

Tim's Notebook

At the time I didn't know who Corey Hall was. I never wanted to know anyone at that zoo of a high school.

I was sitting alone, eating the cheese sandwich Dad had made, crust cut off and all, in an empty classroom. The cream-tan paint and the posters of dead presidents didn't kill the prison-vibe of the brick walls, but it was a rest from all the noise. From all the bullshit. I could write poetry in my little red notebook, drink in the words, be at peace. That is, until Corey and his friends came in; Henry I knew at the time — that fat asshole threw a meatball sub at me in front of the entire lunchroom months ago — but other than that they were all strangers.

“So this is where you eat Timmy,” Corey said all nasally just to mock my voice. “Too good to eat with your boys?”

“W-w-who the —”

“Wuh-wuh-what was that? Speak up. You gotta stop stuttering.”

“We know you snitched Tim,” Henry said. “Don't even deny it. You couldn't take Pete's ass beatin' like a man so you had to rat him out to Mr. Johnson? He got expelled because of you.”

I held my hands out in front of me. “Guys w-wait a m-m-m-m-minute I —”

“Dave, Scott,” Corey said. “Hold him. Henry, keep a lookout.”

I tried to run, but they grabbed me by the arms and pinned me to the ground. That's when Corey stood over me, unzipped his pants, and let the warm yellow stream hit my face. It clouded my glasses. Dampened my collar. Pitter-pattered onto the carpet. I wanted to gag and puke and scream but every time I opened my mouth the bitter-sour yellow poured into my mouth and down my throat. Tears followed.

"What's this?" Henry said. "Yo check this faggot's writing."

"I didn't know you were a poet," Corey said. "Let me hear some of it."

"With desert's day unforgiving, I crawl knee and hand; In an unknown direction, begging for homeland –' Kid's got bars."

They all laughed. "That shit's so awful," Corey said.

"Let's get out of here," Henry said.

After Dave and Scott let go of me, the four of them ditched the classroom. For the longest time I stared up at the drop ceiling. My eyes stung to the point of redness. The fluorescent lights blinded me. I wanted to sink into the carpet and never come back out.

I got up and, after gathering my things, rushed into the bathroom to wash myself with hand soap and water. But remnants of stink remained. I screamed at the weak child in the mirror and told him he'd be better off dead. While avoiding contact with anybody, I left schoolgrounds with my head hung low.

Pink and green tree leaves adorned the park. Azalea shrubs in brown mulch bordered an empty playground – in fact, the entire park was empty save for the homeless man sleeping on a bench. Rips, dark stains, scars, and an overwhelming musk covered him as he slept under a torn-up blanket. I passed by him and sat on the ground leaning on the trunk of a tree. I took a long breath, flipped to the last page of my little red notebook, and wrote:

I wish I were white. Ever since we moved from Hershey to Philly, I've begun to hate the black race, my race! A bunch of dumb, cackling, lazy animals. Victims of our own creation, waiting for someone else to lift us out of poverty. Instead of peace we praise crime and violence. Instead of intelligence we spit in the face of education. Yes, we were pushed in the mud, yet we keep bathing in it and cry that we're dirty. What did I do to deserve living among the lower-class?

The moment I got home I scrubbed the stink and stick of piss off myself with, as Samuel L. Jackson so eloquently put it, “great vengeance and furious anger.” Dad asked me question after question about my early arrival home, and he received simple, one-syllable answers until he lost interest. Nonetheless, his routine Eeyore vibes were the last thing anyone needed after a day like mine.

Several hours later, to take my mind off things, I logged onto a Formula 1 Discord server, passing time predicting what was going to happen at the 2021 Spanish Grand Prix, which eventually turned into a debate with a user named SilverDiva over who the greatest driver of all time was (I said Senna, she said Hamilton). Turned out she was a Philly high school student as well. Talk about ridiculous coincidences. We friend requested.

After several more F1-related debates over the course of the week, we agreed to meet at a diner in Manayunk. She said I would know it was her by her “Mercedes” look.

