PENTHOUSE, OR, THE BLISSFULNESS OF YOUTH

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It's the winter of 1991, December, to be exact, and we've found ourselves in a bind. We're hunkered down in a frosted ski jacket, face to the wind, on the northeast corner of Division and State. We can see the magazine stand beside a lacerated bus stop. There's a Walgreens on the corner, out of which drunken types regularly lurch—this was back before Big Pharma had taken hold and the pharmacy subsisted on liquor sales. It's 3:36 p.m., according to our watch, a shiny, faux Movado, which we bought once in New York and find ourselves continually impressed by. What's not so impressive are Gary Tanaka, Tim Sherman, and Alex Grabowski, all cowering inside of Dunkin' Donuts, half a block down, pressed to the glass, egging us on. *Go ahead*, Alex says, with that devilish smirk.

We've found ourselves becoming less popular in recent weeks—such is the gauge of middle school, that it readjusts hourly—and we have to admit that our glasses, a triple-thick, horn-rimmed, oval-shaped pair, which somehow look far more appealing on Jason Priestley, are not helping our case, although they've improved our performance in math class. If Mr. Prendergast, a wolf of a human, ostensibly an algebra instructor but more likely an out-and-out predator with a penchant for terrifying kids, were to catch us out here—he's rumored to live close by; this is later ascertained by locating his number in the Yellow Pages and ordering a dozen cheese pizzas to his home, for which he would publicly express his gratitude—he would throttle us singly. Worse yet, he'd call our folks. For whatever reason, we can live with the embarrassment of cigarettes. Alcohol, even. But this is something else. This would destroy our social standing, were it ever to get around. And yet we want the same thing that every twelve-year-old wants. The fact that two of our cohort would later turn out to be gay does not color this incident. We are twelve, and only one thing purrs in our brains.

We gather ourselves, rechecking our laces. Our overpriced Timberlands—adding a valuable half inch to our step—are still tightly tied, and our coat hood is cloaking our face. In an area where black children are routinely arrested for loitering, interrogated briefly, and dropped off on Division and Larrabee, we do not worry about the police

at the moment, nor even the authorities who man this fine shop. No, our greatest fear is the girls—dozens of them, ostensibly classmates, who inhabit the blocks all around. They would never live this down. That much is definite.

Abu, as our cohort has taken to calling him, sights us immediately as we cross Division, knuckling our pockets, eyes firmly fixed on the slush-laden ground. We're just your average eighteen-year-old out for a leisurely stroll, perhaps a quick stop at the newsstand, where we'll peruse the latest issue of *Sports Illustrated*, *Esquire*, whatever catches our eye.

Abu despises us. That much we've known from birth. We know that he despises the private school we attend, four blocks northwest, where the parents drop tuition dollars daily that would easily pay for his stand. We know he despises white folks, which we are—even Tim Sherman, who's technically black and on scholarship but dresses like a country club patron. And most of all, he despises me, the bravest of the bunch, or perhaps the most foolish, advancing, wallet in hand.

Abu slides back the Plexiglas door, coughs a little bit. His dark, whiskered face breathes in his hands. The space-heated confines smell vaguely of plastic and coffee grounds. "How can I help you?"

We look him down. Or up, as the case may be. "Just wanted to see what you got."

"Excuse me?"

It's difficult to muster an eighteen-year-old's voice. We sound like we're choking. "Can I see that *Sports Illustrated*?"

Grinning, he hands over the laminated copy, which we quickly browse. He's witnessed this drill before, and his eyes do not budge.

Ours, meanwhile, are a flurry of activity. For any twelve-year-old growing up on the Near North Side of Chicago, this darkly lit space in many ways resembles Fort Knox. We try not to glance at them, The Magazines, hanging from the wall, illuminated vaguely like spheres behind tight, sweaty sheathes of bright plastic. The cover girls, to the extent they wear clothes, bear bright pastel string tops and fluorescent thongs and do complicated things with red lollipops. This is before the era of Photoshop, and every single wrinkle is clear, every stretchmark and birthmark, every dollop of silicone sheen—even to our flitting eyes.

Yet most palpable here is the smell—that gummy smell of plastic, tinged with exhaust and cologne.

"Are you gonna buy that?" he asks. We both know the answer.

"Uh, I guess so," we say in the half-choking voice. "And you know what, let's throw this in." We gesture to a *Playboy*, which probably wouldn't be our first choice but seems the most passable. Its cover shows a glowering supermodel, Rachel Williams, swaddling herself in a fuzzy

pink carpet of shag.

"Eight dollars."

