

Act One

1 / No Man's Land

Here is Eli Wheeler in September 1969, a 9-year old, freshly commissioned 4th-grader, all innocence and watchful awareness. Was he happy? Certainly not. But Eli was expectant.

At recess, sprinting with his mates, out the back door of the classroom to the playfield. The stately elms filtering sunlight. The blue asphalt warming. Eli loved school, especially his short, attentive teacher, Mrs. Greenberry, with her Jackie Onassis bouffant and perfume smelling of earth and twigs and leaves. He loved the trees at his school. He loved the playground asphalt and the recess kickball games.

Never first chosen, never last, Eli stood near second base (proud not to have been consigned to the outfield), crouching like a cat, waiting for Mighty Mick Miller, in his blue overalls, to strike at the red rubber ball careening toward home plate. Mindful of the girls in his class squatting together nearby, jumpers pulled tightly over their knees. Eli listening for their laughter, a sign that all was well.

Eli bounced up and down on his toes, and then Mick jumped forward and swung his left leg like a hammer, the red ball arcing sharply into the cerulean blue over Eli's head, landing well behind him and leaping with conviction off the asphalt into nearby No-Man's Land, rooted, grassless, populated with stunted cherry dogwoods, low branches perfect for climbing.

The boys in Eli's class did not play in No-Man's Land. Not since the school's janitor arrived at school one morning during the previous spring, with the rising sun, and in the shadows of the flowering dogwoods and red maples seeing a different kind of shadow, plum-darkened like a bruise, some strange fruit, low-slung, swaying like a crooner, tremulous, this shadow swinging from a broad, steady branch halfway up the tree, as the janitor neared No-Man's Land, the shadow catching a bit of new light, shining on the swollen face of a stocky middle-aged man, a white man wearing a fine summer suit

(seersucker) and brogans (no socks), his hair slick with pomade (he did not remove his horn rims).

The janitor called the police and the police called the ambulance and the ambulance attendants sped across the lawn of the school and parked on the asphalt playground near where the janitor and the police stood. They cut the rope from the cherry dogwood and with tender mercy carried the man to the edge of the asphalt playground, laying him upon a blanket, removing his suit, his glasses, his brogans, examining his neck, his eyes and mouth, his hands and feet, his genitals and anus, his pockets, then slipping him into a canvas bag with a long metal zipper and lifting him on to a stretcher for the short ride to the ambulance. No one played under the dogwoods after that.

Eli wanted the red rubber kickball. Three boys stood together behind him guarding right field. But they had ignored the ball, and Eli was in any case fleeter of foot. He considered it likely he could retrieve the ball quickly and throw it to a teammate who might then give a *Big Mick* a *Big Kick* on his *Big Dick* with the red rubber ball (*ha-ha*), preventing a home run.

Eli favored this outcome, enjoyed visualizing it, and so gave the boundary between the asphalt playground and No-Man's Land no heed as he chased the bouncing ball, which the rooted soil under the cherry dogwoods had now confounded. The ball squirted right and left. Eli pursued the ball like a mad terrier, his head down, his thin legs pumping with conviction inside his baggy shorts, and he did not see the four dark-skinned boys assembled under the cherry dogwood where the ball finally came to rest.

Eli stooped to retrieve the ball, bent on fulfilling his *Mick-Kick-Dick* mission, but now stymied by a Keds-sneakered-foot planted on the ball. Frustrated in his pursuit, Eli looked up and saw the black boys for the first time. Two of the boys were identical twins, with square faces and serious Afros. The foot planted on the kickball belonged to one of the twins.

"Hey," said Eli, straightening up. "Can I have my ball?" These boys were in 3rd grade. Eli knew

that. And while these younger boys were larger than Eli, he assumed they would accede to the elementary school pecking order and allow him the ball, perhaps with enough time to still pursue Big Mick.

In the furthest reaches of his young mind, Eli recalled Tobias discussing the busing decision during the dog days of summer, just before the school year began. Both Tobias and Martha supported this decision. Nixon was president. The war in Vietnam did not abate. The riots in the cities did not abate.

Eli watched protests on the Princeton campus, clinging to his father's strong hand. His parents did not understand or approve of the protestors, but were otherwise staunch opponents of Nixon, his racist Southern Strategy, and the terrible War. Tobias and Martha voted for Hubert Humphrey in the 1968 election. Eli remembered this because he and his younger brother Lawrence so enjoyed shouting *Hubert Horatio Humphrey* at passing cars when they accompanied their mother on canvassing outings in the month prior to the election.

“Hey! Can I please have my ball?”

The boys stared at Eli with cow-brown eyes and only later would he, Eli, imagine what it must have been like for these boys, unconsciously, to serve as 8-year old spear carriers, sacrificial lambs, really, for social policies whose unfair, impossible mandate was to cleanse the nation of its most primal sin. Both protected and undermined by their own innocence, the boys, departing from their homes for school when pale morning light breaks in the east, for the daily ride in the squat little yellow school bus with only four bench seats on each side. Not the terrifying desegregation experience of children in Alabama, perhaps, but certainly weird and strange, and possibly disorienting and frightening, as well.

The boys shifted their feet, clenched their fists, and punched their faces forward. They looked

pugnacious (a word Eli had just learned). The boy with the ball peered at his twin brother. “He wants dat ball,” the brother said, his voice high-pitched and trill. “Give him dat ball, Lester.”

Lester removed his foot from the ball. He bent over and picked it up and held it in his hands. He stared earnestly at Eli, whose blonde curls leaped high above his head. “He look like a cocker poodle, Chester.”

Eli realized Big Mick had by now circled the bases. He reached for the ball, experiencing a new sense of urgency that recess was about to end, and Mrs. Greenberry would expect him to steer clear of No-Man’s Land and line up with his classmates by the classroom door (he was an expectant boy).

Lester backed away. “Hey Cocker Poodle,” he said. “You want dis ball?” He spun, sprinted to the asphalt, and threw the ball high toward the sun, Eli tracking its slope, the ball disappearing into the bright light and then descending, reacquiring form and color, plunging toward earth, Lester in a single motion now leaping toward the ball, planting one leg, swinging the other, driving his foot into the ball as it neared the asphalt, smashing it back into the sun, until the ball reappeared as a far smaller red dot at the far end of the playground, landing by the swings and taking high bounces into the brush by the fence separating the school from the surrounding houses.