

ROOSTERS

John Hazard

In the summer before I started seventh grade, Turk Johnson moved from Kentucky to my block in Leonard, Ohio and kept knocking on our door until he became the closest thing I had to a best friend. We hung out together through junior high, often with other neighborhood kids—Don Venable, son of a grocer; Eldon Crowley, son of a strip miner; and Terry McVicker, son of the postmaster and boy with a heart condition.

In 1951, I had started first grade at Leonard Elementary, the same building where my parents, Larry and Betty Hanson, were first graders in 1923. At the top of a hill, in the middle of a gravel lot, the school was a gawky, three-story structure with dark red bricks and a black fire escape. Buses groaned in their lowest gear as they climbed the gravel driveway, hauling in the farm kids. But

most of us lived in town and arrived by foot, plodding up the thirty-eight concrete steps from the street. I don't think we complained, yet, half a century later, I remember the number of steps.

Walking to school, a lot of us crossed the Kearney Street bridge over the railroad tracks. The concrete guardrails were about four feet high and a foot thick. Sometimes one guy dared another to walk across the rail thirty feet above the tracks. Most accepted the dare. Nobody ever fell, but some of the showier kids pretended to lose their balance up there. They wobbled. They danced. They leaned over the tracks and jokingly shouted, "Oh, no! I'm faaallllliiiiing." Some of the audience protested, some cheered or jeered, depending on the acrobat's popularity. I just watched.

I noticed Peggy Fitz whenever she was there. Sometimes Eldon Crowley said, "That Fitz thinks she *is* somebody." Without saying so out loud, we thought calling girls by their given names was effeminate; so Peggy was Fitz. Crowley was right though. Fitz was a banker's daughter, and even in grade school it seemed she carried herself like someone important, apparently with no awareness that she lived with the rest of us in the second smallest, second poorest county in the state, a dry, quiet town in southeastern Ohio—the foot-

hills of the Appalachians. Peggy never seemed fully engaged in the entertainment at the Kearney Street bridge, never squealed or covered her eyes or stooped to the theatrics of the other kids. Yet, she showed up at least a couple of mornings a week—the fair-weather days when her mother didn't drive her. I told absolutely no one I was interested in her, but I was glad to know she'd be where I was going.

One October day, when Turk had lived in Leonard only a few months, he dared me to walk across the guard rail. He spit through the space between his two front teeth, a new trick he'd learned. It was impressive, but I declined. The next day, with half a dozen kids watching, he laid a dime at the far end of the guardrail. Again, he spit and said, "Whaddya say, Hanson?"

Maybe I wondered too much how other kids saw me—an only child whose white-collar father and mother sold insurance in an office above the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank on the town square—a white shirt and tie for Pop, skirts or dresses for Mom. I was vaguely aware that clothing reflected status, but I neither understood nor desired it. Did other kids see me as the male Peggy Fitz, quiet and aloof? I didn't think so, but I wondered if I'd always be Larry and Betty's boy, and I was Larry *Junior*, no less—tall, thin, freckled, and usually standing a little off to the side.

So, I figured I had to accept Turk's dare or hear about it forever. Hyperfocusing on each step, tuning out my anger at Turk, my awareness of Peggy, and my irritation at the other kids' mindless noise, I did it. I felt relief, but not a bit of pleasure and certainly no triumph. I sensed that more stunts would be required in the future, most of them as mediocre as this one. I left Turk's dime on the rail.

§

One day, Turk showed up at school wearing a Confederate infantry cap his father had given him. He was the only kid in Leonard who had one. I disapproved and preferred the Union blue that a few of us had; after all, we were the good guys. Then again, I was fuzzy about why, and I liked that gray hat. I envied Turk—and Turk only—when he was the one who had something new or different. It didn't happen often, but when it did, the prize was perfect in some manly way—an arrowhead, a squirrel's tail, or a mashed bullet on a cord around his neck, all gifts from his father.

From the movies, I got the notion that the rebels had been rougher and tougher than The Union was, although my two trips to snowy Cleveland to the north and Cincinnati to the west had made Yankee cities look plenty rugged with their factories and their people of all types and colors. But in our rural

corner of the state, we were closer to West Virginia's cities than Ohio's. We were tenderfoot townsfolk in a cowboy movie, not the sheriff or bandits or Indians we romanticized—just obedient, boring citizens. Johnny Reb was a colorful outlaw who broke from the ordinary; he stood slender, serious and alone—in the name of chivalry, as he saw it. In a child's way I understood a little about the evil of slavery, but I never had to think much about it in a town and a county that were entirely white and Christian. I wasn't sure *why* we weren't interesting, but we weren't and never would be. I knew it, and it bothered me some.

