

PREFACE

TELEPHONE MAN

Racism speaks volumes about those who hide behind it, says exactly nothing of those at whom it is directed.

A seventeen-year-old friend of mine, Justin Thomas, understands that truth as most adults in his life don't. Following a summer league basketball game last year, Justin laughingly told his mother the player he'd been guarding called him a "dirty nigger" shortly after he had slapped the third shot into the bleachers. With African, Native American, Norwegian, German—and smatterings of Chinese and French—blood coursing through his veins, Justin could well be the United Nations poster boy.

"What did you do?" his mom asked, a little worried about what he could do at six feet five inches, 235 pounds, and catlike reflexes, but Justin only smiled and

said, "Just what I'd been doing. Get a guy talkin' like that, you can wipe up the court with him."

Racism speaks volumes about those who hide behind it, says exactly nothing of those at whom it is directed.

Telephone Man, from *Crazy Horse Electric Game*, is a racist. He's a racist because he has no tools to elevate his status in the world without putting others down, at least in his mind. He has been schooled by a fearful, insecure father to believe he is superior because of nothing more than skin color and place of birth. It is easy to imagine his ignorance was passed to him through generations.

I have fears in writing a story about racism. In fact, there are a significant number of people who don't understand the simpler truths about bigotry in the same way my friend Justin does and who don't believe that basic lessons are best taught by reflecting the truth. Those people believe when I use the word nigger or spic or beaner or any other of a million slurs, I am condoning the use of those words. They think kids should not be exposed in print to what they are exposed in their lives.

But I believe what I believe, and so I write my stories.

TELEPHONE MAN

If they think I don't know they think I'm weird, *they're* crazier than they think *I* am. I'm not crazy, though, I'm really not. And there's nothin' wrong with my nose, either, except for maybe it gets some pretty big zits on it. People just say that to make me mad. Mostly it's the niggers. They're the ones. Except sometimes it's the white kids, too, and every once in awhile a spic or a Chinaman or one of them Japans, but I bet they get the idea from the niggers. Dad says they're the worst.

Dad says he's sorry he had to send me to another nigger school, but it was the only one he could get me into after I had trouble at my regular school; that's Oakland High, which is a nigger school, too. It wasn't my fault, though. It was because everybody teased me, and then I'd get real mad and do things I don't

remember too good, like they said I tried to bash my face through the door to the boys' rest room, and I don't remember that at all. Except they must of been right, I have to admit, because when I started remembering things again, my face was all bloody and my nose was broken. There's nothing wrong with my nose, though, except for maybe a few pimples. Anyway, next thing I knew they were telling my dad to send me to this special school. Only they didn't call it that. They called it OMLC, and it's a lot smaller than Oakland High; but it's still a nigger school. They said I'd get "specialized attention" because there's no more than twelve kids in a class, and that's supposed to be good for kids who are "eccentric"—along with kids who should be in prison. "Eccentric" is what the teachers at Oakland High School call kids they think are crazy. They use words like that so people like me won't know what they're really saying, but I been hearing that word as long as I've been alive because it's what everybody calls my dad. My dad is a fencer—you know, like he teaches people to sword fight—and he's a great guy, even if a lot of people call him Zorro. I don't know why they call him that. He never wears black clothes, and he's not a spic, which the real Zorro was. But he could sure carve a Z in you quick enough. He wouldn't,

though, because his name's Carl, so it would probably be a C.

There's a few people I'd like him to carve *something* in, which are mostly the niggers and other colors of people that give me a hard time about my nose—which there's nothing wrong with, I think I already said—or my telephone equipment, which is the most important thing I have. Around this school they call me Telephone Man, which is one of the few things I like, even though I know they think I'm a dork for wearing telephone equipment strapped to my hip. But without it, I feel like how the Duke must feel when they make him check his six-shooter at the saloon door. I feel bare naked. I heard the Duke say that.

I have a deal with André, the guy who runs this place. He's a nigger, but he's not so bad because he makes deals. When I first got here, I went right into his office, real toughlike, because I saw through the outside window on my way in what color he was and I knew you have to shoot first and ask questions later. So I walk straight in there with my dad right behind me, looking good in his white fencer's suit and his mask under his arm, and I walk right up to that André—only I don't know that's his name yet—and I say, "I don't want to go here."

He looks at me and sort of smiles and says, "So why are you here?" and I says, "Because I have to be."

