

Playground Zero – Part II, Chapter 5

Then on Sunday, Alice's father asked if she would go for a walk.

“Where are we going, Dad?”

“Just for a walk. It's a beautiful day.”

So, he'd learned the local commonplaces, Alice thought, though coming from him the slogan sounded phony and jarring.

She could see they were heading for Telegraph Avenue. She wondered if they would be passing People's Park, but her father was an uneasy presence and there would be no asking. Contact of any kind was becoming unbearable; there was a hum whenever they found themselves alone in a room, the sound of suppressed anger. She could not remember when they'd last gone anywhere together; but here he was, on a Sunday in May, offering to lead her on a walk through the forbidden zone. Maybe the park was a sign of change, and he was responding. Maybe the adventure would forge a bond between them, the beginning of a new sympathy. She'd never been on Telegraph Avenue with her father alone. She could sense him moving alongside her, carrying her along. Why was he taking her there? Was there something he planned to show her, something he wanted her to know?

Rounding the corner by the park, they saw armed men guarding the fence, the hapless parcel of land overrun by vehicles and equipment. One hand resting on her shoulder, her father shepherded her across the street and proceeded along the edge of the park. Every few yards, they passed close by a National Guardsman as the young man's face responded, the eyes following them, human and wary. Armed with rifles and gleaming bayonets, the men were ready for combat, or for a sunny campus day.

Her father had placed himself between her and the armed men, as though forming a moving barrier—ready to block, dodge, flee. She was by a scrimmage line, and he was guarding her. They pressed on, ready for a move by one of the guardsmen. Then, as they passed a heavy-jawed man, the man shifted his weight and her father veered, bumping her hard.

The sunny day glared numbly, marred by her father's fear. If only she could run home, but her father's hand was grasping her arm.

Moving at a faster pace, they cleared the park and rounded the corner onto Telegraph Avenue. The army camp had faded, mirage-like, replaced by simmering anarchy and people in colorful garb. Her father was moving along in a bubble, barely glancing around as he paused and removed a copy of the *Berkeley Barb* from a vending machine.

“Here’s the paper,” he remarked, handing it over. “Don’t go anywhere—I’ll be right back.” Then he moved on, leaving her by the door of the jeans shop as he approached a nearby jeweler. She unfolded the *Barb*: on the cover was a photograph of a boy, younger than herself and seated in a swing. Up he smiled, sunny and joyful, at the overbearing body of an armed man, demanding that he leave or be uprooted and removed.

Emerging from a doorway, a boy dropped and crushed a smoldering cigarette before prancing on.

She moved under an awning, away from the flow of passersby. A car horn sounded as a Ford pulled up; the door swung open and several longhaired boys tumbled forth in purposeless hurry to be there.

As she lingered by the jeans shop, wondering why her father was buying jewelry, she was bumped by a young man. Pale forehead, black hair, eyes of blue glass: she’d seen him before, maybe in photographs of the park. He was lean and muscled, wearing frayed bell-bottoms slung low; beads on a leather thong hung over the bare abdomen. He paused before her, shoulders pale, and waved the lazy plume of a musk-smelling cigarette. He engaged her eyes; as he reached forth offering her a smoke, she saw the thumb, where he wore a heavy ring made from the handle of a spoon.

“I’m Johnny,” he confided, holding the smoke between them. The tone was close and friendly. “I’ve seen you before.” He put the joint to his mouth and inhaled sharply. When he spoke, a plume poured from his mouth, fading. “What’s your name?”

The heavy cloth of the awning flapped near her face. “My father’s in there,” she said, and glanced toward the jeweler.

He moved away and was soon squandering words with a couple of boys her age. They reminded her of windup toys she’d once seen, abandoned in random movement on a store shelf.

When her father emerged from the jeweler, he was burying something in a jeans pocket. The jeans were no longer new; he always wore them now when he was home. She wondered what he’d found in the shop but never bothered asking, sure of an uninformative response.

They were passing along the park, as they’d come, when her father grasped her arm roughly and dragged her by a parked car. Then he leaned and scooped up a fragment of asphalt, balancing it loosely in his palm, as a nearby guardsman adjusted his bayoneted rifle. She would have run, but how could she abandon her father to the guardsman? She was staring at the man’s rifle in the ugly noonday glare, when her father propelled her along between the parked cars and across the asphalt no-man’s-land to the far side of the street. There they passed an overgrown rhododendron.

He tossed the rock in the rhododendron.

“What happened?” she asked.

He made no response. When she looked up, there were damp beads under his mouth and in the lines of his forehead. “He made a threatening move,” he answered, finally. She’d seen nothing—or maybe she’d been unaware of the meaning of things she’d seen. As they passed out of sight of the guardsmen, her father glanced over and then away. “Do you plan to inform your mother that we came by the park?” he demanded. “She’ll be unhappy with us both.”

Alice was feeling too confused to respond.

“Well, have it your way,” he added.