Not old Kentucky Turk. He spoke with the authority of a general on horseback, though he was a head shorter than the rest of us. "That's what you do," he said about the Confederacy. "People try to push you around, you say no. Sometimes you fight."

"That sounds like something Audie Murphy would say," I replied. "Or John Wayne," I added, in case Turk thought I was mocking short men by mentioning Audie Murphy.

"Yeah," he said. "And those guys are right."

During one late September recess, I found a strip of black rubber at the outer edge of the gravel playground, where it looked down on Kearney Street. The thing was roughly the shape of a smashed hot dog, and all I could imagine was a piece of inner tube from a bike tire. But I was twelve, so another possibility occurred to me.

“Hey, Turk,” I shouted, “look here! I think it’s one of those rubbers.”

“A *rubber*?”

“Yeah!”

Now he was interested. “You think?”

“What else could it be?”

If Turk knew, he’d say so. Otherwise, we’d be equals in ignorance, and at age twelve, we were very much about rank and one-upping each other, sometimes pounding on each other for amusement. When one of us spotted an empty pack of Lucky Strikes, he’d step on it, shout, *Lucky on me!* and punch the nearest friend’s shoulder. Turk and Crowley enjoyed the slugging too much. Crying was unacceptable, of course, but there was also an unspoken code about punching too hard. Turk and Crowley carried themselves with a confidence that the rest of didn’t have, or understand, and we didn’t try to compete with it. In return, all we wanted was a little respect and a venture out

of the ordinary now and then, a little entertainment, preferably something funny.

“But it’s just a flat strip of rubber,” Turk said. “How does it go on?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But what else could it be?” I knew I was a goner, but I had to stand my ground.

“How does it *stay* on?” he said, ignoring my question.

“I don’t know.”

“Band Aid maybe?” he said sarcastically. “Elmer’s glue?”

“Very funny,” I said. “You’re a regular Jack Benny.”

I’d lost control of the situation, but I tried sounding as if I understood the way the world works, at least in Leonard. “You know, stuff happens up here at night. You’d never walk your bike up here to change a tire, so you know that rubber’s not from an inner tube.”

“Well, yeah,” said Turk. “Now we know what it’s *not*.”

I could hear him thinking of more ways to mock me. Even at twelve, I knew there were times to keep your mouth shut, but I wasn’t up to it. “So, if it’s not a rubber, what is it?” I said.

He let out an exaggerated laugh. “Hey, you guys! Come here!”

Crowley, Venable and McVicker had been playing marbles by the fire escape. They walked over to us at the playground's edge.

"Turk," I said, "come on now."

"Look here," Turk said. "Hanson found a rubber. Right, Hanson?"

"A dick slicker!" Crowley said and laughed way too hard.

Turk needed to keep the patter moving to prevent anyone from interrupting his solo. He turned to me and said, "This is not a rubber, you moron. This is nothing like a rubber." He shook his head in mock despair, and the others chuckled dutifully.

I knew I was done, and deserved to be done, but I stupidly kept trying for a little status. "How do you know?" I said.

"I found some in my old man's drawer," Turk said. "I asked him what they were, and he about shit himself."

The others laughed still harder. Like me, they were trying to picture the short, stout, vaguely scary T.R. Johnson bested by his seventh-grade son.

I had some sense of a code that said that if these guys knew no more about rubbers than I did, they should own up and shut up. If they did know more, they shouldn't pile on in Turk's game of Get Hanson. And what if Turk didn't know what they were till his father gave it away? I tried to squint accusingly

at the others, but my expression drew no confession, no retreat; there was no honor among this crew.

§

One afternoon that fall, we'd ended up sitting around on Don Venable's front porch, and Turk decided the five of us should formalize our bond. We needed a name, something with punch but also a name that would sound innocent in court, Turk said—in case we ever got caught breaking the law. “We'll be a *confederacy*,” he announced. “That's as good as blood brothers.”

“But that's the South,” said level-headed Venable.

“It's not *just* the South,” Turk said. “It's any group of guys—you know, like a club.”

“So why don't we just call it a club?” said McVicker.

“Because, Numb Nuts, *confederacy* sounds better. Jesus, maybe we should just chuck the whole thing,” Turk said.

“No, no, go ahead,” said Crowley. “I like it.”

“Yeah,” Venable said. “Go ahead.” My heart sank a little. Unlike the others, Don Venable seemed a kindred spirit, a guy I respected. I was fond of Terry McVicker, but he was little more than a mascot. Also, Terry sometimes looked pale, and I wondered if his heart condition was more serious than he'd led us

to believe. He did everything the rest of us did, whether he was supposed to or not, but I worried about him some.

“Okay,” Turk said, “What else? The *what* confederacy? And we need a motto. And a secret handshake.”

