

Euclid Avenue



“IF THERE’S ONE thing wrong with people,” Paul always said. “It’s that no one remembers the shit that they should and everyone remembers the shit that doesn’t matter for shit.”

I remember Euclid Avenue. I remember yelling outside our window, coming in from the street. Grandma put down her coffee. I remember Grandma holding my ankle, swinging my two-year-old self out the front door, flipping me right-side up, plopping me down next to the Hawaiian violets, plopping herself down next to me. I remember awe and disbelief.

Dad was on the curb, wrestling another man. He had the man’s head, the man’s life and soul, between his thighs.

Upstairs, above our heads, Mom screamed for the men to stop, to regain their senses, civilize themselves.

“You’re friends!” Mom yelled. “You go to church!”

“Say it again,” Dad told the man.

“I’m sorry,” the man told Dad.

“Sorry for what?” Dad asked the man.

“Sorry for saying you look like Booker T. Washington,” the man told Dad.

Dad unsqueezed the man. Chicago Cops came speeding down our street before Dad’s loafer could unhinge the man’s teeth.

“Gentlemen,” Dad told the cops, after noticing me sitting there applauding. “Not in front of my son.”

The cops shook their heads at this ridiculous black-on-black crime.

“You’re brothers,” the cops said. “You’re on the same side.”

The man on the ground stood up, brushed grass and dirt off his jeans, wiped his bloody and twisted nose on his torn shirt-sleeve, adjusted his purple and blue floral tie, adjusted his large silver belt buckle. He stared at me, this man I hadn’t seen before or since and would never see again. He had a sad face. On his tongue: something important and tragic; a forever-buried secret.

Then Paul ran out with a fireplace poker, with his robe open and his belly fat rippling.

“That’s it,” Grandma said. “Enough culture for one day.”

No one pressed charges. When the cops came around asking, no one saw anything. It never happened.

Fog



DAD'S FRIENDS HUNG out in places I couldn't go, on the track's other side, down Jeffrey Avenue, deeper into South Shore. That's where Dad grew up, near the train stop to Indiana, across from the strip mall. That's where Dad's friends lived, still, in apartments hovered near mass transportation—people always coming and going and waiting and never leaving.

Mom was from The Highlands, a three-block chunk of South Shore reserved for black doctors, black politicians, black bankers and black lawyers—all the rich people too dark-skinned for the suburbs, too poor to live downtown.

Dad's friends didn't come over often.

When they were teenagers, Coach and Dad had tipped buckets in the sixties.

They snuck up and tipped buckets of fish in the harbor,

hauling ass through the golf course before the guy in a Vienna Beef uniform could catch them. That was when South Shore was still Jewish and Irish, before expressways and White Flight and manicured suburbs.

When the guy in a Vienna Beef uniform caught Dad, he dangled Dad by his ankles over the harbor and promised to drown him. There was a moral to that story, but Dad was never sure what it was. Coach thought the moral was don't fuck with anybody in a Vienna Beef uniform.

When they were growing up, Harold Washington was mayor. The Jews and Irish were almost gone. A few stubborn old men refused to leave, clung to their porches until death, didn't care about the neighborhood's changing color. Dad and Coach would recite poetry by the water. Dad, once, wanted to get a doctorate in High Renaissance Art. Coach, once, wanted to play in Northern Italy, make a modest living around high culture.

When they were young, Dad and Coach rode their bikes through The Highlands.

When Dad started taking me to see Coach, Mom thought Dad was toughening me up by letting me witness a broken man break further. There wasn't anything tough about Coach. His wife had left him with two babies and moved to Florida. Dad took me to see Coach because Dad thought Coach was capable of murder-suicide.

The first time Dad took me to Coach's apartment, five of us sat in three plastic chairs on Coach's shag rug. Dad bounced the babies on his knees.

The empty fireplace overflowed with dusty trophies. When

Coach started crying, Dad made me go in the bedroom with the babies.

ONE THANKSGIVING WHEN I was five, Dad invited Coach over. Paul sat in the living room, watched Detroit struggle against Green Bay, and grunted when Coach pushed the doublewide pink stroller through the door.

“Paul,” Coach said. Paul was Grandma’s friend.

Coach handed the babies off to Mom and sat next to Paul on the couch.

The game was enough to get Coach and Paul drunk off excitement. Dad wanted to get drunk too. Mom and Grandma kept yelling from the kitchen.

Dad gave me a beer at dinner, which turned into a fight.

“What do you want my Grandson to be?” Grandma said.

“What do you want our son to be?” Mom said.

“This is a party and I don’t want him to feel left out,” Dad said.

“My Grandson is not a follower,” Grandma said. “He is his own man.”

“My son will be a force in the world,” Mom said.

“A father can give his son a beer whenever he wants. I can give my son a beer whenever I want.” Dad slammed the table.

Nobody looked at me. While they argued, I chugged the beer as fast as possible. Grandma, Mom, and Dad looked at Coach, who was flinging mashed potatoes at a giggling Paul. He used his fork as a slingshot. Mom slammed the table. Paul wiped the potatoes from his face. Coach turned toward Mom, raised

his weapon, and hit Mom on the neck so clumps fell down her blouse. Grandma gasped while laughing. Her bracelets jingled when she grabbed her chest. Dad went for another beer. Paul called Coach a bastard. I felt lightheaded and sick.

The babies' crying marked the end of Thanksgiving. Mom held open the front door open, held back her own tears. Dad told me to get my coat.

Jeffery Boulevard felt quiet. Cars dodged potholes with grace. Coach stood at the stoplight and didn't say a word. We all smiled, waited for the light to change, looked at a bus struggle to a stop, and nodded at the faces in the window.

Outside Coach's building, I knelt in front of the babies. Dad grabbed Coach behind his neck.

"Are you going to be okay?" Dad said.

"Can you come upstairs?" Coach said. "Please."

Dad carried the babies. I folded the stroller and lugged it up. Coach hummed like mad over his jangling keys.

Who said, God hates me? Who opened the bottle? Who sat there drinking all night and paced around the room with arms raised towards the ceiling and asked for forgiveness? Who forgot I was standing there? Who didn't hear the babies crying?

Dad woke up the next day with a hangover.

Coach disappeared around Christmas.

The babies ended up in Kentucky, or Pennsylvania.

And my life went on like that: people coming and going, valuable things left in a hurry.