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Jackson at 1st

by

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“Anthony!” His mother’s voice rips through the stale, Hoboken air; a gutting knife through a fish. Consolata Conti. “Connie” for short. She is small, wiry. Her hair is short, brittle, black, peppered with quarter-sized patches of white - dead spots where her skull was struck years past. One side of her face sits an inch lower than the other, melted by time. She hangs her body out the front window of the crumbling railroad apartment, left forearm flat on the hot, pebbled cement sill, and shakes her opposite fist in the air. “Anthony! Ya’ sonava-bitch! Where are ya’, ya’ sonava- bitch?” Saliva flies and falls. It’s a hundred degrees and thick as a runny nose.

Connie’s stare torches down to the sidewalk below. Her eyes are vacuous yet lean. It is only the tops of heads that return her gaze; neighbors accustomed to the rant. She locks eyes with an alley cat perched on a ledge and jerks her head forward to spook it. The cat stretches then settles in to groom. Connie ducks back inside.

She rubs her head hard where the sun hit. Her hair crackles like scorched grass. She grits her teeth, emits a yelping sound, rocks her neck back and forth, faster and faster yet, then tramps into the next room where she... sits and stands, sits and stands, mumbling, sits and stands, scratching her forearm, scratching harder, really hard; she stops, rolls her neck, rocks it back and forth, then sits. Then stands... and pounds back up to the front window to try again.

“Anthonyyy!” Her voice is a banshee in a get-away car. Her eyes dart about as if unable to see.

Down on the ground, in the alley beside the building...

“Your mother’s a whack.” Anthony’s friend, Dominick, is taller than Anthony and weighs more. Simply put, he is a bigger boy. Anthony is built like his mother - small and tightly molded. His left cheekbone has already begun to melt. His skin is bronze with splotches of unclean and decorated with bruises in various stages of repair. He wears shorts and a filthy T. His hair? Erratic. Dominick’s T is

clean, newish. His hair is combed. Both boys should be repeating fifth grade come September, but the system is pushing them through. Anthony does not respond to Dominick's remark, just gives a small wince touching a fresh scab that's forming across an inch long gash over his left eye.

"Hurt?"

Anthony shrugs. If you look closely, Anthony's face contains a total of five such scars. Pale now. Permanent.

The boys have situated themselves behind a stoop in the alley that runs between Anthony's building and Dominick's. Unless Anthony's mother comes outside looking for them, they are safe.

"I got about twelve bucks saved. You can have it." Dominick's eyes are small and sincere. Anthony's eyes are oval. A deep, watery brown. His lashes are long and gracious in sharp contrast to his mess of black hair. Anthony squints down the alley looking at something, some movement. It is likely he is near-sighted. He loses interest and gnaws at some loose skin on his fingertip. His knees are bouncing furiously, but then they stop.

"Let's rob somebody."

"Who the hell we gonna rob?" Dominick's face is pudgy and impressionable.

"My fuckin' mother, that's who."

Like circles of spinning dough, Dominick's eyes expand. Anthony's expression holds serious but not for long. He lets loose an uproarious round of laughter holding his belly. "Right. Ha! Good one!" Dominick falls in line quickly and soon they are both rolling and squealing, their laughter bouncing within the confines of the alley. Dominick's hips wiggle uncontrollably, and he stands, dropping trou to piss against a wall.

Back upstairs...

"He's a fuckin' good-for-nothin', the sonova-bitch. Fuckin' sonava bitch." It's Connie, alone in the front room, thrashing her head back and forth in the stifling air. She would be medicated if she were insured or employed, but she is neither. "The Price is Right" blares from the back where her infirm mother resides.

Connie grabs her orange beaded purse and heads out, slamming the apartment door behind. The hallway heat, more intense than inside, pushes on the sides of her head and her cheeks inflame to purple. She fumbles for something in her purse, finds it, or maybe not, kicks the apartment door, mumbles, then barrels down four flights of stairs. "Sonava-bitch, sonanva-bitch." Connie exits the

building and halts on the tall, front stoop. Her bent body resembles a child's green, toy army figure.

"Have ya seen 'im?" Her eyes burn into the side of Mr. Herschel who, in a stained and thread bare Fruit of the Loom and too tight shorts, sits muffin-like in a dilapidated folding chair, fanning himself with a newspaper. A gust of wind pushes wet dirt through the air and loosens a singular, sweaty bang atop Mr. Herschel's balding head. The bang dances, windsock-style. One missed grab, but Mr. Herschel regains control and secures it with saliva and a firm pat.

