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John Styron

The Lux

*Bull's Eye, Missouri, 1963*

He's eight years old and a cowboy. He stands in front of the full-length mirror in the hallway, dressed for Sunday School—a tweed jacket, white shirt, narrow clip-on tie, slim black slacks and brown Hushpuppies—but what he sees is the buff, wide-brimmed cowboy hat, tipped low in the front, tough like Marshall Dillon, and the two-gun holster with "Maverick" tooled into the leather, and a pearl-handled six shooter on each side. He pushes the belt low, to the top of his hips. He draws. He's fast.

Big brother approaches. It's Harold. "Get out of the way, Moron." He shoves Frankie.

"Hey!" Frankie yells. He catches his balance and turns both guns on his brother. The pistols buck, perfectly timed to the explosions he makes with his mouth, and he glimpses a bit of the action in the mirror. It looks just like the movies.

"Stupid," Harold says. "You're always hogging the mirror."

Harold is three years older and a foot taller. Lately, he calls Frankie Narcissus. Frankie doesn't know what this means. Harold could spell "encyclopedia" by the time he was four. Frankie wants to sock him in the face.

Harold takes one quick glance at his reflection, straightens his glasses, swipes his bangs, and disappears into the living room.

Frankie steps back in front of the mirror and watches himself holster the pistols, then raise his right hand to the front of his hat brim. He tips it and nods his head ever so slightly, "Ma'am," he says, "I reckon my work here is done." He watches himself turn. He's on a dusty street in some place called Dodge, or maybe Laredo. The townspeople pause on the boardwalks on either side of the street. They're watching him leave.

"Easley! Stanley! Jackson! Julie!" His dad is at the bottom of the stairwell in the living room hollering up to four more siblings. "It's twenty-after."

Corwin is crying in his crib back in Mom's sewing room. Mom is in the kitchen on the other end of the house. "Ernie," she yells, "Tell Julie to get down here and see about Corwin."

"Julie!" Dad barks up the stairwell.

It's Sunday morning and the Grays are getting ready for church as they do every Sunday, and will again that evening, and on Wednesday night for mid-week prayer meeting. The Sunday morning ritual is controlled chaos.

Frankie sticks his head through the kitchen door. The cabinet is cluttered with breakfast dishes. Mom is putting a roast in the oven for Sunday dinner.

"I wanna walk," he says.

"Get Harold to go with you," Mom says without looking at him. She says it much louder than she needs to. Another order yelled from the kitchen.

Frankie is already pulling off his hat and gun belt. He tosses them onto the couch. Harold is on the other end, his legs crisscrossed Indian style, his face buried in a book, his black horn-rims low on his nose.

"Hare, Mom says—"

"I'm not deaf," he cuts Frankie off. He closes the book and drops it on the couch, stands, and starts for the front door, all in one motion. He stops to pick up a Holy Bible from the end table.

Frankie bolts past him. He's out onto the wide front porch. Yesterday it was the deck of the *Argo*. He and Stevie Morrison had fought the Hydra and the skeleton warriors. They had sailed through the Clashing Rocks, barely escaping death. *Jason and the Argonauts* was at the Lux the week before and they both saw it.

Stevie lives in the little rent house behind the Grays. He has a big collection of comic books—which Mom says is a waste of money—and he sees every movie that comes to town and watches TV all the time. He's actually in Harold's grade, but he prefers to play with Frankie. Harold doesn't play dumb make-believe games.

The problem with Stevie is that he always has to be the main guy. So Stevie had to be Jason, of course. If he's Batman, Frankie has to be Robin, or even the Joker. If he's Sgt. Rock, Frankie has to be a Kraut. When they're cowboys, Stevie is Kid Colt, the Lone Ranger, Ringo Kid. Frankie has been roped, stabbed, saved, or shot by all of them. This time, at least they were both Argonauts.

The siren song had been sounding in Frankie's dreams all week. There's always a scene in a movie that stays with him. Jason tied to the mast—it was that scene. But Stevie didn't want to be tied up, so they didn't play that part. At the top of the porch steps, Frankie hops over two long sticks and a doormat—swords and a golden fleece. Then he leaps. Seven stairs down to the front walk. It's the first time he's done that. Mom says he's having a growth spurt. He'd really like to punch Harold.

