

I Was A Republican (For only one day, and it was a long, long, time ago.)

by Ray Nessly

There was gonna be a rumble in our schoolyard. An outright brawl. It was gonna be just like *Blackboard Jungle*. Only real. Not some movie at the Duwamish Drive-In.

Every boy in my school, it seemed like, was lined up outside except me. All the third and fourth graders anyway. Two rows of punks stood glaring at each other, white sneakers toeing an imaginary line, pawing the asphalt playground like little bulls.

“Kennedy!” one side screamed, cued by a nod from their leader.

“Nixon!” the other gang yelled, even louder.

“Kennedy!”

“Nixon!”

“Kennedy!”

“Nixon!”

“Kennedy!”

“Nixon!”

It was time for me to join the battle. But which side? Sure, I knew about the upcoming election. I wasn't a dummy. But up to now, I'd never given stuff like civics much thought. The pressure was on. Which side? Which?

Luckily, I spotted the coolest guy in my class, John W__, standing at the far end of the Nixon line. I squeezed into the line, next to John, muscling out some poor sap a whole grade younger than us. John smirked; I smirked. We banished the kid to the teeter-totters. The swing-sets. Maybe the hopscotch girls would have him.

“Nixon!” I screamed, along with John and his followers. And I jumped, pumping my fist at the low and misty morning air, like I was

clenching a weapon. A gun? No, I was chucking a spear! This was primal stuff, kiddo.

“Nixon!” I yelled, “Nixon! Nixon! Nixon! Nixon! . . . “

After school that day, I was talking with my friends, Barney and Red, when John walked up to us.

“You. Not them,” he said.

And so it was that John invited me to play at his house for the first time. He lived six blocks away, on the far edge of our neighborhood, where houses were nicer, the yards larger, the cars newer. His house was twice as big as our house, easy. And it had two bathrooms. Two! Hard for anyone on my block to imagine. Two stories too. How the heck did his mom wash those windows? His bedroom was up there, way up high on the second floor, giving it a built-in superiority right off the bat. And, get this —his room was bigger even than my mom and dad’s room! John had toys galore and stacks of comics so high I thought I’d never get to them all. I did my best. Reading the newest *Batman* in John’s room that day while he played with toy soldiers, I wondered what his dad’s job was. But I didn’t ask.

That evening at the dinner table, I got to wondering about stuff.

“Dad? Are we for . . . Nixon?”

Dad about choked on his TV dinner. Mom turned down the sound on the TV. She must’ve figured a lecture was coming.

“Nixon?” repeated Dad through a mouthful of fried chicken.

“Nixon? . . . *Nixon?! Heck no, son, we’re Democrats. No Republicans in this family, by god! Never has been, never will. Republicans are no good at all for the working man. Remember that, son. Okay?”*

“Okay, Dad.”

“Actually, Eisenhower was a pretty good man,” Mom said. “For a Republican, I mean.”

Dad looked at her. “Yeah, I suppose he wasn’t . . . *terrible*. But wouldn’t vote for him if he was the last Republican on earth!”

“Actually . . .”

“What? What?”

“Well, actually,” Mom said. “I voted for him.”

Dad dropped his fork. "You voted for Eisenhower?! Not . . ."
—Dad groped for the name, looking as flustered as I'd ever seen him.

"Stevenson?" Mom said.

"That's it!" Dad said, pointing at her, jumping up from his chair like they were watching a quiz show, Mom coming up with the answer out of the blue again.

Only the TV was off. This was for real.

"You voted for . . . Eisenhower. Huh." He stared at the silent TV. "How many times? Twice?"

"Actually, just the once. Just the last time, '56. Really."

"Well, I'll be," Dad said. He turned the volume up on the TV, sat back down in his dining chair, bent the foil back on his dinner, and spooned up his peas and carrots.

The next day, in the schoolyard, I joined the Kennedy line.

Looking down at my sneakers at first, I stood across from the Nixon gang.

Finally, I stole a look.

John W__ , directly across from me. Glaring. Glaring right at me.

"Nixon!" he yelled, "Nixon!"

"Kennedy!" I screamed, "Kennedy! Kennedy! Kennedy, goddammit, Kennedy!"

