



Who, What, Where, When

I remember being excited.
Something, finally, had happened to us

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EVERY TWO OR THREE years at our school, the teachers would turn severer and more repulsed than usual. They would tell us in sombre tones to stay away from the schoolyard fence and the brown tree-bordered field beyond the playground. A man was lurking nearby. The term our teachers used for him was flasher. This didn't sound so bad to me. To my ear, the word sounded playful and plucky. It brought to mind a sparkler on a birthday cake, fireworks, or something you might hear during a game of marbles. Our strict and anachronistic principal—who even in the mid-'90s would drag children to his office by their ears—had introduced us to marbles, chalking several pitches on the concrete slabs near the tetherball posts. Electronic devices like Gameboys and Tamagotchis had been banned. As had the ancient and more

wholesome tetherball, after a student broke his nose.

The principal commanded us to bring our own marble sets to school. At recess he would lead us like lambs to the pitches. The game introduced an embarrassing language, taught and translated by our principal. If you were serious you could play for keepsies. Marbles were called poppers, bowlers, shooters, thumpers, smashers, boulders,

The golf ball house marked the boundary beyond which we were forbidden to play.

bonkers, coshers, mashers, plumpers, bumboozers, giants, godfathers, biggies or toebreakers. A flasher sounded like it belonged with this vocabulary. Though any one of those peculiar terms might be mistaken for something ribald or perverse. Imagine the potentially

salacious uses for words like plumpers, biggies, giants, thumpers, boulders, bumboozers and bonkers.

In addition to the warning about the lands beyond the schoolyard fence, we would be sent home with a typed bulletin. It explained to our parents that one or more of our classmates had been the victims of this flasher, who was yet to be caught. I understood, vaguely, what this meant. I had been told. Not who the victims were or what, exactly, had happened to these ill-fated children. My parents would unfold and read these notices with looks of gravity and clucks of disgust. They lived apart, but my parents would get together to deliver a lecture about staying on school grounds and not going off alone. In my father's sea-green living room, the tone of these lectures made it sound as though my sister and I were the ones who had done something wrong.

The flasher was a regular-looking white man in a beige trench coat. The

thing he would do was open his coat. That's what you had to watch out for, the trench coat opening wide, like an unlatched gate. It was what happened next—after the flashing—that remained unstated and thus unclear.

For a week or two at school, rumours spread. The rumoured victims gave off an illicit sheen, glimmering with trauma and experience. If a teacher overheard our giggled whispers, we were reprimanded with more gravity and disgust, as though we too were monsters for even thinking behaviour like flashing was funny.

Often, during what was called gym class, everyone was ordered to pick up the trash fluttering in the gravel, the grass, against the school's concrete siding and chain-link fence. After collecting five pieces each, we were to line up at the mouth of the trashcan and open our fists before the counting eyes of the principal, who supervised us outdoors. Pierre was the only Black child at our school. He wore thick glasses and striped T-shirts, and he played the recorder better than anyone in class. In line for the trashcan, he held a condom up to the sunlight, its innards thick and milky. He looked perplexed but pleased.

The principal had been smiling benevolently, hands clasped behind his back. He reddened. His face changed. He moved swiftly toward Pierre.

I was nearby, waiting to show off my diligence with several granola bar wrappers, a Teddy Grahams box and a crusted Jell-O pudding cup. The principal grabbed Pierre's wrist, forcefully, the way he handled the ears of bad children.

Pierre dropped what he was holding. A tremor of confused fear rippled over his brow.

The principal called everyone over. There was something ugly and righteous and angry in his manner. We gathered in a circle as Mr. Strachan pointed at the translucent thing, spread like a slug on the gravel. He placed his hand over his heart. We were to never touch anything like what Pierre had touched, he said. The janitor, Mr.

Andrews, would come and take it away.

Pierre kicked sullenly at the gravel. He kept his eyes on his navy Velcro-strap sneakers and began humming the recorder notes to "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

I was a child who spent time fantasizing about illness and imagining my own funeral.

IT WAS NOT LONG before I encountered a flasher in the flesh. I was not alone but with my sister and our neighbours, two cousins who lived at the end of our inner-city street. The cousins were also two girls. Each lived with only her mother. Our father, too, was a single parent. Or he was during the weeks we stayed with him. At the time, he was dating the mother of Fiona, one of the cousins. I was eight, Fiona was seven, my sister and Jody were nine years old. We liked to think of ourselves as a pack of orphans.

Most of our time we spent outdoors. There was a park nearby with two hills, a stand of swaying poplars, a wooden bridge and a merry-go-round with brightly painted animal-shaped seats: a tortoise, a dog, a snail, a horse. The following summer the city would deem the merry-go-round a hazard and bolt it down, so it no longer turned. Hearing the news, my father guessed that some child had broken a limb. With its round and slippery back, the tortoise was particularly treacherous.

While it still spun, we liked the merry-go-round. But our preferred park game was hide-and-seek. Occasionally we permitted the other two children who lived on our street to join us. I was a fat and timid child, accustomed to being the victim. But Celeste had cerebral palsy. And Lance—also fat—was the kind of boy who ran home crying to his mother. Equally bad, his mother was the kind

who marched to the park and lined up everyone like criminals. Rightly or wrongly, I believed that my own parents looked with contempt upon such gross overinvolvement.