The Gray's house is a two-story, frame bungalow on Main Street, three blocks from the caution light that hangs above the intersection at the center of town; two sides of the light blink red to the traffic on Main, and two blink yellow to the semi-trucks and cars blowing through on the highway—there isn't much to stop for in Bull's Eye. But Mom and Dad say it's a good place to raise a family.

Harold catches up with Frankie out by the street just as a motorcycle with ape-hanger handlebars tops the rise on Main, coming from the highway. The biker thunders into the Sunday morning quiet in a black helmet and no shirt. His shoulders are broad and brown and his biceps bulge. Aviator-style sunglasses glint in the sun. He raises his left fist to the wind with the middle finger up. It isn't for Frankie and Harold. An old Ford convertible is approaching from the opposite direction. The driver has one hand on the steering wheel and his right arm around a teenaged girl, her platinum blond hair blowing in the wind.

The flying finger and the couple pass right in front of Harold and Frankie. Tires squall. The car skids to a stop with the driver shouting, "Sonuvabitch!" The motorcycle is already roaring into the distance. The convertible spins around in the middle of Main, rubber burning, smoke boiling out from the rear fender well, the driver's eyes wild like a horse in a barn fire and the blond holding onto him with both arms. The Ford catapults out of the spin and flies, engine whining, after the bike which is just then disappearing over the hill at the far end of North Main.

Frankie and Harold stand still on the sidewalk in their Sunday School clothes, silent before the violent arcs of burnt rubber on the pavement, acrid smoke rising.

"Mike Turner and Hoss Crabb," Harold says.

"You know them?"

"Everybody knows them."

They turn and start walking. It's just four blocks to the church. Frankie's hands are up in front of him. He's holding the reins. He's making a little clippity-clop sound with his tongue. He stutters his steps slightly. His stallion is prancing.

Harold rolls his eyes. "Will you cut that out?"

Frankie doesn't cut it out. For an instant, he thinks about Mike Turner's middle finger, and his own, and how it would look in Harold's face. He doesn't know precisely what the finger means. But he knows the feeling it gives him to see it. He might know how Mike Turner feels about Hoss Crabb.

In a few steps, Frankie is watching the tops of the buildings on the other side of the street. There could be outlaws. The pavement on Main Street turns to dirt, and the early century buildings—mostly brick and stucco with tall flat fronts and some with awnings—easily morph. Garnett's Grocery and Laundromat is a hotel. Dowger's Plumbing and Electric is the General Store. City Hall is the Sheriff's Office. The old Miners House Café is a saloon. To his left, there is a small city park. It is the scene of many cattle drives. The bandstand is the Alamo, or sometimes a fort on the western plains where he fights off wild Indians.

They come to the first cross street. On the other side stands the Lux. It is an old and tall, long red brick building, clearly repurposed. Large windows down the side have been bricked in. The front part of the building is poured concrete painted white. The paint is peeling. The marquee suggests art deco and is lined with neon tubes that are not lit. On top of the awning, LUX stands in dimensional block letters also outlined in neon tubes.

"Is lux for deluxe?" Frankie asks. He's wondered since first grade.

"It's Latin, Stupid," Harold says.

"What's Latin?"

"A language. Very old."

They're across the street and under the awning. Frankie is thinking very old is probably the cowboy days, or maybe Jason's time, which he guesses is a little further back.

"What does it mean?"

"Light," Harold says. He's standing in front of the *Doctor Zhivago* poster.

"Know-it-all," Frankie says. He trots his horse to the other side of the ticket window. He stands staring at the *Beach Party* poster. He drops the reins.