"Nope," he answers.

"Hmmm." Connie's "hmmm" is the up-close sound of a railcar flying past. She surveys the street. Bow-legged, she teeters forcefully down a half dozen stairs to the sidewalk.

"Seen 'im? The sonava-bitch? Seen 'im 'roun here?" Connie gnaws at her bottom lip while her eyes shift over the whole of Carolina Sweed. Carolina is fourteen, freshly showered and heavily involved in her movie magazine. She is seated at the bottom step of the stoop. She glances up at a crumpled-looking Connie and cracks her gum. Snap! The pink, elastic explosion startles Connie who is sprung tight as a rattrap. Connie's body shotguns into a different green army man position. "Well?" Connie stays on mission.

"What's in it for me?" Carolina's words are calculated and old for her age.

Connie grumbles then shoves her hand in her purse. She removes a damaged pack of cigarettes - the soft-pack kind. She pokes her fingers through the insufficient hole in the top, then tilts the pack down and pulls one out. She thrusts the cigarette toward Carolina.

"Looks like a goddam dead worm." The girl snaps her gum again then snatches the bent-up cigarette from Connie's unsteady hand. "Yeah. They been here," Carolina delivers. "Think they went to the park, though."

Connie scratches her scalp. Her hand is a rake through dry weeds. "GoDAMN sonava...fuckin. Fuckin' kid!" Her eyes swirl that maniacal swirl.

Carolina glances down at the beautiful faces in her movie magazine, fluffs her still damp hair, then folds the magazine closed, keeping a finger inside so as not to lose her place. "What'd he do this time?" Carolina looks up, but Connie is gone, steaming down the street - a four and a half foot Godzilla denting the molten pavement with her Keds.

"Fuckin' nut-job, man." Carolina turns her gaze toward Mr. Herschel who affirms her sentiment with a shake of his bulbous head. She refastens a loose barrette,

then pulls the wad of gum from her mouth, takes aim and flings the wad in the lingering trail of Connie Conti. Carolina places the worm-like cigarette awarded by Connie between her lips and, starlet-style, she walks up the steps toward Mr. Herschel's waiting Zippo.

Last night, the scene in apartment 4b went like this:

"I'm just hungry!" Anthony, in his underwear, stands on a kitchen barstool rooting through cabinets.

"Get the fuck down!" Connie swats at her son's bare legs with an old dishrag.

"No! Ow!"

"Get the fuck down, ya' little dick face! Ha!"

Anthony's grandmother, non-ambulatory and obese, sits large in a pilled, cloth recliner in the adjacent back room. She cackles with delight as she watches the exchange through the open doorway.

"Get the fuck down, fuck down, *fuck down!*" With each raw-throated directive, Connie swats the dishcloth harder. She turns on the faucet, soaks the cloth, and smacks more wildly now at Anthony's legs, and with greater force. "Gonna be a fatty like Dominicky?" Anthony's shoulders raise. "Fat, fat, piggy fat. Fat!" She swats hard.

"Here, piggy piggy!" is chortled through coughs from the back room.

"Tubby tubby, tubby tubby!" Connie's upper lip pushes high beneath her flared nose. "Fat!"

"Stop it!"

One final wallop of a swat and the dishrag grabs hold. Anthony slips on the wet surface and crashes to the floor, whacking the side of his head on the counter as he falls.

Connie howls, "Ah Haaa Haaa!"

Anthony looks up from the floor. His words are choked. "There's nothing... to... eat. I'm huuungry!"

"Toooo fuckin' bad." She kicks him repeatedly in his side. He covers his ribs with his hands. She kicks his hands.

“Stop!” he pleads. He pulls the bar stool between his body and hers.

“Get your own fuckin’ money. Buy your own goddam food!” Connie pounds away then turns back. She grabs the teakettle off the stove and swings it at Anthony’s head, its spout making contact just above his left eye.

“Ahhh!” He cries out in pain.

“Pain in the ass!” Connie continues on, out into the next room joining her mother repeating, “Pansy pussy. Pansy pussy. Pussy pussy pansy pussy,” as she goes.

Anthony reaches across the floor and grabs hold of the discarded, dirty dishcloth. He places it to his bleeding wound.

This is the side of Hoboken where you don’t want to live. The “Presidential” streets. Yuppie families and college grads working in Manhattan dominate the *other* side of town. That’s where the gentrification has begun. This is old Hoboken. Poor Hoboken. The real Hoboken, some would argue. And Anthony’s street, Jackson Avenue at 1st, is just about as bad as it gets. The year is 1992.

