

# Riotous

*Tim Parrish*

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“It’s gonna break loose after the pep rally,” I told her.

“How do you know?” she asked.

“Heard people talking. My neighbor said.”

“Your racist neighbor?”

“I guess.”

“You’re not going to be in it?”

“I don’t want to be. I think I don’t.”

She clutched the small meat of her cheeks, my eleventh-grade history teacher, 1975, brilliant, twenty-two, hippie-beautiful, her face the shape of a tall thin olive. She’d said “Fuck Nixon” in class and nobody ratted her out. She was that cool. I’d smoked dope with her and her husband, a sullen encyclopedic dude. Oh, I wanted her. She wanted a doofus friend of mine. For love I’d liasoned a rendezvous for them at a crummy downtown bar that afternoon.

“You still gonna meet him?” I asked.

“Yes, I suppose.” She blinked a bunch of times.

“You don’t want me to?”

“I don’t get it. You’re married. You’re a teacher. He’s a student.”

“I don’t get it either. Any of it. It’s so fucked up. Everything.”

It thrilled me to hear her curse. I’d done speed and revved full-on frenetic, then told her because she’d been a speed freak in college. A chain smoker. The mold shatterer at our ignorant conservative Baton Rouge high school exploding with race tension, the border of black and white neighborhoods coming together like fire and match head. First day of American History she whooshed around class in patchwork prairie skirt and clicking ear rings like little mobiles, talking Jefferson and anti-war and feminism. At night I read extra, beat off and cried. At school we talked, really talked—politics, religion, rock and roll—then she wanted my misfit friend, a dorky bleached-out musician in shaded tear-drop glasses I doubted even knew how to beat off. But damn he could play. Guitar, trombone, drums, soulful attached to instrument and fluid lanky in his goofball way, and that was everything. She believed having him would give back something she’d lost in her stoned distant marriage. She was a kid like us.

She covered her ears and pressed shut her eyes. “Those drums are driving me crazy,” she said, meaning the drums they beat all-day game days atop the main building. We were the Indians.

So I went to the gym. She sat on a front bleacher, fidgeting, all angled legs and arms, fearing the riot and scanning the stage for Doofus. That fucker. I took the lowest bleacher. Two nights before several blacks had beat ass on a racist white kid and his mother at their house and duty pulled at me with the stupidity of animal mating. I didn’t know if I would fight. I had some black friends, but the baddest-ass white, he lived on my street and was my mentor.

Our pep was sheer blood fever. A dude in loin cloth and full war paint would end the rally stabbing a spear into hay as twelve-hundred shrieked. The football team sat beneath one basket, the band onstage behind them. Whites sectioned themselves in the bleachers—sophomore, junior, senior on one side—while blacks segregated themselves on the other. Plan was when the spear went in and the band struck up, the brawlers would rush the b-ball floor and get it on. It was in the air like the second before a lightning strike. Our ex-Marine Colonel principal knew, the coaches knew, the one hired cop and the gym teacher knew, but what could they stop if hundreds of quasi-men went to fight. All I wanted was to save my teacher and have her want me for saving her. Wouldn’t she see Doofus could never do a thing so heroic?

We cheered, pumped fists, heard jock exhortations to war. My only close black friend from basketball was with the team and wore the red football jersey of race neutrality, so I didn’t worry for him. Then our white Indian stabbed the hay and everybody howled as the band barrelled into the fight song. She smiled all orgasmic toward Doofus blowing his bone even though blood was about to spill, and I had to check him out myself in his ecstatic glory. Goosebumps humped up on me as he raised his horn. The male authorities strung out down the center of the gym and there was some shoving and tussling before the leaders led their troops to the exits. I stood atop the first bleacher to watch her.

When she motioned to me, I squeezed into the stream, knowing she was safe and showing her I wouldn't be summoned.

"Hey!" Doofus yelled to me from atop the stage steps as I neared the door. I didn't want to, but he wore concern, so I jostled through the white herd to the foot of the steps. "Thanks again," he said, five stairs above me, hand cupped by his mouth like he wasn't yelling. "I'm scared stiff." He grinned at his own joke.

"You'll get over it."

He glanced at the segregated crowd funneling out, frowned, shifted his trombone. "You going out there?" He knew about my neighbor.

"Yeah, I'm going," I said.

"Come to the band room," he said. I pictured my racist friend's face disapproving, not only my not fighting but, worse, taking refuge with the band.

"Can't," I said and left his other words trailing.

Oh what years of violence those were. My neighbor bragged our fights were worse than South Boston's, said Fuck those Yankee mother fuckers for getting what they forced on us, serves 'em right, and I laughed and felt his pride. I loved him. He taught me to smoke pot, hipped me in with older dudes, consoled my weakness and ineptitude with girls. That morning he'd said to me, "You ain't gonna pussy out are you? Them niggers go to his house and do that shit, they can come to yours." I said nothing. I didn't know if I was a man. My love, my teacher, she wanted a doofus and I was supposed to shed blood and raise bruises. How was I qualified?