“The Kearney Street Boys!” blurted Terry McVicker.

“Nah, that could be anybody in town,” said Turk. “And I don’t like that business about *boys*. We’ll be men soon enough.”

“The Banty Roosters,” said Crowley. “They’re mean.”

“Yeah, but they’re *little*,” said Turk.

“But they’re fighters,” said Crowley. “You put some fat ass Brahma rooster against him and it’ll be over fast.”

“Nah.” Turk waved him off, calmly, without explanation, just no, as if he were a parent. We were finished with Banty Roosters.

“So just *The Roosters!*” said McVicker, who never gave up easily. “Roosters are cool. Roosters are a pain in the ass!”

“No, no,” Turk said, “Plain old *Rooster*—that’s boring. Everybody knows roosters.”

“How about just *Bantys?*” said Venable. “Nobody’s ever been The Bantys.”

“Sounds like panties,” said Crowley.

“Crowley!” said Turk. “Good catch, Crowley!” And there’s still that business about *little*. We’re not little, and we’re not girls in panties.”

“Yeah, never mind,” said Crowley.

Finally, Turk said, “I’ve got it! Leonard High is purple and gold. The Miners. Right?”

“Right,” we said, almost as a chorus.

“So, we’ll be The Purple Gang,” said Turk. “We can look like we’re loyal fans of LHS. Go, Miners, and all that.”

“Well . . .” I said. It actually felt like a good idea, and I had no counter, but I wanted to pick at Turk’s offering the way he picked at everyone else’s.

“Yeah, I guess that’s OK,” said Venable.

“But there’s something weird about purple,” Crowley said. “Why not red or blue?”

“No, purple’s good,” said Turk. “Let everybody else be red or blue. I don’t want to be everybody else.”

“So how about pink?” I said.

Turk scowled, I backed off, and the discussion was finished.

“Let’s go over to Dave’s and get a Coke,” said McVicker. “Let’s see who’s there.” He took a couple of steps, then stopped. “Wait. Can somebody loan me a nickel?”

But Turk wasn’t finished. “Listen. We’ll try to keep the confederacy a secret, but if the name gets out, people will be okay with it because of Leonard High. They might think we’re a little wild but not *bad*—you know, not *criminals*.”

In 1955, the movies hadn’t made much of the actual Purple Gang. Every family in Shawnee County was Christian, at least nominally, and we didn’t know we’d practically plagiarized a group name, much less a crew of Jewish gangsters in Detroit. We had no clue how perfect the noise and chaos of “Roosters” would have been. It flattered us, while “Purple Gang” was just another example of our incompetence.

Turk kept going. “We probably oughta be the *union* of something, too. In Kentucky, there was the something or other union that my dad used to talk about. And they shortened it to the main letters. U.V.D. or something. I think he belonged.”

“You mean the Union Army?” I said, with no irony whatsoever.

“No,” said Turk, “that was just Yankees. Some other kind of union. Something about jobs.”

“V.F.W.!” perked Terry McVicker.

“Jesus, McVicker. What’s that got to do with anything?” Turk said.

“Initials!” Terry said cheerfully.

“Initials of *what?*” said Turk. “What about the U and Union business?”

“Oh, yeah,” Terry said.

“Hey,” said Venable. “What exactly is the V.F.W. anyway?”

“My dad belongs,” said Crowley.

“Mine too,” I said.

“My dad does too, but what *is* it? What do they *do?*” Venable asked.

“They drink,” said Crowley, grinning. “I know that much.”

“They play the Knights of Columbus in softball,” I said.

“So, they’re drunk softball players?” said Venable. “Gotta be more to it than that.”

“Okay,” said Turk. “Let’s go to Dave’s. We can ask somebody there.”

But Terry and Turk both needed nickels for a Coke, and the rest of us couldn't help. We stopped short of Dave's Diner and drifted toward our different houses. Later, I realized we'd also lost track of Turk's need for a motto and a handshake.

A week later, I said to Turk, "You should ask your dad about that U and Union business. It might be something good."

"Nah," Turk said. "He's always worrying about his job. Told us not to talk about Kentucky."

"What's Kentucky got to do with it?"

"Not sure, but he goes to the lumber mill early and comes home late. Gets overtime every chance he gets. He's always too tired to play catch. He doesn't need me pestering him about stuff."

I wouldn't have pressured Turk, but I remembered a day at Dave's when Turk and I overheard Venable's father, Jack, referring to Turk's dad as "that loose cannon, T.R. Johnson."

As soon as we were outside, I said to Turk, "What was that about?"

I could pretty much guess what a loose cannon was, but I honestly wondered, out loud, if it was some kind of military honor.

