

A Tale of Two Toys

Finalist

By Douglass “Puck” S. Hall

If I were not a white man, my evening could have ended violently. The three police officers could have beaten and arrested me. Those three police officers aimed their firearms at your foolish narrator. They were prepared to take lethal action. I did an incredibly stupid thing, but I did not deserve to lose my life. In other circumstances, different cops did not afford countless people of color the opportunity to explain their situations. Their contact with the police was lethal. Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old African American boy, made a mistake similar to mine and it cost him his life.

From out of nowhere but suddenly everywhere, three police cruisers roared into the gas station parking lot at the intersection of Emmet and Ivy Road. Each cruiser zoomed in from a different direction. Bright lights and piercing sirens assaulted me. Had someone called 9-1-1? But, we were only there a few minutes. Pulsing blue and red stung my vision. I was shocked. Why were the cops here? How did they get here so fast? My eyes adjusted. Three officers surrounded me. They took cover behind their vehicles with their guns drawn and trained on yours truly.

“Drop your weapon! Hands in the air!” the officers screamed. It was a cool night, but beads of sweat ran down my forehead. My throat tightened, and my heart banged against my chest. The parking lot spun around me. I felt sick.

It was May 2006, when the UVA students who resided on campus were required to move out. Months earlier, I threw my lot in with 120 people on a rural commune. On paper, we were poor, though this never felt true. My friends and I sneaked behind grocery stores and jumped into dumpsters, looking for passable food. We literally feasted upon the trash. We were resourceful, and we found the things we needed in the garbage. This was a special day. Praise Dump-Ra! It was the annual UVA Dumpster Dive.

“There’s gold in the streets,” my friend Daxus said as he prepared me for the mission. He was thirty years older than me, and in the dumpster diving battlefield he had graduated from a cadet to general. Dax spread out a map of Charlottesville and circled areas of the map with a marker. These were parking lots of UVA dormitories. “Yar, here be dumpsters” he said, impersonating a pirate.

Four friends and I shuffled into a derelict cargo van and were dispatched to the city in search of the treasures to be found among the items hastily discarded in the exodus. None of the van’s windows could fully roll up. The wind blasted us as the van lurched down the highway. The day followed a pattern: each time we pulled into a dormitory parking lot next to the dumpster that was placed there the day prior, Elona and I scrambled into a dumpster, Mary stayed out to catch, while Maddog kept watch. Cardin, our getaway driver, helped Mary. Elona and I hoisted the “good scores” over the edge of the dumpster, while Mary and Cardin loaded the van. Maddog alerted us when he spotted campus security, and we departed for the next dormitory.

From the mountains of waste, we rescued lamps, couches, rugs, laundry detergent, shampoo, soap, mini-fridges, mattresses, stereos, couches, tables, chairs, desks, televisions, clothing, lingerie, hats, sunglasses, fifty dollars, uneaten food, coffee, unopened beers, marijuana, and bottles of liquor. What we found in those dumpsters dumbfounded me. I could not imagine the life of a UVA student with so much material wealth that so many things could be disposable. What we took did not belong in a landfill. We made four trips from the city and back. At the final dumpster we excavated the remnants of some costume party. The van was full, but we forced the costumes and props into the van. During our adventures, we emptied the gas tank.

Cardin pulled the van alongside a gas pump at the intersection of Emmet and Ivy Road. We spilled out of the van and so did the costumes and props. Feeling festive, I adorned a green leprechaun’s hat, a pair of New Year’s 2005 glittery glasses, and I picked up the black plastic gun that also fell out. I lit a cigarette and paced around the parking lot while waiting.

Twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was playing a game of “cops and robbers” with friends in his neighborhood on a November day in Cleveland, 2014. He played this game with a black toy gun, not dissimilar to the one I picked up. Tamir’s toy gun lacked the orange tip that could have indicated it was a harmless piece of plastic, as did mine. Someone called 9-1-1. A police officer shot and killed Tamir immediately after arriving. Tamir’s game was innocent. I was a grown white man who spent the day deliberately trespassing on university grounds. My friends and I premeditated this crime from our home outside the city. Tamir was an African American boy who played a children’s game with his friends, in his own neighborhood.

* * *

I dropped the plastic gun on the pavement. My hands were in the air, and I yelled, “It’s plastic! It’s a toy gun!” After a few terrifying moments, the officers lowered their weapons and approached me. I was told that I was stupid, that I was lucky, and that there could have been a grimmer outcome. I was told to “stay out of Charlottesville.” I was not searched, beaten, restrained in a sleeper hold, or arrested. I threw the toy gun into a trashcan by the gas pump, where it belonged. I went home that night, with a story to tell. This naïve and unwise narrator was lucky. My story is an illustration of white privilege. White people who do stupid things go home with a warning. In similar situations, people of color are treated with hostility, are often arrested, and are sometimes killed before the police ask any questions.