There was no stopping it outside. The courtyard spread huge and soggy. The blacks crowded along the sidewalk, hemmed against buildings by the whites paralleling them, taunting and throwing shells put down to keep the ground from muddying. My friend took off his blue-jean jacket and slung it high into a tree's branches. I shit you not, he did, and then waded into the blacks with horrible powerful fists. He was a nightmare wonder to behold. Big with long jet dark hair and hunched shoulders and massive legs, he attacked with every part, feet hands elbows knees head. Bruce Lee and Billy Jack he idolized and he kicked ass, did damage. He was a black hater and I did not deserve him because I couldn't hate so well. When the fight erupted and bodies surged against bodies with a wail, I planted my feet and nursed my nausea. Maybe that was why my teacher wouldn't have me. I was stranded between. Not artist,

not warrior. I was bright, sensitive, athletic. Tepid year-book designations.

The horror was just getting going. My neighbor, oh how he injured black kids that day. There was wild mixing, flashing arms, body blow thuds, scuffling, a swirl, an orchestra of tumult and infliction, hundreds of people in different attitudes of fury and fright. I had been in race riots before but never one with such cinema and soundtrack. The blacks who didn't fight stampeded through the chute of cafeteria doors, while others fled up and down the sidewalk, valences of panic, people squirting from mayhem. My neighbor in snapshots: cracking jaw; kicking kid into rail; slinging slight boy across cement where others set on him like dogs. People sprinted and twirled and staggered past and around me, but I didn't move, paralyzed as I was by failure and indecision.

Heartsickness had immunized me against action, so I mooned back toward the gym, imagining she would rush out hand in hand with Doofus in search of some niche to sex away the heat of riot. He did know some things. He'd told me about Kiss, Strawbs, and Blue Öyster Cult, alien Yankee bands he saw at Independence Hall. Who were they? Their names were queer, not Skynrd, not ZZ Top, not Foghat. But he liked them and I knew they were good and that they were his because he'd found them and didn't need to act balls-out to be cool.

A white kid I knew stumbled by, mouth and nose mushed with blood. A beautiful cheerleader and other senior girl grabbed his arms and ushered him off, all crying. I wanted to rush forward and be broken, have my teacher stand over me and tend my wounds in a silly movie way, but there was the issue of courage, of not having it, and of injury, of not wanting it.

My friend was flailing and kicking now at a large dude wielding a rake comb, and black girls' faces pressed the inside of the cafeteria windows and contorted in unheard yelling. My friend's hair bounced like a curtain of crow feathers as he backed the other kid to the wall and knocked him down. He kicked the kid in the ribs one, two, three times, made him fetal, spat on him and then at the girls in the windows. I believed he would enter the cafeteria, go into that place like some cruel indomitable Olympian and brutalize them all. How I despised him and envied him his power and conviction. He was filled with hate, yes, but he'd blown me shotguns, held my head as I puked vodka, listened

to me confess my weakness and encouraged me to fight like a man. He turned and I froze to think he would see me and judge. Or, worse, expect me to act. He did not see me though, obscured as I was by passivity.

Sirens sliced the air and I unanchored my feet and walked. I would go to her room and maybe find her there, see if she was with Doofus and tell them something. I pictured them intertwined in a corner, hot with commotion, his musician's hands gripping the lean flesh of her back, his fingertips on her vertebrae like wind stops. The riot had dispersed and now the various tunes of hysteria and rage played out from sporadic battles, giddy trauma, and the injured. A white boy lay sprawled flat out on damp concrete, thrown jackets heaped on him. A black boy sprinted past, forehead gashed, pursued by two whites. The senior class president—she had shining green eyes—stormed near, weeping and cursing. The ex-Colonel principal's voice echoed from the loudspeaker for everyone to go to homeroom, then seconds later said no one should enter the buildings. My skin began to sting. Then he said both those things again.

Police rampaged through the hurricane fence gate. It was plain the glee they took in the psychosis of the day, lashing with sticks, tossing and cuffing kids. Amazing too how quickly twelve hundred had scattered and cleared, leaving those enacting vendettas and grief the choice now to stay or flee the law. A helmeted cop with shotgun sprinted way. I booked toward her room.

I'd been coolest in her eyes, was asked to her apartment for supper, a tiny space stuffed with art and books and records and drapes. Her husband, hidden behind beard and Lennon specs, rolled perfect joints, entered our stoned chat just to cut through it all, clarify, box things up. I could see how his mind would hem you in. In class she'd first loved me when I named *Guernica* and Picasso, the only Picasso I knew and I didn't even know how, its angles of destruction and terror embedded in me for some future familiarity. I'd puffed up, so smart, so proud, but that night I knew her husband could go to the garage and build a *Guernica* from scraps, could dissect cubism to simple geometry. No wonder she loved him. He knew more.

