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## Purple Kites

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## Purple Kites

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"I often recall my kite-days. Whenever the city streets seem to fill up suddenly with wintry people, whenever my business takes me through hustling, friendless sections of town, I let my mind wander back. Whenever I begin to look into every face, I see with suspicion. Whenever I find myself categorizing everybody into neat pidgen-holes, labelling this one a competitor, that one a sucker, the other an out-and-out enemy, then I know it is time to go back to the deserted playground with Runner (we called him Runner then because his nose was always running), time to pretend that both of us are just now running through the high dried grass, looking up at our purple kites trailing behind us."

### Cover Page Footnote

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## PURPLE KITES

*Tom McKague*

I often recall my kite-days. Whenever the city streets seem to fill up suddenly with wintry people, whenever my business takes me through hustling, friendless sections of town, I let my mind wander back. Whenever I begin to look into every face, I see with suspicion. Whenever I find myself categorizing everybody into neat pidgeon-holes, labelling this one a competitor, that one a sucker, the other an out-and-out enemy, then I know it is time to go back to the deserted playground with Runner (we called him Runner then because his nose was always running), time to pretend that both of us are just now running through the high dried grass, looking up at our purple kites trailing behind us.

I like to think that my kite-days took place the whole of one quiet spring about twelve years ago. Were I to be truthful to myself, I would have to admit that my "kite-days" consisted of probably one Saturday afternoon in the middle of some muddy-sunny April, a single ambiguous event that clutters a whole mental attic of insignificant memories. But I'd rather apotheosize the day and spread out its glory for a whole season. Everyone has a right to *something* mystical.

And there *was* something mystical about watching those purple, crystal-shaped kites soar up into the washed-out blue sky. Both of us felt it then, I'm sure, even with the vague way of feeling of a twelve-year-old heart. The kites would go higher and higher, fly freer and freer, and yet always be under the power of our mighty grip. And as we watched the free purple birds grow smaller and smaller in the soft blue sky, as we lay in the weeds looking up at our other selves tossing about on the wind, we felt free and flying in our souls, happy with the pale spring sunshine and warm April winds.

One Saturday afternoon I thought I'd visit Runner. I hadn't seen him for four years. At that time I had happened to take the subway to work, since my car was at the garage (busted radiator), and I met him as he was rushing through

the crowd toward the street. He said he was in a hurry, but he stopped long enough to tell me that he had quit college recently and was working at the art gallery. In a moment he had disappeared into the human stream flowing toward the street. He never did tell me what he did at the art gallery. But I thought that he was probably happy there, around beauty. He had always had an aesthetic craving. Recently I heard that he was now living in an apartment building on Narrow Street. I was told that I wouldn't believe the change in him.

I walked along the streets toward Narrow Street feeling anxious and yet strangely hesitant. There were still dirty patches of snow and ice on the ground. It had rained the night before and the gurgling, slushing sound of running water was all around as the remaining rainwater and melting snow ran along the roof gutters, down drains, along the curbs and through the sunken sewer grates. But it was sunny now, that kind of glistening, moist sunny day that can only be in April after a night shower. As I walked I saw a lot of little kids "running" their kites, but the streets were too confined and the spoked, budding branches of the maples were in the way, so they were having trouble getting them airborne. Suddenly one purple kite escaped through a clearing between the trees and telephone wires; for a second it began to shoot upwards into the bleached blue sky. But then a drift of warm wind sent it crashing down into the clutches of the deadly branches. It ripped as its boy tried to pull it out of the tree, and fell to the street like a bird blown apart by a bullet.

I felt sorry for the little kid as he started to run home with his ripped kite on his back, so I stopped him and gave him a quarter, telling him to buy himself another one. He didn't seem at all impressed with my offer. Instead he just looked at his crushed kite and whimpered. I patted his head and left him with his big tears and runny nose. I didn't know what else I could do.

Soon I came to the shabby brownstone apartment on Narrow Street. The closer I got to Runner, the more I felt a part of spring once again. When I knocked at the door of his third floor apartment, I heard someone stumbling around inside, then the metallic clicking of the turning doorknob. Wearing my heartiest smile, I lifted my eyes up to meet his as the door slowly opened.

"Runner, I was in . . ." (I stumbled in my words for a second as a pair of familiar and yet strange watery eyes looked vacantly down at me.) ". . . the neighborhood, so I thought I'd stop in and see my old friend." Was this old Runner? I thought. Was this tall, thin, curly-brown haired man the Runner who lay with me in the weeds watching our purple kites so many years ago? Was this sallow-faced, stubby-bearded, sloppily-dressed man the aesthetic rebel who

quit college to work in an art gallery just to be near beauty?

"On in, Skits," he said with a lazy motion of his head directing me toward an over-stuffed, mud-colored chair near the door. Right away I felt hurt by his unenthusiastic welcome. I saw no need for my warm-hearted smile anymore, so I just sat down and looked around the room, waiting for him to say something.

The apartment was as shabby as I expected from the outside appearance of the building. He probably doesn't pay more than fifty a month for this place I thought. The walls were a sort of coffee brown, the rug, chair, and sagging couch all of a lighter, mud shade.

