

On Your Knees, Sambo!

by

April Kutger

I would have preferred to live in Berkeley or Albany or El Cerrito, but I couldn't find a house I could afford in those communities – except in bad neighborhoods. Little did I know just how bad the neighborhood was that we had moved into.

It was summer 1983. We had lived in Pinole, California, for less than one year. We had a three-bedroom, two-bath house with a two-car garage and a back yard adjacent to a shopping center with a Safeway, a bank, a dry cleaner, and a drug store. It hadn't rained very much that winter and the yard and surrounding areas were already dry and yellow.

Mostly white, middle-class, blue-collar homeowners made up the population of Pinole. A retired one of them owned the house we rented. He had been willing enough to rent to me, a single mother with a car and a good job in San Francisco. He was, however, obviously displeased when he saw my children after we were already moved in. I suspected he might not have rented to us if he had seen them before I signed the lease. I had faced similar situations often enough since Eva was a baby. My caramel-colored children with black curly hair and dark eyes were beautiful and smart and well behaved, but they were not white. I was no longer surprised, though, when

people looked at us contemptuously, asked if the children were adopted, made assumptions about what kind of person I was – usually that I was a never-married slut whose children probably had three different fathers, who lived off welfare and maybe used drugs. Anyway, even though I could see that he was unsettled when he saw my children, he didn't say anything. But I had seen the look in his eyes and set of his jaw many times before.

Despite the landlord's disdain, we had faced little overt racism in the ten months we had lived in Pinole, neither from the neighbors nor the children's schoolmates. Samuel and David had made friends with quite a few other boys at school and played on sports teams with them. Eva had a best girlfriend, and she often hung out with her brothers and their friends.

After lunch that Saturday, Samuel had decided to go over to Craig's house, more than a mile from where we lived. He had recently turned 13, and he was used to walking, riding his bike, or taking buses and BART all over the Bay Area. His route that day would take him over the freeway on Apian Way and through some parking lots and fields to Craig's back yard. He had climbed up the retaining wall behind our house and then scaled the hurricane fence surrounding the shopping center. He crossed the bridge and was taking a shortcut behind the Lucky's when three white, teen-aged boys stopped him. They were dressed in Levi's, T-shirts, and sneakers and one of them had a gun.

They were acting tough as only teenagers with companions, a weapon, and American history on their side can. Boys like those can be very dangerous. They want to prove to each other that they are fearless. They will bluster and strut like cocks of the walk. They will copy what they hear their fathers and uncles say when they're drinking beer and watching the Raiders on TV. They will act more maliciously in front of their peers than they ever would on their own.

The biggest boy pointed his revolver at Samuel and said, "On your knees, Nigger! I'll kill you! Get on your knees!"

Another one said, "What are you doing here, punk? Who do you think you are? You don't belong here, Nigger!"

Samuel was on his knees the by the time he heard the first words from the one holding the gun. He was terrified, afraid to say anything, afraid to ask a question or beg to be let go or run or try to joke his way out of the situation. He just knelt silently in front of them and waited and hoped they would finish their taunts and threats and let him go.

"Whaddaya think you're doin' here, Sambo?" the third boy demanded.

"I was just goin' to my friend's house," Samuel whispered, starting to get up.

"Don't move, Nigger! Don't move 'til I tell you you can," the big boy ordered waving the gun. "I know how to use this," he said, but this time his

voice was a bit unsteady and Samuel could tell that he, also, was afraid. He could smell the acrid odor of fear emanating from them and him.

Samuel didn't know what kind of gun was pointing at him. It could have been Derringer or a Berretta or a Magnum. He had never seen a gun before, except on TV or in the movies. He didn't know if it was loaded or if the boys were just using it to bully him. He didn't know if the boy would have the nerve to fire it or the ineptitude to misfire it, either way possibly hitting him. Sweat poured down his back and the sides of his body and formed on his upper lip. He was using all his muscle control to keep from shaking or messing his pants. He was gritting his teeth to keep from crying. It was bad enough to be on his knees, barely able to speak. He did not want them to see him blubber or tremble in fear.