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I sat at the window booth as a bundle of balled up nerves – from the leg-bouncing to the nail-biting to the heart-pounding. The place was full of people, none of them alone. Then the thoughts poured in. What if this SilverDiva chick never shows up? What if she’s a catfish who wanted to prank a stranger? Worse, what if she does and she laughs at my stutter? How come nobody ever wants me? I’ll die without so much as ever having even kissed a girl. I’m a loser. A weirdo. I should just die and get it over with.

Right when the self-doubt hit an all-time high, the glass front door swung open. There she was. Platinum-dyed tips on her short curls. Rhinestone stud earrings. Noserings. Two lip rings. Lewis Hamilton 44 t-shirt with sweatpants to match. She was an alright-looking black chick.

“Nice to meet you,” she said once she walked up to me. “My name is Raya.”

“M-m-m-my n-name is T-T-Tim.”

Smooth Tim... a regular Don Juan you are...

My eyes were glued on her face for any hint of a smirk or frown. Instead, she kept as serene as a monk’s and sat down opposite me. “What are you getting?” she asked.

I ordered the chicken margherita pizza while she stuck to a bacon cheeseburger. With each bite, rivulets of grease dripped down the corners of her lips — not gonna lie, the primal viciousness with which she sunk her fangs into that meat kinda turned me on. She spoke of cooking focaccia in a brick oven with her grandmother when she was eight, spoke of backpacking through the Portuguese mountains with her mom and dad when she was thirteen, she spoke of many things... then she told me about her brother John:

“I always wanted to be an architect before it happened,” she said. “While the other kids hung out during lunch, I’d be alone studying two-point perspective and façade elevations in the art room. Then one night as the family’s eating dinner, the police came in and arrested John for killing Anthony. It eventually came out that the landlord found the body three days after the fact – rotting, bloated. Now it hurts to admit this but John loved Anthony more than he loved any of us, I mean that man was his *world*, so I know he didn’t kill him. But his lawyer was clown and the jury was a lynch mob ready to hang a black man. So now I’m visiting him inside a prison for the rest of his life. Sad thing is, he ain’t the only one the prison industrial complex fucked, so here I am, working toward becoming a criminal defense attorney.”

Talk about a mood killer. What the hell do you say after that?

“Y-yeah,” I said. “Um... so the p-police never found a-a-any proof?”

“The shit they brought up in court was weak. I know my brother. I know he wouldn’t do something like that.”

There was a question I wanted to ask, but I thought better of it and instead we discussed meeting up at her place next Saturday to catch a movie. We paid Dutch, parted ways, and texted back and forth throughout the week. On Friday night, she tossed up the idea of us attending a Black Lives Matter protest on Sunday. I declined, stating I had already made plans to visit my grandmom. She sent a GIF of a disappointed cat, then a text immediately after saying: “JK have a good time.”

At 1 AM, a few hours later, gunshots rang out in front of my home.

But it was the screaming that got me out of bed and peeking through the blinds.

A body lay face down in blood while the silhouette of a young woman wept over the corpse. A man in black clothes ran up the street, away from the scene. Probably some dumb gang thing, I thought. Nevertheless, I stayed up for the rest of the night staring at the ceiling, pillows plugging both my ears to muffle the sirens and conversations, jumping at every sudden noise whether real or imagined. I didn't want to wake Dad since he had to rest for his side gig.

The first thing next morning, the school called us into the auditorium for an assembly. The students cackled among themselves. Paper balls were tossed around. Homework copied. Soda cans snapped open and chip bags crinkled up and consumed despite the NO EATING NO DRINKING sign over the exit. Onstage, mask-wearing teachers sat on chairs in front of a black curtain, their hands wriggling and faces stone. The principal entered stage left and walked up to the podium. After asking the room to quiet down, and after her long preamble regarding regret and sadness and so on and so forth, she got to the meat of why we were here:

“Last night there was a shooting that took the life of a fellow student of ours, Corey Hall. Filled with so much potential, so much kindness and compassion for his teachers and peers, he was struck down by those who did not wish to see him flourish and share his gifts with the world.”

