



DRAMA

**LINEAGE**

**LIZ LYDIC**



“**I** think we’re all looking for resolution here,” my high school principal said in the general direction of me, my mom, and my dad. Mr. Conti was in his signature pose: leaning back in an office chair, hands behind his head. The week I was set to graduate with the Central Texas High School Class of 1992, Mr. Conti was asking how me and my “fellow violators” felt about not walking in the ceremony, as punishment for our involvement in the slaughter of a Future Farmers of America livestock goat.

“I’d rather just apologize to the school board,” I said. My chin flicked upward as I spoke, instead of collapsing toward my chest as it might have before the previous Friday night. Unknown to me then, that Friday night would be a marker in my life. At the time, it was a simple ‘yes’ instead of my typical ‘no.’ There wasn’t even any kind of aggressive pressure from my solicitors - Clay Torres, James “Davidson” Davidson, Jonathan Henrich, foreign exchange student from Poland Aleksander “Ziggy” Zielinski, and Nathaniel Dorn.

“It’s not your choice, Dan,” my dad said. “Mr. Conti is in charge here.”

“Co-rrect.” Mr. Conti’s response prompted my dad to nod, my mom to grip her practical Jansport purse tighter, and my stomach to shrink.

“So, when you said ‘how would you feel,’ you weren’t asking me my opinion, but actually, telling me through the use of rhetoric - in order to exert authority - what the decision already is?” My neutral tone, my nerdiness (I’d probably be diagnosed with Asperger’s if I was a teen today) prevented my statement from sounding snide, and instead, as if I was reading the inside jacket of a novel.

“Dan-” my dad started, but stopped.

Conti studied me. In the silence, I identified something he’d said that was agitating: that the people I was with were ‘fellow’ violators,

insinuating an established camaraderie. In reality, I was just there at the moment something was happening.

Jonathan Hendrich and his mom lived across the street from me. Jonathan's mom was loud, bossy and crass. My mother hated her. That a friendship never evolved with Jonathan was either because of my mom's preference, or at least to her great relief. My only two friends growing up were Tanner and Derrick. I suspected our trio originated as an arrangement between our parents: "If your nerdy, awkward child helps our deviants stay out of trouble, we'll make sure they are loyal." Tanner and Derrick held respect enough in most social circles. What they liked about me, I think, was my humor, my blatantly critical take on things. One of the hardest parts about being shy but not necessarily nice, was the sort of bottling up I felt. With Tanner and Derrick, I felt it less.

A simple, automatic 'Hey, man' between Jonathan and me had set that particular Friday night in motion. Around 10pm, I was returning home from my after-school job at Safeway market. In my headlights, I'd seen Jonathan, Clay, Davidson, Ziggy, and Nathaniel lingering on or around Jonathan's Volvo. The body language and lack of inertia indicated that the group was not in the middle of anything nefarious.

"What up, Burrell?" Clay had called out. "You seen Ziggy's Olympic threads?" On the far side of Jonathan's car, Ziggy was beaming in a 1988 Olympic bomber jacket, and the group - now suddenly including me - was asking questions about his country's wrestling team and how Polish girls were stacked. My dweeby inquiries about how the 1984 boycott impacted participation in the upcoming games were lost amongst the debates about which one of us boys would look the faggiest in the jacket.

Relaying the sequence of events from that moment on was not unlike explaining how I won a particular game of Chutes and Ladders: a spin led to a certain advancement, and so on, until I was at the end. Ziggy told more stories. A neighbor's light went on. There was discussion of getting out of there. Clay - the apparent Alpha - had a restless energy for which the rest of us seemed to feel responsible. His idea to go to the high school sounded interesting. There was no particular plan, but an unspoken understanding

that the issue would resolve itself when we arrived. Later, I would come to miss the hubris of adolescence: that inspiration would find us without requiring pursuit.

We wandered around the quiet campus for a while, kicking trash cans, trying to climb flat cinder block walls, and racing each other across the football field. I didn't say much, just joining in with full enthusiasm at each activity. I ignored a tiny pull of guilt about Tanner and Derrick.

The high school's agricultural area was adjacent to the science wing, which backed up to the football bleachers. It seemed inevitable, based on our edginess and the school's geography, that we'd end up hopping the chainlink fence surrounding the greenhouse, pig and goat pens.