"Look at that Brillo head. You could hide some serious stash in there..." The boys giggled.

No one saw him or his tormentors behind the supermarket. No one came to his rescue. Samuel was praying silent, desperate prayers to the avenging God who destroys tyrants. "Please, God, please, make them let me go. Please, let me live. Save me. Please, God, let me get away from here."

And God heard him. "You gutless little turd, you spineless piece of shit," the big boy spat at him. "You don't belong here. If I ever see you around here again, I'll kill ya! Now get outta here! Run! Run, you asshole!"

Samuel got up and started running. He didn't know if they would shoot at him, but he ran as fast as he could, finally shedding tears of reprieve. When he got to Craig's, he ran into the back yard and called out for him. Craig's mom opened the screen door and invited Samuel in. "Craig's upstairs, Samuel. I'll call him." She could see something was really wrong from the terrified look in Samuel's eyes and the dirty streaks down his cheeks where his tears had spilled.

"Samuel, honey, what happened?" she asked.

"Nothin'," he whimpered, hating himself for not being braver. He was still afraid, even of her. She was white.

"Come here and sit down," she directed as she pulled out a chair from the kitchen table. "I know something is wrong. Now what happened?"

Samuel blurted out a sketchy description, I was comin' over the back way. Some kids stopped me. They had a gun. They pointed it at me and made me kneel down. Then they told me to run."

"Oh, honey, that's awful," she said as she leaned down and gave him a hug. "I'm going to call the police. Maybe they can find those boys." She walked to the phone and lifted the receiver. "Do you know who they were? Do you know them from school?" she quizzed.

"Don't call the police. I don't want to tell."

“But we should report this,” she said, hanging up the phone. “Those boys had a gun. They could have hurt you. I have to call the police. And I’m gonna call your mom.” She picked up the receiver again.

“Don’t tell my mom.”

“Honey, I have to tell her. Come on, don’t worry.” She went to the refrigerator and brought out a pitcher of lemonade, poured a glass and set it down on the table in front of him.

Craig walked into the kitchen and said, “What’s goin’ on, Ma? Hi, Samuel. *Que pasa?*”

His mom told Craig what happened.

“Wow! Geez, Samuel, you musta been scared. What did you do?”

“Nothin’.”

“Aw, come on. You musta done somethin’. Tell me. What did they say to you?”

“Nothin’.”

“Man, I know they musta said somethin’...”

Mrs. G called the police and then called me. “Samuel told me that some boys threatened him on his way over here. He was really upset and I’ve called the police to report it,” Deborah told me.

I didn’t hear the whole story until some days later. Samuel had told David first and then finally told me. I was devastated for my boy and furious with the kids who had done it, in fact, with the whole world. Why should my

son have had to experience this kind of evil at his young age in the last quarter of the twentieth century?

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Over the years since that day, I have wondered why I didn't do anything about it. When I didn't hear from the police, why didn't I contact them and demand action? Why didn't I contact the schools or local government or newspapers? Did I think nothing would come of my actions? Did I distrust the police because I had never known them to be of help to me? Had I had too many experiences of being a victim of a society that did not provide equal treatment to the poor and minorities, that did not take women seriously? Did I believe I wouldn't have any influence on a "system" that considered people like me to be an aberration? I had long ago learned that it took intelligence and tenacity to survive as a low-income, single mother of mixed-race children. And I had learned that I had to pick my battles because there was a limit to the physical and emotional energy I had for responding to everything life threw at us. Was I just too tired?

I wonder now if Samuel would have been killed, if this confrontation had taken place last summer rather than seventeen years ago. There are more guns now. And more boys are actually shooting those guns. And ignorant, racist bullies will be forever with us.

When I was young and in love with a black man during the most hopeful period of the civil rights movement, I thought the children we might have would grow up in a very different world than I had.

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