

## THE COLOR WAR

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It wasn't that Raymond Willis had anything against the Lord, but he knew as sure as he knew that he was nine years old that he wasn't a child of God. *Made in His image* – that's what they said at Sunday school, but it was a lie. Jesus was the Son of God, and Mary was his mother, and neither one of them had Raymond's skin; or his eyes, which burned like coal.

“It ain't necessarily that way, Raymond,” his grandmother had said when he told her this truth. “You been looking at the wrong pictures.” She got up off her chair and put aside the quilt she'd been patching forever, because she got distracted by her game shows. She walked into the kitchen and crossed the linoleum floor, even the part that scared Raymond because it rose like a bubble of gas or maybe a ghost was trapped beneath it, and dug through a drawer. Finally she found what she was looking for. “See, child?” she said, holding out a framed illustration that looked like it had been ripped from a book. In it, a man was being crucified – a black man with an Afro – and up above, floating in the vicinity of the sun, was the fading face of another man, His brown skin standing out in relief from his snowy beard.

“That ain't Jesus,” Raymond said. “Jesus got hair down to his shoulders.”

His grandmother had laughed. “When you ever seen a man like us that got hair down to his shoulders?”

Raymond had known better than to argue with his grandma, who was as old as the earth and who got to church an hour before the service as if Pastor Dumont was going to be giving out the new iPhone instead of just another boring homily. So he kept going to Sunday school and church, knowing he understood something that everyone else seemed to have overlooked, waiting for his own personal opportunity to meet God and say, square-in-His-eye, “I told you so.”

The only person he told about his hunch was Monroe. He and Monroe had grown up together in Dorchester, playing in the streets when the summer made the asphalt breathe and their laughter bounced like a tennis ball off the high brick walls of the apartment buildings. Monroe had been one for adventure, and Raymond always had his back. They’d spied on Monroe’s older brother, crawling through the HVAC system and eavesdropping through the heating vent. They’d hopped the turnstiles to get onto the T and had ridden it all the way to Wonderland, which did not live up to its name. They had gone gallon smashing at the grocery store.

But that was in April, when Monroe was still here. It was almost July now, and with school out, there was nothing for Raymond to do except wonder about the color of Jesus’ skin and watch his grandmother snore

through Wheel of Fortune. What he needed was a new best friend; what he wanted was his old one.

“Raymond, baby?” At the sound of his mother’s voice, Raymond ran into the hallway. Their apartment was painted bright yellow, as if that could make up for the water stains on the ceiling and the rust ringing the pipes. Raymond’s mother had been born in this apartment, and as she said, she’d probably die there. She swept Raymond into her arms. Even though she was wearing her green cafeteria uniform, even though she smelled like the bubbling oil from the fryer, Raymond thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world. She worked six days a week at the hospital, since her income was the only one in the household. If Raymond had a father, he’d never been mentioned, and – truth be told – he liked not having to share his mother with someone else.

“What did you do all day?” his mother asked, her smile as fragile as the crumbling edge of a cliff.

Raymond was afraid to tell her. Not because of what he’d done, but because of what he *hadn’t*. He knew it made her sad, hearing that he didn’t go out to play basketball with the other kids – but how could he, when every time he dribbled the ball he remembered how he and Monroe once managed to sneak in a beautiful pass and a lay-up against the two biggest kids in the third grade? Still, he didn’t want to tell his mother that he spent most of the

day in front of the window fan, repeating Pat Sajak's words, because he liked the way his voice sounded as if it belonged to someone else.

Her smile flickered just the smallest bit, the way the TV did when too many people in the building were using their fans and air conditioning units. But just as quickly, she turned to Raymond again. "I've got some news, little man," she said, taking his hand and leading him to the living room where his grandma was still watching television. She leaned down to kiss his grandmother on the cheek and toss her a pack of chewing tobacco – her only vice. Then she settled Raymond on the couch. "You," she announced, "are going to summer camp."

At this, Raymond went still. "Summer camp," he repeated. The words felt like stones on his tongue. He didn't know anyone who went to summer camp, not from his neighborhood or his school.

"Bible camp," his mother said. "It's like Sunday school, only better." She didn't tell him it was a Christian charities camp, run by a collection of Metro West pastors and staffed by rich white kids looking to pad their college applications. She did not tell him how, those three weeks he was gone, she'd be staring out her window at night with her hands pressed to her mouth, willing her son to be thinking about her.

She cupped her hand around Raymond's cheek. "You'll get on a big bus," his mother said. "And you'll go out to the mountains with a bunch of

other kids from the city. You'll get to ride horses, Raymond. And play basketball, and swim."

