

1.

This world is on fire. It's on fire and I don't know what to do. I can't make the world happy. I can't make the world love one another. But at the same time, I can't retreat to my corner and huddle in the darkness. And even though I learned many years ago that I can't change the world, I do what I can do.

I shake a lot of hands. I ask everyone I meet how their day is going. I hold doors for every person I meet. I get a lot of warm smiles in return. People tell me their life story and what's on their minds. They seem to be a little better off for the exchange. That's all I can do. I think people are pretty good taken one at a time.

Likewise, I firmly believe in simple childhood rules that we are all ingrained with. I believe in "do unto others as you would have them do unto you". I believe in "run away and live to play another day". I believe in "if you can't say something nice, then don't say anything at all." These have been my guiding principles my entire life.

Yet, I do have an incident in my distant past where I fell off the wagon and these rules were tossed out the window. And even though it happened when I was only twelve years old, it still haunts me. I've kept it buried for decades. I've never told my parents or even my wife of twenty-one years. But right now, I'm going to tell you. I'm going to tell you before it suffocates my soul. I'm going to tell you, be done with it and go on with life for good or bad. I'm going to tell you before I myself ignite into flames just like this old world we live in.

It all started some thirty-eight years ago in a small Texas town on the wrong side of Houston. It started in that small Texas town on the wrong side of Houston on the wrong side of the railroad tracks.

It started on South Fourth Street.

2.

South Fourth Street was where I grew up. It's where my best buddies I've ever had grew up too. There on South Fourth Street in the shadows of Houston. Our fathers worked hard and sweated all day, but they made decent money. They drank hard and smoked hard. But they got up at four every morning and went to work. They got all our lazy asses up every Sunday morning and made sure we all went to church. Our mothers kept us in line with the back of side of their hands during summer days and when that didn't work there was always the thunderous threat of "wait until your father gets home."

During the summer, we were outside at the crack of dawn and didn't come back until after dark. We rode our bicycles, played baseball, basketball and football.

We also had a magical place on South Fourth Street we simply called "The Woods". The Woods was a large section of our neighborhood that had an old house at the back of it. Nobody had lived in the house for decades. The house roof had fallen in. Large trees and bushes had grown up in the yard. The yard was at least the size of two or three football fields. It was thick and dark even in the middle of the afternoon. It seemed like you could walk and wander through the woods forever without reaching the other side. The ground was soft from decades of leaves and needles.

And The Woods were our domain. We played cowboys and Indians in the woods. We played cops and robbers there. We built forts and read our comic books in The Woods. It was our world. No parents or outsiders allowed.

But perhaps before I go any further, I should tell you just who "we" were. We were all twelve years old. And there were five of us on South fourth Street. We had known each other our whole lives and were inseparable. We did everything together. There was me, I'm David Edwards. There was my next-door neighbor, Shane Little. There was his cousin Robert Stanley and there were the twins Marvin and Kenneth Goodson.

It was a great time and place to be a sixth grader. We were the Lords of Our domain. But then, just one week before the end of the school year, that world came tumbling down. A stranger moved into the neighborhood.

3.

It was the Friday before the last week of school. We were sitting at the back of the bus on the way home from school and were planning out our summer. The bus came to our stop and all five of us got up and walked out the door and started down the street. And there he was standing and staring at us.

He was standing on the road in front of The Woods. We didn't know who he was or where he came from. We didn't know how old he was. He was standing there on the corner in front of The Woods and The Twins house, smoking a cigarette watching us as we came down the street. He must have been about six foot two inches tall and weighed 250 pounds. He had a scraggly black beard and moustache. Whoever he was, we gave him a wide berth and moved to the other side of the road.

He ran up next to us and then stepped in front of us. We stopped. He dropped his cigarette and crushed it out on the pavement. He let out his last puff of smoke. "Listen," he said in a deep raspy voice.

We looked at one another.

"Look at me you little pussies," he said again. "This is my road now. This is my neighborhood. I've been watching you little nimrod fuckers since I moved in and I don't want to see you around. Fuck off and bug off. Or I'll shoot you little pricks with my 357 Magnum."

We stood frozen in our tracks.

He stepped aside and said, "Now get the fuck out of my face!"

We started galloping. When we were halfway down the road, the new stranger started throwing rocks at us yelling, "Run you little fuckers, run home to mommy you little pussies!"

I got hit in the back of the head, he hit the twins in their back. We ran like hell to our houses.

4.

Shane Little called me on the phone Saturday morning.

“Hey man. What the hell is happening with this guy?” I said.

“Did you see how huge that he was?” asked Shane.

“Yeah, who the hell is he?” I asked.

“I asked my mom, my mom asked around and I’ve got the scoop.”

“Well, what is it?” I asked.

