

A Cruel, Beautiful World

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Floyd felt tired as he gazed over the south Chicago beach, watching the blue waves and white foam pull at the shore, and all the young kids playing around in the soft, tan sand that shimmered in the summer heat. He realized that his life had passed him by and he was already 43 with nothing to show for it but a mediocre job painting buildings for white folks and a lot of dissatisfaction. In his defense, it was 1919 and as a black man, he didn't have many options to choose from, but he had always felt he had more potential. Perhaps it was the leisurely activity of sitting on the beach with his longtime friends, Jerome, with his massive 6'4" frame and black t-shirt atop blue and white swimming trunks and Samuel, with his elegant self-trimmed beard and glasses that made him feel this way. After all, sitting and talking is a good reflective pastime. Floyd watched a young boy, no older than 16, splashing in the blue waters of Lake Michigan with his friends, and not 20 feet from them, he saw an identical group of boys playing. But the other group was a group of white boys, across the 29th street line that segregated the refreshing waters. He looked across the imaginary line, and the stark racial differences struck him deeply. There they were, the two groups of boys, so close, but they could never play together, for the Negro, child or not, was to shunned from all manner of whiteness. And Floyd knew that he wasn't just tired, but also angry of working for white folks and all the injustice that surrounded him.

"Why you so quiet, Floyd?" Jerome inquired.

"I'm contemplating the white man," Floyd responded somberly.

“Hell with the white man!” Jerome exclaimed. “We’re out here to enjoy the nice company of some water and some relaxing sand, and you bringin’ your thoughts of racism in here! I swear to God, you becomin’ more like Fredrick Douglass day by day.”

Jerome was always the big, loud one and he didn’t like the way Floyd was always harping about the problem of race in the city. But deep down, Jerome hated it more than anybody because he lost his wife to an Irish gang five years ago. It was too painful for him to voice consistently, so he tried to focus on just the present moment and avoid the subject. His friends didn’t even know that Alicia had died because of a gang, and Jerome preferred to keep it that way and not relive the memory.

“Honestly, he’s right to be thinking though,” Samuel said. “Look at everything that’s been happening this year. Brothers in Washington already been rioting and I think it’s a matter of time before it happens here, what with that no-good cracker mayor in charge.”

William Hale Thompson was just recently re-elected, and he was the voice of the common people. Except for the fact that he was only the voice of the white common person, and Samuel sensed that out pretty quick, being the intellectual person he was. He was also angry with it and he regarded Mayor Thompson to be the worst in Chicago’s history.

“Still, I don’t like it,” Jerome said. “All this race talks makes me nervous, like something ‘bout to happen. I’d rather be at peace.”

“Peace don’t do s--- for us,” Floyd said. “We gotta take example from Washington and start something—”

“Goddamn! We ain’t startin’ nothin’! Three old black guys from the Black Belt ain’t gonna make a difference!” Jerome exclaimed.

“That’s the type of thinking we don’t need,” Samuel said. “Although, I don’t entirely agree with you Floyd. We don’t need to do nothing. It seem as though the white people gonna start something for us. You hear about them Irish guys blowin’ up houses and blaming it on ‘the Negroes?’ They ‘bout to start a war for us, I’m tellin you.”

At the mention of Irish, Jerome’s face fell into shadow, and he leaned back in his red and white striped beach chair against the rough rock wall that led up to the rest of Chicago. He took his eyes away from the conversation and focused on the group of black boys that were near the segregation line edge. The boys had now moved to the shore and were burying one of their own in the sand jovially. As he let the sun reflect nicely off his shiny bald head, he couldn’t help thinking that Floyd was right, and that this whole race thing was a massive problem. It just pissed him off, and he didn’t like being pissed off, so he decided to change the subject.

“Floyd, why don’t you tell us a story about your paintin’? Jerome asked.

“Hmmm... let’s see. Did I ever tell y’all about Joyce Greene?”

