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From On High

“This is getting old,” said Sam, lowering his binoculars. Mrs. Logsden (Jake’s mom) and her neighbor, Mrs. Schuster (Henry’s mom) had been setting up the back yard forever. Streamers. Paper table cloths. Your typical Happy Birthday banner. Ethan was staring through his own, better, binoculars. He was just waiting for Sam to ask to switch (“just for a sec”) because Sam’s own binoculars were weird, one side wouldn’t focus the same as the other side. Sam had shaken them violently, tried them again and found no difference. He’d thumped them on the ground and that seemed to make it even worse. Sam was not mechanical minded. Ethan braced himself for the request for a switch (“just for a sec”), knowing that if that happened, he wouldn’t get his own, better ones, back, probably ever. Ethan was realistic: Sam was his best friend, but you had to watch him.

“Whoa! *Whoa!* Look!” hissed Sam, but Ethan already saw. Mrs. Logsden had lit a cigarette. Mrs. Schuster, her best friend, seemed to be keeping lookout for her, was on high alert for any witnesses. The boys couldn’t see how Mrs. Logsden could possibly be enjoying the butt since she was all wired up, puffing quickly and nervously, not quite trusting her lookout friend.

“Hah! Wish Janice could see this!” hooted Ethan, lowering the better binocs.

“We should have a camera!” moaned Sam. “It would get the Imaginary Maid off the hook!”

Mr. Logsdon had found a pack of cigarettes stuffed under some sweaters in a hallway closet and all eyes had turned to Jake Logsdon’s older sister, Janice. To hear Jake tell it, no one had even looked at him or his mom, just Janice, because Janice was always the one they figured was behind stuff. Janice denied any connection to the cigarettes but Mr. Logsdon didn’t believe her. Janice finally said, “They must belong to the maid!” The Logsdons didn’t have a maid and Sam and Ethan agreed with Jake that Janice was being a super smartass, which was cool, in their opinion. But the Logsdons were super-psychological about their kids and got all worried that Janice truly believed in an Imaginary Maid. The real outrage was that Mrs. Logsdon was willing to throw her own daughter to the wolves rather than admit the cigarettes were hers. Come on, everyone but Mr. Logsdon knew it. Mrs. Logsdon smoked on the sly, they were seeing it right here and right now, as if they hadn’t known.

“Poor Janice,” sighed Ethan. “Her mother is such a hippo.”

“Damn straight,” agreed Sam, repeating a phrase he enjoyed hearing his older brother use. The boys vaguely understood the word “hypocrite” but weren’t quite confident using it, so “hippo” had come into use to denote a person who preached one thing and practiced another.

Mrs. Logsdon, the hippo, had now ground out the butt under her heel, wrapped the remains in several napkins and stuffed it into a trash can by the back door.

“*Looklooklook!*” cried Sam, quivering. Janice herself had emerged from the house. Cutoff shorts, a bright blue tank top. Dark brown hair swinging around. She had a tote bag over one shoulder. She looked like she was getting ready to go out somewhere and was conferring with her mother. Then (and this proved how cool Janice was) she casually popped on a pair of sunglasses and strode off around the house to the front driveway. Twelve cool years old, she had breasts and everything, though this was something Sam and Ethan could not yet bring themselves to discuss. Each knew the other saw them, though. One day they would bring up the subject, but the time had to be right.

“I’m glad Janice won’t be here,” said Ethan.

“Me, too,” admitted Sam. They both liked sneaking stares at Janice, but their secret adoration (which had been heightened by the outrageously cool “Imaginary Maid” thing) made them glad she would be spared the planned bombing of the birthday party. The boys had been denied participation in the party due to a series of misdeeds, culminating in one involving fire crackers. Their parents were powerful entities -- the idea of seeking revenge upon them was inconceivable, so they did not seek justice in that direction. It was tempting to find a way to hold it against Jake, whose birthday it was, but Jake had had nothing to do with the firecracker incident, he’d been an innocent bystander. Somehow the bombing of the birthday party they

could not attend seemed the answer to their frustration. They realized that retaliation against the group of blameless party-goers made no sense, but they were eleven years old.

