It all started just before supper when little Alice Cosgrove fell off her bike riding circles in the deli parking lot next door to Avery’s while me and Avery hung in the oak tree like two zoo monkeys.

That’s where me and Avery spent most of our time. Two zoo monkeys hanging up a tree waiting for things like Alice Cosgrove falling off her bike riding circles in the parking lot. Like the head-on collision at the four-way stop when Avery had to sit on the curb right after. Pussy, I said. And Avery puked in his mouth a little.

Me and Avery stood no chance standing in my parents’ kitchen that night, charged and awaiting conviction of pushing little Alice Cosgrove off her bike in the parking lot next to Avery’s just before supper. Avery’s parents arrived in the middle of things. Pauline, Avery’s mom, smacked Avery across the mouth, while Avery’s father, Artie, loosened the belt under his T-shirt one notch. The whole time Alice Cosgrove with her gravel-torn knees bawling red-faced in my parents’ kitchen while an uneaten chicken casserole cooled on the stove under a sheet of tin foil aluminum.

These boys are monsters, said Alice Cosgrove’s mother with her woodbark-cratered face. Monsters, monsters. Just look what they’ve done, she said, looking like she’d almost spit, pulling at the scraps of denim and birdshot bloody knees of the bawling red-faced girl.

I thought I was shouting but heard nothing, like I was trying to scream out in a dream, my parents shaking their heads and asking why, why, why, why as if I could even answer at a decibel loud enough for dogs to hear.

Our guests gone, I was sent to bed never having tasted the chicken casserole, only thinking about how the world stops for red-faced bawling girls and the how could you of it all. It not being a question but a wagging finger.

For two weeks I watched Avery ride by occasionally my window, he only getting a beating from a belt and me two weeks solitary with no TV. I’d have taken the belt, too, if I lived in his house with garbage bag squares for windows.

I sat alone in my cell, thinking what Avery was up to out there during the last licks of September, knowing that the trust in my piggy bank didn’t amount to more than the sound of a couple coins banging together because boys don’t start out with much in the first place.

I bet he’s swinging at those dandelions, I thought. Swinging the heads off dandelions with rusted golf irons being part of our routine. I was jealous that Avery
had them all to himself, lopping off their heads with that swift *dip dip dip* of the club. I think we used to hate those dandelions. Hated them for taking over the whole yard looking like flowers but really being weeds. Now we just swung for the fun of it.

It figured that when my time was up, it was pouring rain for days and all those dandelions were all closed up. Even after the rain, the sun hid behind the clouds like a slug waiting to be poked with a stick. Me and Avery sat up in the oak tree, its still-damp limbs holding us up above the rest of the world while we waited for something like a head-on collision. Anything but a liar like Alice Cosgrove riding circles in a parking lot like something stirring in a boiling pot.

I did get a glimpse of little Alice Cosgrove while sitting up the tree waiting for all the dandelions to open up so we could lop off their heads and Avery said. Nothing but a damn liar. Family’s full of them, he said. For me and Avery knew the truth behind Alice Cosgrove and her family full of liars.

It was a wink, only a wink, or maybe a wink that got me good like a bee sting when I looked past the deli and saw Alice Cosgrove smiling at where I was sitting up a tree with nothing to swing at except a field full of closed-up dandelions. I bet she laughed, swear that she did, walking home under the clouds where the sun was aiming to poke itself through before its shift ended and the moon took over its watchful gaze.

It was then in the twilight before supper that we saw a figure cutting through front yards across the street, across the corner of Eden and Sycamore, past the deli, lumbering.

That looked like Lamar, Avery said.

How can you tell, I asked Avery, who was now swinging from a branch by his arms. It just looked like him, he said. How he’s running.

Lamar Gaffney was a goon if I ever saw one. Had a way of hobbling when he walked, although this Lamar was running, and no one’d ever seen Lamar run. Lamar was an albino and his eyes had no color to them. Just black dots getting bigger and smaller.

A car with asphalt-tearing wheels slid to a stop in front of the oak tree us two monkeys were hanging in. The group of teenagers inside asked Avery if he knew the kid who’d just run by.

Avery grabbed hold of the branch above him and sat back up higher in the tree and didn’t answer. What about you, they said. You know that kid?

What’s he done, I said.

A girl inside cried that he was getting away and the driver revved the engine while the shotgun passenger told us thanks for nothing.

The driver moved the stick down the box and I said I knew him. I knew who he was. Then he moved the stick forward, jerking back on the brake, and got out.

Looking down, I felt like falling to see if he’d catch me. What’s his name, kid?
Lamar is going to get you is all Avery had to say as the car sped out of sight. But that’s not all Avery said. For calling me a rat I called Avery a poor son of a bitch who lived in a shitty haunted house. Then Avery said he hoped Lamar would kick my ass good, never looking back as he disappeared through his back door.

I didn’t see Avery at all for a few days. Not even in school, but I knew he was there. I did see Alice Cosgrove. I saw her all over the place as if she was stuffed inside the whites of my eyes. She’d been given the lead in the school play. Annie. Last year they’d given her the role of Dorothy and made most of the kids in the fourth grade classes her little munchkins. I had to wear one of those green and yellow felt getups looking like an idiot all of sixth period right after lunch and just before gym. I never wanted to be in the thing, but they made us. They made everyone dress up in the felt getups who didn’t want lines in the play.