We had been repeatedly and sternly told that we were to include Celeste anytime she liked. No such decrees were issued on Lance's behalf.

"You better smarten up," Lance's mother would say. "You better start being nice to my son."

"Or what?" The bad one of the two cousins, Jody, would hold her chin high, her gaze level.

Of all the mothers I knew, I liked Jody's mother best. Her name was Sheila. Believing it glamorous, I often whispered the name to myself—Shhheila. It sounded like waves.

Shhheila was funny and warm. Her embraces were perfume-soaked. She worked in a downtown bar. More than once I'd heard my father say that Jody's mother spent whole nights away from their apartment. I'd heard nothing about Jody's father. Unlike the phony brazenness my sister and I occasionally adopted—a muttered insult or stifled snort—Jody had an aura of real wildness. Her matted hair was nest-like. Her jeans had holes in the knees, and often in the crotch. Jody did not mumble apologies during a rebuke. It seemed to me she liked trouble. I might have learned something from her. But Jody was unpopular with parents and teachers. And this unpopularity, this not being thought nice, was something I ardently feared.

About once a week, my sister, the cousins and I set up a lemonade stand on the corner of the busy thoroughfare that intersected our street. We spent our earnings on five-cent candy dinosaurs at the convenience store bordering the park. In the evenings, we were sent up the hill to the video store with a note from Jody's mother. The video store smelled of stale popcorn and cassette plastic. The clerk, who knew us by name, would sell Jody her mother's cigarettes while the rest of us squatted and crawled on the filthy

carpet to get a look under the slatted saloon-like doors of the Adult section.

At the end of our block, at the top of the hill, there was a house shaped like a golf ball. This house was somewhat famous in our city, or so it seemed to me. I would tell my classmates that I shared a street with the golf ball house. Everyone would be impressed, jealous. I often imagined what it was like to be inside the house. A place a wolf would dwell, with its cave-like ceiling and sun slanting through octagonal windows.

The house marked one side of the boundary beyond which we were forbidden to play. And it was there, near the golf ball house and not in the park, that it happened.

It was spring. The sun was bright. There were tight green buds on the branches. Shadows stretched over the sidewalk. I don't remember what we were doing—playing a game or walking to the corner or video store.

The man was white. And young, I think. His black curls fell to his shoulders and looked wet. He wasn't wearing a trench coat. He was wearing a white tank top and green basketball shorts. His arms were pink and flabby. And he didn't unbuckle any garment with a grotesque flourish like we'd been taught to expect. I don't remember him doing anything lewd like reaching down into the waistband of his shorts. I believe his face looked bored. He didn't even glance over at where we stood huddled and unbreathing on the sidewalk. His thing—that's what we would've called it then—just seemed to be there, hanging over the top of his shorts. Hanging there, a lolling tongue, bouncing with his gait.

He walked by and still did not look at us. He gave nothing away with his eyes or even a twitch of the mouth. We stayed frozen in place. It was as though we couldn't quite believe what we were seeing. Or perhaps we felt sorry for him, thinking this was some embarrassing mistake, like an open fly, only worse.

He reached the corner of the street. And there, instead of turning out of sight, he spun on his heels. Head high and gaze straight, he walked in



that business-like stride back up the same sidewalk from where he'd just come, with us silent and staring on the street's other side.

He kept walking. He did not look back.

He was a half-block away when we took off running. We ran fast and laughing, like the time we'd believed, after watching *Old Yeller*, that we'd seen a stray rabid dog.

Something, finally, had happened to us.

I don't remember anyone being frightened, at first. What I remember is being excited. My heart was beating in my throat. Normally, I was a slow mover—asthmatic and clumsy. But that day, as we ran toward home, my lungs were clear, my legs strong and quick. The air held a charged and ruptured feeling, like the crack of a bat.

Why did we run to Fiona's house? Ours was closer, if only by half a block. Perhaps it was because a mother was there, waiting inside. A mother would validate our story. And Fiona's mother was outraged. She was angrier than I had ever seen her. In her living room with its chintz sofa, ferns and picture window, we sat solemnly before her, our laughter gone, as she frowned and paced among the ferns like a tiger at the city zoo. My sister and I had visited the zoo recently, with our own mother. We had seen the tiger, striped and pacing. My sister had giggled meanly. She gripped my cheek, pulled my ear to her mouth, and whispered, "Look at the tiger's balls."

Fiona's mother asked for details: who, what, where, when, but not why. With careful furiousness she listened. Her face went red. Then, she did something unexpected and wondrous. She went to the kitchen and called the police. It was a much bigger affair than any of us had imagined. I was a child who spent time fantasizing about illness and imagining my own funeral. This turn of events felt almost like a daydream come true.

And it was there, in Fiona's mother's living room, that I felt tears on my face. Once they started, the tears seemed hard to stop. None of the others were crying. But I carried on anyway. I sat on the couch and cried and hugged Fiona's fat, three-legged lab, Taco. Wedged between the dog and Fiona's mother, I made ugly, hoarse wailing sounds. I reminded myself of Celeste.

Fiona's mother rubbed my back. The others looked away. Abruptly, Fiona's mother stood and again took up her pacing.

Later, it was Jody who suggested we climb the hill to the golf ball house. She had grown bored of hiding and seeking in the afternoon shadows. Under her matted hair, Jody's face looked flushed. She poked the edge of a hole in her jeans.

"Maybe," she said, "the man will return." ■

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