They glanced at the weaponry they'd prepared, then went back to their surveillance. "Here they come," murmured Sam. Impatiently he shook his binoculars hard. Shaking seemed to work with flashlights, he didn't get why it wouldn't work for his faulty binocs. He glanced covetously at Ethan's better ones; aware of the scrutiny, Ethan stiffened and kept his binocs firmly affixed to his face.

Kids were beginning to tumble around the side of the house from the front driveway. Jake emerged into their midst like some kind of freakin' king or something. Grinning, he greeted each kid while his mother, the hippo, took their wrapped presents from them and set them on a table off to the side. They saw Jake spread his arms in this kind of "Welcome, my friends!" gesture. Jake could be kind of girly. Speaking of girls, there were girls arriving, too. Girls.

"My mom said Mrs. Freak..." (Mrs. Frick, actually) "...asked Mrs. Logsdon if she'd invite the girls," said Ethan, glancing at Sam from his binoculars. "She said, and I quote, 'Get them off our hands for a Sunday afternoon.'"

"Poor Jake," said Sam. "Man, look at Dina Santos!" The other girls were wearing shorts or jeans, but Dina was all done up in a pale blue party dress with a bow in her hair and everything. The boys didn't understand how girls thought, really, but Ethan, at least, instinctively knew that Dina was probably mortified. Some girls (Sharon McCready, for

instance) would be all belle of the ball and shit for being the only one dressed up, but Dina was shy, plus she tried too hard to figure out what to do. So being the only one dressed up when no other girls were was probably a horror for her. Mrs. Logsden fussed over her, of course and Ethan knew this was some sort of kindness that actually just made things worse. Anyhow.

The boys had a perfect spot for their spying and eventual sabotage. A hill thick with second growth trees that sloped down into a field on one side and on the other, down below, a street of fairly new houses, some with pools. The Logsdens had a pool. Both Sam and Ethan watched for signs that it was going to be used for the party. Hopefully it would not, because it was partially blocked from their hilltop view and should the kids adjourn to the pool, they wouldn't be able to observe the goings on as well.

“Snickers?” asked Sam, who'd pulled out a handful of candy bars he'd supplied them with. As Ethan reached for the Snickers, Sam said, “Here, let me try that, just for a sec,” and took Ethan's better binoculars. Smooth move, thought Ethan. But he'd seen it coming a mile away.

Paul Mueller was holding court. He was putting on some kind of half-assed pantomime, bowing out his arms and legs, jutting his head forward and kind of lurching around.

“What the hell's he doing?” snarled Sam.

“I know what’s he’s doing,” said Ethan, watching closely with the not-so-good binocs. “He’s doing the Incredible Hulk. It was on t.v. the other night.”

Gales of laughter drifted up to their spot on the hill.

“Sure, laugh *now*,” said Sam bitterly, watching. “You won’t be laughing pretty soon.”

Ethan shuddered at the quiet ferocity. He had to adjust to this, to this role as a Hidden Threat.

“I like Mrs. Schuster,” he said and was glad to see Sam nod in agreement. They both observed that Mrs. Logsdon had turned her helper Mrs. Schuster into a slave. Mrs. Logsdon would look around frantically, fluttering her hands, and Mrs. Schuster would quickly fetch napkins, or paper cups, or whatever. Ethan’s mom had mentioned that Mrs. Logsdon was “high strung.” Ethan made the connection between Mrs. Logsdon’s “high stringiness” and the smoking. This somehow reminded him again of cool Janice’s Imaginary Maid and he laughed quietly.

“Don’t laugh at Paul!” admonished Sam sternly, thinking Ethan was appreciating Paul Mueller’s Incredible Hulk antics and was, in a way, supporting the enemy.

The kids were scarfing down cake and stuff now, so it was boring for awhile.

“That’s right, eat,” whispered Sam in a sinister voice, “Eat now, while you can...” Ethan saw that Sam had willfully transported himself to another place. He saw that Sam was thinking of himself as Evil. Ethan’s mother said Sam was a “good kid.” If she could see him now.

“About Mrs. Schuster,” Sam said suddenly, dropping the Evil voice. “We don’t have to bomb her.”

Sam really *was* a good kid, thought Ethan, showing compassion for Mrs. Schuster, who Mrs. Logsden had turned into her private slave. They saw now that Mrs. Schuster was running into the house for something while Mrs. Logsden stood near the kids’ tables, hands on the sides of her face.

