

Bit 1

Joules Richardson paced, checking his watch every five minutes. 6:00... 6:05... 6:10. "Tom, check around the building."

"Just did," said Tom Baker Brown. "Just got back."

"Check again," he said. And when Tom returned, "Real sportsmanlike, ditching the on meeting you call, and on Christmas Eve no less. Better be important. Also, what kind of a place is this?"

"This is behind the Home Depot," said Tom. Joules grunted. He'd been told to stop holding meetings behind the Home Depot, but he didn't choose the location this time.

At exactly 6:30, the boy who called himself Newt arrived.

"Mr. Joules."

"Mr. Newt, hello. Can we get this over with?"

"Well, Mr. Joules, I have it on good understanding that one of your boys licked one of my boys in *my territory*."

"Who?" Joules sat down on the curb.

"Johnny Herringsworth. Was supposed to be one of the good ones." Newt held out his hand. Joules put 2 dollars in it.

"Look, whaddaya want? I'll give you an extra dollar and leash him by the ear. He's going through it, right? It's tough times for his folks. You think he's getting anything for Christmas?"

"I don't give a darn what he's getting for Christmas," said Newt. "Rules are. And for too long you've been pretending like they weren't, letting your boys run around like a litter of stray cats. Lately, it's been getting worse. And don't try to peg this on me, 'cause you would. This is your problem. You need to fix it."

"Well maybe," Joules stood back up, "maybe, if every one of you wouldn't pick on us the moment we enter your territory, there wouldn't be so many fights! This is one town, you know; not two. There's, for example, there's only one auto shop that also has a public bathroom. Only one. That's real important to Johnny. You wanna guess where it is? Your side. Your side, Newt."

Newt stared at Joules. Finally, Joules sat back down. Newt said, "Fine. There's gonna be a battle between our sides, no one else. Bring anyone and everyone. It'll be noon on the 26th, can't do tomorrow. As for location, why don't we say... outside your precious auto shop with a public bathroom? I knew this would happen. I've already told my side." Then, as quickly as he had appeared, Newt vanished.

Joules, scowling, stood up and began to pace again. "We can beat them. We can beat them."

"Maybe," said Tom. "We got a lot of good guys out of town."

Joules said, "Yeah. Let's go."

"Halt!" sounded behind them, just as they were going to leave. "Halt! Joules and Tom, I should have known. Come back here." It was Police Chief Haydermeyer. "Got a call saying two young boys were acting all suspicious-like back here. Wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Joules looked at the curb, frowned, and sat. "Meeting with Newt. He called the location. You can ask him yourself."

"If I can ask him, where is he? Caller said he looked and there were two boys, and he kept looking every five minutes for a half hour and there were always two boys. Newt not show up?"

"No," said Joules. "He did. It took a half an hour."

“Stand up, boy!” Joules stood. Mr. Haydermeyer leaned down to look him in the face. “Even if I believed you, which I don’t, I could still arrest you a dozen different ways. Rules exist. It is my job to enforce them, and, apparently, it is your job to pretend they aren’t there. Give me one reason not to take you in right now.”

“All that paperwork on Christmas Eve,” guessed Joules. He wasn’t sure how much work it is to arrest someone.

“Hmm...”

“There’s gonna be a fight!” Joules continued, “I have information too. There’s gonna be a fight, day after tomorrow. Me and Newt and our gangs. To decide, I, I, I guess, if they get to pick on us. At noon, go to the parking lot in front of the Arthur A. Auto. We’re gonna smoke them good; you can try to arrest me then.”

“Hmph!” said Mr. Haydermeyer. “We’ll see if you’re right. I reckon I could take in several more than the two boys there. If not... I know where you live.” The police chief stormed away.

Joules sighed. He sat on the curb. “Look, my hand is shaking. Have to get that sorted out.”

Tom asked, “You’re really gonna let him take you?”