He looks some more and shakes his head real slow and smiles and says, "No, you don't. You don't *have* to be anywhere," and I figure he probably don't know the truth because he ain't white, but already I like the way he's thinking except I can't think of anything to say back, so I turn around and look at my dad.

My dad says, "Good morning, sir, I'm Carl Simpson. This is my son. He's Jack. I apologize for his rudeness." My dad says lots of things about niggers behind their back, but when he's talking right to them, like to their face, he acts like there's nothing wrong with them. He says that's the only way to get by if you're a man of peace like he is. So anyway, my dad just comes right out and tells old André I'm being rude when all I was doing really was getting the jump on him. But André says, "That's quite all right. I like a man who speaks his mind," which confuses me because that sort of puts the nigger on my side and Dad on the other side, and that's not usually how it is, and I'm thinking maybe this André got the jump on *me* while I wasn't looking.

And then, instead of talking to my dad some more about how rude I am, André turns back to me and says,

"So, Jack, if you don't want to be here, why are you here?"

So I tell him, "Because they make you. I'm here because they make you," and André says, "Really? How do they do that?" and I'm thinking this is a *dumb* one if he doesn't already know, but I just tell him what's true, which is they'll put you in jail.

But André shakes his head again and says, "No, they won't, Jack. Who told you that?" I start to say it was my dad, but when I look around at him, he's sort of hanging his head and his face is a little red, and I don't want to get him in trouble even though he's the one that really told me. "My teacher at Oakland," I say, and André says, "Well, your teacher at Oakland was wrong."

So now my head's getting hot and my hair feels all prickly, which is what happens just before I get mad, which I do when I know something's right and somebody tells me it isn't, and I say, "No, *sir!*"

André smiles and starts to put his hand on my shoulder; but I can't stand it when somebody touches me, especially one of *them*, and I jump away. He says, "Take it easy, Jack. What do you think would happen if they put every kid who doesn't go to school in jail?" and I don't get it, so I just stand there feeling my hairs in my

head, and André says, "They'd have to build a lot more jails really fast, which would cost a lot of money, and that's the reason you don't go to jail for not going to school," and then real quick he asks me about my telephone stuff. I want to tell him how he's wrong about them not sending me to jail, because it's really my dad who told me that and I know my dad doesn't lie; but I can't do it without getting Dad in trouble, and besides, I don't like to pass up too many chances to tell people about telephones.

"I can fix any telephone that a regular telephone man can fix. I can fix it if the people on the other end can't hear you or if you can't hear them. And if you have more than one phone in your place, I can set them up like walkie-talkies, if they have the right stuff in 'em. See, there's lots of wires inside your phone that you don't get to use because you don't pay for them, but they're there in case you get the money. It wouldn't make much sense if every time you wanted some stupid little thing changed, the telephone company had to bring out all new phones, would it?" and André shakes his head like he thinks I must be right. "So see, it's all in there, but it's dead unless the telephone man wakes it up. That's what I can do."

So André asks me if I want to be a telephone man

when I grow up, and I tell him I'm a telephone man right now, and he says, "Indeed, you are. Maybe I can get you a scholarship, seeing you can fix our phones and probably save us a lot of money."

Well this must not be my dad's day because the next thing he does is ask André if that isn't illegal (my dad says most other colors are experts when it comes to what's illegal, especially niggers), and I think my chances of going here are shot; but André just smiles and says, "I suppose it probably is," but he doesn't say he wouldn't do it, and the next thing I know, my dad is filling out papers and I go to this school. Right before Dad signs the last one, André turns to me and says, "Jack, I want you to know one thing," and I ask him what it is, and he says, "You and I both know nobody can make you do anything if you don't want to bad enough, right? Nobody's making you go here, okay?" and I don't get it, but I say okay anyway because even though it's a nigger school, this is the first place where nobody told me to shut up when I told about telephones.

When I asked Dad later about what André said, he said, "André was wrong, Jack. The law is making you go there. Certain kinds of people don't always pay very much attention to the law."

• • •

Sometimes I wish Hawk wouldn't of saved me from the China kids. I used to call Chinamen chinks because that's the name Dad gave me for them, and it was a good one because they don't like it much. But then I found out my dad must not be as smart as I thought because he told me the Japans were chinks, and so were Vietnams and the people from Korea. But see, I was listening in my history lecture about how a lot of times the Chinamen and the Japans and different ones from all those other countries like that don't always like *each other*. Now I'm pretty sure all of 'em wouldn't go around using the same name for the people they don't like as people call *them* because that just wouldn't make sense. I like to pay attention and get things right, especially when it comes to words, because words are communication and communication is my business because I'm a telephone man, and my dad says whatever you do, you got to know your business. And he ought to know, because he's a pretty good fencer, which is his business.