“How about Dina?” asked Ethan, feeling sorry for the poor, shy, overdressed girl. “Let’s not bomb her.”

Sam thought a moment, inwardly battling that compassion, but it got the best of him. “Okay,” he said, then looked at Ethan. “Dina’s parents?” he said leadingly and Sam waited. “The Big D,” announced Sam.

“Serious?” This was how they referred to divorce. The Big D.

“Yeah, that’s what I heard my mom and aunt saying.”

“Okay. So let’s not bomb Dina.”

Changing the subject, Ethan said, “What a lucky dog, Jake, having a birthday in June.”

Both Ethan and Sam envied kids with summer birthdays. Ethan’s was in (“Gag! Spit! Take a shit!”) *February*. Sam’s was the absolute worst: Two days after Christmas. Like, who the hell cared? But actually, a cousin of Mark Medeiros had a birthday right *on* Christmas day, so that really was the worst.

“Well, at least they’re finished eating the stupid cake,” observed Sam. As Ethan had predicted, Sam had hung on to the better binocs. It wasn’t worth making an issue. Plus, he’d gotten the inferior ones to work better, carefully adjusting them rather than shaking and banging them the way Sam had been doing. So, whatever.

“Hey,” said Sam, looking at him sidelong. “I want you to call me Captain.”

Ethan should have seen this coming. He, too, liked feeling soldier-like, laying in the leaves with binoculars, scoping out the enemy. But leave it to Sam to take it a step further and assign ranks.

“Captain?” repeated Ethan. “If you want to be the leader in the war shouldn’t you be General?”

“Yeah, well.” Sam thought. “Yeah, General’s top dog, but it doesn’t sound that great as a nickname.”

“You want to be Captain as a nickname? Not just for just right now?”

“Yeah, I want Captain to be my nickname.”

“Sure,” said Ethan. Hopefully this nickname thing would be forgotten quickly. School was months away and by then Sam would have dropped the whole thing. Or would he? What if Sam really insisted that Ethan call him Captain in the hopes the other kids would pick up on it and it would become a bona fide nickname? What if (more likely) the other kids didn’t pick up on it and Ethan alone was stuck going around calling Sam Captain? He’d look like a jerk. Sam just didn’t realize there could be big repercussions from this.

“You know who’s got a good nickname?” Sam asked him. “Rocky Ramirez. How’d he ever get that?”

“I know,” sighed Ethan. Rocky had come to their school just last year. His real name was Charles but he’d told them all, “Everyone calls me Rocky.” This may or may not have been true, but miraculously, the kids had immediately started calling him Rocky (and even the teachers had!) and he’d been Rocky ever since. No questions asked.

“There he is,” pointed Ethan. Rocky was joining the other kids flocking toward Mrs. Logsden and Mrs. Schuster who were setting up a game. Mrs. Schuster doing the lion’s share of organizing, natch.

“You ever wanted a nickname?” Sam asked. Ethan wasn’t sure if Sam was just asking a straightforward question or if he was, in fact, offering to bestow a nickname upon Ethan.

Ethan hesitated and this was enough to tell Sam that Ethan did indeed harbor a wish for a nickname.

“Come on, what?”

Ethan cringed a little, then admitted, “Blacky.”

“Blacky?” Surprisingly, Sam didn’t mock him, just seemed curious. “Cause of your hair?”

“I guess.” Ethan shrugged. “It just sounds cool.”

“Well, I like Captain,” said Sam. “But just for this afternoon.” Ethan almost swooned with relief. Sam had changed his mind about the permanent nickname. “What the hell?” spat Sam, glaring through “his” binoculars. The adults were now tying balloons to the kids’ ankles by lengths of string. One balloon per kid. Mrs. Logsden then stood back and explained to them

whatever the hell they were doing. Then the kids began rushing around stomping on one another's balloons. The point, so far as Sam and Ethan could tell, was to try to explode the balloons of the other kids while defending your own from the same fate.

“Those poor bastards,” said Sam, observing grimly. Those Poor Bastards was what Sam's father called any unfortunates shown on the news, particularly soldiers, buried mine workers and losing football teams. “You know,” added Sam, looking at Ethan, “We're better off right here. I wouldn't want to be down there. I wouldn't want to be doing that.”

