

## Virginia Slims and Irish Spring

The first time I met Tommy Little, he was beating up one of the sixth graders behind the back corner of the gym after school. I winced at the cracks of knuckle hitting ribs, bone colliding with bone, and I watched as countless repetitions of driving fists pounded the boy. I stood quiet, one foot on the ground to stabilize my red Cruiser bike, while the other coasted along the left pedal ready to propel me forward if Tommy headed in my direction. After his beating, the young boy limped away from Tommy like a wounded mutt, dragging his denim-covered right leg and glancing back every couple of steps to make sure he was not being followed. Tommy wiped his bloody knuckles, darkening his navy t-shirt, glanced upward to meet my eyes, and acknowledged me with a slight jerk of his blonde head before heading back towards the front of school.

I spent the next day inching around corners armored with my gray overcoat and red JanSport pack. As I stood at my locker shuffling through month-old papers in search of a Spanish verb tense worksheet, I sensed someone on the other side of my locker door. Taking an extra thirty seconds to find my worksheet, now shaped like a wilted airplane, I closed my locker door to come face to face with Tommy.

“You didn’t see nothing, alright?” he said, as he picked dirt and dried blood out from beneath his fingernails. “He had it coming, alright?” This time he looked straight at me with dagger-like eyes.

I could not help but wonder why Tommy Little needed affirmation from me that I would keep what I saw only to myself. Maybe it was because he knew if I said anything, he’d just beat me to a bloody mess too, but he could have waited until after school to find me outside and jostle

me a little, throw a couple of threats, send me home with wet pants and a bloody nose. Tommy's civil tone and almost beggar-like nature intrigued me, and so I quickly answered, "Yes, sir," like the military brat I was, and then stared below, taking in the sharp contrast of Tommy's battered Nikes with the new Sperrys Mom had gotten for me at the Belk in Charlotte.

"Thanks, man. I 'preciate it," and with that, Tommy turned on his heel and started walking in the opposite direction down the hall.

I went for weeks without speaking to Tommy, though I could not get him and his kind behavior towards me out of my head. I tried to bring it up to my best friend, Charlie, on the way home from the AV Club meeting, but he cut off my bike, looked me in the eyes, and said, "Nick, you really need to leave this mess alone. Instead of digging around, maybe you should be counting your blessings and rejoining the church because you have all your teeth and organs in the right places." I knew that Charlie was right, Tommy had a reputation for violence, and Mom would have my neck if I came home with a black eye, yet my curiosity persisted, and I found myself taking extra time to leave school every afternoon, hoping to catch Tommy and talk.

I could always smell Tommy before I saw him. As I biked around the cinderblock corner of the science building and out of the teachers' parking lot, I breathed in the familiar combination of Virginia Slims and Irish Spring. I made a donut in the lot and began heading back to the building like a bloodhound, seeking the owner of that distinctive scent.

Tommy was sitting in the grass behind the science building smoking a cigarette, breathing out the smoke through his nose like some fancy chick from a movie. I ditched my bike, so that I could observe in quiet, but Tommy had already seen me and gestured to me with one crooked finger.

“You wanna smoke, kid?” he asked, extending the Slim as easily as some kids shared candy. I denied his offer, knowing that I was already going to have to bike the long way home just to get the second-hand smoke out of my clothes *and* keep Mom at bay. He shrugged and continued to puff. “Why have you been following me,” he asked, in between cloudy breaths. “You shouldn’t be keeping friends with people like me.”

“I haven’t...I don’t follow you, and I don’t want to be friends.” Both of which were lies, but beyond the point. “I just wanna know, why were you nice to me? Why didn’t you beat the shit out of me after I saw what you did?”

Tommy’s face was distant and contemplative as he took one...two...three...puffs and blew each out in concentric rings. “And why the hell would I do that?” he asked in a serious tone. “What have you *ever* done to *anybody* that warrants a beating, kid?”

“But, I...”

“I told you. I beat up that kid because he deserved it, okay? He was messing with my friend’s kid sister, and I can’t have that going on here, okay? I don’t just go around beating people like that for kicks and giggles. I ain’t like that. I ain’t like him,” he said, quietening, like someone had dialed down his volume with a remote.

Tommy’s eyes looked inquisitive and sad, as if waiting for me to give him my blessing, so that he could carry on, and again, I wondered why Tommy Little was waiting for *my* approval. With each puff of smoke and questioning glance, Tommy became a more and more intriguing specimen that I wanted to dissect and discover, but that I was also too hesitant to touch. A boy I once saw as strong and alien was no more indestructible than fine china teetering on a shelf.

“Hey, you wanna go to my house? My cig is almost finished, and I am fixin’ to gnaw my arm off I’m so hungry.”

My head snapped up, Tommy's voice drawing me out of my own thoughts and his question stretching my curiosity like taffy. I managed to grunt out a "sure," before hopping onto my bicycle and following Tommy down the road.

After about fifteen quiet minutes, we arrived at a home that looked like it had been clipped with care from the *Southern Homes & Gardens* magazines Grandma was always sending Mom subscriptions for. I noticed the bushes in the front flower beds trimmed in neat geometric shapes and that the house was painted a clean slate color. We left our bicycles in the driveway, and headed in through the red front door.

