

Fight!

There I was, sitting at my desk, counting down the minutes before the last bell rang. There was only a week left of school, and that was good, but as time wound down, it seemed as though the school bully, Raymond Harris, or Big Ray, was growing more and more irritated by the mere sight of me.

It was the summer of 1990, Badham Island, South Carolina. Nearly a year had passed since Category 4 Hurricane Hugo came spinning along, causing all sorts of catastrophe. Now all that remained was the evidence that it'd been there and punished the Lowcountry for something I did not know of. Today, however, the seagulls floated on heat waves, and palmetto trees lined nearly every street in town. Most still stood upright, but some were missing altogether, and others stood slightly slanted, the position they'd been bracing themselves in for the duration of the storm.

For the most part, I did a good job of ducking and dodging and managed to go a long while without getting into any kind of trouble with Raymond or his gang. Though I was small for my age, I didn't fear him or his crew. I was afraid of losing out on my chance of going up North for the summer to visit my family, who lived in New York City.

As I sat fidgeting, watching the clock, the hands seemed to travel as if rubber bands were preventing them from moving freely.

Raymond had already promised to rip my head off and spit it down my throat at the end of the day. And so, from across the classroom, he and his crew eyed the clock as well; so did everyone else who knew about the end-of-day beatdown. Everyone watched

intently except the teacher. She was busy at the blackboard, writing down last-minute assignments that no one cared to do.

It was the end of the school year. More work was the last thing on our minds.

At exactly 2:45 p.m., when the second hand struck twelve, the school bell let off a piercing, “*riiiiing!*”

And every child in the school took for the outdoors with me leading the way.

Weighing in at 120 pounds and muscular for his age, Raymond went shoving his way through the crowd with little effort. With my Ninja Turtle backpack bobbing and weaving through the crowded hall as though someone was pointing a rifle at the back of my head. I was some ways ahead of him.

What’d caused this all-out pursuit, was me accidentally bumping into Raymond while standing in front of him in the lunch line.



Towering over me at five feet, five inches, with pulsating blood vessels in his big brown eyes, Raymond stared down as his friends egged him on.

“Big Ray, you gonna let that little red nigga hit you like that?” said a crony. I could’ve understood *tap* or *bump*, but *hit*? I could hit a lot harder.

I’m sure I was the last thing of Big Ray’s mind until someone brought me to his attention. Usually lunch was when I had to worry the least about the giant man-child. His mind seemed to be strictly on eating first, then finding someone to torture later. Despite the fact, I began to feel the building sweat in my palms. My heart was beating so hard I could see it through my tight Transformers T-shirt. To avoid confrontation, I didn’t say a word; I only looked away like I didn’t know there was a problem. Raymond must’ve taken that as a sign of disrespect. With my face turned from him, I had no other choice but to expose the new haircut my uncle had given me the night before. It was a fresh fade. The type of haircut you might see on a soldier straight out of basic training, only better

faded. To Raymond, it was a bull's-eye, an easy target that he was sure to hit. Knowing what was coming, I braced myself.

The startling, “*crack!*” along with the sudden jolting forward of my neck and head, nearly gave me a concussion. It was so loud other kids standing dreamily in line suddenly jumped to attention. Then came the burning; the back of my head felt like someone had branded me with the word *idiot*. A rage grenade exploded inside of me, and before I knew what I was doing, I felt myself turn to Raymond saying, “Big trees fall hard.” It was a thing I’d heard on a movie. And I’d said it loud enough for everyone to hear. I knew it had something to do with me being mad and his hugeness, but I had no idea the words would actually come so fluidly from my mouth. After making my peace, or war, it seemed as though the entire lunch line transformed into a field of hungry cows all saying the same thing, “Oooo!” It was at that moment when the yearning hit—that deep gut-wrenching feeling that always came shortly after a dreadful emotion of aloneness. I wished that I wasn’t the only one. I was an only child. I didn’t have a brother who could help me in battle, and battle was sure to come.

“What did you say?” Raymond asked.

“He said he’s going to cut you down!” One boy yelled from somewhere in the back of the line, causing an eruption of laughter. I didn’t realize I’d spoken so loudly.

Still facing him, I saw those veins growing larger in his eyes. As the tension got thicker, my heart continued to beat hard.

“Who, me? I didn’t say anything.” That was the best answer I could give at the moment.

Just as the bully got so close that I could smell and feel his stinky hot breath, Mr. Hartman, the school principal, rushed over.