Ethan agreed, watching the foolishness going on below. He actually felt a twinge of pity seeing the mighty Rocky awkwardly hobbling after one kid's balloon and doing a strange pirouette as someone lunged after his own. He was dismayed when someone exploded Dina's balloon and she started crying. Mrs. Schuster ushered her out of the fray, smiling comfortingly. It struck him that the two they had specifically decided to spare were now segregated from the general mayhem. Now might be the time for the bombing...

“There's Janice!” Sam announced excitedly. Ethan put his binocs to his face so abruptly he bruised his forehead. There she was. Standing in the back doorway, sunglasses still on. Those puzzling breasts. He thought she'd left for the afternoon, but there she was with her sunglasses and breasts. The sunglasses gave her an air of mystery: You couldn't tell what she thought of the kids stomping balloons. Henry got his balloon exploded because he was gawking at her and was too distracted to protect it.

“You know Liam’s neighbor’s older cousin?” asked Sam, still watching.

Ethan nodded. He knew who Sam meant.

“Well, I saw him check her out.”

“He checked out Janice?” The term “check out” was new to them, another phrase they’d picked up from Sam’s older brother. They were only tentatively beginning to understand it and incorporate it into their own speech.

“Yeah. When a bunch of us were in Liam’s pool. The cousin was playing Frisbee with someone next door and the Frisbee landed in Liam’s yard. The cousin came to get it. Janice was there to bring Jake home and the cousin checked her out. Me, Dave and Rocky saw it. Oh, and Jake saw it, too. Jake started singing ‘Janice and the Cousin sittin’ in a tree!’ and Janice smacked him. But get this: She was sorta laughing.”

Ethan stared at Janice through the binoculars. His brain was mush.

“They look so *small*,” mused Sam, watching the gathering below. Ethan agreed. His brain felt like mush from processing the idea of Janice thinking it was funny getting ‘checked out’ by Liam’s neighbor’s older cousin, but he was also feeling powerful, looking down at the partying ants below. They didn’t know he and Sam were up here, watching them. They were so *clueless*.

The kids had finished with the asinine balloon stomping thing. Ethan had missed whether or not a prize was given to whoever stomped the most balloons, or kept their balloon alive the longest, or whatever. Now they were all running around the back yard hunting under shrubs and tables and whatnot and he assumed that now it was some sort of asinine treasure hunt in progress. He saw that Mrs. Logsdon and Mrs. Schuster were both fussing over Dina who was smiling hesitantly up at them through her balloon-stomped tears. Ethan was hit by a startling insight about Dina, but he did not have the right vocabulary to express it. He didn't know words like passive-aggressive or manipulative (he'd heard that one, but didn't get it), and all his mind could come up with was "She knows what she's doing!" He was just wondering if he should attempt to pass this idea on to Sam, but just then Sam let out a shriek.

"*Tick!*" Sam was clawing at the leg of his jeans, his face frozen in a grotesque mask of horror. "*Tick!*"

All fears of being thought a homo put aside for the emergency, Ethan rose to the occasion, yanking the cuff of Sam's jeans up. "Keep your leg still!" he ordered, almost getting kicked violently in the jaw.

"Spit! Shit! Gag a..."

“It goes ‘Gag, spit, take a shit,’” Ethan supplied calmly. It was the newest thing and he didn’t blame Sam for not getting it straight under the circumstances. Plus, it gave Sam something to mull over while Ethan did what had to be done.

“Got it!” he said solemnly, plucking the little bugger off Sam’s calf. He held the loathsome thing, smaller than his pinky nail, between his thumb and pointer while Sam fell back, pale and gasping. Sam was deathly afraid of ticks. An older boy had told him the ticks could burrow all the way under your skin to live in your veins forever, feasting on your blood. Sam could be a hard, cynical kid, but the fear of ticks was the chink in his armor.

They spent ten minutes smashing the tick between two stones then watching it carefully to make sure it didn’t revive. They smashed it some more to make sure.

Staring at the tiny dark glob of tick, Sam said, “Hey, thanks, man.”