He's seen the preview, last week before *Jason*. It's like the poster plays it for him again. There are teenagers in bathing suits on a beach dancing and going kind of wild. A window opens in the center of the screen. A teenaged boy and girl driving in a convertible but their hair isn't blowing. They're singing. "We're surfin' all day and swingin' all night, vacation is here—Beach Party tonight!" The scene cuts to the beach at night. A campfire in the middle of a circle of surfboards sticking up out of the sand. A guy playing bongos--he looks a little bit like Maynard on *Dobie Gillis*. The guys and girls dance. The girls in bikinis. They shake everything. The announcer says things Frankie doesn't fully understand: "Beach Party, the most uproariously uninhibited unveiling of today's pagan rites." It's sort of a joke, Frankie can tell. He listens by feeling more than comprehension.

The music changes. It's romantic. A young couple in the sunset at the edge of crashing waves, the ones who were singing in the convertible. "Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello,"

the announcer says as the names paint across the screen, “two youngsters in love, you’ll love.” Annette’s face fills the screen. Gorgeous.

More bikinis. More shaking. Sun. Sand. Surfing. Bikinis and guys together on the beach. Announcer: “There’s an irresistible surge of that urge to romantically merge. Ah, it’s wild and wonderful when ten thousand kids meet on five thousand beach blankets. Laughing, loving, living it up.”

The whole preview is right there on the poster. The pleasant tightening is right there in Frankie’s pants. He is standing before Annette. She’s crouching on a surfboard looking directly at him. Her swimsuit covers more than most on the poster. But still. He’s seen his teenaged sister and her friends in bathing suits. Heck, he’s seen Julie in her underwear. Less. But this is different.

“She used to be on the Mickey Mouse Club,” Harold says, walking past him.

“Who?”

“The girl you’re staring at, Stupid. And you forgot to bring your Bible.”

Harold keeps walking. Frankie focuses on Annette. He sees the face of a Mouseketeer on the body of a goddess. It’s a little confusing, almost like the harpies who nearly got Jason. He turns and runs down the sidewalk after Harold, jumps to touch the bottom of the awning on the front of a vacant shop, scampers past Mrs. Purvis’s Dry Goods and Notions store and Mr. Purvis’s Locksmith Shop, past the domino parlor, the ice house, across another street, past the little stone Phillips 66 station, and stops at the highway. It’s all slightly downhill to the highway, then uphill to the church. Harold is nearly there. He’s jogging. The bell is ringing in the tower. It’s a clear September morning. The steeple on top of the tower points into endless blue.

The rest of the Gray family, in the old Pontiac, pulls up in front of the church just as Frankie slips through a downstairs door and into his classroom, seconds before Mrs. Dowger quiets the kids to begin. He gets to check “On Time” in the little record book Mrs. Dowger passes around. And “Offering,” because he’s got a dime from his paper route money in his pocket. But not “Bible Brought,” which Harold will get to check, along with “Lesson Read,” because Harold reads constantly—but not Frankie. He checks it anyway, then erases the mark, and there’s just a smudge of black in the box.

Frankie is one of seven kids in Mrs. Dowger’s Sunday School class. She passes out classroom Bibles for those who haven’t brought one. They read today’s Bible verse in unison. “Then spake Jesus again unto them saying, ‘I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.’ John 8:12.”

“Now who can tell me what the verse means?” Mrs. Dowger asks.

The kids are seated around a low wooden table in straight-backed wooden chairs. The pale green paint on the tabletop is scratched and smudged and Crayola marked. Mrs. Dowger waits. She is severe-looking with her graying black hair pulled into a bun on the back of her head. But her face is honest. Kind. She wears no make-up. Her expression bears not an inkling of doubt that an eight-year old should be able to read and interpret this ancient text.

Frankie likes her, partly because she generally likes his answers. He raises his hand.

“Frankie,” she says.

“Well, God said ‘Let there be light, and, um, Jesus was the Son of God. Something like that?’”

“Frankie Gray, someday you just might make a preacher,” she says.

His head is full of Bible stories. Adam and Eve. Moses parting the Red Sea. David and Goliath. Daniel in the lion’s den. Baby Jesus born in a stable. The boy Jesus, just twelve years old, accidentally left behind in the temple—“And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man. Luke 2:52.” He knows a lot of Bible verses by heart. Like every kid at church, he’s been doing memory drills since before he could read.

Mrs. Dowger passes out songbooks. They sing: “The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin / The Light of the world is Jesus!”