Horses scared Raymond, with their long yellow teeth; and he could play basketball right down the street in the empty lot, as long as the older kids weren't meeting up there to do their business. "Swim where?" he asked.

"I don't know, honey," his mother said. "Some lake, I guess."

Raymond thought about last summer, when he and Monroe ran through the streets and splashed in the spray of the fire hydrants the town had set gushing. Once, after begging his mother for weeks, he had gone to the metropolitan free pool, but it smelled like piss and he didn't ask to be taken back.

"I like it here fine," Raymond said.

His grandmother snorted. "That's just why you ought to leave."

"You'll make so many new friends," his mother pleaded.

Raymond looked around at the faded blue walls of the kitchen, at the wrinkles on the backs of his grandmother's hands, at the way his mother's eyes were asking a question, even though her words had just been a plain old sentence.

He thought of Black Jesus, reaching out his hand to Black God, almost touching. He thought of how, at one bodega, he had tossed two

gallons of milk in the air like Monroe had taught him and pretended to take a whopping fall, smacking onto the floor. The store manager had rushed over to make sure he wasn't hurt, and then had given him a candy bar to keep him from crying. He remembered that as he walked into the splintered sunshine, Monroe had been waiting, having seen the whole prank. "8.5," Monroe had said. "You get points for the tears, but your technique needs work." He remembered breaking the Snickers bar in two; giving Monroe the bigger half.

"All right," Raymond said to his mother. "I'll go."

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Camp Konoke was really a Christian retreat in the heart of the Berkshires, where – as one of the overseeing pastors said - God liked to come for His vacations. It may have been true – the velvet slopes of the mountains were dotted with wildflowers, and tucked into the valley was a lake as blue as a jewel. For three weeks each summer, kids from the inner city in Boston were given the blessings of fresh air and sunshine. With the exceptions of morning prayers and evening vespers, there was little to distinguish Camp Konoke from any other New England camp, except for the nearly uniform contrast of white counselors to the campers-of-color.

They weren't all African-American, like Raymond. There were Latino kids and Hmong and Chinese, too. Raymond's mother had dropped

him off early at the Port Authority, with a package of oatmeal cookies and a picture of the two of them taken at Christmas to put next to his bunk. “Don’t you get poison ivy,” she warned, and she started to cry, although she was the one who had organized for Raymond to go in the first place. Raymond wanted to tell her he would be all right but he couldn’t, because of the sadness swelling in his throat.

No one chose to sit with Raymond on the bus. Behind him were two Latino girls, twins, who were chewing their way through a Superpak of Wrigley’s. When a piece of gum had lost its flavor, the twin would pull the wad from her mouth and toss it over Raymond’s head to land in the trash can next to the bus driver. Someone in the back of the bus was wearing Beatz, his music turned up so loud that the hammer of rap music throbbed over the roll of the bus wheels.

The man sitting in the seat across from Raymond leaned over to ask his name, which made Raymond angry because *he* remembered the man’s name – Reverend Helm – and it had only been ten minutes since they’d all had to go around the bus and say who they were and which church they went to. “Well, Raymond,” the pastor said, “I bet you’ve been looking forward to this for a long time.”

“No,” Raymond replied. “I only just found out I was going.”

The reverend was a thin man, completely bald, with a peeling sunburn on the bridge of his nose. “How lucky you are, then,” he said, not missing a beat.

“Luck is for sinners, not saints,” Raymond said, something he’d heard fall from his grandmother’s lips countless times. He thought of her smooth pink palms, running over the edges of her quilt as if she could measure just by touch. He thought of how, when he was out on the street, he would hear his grandma’s voice, swooping and diving like a kite, and he knew she was in the bathroom with the tiny window open, scrubbing the cracked porcelain sink and singing her psalms. Suddenly Raymond was seized by a cramp that snaked around his belly and crept north, taking root in his heart. He looked outside to see fields of wild daisies lining the highway, big open spaces crammed with nothing, and he knew without being told that this was the ache of leaving home.

Raymond slept for most of the ride. He dreamed about the best day of his life, which was really a night – last New Year’s Eve, when he and Monroe had sneaked onto the T and into the world that wasn’t theirs. You’d think, given that they were only a few miles from the Prudential Tower, that Boston was familiar, but to Raymond it was as faraway and exotic as Tibet. There were times when the gangs were out in Dorchester that he wouldn’t even walk a hundred feet down the block to visit Monroe, much less venture



all the way to Copley Place. The people who lived and worked downtown worried aloud about things like the cost of parking and who was going to be elected mayor. Kids like Raymond knew that you only had time to worry if you weren't busy actively trying to stay alive.