Tommy led me upstairs where we entered a small, square bedroom decorated in a spectrum of blue. I stood to the side picking a scab from my elbow and glancing around the barren room, looking for signs of the boy who lived there. No posters cluttered the wall, no books sat on the dark wooden desk, and no ripe-smelling sports equipment crowded the corner; the room was a shell of its enigmatic inhabitant. While I studied his room, Tommy grabbed his desk chair, dragged it to the mouth of the closet, and stood, reaching towards the top shelf for a box.

The box was floral and round like the hat boxes Mom and Grandma pulled out every Sunday before church. The mass of tissue inside the box smelled faintly of orange blossoms and clove, and Tommy pulled each delicate piece out with care until he reached the bottom. Sitting against the soft pink cardboard were three boxes of Virginia Slims and a worn picture featuring an elegant woman holding a small grinning child. Tommy pulled a cigarette out of one of the boxes, and said to me without looking up, "These were my Mom's. I don't really care for them much, but they are *her*. You know what I mean, Nicky-boy?" With that, he repacked the box with the same precision he had unpacked it, and hid it in the shadows of the closet.

“Let’s go downstairs. I am starving, and I hate smoking up here.”

I followed Tommy down the staircase and into a large kitchen. He pulled his lighter out of his jeans pocket, and lit the Slim, studying it and sighing before taking a puff. It was quiet for a spell before I asked Tommy, “What happened to her? Your mom, I mean.” As if in an instant, I regretted my question, wishing I could pull my words from the air and swallow them whole before they even whispered past Tommy’s ear.

He was silent. “I’m real sorry. I didn’t mean to pry—”

“I killed her.” I swear anyone in a half-mile radius could have heard a pin drop, but before I could say a word, Tommy continued, “My pops. He’s a real piece of work, and over the years, he’s become good friends with the bottle.” Tommy took a puff, his eyes beginning to glaze. “I had been struggling in school, Biology and Algebra II, never been great at that math stuff. Anyway, Dad had been drinking that night, and when he heard this, he was angry. Said that just wasn’t acceptable because ‘no son of his was going to be an idiot’ and he slapped me across the face. Mom jumped in front of me before my old man could take a second blow, so he grabbed her instead, and I ran. I just ran, Nick.” By now, tears were streaming in rivulets down Tommy’s freckled cheeks, and I sat there dazed, as he continued, “The next morning, I snuck in through the back door to see Dad talking to two policemen. When the trio saw me, Dad started to cry, saying all of this garbage about how ‘she’ll never hurt me again’ and ‘he was so sorry, son.’ My mom was dead, he had killed her, and covered it up, saying he defended me from *her* drunken rage when I knew it was the other way around. We moved away within a week, and the bruises have taught me to stop bringing it up.”

Tommy wiped his snotty nose against the inside of his wrist and then got up. “All this pansy crying has got me starved. I’m making sandwiches. You want one?”

Tommy made peanut butter and jelly while I was sat staring when the front door slammed open. In walked a middle-aged man, lofty in height like Tommy, but solidly built and dressed in a crisp, clean business suit. Settling his briefcase on the ground, he turned, took one look at my smiling face and roared at Tommy, “What did I tell you about bringing home guests?”

*Slap*

Tommy fell to the ground clutching his cheek and scooting backwards towards the fridge behind him, trapped. As his father walked past me, I caught a whiff of a familiar yet different scent. Smoke, soap, with a touch of Jack Daniels radiated off this man in waves, and my eyes shifted in fear to Tommy who looked unfazed. Tommy’s father had rolled up the sleeves of his business suit and was nearing Tommy now.

With the second blow, I was on my feet. Searching my surroundings, my eyes narrowed on the ceramic bowl of fruit located on the icy, granite island. Using both hands for leverage, I brought my weapon down against the back of the man’s head. Ceramic dust filled the air and my lungs on contact, yet the bowl’s destruction had done little to stop the villain in front of me and more to anger him. Now bleeding from a gash behind his left ear, Tommy’s father turned towards me. Pure rage glistened in his eyes the way pools of water reflected starlight. I was toast.

Looking around for my next method of attack, or maybe my back-up crew, I noticed Tommy beginning to stand. “Run, Nick! Get out of here,” he screamed as his father began to turn his attention back towards the kitchen. Desperate for a final defense, I rammed the blunt end of the television remote into the nose of my attacker, and with an audible crack, a flow of blood cascaded, streaming onto the starched collar of his once pristine button-down. Dropping

the bloodied remote, I ran out of the house, grabbed my bicycle, and left suburbia as fast as the red Cruiser could pedal.

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Tommy was not at school the next day...or the next...or the day after that. His friends moved on, didn't talk about it, and I got my front tooth chipped for questioning one of them after school. I found a spot in the bushes across the street from Tommy's house and from my hidden perch, I watched his father exit his black Lexus and enter the house as if nothing had changed. The only difference from *that* day was Tommy's bike now missing from its strewn position in the driveway.

I biked by that slate-colored house a week later to find a "For Sale" sign staked in the front yard. Peering inside, I saw all of the furniture was missing. The only thing remaining was the scent of Irish Spring and Virginia Slims clinging to the house like a reminder—and a warning.