“No, dumb ass,” said Turk. It means psycho. A *mean* psycho.” He looked hurt, which was rare. He said he’d never heard such a thing about his father and there was never any meanness at home, just rules, like everybody’s rules. That felt true, and it was another rare glimpse of vulnerability in Turk.

§

When the Johnsons first moved to Leonard, I asked Turk if he liked his strange name among all us Tims and Toms and Bobs—or Larry, Terry, Eldon, and Don. Eldon almost had a cool name, but it was a little too country.

It turned out Turk’s real name was Tucker Raymond Johnson II.

“Tucker Raymond. That’s a lot of name,” I said.

“Yeah?” he said, with a slight edge.

“Yeah. And guess what Tucker rhymes with.”

“And you’ll never mention that again. Will you,” said Turk.

“Whatever.”

It turns out his sister, two years old at his birth, couldn’t say Tucker, and what she uttered sounded like *Turk*. Once I asked him if he minded being the only kid with a weird name.

“Nope.”

“Really?”

“Really. And I wouldn’t call it *weird*. Do you think Mickey Mantle worries about his name?” he said, as if facing off against an enemy—and as if his point made sense. “How about Moose Skowron? Yogi Berra? Whitey Ford? You think they mind their names?”

“Way to stick with the Yankees,” I said. “You and Crowley. What do the Yankees have to do with Leonard, Ohio? Or Kentucky?”

“Who cares.”

“You guys just like winners.” Maybe that was too confrontational, so I added, “But keep going with the name business. You’re on a roll.”

“That’s right. I *am* on a roll. You think Mickey Mantle would be Mickey Mantle if he wasn’t *named* Mickey Mantle? Larry *Junior*.”

“Not fair. I didn’t ask to be a Junior.”

“But Junior you are.”

“Wait a minute. You’re a Junior too.”

“No. Tucker Raymond Johnson *the Second*. Not Junior. Big difference.”

I wondered how far this might go or how complicated it might get, and I was losing interest. I shifted the topic back to baseball. “And over in Cincinnati there’s Joe Nuxhall—I mean, Joe Nuts-Haul.” I paused, waiting for laughter, or even praise. But Turk stared straight ahead, so I faked a big laugh—so big it

made me fall over. I remembered it in bed that night, and it was funny all over again.

§

A couple of times I asked my father about T.R., and he said he knew nothing about him—or the ancestry of the Johnsons or their lives in Kentucky. His tone implied that *those* Johnsons weren't our kind of people.

I was only twelve, but I could tell that sometimes Pop had to be discreet about what he said, and to whom, including me. Of the men who worked in second-floor offices above the stores on the town square, virtually all were World War II veterans who came back and went to college on the G.I. Bill. I've always assumed they returned to their hometown in the hills to live out their lives in the peace and harmony they thought they remembered. That would require rules, mostly unspoken, about what was public and what was private.

My father was no exception, and like the others, he was guarded about what might be leaked from home to the coffee counter at Dave's, and from there to the village at large as well as the county's farms, filling stations and beer joints. At every rural mailbox lived a client, potential client, or an adversary of some kind.

§

The Purple Gang's activities ranged from pitching pennies at the curb near Crowley's house on Locust Street, with its wobbly bricks, to shooting baskets in Terry McVicker's driveway, to wrestling with each other in somebody's yard, to debating whether to walk to Dave's and spend a nickel on a Coke—the same activities we'd engaged in before we decreed ourselves a confederacy.

The shortest but most muscular of us, Turk, won at everything. When he wasn't giving orders, he carried himself with the false modesty of some cops and cowboys in the movies, where chatty men were never heroes. In fact, they were often ridiculed or shot. By Christmas of that sixth-grade year, Turk had won a couple of two-punch, twenty-second fights against farm kids who were a year older—and the farm boys had picked the fights. Word spread, and Turk wore a crown that might have been more real because it was invisible.

In mid-November, a few weeks after our confederacy's birth, Turk decided there must be an initiation—and at that time we needed to decide on an oath, which meant agreeing to the oath he'd chosen: "The last shall be first." We didn't know what it meant, but Turk got it from his mother, who got it from the Book of Luke and their Baptist church—not First Baptist on Pickering

Street, but a wood frame church on a hillside three miles south of town. We Roosters agreed it was a good oath, and we'd speak it when he told us to.

"Like the Responsive Reading in church?" said Venable, our Methodist.

Turk processed that for a moment. "Venable!" he said. "Good call." That was the sunny, generous Turk, who showed up now and then, maybe more often than I wanted to admit.

When I asked my mother what "The last shall be first" meant, she said, "That's T.R.'s boy, isn't it?" After a pause, she said, "Already some Short Man Complex in the boy, I suppose. He might try to push you around. Don't you let him."

