CIRCA

A NOVEL

ADAM GREENFIELD

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An excerpt from

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by

Adam Greenfield

pages 28-35: "The Dead Bird"

His mother steered the station wagon onto their street, a typically suburban cul-de-sac replete with kids playing all manner of outside games, of houses whose floor plans were all thought up by the same unimaginative domestic engineer, of well-manicured front yards that told you nothing about the inside of the house. Devoid of personality, the only thing the little suburb had that spoke of its tenacity was its color palette. The reds and blues of the birds of paradise that were found in most of the gardens almost bled life, the color so alive it seemed to run down the flowers fresh from the bucket of a careless painter. The flecks of granite and stone in the sidewalk glinted startlingly bright, catching the sun at every angle, reflecting light back in a dizzying kaleidoscope of motion that verged on musical. Even the sun itself was brighter there, more yellow, more intent to succeed here somehow than in other parts of the world. These were colors so rich, so sincere, that in his mind they couldn't occur anywhere else in the world; they were manufactured hues designed not to emulate nature but to somehow surpass it. His mother's car, for example, an ugly, brown, hulking station wagon that wheezed like an injured circus animal when it was forced to stand idle, was more than just brown. Grace called it "baby shit brown," and she was right. It was a brown car like none other. Uglier than any other.

As she came around the corner, piloting the car with an attitude that was somewhere far left of cavalier, she noticed the kids on the street playing their different games.

"Oh, look," she said, trying to make it sound nonchalant as she narrowly missed kids' skateboards, basketballs, and even the kids themselves, "Some of your friends are still out

playing. You can play with them for a little while if you want. Before dinner. There's time."

Henry watched with morbid fascination as his mother nearly missed a little girl pushing her dolls in a red wagon, the closeness of the car causing the hem of the girl's dress to puff up, a near vehicular manslaughter version of Marilyn Monroe's up-skirt flirtatiousness.

He didn't answer her. He knew that she was trying to get him to go outside, to play with other kids. But she also knew that that wasn't what he did. She understood that he had very little interest in playing outside, that he wasn't good at sports, that these kids, even though he had lived in close suburban proximity to them almost his entire life, didn't know him just as he didn't know them. Sure, he knew their names. He saw some of them at school and in town when he went to buy packs of *Return of the Jedi* trading cards, but he hadn't been to any of their houses since he was a small kid when everyone played with everyone else, because it wasn't clear yet who fit in and who didn't.

Something landed in the road in front of them and his mother hit it without noticing as she kept on driving. Henry knew she hadn't meant to do it, because if she had she would have shown some sign of recognition, a look in the rearview mirror or the release of a little "Oh my." Besides, she was quick to acknowledge the negative, celebrate it even, which was why when her vivid hypochondria was in bloom, a fireworks display of concern, he knew that everything was all right. He turned around in his seat and saw a dead bird lying in the road behind them.

After she parked, he got out of the car and walked over to where the bird lay dead in the street, its body whole but bleeding, one wing spread out to its full length as if it were attempting to crawl across the road. *Why did the pigeon crawl*

across the road? he thought to himself and smiled. It wasn't that he thought the dead bird was funny, but he had to admit to himself that it certainly did die in a very dramatic pose, victorious even, the way a soldier might want to be seen hoisting the American flag above his head as an enemy's bullet sunk into him.

A few of the younger kids walked over to where Henry was standing. A girl with a Strawberry Shortcake T-shirt looked at the bird, looked and him, and then pulled on her friend's arm.

"Come on," she said, coaxingly, the maternal instinct flourishing naturally, "your mommy says you're not allowed to be in the street."

The two little girls walked to the sidewalk and sat on the curb all the while keeping their eyes on the corpse as if they were waiting for it to do something. They were still too young to understand that this was it, that there'd be no flying away, no sad, lonesome sound, no nothing. Then, without any prompting, they began to pick up little stones and bits of gravel that were around their feet and throw them, sometimes accurately, but mostly missing wildly, at the dead animal as if they were willing it away, casting out evil spirits the way it may have been done thousands of years ago in more superstitious times.

More kids began to walk over to see what was happening, and before too long, word went out that it was Henry's car that had killed the bird. Henry had killed it. Other kids joined in the rock throwing until one boy, the oldest of the lot, maybe twelve, threw one of the rocks at Henry. Henry knew who the boy was from seeing him around and he had always looked innocent enough, as towheads so often do, but once he started throwing rocks, he suddenly looked evil and malicious. He thought that all kids looked like that: either

angels or devils. Or, they were angels until they became devils. Long story short, he told himself, you should never trust a towhead.

He shielded himself from the projectile, and as soon as the first one bounced away, more started to come his way. Soon, all the children were using Henry as their target, pelting him all over, stinging his legs and uncovered arms. He crossed his arms over his face and lifted a knee to cover his balls. He remained folded like a piece of origami while they used his body for target practice, never once feeling like he had the right to call out or run away, that he had this coming for what his mother had done to the poor bird.

Out of nowhere a deafening cry of "Stop!" echoed around the street and he looked up to see his sister Grace, two years his senior, standing on their front lawn, her arms crossed sternly in front of her. The kids obeyed instantly, as if the word had broken a spell, an irresistible trance that was the quiet consent of violence. She stood staring at them all for a moment, her brown eyes sizzling with anger, her jaw clenched and set like a trap, her pale skinny arms armor over her chest.

"What is going on?" she demanded of them.

When no one spoke, she walked over to Henry and asked him again what had happened.