“What’s going on here, Travis? Is Raymond bothering you again?”

Mr. Hartman was a short dark-skinned man who reminded me of George Jefferson. He and Papa Red, my granddaddy, were good friends and classmates, way before I was born, probably before the inventions of electricity and telephones.

“No, sir. We’re just talking about a tree that’s all,” I said.

Mr. Hartman showed a perplexed look... Before leaving me to fend for myself, he gave Raymond a scornful stare and walked away.

Now angrier than ever, Raymond made a fist and punched himself in the hand a few times. “I’m going to see if sticks break easy,” he said in a way that caused the eyes of a kid behind him to bulge out.



Luckily, I’d made it through lunch and recess without sustaining any more harm. As I rushed out of class and down the hall, my best friend, Kenya, ran up beside me, and together we made our way through the thick crowd. Big Ray and crew weren’t far behind.

“Come on, Travis. Stop being a slowpoke. Raymond is going to kill you,” Kenya said, now pulling me by the hand.

“I’m not scared of Raymond. I’m only running because I don’t want you to see how crazy I am when I get mad. It’s really for your own good.”

I knew she didn’t believe a word I was saying, but I couldn’t let her see me get another beatdown from Raymond. The first time it happened was too long ago to remember, but more recently, it was under the bleachers during PE. Had it not been for Kenya, I’d probably still be laying in the dark, curled up like a newborn baby in the fetal position.

My best friend and neighbor, Kenya Robinson, was a pretty girl with dark complexion who hardly ever wore her hair any different from pigtails in colorful barrettes. I didn’t have a brother to help me in battle, but she was probably just as good, if not better. As she held my hand, still pulling me through the crowded hall, I began to feel worthless. There I was, running away from Big Ray again. The few times I’d stood my ground didn’t turn out to be the wisest choices, but at least I had my dignity.

Busting through the double doors, immediately the Carolina sun and humidity hit us directly in our faces. We were well out of harm's way until I, like a fool, pulled away from Kenya.

"Travis, what are you doing?" she asked anxiously.

I had no idea what I was doing.

"Oh, I'm just stopping to tie my shoe," I replied

"Tie your shoe? Are you crazy? Don't you remember what he did to you under the bleachers?"

After she asked that question, I could feel the soreness that remained in my right, lower ribcage.

Seconds later, standing out from the crowd was Big Ray. His shadow engulfed me.

I gave it my best shot. The whole thing lasted about twelve seconds; he must've been in a hurry. Normally, a good beatdown lasted well over two minutes; when he was really in the mood, three minutes at the minimum. And I have had the pleasure of receiving the all-day-torment, which consisted of being pushed, spat on, kicked, tripped up, choked out, elbowed, thrown to the ground, and sat on whenever he saw me and deemed it necessary.

Today, it was just a quick punch to the stomach, knocking all the air out of me. I suspect people wanted to see more, considering all of the booing and teeth sucking afterward. The blow left me curled up on the ground like a fried shrimp once again. At least this time, I didn't have to further embarrass myself by kicking wildly while on the ground, covering my face with my hands and arms, and hissing and growling like a rabid cat. It took a while, but I managed to catch my breath.

If I'm on the ground too long, Kenya panics and insists on telling a teacher.

Mortified, not only had I been humiliated in front of my classmates once again, but I let Kenya down as well. I was never the hero in her eyes. Raymond had bullied her as well, but if I couldn't defend myself, how could I help her, my best friend?

"No, I'm okay. I'm fine," I assured her with coughing. "Don't tell," I continued while getting up, brushing off dirt and grass. As

always, she helped to remove leaves and pine needles that were stuck to the back of head.

“Why don’t you say something?” Kenya asked.

“Because, I aint no punk... Besides, I almost had him.”

“You almost had him? You almost had him all right,” she said, shaking her head. “Why do you try to be so tough all the time? You know you’re too little. Can’t you just lift weights or something?”

Kenya and I had known each other all of our lives. She wasn’t the brother I wanted so badly, but she was a sister who happened to be the same age. She was actually a few months older than me and somewhat bigger, but I still considered myself the older brother. She knew all of my weaknesses and what little strengths I had. She was a best friend and more.

“Because, lifting weights and eating Wheaties and learning karate isn’t going to help,” I said. “I have to grow. Until then, I’ll just continue to give him all I can—which is not bad.”