

The Cream of the Crop

By Owen Clarke

The boy couldn't remember the first time he saw the big one. The boy's name was Alex, and he was eight years old, and he liked fighter planes and comic books and skateboarding and Snickers bars, but he couldn't remember where he'd seen the big one.

He'd been out with his mom, he remembered that. Maybe the mall? The grocery? He knew he'd seen him somewhere. He recognized the marks on his face. That and his size. The man was very big. Like a gorilla, the boy thought. Big like a gorilla. He had seen him and his mother had seen him and they'd both known something was wrong. His mother hadn't said anything to him about it, but he was old enough to tell. She'd known the big one was one of them, that's why she'd gripped his hand so tight and pulled him the other way when they'd seen him at the supermarket, or wherever it had been. Alex remembered that much. And he remembered the look on her face.

The other, the one missing some fingers on his right hand, he recognized from the TV. That one was on TV once, when Alex had been watching cartoons. "We interrupt this broadcast to bring you THE COLORS!" That one was marked Black. He'd done bad things. Every now and then they put the Blacks, and some of the Reds and Browns, on the TV to talk about some things. Alex didn't really understand what they talked about, and he never got to listen very long anyways because his mother always turned the TV off when she saw him watching.

"Those are bad men. Those are bad men and you are never to look at them. If you see them when you're out what do you do?"

*Run away. Press your beeper. Run away press your beeper run away press your beeper
run beeper press away.*

Well, he couldn't run away now. They were inside the house and his mom was all tied up. They were all sitting in his bedroom. His mom tied with ropes and the big one with the messy face and the smiley one marked Black who was missing two fingers and the thin one in the suit who never said anything but sat in the corner of the room with one leg crossed over the other like a woman.

"Why aren't ya smilin, little boy?" the Black said. "Little boys like you oughta be happy."

The gorilla man grinned. His teeth were jagged nails, jammed into his mouth like a bunch of crumbled tortilla chips. "He's happy. He's happy," he said.

The thin one in the corner drummed his fingers across his knee. His fingers were long and bony and Alex thought they looked like spider legs. The other, the one who was marked Black, held Alex's beeper in a hand that glistened with sweat. He rolled the circular, golf ball-sized device back and forth.

He leaned in, looking at Alex. "If I press this, do you know what will happen?"

Alex shook his head.

"You know, little boy. You know what will happen. Tell me what will happen."

"The Cream will come and take you away because you are bad men. You're a Black and he's bad too," Alex pointed to the jagged-toothed, gorilla man, "and you need to be in the Creamer with the other Colors like they show on the television. And that other man in the corner is bad and he will go with you!"

The man in the corner raised his eyes to look at Alex, but continued drumming his spider fingers across his knee.

Smiley looked at Alex. “Well I guess I’d better not press it then, eh?”

Alex didn’t respond. His mother squirmed in the corner, biting against the gag. Her eyes were wide, like they were the time Alex had fallen off his skateboard and broken his arm. His legs had felt like Jell-O and he’d lain there on the pavement and cried and his mother had come out of the house and seen him. Her eyes had been wide. They were wide now.

“Why do you think they made me a Black, boy?” Smiley said. When Alex didn’t respond, he continued. “How’d you know I was a Black?”

Alex nodded. “I saw you on TV.” His mother squirmed in her chair.

“I’ll tell you why. I’m a Black because,” he paused, “of what’s in here.” He rapped the side of his head with a pair of knuckles. “They don’t like it if what’s in here is different, you see?”

Alex didn’t, but he nodded.

“Good. Good,” Smiley said. “When a mind thinks different, they don’t like it, see? They want to tell you how to think, and if you don’t think like them, you’re a Color. And the Cream comes for you, eh?”

Smiley stood up. “I mean, who’s to decide if robbing a gas station is wrong and helping an old lady cross the street is right and me killing your mom here is a bad thing to do?” He turned and a knife was in his hand. “Right?”

Then his mother finally bit through the bandage and she screamed and Smiley came towards her with the knife and Alex tried to look away but the gorilla held his head and peeled

his eyelids back and mumbled gibberish into his ear. When it was over Alex didn't cry but his eyeballs hurt. They'd seen too much and they were going to explode. The gorilla was laughing and Smiley had blood all over him and he looked tired. The skinny man in the suit had stopped drumming his fingers over his knee. He was shaking his head.

“Who's to say that what I just did was wrong, any of it?” Smiley shrieked. “You learned a lot more just now than you'd ever learn from your mother. I'll tell ya that, kid!”

Then Smiley's head snapped back, like a rubber band, and there was blood where his face had been. The sound was deafening, but Alex's ears were already ringing and he couldn't hear anyway. The skinny man in the suit was holding a gun, and the gorilla was on his feet, “Hey, what are ya doing?” then bang bang bang he was crumpled over the bed. The skinny man stood and began talking into a cell phone.

“Yeah, he lost it. No dice.”

He grimaced at something someone on the phone had said, the gun at his side. He picked up Alex's beeper from the ground and pressed the button, still talking into the phone. “Yeah, I owe you. Next time it'll pan out.”

He put the phone back into his pocket and knelt down near Alex.

“Sorry kid,” he said. “Thought this one was ready to be de-Colored. I was sure of it.” He sighed. “Gotta test 'em though, and your Momma was in the Opposition once.”

Then the man in the suit left through the front door and the Cream showed up in flashing cars. They came upstairs and put everyone in bags. The gorilla, Smiley, his Mom. They put them in big, plastic bags, like the ones his mom used to put his lunch in. Now she was in a bag. Like ham and cheese sandwich with the crust cut off.