He sprawled himself out on the couch with his feet dangling over one arm. "Anythin' in particular you wanna see me about?" he asked as he grabbed a cigar from the end table. I was shocked. I wasn't sure what to say.

"Why Runner, I . . . just thought that . . ."

"You thought you'd stop by and see how your ol' buddy was doin', since you probably heard all sorts'a crazy rumors 'bout him." He yawned.

"No, I haven't heard anything. What's there to hear?"

"Nuthin' much." He was quiet for a second, almost as if he didn't know what line to use next. "How you doin'?" I suppose that's what I'm supposed to say next, isn't it?"

I watched him spew smoke at the ceiling. I saw his languid eyes follow the gray spiral. Something in me hurt sharply.

"Runner, since when do you have to be careful with what you say to me? After all, we've known each other all of our lives."

"The childhood buddy come back to talk about the time when," he said drily, smoothly, adding after a second, "when we walked the railroad tressle, or tossed rocks at windows, or flew kites together."

At this I felt sick. I started for the door. "Look Runner," I said as strongly as I could (although to my ears it sounded shaky), "I came here with the best intentions, hut . . ."

"Sit down, will ya!" he said with sudden vigor. "I don't mean anythin' personal." I sat down. "Well, what *have* you been doin' with yourself?" From his lounging position and bored expression I was sure he couldn't care less about my recent history.

"I'm working uptown now, at the main office."

"Oh God! Insurance or somethin', wasn't it?"

"Yes," and I couldn't resist adding with a glance around the dirty apartment, "I'm doing quite well."

"Oh you *are*. The ambitious young executive personified! Tell me, do you wear *tweeds* daily, and carry a folded black *umbrella* with you every morning on the way to the office?" Again I started to get up, more hurt than mad.

"Sit down! Christsave, you're jumpy. Would you like some coffee or somethin', 'to go' (isn't *that* how it's put)?"

"No thanks," I answered, and plopped into the chair again, not really knowing quite how to handle this situation.

Runner turned his head on the arm of the couch lazily toward me. He was still handsome, I thought, however unclear he looked. And under his nose there was a hint of dampness. This made me smile in my heart.

"You're gettin' kinda fat in the butt, aren't ya? 'Not enough kite-flying', I 'spect." Before I had a chance to answer anything, a girl suddenly entered the room from the bedroom. She was chubby, brown-eyed, blonde, rough-featured, and wearing a red cotton dress. I recall thinking at the time that were I asked to describe her, this was about all I could ever think of saying.

Runner glanced up at her. She sat by him on the couch, running her hands up and down his chest and at the same time giving me a looking over. "Who's he?" she said in a deep voice, still staring at me.

"That's Skits, an *old friend*," Runner told her.

For a moment all I was aware of were those two pair of limpid brown eyes peering at me through a whirlpool of brown walls and furniture. Then "Skits, this is Gloria, the light of my groins." The childlike creature giggled and looked at him. I, for embarrassment, tried to introduce a new subject.

"Are you still working at the art gallery, Runner?"

"Gave *that* up a long time ago. 'Sort'a lost interest." While he spoke he and Gloria made love to each other with their eyes.

I wondered what he was doing for a living now, but I thought I'd better not ask. Probably the rumors he had made reference to earlier had something to do with it. Perhaps this blonde he was living with was supporting him. I didn't really care now.

"In fact," he continued, "I sort'a lost interest in everythin', 'sept her." He ran his hands over her back while she looked at me and giggled. Yes, I thought, you *have* lost interest in everything, Runner. You've slowed down. In fact, you've stopped. You've stopped yearning for beauty, for knowledge, for the freedom of the kites. You've let the kites escape you. All that was left of that aesthetic boy I once knew was his runny nose.

I glanced out the window in back of me. The sky had clouded up. The street below was well-shadowed and wintry-looking, even though the tiny green buds were just opening on the brown maple branches. A few strangers flitted by down on the sidewalk.

I got up and said, "I'd better leave now, Runner. Don't bother getting up yourself (I knew he wouldn't). It was nice meeting you, Gloria." I nodded to her. She nodded back at

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me with a motion that seemed to me to be identical to the one I had just made; immediately after she lay down next to Runner. As I opened the door I heard him mumble something like 'Nice seein' ya again,' and I distinctly heard her whisper, "Let's go to bed honey, huh?"

Outside the air had become chilly. I walked along thinking about all the forms I had to fill out Monday, all the stops I had to make the rest of the week. Thoughts of Runner tried to break through my business-thoughts, thoughts coupled with vague feelings of sadness. But I wouldn't let them enter. I intended to keep the memory of my kite-days just the way it had been before that afternoon, so that when routine got just a little bit too stifling, when I felt like a lonely figure on a winter landscape, it would be there in some corner of my dusty mental attic, waiting to be called forth and enjoyed like an April breeze in the middle of December.

The slutty character I had just seen was not the boy who lay with me in the weeds of the muddy playground twelve years ago and watched those purple kites, those vital purple kites, fly about wild and free in the soft blue sky of a new spring. He couldn't have been. I wouldn't allow it.