He shrugged. "Mom hit a bird with her car. I think they're mad at me."

She put her hands on him, checked his arms and face for scratches and welts, and when she was satisfied that he looked relatively unharmed she turned and stormed back into the house. No one moved while she was inside, and in a few moments she was back with a shoebox in her hand. She walked straight to the bird carcass and, with her bare hands, grabbed the thing by the tip of its wing and put it in

the shoebox, sliding the lid quickly over the top. She began to walk down the street with Henry at her side, and without a word the other kids followed along, slowly, keeping their distance and with an uncharacteristic silence that children typically had to be coerced into keeping. Even the towhead got off his bike, a thing none of them had ever seen before; that his legs worked as instruments of walking was a marvel to them all.

The procession moved as a group, and the sound of ceramic roller skate wheels clack-clacking against the sidewalk marked their time, a patient grammar they wordlessly agreed to obey as they marched in solemn unison. The most amazing part of it to Henry, the thing he marveled at, was his sister's ability to impose her will on them all, to shame them into behaving and being orderly, himself included. He was suddenly ashamed at himself for having just stood there while they threw rocks at him and could sense that her disappointment extended to him as well.

She led them to the vacant lot at the end of the cul-de-sac, a place they called Rosie's Field for the neighborhood Irish Setter that used it as its primary bathroom. She knelt and dug a shallow hole in the ground and gently placed the box inside. After covering it with dirt she stood, clasped her hands in front of her, and turned finally to look at them.

"Do any of you have anything to say?"

The children looked at one another. They knew that even though she was talking about the bird, about gracing its life with a few simple thoughts, what she was really suggesting was that they take a moment to be ashamed of themselves, that they look upon the dead as just that, the dead, and not as a reason to attack and blame one another for their anger.

She sighed. "Fine. I'll do it." She cleared her throat and

unfolded her arms. "Dear god," she said, her voice high and strong, "we're sorry that this bird died on our street. Please don't let it make you think less of any of us. Birds don't die here all the time, and our mother," at this she looked at Henry and smiled, "she's not always the best at paying attention. Amen."

The kids murmured an assenting "Amen" and stood there until she shooed them away. "Go on, everyone. Get out of here. Nothing else happens. That's it."

Bikes were remounted and roller skates resumed their wobbly trajectories and the field was once again the domain of the neighborhood dogs who would no doubt find the bird's body not too far into the future and that would officially be it. The dogs would have the last say.

Henry and Grace strolled back to the house together, and she let the silence sink in before she asked him, "Why did you let them do that to you? Why didn't you say anything or do anything back? What's wrong with you, Henry?"

It was the inevitable question of a protector, the rhetorical mantra that compelled people like Grace to perpetually worry about people like Henry. He wished he had an answer for her, wished he didn't have to be such a fuck-up, wished she didn't have to ask the questions that he knew he'd never be able to get to the bottom of, even for his own sake. But there wasn't anything to say, which was one of the convenient facts of family, that communication was crucial but ultimately not a requirement. She would always be there for him, his older sister by two years, but besides their being siblings, he couldn't quite figure out why this was. She was infinitely more attractive than he was with her perfect bone structure and skin that was the right shade of pale, and her popularity in school was unparalleled. She got good grades and would certainly get into whatever college she wanted to go to. He secretly wished that it would not be too far away

because the thought of living in their house without her made him truly sad.

Once he came close to understanding her love for him. It was the first time his parents fought so badly that his dad punched the wall, denting it with his fist. The china cabinet rattled, and his mom had smiled and said, "Too bad you're so earnest about things no one cares about, Phil. I hope that hurt." His dad had scowled, and Henry remembered being impressed that his mom knew so well how to push his dad's buttons. They were never as intelligent to him as when they fought with one another. That's when all the strategy came into play, mind games, crystal-clear recall of events that seemed, at the time they occurred, to be completely insignificant.

When their dad had punched the wall, Grace had taken Henry by the wrist and led him up the pull-down ladder above the hallway into the little attic where all the artifacts of their attempts at emulating a "normal" family life were stored away for future unearthing: tennis rackets (they were going to play doubles!), tents, and enough board games to choke a horse. He laughed when he imagined the kind of museum they could build with all of the refuse that was the good intentions of families. It would definitely be one of those things you could see from space with the naked eye.

They sat in the attic and talked about nothing, just bullshitting, and when he made a joke about feeling like Anne Frank trapped up in the attic, she laughed and hugged him.

"That's why I love you, Henry. That's why we've always got to stick together. No matter what."

"Okay," he said, quietly, not sure exactly what she meant, but sensing that she loved him deeply.

"You know what else?" she went on, supremely confident in her analysis of things. "This is not how parents should treat

their kids. We shouldn't be the ones that have to go and hide. They're the ones that should get a room or whatever…" She started to cry, and it absolutely froze him. He had no clue what to do. She was the one who always looked after him, who comforted him, who told him everything was going to be okay. He stared at the walls, where brand-new fishing poles were lined up, part of the architecture of the house now, at cobwebs that captured the infinitesimal light that leaked into this space and glistened as invisible air trembled its ribs. There were so many things he should have done, things he felt like saying and doing, but couldn't summon up the courage somehow, of worrying that it might come off as somehow inauthentic. That would be the worst sin. If she thought he loved her any less than he actually did. It was better not to say anything. So he didn't.

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About the Author

Adam Greenfield's short fiction has appeared in many literary magazines including *MungBeing*, *Outsider Ink*, and *Prole*. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife and two children. *Circa* is his first novel.

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