“No, I’ll get away. I said I’d let him *try* to arrest me.” They sat there a few more minutes, until Joules took his face out of his hands, stood and said, “Let’s split, man. We can tell—”

“Halt!” They were prevented from leaving again, only this time the voice was a squeak, and spoke in an accent neither boy could place. “Halt! You are the residents of this miserable city, are you not?” The boys looked around for their inquisitor, and they looked around again. Finally, Tom realized it was a raccoon who was talking.

“Yeah...?” said Joules.

“Then you shall be their representative. Be advised that the animal revolution will take place the day after tomorrow, in the middle of the day, at the building entitled...” the raccoon produced a paper and slowly read from it. Joules sat. “Arthur A. Auto. For too long the humans have subjugated the animals. For too long, taken their forests. For too long the humans have built their own concrete forests and not allowed animals to compete. If we can take it, the building shall be ours! Huzzah! What say you?”

Joules processed, “Yes, well... fine, but couldn’t you postpone it another day? At least, like a couple of hours? We, um...”

“Pah!” cried the raccoon. “We shall attack, when we shall attack! We animals care not for your human ‘holidays’; if it inconveniences you to defend yourselves, then we shall gain advantage all the more. Rules are immutable, human. They are created by nature herself. Humans have tried to alter the rules, to change them to their own design, but no more! The animals shall rule again. Good day, sir. And the other sir.” The raccoon backed away without turning around, and when it reached the trees bolted for its life.

“Thing was scared,” said Tom. “I didn’t realize.”

Joules said, “We got something in common, then. I don’t know what’s going on. Tom, tell me what’s going on.”

“You’re gonna be up against Newt and the police and the animal kingdom all at once.”

“Any chance we win?”

“Well, it is Christmas Eve.”

Bit 2

The night of Christmas Eve is often written about. It is a peaceful night, they say, when not even the mice wake up to do their regular excursions. It is a bounteous night, but superior to that bounteous day, Christmas, for at night the gifts are only limited by a child's imagination. It is a night, more than anything, of hope.

But for Joules, Tom, Newt, Haydermeyer, and the raccoon, it was a night of worry. Neither Joules nor Newt was sure they could fin the fight, and Newt secretly regretted scheduling it the day after Christmas. Haydermeyer suspected Joules had fed him false information and was already running away. The raccoon knew that the animal revolution would not succeed. Everyone worried about their own woe, and Joules worried about all three. But they were worrying about the wrong thing.

Walk with me, dear reader, through the streets of this fictional town. Not one person is about but you and I. We stalk through the darkness alone. What is about to befall this place? Gawk at the stores to our left, closed for the week; count what will soon be clearance. Admire the mansion in front of us, home of Dopey Toby, who did not agree to that name, who is Joules's best fighter and also out of town. Glance by the houses to our right; they look peaceful but you know it isn't true. Now, look behind you, at the bridge. What do you see? Is that water lapping at the edges?

Bit 2, Aftermath

After the flood, Joules and some of the boys met up.

"Where's everyone else?"

"Beats me."

"It's still hectic."

"I heard some people left town."

"I heard some people drowned."

"Smart thing, leaving town. I heard the water's gonna go back up."

"Well, if it's going back up, why are you here?"

"It's not going back up, I just heard it was!"

"Quiet," said Joules. "We're going down to check out the damage, and see if we can locate all the guys. Who're we missing?" Not in attendance numbered: Hampton, Crampton, Shoelace, Robert "The Duck," and Tom Baker Brown.

They went down to the water line.

"Look," said Young Nathan, "the water's solid-colored. It's not clear like it ought to be. It's brown and black. And look, you can see the exact spot the water got up to, because the grass there is knocked down. And look, the water carried all sorts of stuff with it and dropped the stuff wherever it wanted. Now we're gonna have to clean it all up."

"Look," said Emanuel, the second best basketball player, "there's the big Christmas tree from in front of town hall. Look, it's upside down. How'd it get turned upside down?"