“No,” the other two answered in unison

“A’ight, well it was when I was painting Reverend Bartholomew’s house. It was one of those cool days, know what I mean? That refreshing breeze but that nice sun warming my back, it felt good. So I’m paintin’ his house this nice shade of brown like a forest kind of brown, and I just see a lady walk in, and damn, she was beautiful. She got them vivid green eyes and fiery red hair and skin pale as the moon. But that wasn’t what got my eye, sure enough, it was the little black boy that she had with her. ‘Cept the boy wasn’t supposed to be there. Bartholomew hated Negroes and he made that plain in his sermons. I hated him but I needed the money so I was doin’ my job. The boy didn’t look a day over eight, but he looked like he had been through some s--- out on the streets. One of them homeless kids, orphaned cause their parents didn’t have no

money to raise him on or the parents died. Either way, it warmed my heart to see this white lady helping a young tattered Negro boy into her house. In fact, it caught my eye so much that I stopped paintin' to go have a look myself. She was in the big house alright, fixing him up a sandwich and some fruit. She was hurried though, and she gave the boy time to eat and then sent him away. I went back to my task until she came out of the house and I tried to focus on myself, but I just couldn't. I had to talk to her. So I went up, right, and I asked her, who is you lady and why's you helping young black children? She replied, 'I'm Joyce Greene and I'm the Reverend's daughter. And as for the reason I helped that kid – I guess she knew I saw – well, it's cause I'm tired of my father preaching his whole idea of the black man being the enemy of God. It doesn't sit well with me and seeing the poor child on the street stirred something so fired up in me I just couldn't stop. I had to help him.' I told her that she had done an incredible thing and I imparted many blessings of God on her. And so she left and I finished my painting job, but it just brightened my entire day. The way her eyes would sparkle with fury when she mentioned the state of the child and the goodness that just naturally exuded from her just touched me in the heart. That was the first time I saw her.

The second time was when I was paintin' Greg's roof, and I fell off and broke my arm. They took me to the general hospital and when the doctor came in to examine my arm, guess who it was? Yup, Miss Red-Hair in all her glory. She recognized me too and we talked some nice words. She scolded me for breaking my arm in a playful way and went on to splint it and cast it. Afterwards, now this here the part that gon make y'all jump, she ask me out for some coffee at the local sandwich shop! I said, sure, why not? And we went and I had no clue what was going on. Apparently, she was just lonely and wanted talk and grab a bite to eat at the same time. She had a feed the black homeless program going on and we talked a lot about it and about

how her father didn't approve. And, she was the only white person at the general hospital, which made me proud. It made me uncomfortable, but at the same time, it was easy talking to her, you know. And that was the first of a good friendship."

"How did we not know 'bout this friendship?" Samuel asked.

"Well, I kept it secret and told y'all it was just my job," Floyd said.

"S---, I knew you wasn't ever that productive. Now I know why you was so busy last year. You just liked your white girlfriend," Jerome said with a sly grin on his face.

"Yeah, sorry man," Floyd said. "But y'all don't know the real story. After a bunch of times of hanging out, she just disappeared. I looked all over south side for her for days, but no sign. I checked the hospital and every single street, but there was no sign of Joyce. She just vanished without a trace. So I went to the Reverend's house again, and I was just going to say I missed a spot on his wall so I could try and find Joyce, and the maid opens it. I breathed a sigh of relief it wasn't the Rev and asked her, You know where I can find Joyce Greene, ma'am? The maid got real dark all of a sudden and a pitiful, sorrowful glance just came over her face. 'Son, you don't know?,' she asked. And I told her I knew nothing. And she just broke the news. Joyce had killed herself because she had apparently fallen in love with this black man and her father got word of it. Her father was planning to send her away to their family in Alabama, and not being able to bear the pain, she took her life. The maid added that she was a silly girl, but I knew that the black man was me. And it hit me hard. I mean so hard. I was devastated. I just shut myself up for weeks and I just barely came out of that level of depression. The blackness was for real."

Floyd got real quiet and looked down at the ground after he ended the story and they all just sat in silence for a good, long while.

“Damn, so that’s why you just disappeared from us late last year,” Samuel said.

“Yeah,” Floyd said, not looking up from the ground.

“I’m sorry man, I feel you,” Jerome said.

They all faded back into silence and watched the group of black boys from earlier go back into the water. But this time, they had built a raft out of some wood and stray logs, and were planning to sail it around.

“That was sad story, Floyd,” Samuel said. “Come on, cheer up man, look at this nice view we got here. Enjoy it, be free. Jerome, why don’t you tell a cheerful story.”

