

## A Game of War, by Douglas Chait

I climbed the hill behind our house that afternoon instead of retreating to my usual sanctuary - the woods with their bright streams curling over mossy rocks. After the game of war had ended so abruptly, I chose a different path.

From here, our neighborhood spread out below me like a model train set: standard ranch houses on identical lots, each tweaked just enough to maintain the illusion of uniqueness. Shady streets framed by oaks and dogwoods created a tableau of well-born permanence that the development hadn't quite earned. Just below, a vacant lot divided our property from the neighbors' – a dull field of tall weeds clawing deep into the hard red Georgian clay.

Dusk had settled in. As the birds had stopped singing, houselights and streetlamps flicked on in the slow fading light. Galaxies, Cutlasses, and Impalas, returning from work, made their weary way home, garage doors hummed open and clanged shut. The neighborhood was tucking itself in for the night.

I heard a young boy's voice singing softly, high and pure. A small blond head bobbed in the unkempt weeds below, arms waving a tree branch at invisible enemies. The movement was unhurried, without purpose. It could have been anyone down there, but I knew it was Bill. Safe, secure Bill who would soon be called into dinner by his mother. Bill whom I had been made to understand was somehow blessed, chosen to live without fear. He would never pay a price. Unlike me, one of the cast-offs, scorned in whispers I could still hear resonating from this morning.

That consuming anger resurfaced: the revulsion in my stomach, the burning in my head, the hot seething rage flushing through my body. Until today, I'd never known that forces could

be arrayed against me for things outside of me, for nothing I'd done. His playing and singing made me feel so powerless.

Until I decided.

Then, his singing calmed me. His meandering through the weeds mesmerized me, as the gloom created by dusk lifted and the world crystallized into liberating clarity. He was a piper summoning me. I thought it was not really me up there – no one knows I'm here. It could have been anyone on that hill, looking down on him. I was simply to do what had to be done, and that alone made it righteous, just and deserved.

A flapping red flash startled me until I saw it was a cardinal that settled on a branch nearby, rotating its head before fixing its gaze into the lot below. We would bear witness, together - the bird and me, outside myself, watching from a distance.

Bill moved out of sight, but I tracked his location from the swishing weeds. Kneeling, I tested one rock after another. These rocks were not on my land, I thought, they could have come from anywhere, falling from the sky. I traced their edges until I found the one with the surest grip and sharpest sides. It sat heavily in my palm, like it belonged there. Rising, I surveyed the lot again.

The swishing stopped. The breeze was light – I'd need to overshoot, just a bit. I planted my left foot forward, shoulders squared to the target, just as I'd learned in baseball practice. I could have been any boy, casually throwing a stone into a still pond. The chirping of crickets began to rise and fall, pulsing with my heartbeat. None of this had anything to do with me. I was merely the agent of propulsion for a rock that was bound to go where it had to go.

I bent my arm back, then pushed off with my right foot. The crickets grew louder, rising and falling, rising and falling. I rotated toward the target and released once my arm passed my head.

The rock hung suspended, as if gravity had lost its purpose. In that frozen instant, terror seized me. What had I done? What if it hit him? I wished that I could - somehow, in some way - will the rock to stop, to hover in the air and not fall until it dissolved into harmless dust that would drift down when he was gone, safe at dinner with his family. But gravity had its way, as it always did, and how else could it be?

The rock sailed and spun perfectly on its axis, whistling through the wind in a clean spiral. It traced a precise arc, pulled to its fated destination like it was tethered by an invisible thread.

It landed. The singing stopped mid-note. A screaming not of this earth ripped through the dusk, scattering birds from their nests like shrapnel from a bomb. The screams slowly faded as the child thrashed through the weeds toward home. A door opened, slammed shut. Then silence.

I could not have hurt him that badly, I thought. It was just a small rock. Maybe it only struck his arm or his back, just enough to sting. Maybe he was being overly dramatic. But what if it hit his head? Took out his eye?

Please don't let him be hurt. Please, God, don't let him be hurt. I'll never do this ever again if he isn't hurt. Please please please, God, don't let him be hurt.

The breeze upended my hair and chilled the sweat on my brow. I trembled with fear and dread and self-loathing. I knew I had to tell my father before the neighbors did. The penalty for lying or covering up was always worse than the crime itself. That's what Nixon taught us, my

father said. I started the long slow walk down the hill. Maybe this was just a dream. I didn't mean it. Please let him be OK.

