

James Landis

War

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I stopped by your new house with my mother on Christmas Eve but no one was home, so we left the basket of fruit and presents on the front porch. As we walked back to the car in the powdery snow, she told me you are living with your father now and you decided to take drugs instead of go to college, but in Huber Heights you were my best friend, and my brother's too. He was two years younger than us and you were two months younger than me, but when we fought our neighborhood wars with the ignorant kids up the hill he and you would always be the bravest, and I would stay behind with a big stick in my shaky right hand.

Our father left home about the same time yours did. I did not know your father well, but he was not much more a stranger than mine. Every morning when we left for school I could see the bluish cloud from his Camel Lights rising into the thick grey air over the tall scraggly evergreen bushes that blocked the view of your house from ours, and he usually would be standing in there in the front yard blowing smoke out of his nostrils when we got home. Sometimes I thought that he stood there all day guarding his precious concrete slab driveway like holy ground. His speech was saturated with Catholic shaming and his interpretation of God's Word, but to me it seemed hypocritical when I could hear him screaming at you and your little brother and your mother late at night from two houses away.

I hardly remember my father living in our house in Huber Heights. Sometimes

when I am not thinking about anything at all, I can see peripheral images of him kissing my mother on the cheek in the morning before work or before dinner always carrying his old black briefcase with the silver hinges that snapped shut viciously when I tried to open them, but I when I try to picture him exactly he is gone, swallowed up in the swirling fog of childhood memories. Our fathers disappeared quickly, leaving us with only our mothers and our younger brothers (though yours was younger and purer and more fragile than mine).

You would come over in the summer when we were supposed to take them to the pool while our mothers were at work. You would fight off your screaming and kicking brother to bring your video games to our house, leaving him all alone with his frightened paranoia (at night before he went to bed you would tell him scary stories about what the evergreen scraping on the windows really was and cleverly avoid punishment when he ran to your mother and hugged at her leg with tears streaming down his face). And we sat there upstairs in my playroom all day with the lights off and the shades drawn to keep out the bright summer sun, though the breeze was stifled and the air became sticky, and we killed aliens in bloody masses on the flickering video screen until the high pitched whistle of the cathode ray tube hurt our ears and the nerves in the back of our eyes were sore.

Then we would fight. You and my brother grabbed pillows and plastic toy bats and anything you could find and I would fend you off helplessly with my old bruised forearms until your frustration and anger succumbed to hot sweaty numb fatigue. Then we would lie there on the floor laughing, though I did not laugh as hard as you did. You didn't need your father for a 'whooping,' you would always say.

We found an old croquet set at a garage sale up the street early our first autumn

together and you and my brother each chipped in our ice cream money to get it (plus the money you stole from your brother). We set up the hardest course we could imagine in the hilly terrain of our backyard (yours was too small and besides that you didn't want your brother hanging around); the faded croquet balls with the chipped paint made soft rustling sounds like chipmunks in the giant brown sycamore leaves when we hit them with our splintered mallets. After a long hour when I had finally passed all but the last crooked wicket and you and my brother were still four behind, you both decided to gang up on me, and in two turns you sent my black ball across the yard and into the neighbors tall chain link fence. I was so angry I cried that night when I could hide my face in my cool pillow, even though I still won when you and my brother finished laughing at me.

Our third summer together the wars began. Some new kids moved in next door and across the street from you and we planned our ambushes late at night under covers in your bedroom, peeking stealthily over the windowsills at the neighbors' houses with our hands clasped together like tiny pistols. You let your brother run 'secret' suicide missions for you now, having him sneak into the backyard headquarters of the enemy to draw their attention while we carried out our attacks. As we remained hidden behind the bushes he would come running from the gate giggling nervously and forcing a smile onto his freckled red face, with several of the dirty neighborhood kids running behind him.

One night as I laid awake on the floor of your bedroom after you were already snoring lightly, I heard a familiar yelling from next door: the muffled sound that used to bleed from your house, drowning the placid chirping of the crickets and the rush of the smooth breezes through the metal screens with a dangerous silence. The next day as we rode our bikes up and down the sidewalk (we still weren't allowed in the street because

our brothers were still too young and it wouldn't be fair), I noticed that one of the younger kids had an unfamiliar purple mixed in with the usual brown smears of dirt on his naked tanned upper body. He was guarding his territory by lying sprawled in the middle of the sidewalk in front of his house like a speed bump, and my brother accelerated down the hill towards him on his yellow rusting bicycle with the banana seat. The kid refused to move, and my brother rode right over top of him. You both laughed as the shaken boy got up and ran to his house, a giant tire mark across the length of his back, while the father just stood on the porch and glared at us. I shivered with that old fear, and that night I wrapped my pillow around my ears to keep from hearing the screams.

We invited you to our father's apartment once, after both of our mothers had remarried and moved to different parts of the county, and he let us rent the movie with the giant yellow 'family guard' star on it that you casually picked out of the adult section of the video store with my brother while I watched from the shelves of comedies. I played the video game I rented with my back turned to the television as you and my brother watched the tape when my father had gone to bed. After the movie you said it was the worst pussy you had ever seen, then you looked at my brother and winked before you ambushed me with pillows, waking up my father and the neighboring tenants. While we waited for the yelling to stop, I picked the tiny pieces of shag carpet out of the rug burns on my elbows and looked at the floor, breathing heavily and sweating harder than when we used to when we fought in our old house in Huber Heights. We never laughed anymore when our fights were over.

I saw you in a drug store a few years later. I was buying an almond chocolate bar and you were in line with a box of cheap condoms in your hand, a girl with dirty blonde

hair that I had never seen before, and that impatient look on your face that you used to get when you had to take care of your little brother. But you didn't see me and I shook my head as I handed the cashier a ripped and faded dollar bill that I had earned from mowing lawns that morning. I watched you run to your car and speed off silently into the rush hour traffic.

After dropping off your gift basket, my mother drove the long way home from your new house. When I stepped into my room and flipped on the light switch, I looked for the picture on my cork board of the two of us in front of my old house with our tiny, pencil-mustached, pebble-nosed snowman wearing the blue beret that you stole from your brother. I found it and smiled at our missing-toothed grins and our frozen cheeks, your old house barely visible in the background through the naked trees.

Our first Christmas Eve together, your mother invited our family to midnight mass and it was the only time I ever enjoyed going to church. I barely knew any of the songs and I squirmed with boredom every time the preacher spoke, but at the end when everyone tiredly rose to hug each other before we poured out into the frozen air, I watched you smile as you picked up your little brother and swung him around once before setting him down gently. And when you turned to hug me, I held the back of your ripped denim jacket and looked up at the lighted crucifix above the altar, and for the first time I truly believed.