Balou's Artillery:
disturbing the hornets

A colored lady knelt to the cement walkway of a single story, brick bungalow. Her dark, limp house dress clung to a lean torso. About her head wrapped a faded red scarf. On the pavement before her, a frantic little blonde boy sat screaming. In one hand he clutched a balsa wood glider, its wing folded beyond repair. The other hand hovered about his bleeding knee.

Bobby absorbed this scene as he coasted by on his bicycle. How many times, he wondered, had he been the one to be rescued and comforted? But it was 1960, and he was eleven years old, nearly twelve–much too old to accept the ministrations of a maid. He glanced back to see the little boy being carried to the front door of the bungalow, cradled closely in dark brown arms.

At the playground a block away, three familiar boys, all seventh graders, flung tiny stones toward an unseen target in the newly leafed crown of a ninety foot pecan. Bobby accelerated his bike down the hill.

His older brother surged past. Ronnie enjoyed a fourteen month advantage in stature and strength. When Ronnie pedaled flat out on his 26 inch bike, Bobby could barely force his old 24 incher to keep up.

But Bobby rode proudly enough on the saddle of his beat up bike, newly outfitted with massive balloon tires that barely fit between the forks. Its fenders had been discarded the previous year, and its basket supports replaced by solid aluminum bars from a broken lawn

chair, enabling it to carry just about anything or anybody. It was a bike with personality, he had decided, despite its being only an American bike with one gear and a coaster brake. Unlike the flimsy English three-speeds, of which his friends were so boastful, Bobby's bike leapt up curbs and cruised down steps with ease.

Bicycles, he had learned, do have their limitations. Back in fifth grade, Bobby had been caught by the old lady at the dime store, trying to steal a fifteen cent glider, like the one just ruined by the little blonde boy. He hadn't really wanted the glider, but it had slipped so easily beneath the front of his jacket. She had ushered him out the door by his collar, warning him to stay out of her store, the only dime store within the range of Bobby's bike.

The rest of Atlanta might just as well have not existed, except on those rare Saturdays when his mother allowed the two of them to catch the Piedmont bus on Cumberland to see a movie downtown. Then, she would supplement his quarter allowance. The bus cost ten cents each way, and the matinee and popcorn at the Fox or the Lowes or Paramount finished off the quarter.

One such Saturday they roamed on foot along Peachtree all day, watching colored people carry signs up and down the sidewalk outside Rich's Department Store and Kresge's 5 & 10. Bobby did not understand their painted signs, but he clearly understood the icy words of the white men in flowing satin gowns and peaked caps who shadowed the colored pickets. So far as Bobby could remember, the only time his mother had ever slapped him in the face was when he had spoken the word, "nigger," in her presence. Yet it rolled so easily off the tongues of these angry men in satin. He waited to see a fight, not really caring who might get hurt or who might win, but all they did on both sides was walk and talk and carry signs. He had felt cheated. All that watching and waiting for nothing. Worried, white spectators said that the colored people wanted to eat at Kresge's lunch counter. The few times Bobby had eaten there, the expensive food had been flavorless and greasy. It seemed so pointless to fuss about it.

That same day, he and Ronnie mistakenly caught the bus in the wrong direction to go home. They were too engrossed in changing seats to pay attention to where the driver headed. Bobby decided that the

words, "WHITE PASSENGERS SEAT FROM FRONT; COLORED PASSENGERS SEAT FROM REAR," neatly stenciled on the interior of the bus were more of a helpful suggestion than a law. He understood it to be like the signs above the two adjacent water fountains in Kresge's. Only eighteen inches apart and fed by the same water pipe, one said WHITE, the other said COLORED. He had tried them both and they tasted the same. Besides, sitting in the back of the bus made it easier to judge which colored lady had the fattest arms. Colored passengers shook their heads at the two of them giggling in the back seat. It wasn't a threatening sort of head shake. It reminded Bobby of grown-ups watching some one else's brat throw a tantrum in the grocery store. He ignored them.

By the end of the line, the bus stood in a ramshackle neighborhood of unpainted houses in a colored part of Atlanta. Bobby thought it perfectly ordinary that a heavy, gray-haired colored lady, one who had shaken her head on the bus, would offer them two bus tokens from her tiny, black coin purse. He accepted the tokens without thanking her.

"Now don't you be tellin' your mama you younguns rode that bus all over creation. She'll blister your backsides good. Now go on. Get back on the bus." Her voice carried the authority ubiquitous to the maids that had raised him, cared for him, and wiped his butt until not so long ago.

