

Saturday with Jackie

I remember one Saturday being chased from the house by my mother. She had asked me to empty my pants pockets of Kleenex and I wagged my head while reading the morning comics, telling her that I would. But I didn't. An hour later when she tugged her first load from the washer, she found it flecked with bits of Kleenex. She screamed from the garage and I hurried outside, remembering too late about cleaning out my pockets. When I looked back halfway down the street, she was standing on the porch with a pair of my jeans in her hands. I jogged looking back because my brother Rick had come to stand with her and I thought that maybe she was going to send him after me.

I sat at a curb at the end of the block peeling an orange when Jackie, a school friend, turned the corner with a rattling shopping cart. I called him, and he maneuvered toward my direction, squinting at me as if I were a fire. I got up and approached him with my hands in my back pockets and my jacket zipped to my throat and almost hurting.

"What's up?" I asked, as if I didn't know. On our street it was a practice to collect Coke bottles that could be traded in at liquor stores at a nickel apiece.

"Making money," he answered, simply.

We stood in the street talking nonsense for a few minutes before I asked if he wanted to walk downtown. He looked at his cart, which gleamed like stolen goods, and pursed his lips, looking worried.

"I shouldn't but let's go anyhow," he said. But first he rolled his shopping cart home while I waited at the curb. When he returned he was smiling because he had sold the Coke bottles—twelve of them—to his mother for four cents apiece, and jingled his pockets like a big spender. We started up Angus Street, looking around without talking. If we did talk, it was not in sentences but single words or phrases.

"Look," I said on Washington Street, at a cat curled like a stone in a pile of grass clippings. Jackie threw a chip of bark and the cat turned on its side, stretched, and yawned like death.

"What the . . . !" Jackie said on Orchard Street, to a parked car with one of its doors missing. We looked in to find stacks of newspapers bundled and piled to the ceiling.

We walked without saying too much because talking ruined the joy of noiseless minds. Jackie understood this, I understood this, so we walked looking around like television cameras, catching families sitting down to breakfast, a dog biting fleas from his paws, a grandpa raking leaves, pomegranate trees almost ready to steal from. We looked around while that endless film wound behind our eyes.

At Rontell's Volvo on Divisadero we stopped to run our fingers slowly across the shiny paint jobs and gawk at the instrument panels of Jaguars. Since it was early, we tried opening doors but they were all locked.

"This one's for me," Jackie said, pointing out a Jaguar with gas caps on both back fenders.

We left there impressed, our minds racing with cars, and made our way up Mariposa Street where we stopped at "the nun's place." I told Jackie that when I went to St.

John's Catholic School I often passed the convent and, for my own reasons, imagined the nuns, after a day of teaching and threatening kids with erasers in firing position, would come home, pray, and head to the backyard to play soccer with the altar boys. I would stand at the fence, which was eight feet tall, and hear sounds like balls being kicked, followed by restrained laughter.

From there we checked the telephone booths and Coke machine for change at St. John's Cathedral, climbed into a tree and threw rocks at the Southern Pacific, and dodged cars on "L" Street on our way to the Fresno Mall. Not yet ten o'clock, the mall was quiet with only a few merchants hurrying, in a sort of panic, to their businesses; their faces looked waxen and their suits were bright as the toys at Woolworths. There were a few hobos, some kids like us, a man refilling a newspaper rack, a lone mother whose coat was like a soiled rug on her shoulders.

We ambled on, occasionally stopping to gaze in store windows, especially at clothing stores where we grew dreamy as incense looking at shirts, pants, belts, loafers—those wonderful things that were as far from us as Europe.

We bought doughnuts at Hart's Restaurant and ate them in silence at an outdoor fountain, with the film behind our eyes picking up speed when the stores began to open and mothers and daughters in colorful dresses hurried, almost in step, with big purses looped on their forearms. We ate the doughnuts, then bought popcorn at Penney's, and returned once again to the fountain where there were now more mothers and daughters, with an occasional son in clean clothes who looked stupid, and probably felt stupid, while his mother warned him with a stern finger not to get lost or fool around.

We looked at each other, wagged our heads in disgust, and called him in low voices, "sissy boy." Getting up, we walked up the mall toward the north end that was under

construction with new stores coming up—clothing, import, jewelry, record, and china. We stopped in front of a boarded-up building, which was ready to be torn down to make way for offices, as the sign posted in the front said. There were few people shopping in the area, so we pried and pushed at the door until we could squeeze inside. Once inside, we looked around like astronauts on the moon. A shaft of sunlight, with its orbiting dust, shone from the roof and ended in a seizure of light far on the other side, where we made out desks, chairs, counters, an open elevator, and a broken mirror on the wall, its crack running like the border between Mexico and the United States. We made out mannequins, a hatrack, a pile of curtains, some empty boxes, and the octopus of a tangled chandelier resting on the ground. We took a few steps, with the film behind our eyes turning slowly, as we wanted to touch the mannequins. We walked carefully because of the dark. Broken glass crunched under our shoes; dust, thick as the first minute of snow, made us sneeze. We sensed spiders but we didn't find any swinging on their trapeze. We sensed mice but the only noises were from those things we knocked over. We walked like blind men, hands out and feeling the air, until we reached the mannequins and started back, each of us with one of them under his arm like a surfboard. Jackie fell once, so that a finger chipped off, but mine was intact and even smiling when I squeezed it from the door into sunlight.

"It's a guy," I said to Jackie. "He's got a mustache—and check out the muscles." The mannequin was tall as Superman and his face looked like a composite drawing of Dick Tracy and Fabian.

Jackie brought out his mannequin whose wrist was limp and whose eyes were painted with feathery lashes. A merchant, who was standing at his window, winced in our direction. We pretended nonchalance and walked slowly around the building before running up the mall into an

alley, where we hid behind boxes breathing hard and smiling from our adventure. When no one came to get us, we shouldered our mannequins and walked away, thinking that we could sell them. When no one came to mind, we decided to make them fight.

"You're an idiot," I screamed at his mannequin.

"You're a double idiot," Jackie said. He held his mannequin like a club and smacked mine right in the face, which cracked and chipped. I swung mine, and his mannequin's head fell off.

"You're a triple idiot," he threw at me, swinging his mannequin so that it thudded mine in the chest, almost knocking me down. I swung, then he swung, and I swung again and again, and he swung again and again, until only the arms were left, which we used as swords in our fight all the way back home.

The Small Faces

I was sixteen and unable to find a summer job, so instead of moping around the house I volunteered to become a recreational assistant for the City Parks Department. I had read about the need for volunteers in the *Fresno Bee*. I called a phone number, left my name with a woman, and waited several days before my call was returned by the same woman who lauded my goodheartedness before she came down to business.

"Young man, there are a number of schools and parks. Take your time and just tell me which one sounds nice to you." She read down the list and I almost shouted when she said "Emerson Elementary."

"Emerson. I want to go there!"

"That one is still open," she said, and I could hear a pencil scratching an imagined index card. The woman gave me the name of Calvin Jones, the recreation leader, and said that I could start Monday at six if I liked. She again thanked me for my goodheartedness, asked me to spell my last name, and hung up.

That Monday, after dinner, I walked the four miles to Emerson, across Belmont, Tulare, and Ventura Avenues, where the houses, poor and dilapidated, slowly gave way to industry and shops—bakery, auto parts stores, a tire company, machine shop, and the import car dealer, Haron the Baron. There was a house for every vacant lot,