The night had been Raymond's grand plan. He would tell his mom that he was sleeping at Monroe's, and Monroe would tell his mother he was at Raymond's. Instead, he and Monroe sneaked onto the Red Line and stared at the drunk prep school kids, puffed up like rainclouds in their parkas, weaving back and forth as they passed bottles of Jagermeister. He poked Monroe when a bearded man wearing a dress and high heels sat down across from them. Finally, he pulled Monroe off the train into the glittering hum of the Park Street station, up the escalator that belched them into the slush of the Boston Common.

Surrounding Monroe and Raymond was a sea of people – more white folks in one place than Raymond had ever seen in his lifetime. A tangle of lights, red and emerald, were woven through naked branches. Off to the left was the huge Christmas tree that Raymond had seen lit on the news, and somewhere in the distance was a weird buzzing that made him think of being in the dentist's chair. "We should go," Monroe said, jerking his chin at the knot of cops that was standing a few feet away. Monroe had police radar; he always knew when they were coming and in fact sometimes acted as lookout

for his sixteen-year-old brother when an Oxy deal was going down or when they were in TJ Maxx and the cops followed them, as if it was only a matter of time before they did something bad.

Suddenly Raymond thought of his teacher from last year, Miss Jenkins, who brought in a real live chameleon as the class pet. She showed them how, when it wanted to pretend to be part of the forest, it turned green as the leaf it was sitting on. When it wanted to blend in with the desk, it turned brown. "I have a plan," Raymond had said, and he drew Monroe into the throng of grownups, moving to their rhythm and laughing as if he understood their jokes.

The buzzing turned out to be chain saws. For a moment Raymond stood mesmerized by the machines, by the chips of ice thrown like sparks when the artist touched the saw to the edge of his masterpiece. It was a contest. Everywhere Raymond looked there were sculptures, in various stages of completion. Huge rectangular blocks of ice were stacked, melting into each other to form a wall of ice seven feet high. The big cuts were made with the chain saws; the final touches were done with a chisel or awl. Some were already finished, lit from behind with recessed bulbs in eerie aqua and milky yellow. Raymond and Monroe walked in wonder between a gryphon and a mermaid; past a pair of entwined lovers and a monstrous turtle.

Raymond was so engrossed in a life-size medieval castle, complete with turrets and flying ice-flags, that he didn't notice when Monroe disappeared. When he turned to push Monroe along and found him missing, he panicked. He called his friend's name, but his voice sank into the sponge of the crowd. He tried to see around the sculpture, but he was too small. He scrambled onto an unused block of ice. "Monroe!" he yelled.

The chain-saw artist was leaning against a tree, smoking a cigarette. "You lose your daddy?"

"My best friend," Raymond said.

The artist lifted Raymond onto the second story of the ice castle, so that he was perched in one of the turrets. He braced his bare hands on the wall, even though his skin stuck to the ice. Below, people pointed and took pictures with their cell phones, but Raymond didn't notice. From this vantage point he could see halfway across the Common. He could see the gazebo and the entrance to the T station. He could see the edge of the skating rink. And he could see Monroe.

His best friend was kneeling in front of an angel made of ice. Her wings brushed the stars; her eyes were blind and beautiful and terrible all at once, like marble statues Raymond had seen pictures of at school. Raymond climbed down from the castle and ran to Monroe. This ice sculpture was not lit with bulbs, but still seemed to be glowing. *You found me*, Raymond

heard, but didn't know if it was Monroe who spoke the words, or that angel, reflecting the moon and casting him a hundred shades of white.

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Raymond woke and found the bus empty, except for the angel. "It's about time," she said, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "I was about ready to give up on you."

She was a dream, but she was here; and she didn't look cold and forbidding anymore. Still groggy with sleep, Raymond touched one finger to her cheek – expecting ice; expecting her to vanish.

She didn't. Her skin was smooth and soft and so pale it looked like the glass of milk his mother made him drink with his breakfast every morning. The angel leaned forward and touched her finger to Raymond's cheek, too.

Raymond sucked in his breath. "Do you know Monroe?" he asked.

Her eyebrows drew together, making a small crease. "Not yet," she said. "Is he another camper?"

That's when Raymond remembered where he was supposed to be, and that this wasn't his angel. He began to notice more about her, embarrassed that he had been dumb enough to think she was heavenly, when she was just a girl. She had freckles over the bridge of her nose; she smelled of lemons and clean laundry. He sat up straight, looking out the windows for

landmarks he didn't know. "It's okay," she said. "I'm Melody. Everyone else went off to find their bunks but I didn't want to wake you up. You were sleeping like a baby."

Raymond bristled. "I'm not a baby," he said. "I'm nine."

"I'm sixteen. I'm a lifeguard." Then Melody smiled. It hit Raymond like an unexpected patch of blue sky on a weekend forecast to be 24/7 rain; and that was about when he fell in love.

