



SNAP-FLASH

**Auburn, Alabama
October 26, 2001**

They were having a party. Not of the grandest fashion, but modest in comparison to ones in the past. It was a small gathering of their own kind and some choice co-eds who'd gathered to take part in the spirit and to partake of the spirits. They partied while the library housed foreign students to whom party meant a voting preference for natives. They partied while faculty slumbered disillusioned that classes of ethics, humanity and history had served a purpose. They partied while nightshift mail workers sorted endowments and banks routed contributions to the school in appreciation of days gone by.

The house where the party was taking place had stood for many years and seen several boys grow to men. Lifelong friends had been made here and innocent girls entered only to leave experienced. It was a place parents loved and loathed. The comfort of home mixed with concern for the world. It was a place where youth conducted life's experiments such as finding their tolerance for liquor and testing their drug limits. Girls performed acts they'd do no more once married, while boys experimented with their preferred lifestyle.

Parties at the house were always festive no matter the cause for celebration and no matter the invite list. There was always

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a wealth of good times to accompany the wealth of the house's occupants. They'd come from good stock, or hoped to learn how to become good stock. They were the sons of physicians, attorneys, entrepreneurs, vice-presidents, publishers, legends, heroes and gridiron gods. They were the sons of laborers, couriers, landscapers, mechanics, waiters and cooks; sons who thought this house would make them better than their fathers.

At semester's beginning, they partied to welcome all back. At semester's end, they partied to send all away. On occasion when holidays didn't merit a visit home or a road trip, the occupants threw parties like the one going on tonight.

It was nearing All Hallow's Eve when evil lurked, goblins howled, creatures prowled and boys put on the masks of monsters.

"I wanna be the nigger," said one of the hosts.

"Hell, no. I'm the nigger! You've got a damn sheet on your head. How can you be the nigger and the Klan?" another host asked.

"Stop sayin' that word. I 'ont like it," another host announced, walking into the crowd. Eyes turned toward him. Smiles vanished. Good cheer stopped and only music moved. A musical fusion of rock and rap blared through speakers. "I'm the highest ranking officer here," he continued. "And I say who's who. So...I'm the coon and that's all there is to it."

An eruption of laughter rang and echoed through corridors. Backs were slapped. Good cheer returned. Smiles beamed brighter.

The self-proclaimed high-ranking coon placed a large afro wig atop his head. He placed it on backwards having had no experience with the doo. The only tutorial he'd had was MTV-BET. The coon imitator clutched his crotch. His other hand swung in awkward rhythm with his legs. He bobbed up and down in stride, mocking the coons he'd seen on MTV-BET. With a clutched crotch and swaying arm, he spoke an idiom of coon for all to decipher.

"Sup Nig? Every time I come around da corner, bling bling." He flashed a coon gang sign (four fingers formed into a W).

Laughter erupted once more at the next coon imitation.

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This one synchronized: gang sign, crotch grab, coon talk, laughter. “Wessst Siiiide.” More laughter.

The attendants clutched plastic cups filled with toxins of cheap beer, grain liquor and spontaneous laughter between sips. A large silver keg pumped and pumped and pumped. The containers appropriately, or ironically, enough were known to the world as Dixie cups.

“Hey, boy!” said Klansman to the coon.

“Sup, G? Bling, bling. Smoke a blunt, fool. Roll to da crib. Holla at a nigga. You my nigga and they don’t get no bigga.” He machine-gunned his entire coon repertoire.

“I gotta nice necklace for you.” Costumed Klansman whirled a noose about his head. Laughter chimed, but not as much as before. A door popped open. In came four more coon imitators wearing afro wigs. One of them suffocated his skull with a doo-rag. It was a cosmetic device gone wrong.

Once worn only in the confines of coon houses and only at night, the doo-rag was invented to lay down wavy hair or simply mat coon hair to the head. At dawn, the rag was removed and stuffed into a drawer. But like many other coon cosmetics, it had made its way out to the streets during broad daylight.

The doo-rag now joined ranks with the shower cap, dripping with grease worn to protect pillowcases during slumber, but then become a fashion statement heralding—*I’m a coon. Look at my coonology*. Hair rollers once worn only in the deepest part of coon caves often made public cameos in grocery stores screaming to the world *I’m a she-coon. Smell my scent and we can coon cohabit*.

Colored scarves were used by coons years ago, even before the shower cap. It held in place coon conks or processes or whatever coons were calling them back then.

Like its predecessors, the doo-rag was wildly popular. And it was more tolerable now. Parents accepted the object as a fashion trend. Coons wore them with formalwear. Coon professional athletes wore them. Artist coons wore them and even Caucasian coons had copped the style. Coons were setting more trends now, so it was only natural that the boys attending this party would masquerade wearing doo-rags.

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The four coon imitators wore camouflage pants and military boots. Fake gaudy gold jewelry dripped from their necks. Faces were painted with shoe polish to match their favorite shade of coon. They wore purple shirts with shiny gray Greek letters that meant Psi Phi; a fellow fraternity of the Intercollegiate Greek Council. One they'd never partied with and never invited over to the house. One made up solely of coons.

"Where the hell y'all get them shirts?" someone asked. Not really caring, but instead having nothing else to say.