“Man, that story got all the cheer right up out of me. But it made me angry. These white crackers, always messing up our lives in any way possible. Makes me want to strangle somebody,” Jerome said.

“Well, you can’t strangle nobody, so you just gotta make do,” Samuel said.

“He’s right though, it makes me sad, but it also makes me angry too. And I can’t do nothin’ about it,” Floyd responded, looking up from his sullen state.

“Maybe I will tell a good story,” Jerome said. “It started in on the west side, where I was working an away shift at the Stockyards there. There were these three goats— Ho. Ly. S---.” Jerome suddenly and slowly exclaimed.

“Look at that,” he said, pointing to just past the segregation line in the waters. And there it was, in all of its gruesome tragedy: the group of black boys who had built the raft had sailed across the waters into the white territory, and this group of white men had started throwing bricks and large stones at them. The boys ducked for cover and they soon jumped ship into the safety of the waters and started to swim away. But one remained. He couldn’t swim, so all he could do was grab on to the raft and watch in the utmost horror as a massive rock came hurtling

through the air and hit him squarely on the forehead. Blood streaking down his face, he slowly crumpled off the brown raft, his dark-skinned body breaking the surface of the water with a splash. And down he went, sinking lower and lower, until the darkness of Lake Michigan had enveloped the entirety of his figure. His friends, and Floyd, Samuel, and Jerome all watched in horror and anger, as the boy slipped from their midst. One of the boy's friends started to cry.

“WHAT THE F---?” Jerome yelled. “WHAT THE ACTUAL HELL JUST HAPPENED?” He suddenly grabbed a black handgun out of his swimming bag and started to head over to the white side of the beach.

“Calm down!” Samuel shouted as he and Floyd tried to restrain their friend. “If you go and try to kill them, you’ll just end up dead too! Stop!”

Jerome turned to them with a primal, animal-like fury blazing in his eyes, no doubt recalling the hate and sorrow he had felt as his wife was taken from him and said, “I can’t just stand here and ignore what just happened in front of my own eyes. Did y’all not just see that! They ended that young boy’s life! It ain’t right I tell ya, It ain’t right!”

“No, it ain’t,” Floyd said. “But getting yourself killed ain’t gonna help with that.”

“Look here at that police officer, what we’s gonna do is tell him what happened, and he can put those cracker-ass Negro murderers behind bars,” Samuel said.

Jerome looked as if he might just go on and kill the white men himself, but, finally, he succumbed, and they all went over to the white police officer standing on top of the rock ledge.

“Mr. Officer, sir, there’s been a big tragedy. A black boy was just stoned to death by that group of white men,” Samuel said, pointing to the murderers. “You gotta arrest them, officer, you gotta.”

Ten or so other black observers of the event came up behind Samuel, Floyd, and Jerome and they started to back Samuel up, saying that what happened was true and that the white men had to pay.

The officer just sneered however, and the amount of contempt in his eyes was remarkable. "I don't think so. But I do see a black man with a gun that he isn't supposed to have," he said, pointing at the black pistol in Jerome's hand. He briskly walked over and grabbed Jerome by the arms roughly, and force him to his knees. He then took out a pair of silver handcuffs and bound Jerome in a blink of an eye.

The mob that had gathered to quite a size now was in an outrage, and the one who was the most outraged was Samuel. His eyes showed only pure hatred for the officer, and all injustice that had been brought about in the last few months in Chicago, just all spilled up together into one, large, hot, boiling pot of anger. He picked up the black gun Jerome had dropped as the police officer was taking Jerome away and he shot it twice into the air.

Faster than anyone could react, the officer spun on his heel and pulled out a firearm of his own. And he didn't hesitate to let it fly. CRACK! A big red stain to the left of Samuel's sternum began blossoming rapidly, and he fell to the ground in a big, bloody, coughing episode. The blood watered the ground in the blink of an eye, and Floyd was soon crouched down in the pool of his friend's blood, yelling futile words of hope to him. None reached however, and Floyd grasped his beloved friend in his arms as the racial injustices of 1919 Chicago took the life from Samuel's body in the form of a single, dull bullet. Floyd watched as his Jerome left in a police car and Samuel left the cruel earth in spirit, and he felt numb.

