

He's Kinda Tall

(Julian's Sophomore Year, Part 2)

Eldot

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Julian Forrest, a sophomore in high school, is extraordinary in more ways than one. Introduced to us by author Eldot in a novel called Barr's Meadow (the beginning of his adventures in Boy Scout Camp) we are acquainted with Julian's finer points, as well as his insecurities, yearnings and evolving, altruistic desire to be the best guy he can be. His ingenuousness is frankly, surprising and altogether charming. The all-male environment provides numerous occasions for unintentional, if fortuitous sexual intersection. No swimsuits at this lake. When Julian applies cream to his buddy Danny's poor sunburned ass, he seems genuinely surprised that Danny pops an erection. And because it is Julian, we believe it.

We follow Julian through a number of novels (all set at the camp) as he discovers new skills, explores his feelings, and a crush he has on Mark, one of the scoutmasters. Eldot, with his typical and commendable sensitivity, treats the subject with understanding and warmth. Eldot is thorough in his depiction of various other scouts (Sidney, Tom, Andy, Danny...) who are trying to navigate the confusing onslaught of adolescence. The surge of libido, new challenges, badges, and athletic demands. The songs around the campfire and cooking hotdogs and lighting farts. The Julian series is thoughtful in its inclusion of secondary characters, each carefully drawn to give us a feel for their values and personality.

He's Kinda Tall, the next novel after You're In High School Now, removes Julian from the context of Camp Walker and places us in the boisterous world of high school teenagers. By the time we catch up with Julian, he has learned to persevere in the midst of shrieking, swoony girls, who have a heart attack whenever they see his Apollonian good looks. He has learned to endure his mother's snoopy best friend (and boss) who insists on commandeering Julian's romantic life. He spends his lunch hour drawing portraits for free.

Now in Part 2, Jackson High is about to welcome it's first "Negro" student, at the onset of integration in 1960's. Kasey Wood, a piano prodigy who's been attending a private school, may be transferring to the small town where Julian resides. Kasey's dad is a scientist, enlisted to work for a millionaire philanthropist, Mister Frederick Swann. Those in charge at Jackson High (the Principal, Faculty, School

Board) are getting somewhat nervous about Kasey's assimilation. They hit upon the brilliant idea to enlist Julian as sort of a good will ambassador, and buddy to Kasey, to put him at his ease. Like everyone else, Kasey is overcome by Julian's authenticity, graciousness, congeniality, and sincere desire to see the best in people. In a world of formality and artifice, Julian's lack of pretense and need to reveal himself (emotionally speaking) comes shining through. He believes most everyone is his friend. He's Kinda Tall, is brimming with adventures, and the sly kind of guy humor that Eldot excels at. Andy and Randall feel their way towards sexual attachment, trying to process Julian's role in their friendship. Randall is a skilled and gifted photographer, and Andy a musician. One of the most touching moments comes when Helgar has a father and son talk with Randall, and lets him know that his mother and he have absolutely no problem with the romance between he and Andy. Not bad for the 1960's. A number of Julian's friends from his Scout Troop start with two buddies planning a camp out, then (from a mix of spontaneity and serendipity) wind up with a throng of robust scouts, eager to pitch tents and spend a couple days climbing and enjoying the brisk air. Helgar becomes the de facto leader, using his considerable means to have food catered to their outdoor gathering. He makes sure that they know he's not the big bad boss; not too proud to cut a few scorches after their evening meal. When the guys turn to climb into their tents, they are happy to snuggle and perhaps enjoy the other's touch.

Eldot loves to cast his narratives with any number of quirky supporting roles. There's the butler who serves Swann, who is beyond resourceful, often reminding us more of Batman's Alfred, than say, Mr. Belvedere. Helgar, Randall's dad, is remarkably jovial, whooping it up in inspired moments of zeal for living. Helgar is one of the scientists that must cure an unnamed disease that ails Swann. There's Candace Wood, Kasey's exotically beautiful mother, and his quiet, yet sentient younger sister. There are the two wrestling boys who have worked out their own solution to the occasional pesky erection. There's also Pat, Mark the Scoutmaster's sympathetic (if estranged wife) who supports him in his odyssey of self exploration. These are but a few of He's Kinda Tall's varied and distinctive characters.

Eldot is quite savvy when it comes to the sexual behavior of the young men. Curiously he depicts teenage boys who are quite comfortable with their same-gender erotic impulses, in the context of a heteronormative culture. This doesn't mean the boys have it all figured out. For all their impulsive squeezes and discreet fondling, they do not resort to predatory or unwelcome advances. Eldot knows how to detail the quandary of young men trying to scope out yearnings and playful pleasure with a buddy, without causing frustration or havoc. His avid, curious scouts may be driven by raging hormones, but they also get there's nothing deplorable about their urges.

I have ruminated long and vigorously about Eldot's inclination to to erect meticulously crafted Utopias. It's not that there's anything wrong (of course) with a story in which most everyone behaves responsibly, everyone is considerate, all the pieces and plans fall together flawlessly, and all worries and concerns evaporate. And there's more than a slight suggestion that Julian brings out the best in people. The phenomenal aspect of Julian's enthusiasm, is how profoundly refreshing it is in a disappointing world. Though I should add that this time around, Julian walks a sharp edge between the childish and childlike. Throughout this series, there have been times when others protect Julian from those with apparently deficient moral compasses. That only stands to reason. If I compare this realm that Eldot has offered, to say, Dickens, or Irving, or Knowles, in which the poisonous and predatory often lurk, then perhaps the strategy behind Julian's adventures doesn't feel like a reach. To put it another way, I believe most of us are far more likely to embrace a grim worldview. If we read a novel where most everything went wrong (whether for the protagonist or all the characters) we'd probably, sadly, be less skeptical. My hesitation then, such as it is, may be that Eldot makes his pitch a little too often and a little too hard.

What continues to impress me, as I partake of Eldot's novels, is his remarkable insight into erotic behavior between teenage boys. It's ironic that individuals and communities still dismiss this as trivial experimentation. A phase, a dalliance, a lapse in judgment. Or worse, they demonize it as depravity. To take a group of buddies, and set them in the 1960's, while imbuing them with the wisdom to rise above shame, is sheer brilliance. We live twenty years into the turn of the century, and yet there are still places (all over the world, and in America) where queer men are understandably terrified of revealing their true selves. Yes, of course there are times when teen guys touch in certain ways, that bear no significance to their actual orientation. What makes Eldot's novels different, is that they contain unblinking, tender, often humorous situations that refuse to distort or condemn what is simply another aspect of the male experience.

