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Bridge

"That wasn't funny," said the kid.

We were walking down the stairs in front of the school on our first day in kindergarten. In the distance, by the chain link fence, all the parents waited for their little ones to emerge. Proud moms with big grins waved at their children who ran toward them with equally large smiles. Many of my new classmates called to their mothers, their voices bouncing and echoing off the old brick school building.

"Was too funny," I said, "Don't you get it? 'Orange you glad I didn't say banana?'" We were almost to the bottom of the stairs. The heat of the day rose from the blacktop.

"No," he said.

A miller-moth flitted above the sidewalk followed closely by a small bird diving for its lunch. "You must be stupid, then," I said, "Why are you even at school? Only smart kids are allowed to go to school, you know."

My Aunt Neeny's red Mercury coupe appeared at the intersection, its tinny-sounding radio loudly reporting on something called "Woodstock" -- whatever that was. I'd heard her and Grandma arguing about it for a week. Neeny wanted to hop in her car and drive across the country to go to it. Grandma absolutely refused to give her permission.

"I ain't havin' you traipsin' all over creation to go to some long hair, hippy, rock-n-roll party, young lady," Grandma had told her.

Neeny was a teenager with a brand new driver's license. I was excited to see her pulling up to the school to pick me up. She told me stories about high school and she played the guitar for me, letting me sing along with her even though I didn't know the words to most of the songs. Besides, she often took me to Howdy Pard', the drive-in restaurant where she worked, and treated me to french fries and strawberry shakes. In my eyes she hung the moon.

Something wet splattered me in the face, right on my upper lip. It oozed slowly into my mouth, tasting vaguely salty. While I was lost in thought about what a Woodstock was, the boy had spat

on me and was preparing to do it again. "I'm not stupid!" He worked his mouth around another gob of saliva.

Wiping the spittle off with my forearm, rage percolated upward from my stomach, like locusts spilling out across a virgin field. That's when I said it. The word popped out of my mouth before I could stop it, even though Aunt Neeny told me I should never say it. Ever.

"Nigger," I said, "filthy damn nigger!" I hit him. I kept punching, blinded by the crimson rage pulsing through my limbs and ending in my balled-up fists. He raised his arms and screamed while I blindly beat him in the face shouting 'nigger' over and over again.

At some point arms encircled my waist and lifted me off the ground while I flailed at the empty air. I looked down and noticed a satisfying amount of blood dripping from the nose and mouth of the little boy who lay on the hot asphalt sobbing. His mother ran to him. I knew it was his mother because she was the only black woman running across the playground.

"You're a nigger, too!"

"David, stop it. Just stop it," a familiar voice said in my ear. Twisting around in the arms that restrained me, I recognized my aunt. "Shh . . . calm down. There's no call for that kind of language," she said.

"But he spit on me," I protested.

Before Neeny could answer, the mother of the little boy scooped him up from the ground and held him close to her, glaring at both of us through wet, red-rimmed eyes. She stood like that for a moment, locked in some internal battle, then turned on her heels and left without speaking. Neeny let me go and knelt in front of me, holding my face in her hands. She looked me in the eyes, and then glanced upward toward the teacher who stood at the top of the stairs watching, saying nothing.

"Mother," Aunt Neeny growled. Standing, she grabbed my hand, and led me out of the schoolyard to the waiting Mercury.

"What about Grandma?" I asked as Aunt Neeny slid in behind the steering wheel.

"Nothing, Boo. Grandma just has a lot of funny ideas, that's all."

We sped away from that school and I never returned.

"Grandma, can I go out and play?"

"Your Dad's gonna be by soon, Boo," she said from the kitchen.

The whole house smelled of pumpkin pie and sugar cookies. I loved this time of year because of all the food that Grandma made, and relatives visited from all over the state. This year was especially fun. Our entire fourth grade class was putting on a Thanksgiving pageant for the parents and I had two solos. Shrugging, I went back to playing with my Lincoln Logs and practicing one of my songs.

"This is myyyy country, land that I loooove ... This is myyyy country, home of the free . . .," I warbled gleefully.

Grandma's heavy footsteps clunked across the linoleum of the kitchen and she appeared at the doorway. Her large frame was draped with a flower print dress dulled by many trips through the washing machine. She wiped her hands on a towel and sighed, then absently pushed the heavy black frames of her glasses up to their rightful spot on the bridge of her nose.

"I guess you can go out," she said. "Just you make sure you stay away from those spics down the street -- nasty, filthy people. When you hear your dad whistlin', you come-a-runnin', you hear?"