While she talked, I got on my phone and looked up the news on this shooting. In the article, they put a picture up of him smiling on his front porch, cradling who was supposed to be his baby sister. It was him, the same kid who had pissed on my face.

“If you please,” the principal said. “A moment of silence.”

During that moment, there were a few whispers and muffled laughs scattered around the audience, and other than a shush from a few of the students and teachers they weren't remarked upon.

After the assembly I ran to the bathroom stall ready to explode against the canonization of my tormentor, at the students' total lack of care for the loss of one of our own, at the curse of being the person who I was alongside the people who I was with — dogs tearing at each other with owners who made money off our blood and ignorance. But I kept quiet, like I always do.

Raya and I spent the night at her parent's house rewatching Senna (for her it was her third, me my seventh). There was a man who knew pain. Determination. Speed.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Raya said.

Rain, broken gearboxes, FIA politics, it didn't matter. He fought, struggled, and won three titles in that Marlboro-red machine of his. No excuses.

“About w-what?” I asked.

“I heard what happened to your classmate,” Raya said. “Was he a friend of yours?”

“No, he w-wasn't. I n-never m-m-met the kid.”

Ayrton did not fall under the weight of the world. Rather, he picked it up and pressed it high above his shoulders, taking all of Brazil with him.

“This is why F1 is so aw-awes-some,” I said, waving my hands at the flatscreen. “As-s long as you had grit and s-s-s-marts you can make it.”

“You also need millions of dollars and a racing career pre-the-age-of-ten,” Raya added.

“Tim, are you sure you don't want to talk about it?”

“There's nothing to s-say.”

She held my hand and leaned on my shoulder. The kiss happened on its own, but it wasn't the fireworks I expected, more so, it was the dullness of flesh touching flesh. The mystery of romance and love vanished, and in its place was a nothing. A sensation to keep in my mental background along with my constantly exhausted Dad and the mom I only knew from stories told. Like plastic flamingos in a garden as bountiful as Versailles. Yet buried under this plastic kiss, there seemed to be a seed of gold.

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At 1:00 pm every weekday, I spent an hour in the ninth circle of hell that was American History. The lesson that day touched on some unimportant nonsense about the Eighth Amendment or whatever. The dust trickled speck by speck from Mr. Rabinowitz's chalkstick and onto the tray like cocaine rain — a more exciting event than his turtle-like ho-hum which said: "...nnn'd soo that's haoow in thuh case of Fuurman versus Ge-or-ge-ia..." and so on and yadda yadda.

Usually, a few kids would talk or joke which, for once, would brighten up my mood. However, the entire class was all wandering eyes and sleeping heads, and not a voice other than Rabinowitz's own. Even the girl that was usually the loudest, Tyra, sat unusually quietly in the back — that was until, out of nowhere, she burst into hysterics:

"I GOT HIM KILLED I GOT HIM KILLED WHY WHY WHY?!"

Stares and held breaths suffocated the room. Even the teacher stood frozen at the board, chalk-hand suspended in the air, droopy lower lip with the shiny puddle of spit kept stiller than a statue's. And so he stayed as Tyra bawled and bawled. Actually — no, she snarled as tears and snot poured out of her. She bared her teeth. Her eyes turned redder than they did pink. From snarls to screams, screams to gasps, just when you thought Tyra wrung herself dry with grief, another wave came and again through the cycle she went. It seemed forever when Ms. Hathaway from the neighboring class came in the room, put her arms around Tyra and escorted her out.

I excused myself from the bathroom but instead of going I followed the two down the hall from a distance and hid around a corner in the hallway once they stopped to talk.

“I’m the reason Corey’s dead,” Tyra sobbed.

“It’s okay Tyra. It’s not your fault.”

“But it is. If I didn’t cheat on James, he wouldn’t have shot — oh if James wasn’t so mean all the time, if he wasn’t such a damn hothead —”

“There there, it’s okay.”

A shoulder bumped into mine. It was Henry.