“Got one!” Dominick pockets a dime he has found in the change dispenser of a body shop’s soda machine. The boys’ activity choice for the morning begins.

“Laundromat.” Anthony points his whole arm in the direction he wants to go and fires a pretend bullet. The boys speed down the sidewalk, burst into the laundromat, and hit each washer and dryer for forgotten change. They reemerge fifty cents richer.

“Got the fare to Bayonne,” Dominick encourages.

Anthony looks at Dominick funny and puts a finger in his mouth pretending to barf. “I’m goin’ ta’ Manhattan. Takin’ the ferry.”

Anthony spots a hot dog vendor. “Let’s go.”

They skulk forward then straighten their backs as they approach the vendor. They linger nearby, untying and re-tying shoelaces. This is a game they have played before.

“Boys want a dog?” The man is old. Indian. He sits on a crate behind his cart. The cart’s yellow umbrella offers no shade. In this heat, the hotdog water boils on it’s own.

“Yeah. I do.” Dominick fishes in his pocket for money.

“How much?” Anthony says.

“Dollar a dog,” nods the old man. He holds up a single finger that looks as if it’s been boiled along with the meat.

“Where’s it say that?” Anthony asks.

The old man laughs a quiet, wheezy laugh. “Right on the sign,” and indicates the front of the cart.

“Don’t see it,” Dominick says.

“You boys are too young for glasses. And I am too old for games.” The old man stands and ventures out from behind his cart. “It’s right...” his denim moneybag hangs from his waist, “here”. He points to the “Hotdogs \$1” sign. Anthony slides up beside the man while Dominick stands watch. Anthony crams his hand into the old man’s denim pouch and pulls out a fistful of bills.

Dominick yells, “Run!” and the boys are off, speeding down the street, rounding bends and sliding through alleys until they are winded and unassailable.

The next hour unfolds in the same manner, with a flurry of small heists. The streets are desolate from the heat, and those out in it move with sluggishness. Youth is an advantage today.

The boys have been able to bully the six-year-old at the corner market out of forty five cents, talk an old lady into giving them fare money for the bus they have no intention of taking, and they have stolen peaches and flowers from the produce stand. The flowers are for Dominick’s mother. It is her birthday today.

High from their spree, the boys head to the park to seek shade and a place to rest. They have eaten the peaches and their hands are sticky.

“Okay. Stop. Stop. How much ya’ got?” Dominick is eager to count their pool. The boys stand at the entrance to the park.

“Let’s sit down someplace,” Anthony suggests. He wipes his hands along the sweat of his legs, then rubs his hands together.

An elderly couple sits on a bench under the shade of an elm. The park is littered, and smells strongly today of body odor and dry urine. Dominick sticks his nose in his mother’s flowers to cover the scent. “Can we go over there?” He points to

a remote corner of the park where there is a small collection of trees. Across from the trees, on the other side of the street, there is a church.

"I been there once." Anthony points to the church. He seems surprised to see it there.

"Yeah?" Dominick lifts his nose from his flowers. "For a wedding or something?" He ducks his nose back in for safekeeping.

"Nah. My mom made me go one time. Actually two times."

"That sucks." Dominick's words are muffled, mouth in petals.

"Tell me 'bout it. She told me I was Catholic so I was supposed to go and tell the guy there all the bad stuff I done. Otherwise God was gonna send me to Hell."

"Wow."

"Yeah. It totally sucked."

"Whatdya say...to the guy? Was he a priest? I talked to a priest once."

"I dunno. I don't know *what* he was. He was hiding in this box."

"So whatdya say?"

Anthony picks his nose with the sleeve of his T-shirt, dislodges something and sends it flying. "Just told him whatever junk I done. Tried to tell 'im the junk my mom done but he said I couldn't say that part. That she had to say that stuff herself. Then he'd forgive her and God would let her go to Heaven when she got old."

The boys continue to approach the tree-lined area.

"What about the second time?" Dominick inquires.

"Don't remember that time so good. I just remember I was really hungry and all they served the whole time was this skinny little cracker. Tasted like, like one of those foam coffee cups. Tasted like... nothing."

Dominick spots the back of a man's head. "Hey. Shoot. Somebody's got the bench already." The man is seated on the only bench under the trees.