The four imitators replied only by barking, which was a signature call of Psi Phi? More laughter.

The impersonators-of coon and Psi Phi-stood one behind the other. A common act of the Psi Phi while in public.

"Oh, I think...is it? I think it is," a bystander wielding a plastic cup announced. "I think they're gonna do the coon dance!"

More attendants gathered around with cups, good cheer and grins. The coon duo began their feat.

"I say who's that knocking' at my do'? Ruuff! Rufff!"

It was the most common chant of the Psi Phi. Many had seen it. None had practiced it. There was more laughter as the duo clapped hands, jumped, turned circles, barked, waved arms, bobbed heads and barked even more.

Klansman appeared again with a noose twirling above his head.

"Here coony, coony, coony. Where's my coon at?" More laughter. The cups had taken over by now. People were on auto-laugh. "Gotta nice leash for ya." With red eyes, slurred speech and almost stumbling, he sang"

Oh where oh where has my coon dog gone?

Oh where oh where can he be?

I gave him a nickel to buy some ham.

But the coon dog used his food stamps.

"Everybody sing along!"

The voices, after laughing, rang out in drunken harmony. Klansman began conducting. The melodic sound of his orchestra filled the house and spilled out into the front lawn.

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His hands rose and dropped to a 4/4 beat. He sang the final chorus. The last stanza ended slowly as the serenade stopped.

*Buuuut, the cooon doooog uuused his foood
staaaaaaaaaaaaamps.*

The conducting Klansman held a wiggling hand high in the air making his orchestra hold the last note. Ten seconds later, out of breath, the choir gasped for air quickly then cheered and applauded for the great hooded maestro.

The door popped open once more showing a fair maiden dressed in pink bunny rabbit ears and soft white cottontail to match.

“Hey y’all! The photographer’s here,” she announced.

A man, not costumed, holding a camera entered the room shocked, then not surprised at all, then thinking of money, then laughing along out of courtesy to the client. He thought of leaving. Thought of giving a lecture on history, moral standards, sensitivity, the old and new south, simple decisions that changed lives forever. But then he tallied the heads, the number of proofs, the number of reprints, the number of return customers, the number of referrals and said simply with a smile, “Okay boys and girls. Who’s first?”

“Me! Me! Get us,” yelled an entrepreneur’s daughter or perhaps debutante, or executive vice-president’s princess. She was pulling her beau into the picture who was dressed as a Psi Phi coon. They jumped in front of the camera and smiled. She wore a navy blue Auburn football jersey with the number thirty-four. The number had been worn by perhaps the greatest coon gladiator to grace their sacrosanct coliseum. SNAP-FLASH.

“Here. Take my picture,” said a cup-clutching lad. Face smeared black, noose around his neck, a white shirt with the word FUBU hand written in black ink. It was an acronym seen often on coon apparel worn. It meant For Us(coons) By Us(coons). His belle was a sandy-blond third generation Auburn attendee. A doctor’s precious, or lawyer’s pride, she was wrapped in an innocent pink shirt with innocent pink

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cardboard wings on her back. Cute little yellow wire twists sprang from her head completing the butterfly costume. The two smiled as though they were wearing a tux and evening gown. SNAP-FLASH.

A litter of bunnies with long hair (brown to blond) smothered the Psi Phi coons while the photographer tried to fit them in his frame. They wore white sleeveless tops, white bowties and short black skirts—outfits never worn around family during holidays. The photographer thought once more about giving his lecture, but they all smiled. SNAP-FLASH.

“My turn, dammit!” demanded the conducting, lassoing, coon-hunting Klansman. He’d finally roped his prey and yanked it over to the photographer. “Over here. Take it right here.” He stepped proudly in front of a Confederate flag. The noose around coon’s neck was held high. A bearded boy dressed as a hunter wielding a shotgun jumped in the picture. Klansman, not to be outdone, also held a shotgun. They crossed the guns making an X to match that on the flag. The hanged coon smiled. SNAP-FLASH.

A rosy-cheeked boy had come to the party in a innocent policeman’s outfit until he too grabbed a shotgun and jumped in the picture. The policeman pointed the gun to the coon’s head and smiled as though he’d just been made a proud father, earned a degree, said *Ido*, won a football game or some treasure that life distributed in moderation. He smiled as large as he had all night. SNAP-FLASH.

The FUBU coon was just as popular as the Psi Phi coons. FUBU coon wrapped his arm around another bunny with a cheerleader smile. Her cleavage was exposed the way it had been in a father’s nightmare. Fearing and knowing that if some boy in manhood’s larva got a whiff of the bosom, he would lunge upon the untainted breasts and carry on until she said no or yes, both meaning the same to boys in larva. The cleavage drew attention from coon’s blackface paint job, but not much. SNAP-FLASH.

In front of Dixie flags and Dixie cups and in front of photographs of former fraternity members who’d lived in the house and made it out unscathed; who’d gone on to run the south, or at least help it flourish (or falter)—they snapped

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and flashed until almost everyone had taken a picture with the coons. The line ended as it did when Santa had seen all the kids and heard all the lists. Silly little costumes at the party like grown babies and condoms and pirates had gone unnoticed. At the Beta Delta fraternity house, they partied, coon danced, drank and snapped-flashed while Auburn slumbered.