

An Eighth Grade Hootenanny

By Nick Kaminsky

When you're in junior high, you have to learn how to make your own fun. It's a pretty miserable age to be sometimes because it seems like you can't do anything. You don't have your license, so you're forced to have your parents drive you everywhere (and what else could POSSIBLY ruin a cute little teenage date quicker than having your parents drive you to the place you're going, and letting them know exactly where you'll be when they have to come pick you up, and yes, yes mom, my cell phone is on, okay?) you can't stay out late, and you can't even get into R-rated movies, hell, I couldn't even rent R-rated movies when I was at a friend's house. For me, being thirteen was an awkward age for so many reasons (surprisingly puberty wasn't one of them...shit, I really hope I hit that soon). For me, it was the first time I was ever old enough to want the freedom to do what I wanted, but didn't get it, which led to countless nights of me and my best friend Brett sitting around at my house listening to Blink 182 records and complaining that he had nothing to do, stuck in a house with parents around

My only salvation was Brett's house. His folks divorced a long time ago and his mother worked as a part-time flight attendant, so one or two weekends a month she would fly to some exotic and fantastic place; going to Germany, Rome, Spain, all the while leaving us behind in what seemed to be the most fucking boring suburb on the face of the planet. In eighth grade Brett was finally able to stay at home by himself and wasn't shipped to Brett's mother's creepy friend Laura-Sue's house (a strange, dumpy, divorced, middle-aged woman who was a religious fanatic and popped Prozac like they were tic-tacs).

Once Brett was freed from the never-ending psychosis of Laura-Sue (oh, who by the way was really just named Laura, but arbitrarily added the hyphen and the Sue one day because she liked it...fucking weird woman) it opened up all new sorts of possibilities to having fun. I started sleeping over at Brett's house every time his mother would leave the country (of course I always told my parents that she was home). We'd stay up late, play our music loud, ride our bikes over to our friend's houses, invite people over, try to get girls to hang out with us (which NEVER worked), smoke cigarettes, and rent R-rated movies on his mother's Blockbuster card without the stupid age restrictions (one night we rented Friday! And Next Friday! And had ourselves a hell of a little marathon! Another night we rented Showgirls...but I swear it was just for the articles).

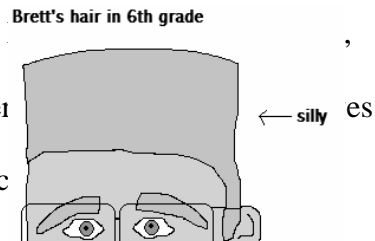
It was just nice not having to answer to anyone, doing what we wanted and when.

I remember one warm night from the beginning of my eighth grade. It was Saturday night, and like many Saturday nights, Brett's mother was probably flirting and drinking with Italian men half her age, and I was sitting comfortably on the meticulously cleaned white tile floor in Brett's kitchen. The entire kitchen had this remarkably elaborate red chili-pepper design to it. Chili-pepper magnets, notepads, salt and pepper shakers, and silverware. Even the fucking arms of their ceiling fan were chili peppers. We sat there, heads moving around in a bored blur. We had yet to think of what to do with our night.

"We could..." Brett trailed off. He thought again. When Brett thinks really hard it looks like it hurts him. He looks like a mix of extremely vexed and like someone is poking him really, really hard in his ribs. "Or..." He stopped again. I hoped he was

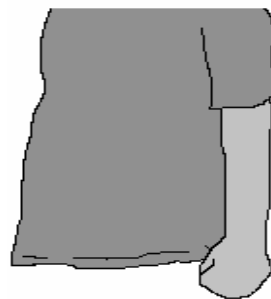
going to stop trying so hard, I was afraid he was going to have an embolism in his big head.

Brett was of average teenage height, skinny and lanky. His hair is remarkably thick, and naturally grows upwards, into this fantastically awful looking blonde-haired flattop. When he was in 6th grade his hair used to reach upwards four or five inches above his head (he looked like the real life, eleven-year-old, boy-version of Marge Simpson). By eighth grade, however, he had managed to get his hair shaggy and frizzy. When his hair got long it grew all over his head and making him look like he should be out of a Peanut's commercial.