“Watch where you’re going dickhead,” he said, shoving me against the wall.

I was about to speak and stutter when I saw it. Those glass eyes of his which stared not at or even through me, but into an empty world only he could see. It was subtle, but it was there. His gaze which slightly offset to the left of me, the quieter-than-usual inflection of his “dickhead”, as if he ran out of energy near the end of his sentence and barely managed to spit it out. Seeing his masquerade falter gave me a hint of Schadenfreude. I even found myself hoping Henry heard his friend die painfully, slow and with the most graphic detail, brain matter and all. Cruel, I know, but were they not cruel to me?

He walked away. I walked the opposite direction. We both never talked again afterwards.

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Sunday morning, the day of the Azerbaijan Grand Prix (and three days before Raya's birthday), we studied over at my house while Dad worked at the burger joint. We sat on the couch with books open on the coffee table but with eyes on the TV. Raya leaned her head against her hand, silent, in a world of her own, piercings reflecting the colors of the race.

"Are y-you okay?" I asked.

With unblinking eyes staring at the carpet she sighed. "My brother's appeal got denied."

"I'm s-sorry-y to hear that."

"It's like they don't even care. Life is just another statistic to them. 'Who's got time for the negros? I've got a game to catch, dinner to eat, women to fuck.' These white folks don't give a damn about us."

"W-what about a-affirmative action? S-scholarships? Pride months?"

She lifted her head off her hand and turned to me. Bloodshot eyes like deathspikes.

Why the hell did I open my mouth?

"Seriously?" Raya said. "Did you just say that? These rich motherfuckers give out of self-interest. Their 'charity' is business, it's them saying: 'If I give you this much, I buy the right not to be bothered. So when I give, stay in your little ratholes and keep your sadness away from me. Affirmative action my ass.'"

"Raya," I said. "The entire world isn't out to get us."

She scoffed. "If they want to hurt the innocent, fine. Two can play at that game. We should burn it down. Burn it all the fuck down, innocent whities be damned. That's the only way to clean the giant mess they made. Kill em all and let the bodies rot in the dirt."

“Then what?”

“Then we build something new. Something better.”

I desperately searched the TV screen for a different topic — race predictions, F1 memes, anything other than the hellfire and rage we were on. But nothing but half-formed ideas came to me.

I went to the kitchen cabinet to grab some nachos. Then the refrigerator for salsa.

“Shit,” I said.

“What,” she said.

“No more s-salsa. I have to go to the c-corner store down the street. Wanna come?”

“I actually have to study,” Raya said. “I can wait though.”

As I walked to the store, the things Raya raved on about bounced around in my head: Prisons, the system, the world. Is everywhere and every day a cage which endlessly fluctuate in size? Is freedom a lie? How does one live with the lack of control? Some people learned to love their chains while other broke their teeth biting their way out of them. Which group am I in? For the longest time I had believed a large majority of blacks were like dumb beasts — mistaking their flesh for shackles as they tore and ripped until they choked on blood. But as I fought through the days my mind stayed inside the yard of the familiar. And here I am, still fighting, still biting, still bleeding. What do I do about it? What can I do? Perhaps the others suffer like I do, and they hide it behind strength and violence not to attack but to defend. Maybe...maybe I'm not different from the others. I mean I am, but at the same time maybe I'm not. Maybe.

I didn't even remember going to store until I return to the front step with a jar of salsa in my hand.

I opened the door. Raya's face was stone. Her leg bounced feverishly. If looks could talk, her glare spat fucking blood into my eyes. I wasn't sure what I did, but then I saw it.

The red notebook in her hand, open to the passage which started with, *I wish I were white...*

My heart divebombed into my stomach.

"Tim," she said. "What is this?"

There was so much I wanted to say. But the words refused to come out.

"I asked you a question Tim. What. Is. This."

"L-l-l-let's n-not get into, into, into, into, into t-t-this."

"No, let's get right the hell into it."

"I don't have to...to-to-to-to...to-to...to-to-to-to-to."

