



Out of the Pocket

BILL KONIGSBERG

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For Chuck Cahoy

OUT OF THE Pocket

1

I was in the closet with Tamara Muncie.

It was dark and cramped and a hanger was poking me in the back.

“So,” Tamara said. I could hardly see her, but I could hear her voice, her slightly asthmatic breathing. Her face was inches from my chest. “What do we do now?”

I chuckled, because it was all so ridiculous. Outside I could hear the laughter and shrieking from the party, what sounded like the bassline of a Gnarlz Barkley song I liked.

When one of the cheerleaders said we should bring back “seven minutes in heaven,” a game we played in, like, seventh grade, Martin Somers, one of my teammates, said, “That’s so gay.”

I’m here to tell you. It’s the opposite of gay.

It was a stupid game, and if one of the guys on the team had

suggested it, he would have been called lots of names. But since a cheerleader wanted to, what do you know? Suddenly all the guys were into it.

And as much as I didn't want to, I had to play. There were certain things you had to do as a team.

When I laughed, Tamara did too, and I immediately felt more comfortable. She was as nervous as I was, just for different reasons.

"I really can't, you know . . ." I said.

"No," she quickly answered. "I know. Carrie and all. I totally get it."

I exhaled. Saved by the Carrie. Again.

"Thanks," I said, and I gently put my arm on her shoulder to show her I was not repulsed by her or anything.

"Carrie is really lucky," Tamara said. My eyes had adjusted a bit and I could see her eyes and the triangle of her mouth as she spoke. "I mean, there are a lot of girls who wouldn't care that you're taken. I mean, a *lot* of girls."

"Hmm," I replied, taking my hand off her shoulder and crossing my arms over my chest.

Things got quiet, and on the other side of the door I heard my best friend Austin Rivera's voice crystal clear. He was laughing and saying, "Yo, dude, you gotta believe, you gotta believe." I tried to put the words in some sort of context, and it pissed me off that here I was, in a closet, not out there with my team, joking around. I hated not being in on the joke. But that's life.

"It's just . . ." Tamara said, in that way people talk on television when they want to share a secret but want the other person to think they really don't want to. "No . . ."

I could see her silhouette as she dramatically looked down and away from me. A fleece collar nuzzled my ear and I resisted the urge to tear the coat or whatever it was off its hanger.

“What?” I said.

“I shouldn’t,” she said, and I thought, *That’s true, you probably shouldn’t.*

“It’s okay,” I said.

Tamara looked up at me and I could see the whites of her eyes. She exhaled. “It’s just, I haven’t been kissed in a really long time. I mean, I know you can’t, but I just wish . . . never mind.”

Probably some people in my position would have been real asses about this, and would have run out and told all their friends, and made fun of Tamara forever. Instead, I reached out and stroked her shoulder.

“How about this?” I said, and I tentatively leaned down to kiss her lightly on the cheek. As my lips zoned in on the soft skin of her cheek and I began to feel the heat of her body next to mine, she ever so slightly turned her lips toward mine.

I flinched, and instead of her cheek, I planted a quick dry one on the corner of her chin.

It was weird.

As I pulled away, I blushed and averted my eyes, because something had happened. A moment earlier, I had all the power. And now I just got this feeling that Tamara knew.

I was one hundred percent sure that my lips had given her all the knowledge she needed, and I couldn’t look in her eyes. *She knew.*

We exited the closet together, to catcalls.

“Did you do anything I wouldn’t do?” asked Austin, a major ladies’ man, when I sat back down next to him and the next person spun the bottle.

“I think so,” I said.

The head-shaving thing was my fault.

Later at the party, the football posse was in Rahim Bell’s room,

hanging out, when Rahim asked what we were going to do for team unity this year.

It was a Durango Bulldogs tradition. Before the school year, the seniors on the team came up with something and everyone had to do it.

Last year, the seniors wore maroon armbands. Seriously. That's what they came up with. It wasn't a really good group of seniors last year. On the first day of school, there they were, six guys wearing armbands. It was way weak.

"How about tattoos?" asked Rickey Mendez, our running back.

"Uh, no," said Martin Somers, one of our best receivers. "No ink. Nothing permanent."

"True dat," said Austin, turning to me. "What you got, Bobby?"

"I don't know," I said, sitting up. I had been reclining on Rahim's bed. "Shave our heads?"

The room got very quiet, and I realized I had just suggested something drastic that was now going to happen. And I was going to have to start it.

