

J.P. Monacell  
**Stuck**

I was visited and revisited by a nightmare. I move through a cavern with purpose. Then the cave narrows and darkens, but I am compelled to go on. Soon I must stoop, crawl, then slide, on my stomach, then on my back, slithering and wriggling, deep into the earth. Suddenly the tunnel falls into a narrow shaft. I can no longer move, forward or back. My mind jerks and jumps as I seek to comprehend the impossible passage behind, and the void below. My jaw locks and my joints freeze. I know emptiness akin to death.

My mother was parsimonious with her words. One adage she did repeat often, in gospel-like tones: "If you have nothing good to say, say nothing." John Kennedy was shot as I was developing awareness of a broader world, and Nixon's downfall dominated us in the years as I prepared to leave home. In between there was George Wallace, MLK, the Ohio National Guard, RFK, Malcolm X, Timothy Leary, the Weather Underground, Charles Manson, Jimi, Janis and Morrison. In our house we did not talk about much. Who was I to question this silence?

One night I tossed in my bed, hearing tinny shouts and dogs' barks, over and over. Pulled from my sleep, I slowly recognized the sound as coming from the TV in the living room. My parents watched little television, other than Lawrence Welk, or maybe an occasional Ed Sullivan if Jimmie Durante, the Singing Nun or Topo Gigio were appearing. Were they watching some new adventure show? Lassie would bark for a few moments to warn of danger, but this was the sound of chaos. When the angry noise went on and on, I could not stand it. I did not want to see the source of the dogs' fury, yet I had to know what was happening. Finally, I did steal from bed, feeling that if I were not seen or heard I could deny everything. I crept on my stomach to avoid the squeaks of the hall's wooden floor, and saw the sickly light from the television and heard the yaps and snarls of the dogs. Finally, I peeked around the wall and I saw my parents, each sitting erect in a chair, staring at the screen as uniformed men used German shepherds and fire hoses to attack a crowd. I wanted to run to my parents, crawl into a lap, but that would admit what I had seen. I was not supposed to see. I returned to bed and attempted to wall up my mind.

The next day, I was at the dining room table doing homework. My brothers and sister were all elsewhere and my father had not yet arrived home. The setting sun through the dining room window let in canted light and shadow. My mother, neat in her housedress, left her steaming pressure cooker in the kitchen, came silently into the dining room and began to set the table. As she was stretching to lay a plate, I asked: "Momma, did I hear dogs barking on television?" She jerked in mid-reach, and I saw a wince of pain on her stoic face. I knew then, I should not have heard and should not have spoken. After a glance, she looked away, said it was nothing, not for children, that I needed my sleep to be ready for school. She continued her work. The television did not come on again.

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The news was everywhere, however, and seeped through. I felt dirty and confused when I saw the images of Birmingham, the police batons and the cringing black men. But they were far away. A few summers later, I would see dark smoke rise in the eastern sky for weeks. I would reassure myself that the broad Potomac separated Arlington from D.C.

In our house we did not speak of the burning slums.