“He’s bad news. Really bad news. His name is Calvin Wingate. He’s living over on eighth street.”

“Eighth Street?” I asked, “What the hell is he doing over on our road?”

“I think he means to stake a claim. My mom said he’s living with his grandmother. His dad is in prison. His mom is dead, and he just got out of Juvenile Detention in Houston.”

“Holy Hell, Juvenile Detention. He looks like he’s 25 years old!”

“He’s only fifteen. My mom heard that he’s going to be starting high school next year.

“Oh shit, you mean he’s here to stay?”

“Apparently,” said Shane.

“What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know,” said Shane. “Can you call The Twins and let them know? I’ll call Robert and let him know.”

“OK, I’ll do that.” I replied.

I hung up the phone, called the Twins and passed the news on to them.

Our world on South Fourth Street had been shaken. And not only had it been shaken, but it was about to be crumbled and destroyed.

5.

The joy of the last week of school before summer was tempered by the fact that we had a new tormenter waiting for us at the bus stop every day of that week.

Monday it was rocks again.

Tuesday, he walked beside us with a long trench coat on telling us that if he saw our ugly faces hanging around on his road, he would shoot us with his “357 Magnum”

Wednesday, he wasn't there. We walked down the road on alert looking around. It was Kenneth who got hit first in the back, “Holy Shit, “said Kenneth, “What was that?”

Before we had time to figure it out, Marvin got hit in the leg. Shane got hit in the back of the head. Robert and I got hit in legs.

Suddenly, out of the bushes of Mrs. Wilson's house, Calvin stood up with a long gun and said, “Better start running you pussies, I'm re-loading!”

I could see him pumping the lever on an air gun. He must have been shooting his pellet at us.

We interrupted our casual pace and conversation and scattered throughout the neighborhood. Calvin drew a bead on poor Shane and started pelting him. He hit Shane in the back. You could hear each shot come out the end of the barrel. Ping!

Shane fell over, he got up again. Calvin stood up and pumped his air gun, aimed and shot at Shane again. Shane grabbed his leg and kept running. He made it to his driveway. He ran up the driveway. I saw Calvin aim again and take one more potshot at Shane. He hit him in the back again as he fell into his front door.

We somehow made it safely into each of our houses.

I looked out my bedroom window trying to catch my breath. I looked at this new kid Calvin standing in the middle of the road. He was pumping his pellet gun. He pumped it full of air, he took aim at Mrs. Wilson's cocker spaniel and shot poor little Buffy right in the side. Buffy ran off yelping and squealing. He walked off laughing.

I asked my mom if she could pick us all up in the station wagon Thursday and Friday. She didn't ask why.

So, we all made it to the end of sixth grade safely the rest of the week.

I cowered in my house that weekend wondering if there was any summer to be had. I looked out the window. I couldn't see any of the guys out in the neighborhood either.

I was safe for now. How long, I didn't know. And what kind of terror waited for us out there in the form of Calvin Wingate, I wasn't sure of. I didn't have to wait long to find out.

6.

We talked on the phone. We didn't go outside. There was no summer baseball, no summer bike riding, no running in the woods. No fishing down at the river from the boat ramps. I went out to my back yard and played basketball every evening. I felt safe around the confines of an eight-foot privacy fence. I played basketball and listened to my radio from late in the evening until dark.

But one night that June, while I was there shooting hoops, Calvin jumped over the fence. He jumped over the fence and ran over to me. He stood there in front of me on my backyard basketball court, staring me down. I dropped my basketball. He had heavy boots on beneath that trench coat. He moved closer, he stood on my feet with his heavy boots and body frame. "Listen," he said, "You say a word, you scream, you peep, you piss, and I'm going to kill you." He opened the right side of his trench coat, and I saw a silver pistol in a leather holster attached over his shoulder on his body.

"Walk..." he commanded as he pointed to the gate on the far side of our yard.

I walked. I got to the gate he opened it.

"Keep walking." He said.

"Where are we going?"

"Shut the fuck up, you nimrod." He said.

We walked across the road, down South Fourth Street, through the ditch and he prodded me into the end of The Woods. He marched me to the back where the old house was. He kicked the door in.

He pulled me towards an old wooden table. He tied my hands to a table leg. He wrapped duct tape around my mouth.

Then he pulled my shoes, jeans and underwear off my legs. I was so filled with terror, I had lost my voice and ability to scream.

I heard him take his trench coat off, unbuckle his belt and unzip his jeans.

And you know what, I don't need to describe the details of what he did to me any further other than to say that I had to let my spirit leave my body and find another place for my soul to hide while it was all happening.

When he was done, he untied my hands. I put my clothes back on. I ripped the tape off my face. He took the pistol out of the holster, cocked it and put the barrel on the temple of my head. "Listen here, little fucker," He said. I could smell smoke and whiskey on his breath.

