had only read once. Mom wasn't the easiest person to get along with in the best of times. He hated to think of what she'd be like without her novels.

She was standing beside the brown metal drum in the corner of the backyard, poking the smoking drum with a broom handle, the worn straws bouncing by her silver and black hair. Jackie was sure her hair had started graying faster since Christmas, when his older sister Susie had come home from Florida with her pregnant belly stretched tight as a drum head. Now Susie was living in Mom's old bedroom with little Billy. Billy was three months old and cute as new money, even when he was crying.

Four or five paperbacks were left on the ground. The frayed covers lifted and fell in the still chilly April morning breeze. She had bought the novels from the Goodwill for a dime or fifteen cents, and they were her main pleasure.

After she got home from the mill and supper was finished, the dishes washed, she sat in her corner chair, ignoring the television blasting out "Life with Lucy" or "The Partridge Family," and read until she fell asleep. She had read through all the Zane Greys with their page after page of descriptions of the single Judas Tree in the desert and

then read through Taylor Caldwell, but none of them took her away like Frank Yerby.

She would finish one and sigh and gently lay it on the floor and say the same thing every time. "He sure can tell a story." If it was an especially good one, she would open it back up and before you knew it she had read it again. She could really speed through a book. When he had been a little boy, Jackie had marveled at how fast she could read. Now he could read faster. He knew because he had raced her without letting her know.

Jackie stepped up to the barrel. "What are you doing, Mom?" He had begged her the night before not to burn her books. He had tried everything. "That's what Goebbels did!" he yelled, but it did no good. He might as well have been talking to little Billy.

"Books don't burn worth a damn," she said.

"Yeah, you gotta reach Fahrenheit 451. That's pretty hot."

She looked at him for the first time that morning. He knew she thought he was smart because she was always saying "You're too smart for your own good." She wanted him to go to college and become a lawyer, fight all the rich people and get rich himself in the process.

"I learned that from Ray Bradbury. Great book. Maybe you'd like it. I know for sure Bradbury is white."

The night before, Aunt Shelia had dropped by. Shelia was Mom's younger sister. She was even shorter than Mom and had little eyes that were dark brown but seemed black because her pupils were always dilated from the "black beauties" and "west coast turnarounds" she got from her truck driver friends. But her eyes hadn't been dilated lately. Jackie wished they were.

Shelia worked on production as a knitter and sometimes made nearly a hundred and fifty, even two hundred dollars a week. She drank 16-ounce Budweisers and smoked Benson & Hedges.

When Shelia dropped by it was usually to start trouble. This time was no exception. She walked in without knocking, right after supper, put her beer in the little brown bag on the table, lit a cigarette and blew the smoke toward the sink where Mama stood washing dishes. Jackie was sitting at the table reading a story in the afternoon newspaper about a big trial that had gone to the jury the day before.

"Hello, Shelia," Mom said.

"Hi, back to you," Shelia said and took another long drag off the cigarette, ground it out in the tin ashtray and said, "Frank Yerby's a nigger."

Mama didn't say anything for a minute. She went on washing the dishes. Finally she said, "What?"

Jackie stopped reading, watched his mom closely. She was rattled. Usually, Shelia couldn't get to her but this time. . .

Shelia smelled blood. "I said Frank Yerby's a nigger. I saw his picture on the back of a book when I was buying my True Confessions. I couldn't believe it at first so I asked the cute boy who works there. He said it looks like it but it didn't matter. I said it'd sure matter to my sister."

Mama pulled the rubber plug out of the sink and started rinsing. As the water sucked down the drain she said, "Thanks for coming by, Shelia. Run on along now. I promised Jackie I'd help him with his homework."

She hadn't helped him with his homework since the fourth grade.

Shelia's face sagged. She had hoped for a fight, maybe even a chance to drag Mama down to the newsstand to prove it to her. Anything but to be told to run on home.

She wasn't ready to give up. "I've got to ask you one thing. Couldn't you even tell, reading the books? That he weren't no white man? I mean, didn't he give himself away even once?"

Mama went on rinsing the dishes. Shelia glanced nervously at Jackie but didn't like what she saw and jerked her eyes away. After a minute she picked up her beer. At the door she stopped and said, "I only told you 'cause I knew you'd want to know."

"Thank you," Mama said.

After Shelia left, Mama finished up the dishes and then walked heavily around the house gathering up the paperbacks and dropping them into a brown paper bag. She sat the bag on the table and said, "I'll burn them in the morning before I go to work."