Frankie likes to sing. He sings loud. Sometimes he stands in front of the hallway mirror and sings. “Amazing Grace”—only like Elvis. Mom doesn’t like that. He looks at the title of the song. The lux of the world?

During the worship service, Frankie listens to the sermon more closely than usual. Could he be a preacher someday? He watches Brother Wolf, the pastor. The man is a little bit fat, and red-faced. He’s in a dark suit and tie, and he’s serious but a good storyteller. So Frankie is right there with the disciples in a fishing boat in the middle of a ferocious storm on the Sea of Galilee. It’s just like a movie. The wind is whipping. The waves are crashing over the sides of the boat. The disciples are afraid for their lives. But Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat. “They awake him,” Brother Wolf reads with drama in his voice, “and say unto him, ‘Master, carest thou not that we perish?’ And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, ‘Peace, be still.’ And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.”

Frankie picks up a pew Bible and opens it. In the front there is a picture. It’s Jesus, his arms spread wide, nailed to a cross. The sky behind the cross is dark and stormy. The picture looks something like Jason tied to the mast, like that siren song scene. “He could have called ten thousand angels,” Frankie thinks in the words of a hymn, and how Harold had told him it was wrong because the Bible actually says he could have called twelve legions of angels which would be 72,000.

After church, Frankie starts toward home. Harold and Easley run past him on the sidewalk and Harold pops him in the back of the head for no reason. Frankie raises a fist and a middle finger, but quickly drops it. The two older brothers catch up with Julie, who is already at the highway holding Jackson’s hand on one side and Stanley’s on the other.

Frankie shuffles along slowly with his hands in his pockets. He wants to stop at that show poster again, but he’s got Brother Wolf’s question on his mind. The one the disciples asked. “What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” It’s sort of like the end of almost every Lone Ranger episode: “Who was that masked man?”



But Frankie knows who Jesus is: the light of the world. He knows as only a child can. At least Brother Wolf says so. He says simple faith is the best kind. And the Bible says that all must come like children. It was just a year ago that Frankie prayed the prayer of faith with Brother Wolf at the altar by the pulpit. Then he was baptized. “Therefore we are buried with him in baptism unto death,” Brother Wolf quoted before he lowered Frankie backwards into the water, “that like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,” he said when he lifted Frankie back up, “even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

That was a good feeling, though it seemed odd that Brother Wolf had on waders, like fishermen wear, so he wouldn’t get wet.

Frankie pulls his hands out of his pockets and takes the reins, and gallops his stallion across the highway and up the street, pacing himself so that his brothers and sister are past the Lux before he gets there. He gazes at Annette. A car is passing on Main, behind him. Frankie turns to look. It’s Mr. and Mrs. Dowger, and their two teenaged sons. She’s looking at him from her window. She frowns and her mouth makes the shape of “no.” The poster doesn’t play the preview for him like it did before church.

He stops at the poster again, on his bicycle, the next morning on the way to school. Those bikinis. And every morning and afternoon that week. Annette looks right into him. And also on his way to the post office in the late afternoon to meet Harold for their paper route. He stops on the way to Wednesday night prayer meeting. The days are shortening. The neon tubes are lit. The awning and the LUX glow pink in the dusk. He lingers longer than usual. He hasn’t touched his six-guns since Sunday.

Finally, it’s Friday night and Mom says she doesn’t think Frankie is old enough for a movie like that. She only relents when Harold says, “It’s *Son of Flubber* with a few girls in bikinis. A comedy.”

They’re walking up Main toward the pink glow.

“So you wanted to see it, too,” Frankie says.

“Don’t push it, Cowboy. And don’t hang around me when we get there.”

They blend into the crowd that is already gathering under the marquee. The Lux lights buzz and cast out over Main like a spell. The kids talk and laugh. It’s almost all kids. They’re walking to the Lux from neighborhoods around town. Their parents are bringing them in from the country. High school guys are driving their own jalopies and hotrods. Some are cruising Main. One farm boy shows up on a John Deere. Most of them are older than Frankie. He knows some of them from his older brothers’ and his sister’s classes. Stevie Morrison is there. He ignores Frankie.

