

URBANTASM

a novel

BOOK TWO: THE EMPTY ROOM

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**EXCERPT:
TJ Did the Work**



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I put the note under my desk on Monday and resigned myself to waiting until Wednesday for a reply. I was surprised when I found a note the very next day. I was all out of hall passes, so I held the note under my desk and started to unfold the paper.

“John!” barked Ms. Ropoli.

“Yeah?” I said, putting the note in my pocket.

“Stop reading notes in my class or I'll take them away.”

“Okay.”

“Time to pull your desks up, kids. We're working on our posters for the rest of the hour.”

Terrell and I pulled our desks together. I tried to catch his eye, to stare him down, but he didn't seem to notice.

“What up, Terrell?” I asked once we were facing each other.

Terrell murmured something.

“What?” I asked, annoyed.

“You can call me TJ.”

“Why'm I gonna call you TJ?”

“Because I want people to call me that. It's a nickname. My first name, Terrell. My last name, Johnson. It makes 'TJ,' you see?”

“Well that's fucking stupid.”

“Don't be like that, John...”

“You do the work?”

“Yeah, I did the work...”

Terrell flipped through his notes. He had been writing about the news from '67 and '68 while I'd been covering art, sports, and culture. Now we could work on exchanging notes to finish our respective posters.

“1967 was a big year for music,” I said. “That’s the main thing I’ve got. All these bands. I got pictures of some of them. Um, The Who. The Beatles of course, and the Rolling Stones. In ’67 the Beatles came out with *Sergeant Pepper* which was pretty much the most important rock album ever, and then in ’68 they did *The White Album*. Um. Jefferson Airplane. The Velvet Underground. The Byrds. The Kinks. The Doors. Sly and the Family Stone. They all came out with major stuff those two years.”

“Don’t forget Aretha and Jimi.”

“Who?”

“Aretha Franklin and –”

“Yeah, I know her.”

“– I was gonna say, and Jimi Hendrix.”

“Sure. I mean, I don’t know much about it. My mother does.”

“And Ravi Shankar.”

“Who the hell is that?”

Terrell mumbled.

“Speak up, Terrell!”

“TJ,” he said. “I said, if you want to talk about the later things that the Beatles were doing, I think you have to talk about Ravi Shankar. That’s what my dad said.”

“Yeah, well I’m doing music and you’re doing politics, so why don’t you worry about that. What you got?”

“I got...” he said. “I don’t have much for 1967 yet, actually. It wasn’t that big a year for politics. There were some riots –”

“Yeah, there were!”

“There was, the Supreme Court said that people couldn’t

be kept from marrying people from a different race. Muhammad Ali said he couldn't go to the Vietnam War because of his religion.”

“I think that's a sports thing, not a politics thing. Muhammad Ali was a boxer. It's sports. I got sports. Let me write about that.”

“No, I think it's politics. Yeah, he was a boxer, but this wasn't about that. It was about how he wasn't going to Vietnam.”

“Lots of people went to Vietnam! Look, nobody knew who Muhammad Ali was because of Vietnam. They knew about him – they cared about it – because he was, like, I don't know, the most famous boxer of all time!”

“But –”

“It's sports. I got sports!”

Terrell shrugged. “Okay, fine. But 1968 was when the important stuff happened.”

I shook my head.

“No, listen,” he said. “I read on this. Vietnam heated up in '68. They called it the Tet Offensive. Then there was this massacre where we killed, like, a thousand people. Then that spring, Martin Luther King was shot and killed, and just a little later, John... I mean, John F. Kennedy's brother was shot and killed. Then the war was going so bad that the president said he wasn't going to run for president again. And when they were going to choose another person to run... for the Democrats, I mean... there was a big riot in Chicago. Then Nixon was elected president.”

“Yeah, no, that's bullshit.”

“It isn't...”

“I talked to my dad, it's all bullshit. Things started going crazy in 1967. That's what he said. 1968 was just when they got

crazier. But you didn't even mention the Summer of Love. That was when all the hippies went to San Francisco and all, I don't know, got naked and shit. But at the same time, there were those riots you said. You remember those riots?"

"Not really. I haven't done any reading about that yet."

"It was in Detroit, dumbass! It was when Detroit started to fall apart. They called in the National Guard! People died! Half the city burnt down!"

Terrell shrugged. "It's important. I know. I don't think it's more important than that killing people in Vietnam."

"It was Detroit! Dammit, Terrell, you don't even know what went on in a... in the big city just down the road from you! God, get a fucking clue!"

By the time I was done speaking, my voice was almost a shout. Kids from around the classroom were staring at me, some of them laughing behind their hands, and Ms. Ropoli was glaring at me with angry wrinkles in her chin.

Only Terrell seemed unphased.

"So," he said. "You want us to talk more about Detroit. Okay. That's fine. But half that stuff you said is from California. Why are you talking about San Francisco so much?"

"Because that's how you get to Mendocino!" I snapped.