"Okay," we say, palming our wallet. Our heart nearly breaks through our chest. He's about to drop the magazines in a tall, brown paper bag when he pauses for a second, looks down at us grimly, and smiles. "Oh, and you wouldn't happen to have an ID, would you?" He pauses on the last syllable, as if relishing the effect.

"Uh, yeah," we say, trying to parry. "Let me just check in . . . here." We dig through out wallet, as if an ID would suddenly emerge. We both know how this will end. "You know what, I seem to have forgotten—"

"No ID, no sale." This is the first time that his accent is detectable, as if it were a point of pride.

"I'll give you twenty," we add.

"Save your cash and get out." His expression sours, and his hands, which have previously rested on a space heater, conjoin as he rubs his chalked fists. They're enormous and furry, unlike ours. It's unclear if he's bracing to punch us or merely regaining some warmth.

"Forty," we suggest.

"Get out."

We slink away into the cold, chased less by humiliation than by the burning sting of defeat, by the temptation of what might have been. For weeks, we will remember that smell, and that gleam in Rachel's eye.

II

It takes three more weeks before we work up the courage to do this. Wednesday, January 9, a punishingly cold winter day, even by the standards of Chicago. Our hands are solidified blocks. The backpack we lug—replete with *Introductory Algebra*, *Bonjour! III*, Shakespeare we'll never read, and a spiral-bound notebook filled with richly rendered drawings of Rachel Williams in various stages of undress—weighs heavily upon us, as do the sighs of Gary Tanaka, who is accompanying us here alone. He looks up from his cup of hot chocolate, his newly mustachioed lip wetly gleaming with steam. He actually could pass for eighteen, but for whatever reason—perceived ethnic inferiority, a nonnative accent (he came at age six from Japan), or simply his own humbleness—he's deferred to us on the mission, a mission we will now undertake. We've steeled ourselves for it. We have no other choice. Gym-class swimming has started this week, and the girls, who are mysteriously developing in places one would not have thought physically possible, have puzzled us with their frames. We've begun to detect changes in ourselves, as well, changes we cannot understand.

We've also found ourselves staying up late in recent weeks, watching *Murphy Brown* and entranced by the figure of Corky, a dazzling blonde—and Murphy's antithesis—with a penchant for high-cut skirts. We don't know what to make of our reactions, but we have a fairly good feeling the answer lies in this stand.

Sure, there are rumors circulating of what other middle schoolers have done: bases nearly circled, bras unsnapped, the grueling mono disease that Max Epstein heroically contracted. We're wowed by this, too. But it doesn't change the fact that we have a mission to complete. After all, the good channels are scrambled, and the Internet, God bless it, will not come along for years.

The smell along Division and State is difficult to pinpoint. It's vaguely redolent of pot—a smell we've been alerted to recently by staking out the alley behind Mitchell's Diner, where truant upperclassmen smoke. There's also the odor of Old Style, of which Cubs fans, newly ascended from the Division Street "L," persistently, ogreishly reek. There's also the smell of homelessness, which any Chicagoan knows. And there's the succulent aroma of Dunkin' Donuts hot chocolate, which we can almost taste on Gary Tanaka's furred upper lip, concealed, as he is now, behind the fogged window, goading us on. We feel sorry for him, frankly, growing up in an apartment that is immaculately clean, one where his tiny Japanese mother makes him take his shoes off upon entering and where she routinely remakes his white bed. Whatever curiosities we've discovered in our own bed at night do not, we suspect, inherently pertain to him. It's impossible, given his culture. And while he, courtesy of his father, will later score the first, full-length feature film, one involving climax and penetration and other acts so foreign and astounding and utterly beyond us that we cannot conceive of them, he remains at this point a mere presence, a grim force urging us on.

It's just after five. The sky has darkened redly, as it does in Chicago on the coldest days after dusk. We can hear the 36 roaring, and we fear Mr. Prendergast might be walking close behind. We begin to fear our father, who sometimes takes State when coming home from work. And most of all we fear the girls—Jessica Scott, Ellen Kasinsky, Caitlyn Henderson—visages, really, who have implanted us with their frames. We begin to suspect they're less human than walking, physical testaments to what puberty can blissfully yield. We haven't worked up the courage to talk to them—this we'll never do. But they've found their place in our soul—chiseled it, really—and what intrigues us about these magazines, these images we glean from afar, steeling ourselves to the winter, plodding, backpack in hand, is not so much the curvature

displayed on the covers, curvature we know to be fake, but the briefest hints of pubic hair, like tiny curlicued lines, a few of which sprout up furtively—sinfully, really—from the southernmost flanks of the page. One of them, a fine print journal called *Gallery*, features a smiling brunette whose hands rest coyly upon her lower navel, not unlike Botticelli's Venus, while her massive bangs stream down her arms, conveniently obscuring her nipple swells. These rivet us, too, but not nearly as much as that delectable, mysterious hair, that hair that just doesn't belong, but, as rumor would have it, was once sighted briefly in a microsecond glance stolen by Samuel Lipschitz when Claudia Mills, an ample classmates of ours, was told to display the proper form of the sidestroke while leaning on the poolside tiles. We are unsure of whether to believe him, though our suspicions continue to mount.