"Listen," he repeated. "You say one god damned fucking word about this to anyone and I will kill you with my .357 Magnum. I'll break into your house in the middle of the night. I'll kill you and your Daddy in your sleep. I'll fucking rape your mother and then kill her too. So not a fucking, word. You understand, asshole?"

I nodded.

We walked off into the darkness of The Woods.

I ran as fast as I could out of The Woods, down the road to my house. I looked at my watch. It was 8:30 pm. There was still a little light outside. I ran to my room and hid under my blankets on the bed. In the morning I got in the shower and washed my body until the hot water supply had been depleted.

7.

I didn't leave the confines of my house for the next two weeks. I stayed in my room. I played video games. I watched T.V. I made appearances for supper every night with my parents and made small talk. They didn't seem to think anything was going on. That was just how I wanted it to be.

Then suddenly towards the end of June, in the middle of the night. I heard a tapping at my window. I woke up and jumped out of bed. I ran to the closet, the tapping continued. Holy shit I was thinking to myself, he's come back for me in the middle of the night.

But then I heard a familiar voice, "Dave. Dave, it's me. Open it up.

It was Shane Little. I looked at the alarm clock. It was 1:30 in the morning. I inched over to the window, opened the curtains and saw Shane in the moonlight. His cousin Robert was with him as well as The Twins.

I cracked the window, "Shane, what the hell is going on?" I asked.

"Dave, let us in. We need to talk."

I fully opened the window and they all crawled into my room from outside.

8.

So, there we all were in my room at 1:30 in the morning-me, Shane, Robert and The Twins. Once they had situated themselves on the floor I asked, “So, what the hell is this all about?”

“You know what this is all about, David.” Said Kenneth.

“I do?” I replied.

“Yes. The hell you do know.”

I looked at them all with a blind stare, enlarged my eyes and shrugged my shoulders.

“This is about Calvin,” said Shane.

“What about him?” I asked.

“You know he’s got to us all. Took us out there in The Woods. Shane motioned to the wall of my room adjacent to The Wood.”

I moved my arms across one another and said, “I don’t want to fucking talk about that.”

“None of us do,” said Marvin. “But something’s got to be done about him.”

“What the hell can we do.” I asked. “You’ve seen that damned hand cannon he carries in his trench coat.”

“Look, David. He’s got us all. And he’ll get us again. But what’s worse is I saw him trying to pull Robert’s little sister into The Woods a couple of days ago?” said Shane.

“Little Melissa? My gosh she’s only five years old? What happened?”

“He probably would have gotten her out there too but just about the time he was pulling her that direction, Mr. and Mrs. Harmon pulled in the driveway, stood outside their cars and gave him a really long suspicious glare. He patted little Melissa on the head like the fucker he is and let her go back to riding her tricycle. I was watching all through my bedroom window.”

“Something has got to be done about him before he gets to everyone, David.” Said Kenneth.

“What do y’all have in mind?” I asked.

Marvin spoke up, “Well, we got to get him out the in The Woods.”

“And then? “I asked.

“And then, we beat the hell out of him. We don’t kill him, but we are fucking pummel and terrorize him, so he’ll never touch any of us again or look at our little sisters.”

“So how do we do this? “I asked.

“Robert has it all figured out, “said Marvin. He turned to Robert.

Everyone looked at the middle of my room towards Robert. He unzipped a backpack. He took a package of long tube socks out.

“Socks.” I said. “Are we going to suffocate him?”

And then he took some large brick like objects out.

“What’s that I said?”

“It’s a huge bar of soap.”

“That’s one damn big bar of soap,” Said Shane.

“It’s camp soap, they’re like huge as bricks.” Said Robert.

Robert then proceeded to take a sock out of the package, he dropped the bar of soap into the sock. He wrapped the sock around his hand, slung back his arm and came over head like he as pitching a baseball and let the loaded sock hit my desk chair.

“We lure his out to The Woods, we tackle him and beat the shit out of his with these.” Said Robert, “We beat the shit out of him and he’ll never bother us again.”

“One of us will lure him out there. The rest of us will be loaded, ready to tackle and beat the crap out of him.”

“Who’s going to bait him and into The Woods, “asked Shane.

We all looked at one another for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, I said, “I’ll do it”

“When are we doing this? I added.

“Let’s do it Saturday evening, about an hour before sunset.” Said Robert.

“You lure him out there. We’ll be waiting in the house at the back of The Woods. When y’all come in, we’ll tackle him and let him have it,” said Robert. “We’ll have a loaded sock waiting for you.”

“So, it’s settled then?” I asked.

“It’s settled.” Said Robert.

9.

