

Don't Leave Me Alone!

by Smiley McGrouchpants

I came of age in a time of no heroes. Looking each other in the eye was a crime (it felt like). Social codes were stringent, clung to like a religion, enforced like a police state, and rarely — if ever — articulated. It was hard to know where you stood.

By the time I was 12, I had basically given up. My reading — Dickens, Thackeray, Chaucer — was continually interrupted by the blaring of the television, the condescension from adults, the contemptuous ribbing by my “peers,” and mandatory Little League practice.

Thus it came to pass that I was befriended by an 11-year-old Asian girl with glasses, Christine. (“Slanty-eyes four-eyes” she was often called, to guffawing laughter, by the true “wits” of our class.) I was in sixth grade (born in February, on February 29, during a leap year — so, technically, I was 3) and she had skipped “ahead” a grade.

She squeezed next to me — at the table full of nerds and outcasts, who didn't like each other much, either. (Mutual terror'll do that to ya — *constant cringing* makes it hard to look each other in the eye, and see the same shame, the same fear, that you hope no-one sees in *yours!*)

“There oughtta be a law,” she said, and everyone winced, pained by the prospect of mutual acknowledgement, of raw nerves too-recently stung, and hoped she'd get it over with, quick (you could see this happening, clear as a clouds-shift on a clear day). “Assault's *illegal* when you're a grown-up.”

Bobby grumbled something to himself as if in response (or coughed — I honestly couldn't tell). Julie looked like she was getting beaten on that very minute — her eyes doe-eyed through her black round frames, as if they were saying: “Go ahead, I'm powerless to stop you, anyway . . .”

“That's why people don't *do* it!” She sighed, and started eating her pizza square (that is, Christine did — sorry, like I said, it was

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kinda hard to *focus* under circumstances like these!).

Everything started clicking in people's heads. Who knows what they were thinking.

We didn't know what to say next.

"I saw this movie," Cheryl said, also through her glasses (we were a nerdy bunch) and her braces and her chubby cheeks and her acne and . . . I was starting to doze. The pressure was constant and fatiguing, just being in school. I prayed for the next homework assignment, the next class task, so I could grab onto something: a visible horizon. A set of hurdles to scurry over. And end in sight.

Why am I rambling?

"I mean, I saw it," Cheryl clarified, unnecessarily, "my parents had a *copy* of it," oh — that makes sense, "it was rated 'R'? It was French? It was called:" she cackled gleefully, "*Ridicule!*"

A tremor shook the table. It was like saying to a bunch of post-traumatic stress disorder victims: "*BOMB GOES OFF!*"

Or something.

"But it was this French court, you see" (we didn't — it was rated 'R') " . . . where all the players" ("playas?" what was she talking about?) " . . . under the King and Queen" (oh, ok — "all the world's a stage," and all that jazz — do I have to say it again, we were a nerdy bunch?) " . . . had to maintain their reputations by, like, *jousting* in witty comments, openly, in front of each other, at court."

Suddenly, our own situation didn't seem so bad: it seemed, simply, *conceivable*.

A joust. A tournament. A playing field.

Hmm . . .

Cynthia met Bobby out on the playing field (yes, this what the school called it, the lot adjacent to the football field, the one with the swingsets and slides we were a bit too old to use but were still fold of anyway: the "playing field." "Where's Bobby and Julie?" "Out on the playing field." "Oh, OK." "Janet, you left your lunchbox out on the playing field — go get it, please." "Looks like it's going to rain,

so we probably won't be going out on the playing field today."
"AWW!" See how these things get instituted, and nobody notices they've ended up turning out stupid? Well, good for you. Now fuck off. — ed.). They couldn't believe we were about to try this — and, more so the point, pass it off as a "game," (not even a "prank," which would surely land us in trouble), and, more so even still on top of *that*, that the only way to conceive of pulling this whole thing off — from conceiving of it, to getting away with it scot-free and enjoying the rest of our lives, and basking the satisfaction at the time of a job well done and a comeuppance well-deserved — was to make it so that people wouldn't "get it" — or be unable to *admit* they didn't.

Heh heh.

I watched them from across the street, with binoculars. (I know what they were thinking and feeling because I was thinking and feeling the same things myself — we *all* were. It was like the static was broken in our heads, an antenna had sprouted we could tune to the world around us with, and we grew thick, strong spines.) My walkie-talkie crackled.

"It's time."

The school bus pulled up.

On with the show.

The fallout wasn't what we expected.

Yeah, most of the grown-ups hardly noticed what had happened — they filed it away under "cute," and turned their eyes back to *The MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour*, or worries about their taxes, or the next Monster-Truck Rally coming to the Super-Duper Dome that weekend — though most of the "tough kids" had quite a different reaction.

Some of them didn't get "tougher," but *number* — the brutality that enabled them to perpetuate their former actions ensnared them, and they couldn't admit to themselves, couldn't back down — couldn't back down from *not backing down* — that such an "inconsequential" set of actions in the eyes of the adults had undermined their cred. beyond the point of any recovery.

Others . . . well, let's just say there was a "pecking order" among

them, and some of them, over time, moved into positions formerly assumed by the prior "top baboons" — albeit differently. (Personally, I caught wind of enough overhead conversations by junior year to get the sense that these types — male and female alike — were more interested in illegal activities, particularly the profitable kinds not available in school, than in picking on helpless wimps.)

Christine went to Harvard, which surprised no-one. Bobby joined the Peace Corps for a year, before matriculating at Brown — he said he'd gotten "a taste for it," whatever *it* was, from our little escapade. Julie brought her parents to court and was, ultimately, granted independent status as a minor, for reasons no-one wanted to ask her about, much. Last I heard, she started a 'zine that got fantastic reviews and a rabid following in *Factsheet Five*, before that entity folded. Cheryl worked for an independent film producer in New York City, and carried on a torrid-but-creatively-productive affair with an indie film actress not generally known to be a lesbian.

I tend bar in Mississippi. Nobody down here knows how much reading I do, or how much correspondence I keep up with people from all walks of life across the country, which is how I like it. Something big and weird is shaping up in our country, and I'd rather devote all my time — pleurably spent, of course — to catching it, than be caught with my pants down.

Again.

But, that's a story for another day . . .