Now we have visible confirmation that such hairs exist, apart from the occasional glimpses of relatives and hazy recollections of childhood trips into the locker room with our mom. Still, our suspicions abound, and we seek affirmation. We don't even stop to look at Abu. We've circled the stand now, taking a back-side approach and heading directly towards Walgreens. The stench catches us at once: floor cleaner, combined with what must be peppermint schnapps—never a hard sell on Chicago's virulent streets during winter, much less in this, the party district on Rush, or, as it would later be christened, Chicago's Viagra Triangle. We find ourselves entranced by the phosphorous glare of the store, and the enveloping warmth, and wonder if we could stay here for weeks. But there are urges to attend to. And vaguely descried, glinting hairs.

We scope out our list of Possibles. The first hasn't shaved in weeks, which, even to the eyes of the untrained, strikes us as an unlikely return on investment. The second is black, and while we will later pride ourselves (falsely) on our sense of racial tolerance, there's no escaping the fact that at age twelve in Chicago, we're not up to approaching blacks—not after we've been robbed by them previously, having, in one particularly scarring childhood incident, had our basketball stolen when we offered two young passersby a shot. The third and final possibility is a woman. This is ridiculous, we know. She's in her late seventies, and there's no way she would agree.

"Can I help you," she asks, watching us examine her.

"No, thanks."

Outside the stand, we size up Abu, who hasn't yet detected us. It's then that Tanaka steps up. Whence he summons the courage is unknown, though it would later become a matter of legend in our circles. He casually strolls up to the bus stop, hot chocolate in hand, and

finds the nearest drunk, a homeless man leaning on a bench. The man's belongings—what appear to be a three-gallon jug, a crimson sleeping bag, and an actual mini-TV, whose electrical source is unclear—are housed inside a wire shopping cart. He eyes us slowly, then blinks.

"I'll give you twenty to buy us a *Penthouse*," Tanaka adds in convincing, accentless English. He glances towards the stand.

The homeless man grins. It's not clear if he's processed the remark.

Tanaka repeats the offer, upping it to thirty.

The man smells like Clorox, or bleach. "Thirty-five."

"Deal," Tanaka says and turns to me, eying my wallet. "Go ahead."

It's unclear if this deal will succeed, but it's all we have to go on, and Tanaka's nerve is propelling us. It's too late to back down. Besides, there's always the remote possibility that the homeless man will knife us, though that registers probably third or fourth on our list of arising concerns. More immediate is the 36 bus now approaching, which may or may not hold our dad.

We hand him the money. Tanaka slinks off. The homeless man gathers his coat. His eyes look like jelly beans. We're visibly afraid of the man, and yet the fear—the very fear of pubic hair—is compelling us to succeed. We've entered the dark abyss of adolescence.

The homeless man wheels to the stand, his frayed stocking cap dangling and trailed by a venomous smell.

Peering around the corner of Walgreens, we can see the Plexiglas door slide back. Tanaka's locale is unknown to us presently. It's 5:28 by our watch. An eternity has passed. If we had a cell phone, our mother would be calling us home, our father having arrived and demanding to know why he can't sit down for the brisket. But there are more important affairs at hand. Such as those of reproduction, education, release, the pinnacles of being a man.

Even if he doesn't return with it, we realize, we'll pat ourselves on the back, having braved the earth's elements and devised a respectable plan. If nothing else, it'll make a good story at gym class. Tanaka, we realize, is brave, genuinely fearless, in a manner we'll never become.

Hours pass. Or so it seems. We figure the homeless man's left, though he hasn't exited the stand yet. It's possible he and Abu are discussing kickbacks, or perusing back issues of *Forbes*. It's time to call it a night, we reflect, and suffer the wrath back home—when suddenly we detect an odor in the air, a curdling smell of bleach, combined with the smell of tightly wrapped plastic enclosing a pigment of flesh. Our heart begins fluttering, like some awful bird in our chest. We find the magazine being handed over calmly by a man who smells like death. It's possible that others in this venue are watching this exchange, though

we do not pretend to care. We know we'll never return to this store. We have no reason to now.

Outside, we sight Gary Tanaka prancing up the street, a thin smile curling up on his lips. He knows. We know. We will be famous. Now the only question is who gets to take the thing home. ■