There are no chaperones. It’s a little bit like “Beach Party,” the feeling Frankie gets. Guys and girls. He steps off the curb into the edge of the street. He’s standing next to Bobby Pendergrass. Bobby is two years older. He came to church for a while. Bobby is talking to a buddy. They are both looking at a girl. “God, she’s got ‘em,” Bobby says. He catches Frankie’s

eye. “They let you outa Sunday School? You know you ain’t nothin’ but your daddy’s piss?” He laughs at Frankie’s blank stare.

There are a dozen or so teenaged boys on the sidewalk across the street. They’re standing in front of the Miner’s House Café and the broken windows of a shuttered drug store. They’re smoking. Frankie sees Allen Payton among them. He’s older. Julie’s age. He used to live in the rent house where Stevie lives now. His dad hanged himself in the old drug store. Payton takes a drag. His collar is turned up. His shirt is open halfway down. A girl with long brown hair is crossing the street. She’s in tight peddle-pushers and a short blouse that shows her flat stomach. She leans on Payton and reaches her arms up around his neck. Frankie has seen them on the back row of the theater, other couples, too, “makin’ out,” as Julie says.

He works his way toward the poster, toward Annette. The ticket booth hasn’t opened yet. The wide doors on either side are pushed back and stopped so that kids can go in and out. The lobby is dimly lit. Kids are standing in line at the concession counter. The buttery smell of popcorn wafts out.

He turns to the poster. It plays the preview for him again. “Ten thousand kids meet on five thousand beach blankets.”

Suddenly, somebody yells, “Fight!”

There’s a scuffling sound behind him. A guy: “Like hell you will.” A dull thud. A girl screams. It all happens at once.

Frankie wheels to his left. There are two teenagers circling each other. A wide space opens in the crowd, centered on the fighters. Frankie wiggles through to the front. It’s Hoss Crabb and Mike Turner. All the faces around them vibrate like neon.

Crabb is bleeding. There’s a cut over his left eye. His face is wild, and the blood looks almost black in the pink glow of the Lux. He’s big. Tall. Broad. Not quite fat. His arms are like tree limbs sticking out of a shirt with no sleeves.

“C’mon Turner. C’mon,” he taunts through his teeth.

Turner is crouched, moving around Crabb like a wrestler. He’s in a black T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His muscles ripple. There’s a cigarette tucked behind his right ear.

Some guys are beginning to shout. “Get him. Punch him.” They are caught up in the irresistible surge of that urge to merge—spectators taking one side or the other, and Frankie too, for reasons as unexamined as the flashing memory of Turner’s middle finger. Their voices crest like waves in a sea of myth tinged pink in the lux of the world, whipped to a froth by latent desire, and swirling with the thrill of vicarious redemption and revenge. Frankie whispers, “Get him, Turner.” Then he shouts, “Get him!”

Turner lunges and Crabb swings. Turner ducks the punch and tackles Crabb. They’re falling toward Frankie. A hand comes from somewhere and yanks Frankie’s shirt. He falls backward. Crabb and Turner fall past him. They roll across the sidewalk locked onto each other. The crowd moves with them, Frankie and Harold too. “Let go of me,” Frankie yells. But Harold doesn’t.



Hoss and Turner are off the sidewalk into the gravel and pop bottle lids beside the theater. They are fighting like dogs. It is not like the movies. There are no big punches and falls and rolls and no sound effects and no music. They are scratching and gouging. Crabb has arms around Turner from the back. He has two fingers in Turner's mouth and he's pulling his face apart. Turner's elbows fly into Crabb's gut. A hand goes up and grabs Crabb's hair. Finally, he gets a backwards blow into Crabb's nuts. The pain explodes into the pink air—Crabb's loud, furious groan. Turner is loose. He rolls. He's on his feet. His stance is wide and he's crouched.

Crabb is scrambling backward across the gravel, along the curb toward the sidewalk. He rolls off the curb and rises up at the edge of the street. The kids gasp. He has an empty Coke bottle in his left hand. He tosses it into his right hand, then back to his left gripping it by the neck. He bends and slams the bottle on the curb and rises with the jagged neck pointed at Turner.