Melody walked him back to the little cabin he would be sharing with three other boys and her cousin Matthew – Raymond's counselor. She kept up a steady chatter as they walked, telling him that the best part of the camp was the lake, which felt like a sinkhole when you first walked in but bottomed out to sand if you stuck with it; and that the worst part was Bad Weather Days, when they had to sit in the auditorium and watch movies about being Good Samaritans and Jesus' early life. "Here you go," she said, and Raymond was caught in the web of her voice for a moment before he realized they were standing in front of the door to a cabin, where the other boys and the counselor had already picked out their bunks. Raymond's mouth went dry. He waited for Melody to say something or introduce him or make him seem like any less of an outsider, but when he turned around to look at her, she was already gone.

Lamar and James were from Roxbury and knew each other before they got to camp. They lived for basketball and quizzed each other about which player had the highest career player efficiency rating (Michael Jordan) and whether it was Chris Ford of the Celtics or Kevin Grevey of the Bullets who made the first 3-point-shot in NBA history. Winslow came from Jamaica Plain and was so big for his age he'd nearly been placed with the older campers. They sat on their bunks while Matthew explained the routine at Camp Konoke. "By the time you leave here," he said, "everyone in this cabin is going to know how to swim, how to sail a Sunfish, and how to get a bullseye." He smiled at James. "Have you ever shot a bow and arrow?"

James looked up. "You ever shot a gun?"

Once, Monroe's older brother Deshawn had let him hold his P380. Raymond could remember scratching his nail against the grooved metal where the serial number had been filed off. At the time he'd felt like he was holding lightning in his hands, like if he let out the breath he was holding the trigger would go off. Now, when he thought about that gun, he just wanted to throw up.

Raymond shook his head. Beside him, Winslow pulled a penknife out of his sock and began to pare his fingernails. Matthew blinked once, and then turned to the other boys. "We've got a camp meeting in ten minutes," he said. "Who needs to use the latrine?"

Raymond was the last boy out the door. He was wondering if and when he would be seeing Melody again, and he was concentrating so hard on remembering what her skin had felt like, that he almost didn't notice Matthew slipping a hand into Winslow's duffel and confiscating the knife, with no one the worse for wear.

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He saw her once, walking across the empty archery field behind Reverend Helm during the opening address to campers. He couldn't be sure it was her, not with the half-dozen lifejackets looped around her neck and the kickboards stacked in her arms, but his body started doing crazy things – his pulse hammering and his palms sweating and before he knew it he was standing on his feet when everyone else was sitting, and the reverend was asking if he had a question.

“No, sir,” he muttered, and he sat down, all the heat in the world flooding his cheeks.

The counselors played pranks on each other. Someone put toothpaste on the toilet seat. One of the girls turned on a blow dryer and baby powder exploded in her face. Matthew went to put on his socks one morning only to find the toes cut off, so that they pulled up over his knees like leg warmers. Raymond didn't understand why, if you were lucky enough to have a friend, you would try to make him look like an idiot in front of everyone else.

He asked James as they were getting ready for bed that night. “Why do they think that stuff is funny?”

James answered a question with a question. “Why do they think we want to go to this stupid camp?”

Raymond considered this. “I guess it’s supposed to be like a vacation.”

“The problem with vacations,” James said, “is that you still got to go back home.”

One night, Lamar got homesick and cried when they were toasting marshmallows. Matthew told them he was going to a place called Trinity College in the fall and showed them a picture of girlfriend Susannah, who led the younger girl campers and who looked a little like Melody. At nine o’clock – lights out – Matthew coached them in their prayers. They lay in the darkness for several minutes, keeping time with Lamar’s sniffing, and then Matthew asked if they wanted to hear a ghost story. Raymond curled up under the covers, scared by the image of Matthew’s pale face in the reflected glow of a flashlight. He listened to Matthew spin a story about a man named Ichabod Crane, and a Headless Horseman who wouldn’t stay dead. In the silence that followed, Raymond waited for someone else to take the first breath.



James' voice broke the spell. "That the scariest story you ever heard?"

"Just about," Matthew said.

Raymond could hear James roll over in his bunk. His words were muffled by his pillow. "You should try hanging on Blue Hill Avenue with me," he said. "We got stories to last you a lifetime."

The next morning, when the boys went to the latrines to shower, the water streamed purple, orange, red – a tacky, sweet mess that splattered Raymond from head to toe. "Damn," Winslow said, as some of the spray hit his mouth. "It's raining Kool-Aid."

Raymond looked over at Matthew, who had been the target of the prank. His skin was painted like a rainbow, the perfect canvas. Raymond looked down at his own chest and belly. The colors were harder to see against Raymond's skin, but he could feel the stickiness and taste the sweetness in his mouth.