I, on the other hand, was not skinny, nor lanky, nor tall (*I had normal hair...but I used so much gel that my head felt like a cold, wet, sticky mash of desperation to look cool...and it reeked*). I was rather...I suppose chubby is an accurate word, but used in it's most extremity. My cheeks were plump and I used to walk with a slouch to try and hide my chest that I found embarrassingly similar to all the girls in my same grade. So there was that.

My tubby torso



“Why don’t we rent a movie?” I asked, feeling exasperation coming on shortly.

“I don’t have any money,” Brett said without moving his head to make eye contact with me.

“Oh... Yeah I don’t really have a lot of money either,” which was a lie. I had money, but I didn’t want to rent anything unless we were gonna go halvesies on it (in addition to being a husky little guy I was also remarkably cheap...in fact I’m still remarkably cheap, I’m the kind of asshole who will go to a party with their friends, not buy a cup, and then wait until my friends are tipsy enough to let me keep borrowing it...but back to it). “Why don’t we just walk around?”

Brett got his uncomfortable look on his face, but this one looked more like he was pondering something of dire importance, and sort of like something smelled really badly around him. It might’ve, I don’t know. His brow was furrowed and his forehead was wrinkled, his eyes were squinty and darting back and forth in uncertainty. Then he nodded his head. “Yeah, yeah that could be good. Where do you want to walk?”

“You know the area better.”

“We’ll just walk around my neighborhood. We’ll try to avoid the bad spots.”

“Cool!” We got up, put our shoesie-shoes on and walked right out that front door. Before I left I noticed the digital clock on the shiny clean microwave said 9:59pm. We were gone.

Now there’s something to know about Brett’s neighborhood. It’s like a big circle, and the ring around the circle that is on the outside was really nice, regular suburban neighborhoods with normal old town homes. But the inside of the circle was actually surprisingly scarier to walk through, hence Brett saying we would avoid the “bad spots.”

Now don't get me wrong, we still were walking in pretty middle/working class areas, but still. There's a park that is only two or three blocks by Brett's house where we used to go and shoot hoops or waste time hanging out on the equipment late at night until earlier that year when we heard about a man being killed on the corner only feet away from the park with a shotgun. After we heard about more things like that we proceeded with caution around those areas.

(note: the park is located
inside the bad part)

The night air was crisp and warm. The end of August made me sad, but I still happy to be outside while it lasted. It was a nice old walk, me and Brett were having. On this particular occasion we had found a pack of his mother's cigarettes and had each taken two (Of course, at the time we didn't know that smoking Virginia Slims Ultra Lights made us look like two most metrosexual little kids who attended District 54). We always just laughed, shot the shit, talked about what girl's we pined for (although at the time I think the language was a tad bit more vulgar than 'pine'....god, we probably used the term 'pork' on more than one occasion. I don't know why I'm telling you this), and what guys we fuckin' hated. Oh and there plenty of those. Not that we really thought we were better than anyone, but damn, did a lot of stupid people annoy us.

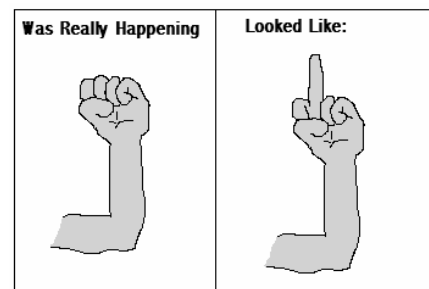
This particular night we were talking about one particular fucker that had been bugging us since like, the fifth grade (I don't want to say his name for safety and legal reasons, so for the story I'll refer to him as Lieutenant Tool). He was annoying and

jocky, made stupid jokes and always laughed at them, and had bad teeth. Brett was getting really riled up talking about him, I loved Brett when he really gets going on something, he was like a caricature of a mad person, all cartoonish and cute.

“Man I wanna kick his ass!” Brett didn’t really want to get into a fight with him, it’ just fun to talk. “You know what I’d do to him?” He asked laughingly.

“What?”