Anyway, I was telling how sometimes I wish Hawk wouldn't of saved me from the China kids because it confuses me, and I hate that most of all. When a nigger goes saving you from Chinamen, it throws you off because everyone knows niggers are the worst. It all

happened on one of those days when I just don't think. That's what my mom and dad both say: "Jack, most of the time you get into trouble because you just don't *think*." I got up late that day, and it looked like I would have to go to school without breakfast again, which happens about every other day. When I do get up in time and wake my mom up, I have biscuits and strawberry jam. A guy needs a good breakfast. Well, Mom was still in bed and the bus was coming in about four minutes and I looked through the cupboards and I couldn't find anything except there was the Bisquick. Well, I knew that's what Mom made biscuits out of, and I figured, hey, even if they don't taste as good not cooked, they have to be just as good for you, right? I mean, your stomach doesn't know if they're cooked. Everything turns about the same temperature pretty quick down there anyway. There wasn't any strawberry jam in the fridge, so I just ate the Bisquick right out of the box, which it was pretty dry. But then, when I was in the bathroom trying to blast off a pimple from my nose that looked about like a spaceship or something, I saw this strawberry stuff sitting on the bathtub, and I didn't know why it was *there*; but I did figure it was no big deal if I ate it *after* the biscuits because like I said before, it all ends up in the same place anyway and your

stomach would never know which order you ate it in. Right?

I think it should be against the law to make soap or shampoo that smells like jam and has pictures of strawberries on the front. I mean, it was red and it was thick, and even though it didn't have clumps of strawberries in it and it tasted funny, it looked like syrup, which is close enough to jam to drink when you're in a hurry and just want to get something close to your regular breakfast in you.

Well, what went on inside me probably would of made a good science lesson, I bet. I didn't know how many biscuits you can make out of one box of Bisquick, but I found out later it's a lot. And I also didn't know what happens when you get soap inside you. It's like if you got a lube job.

I was in history when it hit. There was this sort of rumbling inside me, and all of a sudden I knew I had to get to the bathroom really quick, so I just ran for it. I was lucky enough to get my telephone stuff off and up high out of the way, but right after I did that, I started feeling like a balloon that you just let go of the end. I wanted to save my clothes, and I got my shirt off, but my pants got stuck down around my knees right when my butt just turned into a cannon and I was shooting

biscuit stuff all over the whole room. It didn't help that I got my clothes almost off. Willie Weaver, the crippled kid that found me—he's the one that cleans up the place after school—said the bathroom looked like a whipped Jell-O factory blew up in there.

I was really scared, even though I never told anybody that. By the time he found me I was curled up in the corner bare naked, because I couldn't tell if I was all shot out or if I was just building up for more rounds, which had already happened twice. I sure didn't want to put my clothes back on till I was all done, and I was also really sick. Anyway, Willie went and got me some clothes out of Lost and Found and snuck me out of the building so nobody would know who did it. When people tease you as much as me, you don't need them knowing you just spray-painted the bathroom out your butt with strawberry shampoo and Bisquick. Willie's a pretty good guy for a crippled kid. Anyway, I was feeling better by the time he got me up, and I begged him not to tell anybody, not even André, and he said okay and that I should take the bus home and change my clothes real quick and if I started feeling bad again, to go to the doctor, but if not, to come back here. He was going to tell everyone my pants ripped and I just went home to change them.

So everything would of been okay except on my way to the bus I ran into the China kids. Now the China kids have been hanging around outside our school for a long time, and if you try to go home alone, they might stop you and take what you've got, like your money or your book bag or your telephone stuff. And I knew they might be out there, but I thought maybe not because it wasn't the end of school, where you might catch somebody going home and take their stuff if you're a China kid, so I took a chance because I didn't want to stay around school and have everybody find out what I did.

Well, there's these steps that you have to go down from our street to the street down below if you want to catch the bus that goes close to my house, and if you don't take that one, you have to walk three blocks farther, and then it takes two transfers to get home if you take that one, and maybe you'll be late if you have a certain time you're supposed to be there or if you're just in a hurry.