We explored the area with unease. Not knowing the abilities of these animals, plus the obvious invasion of their peace, gave way to our defensive anger. We walked closer, then backed away, scuffing dirt and hay toward them. The air was thick with heat and the smell of shit. Talk turned to the fate of the livestock.

"You think those FFA kids make good money selling them?" Nathaniel asked.

Clay shook his head. "Depends on if they sell them when they are dead or alive." This did not seem corroborated by anything, but the other boys nodded.

"They shoot them?" Nathaniel was half-smiling, his t-shirt damp at the armpits.

"My uncle," started Ziggy, "he a butcher, you know. He kill the thing by holding it tight then slice it. Then, he tie the thing to go, like, upside down." Ziggy leaned his body to the left, hands holding the legs of an imaginary animal in demonstration. "Then, all blood can go out, you know?"

Violence now looming, we proceeded to toss around suggestions as to which one of us would be best suited to hold down a braying goat, and which would be most adept at slitting its throat.

I cannot, to this day, remember how this theoretical discussion morphed into our entrance into the goat pen. Like a useless cliché, it all happened at once. Davidson grabbed a goat; Nathaniel another. When Clay

restrained the third, it was clear that his would be the target. Jonathan toggled like a referee between the pairs. The bleating was surprisingly loud.

“We need a knife!” Clay yelled.

My impulse was to oblige, but - with no thought behind it, just my words, and my body throbbing and eyes now blazing - I instead told Ziggy to go to the greenhouse where I had seen an oversized pair of pruning shears. He didn’t know the word, so I screamed “Big scissors!” and mimed their opening and closing with my arms. Everything was urgent, loud, and fast. Ziggy ran back and was about to go to Clay’s goat, but I blocked him. My arm across the front of his bomber jacket, I shouted “No! This isn’t *for* you!” and I took the shears.

“Should you hit it on the head first?” Clay was yelling, and he looked scared. I didn’t answer. I just allowed my body to work its way through the task of opening the shears, and then make the forceful, deep and quick swipe from left to right, and for my breath to release a corresponding “Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!” For once, my voice didn’t create a well-articulated statement that would make its way down from the mayhem of my brain. Instead, energy simply exited my body as I completed this self-imposed mission deftly and naturally.

The goat was limp, and Clay was covered in blood. Looking at his hands, he too emitted a glottal cry. The surviving goats went berserk. The other boys screamed in joy “Fuck yeah!” and “Holy fucking shit!” over and over, laugh-grunting, eyes wide and maniacal. I snapped out of the moment quickly and raised my voice to say “Guys, there is the question of the carcass.” Blank stares and quiet followed. I looked over at the dead goat.

Clay and I were off the hook for the retrieval of the body, and I found this logic touching. Nathaniel suggested dumping it in the athletic pool, and later I’d remember that one of the girls on the swim team had dated and then broken up with Nathaniel the year prior. The task took ten minutes, and when the other boys returned, I handed Ziggy back the Olympic jacket, which I was holding. He grinned at me. We all parted to drive home, discard soiled clothing, and wash off.

Ziggy inadvertently got us caught. The student he lived with - a classmate we'd all known since kindergarten - arrived home late that Friday night from work as Ziggy was sneaking in. The bomber jacket covered the blood on Ziggy's shirt, but there was a large smear of red on his face, likely swiped from his hand in some habitual scratch. The student 'brother' - assuming a fight had occurred - shouted, and the ruckus awoke the host family. In an attempt to provide an explanation for the blood, Ziggy simply could not find an alternative to the truth quickly enough. Mr. Conti was called in the morning.

I didn't walk in the graduation ceremony. Summer vacation started with no fanfare or academic victory. I endured suffocating shifts at Safeway, saving for tuition for the University of Chicago, where I'd attend in the Fall. My parents never spoke of the incident, starting with the day we walked out of Conti's office in silence. Their avoidance of the subject that summer and from there on out left me with the assumption that I had single-handedly ruined their lives. When I came home for school breaks, I took cues from the chill in the air, which I returned in self-preservation. Eventually, I stopped visiting them altogether.