Where did *that* come from? But I'd learned how fast Mom could go icy—in this case, *certain* of what Turk was and how I was expected to respond. She was Pop's secretary, and when they bickered about a client's needs, Mom always pushed for a larger policy. Over the years, as I sat in Pop's waiting room for one reason or another, usually to ask for money, I witnessed a few occasions when Mom stopped typing and issued her unsought opinions to the client. "Wayne, do you know what it would cost to replace the barn *and* the livestock? I'd really like to see you up your coverage today. Thirty percent would not be too much."

And Wayne would say, “Well . . .”

And Mom would say, “I know Larry will agree. He’ll just be another minute, so you think about it. Okay? We’re looking out for you.”

I suppose I understood such talk only by tone, but there was sometimes a distance, even a formality, in my mother’s words—in the office and at home—that often made me uncomfortable. Later I’d learn that when she said thirty percent, she expected to settle for ten percent, which was a victory. The strategy worked surprisingly often.

Pop wasn’t a doormat, or if he was, it was only with Mom, but that was enough to make me uneasy, even at twelve, and more so as I grew toward adolescence. At work he seemed determined to do right by a client and hold onto him for the long haul instead of the quick financial bumps Mom looked for. On the other hand, who knows how much Mom increased the accounts receivable by making clear just how much she knew and how much more she was happy to predict.

My parents’ disagreements at home touched on all kinds of subjects, usually minor, and I often wondered why the friction was worth their effort. Was Sadie McDonald trying to look young in that red overcoat? Was Vernie Betts, a forty-ish widow, two-timing Harold Bennigan, the sixty-ish, kindly bachelor

who was rumored to have some money—nobody knew how much, but a good bit? How good would the football team be this year? Mom usually said two wins at most, though Leonard was usually around .500. How much would the coming snow cripple traffic? Mom had slid off the road three times that I knew of, but she kept saying she'd never let a little snow keep her from what she wanted. And, weighing in on my world, one day she said, "Who does Bob Fitz think he is, being so tight with loans? That little Peggy's in your class, isn't she? She's cute. But maybe she thinks she *is* somebody? I knew Bob Fitz's family when they were kids and they'd just moved up here from West Virginia, and let me tell you, that family is not the Rockefellers they pretend to be. There's no Rockefellers in Leonard, Bob Fitz."

Sometimes Pop looked hard at Mom and then over at me, as he tried to silence her in front of the kid. Even I felt I was sometimes hearing more than I should, more than I knew how to handle.

§

Turk's line from the Book of Luke stuck as our oath: "The last shall be first." Were we the last? Was I? Maybe, in getting Turk to see me standing there—me or any kid our age. Was Turk the last because he still felt like an outsider after a full year in Leonard? And because he was short? In my house, maybe

my warm but methodical father was last, at least compared to my mother. I'd have liked him to be first.

What about the other guys in the confederacy? Or the whole town? We'd all agree that Leonard would never be first.

§

Once our confederacy had a name and an oath, Turk demanded an initiation ritual. At one chilly November recess, he declared that we'd meet the following day, a Tuesday, at 5:00 P.M. by the bushes around the outer edge of the school's gravel playground, where it looked down on Kearney Street, the site of my great false condom discovery. There we'd execute his plan. Dusk was important, for we must not be identified. Also, of course, we had to get home in time for supper—we were twelve; we'd be missed.

Turk's plan for the initiation was to drop our pants and moon the cars as they passed below us. Our identity and purpose would be a mystery, and that would bind us in brotherhood. People would talk about us for decades, wondering who we were. Did we live here or had we escaped from a reform school? I thought the whole plan was asinine, but I figured it would be a break from dailiness and a touch of odd comedy. I wondered if the others were skeptical too, but it didn't matter—Turk had decided.

Rush hour in Leonard meant four cars rather than two waiting at the intersection of Kearney and Dexter, the site of the town's only stoplight. But Turk made us feel we'd be flashing our pink tails for a crowded stadium in consequential places like Zanesville or Marietta.

Tuesday came, and on the hill, behind the brush, with a November night-fall approaching, we weren't just hidden—we were invisible. If we succeeded at stripping but were never seen, was it still a triumph? Was it even a mooning if there were no witnesses, if we saw no shocked or giggling or disgusted *victims*? Whether or not any of us thought that, no one mentioned it. We were preparing an attack of sorts, and stealth was essential. At last we could be the Indians or outlaws from the movies, and the adults below were a steady wagon train plodding in the dust.

Finally, Turk spit and said *now*, and The Great Group Moon actually happened. After about thirty seconds, I was getting bored and uncomfortable. I think the others were too. McVicker let go a thunderous fart, and everyone laughed loud and hard—everyone but Turk. He backhanded Terry across the face. “McVicker,” said our leader, “if you give us away, I'll beat the shit out of you.”

