Sticks and Stones

Winifred Batson*
DOMINICK walked slowly down the hot sidewalk, carefully stepping over the cracks. The heat burned through the soles of his sandals... turned the tenements into huge steam boxes...
the God's arms around him. He was getting colder. Wished he had another blanket around him. Wouldn't be many more days before they'd be going rabbit hunting. He certainly was sleepy. Wonder if the God would mind if he'd take just a little nap. He looked up at his face. That was funny. It was all wet, and he had such a funny look. He'd never seen him look like that before. It might be the light though. It was getting awfully dark, and things were getting dimmed. He was so sleepy. He'd just close his eyes—and take a short nap—before they went home.

—J. C. Jones, Ent. Grad.

STICKS AND STONES

DOMINICK walked slowly down the hot sidewalk, carefully stepping over the cracks. The heat burned through the soles of his sandals. . . turned the tenements into huge steam boxes. He wanted to run past them to his mother. "Ma! Ma!," he would call, "Johnny was at the playground again today. He's promised me a pair of swim'ming trunks!"

He walked slower, glancing up at the over-ripe bodies sitting on the wooden tenement stairs, or leaning against the railings, languidly watching. "The alley's jest six cracks away," he teased himself. Reaching it, he quickly wheeled around knowing that he would see Johnny. They grinned at one another, both walking backwards as if performing some sacred ritual. . . a ritual but four evenings old. Then before Johnny's black face disappeared around the corner, Dominick yelled, "See ya tomorrow, Johnny!"

Breathlessly he ran up the dark stair-case, almost bumping into a baby buggy on the landing, and flung open their door. "Ma," he called. "Where are ya?"

"In the kitchen." Her flat voice stopped him.

Slowly walking into the kitchen, he leaned against the door frame watching her feed the baby. Her chunky shoulders faced him, her short fat hands the only live things
he could see. One caught the baby’s hands, while the other followed the baby’s shaking head with a spoonful of potatoes, finally emptying it into the crying mouth.

Why didn’t his mother look up? Dominick felt some of his words oozing away from him.

“Ma, guess what Johnny promised me today?”

“Johnny! That’s all we’ve heard around here the last couple of days. Don’t you play with anyone else on the playground?”

Defensively, he answered, “Sure I do, but I like Johnny best.”

She turned her head. “Well?”

“Johnny’s given’ me some swim’m’ng trunks!”

“Uh. Hope they’re clean.”

He felt that her turned back dismissed him. Yet he waited. He watched the flies buzzing around the opened jelly glass, and cupped his hand into a hopeful trap.

“I don’t have none, ya know. Teacher let me go wad’ng today in my underwear.” He paused, expectantly. She did not turn. “Ma, they’re full of holes!”

Now maybe she’d stop feeding the baby, and listen. Hot darts of anger swept through him. He wiped his damp forehead, and then jerked off his T shirt. “Those kids at the playground,” he thought, “I hate ’em.” He dug his nails into his wet palms. “Pointing at my underwear, yelling they’re torn. That my folks are poor. Splashing me with water, and calling me cry-baby. I hate ’em! And I started to throw gravel at ’em. Only teacher came.” He straightened his fingers, surprised at their numbness. “But Johnny’s given’ me a pair of red swim’m’ng trunks. New ones that his Ma bought for him, and he doesn’t want’na wear.”

Smiling, he looked up. “Ma, Johnny’s bringing ’em tomorrow!”

“Johnny who?” and Sam’s tall thin body lounged into the kitchen. He gave his mother a friendly swat across the shoulders, and then sat down at the kitchen table. He languidly flipped his long fingers at the flies, and then poked his forefinger into the glass, scooping up some jelly. “Johnny who, Dominick?”

“I told ya. It’s jest Johnny.”
Sam laughed, glancing at his mother's puzzled face. "Jest Johnny, huh. I know a good last name for him."

Dominick moved further into the kitchen, glancing at his mother's expectant face. "What'cha talk'ng about, Sam?" he asked.

Sam licked his finger, watching his mother lay down the baby's spoon and jerk her chair closer to his.

"The family that jest moved in, Ma. I told ya about 'em, remember? That's too lazy to sweep the moving mess off their porch stairs."

Haven't made a social call yet, have ya, Ma? Brought over some of your home-made pinza's, and sat for a nice chat?"

Her fat body quivered with rhythms of laughter. There was no sound in the kitchen except her laughter. Dominick turned away from her shaking body, and saw that Sam was wickedly watching him.

"The gang's making a visit on 'em tonight, Ma."

"Take 'em with," she choked out, pointing toward Dominick.

Sam grinned, winking. "Ya catch on fast."

Sam's laughter slowly ended in sniggers. "My gang's meeting tonight, Dominick. Want to come along?"

Dominick dropped his hands to his sides, staring at Sam. His voice trembled in its eagerness. "Ya really mean it, Sam?"

"I'm telling ya, ain't I?" His loud bellows set his mother's body moving again in jerking rhythms. "Go over to Immediato's and get some bricks. I saw some in his back-yard this morning."

Dominick eagerly nodded. "Noth'in more?" He waited.

"What were ya laugh'ng for?"

Sam shook his head, flipping his fingers in dismissal.

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Dominick swaggered behind Sam down the alley. He was watching Sam's feet, trying to put his own in the exact places Sam had stepped. "It's like walk'ng down the sidewalk," he thought, "trying not to step on the cracks."

"Look at that, will ya!"