Sometime while in Chicago, through great effort and intention, I stopped talking in such a formal, awkward manner. Despite multiple attempts by them both to prevent it, I completely fell out of touch with Tanner and Derrick. I felt a natural separation from them, eventually leading to a breaking-off from everyone I knew. What I had guessed was my fate became real: I was out of everyone's reach, always on the outside looking in.

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A post from my uncle appears in my Facebook feed: a scanned image of a man wearing a loose tie, large jacket, and lapels. It's titled '1827, John Burrell.' There's a comment from my cousin Mia: *'Is that our relative that killed Native Americans?'* followed by an emoji with a miniscule hand covering

its mouth. I feel my neck heat, and in all caps, I write: *WHAT?!?! Mia responds with a comment, Too much to type. I'll call u.* I immediately wish I had gone to any of the recent family gatherings Mia has hosted. She lives so close to me in San Antonio, and yet I rarely see her or anyone I'm related to. I tell myself often that it's not too late, that one of these days I'll take her up on invitations to go the five miles to see her, and start this adult version of us.

On the phone, we catch up for a few minutes before there's a lull.

"So, this John Burrell thing. Apparently, Uncle Jagger made some kind of discovery in Grandfather's family history stuff, a record or something about our...hang on, let me get this straight..." She's silent for a beat. "Ok, it's our great, great, great, great, great grandpa. I guess he was somehow involved in an event in Oklahoma - did you know anyone on that side of the family had lived there?"

"Yeah, actually, that's familiar," I say, remembering my mom's brief interest in genealogy when I was ten years old. She had joined a club through the local library and attended a single meeting before declaring it "too full of unrelatable people," code for her excruciating discomfort with other humans.

"Oh, well, I had no idea! So, John Burrell, was apparently in a group of men - *white* men - who stole land from Native Americans. Not just stole, but also *murdered* them." I let this information sink in, creating a quick visual of the era. I have sudden pity for John, being scrutinized by us, his family.

We discuss it a bit more before the topic tapers off. It feels good to talk to her, and it's sincere when I tell her that I am available for her Easter party in April. After looping on our conversation for an hour, I register with Ancestry.com.

There are pictures, names, and timelines to sort through. I find John. There is a newspaper article, a small piece written in the Atoka Times in 1827. My relative was one of eight men who overtook a Native American settlement on the Northeast side of the Atoka Creek, Native American territory in 1822. Half were charged with kidnapping, and the other half - including John - were charged with murder. The last paragraph explains why

the event was being written about five years later. Three of the men serving time had been executed the year before. My relative was receiving a pardon by the governor, who felt as if John, the youngest member of the criminal group, 'lacked the intelligence' to understand the consequences of his actions.

Suddenly exhausted, I lay down, and invite images as they appear effortlessly behind my closed eyes. There's John with the seven men: he, plucked by the others. Or, perhaps, *joining* them. I curate vague circumstances: John traveling down a road, the rest arriving in pairs, or maybe in small groups. Or, John entering a general store where the seven of them are already situated. Maybe they collect one another not with the malicious intent that makes the story easy, but with the overwhelming simplicity of space and time: assembling the way a tumbleweed makes its way across land, gathering whatever is in its path, the energy moving the unit of nature forward. Weighing our two crimes against each other, mine and John's, I look for the thread that connects us: his crime more heinous, mine less explainable. I zig-zag between the stories, and realize how useless any of us are in our attempts to control the specific breadcrumbs of our life paths, never more so than in our youth.

It's late when I rouse myself out of bed the next day, and I get decent with food, shower, and clothes, then decide to take a walk. There's no destination in mind. After an hour, I realize I'm heading in the general direction of Mia's house, and I don't stop myself from continuing, I pull out my phone to text her if I can come by, but then put it back. *It's ok*, I think, *to just show up*.

LIZ LYDIC's work has appeared in McSweeney's, Typishly, Rougarou, Little Old Lady Comedy, The Belladonna Comedy, Pine Cone Review, Ruminant Magazine, The Offing, Robot Butt, Moss Piglet, and is forthcoming in Farside Review, Eggplant Emoji, and Defenestration. Liz is a mom, writer, and an admin for a city in the Los Angeles area. She also does theatre stuff. Visit [lizlydic.com](http://lizlydic.com)