



Source: Dexter Filkins, 'Baghdad College old boys top the class', *New York Times* in *The Age* online, 13/12/05.

Tags: [racism](#)

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I first saw Gerry when I canvassed his house, a peeling white bungalow eight blocks inland from my place. I had to have seen him before that; keep thinking I must have. Anyway, it's accurate at least to say this was the first time I noticed him. A skinny bike leaned chained to the porch rail like an arthritic greyhound. When I knocked on his door, an adolescent boy wearing a black T-shirt and denim pants glowered down at me. 'Gerald Pinter?' I read the name off my sheet.

The boy called over his left shoulder, 'Dad.' The rooms lined up one behind the other, like a train. In the middle room, I caught a glimpse of Gerry's shoes and pants legs. Faint applause from a game show drifted towards us through the front room which, based on my unobtrusive glances, seemed to serve as someone's sleeping quarters. The father stood up slowly and came to the door. Against a full head of white hair, his face was remarkably unlined except for one vertical harlequin crease under each eye. He wore his work boots inside.

'Gerald Pinter?' I asked again.

The boy spared me a quick nod, then disappeared into the room with the television.

'Gerry,' the man said. He took in my clipboard and pen, didn't ask what this was about. He waited for me to go on.

'I have a petition to block the annexation of King's Head—'

'I'll sign it,' he said quickly. He held out his hand for the pen.

'Great!' I marked a check to the left of his name and pointed at the 'X' to the right of it. 'Right here.'

Not a week later he passed me in the hospital's main lobby, pushing a cart of cleaning supplies and barely moving his lips in half-whispered song. King's Head is so small, you'd think I'd have seen him somewhere already, if not in that lobby where most everyone in town passes through one way or another. Especially considering I've been working there five years. Gerry looked straight at me and smiled in that spacey yet somehow polite way of his. Gave no indication he recognized me from the petition.

Suddenly I was seeing Gerry every day. Every day he wore that same expression. He did remember me, though. Once we stood in the elevator alone. His cart took up most of the space between us.

'Looks like that petition didn't work after all,' Gerry grunted.

'Well, we did our best.' My surprised voice came out louder and chirpier than I intended, reverberated off the close elevator walls and the gently swaying mermaid hair of Gerry's mop heads.

'Yeah,' he grunted again.

Stapleton's city limits were going to be pushed out to engulf King's Head; that's all there was to it. And where were we going to go? The ocean? The city-dwellers all wanted it, of course. They were already paying Stapleton taxes, and their schools were inferior. Heck, this hospital was better than either of the two in Stapleton. The crime rate; don't get me started on the crime rate. I live around the corner from Mayor Hattler and have spoken with him about this. He sees dollar signs for King's Head, but most people at the hospital see its halls filling up with a bunch of interlopers.

The beaches, too. More and more, the kids from Stapleton are driving out here and causing trouble. Throwing cigarette butts in the sand, having to be escorted away after the public part of the beach closes for the evening. My nephew Bryan works at Scoops 'n Stuff along the strip of asphalt running alongside the beach, which everyone calls 'The Boardwalk'. He says those kids from Stapleton are the rudest, most ignorant bunch of hooligans he's ever seen. 'Hooligan' wasn't the word he used, though. Cat-calling the cashiers, most of whom are girls in Bryan's graduating class. Not that it's mandatory, but they never put so much as a penny in the tip jar.

I don't go to the beach often; I burn like crazy. I just enjoy the salty air from my porch. Doctor says I need to walk at least a mile a day to start with though; one of the advantages of having him at work every day is that he can chide me about spending my lunch break in the file room with a bowl of soup. I lied and said I walk in the evenings, which Dr. A. said is great.

Thought I'd better live up to it tonight, which is how I happened to be at the beach for the big row. Didn't see what started things off. All I know is that a lanky girl in a bikini almost knocked me to the ground outside the sunglasses kiosk. She ran past me towards the sand, without so much as looking back. 'Shawn!' she yelled. 'Shawn!'

That's when I saw the knot of people. Cautiously, I moved closer to see why such a large crowd would gather here. The knot split off into two clumps: one, the Stapleton contingent, gathered around a black boy in swim trunks. He leaned against the girl who had been calling his name, dripping blood from his face onto the sand. Now I broke into a run, digging in my purse for my first aid kit. Shawn's lip was split, his left cheek a bulging purple mess.

'Did someone call 911?' I asked the girl. She nodded, dazed.

'He'll be okay,' I reassured her.

I looked across the circle at the other knot. They were holding back Gerry, even his own son. Gerry continued lunging. 'Punk-ass nigger!' he screamed, spit and sweat flying off him.

Our eyes met across the ring of bodies, and we recognized each other again.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ziggy Edwards.*