I could feel the enthusiasm pour across the room like a wave, starting with Geoff Bolleran and Kyle Colby.

"Yeah!" yelled Bolleran. "Shaved heads!"

"That's freakin' awesome," said Colby. "Shaved! Shaved! Shaved! . . ."

Colby started the chant, and suddenly the whole room was doing it.

Rahim leaped to his feet, put his fist in the air, and yelled, "Whose house is it?"

That was this call-and-response thing we did before games to psych ourselves up. The seniors called and the underclassmen answered.

But since underclassmen were mostly not invited to this party, we all answered.

“Our house!” we yelled. A couple kids in the hallway stopped and watched.

“Are you ready to conquer?” Rahim yelled.

“Hell yeah!” we screamed back.

“Lock and load!” Rahim shouted, pretending to aim a rifle.

“Open fire!”

He pounded the bed, his eyes darting to each of us. “Are you ready to kill?”

A new voice responded from the doorway of Rahim’s room. “Hell yeah!”

We all looked over and there was Rocky.

“Rock-ee!” yelled Austin. “Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about!”

“We got ourselves an underclassman,” said Rahim. “Are you ready to fight?” he yelled, aiming his pretend rifle at Rocky.

“Hell yeah!” screamed Rocky, pounding his chest.

Rocky’s real name was Phan. He was a kicker, a sophomore, and too tall and skinny to look like a football player. He got his nickname because of how he walked, with his chest puffed out and his arms really wide.

It looked stupid, but that was how he walked. He was more a poet and writer type, but he wanted to be on the team and he had worked really hard. He was actually a pretty good kicker, and even though we gave him tons of grief, he was one of us.

“Shoot to kill!” Rahim bellowed.

“Kill at will!” Rocky yelled back, and Rahim and Austin jumped in the air and bumped chests. Dennis, a little drunk, did his usual and took off his clothes. Seriously, I’d never been to a party where Dennis didn’t wind up in his boxer shorts.

Taken out of context, I guess, the team antics seemed a little scary. But that was the point. We wanted to be scary out on the field.

While Dennis streaked around the house, scaring underclassmen girls, Rocky hung with us, but not before we made him do twenty push-ups.

It had happened to us, too. Now it was our turn to tell the underclassmen what to, do and it felt awesome.

While Rocky huffed and puffed, I jumped off the bed, took a deep breath, and said, "C'mon. Where are the razors?"

Rahim stood next to the sink with an electric razor in one hand and a towel in the other. In front of the sink was a chair, and Rahim draped the towel over its back.

"Take a seat," Rahim said. People were lining up in the hallway to get a look at the quarterback who was about to be bald.

"Okay," I said. "But I want everyone's word. We're all doing this, right?"

Somers nodded his head yes. His black hair was already buzzed pretty close to the scalp, so it wasn't going to be a big deal for him. Meanwhile, I'd had wavy blond hair since I was a kid. My mom was going to kill me.

"I'm in," said naked Dennis, huffing and puffing after sprinting around the house. Then he took off again.

"Me, too," said Mendez. "If Bobby does it, I'll do it."

"Yeah," said Austin. "Me, too."

"That's all I needed to hear," I said, smiling as I sat in the chair.

"I don' know," said Austin, using this terrible Mexican accent that he thinks he can get away with because he's half Mexican. "I cuh go an gemme a do-rag at Walmartinez, but wha's Bobby gonna do to cover up that cue ball on his head?"

I laughed. “Don’t you worry about it,” I said, very worried about it.

Rahim did the shaving with the electric razor he uses on his own head. After the first stroke, I began to feel a cool breeze on my scalp. I liked it.

“Look at him! Dude’s smiling,” Mendez said, smiling back at me.

I don’t know why I was so happy, but I was. These were my brothers, and now we were going to be recognizable as brothers, all bald to start the school year. I quaked with pride as Rahim’s razor massaged the top of my scalp.

We were all the same. *And that means it’s okay, the one way I’m definitely different.*

Right?

I’d known about the gay thing for a few years, but it was really over the summer that I’d put together the final pieces—that it mattered, that I was going to have to tell people, come out or whatever.

The dreams began in tenth grade. They were about Todd Stanhope, who pitched junior varsity. He had jet-black hair, piercing green eyes, and no extra meat on him at all, just a muscular V with a tapered waist and biceps like grapefruits.

When I dreamed about Todd for the first time, I woke up horrified, because the dream crossed some lines that I wasn’t sure should be crossed.