With the possible exception of Don Venable, I was the least enthusiastic member of The Purple Gang, but in the minutes just after The Great Group Moon of 1957, I felt vaguely proud to have nakedly risked something with those guys and to be walking like a motley band of brothers, including the chastened McVicker, down the hill toward the town that held our homes. Maybe Turk was right in predicting we'd remember this for the rest of our lives. I tried to tell myself the town would remember it too—after one of us, probably McVicker, spilled the beans at Dave's, or the barbershop, or somewhere. In any private situation, bean-spilling always seemed likely.

Was Turk satisfied? Maybe he too caught a whiff of irrelevance and silliness, but he never let on—which is one more way to seem presidential. That next day, that Wednesday in seventh grade, we were the only *confederacy* in town, and it felt grand, even to me.

§

My father and T.R. Johnson had both gone to war in 1942, but Larry Hanson Sr. worked at a desk in D.C. for four years while T.R. Johnson flew P-51 Mustangs over Germany. Larry Hanson worked his way through college, doing dishes, sweeping halls, and mowing Ohio University's campus lawns in Athens. T.R. Johnson went to eastern Kentucky's Morehead State on a football

scholarship, and in his sophomore year, he became an all-league halfback. My father wore glasses and pushed paper for a living while T.R. worked with lumber all day, building houses, barns, fences, hauling wood, operating heavy equipment, sweating, making things. These were some of my thoughts when I was a child.

T.R. hadn't returned to Morehead State for his final two years, and Turk said he didn't know why. That surprised me. In spite of Turk's reticence about family matters, I wondered if he was telling me everything. As a snoop and as a friend, I wanted the inside story.

Then one August morning, with eighth grade only a couple of weeks away, I worked up some gumption and said, "Do you think your dad flunked out? I mean, it happens."

We were sitting on a bleacher, watching the Leonard High football team labor through a pre-season practice in their purple helmets. As usual, we bet pennies on who would throw up. Pinky Beckenbauer, a big but soft redhead and second-string tackle, was such a cinch to puke that we removed him from the betting pool.

“Guys flunk out all the time,” I said. “I guess we really are a bunch of hicks—because some of the flunk-outs were hot stuff here. Denny Baranski was a star, but he got cut from the O.U. football team *and* he flunked out.”

“Yeah?” Turk said, with little interest.

“Yeah. I’m telling you, college must be some hard, big world.”

“It’s five years from now. Why are you already worrying?”

“I don’t know. But I am.”

“Why? The Commies might blow us up way before college.”

“That might be better than flunking out. My parents would shit if I flunked out. Well, Mom would.”

“By the way, my dad did *not* flunk out,” Turk announced. “He had to go back home and help out because his mother was sick.”

I let that sink in, wondering if it was the whole truth. I said, “That’s some price to pay.”

“It’s family. It’s what you do.”

There he went again, ramping up for a speech on codes of manly behavior. If he didn’t grow up to be a coach or career military man, he might become a revivalist preacher—maybe even a snake handler, declaiming about this, that, and the fence post, the last and the first, the cats and the dogs, the lambs and

The Lamb, all of it under summer tents in towns even smaller and less relevant than Leonard. After all, the Johnsons already went to church in a pasture.

I tried to bring us back to where I thought we'd been. "Mom thinks that maybe Denny Baranski wasn't as good as everybody thought—with books *or* football. Or maybe he turned into a party guy even though he was a good Catholic. But you know, these guys come back—*smart* guys—and all they can talk about is how hard college is."

"I guess you just do good work," said Turk.

"But how? When you do something good in this place, you don't know if it's really any good or not."

"I do."

"You *know* you'll be okay after Leonard."

"Yeah," said Turk.

"So you're gonna go to college?"

"Sure."

"And you're not worried about coming back here with everybody talking about you—what a loser you are?"

"Never thought about it."

"You lie," I said.

“Nope. No need to lie.”

I thought, “You just keep a lot of secrets maybe.” But all I said was, “Well, you never see Denny Baranski around town anymore. Mom said he’s looking for work in Zanesville and Marietta. Even Wheeling, she said. I mean, *West Virginia*. Dang.”

“Doing what?” said Turk.

“Don’t know. Venable heard he might be selling cars. That wouldn’t be so bad, I guess. Better than strip mines or pipelines.”

“Not the pay.”

“I guess.”

“Well,” said Turk, “if you must know, I’m gonna go to college. I’m gonna be starting halfback on the freshman team, then starting halfback on varsity, then all-league junior and senior year, and then I’m gonna go to law school.”

“Just like that,” I said flatly.

“Why not?”

