

## SAINT IT BLACK

When I was six years old, Russell was probably my best friend. He lived next to our duplex in a modest house on Carroll Avenue. Our dwellings were near downtown St. Paul, Minnesota—and proximate to nothing else of significant interest. However, the lack of attractions in our neighborhood didn't trouble me. During the summer of 1956, I wasn't allowed to even cross the street. This lack of permission should have extended into my adulthood, but that's a different story.

I was allowed to visit Russell on his front porch because he had earned the approval of my parents. They liked him because he would always wave at them, and they appreciated his manners. I would later learn that some serial killers wave at people, but I was too young to apply this reasoning to the situation.

I'm not certain why I liked Russell. Perhaps one reason was that we both wore suspenders—his were wide and brown; mine were narrow and red and transmitted the concept of “dork” to all who viewed them. I had no fondness for them, but Russell actually preferred to wear them instead of belts. He said if he wore suspenders, his baggy pants wouldn't fall to his knees when he was bending to pick up a ball. I threw rubber balls to him in his front yard, and he did a lot of bending. I had a lousy arm, and he had lousy hands. Perhaps I liked Russell because he was an easy mark. No matter what we did together, I was always better at it.

For example, Russell tried to teach me how to play Monopoly, the real estate trading game. I always chose the cannon as my token, and he would take the shoe. At the time, I didn't understand the intricacies of capitalism. I didn't know how to pay rent, I couldn't count money, and the concept of taxes evaded me. (I struggled with these ideas even in college.) Whenever we played, it seemed as though a stiff breeze would rip across the porch and scatter my cash faster than a senator's pork barrel project. But, for some odd reason, I always won.

I, in turn, taught Russell how to play marbles. Russell didn't have any marbles. It's not that he ever lost them—he just never owned any.

So, I lent him some of mine. After we carefully selected our shooters, we kneeled in the dirt and tried to shoot the other marbles out of a circle we had drawn with a stick. Before long, I had won back all the marbles I had lent him. Little did I know at the time that Las Vegas was built on a similar process.

Russell and I never left his front porch or yard. One morning he invited me to go fishing with him, but Mom nixed the idea. She told me that if I fell into water, I would drown because Russell wasn't strong enough to pull me out. Not knowing how to swim didn't help my case, either. So Russell and I spent most of the day catching grasshoppers, watching clouds, and shooting marbles.

Finally, the boredom and the heat from the summer sun must have impaired Russell's judgment. While we were shooting marbles, he got up off the ground and asked me if I wanted a soda. I nodded affirmatively, and he reached into his pocket and pulled out some quarters.

"Grape or strawberry?" he asked.

"Strawberry," I replied. "I hate grape."

"Well, I love grape," he said. However, instead of walking into his house and opening the refrigerator, he started walking to the corner grocery store.

This, of course, was a clear violation of the rules. Even my parents never walked anywhere alone because they knew the city was full of robbers, kidnapers, murderers, mad dogs, and open manhole covers.

I panicked. "Russell, you can't go to the store by yourself!" I yelled. "You'll get in trouble!"

Russell just laughed. "Well, don't tell my mama," he said as he kept on walking.

I ran home to tell Mom that Russell was walking to the store by himself, and that some unspeakable tragedy was about to occur. Mom told me not to worry. After all, Russell was not her responsibility.

I ran back to Russell's front porch, anxiously awaiting the outcome of his foolish mission. Miraculously, Russell returned intact after a few minutes with two bottles of Canada Dry soda—one grape and one strawberry. From that day forward, it became a ritual every afternoon:

"Grape or strawberry?"

After I reaffirmed my desire for strawberry soda, he then would walk to the corner store alone, jingling the loose change in his pocket.

My friendship with Russell led to serious trouble in the fall of 1956. It wasn't because of anything he did. It was because of what he was.

## DAMAGED RIGHT OUT OF THE BOX

When I was six years old, Russell was about 66 years old—and black.

It happened at the Catholic elementary school I was attending. Sister Caroline, my first grade teacher, was a no-nonsense nun. She never smiled, and she tugged firmly on the rosary that hung from her waist whenever she was upset. No doubt she was drawing strength from her beads—and probably the restraint she needed when it came to dealing with me and my classmates.

The trouble erupted after she had asked us to complete a page in our coloring book that contained an outline of the Virgin Mary. I colored her carefully with my crayons. But, instead of using a white or flesh color for her face, I chose black.

When Sister Caroline looked over my shoulder and saw what I had done, she was aghast. She snatched my coloring book from my desk and grabbed me by the arm. She dragged me to a corner of the classroom and demanded an explanation for what I had done.

I told her briefly about Russell. I told her he was really nice and that because the Virgin Mary was nice, she probably was like Russell.

Sister Caroline would not let the matter rest. I was sent to the mother superior, and she conducted her own version of the Spanish Inquisition. Mom was summoned to attend the proceedings. In the end, Russell's front porch was declared off limits.

I doubt if anyone told Russell why I was no longer allowed to play on his front porch. He knew that something had happened, but his good nature remained unaffected. He continued to wave at me and my parents until we moved to Colorado about one year later.

I saw Russell again in 1990. Actually, I saw someone who looked exactly as I remember him—with wide brown suspenders and baggy pants—standing in a grocery store aisle with a six-pack of grape soda under his arm. During that moment of *déjà vu*, I saw Russell within this stranger.

In my heart, I know that Russell no longer walks to the store by himself on this earth. However, I envision him in a place that is peaceful, kneeling on the ground, drawing circles in the dirt with someone who truly needs a friend.

I only wish that for just one time he would play to win and get all of Sister Caroline's marbles.