"Look," said Dopey Toby, who had come back early, "some spots that looked safe weren't. The basketball court is covered in mud, even though it's on a little rise. I'd have thought the water would go around, but it didn't."

“Look,” said Blackbear, the nerd, “some of the basketball court’s been smashed off. That’s solid concrete. What could have done that? We know the corner was here last week because Joules made a trick pass off it.”

“Thank you,” said Joules.

“Well, you couldn’t do it any more.”

“Look,” said Johnny Herringsworth. “There’s your answer, Blackbear. The water lifted a 4 foot cube of quarry rock. It must have slammed into the corner of the basketball court and knocked a chunk off. It must have been going fast. It must have been going the same speed as the water.” The boys shuddered.

Someone saw Hampton farther down. “Heyo! Look!”

“Look here,” said Hampton. “Someone’s house got the walls blown out. See, the walls are still attached to the ceiling, and they’re still held in place from corner beams, but there’s a gap between the walls and the floor. The water must have done it. Do you know whose house this is?” No one did.

“Look,” said Joules, “the bark got stripped off these trees. These are cypress trees. Have you ever tried to pull the bark of a cypress tree? I have. Ain’t gonna happen. There’s layers, see. You pull a strip of bark off, and it reveals more bark underneath. And you pull that off, more underneath yet. I’ve never made it to the bottom. But the water, the water pulled every layer of bark off, in a full circle around the trunk.”

Crampton ran up to join them. “Look further down,” he said. “at the sandbanks. They’re all in different places, and in different shapes. Sand is heavy, sand is as heavy as rocks, nearly, and it all – it all got moved. Hills and hills of it, all the way down the river to the sea. Eh, I assume. Our sandbanks all got moved.”

Shoelace, up at the top of the hill, spotted everyone. “Hey guys! Come look! There’s dead fish up here. This is as high as the water got. It must have gone back down real sudden, and left the fish in this dip, no way to get back to the river. Hundreds and hundreds of fish.”

“Jeez.”

“Yeah, let’s move on,” said Joules, and they did. “Look for Robert and Tom.”

Dear reader, let us not move on. Let us move three feet down the hill, and look upon another dead fish, lying upon the steepest part of the slope. With even the slightest effort, it could have flopped back into the water. But it never did. That’s how you know: that when the water came down, the fish was already dead. It drowned, dear reader. The fish drowned, because floods are a terrifying thing where fish can drown.

Epilogue

Robert “The Duck” returned to town a few days later. His family had left because they thought the water would go back up.

Christmas was not celebrated that year, except by a few families. Many gifts sat in spare rooms, gathering dust. They were finally given away after a full year, when Christmas rolled around the next time.

Joules was arrested for about five minutes, then put under curfew for the month of January. Not once was he home on time.

Shoelace and Young Nathan held a burial for the drowned fish. It was quite an event; the six major groups were there, and even Newt made an appearance. After the hole was filled in, Young Nathan said this: "All the fish that were stranded in the air are now free. They can go back to their houses, metaphorically. Stranding fish is wrong. Today, we have tried to fix that. But, everyone, remember: one day, more fish will be stranded in the air. When that happens, we need to bury them too." By the time of the next flood, everyone had forgotten this speech.

The animal revolution was officially postponed, and Joules was notified of this.

There were whisperings of what caused the flood, of course, and whether it could have been stopped, and who failed to predict it. There are always such whisperings. It's best not to write about them.

As to the fight that was going to occur, and the police sting, and the animal revolution, all at the same time and the same place: no one showed up. It was a very simple affair. Neither any people nor any animals were present at the appointed time, and none showed up late. Joules remembered later, and sent Newt an apology, and, the next day, received a similar apology back. They intended to meet and set a new date, but, for whatever reason, that meeting never seemed to occur.

After a disaster, it's hard to stay angry with people. Being angry is a lot of work; cleaning up from a flood is a lot of work. I guess you can only do one at a time.