“Are you kidding? Kids from big schools. City schools. Colored kids. All as fast as you but big as horses.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t *matter*?” I said.

“Nope.” Turk spit through the space between his front teeth. It was so casual that it seemed a simple, honest gesture, not a theatrical spit. Not a challenge. Once again, I envied it.

“There goes Watson,” he said. “Off to the creek to puke. Pay up.”

§

One raw March day in that eighth grade year, we were playing a game of horse at the basket in Terry McVicker’s driveway. Terry hollered that we had to look at his left-handed jump shot, which meant praise it, marvel at it. In a mock play-by-play he announced his own greatness. “He fakes right, he goes left, pulls up . . . *Two!* Nobody can stop McVicker!” It was Terry’s good-natured, mouthy self again. Maybe he thought he could shout down a heart condition, yelling and laughing at it, daring it to show itself as he jumped around.

Turk spoke up in his tough coach voice. “That’s no jump shot, McVicker. That’s a set shot with a stupid little hop at the end.” Then he added, “Hanson’s the only one here with a real jump shot.”

I’m Hanson, and he said that about me, to others. I thought my shot might be okay, and here was Turk, confirming it, declaring himself my ally. But then

he went on, “Hanson’s gonna be six-four. He’ll need that jumper playing underneath against the big guys—he doesn’t like driving into a crowd. He might get a booboo.”

The Lord giveth and taketh away. I never knew what was coming next from Turk. Could one positive stroke from him be worth a week of insults? Apparently so. And maybe that, too, amounted to leadership.

One day we were sitting on the steps at Dave’s, and Terry said Turk should make a move on Peggy Fitz, who, I was beginning to admit to myself, was my dream girl. She was the best looking, smartest girl in our class—and the most distant.

“She’s too tall,” Turk said. “She’ll be Hanson’s girl someday.”

I waited for the insult, but there wasn’t one. Maybe he meant it.

Kindness from Turk wasn’t just for me. He’d tell Venable how much we needed quiet guys like him. “You know, Don, *steady* guys. Thinkers.” *Steady* and *thoughtful* weren’t high on the wish list for us at age thirteen, but maybe Turk intended it as an honest compliment.

We always assumed Eldon Crowley was second to Turk as the toughest guy in The Purple Gang, but every once in a while, Turk deferred to him. Or

was he pretending? One time he conceded an empty pack of Luckies to Eldon because, he said, “I’m not gonna start something with Eldon Crowley.”

One of Turk’s favorite gestures was to pat Terry McVicker on the head as if he were a puppy. It was condescending, but Terry liked it, and Turk’s affection seemed genuine. It made the rest of us love Terry a little more. We had Turk’s permission.

§

At times I wondered if Turk was even aware of the tension between him and me—or maybe I should say, the tension in me, about us. Maybe we should have come to blows. That would have happened in the movies, and maybe it was what my mother wanted from me. Maybe it would have offered some clarification, but I doubt it. He would’ve won, and I might have humiliated myself in more ways than losing the fight. I might have said stupid things, might have cried, might have run home to my mother, might have tried to stir up a group insurrection against Turk, which would have failed.

I also have to remind myself that I actually liked the guy most of the time. Even when I was mad at him, or felt intimidated by him, or was just weary with not knowing what would come next, he was the most *interesting* kid I

knew and the one most likely to knock on my door. Maybe I was right to ride it out.

Leonard wasn't like a small town in the movies. If dramatic things were going on behind the closed doors of the T.R. Johnson family, or anywhere else for that matter, I never knew it and never knew anybody who did. We lived in an enduring gray, which was comfortable more often than not. Maybe we'd all get fat and die young, whether we stayed in Leonard or went off to play on bigger stages. What we would *not* do was fight duels on some island in the Ohio River. We would not end up in history books or Hollywood. Leonard was a safe, dry town, a wagon train of citizens that never went anywhere. When we occasionally heard about a nasty fight at one of the roadside bars out in the county, or an arrest, maybe even a knifing, we were comfortable in knowing that was not *us*, not our Leonard, not inside the city limits. That stuff only happened out on County Road 94, a narrow, curvy, tarred gravel passage that crossed one hill and wound around another until, four miles later, two ramshackle beer joints appeared across the road from each other. We could ignore the patrons out there; more often than not, we'd never even heard of those family names.

In the summer before ninth grade, Turk abruptly moved away. T.R. went to work at a chemical factory in Nitro, West Virginia, about a hundred miles away, and nobody heard from the Johnsons again. I wrote Turk one letter. In those days there was a good chance of getting through to someone in a small town if you simply wrote his name and the town's name on the envelope. "Turk Johnson, Nitro, West Virginia." He never responded, and I was surprised to discover that I didn't care whether he'd received it, whether he was ignoring me, or what he might have said in reply. I could feel my mother operating within me.