Jackie begged and pleaded, but it did no good. Once her mind was made up you couldn't change it with an act of Congress. "Shelia would never give me a minute of rest," was all she offered by way of explanation.

Now Jackie watched her drop the last of her books into the smoldering can. "Bradbury," she said. "He writes that science fiction stuff, doesn't he?"

"Not always. He writes all sort of stuff."

"I never had much use for science fiction. It's just too out of this

world.”

“It's supposed to be,” Jackie muttered. He didn't say anything more. It wouldn't do any good. The books were burned and she wasn't about to change her mind.

“Ain't you late for school?” she asked.”

“Yeah, a little. They'll have to start without me, I guess.”

“I'm sure they can manage,” she said.

* * *

Jackie went to Central High. Home Room was at 8:15. He got to school at 8:25 and went to first period. If his name didn't show up on the home room roll, the secretary would assume Mrs. Sharp had forgot to mark him down. Mrs. Sharp had been teaching algebra since Truman was president, and she had a tendency to forget things.

First period was economics with Coach Greegson, whose football team hadn't won ten games in ten years. Jackie had played football until his sophomore year, but he and the Coach hadn't got along. They had argued about offensive formations for one thing. Coach hated the I-formation and loved the single-wing, which had pretty much be rendered useless when Knute Rockne invented the forward pass.

What Coach Greegson loved most of all, much more than football or teaching, was the want-ads. He had a used car lot with his brother-in-law and because he was the brains in the outfit he was always on the lookout for smart buys.

Jackie slipped unnoticed into his seat, opened his economics

textbook with the cover facing forward, and pulled his Scribner's paperback copy of A Farewell to Arms from his the middle of his stack of books. He was embarrassed by the parts of the story that seemed like Hemingway was working too hard to break your heart. But he would take Catherine seeing herself dead in the rain over Coach Greegson any time.

He was at the section where Frederick was wounded when he realized the class was doing something different from the usual reading aloud from the textbook. Coach Greegson was saying: "The jury will be back today, most likely. We have to hope they stay in prison long enough to figure out that they can move to Russia if they want to live in a communist country. We want it just like it is here, where a man can go out and buy some furniture frames and start up his own upholstery business if he wants to."

Coach Greegson was talking about the trial of the High Point Four, except he didn't call them the High Point Four—that's what his friend Gary called them.

Jackie got his first real job the summer before. He tailed a rip saw in a furniture factory, which meant he caught the lumber when it came out of the end of a big machine, separated the waste and stacked the freshly cut pieces on a buggy. It was hot, dirty work; by ten o'clock he had handfuls of sweaty sawdust beneath his t-shirt and down his pants, but the pay was a quarter above minimum wage, and he was supposed to be saving for college.

When he first started tailing the saw, Neil Greegson, Coach's son, was running it. Neil was a couple of years older than Jackie and had gone to work at the frame shop right after returning from his graduation beach trip. Neil's ambition was to be a shift supervisor.

On his first day tailing the saw Neil fed the lumber in end to end so that it poured out of Jackie's end of the machine faster than he could

stack it. At first Jackie panicked and fought to get back in control of the lumber flowing from the metal conveyor belt. Splinters jammed under his fingernails, and the long sofa pieces would ram his thigh and hips and leave purple bruises.

By the second day he wised up and as soon as he lost control of the flow he jumped back and let the rest tumble to the floor until Neil stopped cramming them in. Then Neil would stand at his end of the saw and yell, "Clean up the mess!" so the supervisor would be sure to notice. The more Neil yelled, the slower Jackie worked. He hoped they would fire him, or give him another job.

On the third morning, Neil wasn't standing at the rip saw when the shift started at seven o'clock. Instead, the operator was a tall black guy Jackie had never seen before. He stood straight and calm while Jackie rolled up his sleeves. Then Jackie nodded his head and the lumber began rolling through in a steady pace. When the lunch horn blew, they had already ripped more lumber than Jackie and Neil had in two days.

Neil was standing by the time clock when Jackie punched out for lunch. "Too bad you got stuck working with the jig," he said. "I had nothing to do with it. They put me in charge of the drill presses."

"That's okay, I'll survive," Jackie said.

Neil cocked his head. "You don't like working with him, do you?"

"No, no, it's horrible, and working with you was so atavistic."

Neil nodded his head, slowly. His lips moved in a little circular movement as he tried to figure out what Jackie had said. Jackie gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder and walked on.