Matthew turned off the faucet and unscrewed the showerhead, which had been jammed up with the powdered mix used to make juices in the mess hall. "Not cool," he yelled out the window, to the girl counselors who were outside waiting to hear the reaction to their night's work. But Raymond noticed he was grinning while he said it.

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At Camp Konoke, Melody taught swimming to beginners. Raymond figured this out from the locker room, watching her through a cobwebbed window as she demonstrated how to make bubbles through your nose. So when Matthew asked them to raise their hands if they knew how to swim, Raymond didn't move a muscle, even though he knew the front crawl and the breast-stroke.

He stepped into the lake, letting it lap at his ankles. He felt a little sick to his stomach, and he knew it was because he had lied, but then again hadn't his mother told him to make friends at camp and wasn't that what he was doing? "Raymond!" Melody said, remembering him, and he smiled. "How many of you can hold your breath for a count of three?" she asked, and when they all said they could she dared them to do it. Raymond held his breath for five counts, just to show off.

He was careful not to look like a good swimmer, because he didn't want to get bumped into the higher-level group, which was taught by a boy with a birthmark on his shoulder that looked like a sunburst. So Raymond sank a little during his dead man's float and he swallowed water several times on purpose. Then Melody waded toward him, picking him out of the group of six to be her guinea pig. She stood behind him, modeling the windmill of the freestyle stroke, her hands each covering one of his and her

breath falling on his ear. “See?” she said. “Over, then through. Over, then through.”

Raymond followed her gaze as she watched the next group of campers arrive for their swimming lesson. “That’s for today, guys,” Melody said. “See you, Raymond.”

“See you,” he replied, realizing for the first time at that moment how cold the water in the lake really was.

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Without knowing how it happened, Raymond became accustomed to the sound of starlings waking him up, instead of cars and sirens. He learned how to saddle a horse and how to tie square knots for rigging. The backs of his hands and his cheeks became sunburned. He relearned the front crawl and with Melody’s help he swam longer and faster than he ever had before.

Raymond looked forward to the three days of the week when he had swimming with Melody. On those days, he was the first one out of his bunk; he walked a little more purposefully from activity to activity. He spent the time he wasn’t with her dreaming of the moments he would be.

The other kids in his cabin noticed. Matthew gave Raymond the nickname *Phelps*, after the legendary swimmer. Mrs. Knott, who treated him for his swimmer’s ear, said she was pretty sure he was growing a fin. Only James seemed to notice that this was about more than just swimming.

One day as they sat in a steamy tent, weaving bright yarn around popsicle sticks to make God's Eyes during Arts & Crafts, James grabbed Raymond's out of his hand and held it up to his chest, along with his own – a makeshift bikini top. "Lookey here," he sang. "I'm Melody the Mermaid."

Raymond yanked his ornament away from James. "Cut it out," he said, fierce.

"You defending your *girlfriend*, Raymond?" James laughed. "Like some kind of white knight? Oh, wait, that's right. You *black*."

"Shut up," Raymond grit out. He looked to the edge of the tent, where the counselors were gossiping over a magazine. He could go to them for help, but that would make this an even bigger deal than it already was and Raymond just wanted it to stop.

"You ain't nothing special to her," James said. "You just the charity flavor of the month. Next week, she might rescue a kitten from the SPCA instead of you."

"She's helping me with my swimming."

"Yeah," James said. "Is that your ticket out? You gonna swim yourself right off the streets?"

Raymond lifted his chin. "Maybe I will. There are tons of brothers who are famous athletes."

"Name one swimmer," James said.

Raymond couldn't. "Just 'cause I don't know one doesn't mean it don't exist."

James looped some red yard around the crossed sticks. "You believe that," he said, "and you an even dumber nigga than I thought."

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On Wednesday, when his cabin had swimming as their final afternoon activity, Raymond helped Melody stack the kickboards and water wings in the supply shed. Usually the other lifeguards left, in a hurry to shower or to make it to the cafeteria before the red Jell-O was gone. But if he started talking, Raymond could get Melody to stay a little longer.

"You're quite a swimmer, Raymond," she said one day. "You're going to the number one pick for the Color War swimming relay next week. Either you were lying to us, or I'm a better teacher than I thought."

Raymond, who was unlacing buoys, hesitated. "Are there people who get famous because they're swimmers?"

"Sure. I mean, everyone knows Michael Phelps. And there's a woman, Diana Nyad, who swam all the way from Cuba to Florida."

Raymond had no idea if that was a long distance. "I mean people," he said, "like *me*."

She blinked. "I...I don't know." Her face looked funny – pinched tight - and she grabbed a string of buoys and carried them toward the shed.