"I will, Grandma."

Art class. Mrs. Chavez played "Fly Like an Eagle" while we worked on our projects for the seventh grade art show. I studied the perfect body of Cheryl Tiegs in her red dress with white polka dots, struggling to duplicate it on my paper with charcoal. The drawing was difficult because – well, she was just so gorgeous, and I was very much in the thralls of puberty. I kept getting sidetracked with fantasies about her.

A red Corvette convertible drives up to the front of the school, right in front of everybody. Cheryl gets out of her car wearing a matching 'Vette-red dress and mirrored sunglasses. She asks the dumb-struck jocks where she can find Dave. Of course, everybody points at me. She takes off her glasses with a toss of her head that sends a waterfall of blonde hair arching through the air to lie glistening on bare shoulders. Eyes locked on mine, she walks toward me, crooking a finger and beckoning me to meet her. When she's close enough she says, "Hey, Dave, been lookin' for ya. Wanna go out?"

During one of these moments, Theresa walked by and nonchalantly tossed a folded up piece of paper in front of me. Theresa and I had been friends since second grade, so I thought she was passing a note to tell me about a party or something. This time Theresa didn't look me in the eyes and smile the way she usually did when we passed notes. She walked away without so much as a wink and sat at the table where several others were sitting, including my cousin, Kenneth. Everybody at the table broke out in smiles and snickers. They whispered to each other

as I slowly opened the note and read it. They stared as I sat, numb and in shock at the one word that was printed there.

"FAG."

"I'll take Jeff," Chris said. He was picking his team for a basketball game in gym. We were good friends until seventh grade. Now, three years later, all that had changed. I watched as each person was chosen, leaving me standing there alone.

"That leaves Dave. Who wants him?" asked the other team captain.

"Don't want no faggots playing on my team," Chris said.

I still didn't know where the rumors came from, but there they were, and it seemed my life was over. I hurt inside in a way I never thought possible, but I said nothing.

"My dad says you want to have sex with guys, Dave," said my cousin Kenneth. "He says I shouldn't even change in front of you in the locker room. You might get a hard-on or something." Nervous laughter filled the gym.

The muscles in Chris' jaw worked. He looked at me in disgust, as if he couldn't believe we'd ever been friends, let alone rode motor-cross together. "Gross," he said. "Let's play, folks. My team is skins."

As Chris' team took their shirts off to begin the game, I walked to the locker room. Amid the smell of bleach and sweat, musty towels and mildewed tile, I sat and cried as quietly as I was able.

I dialed the phone and listened to it ring on the other end. What was I going to say? "Gee, Dad. I got married this weekend. Sorry I didn't tell you about it." No, that wouldn't work. Well, I'd think of something.

"Yeah," said the voice on the other end of the line.

"Dad?" My stomach was in knots. He knew I'd been living with Sherry, but I don't think he had a clue we'd gone so far in our relationship.

"Hey, you. How's 'Frisco?"

"Good," I said. "Hey, you know that picture I sent you?"

"The one of that girl? What's her name? Cheryl?"

"Sherry, Dad. Her name's Sherry. Cheryl was high school."

There was a pause on the other end. Tension hung there, waiting for . . . something. I couldn't tell what. I sat on one of the large cushions that served as furniture in the living room of our apartment.

"Yeah," he said at last. "You know I don't approve of that shackin' up stuff, David."

"I know, Dad. We fixed that problem. We ran off to Reno and got hitched this weekend. You've got a new daughter-in-law."

More silence. Finally, an audible sigh. "I was afraid of that. You went and married a Jap, huh? A Chink. You know, you're only twenty-five. There's plenty of time to find the right person."

"No, Dad, she's not Asian. She just dyes her hair really black. She's German."

"Oh great, a Kraut in the family. Your Grandma's gonna have a conniption. You know that, don't you?"

"Mom's German, Dad," I said. Anger welled up in my gut, stinging my chest and tightening my throat. *You hypocrite*, I thought.

"Yeah, and your Grandma hates her. I just wanted better for you, son."

"Congratulations to you too, Dad. See you when I can get out that way." I slammed down the handset and shook my head.

I pulled into 7-11 at about three A.M. and got out of my car. The cold, January night might as well have been July for all I felt it. As I opened the glass door, I glanced at the person behind the counter. Paula stood there counting change for a customer. I tried to keep my voice under control when she looked up from the cash register. "Hey, Paula, is Renee working tonight?"

"Yeah, she's back in the office." She pointed to the rear corner of the store.