At lunch Jackie bought the least horrible thing left on the catering

truck, usually a grilled cheese, and ate it in the shade of the loading dock.

His new work partner never ate. He sat in his yellow VW with the windows down and smoked cigarettes, blowing blue smoke toward the blue sky. The only other people around during lunch were three women who had been saved the same Wednesday night at the same holy roller meeting. The experience had bonded them so they ate lunch together everyday.

One hot day Jackie finished his sandwich and walked across the parking lot. He was tired of working with someone he'd never had a conversation with. As Jackie approached the VW, he watched Gary tip back the last of a bottled Coke and drop the empty on the seat beside him. He didn't look up until Jackie was standing beside the car.

"Hey, Gary," Jackie said to the impassive face. Gary's eyes opened a little wider for second. "I got it off your time card, your name. You didn't introduce yourself so I found it out on my own. You running from the FBI or something."

"I might be."

"Well, if you are you might want to talk to my uncle. They looked for him three years. Never did catch him. He got tired of running and gave himself up. I'm sure he would pass along some tips."

Gary was staring at him now, a hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth and eyes.

"I don't guess Gary in your real name, then. I'll just keep calling you that. It'll be our secret."

"You sure talk a lot."

“Yeah, I know. I’m working on it.” Then Jackie noticed the music coming from the car. It sounded like two, maybe three horns were playing three separate harsh and unrelenting melodies at the same time. It reminded him of how the symphony his fifth-grade class had visited on a field trip sounded when it warmed up.

“Is that an orchestra?”

“That is the greatest horn player to ever live,” Gary said evenly. “And he grew up right here.”

“In High Point?”

“John Coltrane. Right here. And you crackers don’t even know it.”

“You seem to be under the impression we crackers are supposed to know everything. I think you need to open your mind some.”

Gary let out a couple of chuckles. Jackie knew he was a smart ass. He’d accumulated enough bloody noses and school suspensions to prove it. Sometimes he even ran into adults who liked smart ass kids, the people who didn’t say things like, “What are you going to do with your life?”

Gary was a few years older than Jackie, probably around twenty. But it was hard to tell. He had an ageless quality, like one of those long-lived sea turtles.

“That’s only one horn?”

“Yeah, a saxophone.”

There was a pause while they listened.

“Do you listen to horn music?” Gary asked.

“No, not much.”

“Poor pitiful white people,” Gary said.

They started hanging out at lunch, sitting in the car, leg sweat turning their jeans from blue to black, while Gary explained how jazz developed from field hollers and work songs, African counter-rhythms and the blue scale.

Jackie didn't understand a word of it technically but the explanation made him think of a vine winding in and out of a trellis. He felt like a little boy who was being told of another kingdom that had existed right before his eyes he had not been able to see before. And he was being told of it with a quiet, soothing voice that wouldn't ruffle the hairs on a baby's neck.

Gary began picking Jackie up for work. Mama would peer out her window and say, “Your ride's here,” and go back to what she was doing. After work, they would sometimes go back to Gary's tiny apartment with the old one-piece stereo on the floor and listen to Coltrane, Bird, Miles, Sonny Rollins, Lester Young.

Every time he put a new album on, Gary would introduce the story of who was on each cut and how the cuts were recorded. Jackie soaked up the stories of the cutting sessions in Kansas City Hi Hat Club the same way Shelia swallowed a tall Budweiser.

Soon, Jackie was hearing the music in his dreams, especially the album A Love Supreme. He was surprised when he started hearing it in his dreams because he didn't think he liked it when he was awake. It was like the sounds that would come from a church with a funeral on one side, the mourners yelling and moaning their agony, and a baptism on the other, with the family singing out their joy at

the new life, full of expectation.

It had frightened him; now it filled his dreams. The dreams were nothing special. He would be walking in a strange city, or sitting in the brown, dusty yard of his house and watching the stars, and the music would come along and pick him up and hurry him away, not to exciting places, but to some other plain-old regular place.

Then one morning Gary didn't show up to take Jackie to work. He walked all the way. Gary didn't show up for work.

At the end of the day, Jackie walked a mile out of his way to go by Gary's apartment. No one was home. Jackie turned back, tired, and surprised at how empty he felt inside. A couple of blocks from the apartment the yellow VW stopped beside him. Jackie got in the car, careful to hide his pleasure. Gary was wearing a white shirt, tie and dress slacks.