At evening's end, her husband shook my hand, told me drive safe, me, a sixteen year old. She walked me to my car, parking lot streetlights yellowing us like THC made beamish. I was high, real high, their dope

much much more than the Mexican we doobied in strawberry papers. I expected nothing, but my brain had already travelled over everything: Why was I here? Had other kids been here? Did she spark between her legs for me like I did for her? I licked my cotton lips for a woman's kiss, but she lit a cigarette and crossed her soft boots, glanced at the overcast citylight sky somewhere between sun and moon. Tears came to her. She told me she wanted Doofus and could I help. Yeah, I said, yeah. She hugged me. A block from their house, I pulled over and rode the spins until the street settled, then rawed my throat with screaming. At my neighbor's house he shook his head, slapped my back, and said Bitch when I told him. He bought us beer, took me cruising and garbage-can knocking till after 1 A..M. Said again, Bitch. That was a friend.

I slammed through the heavy door and into the hallway, dark as oil and glinting with dim window light off lockers. Fifty yards it stretched and there was no one and only distant yells and siren echoes and the lights dead things that stuck my feet and made me squint. Her room was a floor above and I didn't know about that, what I wanted, or about anything. My mind could see them fucking, Doofus's lips on her breast, and I staggered like the black kid with gashed brow and stared at the floor slick with spots. A feeling was spinning upward in me and it was coming through my eyes. Those spots and spatters. Liquid. Ah, yes, I saw. Blood, all blood, a trail dripped the length of my school, its hall twilight and stained before noon. My friend out there savaging. She and Doofus where, doing what? Me smearing through blood alone.

A door banged somewhere and lockers clanged with raised voices. I stalked, skulked—what did I do?—into a stairwell and up. More blood, no not more, the same amount, here a puddling greater, there a smattering lesser, but yes, more in total quantity. It smelled, I swear now and knew then, coppery and rich above the antiseptic and rank of school. The emotion continued its expansion—rage, revulsion—impossible to exactly name, but it moved my feet.

On the second floor there were white kids, not bleeding, clustered and huddled as if conspiring. They saw me and my complicated moment hunching me like an apeman and when they didn't speak I screamed at them so that they stared as I passed. No longer was I sure I'd find her or Doofus and fear settled with me a second to consider they were injured. Oh, that brought

cold to my limbs, then narcissism to my heart. Who would I be without them?

Her door opened and her face was white in the hall's gloom. Two big feelings tugged me in opposite directions, then she had my arm and pulled me inside. Her classroom was unchanged, an insult: the desks in rows, maps bold in color, the globe still round. Four girls and three boys sat grouped, Doofus with towel pressed to brow. Her fingers gripped my arm as she closed the door behind me.

"Tuba injury," Doofus said, and smiled, another insult. "Got crazy in the band room," he joked, controlled, understated, disregarding of what was on my soles, of the cops and battering all around.

"Sit down," she said, and placed me in a desk right by the door, my pulse driven from my head and all in my guts. "Are you all right?" she asked and I nodded. "I saw somebody I thought might be dead on the sidewalk," she said, whispery, breathless, conspiratorial, her fingers working. "There was a tennis shoe with blood specks all over it in the middle of the courtyard." She paled and touched two fingers between her sparkling eyes.

"Yeah," I said.

"I thought you might be hurt," she said, "so many people got hurt. I wanted you to walk me from the gym. I hurried back here."

"That's good," I said.

"We were worried when you didn't show," Doofus said.

"It was horrible," she said. "Were you in it?" Her cheeks were rosacea again as she leaned in.

"No," I said, and she gave a small, "Oh," a girl's disappointment and confirmation of all that was high school. She leaned so close I smelled smoke. "I'm sorry," she whispered, and I didn't know for what all. She nodded and strained like she was about to cry. Doofus shrugged.

My fantasies of her were always permutations of this: She alone at her desk, late afternoon, the light diffuse and dusted with absence, a wash of orange on her hair and the papers over which she hunched. Enter me from the silent hall. Slowly, as if in anticipation, she turns her head, then stands, places her pen diagonally across an abandoned essay. "You're here late," I say. "Catching up," she says. I cross the gray tile to her, there in her orange and green hippie skirt, in her sleeveless black blouse, a turquoise necklace bright against the

pale of her chest's V. I do not hesitate, emboldened as I am by the freedom of fantasy. My fingers part her strands, my lips touch hers, soft and tasting of coffee. I slide the straps of her blouse down her skinny arms, reveal her small breasts and dark nipples. She moves me aside, strides over and locks the door, lifts the map of America from its holder above the blackboard, spreads its quilt of colored states on the floor, its roll of unfurled maps a pillow. She watusies from her skirt to her bikini panties, instructs me to undress, my teacher again, then there we lie in the quiet of an emptied class, my Civil War diorama our only witness.

That afternoon, though, she straightened and touched my shoulder. I almost took her in my arms, almost embraced her in truth and sadness of melodrama, or probably not. She sat across from me and rubbed her temples, her fingers slender probing, her neck a long thing my tongue wanted, her fine hair draped aside by her tilted head. And I knew that she would not meet Doofus or me. No, she would stretch on her soft couch with plants crouched in corners and light a joint. And she would think of Doofus, and me, and maybe violence while the soft haze gathered with the evening.