The doorbell to our house was wired wrong years back and never fixed so how we know someone’s at the door is the sound of rattling glass inside the metal storm. I was alone after school when I heard the sound of rattling glass inside the metal storm. Sometimes I pretend it’s the cops coming to take me away for robbing the bank. But I didn’t see cops rattling the storm when I peeked through the blinds in the window. What I saw was dressed in a black leather coat and cut-up jeans. What I saw was Lamar Gaffney the albino with no color in his eyes banging on the storm and rattling the glass inside, making like it was thundering and lightning and the lightning was looking to touch down somewhere close.

Eventually Lamar backed away from the door and walked out to the street and told me with the dots in his eyes getting bigger and smaller that he knew I was inside and he’d be back again. It began to rain like fat drops of thick soup falling out of the sky, and I ran upstairs to my room while the world outside turned to a darker shade of gray.

Avery cried and asked what’s that for when I punched him for telling Lamar I was the one who told on him. Avery got up from the ground he was crying on and shoved me and denied saying anything to Lamar. I shoved Avery back and told him who was the rat now and Avery stuck to his story like we stuck to our story that night Alice Cosgrove was bawling red-faced in my parents’ kitchen.

Lamar snaked $60 from me once, I remembered while walking back home after fighting with Avery. I’d gone to school last year and bragged about all this money I’d found that amounted to nearly two hundred dollars. Nearly two hundred dollars I’d actually stolen from my mother’s sewing kit. Alice Cosgrove claimed she’d lost that money just where I’d said I found it. Over at the bus stop across from the deli. Lamar told me that he’d let me have the rest of it if I gave
him 60 so he wouldn’t have to tell my parents what I’d done. He made me shake his albino hand and said he was glad to do business with a man like myself. It was then that I’d remembered that Lamar was as bad as Alice Cosgrove. Which figures because Lamar’s father was Alice’s mother’s brother.

Dress rehearsals were starting for the play and lunch ended earlier so everyone could all watch Little Orphan Alice skip around the stage while we sat at the back of the cafeteria that doubled as a theater, scratching at the fabric that made us look like rattier versions of ourselves. One more time, said Mrs. Daniels, as rehearsal continued and the time we had for dodging rubber balls in gym withered down to the speck of nothing I felt like in my little blue getup.

Don’t be so dramatic, Mrs. Daniels said, when I ripped off the felt getup and threw it on the floor. And Little Orphan Alice said, Yeah, don’t be so dramatic, with extra emphasis on the tic.

Mom and Dad were talking about Alice Cosgrove and Alice’s mother after dinner while I sort of listened from my bed. Mom and Dad said Alice Cosgrove would make it out of here some day. They said when Mr. Cosgrove killed himself drunk driving over the overpass, Pearl Cosgrove, Alice’s mother, had to do what she had to do. The name Pearl doesn’t fit my picture of Alice’s mother who had tree bark for a face and looked like she could spit at any moment. A pearl is something smooth and round and beautiful and Pearl Cosgrove is an ugly stick of woodbark that spits and gave birth to red-bawling-faced Alice Cosgrove.

After the fight, me and Avery didn’t talk so much when we were together. Avery was picking at the scabs of the wounds my words had made. They were healing, but he was still picking at them. I think.

The sun’s trying to break through, Avery said, and I was already hopping over the fence when something down the road hooked my eye. That looks like Lamar, Avery said. And I said, How can you tell.

How he’s hobbling, Avery said.

Lamar was wearing a black leather coat and cut-up denim and his long white hair was trailing him like a parachute. I told Avery to hand me the golf iron lying against the fence, the six, and Avery looked at me as if I aimed to swing it at Lamar, but instead I threw it at him so Lamar picked it up and everyone at the deli saw him chasing after me, swinging the six like he was going to lop off my head. But what he tried to do to me, he really did to Alice. That’s what everyone’s been saying.

Mom and Dad say Lamar deserves what’s coming to him for what he did to Alice. Dad says why don’t I go out and play and I tell them I’m going over to Avery’s.
Avery’s not up the tree but standing in the field of weeds that’s his yard, staring at the spot where Lamar chased me with the six. Avery says it’s a funny thing and I say, What’s that, and Avery says he could’ve sworn he saw Lamar toss that iron away. Why you think he just left it there propped up along the side of his house, Avery says. Alice Cosgrove is riding circles round Avery’s head and Avery says he’s sorry for laughing at Alice when she fell.

We didn’t touch her, Avery says, but maybe we made it happen somehow. Avery has convinced himself that the will of our minds is as strong as the force that pulls all things to earth. Avery believes in the gravity of the mind, and he says, I never took Lamar for an idiot. And I tell Avery I had the strangest dream.

I tell him how I dreamed Alice Cosgrove was lying in a field full of dandelions dressed in a little red dress, crying out to me but how there was no sound, not even at a decibel loud enough for dogs to hear. I tell Avery how I stood over her not hearing anything, just standing there among all the rest of the dandelions rising in ovation, watching her bawling red face and thinking how good she really was I almost believed her.

Avery looks like he’s seen a head-on collision and turns as white as the ghosts living in his poor son of a bitch haunted house. But it was just a dream, I tell him, and Avery smiles as if he’s embarrassed. He looks at the rest of the irons lying against the fence and says, For a minute, I thought...

I pluck out an iron and hand it to Avery.

You’ve got one hell of an imagination. 🦅