The China kids hang out at the top of the stairs, and if they're going to get you, that's where they do it. I saw them there, and right away I was going to go back to the other bus; but our school bell rings outside *and* inside, and I heard it and I knew the kids would be changing classes and some of them would come outside and see

me if I tried to go back the other way—and I thought they'd know what I did in the bathroom. I think people just know if you mess up sometimes, even if no one tells them. So anyway, I decided to just go ahead and pretend I didn't see the China kids and maybe they'd just let me go to the bus so I could go change my clothes.

But they didn't. The leader, he's a guy named Kam, was practicing that karate stuff, and the rest of his gang was clapping their hands and saying "way to go." They call theirselves the Jo-Boys. That's a really dumb name, and I don't get it; but I wasn't going to say anything. I just put my head down and walked around the corner to the steps, trying to make it like no one could see me. I can do that sometimes, but not this time. Somebody said, "Hey, kid!" but I just put my head down farther and kept walking. I tried to do it like when you're trying to get past a mean dog. My dad told me not to walk any faster or anything, just to act like I'm not there. But this kid wasn't a dog, and he said, "Hey, kid," again. I tried to walk faster; but somebody grabbed my shoulder, and I turned around toward him and said, "You better leave me alone," but I kept my head down.

He said, "That right?" and I said, "That's right. My dad's a sword fighter, and he can cut your head right off. He'll do it, too, if anybody hurts me."

Then it was a different voice that said, "We're not gonna hurt you," and it sort of tricked me, and I looked up and it was Kam, the leader of the gang, and I didn't quite believe him, but I said, "Okay then, can I just go to the bus?"

But he said, "Well, yeah, but these are our stairs, and we have to charge you to go down 'em," and I said I don't have any money, which was a little bit of a lie because I had enough for lunch, but my dad told me to always say I don't have any.

So Kam says well, how am I gonna get down the stairs, and I tell him, "That's okay, I'll just go to the other bus," because I'm *really* getting scared now, but he says, "Do you see this little area here?" which I think he means where we're standing and I say yes. So he says that part belongs to them, too, just like the stairs and I have to pay to use it. But when I say I won't use it anymore, he just shakes his head and says too bad I already did. Then the kid who talked to me first says, "What's that you got around your waist?" and I tell him it's my telephone stuff. He wants to know what it's worth, and I tell him it's not for sale; but he just laughs, and Kam tells me to take it off.

Now, I'm scared a lot of the time, and most of the time I'm afraid to talk because people just make fun of

me because I have this really deep voice and these stupid zits on my nose plus it's hard to get the words in my head out so they sound right. So usually when somebody wants to take something from me, I just give it. But they wouldn't take it, though, if they saw how much it makes me hate them because someday I'll get all the hate together and do something really mean and get even. But anyway, now I'm pretty scared; but they want my telephone stuff, and they're just not going to get it. They're just not. I'm almost nobody anyway, but if I don't have my telephone stuff, I'm *really* nobody. Absolutely, completely, and all the way nobody. So I scream, "Leave me alone!" and they start laughing and kind of pushing me between each other. I grab the buckle to my telephone belt and hold on to it tight, and they push me harder, and they start sort of singing, "Leave me alone, leave me alone, leave me alone," so I scream it at them again, only louder this time, and I keep my eyes closed really tight and hold on to my belt buckle with all my might. Then I hear some girl's voice that sounds like I should know who it is, like she's from our school or something, but I'm not opening my eyes because I don't want things to get worse. Sometimes if I scream and scream and keep my eyes closed tight, things just get over.

But then it starts to hurt. I hear some of the boys telling Kam he could probably kick the belt off me, and he starts to try to do it. By now I'm on the ground, and he's kicking my hands just hard enough to make me let go of the buckle, but I won't, I won't, I never will, and he starts kicking harder and I just lay there and scream.

Then all of a sudden everything stops, and I think maybe it worked, but I keep my eyes closed a little bit longer because sometimes that makes sure everyone goes away. Then I open them just a little and take a peek to see if it's time to get up and run yet.

But what I see is Hawk, and I know I'm done for. See, Hawk is this big nigger that goes to OMLC, and everybody knows if he's after you, you might as well buy a plot in a cemetery somewhere because he might just be the toughest guy in the world. He's never teased me before. In fact, he says hi to me sometimes, but I just figure that's some kind of nigger trick, because that's what my dad said it probably is. Usually Hawk just walks up to me and says something like "Telephone Man, you a kick," and he smiles and shakes his head and walks away.