A colored maid had guided and chided him as far back as he could remember. At the age of three, while enduring a bout of diarrhea, Bobby had spoiled his new underpants. It was a handsome pair with a front panel of bright yellow stripes. Ashamed, he had called to their maid, Jeanette, from the bathroom. Jeanette had dried his tears and whispered, "It'll be our little secret. Jeanette won't say nothin' to nobody." She had taken care of things. He had trusted her implicitly. Gratitude, however, had never been an element of that context. His needs and her fulfillment of them were simply the way things were for him.

Since his father had died in surgery nine months ago at Emory hospital, they could no longer afford the twenty dollars a week for a maid. His allowance continued, but couldn't keep pace with his

maturing expectations. Ronnie had suggested the obvious solution. For every day he skipped lunch at school, he was twenty cents richer. That sounded good, but more often than not, part of the sequestered lunch money was spent immediately after school on candy or a pickle or potato chips, something to stave off hunger until supper.

This week he had succeeded in accumulating forty cents by the close of school on Friday. He hurried to meet his brother at the bike rack, then coasted alongside him as they descended the sloped pavement to Morningside Drive. At his left, two flags clapped against their halyard—above, the new forty-nine star US flag, below, the four year old Georgia state flag. Bobby remembered that huge state flag being carried in the hands of two seventh graders into his second grade classroom. It had spanned halfway across the room. The new flag, with its bold Confederate stars and bars had clearly outdone the old Georgia flag when displayed side by side in front of the class. They had carried it in after the Lord's Prayer, immediately following "the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." Now, four years later, that same flag appeared faded and much smaller, as it flapped in fits beneath the new US flag.

He rushed up Morningside to catch his brother. A week of nutritional deprivation dizzied his head. The sacrifice had been made for the sublime pleasure of marching up to the soda fountain at Shackleford's drug store that afternoon and ordering an American cheese sandwich on toasted white, and a cherry-Coke with a double squirt of cherry. He and Ronnie smiled at one another as they consumed the delicacies. Wonderful food, it seemed to Bobby, was the most gratifying and least contentious fraternal activity they shared. The food at Shackleford's, he thought, might justify carrying a picket sign.

Their meal complete, Bobby and his brother exited the air conditioned chill of Shackleford's into the afternoon warmth of late Georgia Spring. As he straddled his bike, parked beside the bus stop, Bobby glanced across the street to the mostly deserted parking lot of the Big Apple grocery. Just a week before, crowds had gathered there to watch the itinerant Yo-yo man perform impossible tricks with a Duncan Hesitator. He had walked the dog and rocked the baby. At the

exact moment when the Yo-yo "dog" jumped between the man's legs and "bit" the seat of his baggy trousers, Bobby had realized that the way to accomplish incredible things is to see not only the stuff that everyone else can see, but the hidden possibilities, the things that no one else bothers to think of.

He glanced longingly at the forbidden dime store, two doors from Shackleford's, then turned downhill off Highland Avenue and headed for Louis' house. Halfway there, he spotted the boys aiming their stones at the tree top.

As they reached the playground, Bobby stomped his brake, throwing a spray of dust from a carefully practiced fishtail. In a single, fluid movement, he vaulted his right leg forward over the cross bar and set the kickstand with the same foot, all before either foot touched the ground. He had styled the dismount after the old cowboy movies that appeared on television early each morning. Ronnie simply dropped his bike to the dirt.

"Gaah," Louis exclaimed, pointing high up into the pecan. "Look at that!"

Bobby leaned his head back. Way up, maybe sixty feet above them, a pear shaped, paper hornet's nest the size of a basketball hung from a twig of a branch.

"You'll never hit it," Bobby observed, as Louis, Albert and Harry resumed their attempts to strike the nest with small rocks.

"Shut up, Balou!" Albert said over his shoulder.

The others concurred with patronizing smiles. They knew how much he disliked the nickname. He couldn't remember how the name had come about—something to do with a big-butt spider they had found in the woods. It certainly could not allude to the size of his own posterior, given Ronnie's corpulence and that of their cousin, Albert. But the name had served, for at least two years, as a handy lever of antagonism for the others.

His overweight and argumentative cousin always offered Bobby taunts in place of ordinary conversation. Albert also claimed Louis as a cousin. Louis was thinner than Ronnie or Albert, and closer to Bobby in height. Somehow, Louis was Albert's cousin, but not Bobby's cousin. He had never quite sorted out the logic of it. Since both Louis and

Albert treated him with equal disdain, he had determined some time ago that cousins were overrated as relatives. Harry, by contrast, was just Harry, and shorter than all of them.