Turner shuffles slowly to the left. He glances down, and back up at Crabb. At Turner's feet, there is a round concrete cover over a water meter hole. He reaches down and grabs the re-bar handle. In one motion, he jerks it up and grunts, "You bastard!" He lunges at Crabb.

Crabb backs into the street. Turner pursues. They corner into Main. The crowd is moving with them. "Like a giant amoeba," Harold says. Crabb and Turner are in the center, like gladiators. They are circling each other. Their faces are scratched and bloody, their bodies tense, sweat pouring. Crabb is punching the broken bottle forward. Turner is guarding himself like a Spartan warrior, his shield arm ripped and taut and glistening.

Then, there is an adult.

He exits a Volkswagen Beetle in the center of Main. He yells, "What the hell is going on here?" He's wearing an eye patch. It's Ben Breedlove. His son, Ben Junior, is one of Frankie's buddies. Big Ben has bullet holes in his thighs, Ben Junior says. Machine gun. "What in the hell," he yells louder. He steps between Turner and Crabb. He holds his arms out like he's pushing them apart, though he doesn't even have to touch them.

"Drop it, Crabb," he commands, his cruciform centered in a sea of faces bathed pink in the light.

Crabb shakes the broken end of the bottle once more.

"I said drop it!"

Crabb flings the bottleneck over the crowd. It shatters on the pavement of the side street.

"Put it down, Turner."

Turner slams the concrete shield to the pavement. It cracks in half. The handle comes out in his hand. He throws it down and pushes his way through the crush.

"This ain't over," Crabb calls after him. "Chickenshit."

"Get on outa here, Hoss," Big Ben says.

Hoss turns and huffs through the wall of kids. Big Ben looks around. "Get out of the street," he growls. "My God. You'd stand here and watch somebody get maimed. Talk about it in geometry class Monday." His one eye is as hard as a hawk's. "Move!" He turns toward his car. The circle of kids breaks to let him through. He drives away.

The ticket window opens. Frankie stands in line. His T- shirt collar is stretched where Harold pulled it, and his neck is chaffed. A tear creeps out of the corner of his right eye. He lifts a shoulder to wipe it away on his sleeve. Everyone is talking about the fight. He sits through “Beach Party” without the slightest hint of an erection. The credits roll. The house lights rise and the crowd streams up the slanted aisles, through the lobby and out onto the sidewalk. Harold is waiting there.

They start for home. Frankie turns back toward the theater. Beyond the pink glow is the caution light. It blinks its silent orders as steady as time. On the next hill, the church steeple reaches up into the darkness. Above, the late summer sky is spangled with stars, the sliver of a new moon.

“You coming?” Harold says.

It's like another tug from his big brother in a direction he isn't quite ready to go. Frankie's right fist doubles up—the old urge to punch him, the new one to put the middle finger in his face. And yet another that isn't so simple.

“You think those guys will fight again?” he asks.

“Yep.”

They walk the rest of the block home in silence.

Inside the house, Frankie stops in front of the hallway mirror. Harold is right behind him.

“You tore my shirt.”

“I saved your neck.”

Mom's sleepy voice comes from the bedroom down the hall. “What are you two talking about?”

“Nothing,” Harold tosses his voice toward the bedroom and gives Frankie a wink in the mirror.

Mom says, “Quiet down and get to bed.”

Days pass. There are no scenes in the movie that stay with Frankie, but Big Ben does, bathed in buzzing pink neon, planted between Crabb and Turner, his arms out like Jesus, like he's holding back two raging forces. Peace be still.

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*John Styron writes character-driven fiction that explores the experiences of people who find themselves at odds with prevailing norms and expectations, particularly those rooted in Fundamentalist Christianity. John grew up in a small, rural town in the Missouri Ozarks, exited for military service, college, grad school and the establishment of a freelance writing career as a media developer/scriptwriter for museums and visitor centers. He returned to his hometown in 1994, continued to write, became a mom-n-pop Main Street businesses proprietor in partnership with his wife, raised three kids, then retired to write fiction. He is currently working on a collection of short stories entitled Bull's Eye, MO, of which “The Lux” is a part.*