

Check

by Craig Lancaster

When Quince came rolling up into my front yard that morning, we were up to our neck in August, staring down a seventh-grade year that had crept perilously close when we weren't looking. I'm thirty-five years clear of it now, and I can still sense Texas on my skin the way it felt that summer, the heat bearing down, relentless. Quince would come up the street to my house sometimes to sit under the swamp cooler after his mama chased him out so she could sleep off another drunk.

"Derek ... you gotta ... come down ... to ... The Field." Quince squeezed the words out between gulps of air.

The Field, an undeveloped patch of ground on the northern edge of our neighborhood, came by its capital letters honestly. It was the perfect so-close-and-yet-so-far territory in our town. At the farthest edge of it, I was no more than a quarter-mile from my own house, but I couldn't see my street, couldn't cover the distance with any sort of speed, wouldn't have been able to call for help if I'd ever been set upon by older kids. It never did happen to me, but Quince and another kid we ran with, Danny Dutton, hadn't been so lucky. The previous spring, some high school guys from Meadowlakes, the subdivision on the far west side of The Field, had caught Quince and Danny walking their bikes through and had beat on them pretty good.

"I'm not going down there," I said.

"Derek, you gotta. Danny's down there. Burton, too. You won't believe what's happening."

"What?"

"You won't even believe it. Just come."

I slipped onto the saddle of my bike. "I'll follow you," I said.

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We crested my hill and rode it down to the bottom on the other side, where it terminated at a barrier fence sporting the most disregarded "Keep Out" sign in our town. We walked our bikes

around the fence, found the well-grooved trail on the other side, and set to pedaling again. Quince veered right, toward a line of trees.

"It's by the pond," he called to me over his shoulder.

Up ahead, I saw Danny Dutton and Burton Mayhew standing by their bikes, waiting for us. Dutton stood a head taller than the rest of us, on account of his being held back in second grade for poor marks. I never saw him without Burton, a smaller kid who was continually getting into scraps with anybody who cared to entertain him. One time, after I'd come home with a split lip courtesy of Burton, my father had said he had "short man's disease," said Burton's own daddy suffered from the same affliction back when they were kids. He said Burton probably felt threatened by me, so from that day on, I tried to be understanding of the little shit.

Quince and I skidded to a stop. "What's going on?" I asked.

Danny held a finger to his lips. Then, in a whisper, he said, "Do you know that older kid Darrell who lives over on Dutch Elm?"

I pictured the kid. Sixteen, seventeen years old. Tightly curled hair. Lots of acne. Smelled bad.

"Yeah, I know him."

"Well," Danny said, and he looked around suspiciously before he said this next part, "he's down by the pond, bopping his bologna."

"Huh?"

"You know," Burton cut in. "He's slappin' little Johnny behind the ears."

"He's jacking off," Quince said.

"I get it," I said. "How do you know?"

Danny grinned like he'd swallowed a delicious secret. "I've been following him. I saw him a few days ago down there. I was hopping a fence, cutting through some backyards, and I walked up the ridge there, and there he was, whacking it. He didn't see me. I started biking by his house, staking him out. I've seen him come out here three times in the last two days. He thinks he's alone."

"He ain't," Burton said. "We're gonna get him."

Danny lifted a canvas bag off his handlebars, dug around inside and retrieved walkie-talkies. One for each of us. He started handing them out.

"Let's surround him and scare the hell out of him," Danny said. I looked at the sweaty, dusty faces of my friends, and I saw three boys who wouldn't be talked out of mischief, not that day. I held out my hand and Danny filled it.

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The walkie-talkie, the volume turned low, spat out words and static in equal measures.

"Quince, you in position?"

"Check."

"Burton?"

"Check."

"Derek?"

The pond sat at the bottom of a earthen bowl. I'd climbed across the outside of it, kicking up dust from that caliche baked hard in the sun, to a clump of oaks along the rim. From my perch, I could see Darrell's supine bare legs, his blue jeans and white underwear down to his ankles.

"Check."

"OK, boys," Danny's voice crackled. "count to five and then run at him like hell."

I must have counted slowly; I was at three when I heard that first banshee scream, and it chased me to my feet. As I rambled down the embankment, I tried to yell — I swear I did — but no sound escaped my mouth. It didn't much matter; my shrieking friends were upon Darrell, beating on him with fists, wailing, as he tried to stand. He finally did get to his feet, but the tangle of denim and cotton around his ankles tripped him as he tried to scramble away.

I just stood there, watching, as Danny grabbed at the kid's feet. Darrell kicked and kicked, and finally, the pants and underwear came off in Danny's hands, and Darrell got away for good, scrambling up and over the rim, lighting out for home in a KISS T-shirt, orange-striped tube socks and Keds, and nothing else.

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I went home alone. Quince asked if he could come, and I lied and told him my folks and I were going to Lake Texoma for the weekend. He'd see me the next day and ask what happened, I knew, but I felt confident that I could conjure another fib if I had to.

The cold air in the house hit me as soon as I walked in, and immediately, my breakfast decided to retreat. I stumbled into the hallway bathroom and expelled it, my body recoiling in waves of wet and dry heaves. When it was over, I stretched out on the tile and set my cheek against its cool surface, and I went to sleep.