As seventh graders, Ronnie and his friends ruled Morningside Elementary. Having attended the school since kindergarten, Bobby could hardly imagine any boy more prestigious than a seventh grader. He fantasized that he, as a seventh grader, would burst into the classrooms of the little kids, right after the Lord's Prayer, and show them their new flag, though he couldn't imagine what flag that might be. At present, he settled for merely being in the company of seventh graders. He understood that his tacit invitation to this group of elite was extended only because of his brother's presence. It could be revoked at the pleasure of any of them, except for maybe Harry.

While Albert and Louis were noted for many feats of audacity, Harry possessed only one source of notoriety. Harry was the only person Bobby knew who could, and would with minimal encouragement, pry the cap off a Coca-Cola bottle with his teeth. Harry's upper and lower front teeth bore graphic witness to this singular accomplishment. Harry now pitched stones toward the hornet's nest with promising accuracy, but his arm had no meat on it. The stones turned back to the playground ten or twenty feet shy of the target.

The others launched their stones with sufficient force, but they lacked Harry's accuracy.

"It's too far away," Bobby said confidently.

Without further warning, Albert spun around and shoved Bobby with both hands. "I said, shut up, Balou!"

Bobby reacted too slowly. He found himself seated on the hard-packed playground beside his bicycle. From this position, his view of the hornet's nest was partly obscured by the bare end of his bicycle handlebar. He studied the two objects, near and far. A hidden possibility! "You need a gun."

Ronnie glanced over. "A BB couldn't do anything to that nest, unless you had like a BB machine gun."

"I was thinking more like a cannon," Bobby explained.

"That's great, Balou," Louis said. "I'll run home and get one.

Gaah! You're so stupid."

Bobby scrambled to his feet. He tipped the open end of his handlebar toward the hornet's nest. "You shoot a marble at it from this."

Four scornful faces turned toward the rusting bicycle. Slowly, but simultaneously, understanding crept over them. They looked at one another with renewed enthusiasm.

"I've got some marbles that'll fit," Harry volunteered.

Without words, Louis turned and sprinted toward his house, half a block away. Albert and Ronnie followed Louis, while Harry headed to his own house a little farther down the block.

Now alone on the playground, Bobby made a solitary attempt to hit the nest with a stone. It arced toward the huge ball of gray paper, but never reached it. He noticed half a dozen tiny black objects circling near the bottom of the nest. Hornets. Won't they be surprised! He applied his strength to tipping the handlebar within its mounting bracket, then sighted the hornet's nest along one end of the open steel tube. "Bam!" He decided that a well placed shot might even knock the nest out of the tree. It should be his to keep, since he thought of the gun idea.

Harry returned first, holding five marbles. By himself, Harry always smelled like a basket of dirty clothes. Sandy hair fell about his head in ragged clumps. Without the other boys surrounding him, Harry's seventh grade bluster wilted into a cloying passivity more appropriate to his size. He held out the marbles for Bobby's approval. The cat's eye was too small, but two dark colored glassies were a perfect fit in the open end of the handlebar.

"We should shoot 'em from both ends, like a double barrel shotgun," Harry suggested.

"They don't point in the same direction," Bobby replied.

"Oh."

Louis approached, with Albert and Ronnie lumbering behind. All three displayed broad, conspiratorial grins. When Albert reached the bike, he casually held out a bottle of Coca-Cola to Harry.

"Hey, Harry, open this for me."

"Forget it," Harry replied.

"You toad!" Albert continued. "Only a Yankee would refuse."

The humiliation of being called a toad in the presence of a sixth grader didn't seem to bother Harry, but being declared a Yankee was sufficient justification for getting punched in the face.

"I'll open it if I can keep it," Harry compromised.

"Why should you get to keep it?" Louis asked.

"Because I won't open it unless I can."

"Okay," Albert conceded, "but you have to open it now."

With consummate nonchalance, Harry gripped the edge of the bottle cap with his bottom teeth and tipped the bottle as though it were in the bottle opener built into a soft-drink machine. Thhhhhoh! He spat out the cap and proceeded to guzzle the contents of the bottle through a leaking smile.

"Gyah!" Louis exclaimed. "How can you do that?"

"You're such an idiot," Ronnie added.