"Jerk." Anthony scratches his thigh where a mosquito has just bitten him. "God I hate mosquitos!" Another one bites him on the neck. "Sonava bitch." He smacks at his neck with his hand, slapping it hard. His neck is sloppy wet with

perspiration. He peers closely at the smashed insect in his hand. With the bug's long legs it nearly fills the width of his palm. He flicks it off with his other hand and wipes the remaining bug-blood on his shorts. "Ow!" Dominick is bitten too. He drops his flowers and scratches at his bare arm, digging his stout fingers in, wishing he hadn't chewed his nails so short.

"God. They're everywhere." Anthony looks to the side of the pathway and grabs a large stick from the ground. He begins swinging it wildly in the air. "Take that, ya' sons-a-bitches!"

Dominick laughs then quickly scours the ground for his own stick, finds one and slashes his through the air. "Fuck you, mosquitoes!" They howl at their own antics, hurling the oversized pieces of fallen wood through the rank, muggy air. The sticks are long and heavy, and hard to control.

Dominick swirls himself around in a full circle, stick fully extended. "En garde!" His circles become wider, moving him yards from his starting place and closer to the trees. He accidentally whacks the side of the bench where the man sits. The man turns around. "Sorry 'bout..." Dominick stops.

Anthony stares, astonished. It is not a man. It is his mother.

"There you are ya little..!" Connie grabs hold of Dominick's shirt, yanks it toward her, twisting Dominick's T-shirt collar tight around his neck.

"Ow! Mrs. Conti! Ow!" He struggles to get free and after an almost unperceivable pause, she smacks him with the inside part of a closed fist on his cheek.

"Whatcha cryin for, cry baby? Huh? Watcha cryin' for? Want more, pussy baby?" She is in high cackle mode and rounds to land another. Anthony runs toward the bench. He tightens his grip around his stick, winds up and hits his mother in the side of her stomach, full force. Connie lets go Dominick and falls to the ground.

"Get up!" Anthony is uncaged. He stands above his mother, eyes wide.

"Anthony! Ya' fuckin...", but before Connie can say another word, Anthony wallops her again, this time on the soles of her feet. "ANTHONY!" she screams, her words are broken with indignation. She scrambles away, rises and runs in her bent fashion toward the street - toward the direction of the church.

A large mosquito lands on Dominick's head. It bites, deep, and remains. Dominick drops his stick, gouges his fingers into his skull and leaves them there. "Anthony. Hold up!" but Anthony is in hot pursuit of Connie and is, within seconds, on her. He swings his stick, eyes tightening like fists. "Take that, ya

sonnova bitch! Go to fuckin' hell or Heaven or where the fuck ever for all I care! Don't hurt my friend! Don't hurt my friend! Don't. Hurt. My. Friend!" With one final, massive blow, Anthony cracks Connie on the side of her head. Blood scatters like water from wipers, and Connie crumbles to the ground.

Anthony regards his mother in the dirt. Both boys stand over her. Rivulets of some nature have found their way through the dust of Anthony's face. Dominick's body shivers. Anthony's mouth opens, lips rounded and feverish. He looks as if he will speak but no words come. His eyebrows rise together and then lower on his face and his fingers twitch maybe considering the scab over his left eye but they do not advance. His head tilts to one side, aligning itself with the tilt of his mother's. Sunlight streams between the scant line of trees hitting him square on the cheek. He feels its warmth and places a hand to the spot, feeling too the moist dirt glued to his palm. His hand is hurt. It aches. The melted side of Connie's face looks better than the side on which she has been struck. Anthony looks at Connie's eyes and they appear soft but he recoils. His eyebrows tense; worlds of thoughts, worlds of memories. He emits a small howl, a recollective yelp, and kicks his mother violently in her side, just once. She does not respond. Her eyes are a frozen stare. He kicks her again, harder. He notices the blood from her skull coats his shoes. He reaches down and picks up her beaded purse. He opens it, rummages through it and removes the few dollars it contains. He throws the purse on his mother's chest, wiping with each foot the tops of his shoes onto the backs of his socks.

Anthony turns and walks, straight-backed, chest forward just a few steps then stops. Bubbles of saliva hold anchor in the corners of his mouth. He leans down again and picks the flowers for Dominick's mother up off the ground. He returns and hands the flowers to Dominick whose expression has remained in a static, startled state then stuffs the cash from Connie's purse in his own pocket. He looks at the bright pink rim shining on the skin of Dominick's neck. Dominick's eyes move downward and pass across the body and face of Consolata Conti, then lift again to Anthony. Dominick blinks then places his arm around his friend. The boys walk away, just like that, side by side out of the park.

By the time they are back on the street, they have begun to laugh.