Dominick glanced up to see Sam pointing toward a spotted dog, his flanks chewed raw. The mongrel had tipped over a garbage can, and was now nosing aside tin cans, and blood
stained meat wrappings. Stooping down, Sam picked up a stick. He glanced at Dominick. Then quickly flipping back his wrist, he spun the stick toward the dog's flanks. Grinning, he said, "Good shot, ain't it?"

As they crossed the baseball diamond, Sam casually pointed toward the bleacher. "Look's like they're all here."

They were leaning against the planks above them, or one another's knees, or the side railing. Their sleeves were tightly rolled up above their elbows, their shirts open at the neck with collars tucked in. Occasional gusts of talk swept between them. Seeing Sam, their limp bodies perked erect. Shrill whistles... cat-calls... a loud eager murmuring.

Feeling that the loud incoherent murmuring was about him, Dominick touched Sam's arm. "Sam, ya shouldn't have brought me. Maybe the gang..."

"Skip it, kid." Sam grinned, shaking a long finger at him. "Jest follow me and you'll be O.K."

Dominick gravely nodded. He swaggered up to the bleacher, casually putting his foot next to Sam's on the warped plank. He stared at the sweaty, dark faces, wondering, "why ain't they smil'ng?" Hearing Sam slowly speak, he felt his body tighten.

"Ya all know why you're here."

Dominick eagerly nodded, watching the others. "We're goin'na teach 'em a lesson." Loudly. "They know the law."

Someone yelled, "They ain't got no right mov'ng in here."

"Yeah. Who in hell do they think they are!"

"Niggers ain't got no right mov'ng across the boundary."

"They know the law."

"Yeah. If they don't they'll learn tonight."

Laughter swept through them, setting their mouths open like so many traps.

"Ain't Nick a card!"

Dominick slapped his knee, "Nick's sure a card."

He glanced shyly up at Sam, to find Sam watching him. "That's right, kid. Watch me and you'll be O.K."

Dominick dug his elbow into his bent knee, cupping his chin in his hand. He stared up at Sam, waiting.

"Ya all got bricks." Sam swept his open hand in a broad
Sketch

arc, motioning across the baseball diamond. "What ya wait'ng for?"

Planks cracked under jumping feet.
"What'cha wait'ng for?"
"Damned if I know."
"Come on. Let's get going."

Across the baseball diamond. Gravel spilled through the holes of Dominick's sandals. He dimly felt the small stones, wedged between his toes, cutting him. Yells. His slippery hands tightened on his bricks.

Down an alley... running... feet kicking aside tin cans... yells that brought grinning faces to open windows. Dominick raised his hands, shaking his bricks.

Climbing Skondra's picket fence. Dominick threw over his bricks. Jumping up, he caught hold of the sharp points. His legs dangled for a moment, and then he was leaping into Skondra's tomato patch.

Skronda banged open his screen door, cursing.
"Aw shut up," yelled Dominick.
"Yeah, shut up, Greek."

A fist-full of dirt splattered against the screen-door.

Across the play-ground. The hard ground was still hot under Dominick's sandals. Dust choked him, clung to his perspiring legs. His tongue felt heavy in his dry mouth. Past the wading pool. "Wish I could stick my head in the water... swimming trunks tomorrow!"

Running down a tenement lined sidewalk, his feet slipping inside his wet sandals. Across an empty lot... stopping.

They were clustered around Sam, who was pointing toward a house across the street. Floral paper drapes hung in the long, narrow window. Someone had placed a blooming geranium plant on a window sill. It seemed the only live thing. Pushing his way against a pair of long legs, Dominick felt a sharp jab in his shoulders. "Stay where ya are."

Looking across the street at the small brown house, he saw that its porch sagged in the center, and that its stairs were bent planks.

"Is this it?" he called to Sam pointing toward the quiet house.

"Yeah." Sam walked toward Dominick, taking one of his bricks.
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He watched Sam's long fingers curve around the brick. Like when he threw the stick at the dog. The brick crashed against a porch window. Their geranium plant swayed and then fell onto the porch, lying near the splintered glass.

"That a boy, Sam."

"Give 'em hell!"

Dominick pressed his brick against his chest. Their yells exploding on him sent him running. He heard the dull thud of bricks hitting wood, the crackling of glass, whistles. He watched the front door hastily open, saw frightened black face peering at him, heard the woman's shriek. He dropped his brick.

Someone pushed him, and turning he saw Sam.

"Throw it," Sam hoarsely shouted, poking a brick into his hands.

As if Sam was bending back his arm, Dominick threw the brick. It fell on the porch with a thud. Seeing Sam's jeering face he stooped down and dug his fingers into the hard ground, loosing clods of earth. Flinging a thick clod, he gleefully watched it disappear through a window. He moistened his dry lips, as if tasting a new sweetness.

He flung another clod, breaking an upstairs window. The glass spilled onto the slanting roof. A head jerked through the jagged opening, a face with large black eyes.

"Nigger," he screamed. "Nigger!"

Bending down, he picked up another clod. He threw it at the face. As it slipped from his fingers he yelled, "Johnny. It's Johnny."

"Sam! Sam!" He grabbed Sam's wet arm, digging his nails into the dark, hairy flesh. "It's Johnny. Tell 'em to stop!" "Sure it is." Sam jerked his arm, flinging Dominick to the ground. "Who'd you expect?"

Dominick lay so quiet that Sam touched him on the shoulder. "What's wrong, are ya dead?"

Dominick shook his head. As he raised his white face and looked at Sam, his hand closed on a thick, hard clod. But Sam's foot pressed down on his dirty fingers. "I wouldn't try to throw that at me if I was you," Sam said. Rolling over, Dominick hid his head deep in his bent arms. He broke into helpless sobbing.

—Winifred Batson