But now I get it. He gets the China kids to beat me up a little, and then he comes along to finish me off. I think, so that's his nigger trick, and I roll up into a ball

because now I know it won't be very long until it's all over.

But then I hear him say, "What you Jo-Boys think you doin' here?" and there's no answer. Then Hawk says, "This here Telephone Man. Friend of mine," and still there's no answer. "How many time I gotta tell you China boys don' go be messin' with my friends?"

My eyes open up now, because this isn't exactly what you expect from a nigger, and I see Kam doing that stuff that Chinamen in the movies do before they start spinning in the air and kicking people's heads in. But Hawk doesn't think that's all such a big deal. He just says, "You done tried that before, Jo-Boy. You 'member that?" and Kam starts breathing big and kind of crouching like an animal; but right before you know it, Hawk's got him down on the ground, and he doesn't get to use any of his karate stuff because Hawk's choking him right to death. The China kid's eyes are so big they're about ready to explode, and Hawk's only using one hand, 'cause he's looking at all these other China guys, who must be thinking they should jump on his back and help out their friend. But nobody does it, they just stand there and Hawk says, "Come on. I be closin' off you number one Jo-Boy air-hole for him; then I take anybody else want some," and still nobody moves.

Then Hawk turns back to Kam and says, "Gonna let you up, China boy. Nice an' slow. You try any you Bruce Lee stuff, gonna embarrass you, front you friends," and he lets a little bit loose.

Kam gets up kind of slow, and when he's about halfway, Hawk grabs him by his cheeks between his fingers and makes him look at me. "You see that boy?" he says. "Got all kinda telephone shit on him?" Kam doesn't say anything, so Hawk moves his head up and down for him, like he's saying yes, and then Hawk says, "You *touch* him, you touchin' me. Unnerstan'?" Kam doesn't say anything again, so Hawk moves his head up and down again. "Now you Jo-Boys, get on. This over here be my school, an' you got no binnis here." Hawk lets Kam go and the Jo-Boys start to leave, and when I look around, I see some of Hawk's friends standing there, waiting to see if they're going to get to fight.

Then the Jo-Boys are gone, and all there is left is his kind and I'm thinking I know niggers are the worst, so maybe they just got rid of the China kids so they could have me all to theirselves to beat up. But then Hawk is helping me up, and this girl named Taronda, who I think I heard her voice before, is looking at my face to see if it's cut and asking me am I okay. It might *still* be a nigger trick; but it sure doesn't feel like it, and Hawk

walks me down the stairs to the bus stop and says, "Cripple kid say you got to go home an' change you britches. See you later," and he starts walking back up the stairs. When he gets about halfway back up, he turns and says, "Hey, Telephone Man," and I look up there and he gets a big grin and says, "You a kick. An' you right. Don' be lettin' nobody get that telephone shit off you. Tha's you one big thing."

So then I'm on the bus and no niggers beat me up like they were supposed to. In fact, they helped me, and so now what was I supposed to do? I quit worrying about it for a while, though, because there was this awful smell, like somebody hung a bunch of strawberries down in the sewer, and I figured out I wasn't all done in that rest room and probably getting beat up made me quit paying attention and I had gone and messed up the sweats Willie Weaver got for me out of Lost and Found. I'm pretty sure the people around me noticed it because of the way they looked at me and then how the ones with perfectly good seats got up to stand near the back of the bus. So I got out at the next stop and walked on home, which took me about an hour when I could of got home in fifteen minutes if I would of stayed on. But while I walked, I got to think a little bit, which is something I don't usually like to do

because it makes me feel nervous, and I wondered if my dad would mind if I stopped hating niggers for a while. I really love my dad and I wouldn't stop if he said not to, and I wasn't going to ask him right out because I didn't want to disappoint him—I disappoint him a lot—but I thought maybe if I started giving a few hints about it, that might give me a chance for him and me to talk about it sometime. And I suppose if I had to, I could *say* I still hate them but not do it really, although I know you're supposed to tell your mom and dad the truth.

The guy I'd really like to ask about all this is André, but what if my dad found out I went to a you-know-what instead of him? But if my dad made a mistake about *them*, I wonder if he could of made a mistake about the other colors, too.

In the Time I Get