The next day I felt really weird at school, dirty almost. And I couldn’t stop the thoughts. Sitting in math class daydreaming, I yelled “NO!” really loud.

Since other people don’t live inside my head, they didn’t know I was yelling at an image of a soaped-up Todd scrubbing his pecs. Everyone laughed, but I didn’t much feel like laughing.

The pictures in my head were the wrong ones, like the post office

screwed up and sent me the ones some girl should have, and I hated it. I tried to replace each one with a picture of something normal. Carrie in a bathing suit. Nothing. The cheerleaders in the locker room, changing. Blank.

I prayed, even though I'd never been big into prayer: *God, if You'll take these thoughts away, I will do everything You ask of me.* But He didn't take them away. They just got more and more frequent, and soon I began to hate and enjoy them equally, and after a while I began to look forward to my sleep because there they'd be, my secret dreams.

"You're almost there!" Rahim said, cuffing me on the shoulder. "You're gonna be the second one in the brotherhood." He had a head start on us, since he was already bald.

"He's not smiling so much now!" said Austin, laughing. "Dude looks like he's seen a ghost."

I realized I was no longer smiling, and forced the corners of my mouth into a grin. I was still thinking about Todd.

One day last spring I saw Todd in school, and without thinking, I smiled at him and said hi. He looked surprised. Even though we were both athletes, we probably hadn't said two words to each other since junior high. As I walked past him, I recognized for the first time that what had been just dreams meant something; someday I might act on those dreams with another guy. That maybe I'd have a date with someone, and that someone would be male.

And then I would be considered gay.

It hadn't really occurred to me in simple terms like that before.

I had this feeling, this delicious sensation of excitement and fear mixed into a ball that seemed to get stuck in my throat. All day, I could hardly swallow.

"It looks good, Bobby," said Somers. "Carrie's gonna die, but it looks okay."

As I got up from the chair, Dennis flashed by in his boxer shorts, chased by about four shrieking girls.

I had no idea what they saw in that guy.

Somers squirmed his way in to be next, and as he sat down I walked behind the chair and Rahim got out of the way so I could look in the mirror.

What I saw shocked me. I stared at my head without hair for the first time, and it was like I saw who I really was, my essence, sort of.

I saw the face of a guy who looked like he had it all. But on the inside, nobody knew me.

“Can we get back to business?” said Rahim.

“Dude is so vain,” said Austin.

I stepped away, flipped Austin off, and punched him in the shoulder.

What I wouldn't have given to tell people, to tell one person, that I was gay. But that was sort of tricky in a team situation. Over the summer I had three close calls with telling Austin. He and I had been best friends since we were nine. And even though he told gay jokes like everyone else, I also knew he was loyal.

I knew he would never turn on me. I trusted him like my own brother, I trusted him more than I trusted myself sometimes.

“You guys look like a bunch of fags,” said this guy, Timmons, who goes to La Habra, as he peeked in the bathroom.

Usually we didn't allow guys from other teams to come to our parties, but Timmons was friends with Rahim and was a pretty good guy.

“If by ‘fags’ you mean guys who are gonna kick your team's ass in a month, yeah, we're fags,” said Austin, winking at me.

And sometimes, I think he knows.

“This feels so weird,” said Somers, who now had one bald stripe on the right side of his head.

“You’re lucky you’re not a senior, Rocky,” Austin said. “You’d look like a pencil with an eraser head.”

“Ha!” Rocky laughed. He’d gotten pretty good at dealing with the put-downs. He wanted so badly to be liked that we actually liked him. He put up with the insults because he had to.

“You’d look like, what’s the one in *Popeye*, his girl?” said Mendez.

“Olive Oyl!” shouted Rahim. “Dude would look like Olive Oyl!”

Rocky had turned a dark shade of purple.

“What is he, your kicker?” said Timmons, still standing in the doorway. “You gonna let some pansy-ass kicker be part of your little fag skinhead posse?”

Bolleran stepped into the doorway, and Somers, Colby, and I were right there with him.

“Dude, what did you just say about our boy?” I said, getting in Timmons’s face.

Timmons looked past them to Rahim for support. “I didn’t say anything you guys weren’t saying about him. I was just kidding. Chill.”

Rahim didn’t look up from shaving Rocky’s head. “He’s our teammate. He’s our boy. You don’t get to say that about him,” he said.

It was so fast, and so united, that I knew we’d done the right thing with this head-shaving idea.