Raymond did the same, following her, and before she could offer to help he hung the string on a hook high over his head. By the time she turned to him again, she looked normal – bright and open. Raymond thought that if Melody had to be a time of day, it would have to be *morning*.

“How I get so lucky to have a helper like you?” Melody asked, locking up the shed, and stringing the key around her neck. She walked to the edge of the wooden dock and sat down, her legs stretched in front of her, staring at the horizon. When she saw Raymond hesitating, she patted the spot beside her.

Raymond sat down and gathered up his courage. “Can I ask you another question?”

Melody smiled. “You bet.”

“Where are the white kids?”

She stared at him. “What do you mean?”

“All of us campers, we’re not like you.”

“Skin color doesn’t make you different,” Melody said. “We’re all the same on the inside.”

“The only people who ever say that,” Raymond replied, “are white.”

“Don’t you like being here?” Melody asked. “Isn’t this better than what you normally would –“ Her voice broke off, like a branch snapped during a storm. Her cheeks flushed pink and she looked into her lap.

Raymond didn't know what to do. He hadn't meant to say anything wrong. He thought of the way during swimming today, they had worked on opening their eyes underwater. You'd think that with all that wet around you, you wouldn't be able to see, but it wasn't like that at all. The light came in sideways and you could see everything floating and in slow motion. Melody's hair had become a pool of silk, and her eyes were alive when she held up a few fingers to quiz him. *Three*, he had gasped, bursting through the surface, and for a moment everything had been blurry and loud and he'd wanted nothing more than to sink below the water again, and have Melody send him another secret sign.

Now, Melody's mouth was set in a straight line. "Sometimes I say stupid things," she said. "Don't pay attention to me, Raymond."

"How come you're here?"

She hugged her knees to her chest. "Matthew's been a counselor for a couple of years, and he likes it a lot. I guess I wanted to do more with my summer vacation than what my friends do – you know, like hang out at the pool or the mall. The Bible says it's better to give than receive."

Raymond's grandmother told him that, too, sometimes. He thought of his grandmother, and of his mother, who had just wanted him to *talk* about what happened in April, as if that would make it better. But to say it out

loud only made it more true, which was why he could almost not believe what he said the instant he said it. “Do you want to know,” he asked Melody, “how come I’m here?”

#

It was April, the first really warm day of the spring. Monroe and Raymond were walking home from school, dodging the soupy patches of melting snow and dog poop. Raymond had his coat off, tied around his waist, even though he knew his mother would kill him if she saw him and would tell him he was asking for a cold.

They had just reached the playground, where a concrete wall had an inspirational mural painted on it: REACH FOR THE STARS! But the word “stars” was cramped, the second “s” hardly readable, as if the impossibility had crippled the painter and the message he was sending.

Raymond and Monroe were talking about who would kick ass in a fight, Batman or Daredevil. “Daredevil is so badass,” Monroe said. “He’s got supersenses and Batman’s just a guy in a cool suit.”

“Batman’s got all that special stuff in his belt,” Raymond argued. “He’d whip out the batarang.”

“Yeah, and Daredevil would hear it whizzing through the air and would get the hell out of the way.”

“Daredevil’s *blind*,” Raymond said.



“And Batman’s dumb.” Monroe started laughing, and then so did Raymond, and then Monroe’s brother Deshawn came up behind them with one of his teenage friends and yanked Monroe’s lunchbox out of his hand. “Hey!” he cried. “Give it back!”

“Make me,” Deshawn said. He was smiling. Raymond noticed this, because Deshawn was *never* smiling. Something must have happened to put him a very good mood, and maybe Monroe would tell him what that was, later.

Deshawn tossed the lunchbox to his friend. Raymond tried to intercept it, monkey-in-the-middle, but Monroe had a better plan. He hurtled toward Deshawn and tackled him at the knees.

They were wrestling on the ground, Monroe landing punches that Deshawn probably didn’t even feel. “Okay already,” he laughed. “Quit it.”

Deshawn stood up, pulling Monroe in front of him.

If only Deshawn hadn’t grabbed the lunchbox.

If only he hadn’t tossed it to his friend.

If only Monroe hadn’t been rolling around on the pavement with him.

If, if, if.

When the rusted Chevy screamed around the corner and the gun came out the window, they were aiming for Deshawn, but instead, the bullet blew off the back of Monroe’s head.

There was a twenty-minute segment on the nightly news where Raymond's name was mentioned. Thirteen gangbangers from the other side of Dorchester were arrested. The mayor came to Monroe's funeral. After the service, Deshawn tried to talk to Raymond, but Raymond ran into the men's room of the church and hid. Later, at home, Raymond's grandmother promised him that Monroe was with the Lord, that he was watching over Raymond even now, as he was surely an angel by now. It had been two months but Raymond still had questions: Could Monroe find him, now that he was in the middle of nowhere at camp? Could you shoot hoops in heaven? Had Monroe met God, and did he look like them? Did Monroe have a new, dead, best friend?