When the excitement over Harry's performance had waned, Louis reached into the pocket of his flannel shirt and brought out a regular firecracker, a cherry bomb, and an M-80.

"The firecracker's too small," Bobby said, "and the cherry bomb'll blow up my handlebar."

Louis tried the hefty, bright red M-80 for fit. It entered the opening of the handlebar with just enough clearance to allow it to fall in. "What are you gonna shoot out of it?"

Harry held out the two dark glassies. "One of these."

"I've got dibbs on it if it falls," Ronnie proclaimed, covetously eyeing the nest.

"We saw it first," Louis protested.

"Yeah!" Harry and Albert affirmed.

Ronnie leveled a finger at Harry. "You can forget about it. You're too big an idiot. If it falls, the rest of us race for it. The fastest one wins. Except for you." He indicated Bobby.

"Why not me?" Bobby asked.

"Cause you're an idiot too," Albert clarified.

"Don't you be messin' with no hornets!" a matronly voice called out. Across the street, a heavy, gray-haired colored lady in a tidy, brown print dress stood glaring at them, her broad arms folded across

an ample bosom. Bobby wasn't sure how long she had been there. She seemed vaguely familiar.

"We don't have to listen to you," Ronnie said contemptuously.

The others snickered awkwardly, avoiding the woman's gaze.

"Just aim it, Balou," Louis finally said.

Bobby crouched beside his bike and ceremoniously sighted along the end of the rotated handlebar. He sucked on a finger and held it above his head, then gave the handlebar a final nudge to adjust for windage. "Just don't move it when you drop the stuff in." He anchored the handlebar with both hands.

Huddled to either side of the handlebar's mouth, Harry held the dark glassie, Louis cautiously pinched the partly inserted M-80, and Albert struck a paper match. The match flared to life momentarily, sputtered in the wind, then faded into curling smoke.

"Cheap matches," Albert grumbled. He struck another one.

This time the glossy, green fuse of the M-80 sprayed a shower of reeking orange and red sparks. Louis dropped it into the handlebar and dashed ten paces to the side, where Ronnie stood poised to race for the nest. Harry hesitated a moment longer, then dropped in the dark glassie, and ran.

Bobby knelt alone beside the bike, maintaining the aim, while he clenched his teeth and squinted his eyes in anticipation. His mind fixed on a vision of a destroyed cannon in the Civil War cyclorama at Grant Park. Its artillerymen lay broken beside it—shattered caissons, dead horses. Columns of smoke rise off Kennesaw Mountain. Two seconds passed.

When the deafening rapport finally came, it was accompanied by a ten inch flame that leapt from the firing end of the handlebar, and a smaller flame out the opposite end. Bobby pulled his hands away. They felt as though he had swung a baseball bat into a tree trunk. His eyes, though, never strayed. He watched the dark glassie sail upward, striking the paper nest dead center.

A cheer went up. As Louis and Albert lurched forward, Ronnie engaged his greater strength to shove them to either side in his effort to get there first. The paper nest swayed back and forth on its frail branch, but did not fall. All that descended from the height of the

pecan was a stream of tiny, black dots.

"Aaah!" Louis cried.

By the time Ronnie had halted his forward motion and turned to flee, the other four boys were already sprinting away in four separate directions. This had become an ultimate test of speed, but since Ronnie was the closest to the tree, he became the only target of the incensed hornets.

Louis won the race, having attained the farthest point from the tree by Ronnie's first yelp. Bobby was next, followed by Harry and Albert. They all turned to see Ronnie flailing his arms as he attempted to escape. Once the hornets had made their sentiments clear, they retreated as a gritty cloud to their besieged nest. Ronnie cautiously returned to the scene of the skirmish, bearing four painful mementos on his back. The other boys converged on him to examine the livid welts rising from his skin.

"Great idea, Balou," Ronnie complained, as he wiped tears from his eyes.

"It worked," Bobby mumbled. He had never seen hornets act like that. Their retaliation was a hidden possibility he had overlooked.

Albert, Louis and Harry exchanged furtive glances and hid their smiles. Bobby dejectedly blew drifting smoke from the end of his handlebar. He flexed his throbbing fingers, wondering if the ringing in his ears would ever stop. He looked about, reassuring himself that all the hornets were returning to their nest.

Across the street, the heavy, gray-haired colored lady stood motionless, her arms still folded. When their eyes met, she shook her head. Slowly, she turned away and plodded up the long hill toward the bus stop.

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