I walked slowly up the candy aisle and peered through the open doorway to the office. Renee sat in front of a computer, tapping at a keyboard. A lump formed in my throat, but I made the words come out. "Renee," I croaked. "She's gone, Renee. Oh-god-oh-god-oh-god-she's-gone."

Renee must have gotten up and run to me because my face landed on her shoulder, and she was trying to lead me back into the office. When we got there, she closed the door and looked at me. Tears streamed down her face. "When?" she asked.

"An hour ago, I guess. She just, she just . . . didn't wake up. It was the breathing tube. They couldn't take it out without killing her, but if they left it in, her lungs couldn't process the air . . . too late for a heart-lung transplant . . . too sick."

I sat hard on the office chair, trying to gather my thoughts and control my emotions. "She just . . . died." I felt my throat tighten again and a fresh batch of hot tears perched on the rims of my eyes.

"David, oh man, I don't know how to say this . . .," Renee began.

"Then don't." My tongue raked across dry lips. I closed my eyes and sucked in a deep breath. "I know. She's better off now." I pressed the palms of my hands to both eyes, harshly wiping the tears away.

"Yeah."

"It was a long fight."

"Yeah . . . but . . . but you stuck with her, man. That meant a lot to her, you know? Most guys I know, they would've bailed a long time ago. It's been – what? – twelve years?"

"Yes. Twelve."

"You gave Sherry all you had, David; the wheelchairs, the doctors, hospital beds, oxygen, medications . . . all of it. Everybody knows what you all went through. Does Aaron . . . ?"

"No. I haven't been home yet. I took him to say goodbye tonight. He crawled up on a chair and gave her a hug and told her he loved her. Don't know if he realized it was the last one, though. I need to get home."

"Yeah. I'll come over tomorrow and we can talk."

I got to my feet, opened the office door and started to leave.

"David?" Renee's voice called out behind me. "You need to be strong for Aaron right now, just a little longer, OK?"

"I know," I said, "That's what I do."

The phone rang its insistent wail again, breaking me from my thoughts. I picked up the receiver.

"Chief, I'm coming home," Jordan's voice said on the other end of the phone line.

"What? You can't be done with your school so soon. What's going on?" I asked.

Quiet sobbing whispered through the receiver of the phone.

"Jordan?" I asked, "What's the matter?"

"I'm getting kicked out of the Navy, Chief. Something . . . something happened in New Orleans." His voice was strained as he fought to control his emotions.

I'd first met Jordan when I was a recruiter for the Navy. He had called to ask about joining and I went to see him. A slight, young, African-American had met me at the door of his apartment. He had wanted to be a Navy Seal. From there, a friendship of sorts had arisen. I think he saw me as more of a father figure really, but I treated all of my recruits with respect. They knew I was always available if they had problems.

"What? What's going on? Maybe I can get you another chance. I know some people out there in Pensacola," I said.

"No, Chief. I don't think this is fixable."

I frowned and sat at the kitchen table, looking out at the starry night through the window. "Most things can be worked out, Jordan. Not all, but most. Why don't you tell me what's going on."

"I'm gay, Chief."

"Duh. Tell me something I don't know."

"You know?" He asked. His voice was louder this time. A little confidence crept into his spirit.

"Well . . . yeah. Of course I know. I've known since we first met."

"But you never . . ."

"'Don't ask, don't tell,' remember?" I said, quoting the official policy on gays in the military, "Besides, I've developed a pretty good 'gaydar' over the years. It's a long story. So, what? You got caught or something?"

"Yeah. Some fool took a picture of me kissing this guy I met up in New Orleans."

I winced. That was a very bad move on Jordan's part. "Ouch."

"Yeah."

"So, whatcha gonna do?" I asked.

"I'll probably get an apartment or whatever out there. I can't go home. That's for sure."

"Why not?"

"My dad didn't know. Mom told him, and he went ballistic, disowned me or something. Anyway, they moved. I don't even know where they live now."

"What? They just left?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"Yeah, last week. I don't know where they are or how to contact them."

I rested my forehead in my free hand and tried to think. There wasn't a lot I could do about Jordan's Navy career. "That's a bit extreme," I said. "Tell you what, why don't you stay here?"

"With you?"

"Yeah, why not? Can you stand living with a straight?"

"You mean it?"

"Yes, I do. You can help out around the house. I'll expect you to get a job and pay a little rent, but I'll give you some time to find one and get your head together. Besides, Aaron would love the extra company."

"Oh God, Chief, I didn't expect that. I mean . . . wow."

"Yeah, well, you need a break right about now. By the way, my name's David."