Once I overheard my father and Don Venable's dad, Jack, saying T.R. had fled Leonard with his wife and four children to evade domestic abuse charges. There were also claims that in T.R.'s Kentucky days, back in his twenties, he'd worked as hired muscle for the coal companies during their wars against the miners and union organizers down in Harlan. So, in the end, T.R., the tight-lipped, shifty halfback, fighter pilot, mover of lumber, driver of forklifts, had fled—first up to Leonard and now down to Nitro. I wondered if there were still more towns that Turk never mentioned. And would there be more in the future?

One day, I stopped by Dave's Diner to buy gum, and Carl Crowley, Eldon's dad, was sitting with two other men at the lunch counter, growling that miners' unions, and all unions, would be the death of America—"bunch of hairy damn dagos and hunkies, and every color, the darker the better. I say send 'em back where they came from."

That summer Carl took a union job in the coal mines down around Beckley, West Virginia. If there was a specific point when I stopped believing any speechifying adult, it might have been that snapshot of Carl crowing at Dave's lunch counter. We never heard from Eldon again. Like Turk, he was a hundred miles away, then months and years away. He didn't feel like the good friend I'd thought he was.

I asked my father what he thought about Carl Crowley. "Oh, he's just blowin' off steam," my father said. "When people get like that, just leave 'em alone."

He went back to his newspaper, paused, then sat up straight with an almost fiery look in his eyes that I'd never seen before. "Now listen. If anybody talks about burning stuff, like a cross, or hurting somebody—and I mean really *hurting* somebody—you get the hell out of there. *Right now*. And you come tell me."

I didn't know what he was talking about. A couple of years earlier, he'd gone into the same mode about a tent revival at the fairground. "If some guy starts talking at you about God and getting you born again, you get the hell out of there. *Right now*. Don't you go *anywhere* with that guy. You hear?"

Those were the only touches of warrior I remember in my father. They were convincing, and I sensed he was on the right side of things. My father was a decent man. But I wished for more outbursts like those, and for his sake, I wish I'd seen *that* man sparring with my mother. Or dancing with her.

§

Peggy Fitz and I did get together in the end, but divorced after eight years of marriage. Our son and daughter were growing tall and freckled as fewer and fewer calm words passed between us. After six years of high school and college dating, how could we have known each other so little? Or lacked the courage to act on what we knew? Maybe the old adage was true: if you don't want the answer, don't ask the question. But there's a price to pay for that. Peggy was bright lights, big city; I was back roads and oatmeal. She was Caddy; I was Chevy. She partnered with her father at the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank; I

moved to Marietta and taught history at a community college there and another one a half-hour upriver in West Virginia. As long as the weather was decent, I enjoyed the drive.

My parents tried to remain calm in post-divorce talks about Peggy and our marriage, but one time my father blurted, “I never even saw you kiss that woman,” as if that explained everything. I nodded at my mother and said, “And I never saw you kiss that one.”

§

In high school a few of us escaped cafeteria food any time we could—maybe once a week. We’d save up 52 cents or beg it from our fathers and walk to Dave’s for cheeseburgers or meat loaf sandwiches. One October Tuesday, in tenth grade, Terry McVicker walked the six blocks from school to have lunch with friends downtown, and his heart condition dropped him right there, dead kid on the checkerboard tile at Dave’s. A half-dozen Leonard High kids witnessed it and probably never forgot it. Venable and I had eaten at school that day, and it shook us up when we heard about it, especially when we saw Peggy with a group of five other girls, all of them weeping beside Peggy’s locker. I looked straight ahead and kept walking down the hall. If people saw Venable or me with tears welling, it would be something we’d have to live down.

Cap Robinson, Leonard High '35, my parents' class, owned and managed the Sunoco station. He'd never been captain of anything, but long before I was born, people started calling him Cap; no one could remember why, but he liked it. Cap told good stories, true and otherwise. He'd been at Dave's that day and said Terry was jawing away and flapping his arms with the other kids, as usual, then "dropped like a bucket of gravel." For several years after that, when there was a sudden death in town, or a reference to Terry McVicker in particular, someone might mutter the grace note, "dropped like a bucket of gravel." I think the image lasted because it felt like country music and because it came from Cap. No one quoted the words of the preacher at Terry's funeral.

Don Venable and I finished high school together, but he took business courses while I was in college prep, and we drifted into different social groups. Even so, with only a hundred and eighty students at Leonard High, Venable and I often saw each other in the halls. Sometimes one of us would mumble, "The Last Shall Be First." The other would smile bigger than he meant to, but five minutes into the next class, it was all forgotten.

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