“Any time, man.” The gruff camaraderie launched them back into military mode and they grabbed for their binoculars, Ethan getting back the good ones. “Janice is gone!” he announced.

“Jake’s getting ready to open his presents,” Sam noted. The kids were moving toward the table with the gifts. “This might be the right time.”

“Let’s check the ammo,” suggested Ethan.

It was a crude contraption made of rubber, springs and burlap. It was meant to be a catapult, and the sack part was filled with small stones, pine cones and acorns. They'd experimented with a prototype out in the field behind Ethan's house and were pleased with the distance they'd gotten with the acorns in particular. The pine cones were a disappointment, too lightweight to achieve much momentum, but they liked the look of them. Up here on the hill they'd found two perfectly positioned saplings close together between which to fasten their mechanism. They ran their fingers through the sack of ammunition they planned to unleash upon the goofballs below them.

A trick of the breeze briefly carried Mrs. Logsden's voice to them. "...everybody... now..."

The kids broke into a round of Happy Birthday to You! while Jake stood beaming and Mrs. Logsden scurried around with a camera, clicking.

"They're supposed to sing Happy Birthday when they have the cake, not when they open presents!" complained Sam, vaguely outraged.

"Mrs. Log Jam is a bird brain," said Ethan, and added, "She's high strung."

Sam toyed with one of the rubber bits of the catapult, testing it. He snatched up his binoculars when Ethan yelled, "Look! *Looklooklook!*"

Janice had come back out, was lounging in the back doorway. She had what appeared to be a pencil in her hand and was ostentatiously ‘smoking’ it. She mimed taking a long puff, then mimed blowing smoke into the air with pouted lips. Her mother looked up from her camera, seething.

“Ha!” both boys shouted, thrilled, as Janice pretended to shake an ash off the end of the fake cigarette before taking another long ‘puff.’

“Oh, man, she’s...” grinned Sam.

“Cool!” supplied Ethan.

They watched appreciatively as Janice languidly turned and moved back into the house. The Happy Birthday-singing kids appeared to be snickering and Mrs. Logsden stared helplessly at her slave, Mrs. Schuster.

“You dare to test my powers, you fools?” intoned Sam. It was from a movie they’d just seen. They’d both been looking for a chance to quote it and leave it to Sam to find a way although, truthfully, it didn’t make a lot of sense in this context. But it still sounded cool.

Jake was now concentrating on opening his gifts with the other imbeciles oohing and aahing like he was opening bags of gold and diamonds. Forgetting the catapult, Sam and Ethan

watched to see what loot Jake was getting. They saw him unwrap a video game and hold it at such an angle that they could briefly see the cover through the binocs.

“Oh, no!” moaned Ethan in genuine sympathy.

“He’s *got* that one!” groaned Sam. They’d played it with Jake just a couple weeks ago.

“I bet anything one of the girls got him that,” speculated Ethan. “The boys woulda known!”

Sure enough, Jake turned to Tamara, smiling and holding up the video game like it was the greatest gift in the world. Sam and Ethan were impressed with Jake’s taking what they saw as the higher road. Neither of them was sure they themselves wouldn’t have sulked.

“Jake can be kind of girly, but he can be kind of cool,” observed Sam, and Ethan agreed. “We shouldn’t oughta bomb him.” Ethan agreed again.

“I’m kind of bored,” said Ethan after awhile.

“Yeah, me too. I mean, who wants to watch someone opening presents? I mean, they’re *their* presents, not *yours*, so who cares?”

“Serious,” said Ethan. He yawned. “Wanna watch a movie at my house? No one’s home ‘cept my mom and she’s always in the kitchen.”

“Is she still mad about the firecrackers?” asked Sam cautiously.

“Nah, she’s cool.”

“Okay.”

They took one last look at the remains of the tick. Sam gave it a last smash with the heel of his sneaker. They ignored the catapult with its arsenal of acorns, etc. but made sure they had their binoculars.

They started down the hill. Ethan skidded a little on some loose rocks and Sam said, “Whoa! Watch it, buddy!” He’d heard his older brother and his friends calling each other “Buddy” lately and wanted to give it a try. It seemed to go over okay.

The stupid catapult wouldn’t have worked anyway. Whatever, it was cool.

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