"To to to tuh tuh what? Spit it out Porky!"

"I don't have to-to explain myself!"

"Yes you do!" she shouted, slamming the notebook onto the coffee table. "Explain this you Uncle Tom ass bitch."

And just like that, the turbulence in my head ceased — the boat stopped rocking — as if I reached the eye of the storm. I was nothing. A peaceful uncaring nothing.

"Because I'm tired," I said. "I'm exhausted of all the excuses, the misery, the crying, the hypocrisy. All it is is excuses and excuses! The Jews, the Irish, the Italians, nobody complains like we do. When they ate shit, they picked themselves up and made something of themselves! But not us!"

“First off, you gotta shout if you wanna be heard, shit that’s what those Jews, Irish, and Italians did. Second, where the hell have you been for the past few centuries? All we did was claw and fight for our place.”

“Yes, back then, but now it’s all noise and pretense. Don’t shoot us, let us do it ourselves. Don’t label us, we ‘gangbangers’ have that covered. Don’t call us violent, or else we’ll loot your store and break your windows. If we stuck to peace, we’d be seen as equals to them.”

“If we stuck to peace we’d still be in chains,” Raya said. “So that’s it, you’re tired?”

“Yes! It’s exhausting being a part of this...tribe. Vote blue or you’re not black. Listen to rap or you’re not black. While my dad’s working himself to death and I’m getting pissed on, I’m getting told what and what not to do. Can’t I just be me without my skin color being used to serve a political point? Can’t I just be me without being a part of some stupid hivemind?”

“No one’s telling you to do these things but I’ll tell you what’s stupid. These...these weak-ass arguments you’re giving if you can even call them that. Life isn’t a binary bunch of ones and zeroes. It’s dense, complicated, nuanced.”

“Is that what you tell yourself when you think about your brother, John?” I asked. “Cause the way you talk about him seems binary to me.”

Her already-hateful glare hardened into something murderous. “Do not go there. I am fucking warning you.”

“Have you thought maybe John deserves to be in prison? Maybe he isn’t as innocent as you think he is? Maybe he killed Anthony because they had a fight that got out of control and things got violent. I get it, he’s your brother, but maybe you should implement some of that nuance you’ve been preaching into your own life. I admit I don’t know your brother and I don’t know what happened, but guess what, neither do you. There are only two people that know what happened that day: one is behind bars while the other’s rotting in the dirt.”

Before I knew it, I was on my back with a nose that began to leak blood. Raya straddled me — her face a mass of protruding veins, contorted skin, and clanking face jewelry — and wailed on me.

When I restrained her arms, she spit in my face.

When I slapped her off me, she scratched and bit my hands as I stood up to block her attacks.

When I went to shove her with my left, at the last moment my hand closed and I punched her in the solar plexus. Suddenly, she curled over holding her chest, face frozen in a shocked expression as if she were ready to cry.

All the air left the room.

“Raya, I-I didn’t—”

She ran, but instead of out of the front door like I expected she went to the bathroom.

After thirty minutes of pacing around and with no word from Raya, I walked to the bathroom door. I raised my hand to knock, then decided against it. What do you do in this situation? I didn’t know. I sighed. I turned around with my back leaning against the door and slid down to a sitting position. I wondered if she sat like I did on the other side.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m sorry for h-hitting you. I’m sorry for saying those th-things. I’m sorry for b-b-being me.”

For the longest time there was quiet. I bounced the back of my head against the door, cursing myself for letting this get out of control.

“I’m no saint,” she said from the other side. “I hit first. You were only defending yourself. I’m sorry for exploding on you. You...you didn’t deserve that.”

“I lo-liked you a l-lot,” I said.

“Heh liked,” she said. “Past tense.”

“Like is what I mean to s-s-say.”

“Well, I like and liked you too,” she said. “It was good while it lasted.”

“Is it over?” I asked. “This thing b-between us?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know how to end this.”

“I don’t know e-either.”

“Should we end this?”

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do I. I don’t know.”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know.”

END