At the apartment Gary said, "Put on whatever you want to hear," and walked into the bedroom and shut the door. He came out a few minutes later wearing jeans and a T-shirt and fell into one of the metal and plastic kitchen chairs. He put his head into his hands.

Jackie listened to the music, thinking that it was easier to understand it than to understand human beings.

Gary finally said, "I guess I should tell you something."

"Go ahead," Jackie said,.

Gary talked, as the August afternoon slipped into a humid twilight. He told the story of how he and his brother Bernard had left college to work with the Black Panthers. Most of their time was spent setting up free breakfast programs.

“Remember when the police raided the Panther's headquarters. The cop got shot?”

“Yeah.” It was the biggest thing to happen in High Point in years.

“Well, Bernie was in the office.”

“Did he . . . ?”

“He says he hid in a closet. They could have tested his hands to see if he fired a weapon but didn't. They charged him instead. Now he's going to prison, serious time, if I can't help him. The Party has deserted him. I don't know what to do. He's my brother, I'm supposed to help.”

Their friendship changed that night. They still listened to music, Gary could always dig out something Jackie had never heard. But now, when the album was finished, Gary would launch into a lecture about the ruling class, class war, urban guerrillas, and how Jackie was lucky to be introduced to the future.

When school started that fall Jackie quit his job at the furniture plant and got one loading trucks on the weekend. He had more time for reading. He read a couple of Lenin biographies, then went on to Russian fiction. Chekhov's “The Kiss” and “About Love” told him more about Russia than both of the biographies. He read “War and Peace” for the first time. He didn't know what to think of Tolstoy's philosophy of history, but it didn't seem any stranger than Marx's. He mainly loved the chapter when Nikolay took the old hound hunting, the sections of Pierre searching for the Answer, and the wounded Andrey staring at the lofty sky.

He began reading other novels about war. He would be eighteen his next birthday and there was still a draft.

On his last day of high school Coach Greegson started off class explaining that it was a good thing the troublemakers and other communists were about to get convicted. The good people's patience was almost worn thin.

Jackie tried to ignore him. He hurried his eyes across Hemingway's loping prose. He knew Coach didn't like him, ever since he'd walked off the practice field and didn't look back.

Jackie hadn't been called on all year. He didn't at first hear Coach call his name this time. "I bet you don't agree with what I'm saying, do you Jack York?"

Jackie only looked up when he realized the room was suddenly very quiet. Coach stood next to him, smiled and repeated his question.

Jackie thought: Why am I getting all this attention? Then he thought—Neil must know who Gary was and passed on word of his and Gary's friendship.

"I hope they get a fair trial, Coach."

"What about the police officer that was shot? Did he get a fair trial?"

"I thought trials were for people charged with crimes, sir."

Coach sucked in air and clicked his teeth. "You're sure the smart one, aren't you?"

"Not really, sir. It just seems that way, depending on who I'm talking to."

The sound of thirty people going "Whew!" filled the room.

Coach Greegson was smiling, a flinty sparkle of anticipation in his

eye. "Trot on down to Mr. Sparkles office, York. I'll be down directly."

The room was filled with a heavy silence as Jackie left. The hallway was dimly lighted with ocher-colored fluorescents. It was like walking in a dirty aquarium. He sipped some lukewarm water from a fountain. It tasted like green powder floor cleaner.

Jackie considered walking on out the door, skipping the formality of an official expulsion. It wasn't the first time his mouth had got him into trouble. He couldn't figure out why he kept doing it. Maybe he didn't like school. His mom wanted him to go to college, but it didn't look like that was going to happen. This was his third expulsion, which meant an automatic month, which would end his year.

All because he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

He went into the office and sat in the lobby. When he saw Coach Greegson approach with a little spring in his step, Jackie stood. Coach took his arm and said let's go. Jackie stopped and looked at the fingers gripping his arm, then up at Coach's face. That's when he saw it. Coach was scared of him, not physically, but of that part of him he would never understand or control. Coach let go of his arm.

Mr. Sparkles sat hunched over a legal pad, his suit coat draped over the back of his chair. A thin patch of auburn and gray hair swirled like an ice cream cone over the brown spots on top of his head. One of Jackie's secrets was that he had always liked Mr. Sparkles, despite their disagreements. But he also knew that Coach, despite his almost perfect losing record, had support among a great number of fathers, many of whom had also had losing seasons with him. Coach Greegson had used consistent losing to bond together an entire generation. Mr. Sparks would fight Coach over a good cause. Jackie York was not a good cause.