“I’d give the little bastard a fuckin’ uppercut man! Right to the bottom of his chin!” Now, I know what an uppercut looks like. I play Mortal Kombat, okay? But Brett decided he need to demonstrate what an uppercut really was, so, with all his might, leaned forward and delivered the air a powerful uppercut with his left hand and yelled out a loud karate yell, “Yeeeeeeaaaaahhhhhhh!” He held the position and laughed. I laughed too. The bad thing, however, is that with his arm and hand in that position, it looked suspiciously similar to giving someone the finger for a prolonged period of time. And unfortunately for us, a car was driving right past us when Brett was in his prolonged flip-off stance.



The car was a large SUV, a GMC Jimmy. It was dark blue, and seemed even darker in the night lighting. It seemed *even* darker because all of its windows were tinted black, so I couldn’t see shit inside. The tires rested several inches below the frame of the

car because the entirety of it was raised by loud and obvious hydraulics. It bounced around noisily, with a loud engine that sounded suped up or something (I wouldn't know I don't know anything about cars), and loud rap music blasted from several stereos. It looked intimidating-as-fuck.

I didn't even notice how suspicious Brett's finger placement looked at the time, and just chuckled on and thought how satisfying it would be to bust Lieutenant Tool's chin, but Brett froze dead in his steps soon after the car drove past us. Brett knows the area WAY better than me, and is always much calmer too. If I ever heard a dog bark two blocks away I'd be sure that it was some unknown force, a burglar, a serial killer, a pirate, who knows what, ready to kill us any way he knew how. It wasn't until I looked at Brett not reacting at all to the noise that I knew it would be okay. But Brett was reacting. He was looking at the car and he looked scared. I KNEW we were fucked.

I immediately panicked and looked in the direction that Brett's eyes had gone in. He was looking at the big Jimmy with hydraulics that had just parked no more than twenty feet away on the side of the road that was not near anything else, and wasn't even a parking zone. At the same time, I think, Brett and I realized what had just transpired and what his fingers looked like. Oh shit, I thought. We waited, petrified, looking at the car. The car turned off. Oh shit, oh shit, I thought. Brett had already started inching away in the opposite direction. The car doors opened. OH SHIT OH SHIT OH SHIT. The two front doors open and one of the back doors. I freak out even more as I realize that there are at least three people in the car.

Before I figure anything else, Brett had already started running away (that little prick). I didn't wait around any longer to see what the guys looked like and I started

running in the same direction as Brett. Now...let's remember that I was about 5'5, and weighed probably about the same as my father did (obviously I didn't get his metabolism...thaaaanks, Mom). I couldn't run to save my life. In gym after the mile I was always the kid that his friends had to make sure was going to keep breathing if he lied down, I'd be all ready and covered in sweat (and I realized that in my Elementary school we didn't have official gym clothes and we just wore the clothes we had on for school, but if you think about it, that's really fucking gross to wear the same clothes you just ran a mile in, and in the sweltering heat of May no less. Being a little kid can be pretty gross).

Brett was already easily fifty feet in front of and picking up distance. I could barely see where he was turning, but I was always able to see his big hair dart in whatever direction he was going. I hated him for being able to run. I don't think I had been going for more than half a minute before I already had huge cramps in both sides of my stomach. I was red and sweaty and gross (and I'm pretty sure I didn't shower after this little run either, so I guess teenagers are pretty gross too).

We ran the five or six blocks back to Brett's house as quickly as we could, ran in the house and locked the doors. It really was a scary experience. We didn't know if those guys saw us, and more importantly, we didn't know if what Brett did had pissed them off a lot or not. We weren't even sure if there was anything chasing after us as we ran our thirteen-year-old-asses off. It all happened so quickly that we weren't able to respond normally and rationally. Everything snowballed in my head so quickly that running away as fast as I could seemed absolutely fucking necessary. The entire time I was running I kept getting these visions of these three or four huge motherfuckers

catching us and, well, to be honest, I figured they would beat the absolute shit out of me. I was never scared for my life, but I sure as hell didn't wanna get punched either (especially in the face, that shit hurts).

After that night we didn't go on as many "walks." If he had somewhere to go we didn't dilly-dally as much. But don't worry, shortly after we stopped walking around as much we discovered the beautiful and sacred joy of prank phone calls.