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Raymond told Melody about how he'd met Monroe, on the first day of kindergarten, and how Monroe had told him that he knew a good spot near a sewer drain to catch toads. He told her about how they kept a dictionary of all the cuss words they learned, hidden under Monroe's mattress, so now Raymond didn't know what had happened to it. He told her about First Night in Boston, and the angel. "I didn't have nobody to hang with anymore," Raymond said, finally. "My mother thought if I came here, I'd feel better about myself."

He could feel Melody's eyes on him. She looked like she'd taken a bite of something she wished she hadn't. He remembered his grandmother telling him the story of Eve and the apple and the Garden of Eden and he had always wondered if it was worth it, that apple, and whether knowledge tasted sweet, or sad, or bitter. "I guess," she murmured, "that's why *we* all come here too."

She reached out and squeezed Raymond's hand.

Her palm was cool and dry and her nails had tiny ridges in them, like record grooves. Melody flexed her fingers, and he could feel his own fingers move in response. It reminded him of being very small, and crossing the street with his mother. For a long time, he'd believed that as long as he held onto her hand, that lifeline, he had nothing to fear.

He knew now the world didn't work that way, with talismans and magic. Bad shit happened, all the time. People lost their jobs and dads went missing and guns went off and people got in the way.

Raymond had pictured sitting with Melody on this dock with the sun caught in the web of a cloud a thousand times. He had run the conversations they would have over and over in his head, until they were as real to him as any truth he'd ever told. But they had not gone like this. And she had not stared at him like that.

"Stop it," he said.

“Stop what?”

“Stop...looking at me that way.”

Raymond did not have the words for it, but he thought of what James had said, about Melody and the homeless kitten. She was a *lifeguard*. She rescued things that were drowning.

But what did that say about *him*?

“Raymond ---“

He stood up, his hands fisted at his side. “I don’t need saving,” he said, and he ran.

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He lied again the next day, and told Matthew he had stomach cramps and couldn’t go to swimming. This way, Raymond wouldn’t have to see Melody. He lay on his bunk while the rest of his cabin mates went to their own swimming classes and returned. There was an hour of down time before dinner called Reflection that Raymond usually missed, because he usually stayed late and helped Melody pack up for the evening. During that period the campers were supposed to wash up and think about God and things like that, while the counselors had an hour to themselves. But tonight, when James saw Raymond in the cabin, he jerked his chin. “You coming with us?”

“Where?”

“It’s a surprise,” James said. “But you ain’t seen nothing like this.”

He led the three other boys through the forest where they had all gone camping a few nights earlier, past the stone pile trail markings and the hollow oak that was home to a family of rabbits. “Okay,” he said, turning suddenly to Raymond. “You gotta be real quiet here.” Getting down on his knees, James motioned for the others to do the same. Raymond did, feeling wet moss grind against his skin. They wriggled through vines and brambles, and finally James held up a hand and pointed through a thicket of branches. Raymond hunched behind Winslow, peeking through the tangle of foliage to see a patch of grass covered by a blue flannel blanket, and Matthew lying naked on top of his girlfriend Susannah.

Stunned into silence by Susannah’s moans, by the pale globes of Matthew’s bottom, the four boys held their breath. Then James snaked an arm through the bushes to grab a pink bra and panties, a halter top, tiny shorts. “Come on,” he whispered, and they bolted, dropping pieces of Susannah’s clothing here and there, like a fairy tale trail back home.

When they reached the cabin, though, the boys drew to an abrupt stop. Waiting on the front steps was Melody. They froze, certain they had already been caught for spying on Matthew. “Raymond,” Melody said, as if he were the only one there, “I missed you at swimming.”

The other campers, recognizing their good fortune at not being singled out, hurried into the cabin and closed the door. “I was sick,” Raymond said.

“Well.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “I wanted to give you this.”

She took a folded piece of paper from her shorts pocket. “Cullen Jones,” Melody said. “He won a silver medal in the Olympics in 2012. He holds a *world record*.” Melody handed him the paper and for a moment, their hands brushed.

Raymond didn’t notice the similar shapes of their fingernails, or the way his own palm was so light it matched the inside of hers. He just saw the contrast, brown to peach. He thought of his grandmother, who had once ripped out a whole row of her quilt because she had mistakenly placed a red flannel beside a calico print. *Don’t you see, child, she had told him, they can’t stand to be so close.*

“You’re not broken,” Melody said. “You’re not what needs to be fixed.”