I told my father that I threw a rock that hit Bill and, when he asked, I told him why I did it.

"The Patton boy said that?" he asked me twice.

Both times I told him yes and he looked into my eyes and knew that it was true. He nodded slowly. A smile crossed his face and he patted me on the back. He told me never to do it again - unless in self-defense, it was wrong to hurt people. And as a man, it was incumbent on me to go to the boy's house and see how badly he was hurt and apologize to him and his family. The phone rang. He took the call from Bill's parents, listened for a moment, and waved me on.

No punishment ever followed. No discipline, no sanctions. Just that quick smile and pat on the back and the subtle welling of pride that sealed our pact: this violent retaliation had been right and good and natural in the order of things, despite the required public show of regret. The apology would be the only price for me to pay.

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It was a time for war. The rules of engagement were simple: last boy standing wins, the weapons were balloons filled with Cherry Kool-Aid stolen from the kitchen pantry, and a kill was final when your shirt turned redder than its original color. My brother Jacob and I against Bill and his older brother James.

The battle was stalled. No kills yet. I peered around a tree at James, who crouched behind a red-clay mound. One swipe of my index finger across my nostril signaled to Jacob, waiting in our foxhole, buried in torn earth and leaves.

“Go,” he mouthed.

I moved into position. Coughed. Ran toward Jacob’s hill. James took the bait. His first balloon whizzed past me and burst against a tree trunk, scarlet streaming down its bark. I circled back and dove into our foxhole, pulling weeds over myself. His second shot splashed red in front of me. I held my breath.

Slap! Balloon against flesh, a sharp cry out, followed by two more: Slap! Slap! I parted the weeds and saw James’ face dripping Kool-Aid, his glasses askew, red running into his collar. James was dead.

Bill broke for open ground. The first hit caught his shoulder, staggering him. We closed in and unleashed our remaining ammo. Slap! Slap! Slap! He collapsed to his knees, hands over his head, a shuddering mass of red dye 40 and tears.

We claimed our hill then, dancing and whooping cries of victory into the sky. Still catching our breath, still grinning, we watched the defeated brothers approach, covered in red and muck.

James reached us and spat on the ground and squinted up through narrowed eyes.

“I would rather be dead than a Jew.”

Bill nodded. They stared at us from the bottom of the hill.

Then they walked away across the lot, James’ arms around his trembling little brother’s shoulders, casting long shadows in the morning sun.

“That has nothing to do with us.” Jacob told me. “Just ignore them. Ignorance and stupidity.”

They disappeared into their house. We stared at the closed door for a long while until the rain began to fall. The red ran from our hands when we wiped our faces, and we left the hill behind.

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Bill’s mother opened the door before I could knock. She screamed that I was a horrible and cruel boy like the rest of my kind. Behind her, a sniffling Bill held a rag against his left eye, sopping with blood. She lifted the cloth to show me the deep gash I’d made, as fresh blood ran down his cheeks - proof, she declared, of my intrinsic evil. God’s scorn made flesh! My very existence an assault on humanity! Eternal damnation awaited me!

And so on. I don’t remember the specifics of what else she said. What I do remember is Bill’s right eye: that single blue marble pressed into bloody dough, darting between his mother and me, trying to decide whether to fear me or hate me before his mother’s hate won out.

My apologies felt hollow - even to me. The more I spoke, the more virulent her screaming became until I opted for silent nodding and she finally exhausted herself and slammed the door.

My walk home felt shorter, my steps light with relief. The night air chilled my ears; dead twigs snapped underfoot. I had an oddly strong appetite at dinner and slept well that night. It was over. And I kept my promise to my father - it never happened again.

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We never saw the Pattons again. Someone bought the vacant lot and built a modern four-story that blocked their house from view. We'd heard later they'd moved away.

Driving past the house where they had lived, my father would play his word game, matching animals with terms for fecal matter. He avoided crude profanity – such as bullshit. Instead, he made it into a lesson: bat guano, tiger dung, cat scat, and elephant droppings. Each time we passed, he'd teach us something new: how to pair Latin names with gutter slang, craft rhymes that made us laugh, master every technique of wordplay – alliteration, assonance, consonance, portmanteau, double entendre. Over the years, we turned this into an art form. It became, forever after, our family's running inside joke.

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