“Our young friend here called me stupid, Jasper.”

Mr. Sparkles flinched at the use of his first name. He looked at Jackie. “Is that true?”

“Not directly, sir.”

“Son, son.”

Coach Greegson gave Jackie another of his metallic smiles and said, “That’s not all. He smells like smoke.”

“What?” Jackie’s mind raced. He didn’t smoke, and it didn’t matter if he did. Central High had a smoking area—the local tobacco industry saw to that. Then he remembered—the barrel, the smoldering Frank Yerby.

“Am I in trouble for smelling like smoke?”

“You may be facing arrest,” Coach said.

“For what, pray tell?”

“Oh, smart ass, you know what for.”

Jackie looked at Mr. Sparks. “Yes, sir, I called him stupid.”

Coach ignored Jackie. “Have you found out who tried to burn the shop building down, Jasper?”

“We’re not even sure that what’s happened,” Mr. Sparkles said. “A barrel near the shop building was set on fire and turned over. It could have been anyone, kids playing, bums.”

“Could have been attempted arson on the part of our little

communist here, too.”

“Holy mackerel,” Jackie said.

Mr. Sparkles swallowed. “Did you try to burn the shop building down, Jackie?”

“You don't expect him to admit that, do you?”

“No, I did not,” Jackie said. “I would have started a fire in Coach Bullwinkle's office instead.”

“That's not very helpful, son,” Mr. Sparkles said.

“What is going to help this situation, sir?”

Jackie walked toward the door. Coach Greegson stepped into his path, blocking the door.

Jackie looked at Mr. Sparkles. “If you're not going to call the cops I'd suggest you tell J. Edgar here to get out of my way.”

“Get out of the way, Frank,” Mr. Sparkles said. “You're expelled for the year, son.”

Jackie walked on and didn't look back. He could have caught the cross-town bus but he felt like he would go crazy locked in a dusty container for an hour. He'd rather walk the three miles.

The day was warming up. The dogwoods would soon blossom and crocuses had begun to color the lawns of the little white houses. The farther from the school he got the more alive he felt. He had a book in his bag, another stack at home, and a library card.

The weekend job could turn into a full-time job. He could get his

diploma next year at the community college and get into one of the state schools, if he saved his money.

By the time he got to Gary's he felt pretty good, except when he thought of having to tell his mother. She'd never get to attend one of her children's high school graduations.

Gary's door was open behind the screen. Jackie expected him to be at the courthouse. He tapped on the door and walked in. Gary was slumped on the sofa.

"How did it go?" Jackie asked.

"Seven to ten years," he said.

"Holy shit," Jackie said. "What a day." He put A Love Supreme on the stereo. Coach will be happy, he thought.

It took him a minute to respond, then Gary said, "What's up with you?"

"I got kicked out of school."

"Oh."

That was all they said about it. They talked about other things, walked to the store for beer, flipped the arm back on the stereo and listened to the same album over and over.

At four o'clock the traffic from the mills changing shift filled the street outside and through the window they watched the cars stop and start, driver's honk horns and shake fists. Near sundown the neighborhood kids started a game of kick-the-can in the building's parking lot. A mother leaned out of a window across the courtyard and warned them to stay out of the street.

At eight, Gary leaned his head on the sofa arm and fell asleep. Jackie lifted his legs onto the sofa, covered him with a sheet from the bedroom, and locked the door behind him.

Downtown, the pool hall was full. A few cars full of students from Central cruised past, turned around at the branch bank, and cruised back by. A couple of students from the football team threw their hands up at Jackie, but most ignored him.

When he got to his block, Jackie climbed onto the bank by the street, where he could see his house, and watched cars whoosh past. The ground was dew wet, the night breeze carried a chill that reminded him of how early in the year it was.

When the lights went off in his house, he slipped down the slope and walked home. There was a plate of chicken and potatoes and green beans covered with an old bread bag on the table. He put it into the refrigerator.

“Jackie, is that you?” his mom called from her sofa bed in the living room?

“Yeah, mom.”

“There's food there.”

“I'm not hungry.”

“What's wrong?”

He leaned against the wobbly Formica kitchen table, his fingers curled around the metal rim along the edge. “We'll talk tomorrow, Mom. Wake me when you get up.”

“What is it, Jackie?”

“Mom,” he said, “why did you burn your books?”

“I don't know. Why does anybody do the things they do?”

“Night, Mom,” he said to the dark behind the kitchen wall.

“Night, son.”