Raymond opened the paper as she walked away. His eyes skittered over the words that were still hard for him to read, settling instead on the picture. The famous swimmer was holding up his medal. But here was the thing: he was just as dark-skinned as Raymond.

The biggest event at Camp Konoke was the Color War. It had begun years before when there were only ten campers – all from Dorchester. The counselors had pitted them against each other in a friendly series of Olympic games, not realizing that when the kids went back home, they'd still be competing – just not for trophies. The games included archery and track and field, a tug-of-war, and swimming races. The winners took home ribbons that were either blue or red, to match their team.

Over the years – fueled by gang rivalries on the off-season – the fight had grown fierce. Blue campers snubbed Red campers in the mess hall. Red campers trashed the cabins of the Blue campers. The staff, in the spirit of sportsmanship, had turned a blind eye; and Raymond and his cabin mates – being among the youngest campers – had been insulated from the battle, until today.

Raymond's cabin had been assigned to the Blue team, and Raymond was being counted on as the star of the swimming relay, just as Melody had predicted. He knew he could win because he was the best swimmer in the beginner group, and he hadn't even really given it his all. He wanted to see the look on Melody's face when he crossed the finish line, the fastest by yards.

The day of the Color War, the Blue team lost in archery but won the 100-meter-dash. Swimming was scheduled as the last event before dinner,

and Raymond changed into his bathing suit in the locker room and stretched, bending at the waist like he'd seen Melody do before she did her daily laps. James came up behind him and clipped him on the shoulder. "Red's dead," he sang. "We're countin' on you, man."

Every camper had been grouped into a swimming heat by ability, and Raymond found himself in competition with two girls and an older boy. He walked down the length of the starting dock, from the beach all the way to the cordoned swimming area in the lake. He tested the water with his toes, waiting for the previous heat of swimmers to get out of the lap lanes, trying to catch Melody's eye.

She was on the finish dock, fifty feet away. She stood beside the other lifeguard, the one with the strawberry birthmark on his shoulder. Melody gave Raymond a thumbs-up sign, and he jumped into the water.

Reverend Helm used a cap gun to start each heat. When Raymond saw it, his heart pounded a little faster. He covered his ears, and in his head he could still hear the sound of a real gunshot, how it was so much louder than in the movies, and left you so deaf you couldn't even hear yourself scream.

He saw the quicksilver flash of the girl's feet in the lane beside him as she started to move. Raymond pushed off the dock with all his strength, churning his arms as if Melody was standing behind him, adding her power;



as if he could propel forward fast enough to shove Monroe out of the way. He kicked and he pulled as his lungs fought for air and the currents made by other swimmers threatened to sway him. Each time he stretched out an arm, it was a millimeter further than he'd stretched before, and finally, Raymond's palm cracked down on the scrub wood of the far dock that was the finish line.

The girl who had been in the lead was just now pulling up beside him. Raymond gasped, his narrow chest rising and falling as the shouts of the Blue team covered his shoulders like a cloak. "The Blue team recaptures the lead," Reverend Helm announced, as Raymond glanced around wildly, trying to find Melody.

She stood in the path of the sun, so that Raymond had to squint, and even then could only make out her silhouette. She was cheering, like everyone else. She was leaning back against the lifeguard with the birthmark, whose arms encircled her like a walled city, like she belonged to him.

It was harder for Raymond to breathe, now, than it had been when he was swimming. He ducked beneath the buoys that formed the swimming lanes, until he was in the No Man's Lane of the lake, the part that was not roped off for swimming. He pointed himself toward the horizon, toward the far side of the lake, where he'd never been. Then he began to swim so hard

that the muscles in his arms burned and his chest was on fire. He swam like he was being chased. He knew that Melody was watching, and that he was surprising her with a skill he wasn't supposed to have as a beginner. He knew she would not have believed he had it in him.

Raymond swam until he couldn't hear people calling his name, until the sun branded the lake with a hiss. Then he stopped, treading water. In the falling light, he saw a rowboat coming toward him, all planes and angles. The world in that moment was two-dimensional, nothing but stripes and edges and marks. The lines, he realized, were already drawn; even a kindergartner knew that color was meant to stay inside them.

“Raymond?” Reverend Helm’s voice came from the boat. “Let us help you.”

For a moment Raymond hesitated. He could see the far shore of the lake, now – the whisper of reeds, the bruised sand. He’d was certain he could make it – but he also was certain they would follow. So Raymond pivoted and swam wearily toward the rowboat. He felt himself being pulled into a shiver of air, tucked onto the narrow wooden seat, wrapped in a clean towel; and he knew as he sat surrounded by their safety that he was drowning.