Saturday arrived. I watched the clock all day. At 7:30 PM I called the guys and made sure they were on their way. They left their houses, I looked out my back window and saw them scurry through the ravine at the back of our neighborhood and into The Woods. A few more minutes passed. I knew they were in place. All I had to do was go to my front yard and wait.

I stepped out on the front porch. I walked down the driveway. Calvin appeared out of nowhere. He approached; I ran. He ran even faster. I ran as fast as I could to the edge of The Woods. He caught up with me. He grabbed my right arm and hammer locked it behind my back and pushed with in.

“Where the fuck do you think you are running to you little pecker-face.”

I didn't answer.

He pushed me harder, over the vines and bushes and around trees. Sticker vines stuck to my jeans.

“Go fast, you fucker. Go faster or I'll shoot you with my .357 Magnum.”

He pushed me up the rotting steps of the house in The Woods.

We lunged into the house. He threw me onto the bed. My face was planted in the moldy old mattress. And then I heard a thud, the floor of the old house shook.

I turned around. Calvin was on the ground. The guys were laying into him with their slings. Robert tossed a weapon to me.

They hit him on the head. They hit him in the stomach. They hit him in his rib cage. They hit him right in the crotch where it counts. He balled up on the floor and didn't say a word.

I reached down, thrust my hand in his trench coat and grabbed the pistol. I grabbed it. I ran to the back of the house and threw it out the window. I ran back to the front of the house and grabbed the sock sling.

I came over my shoulder with my weapon and hit Calvin in the face. I hit him in his ribs. And I hit him on his legs. I hurled again and again, sometimes hitting him sometimes missing him.

Finally, Calvin begin to cry. He cried. He screamed out for his mother. He screamed out for his grandmother. He asked us to stop. He said “Please, please guys, quit it. I can’t take it anymore. Please, please, please.”

One by one, we quit hurling our weapons. First me, then Robert, then Shane and finally The Twins. We stood around Calvin there on that old creaky floor in The Woods. He was sobbing and barely conscious.

Robert kicked him a few times and then spit upon him. “Don’t you ever even fucking look at my sister again, you got that, Calvin!”

Calvin was silent.

Robert kicked him again and said, “Did you hear me, you fucker? Don’t ever look at my little sister again.”

Calvin sobbed we heard him say in a low whisper, “I won’t, I won’t.”

“C’mon, guys, let’s get the hell out of here.” Said Robert.

We ran single file out of The Woods and when we were back on the pavement of South Fourth Street we scattered off into our respective houses.

I watched in the fading summer evening light through my window. I saw Calvin hobble out of The Woods cradling his left arm in his right, He walked down South Fourth Street, turned on Avenue D and headed out of view.

We never saw Calvin Wingate again. We never talked about that evening again. None of our parents ever mentioned it to us. We’d go on and find other places to hang out in play on South Fourth Street, but we never went out into The Woods again. We graduated from High School and never talked about it again. Some of went to college. We all got jobs and families of our own. We get together from time to time at our favorite Mexican restaurant. We still don’t mention The Woods of Calvin Wingate. We all just turned fifty years old, and we’ve never

mentioned Calvin Wingate. We've never mentioned him. But I know, he's back there in our memory still haunting each one of us.

10.

I drive through the old neighborhood often. It's not what it used to be. I see faces, I don't know them. All the faces that I know have long moved away or have died. The houses that they lived in have been painted and remodeled. The trees that we climbed and had our treehouses in have been blown over by hurricanes. The house that I grew up in is vacant and lonely. No one has lived there for fifteen years. But some mysterious owner, keeps the lawn manicured and well-kept.

And The Woods...The Woods. Many years after the incident, some bulldozers showed up. They plowed down The Woods. Excavators piled the trees high in a stack. They pushed over that old house, they added it's rotting wood to the pile, the flames burned and smoldered for days. Mixers came and poured concrete. They built a Circle K convenient store and gas station there. I suppose it's an improvement. But my youthful soul inside my middle age mind can't help but look over that business and still see The Woods, and all the fun we had back there, and how for a few short weeks in June 1982, we were terrorized in It's shadow. We were terrorized until we took matter in our own hands and then committed that horrible atrocity against Calvin.

And I've lived with that forever. And now I've told you. It's out there. The world knows. It's no longer my secret. My soul feels a little lighter, yet not totally unburdened. I've often felt that if hell is an actual place, a special chair might be waiting for me there for what I did to poor Calvin all those years ago.

I would never try to search him out on the internet or social media, but if for some reason, I ran into Calvin somewhere in my old hometown, I'd reach out and offer him my hand. I would tell him, I forgive him. I'd tell him that the war is over. And then, I would ask if he could forgive me. And if he forgave me, my soul could possibly rest at ease then. And only then.