

Watching Over Me: Potrero Hill Recreation Center

A One Act Play by James M. Kemp
and Derrald Etheley



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By James M. Kemp and Derrald Etheley

Setting –

The stage is bare except for a single streetlamp upstage center. The time is 1963 San Francisco.

Cast of Characters –

Young **Derrald Etheley**, a scrawny, short Black male in his early teen years.

Bubba, Derrald's older brother, as a teenager, well built and much larger than Derrald.

Jimmy Lee Simpson, father of O.J. Simpson. Jimmy was a well-known drag queen.

Ollie Cowling, heavily built Black teenager.

Young OJ, Orenthal James Simpson as a teenager, tallest and heavier built than Bubba and Derrald, but smaller than Ollie.

Mrs. **Norlean Bee**, middle aged Black woman, small stature and mother of Derrald and Bubba.

Scene One

(Lights go up center stage at evening. Jimmy Lee Simpson stands under a streetlamp. He is an older Black man wearing a light-colored woman's suit, a light-colored scarf and a fanciful woman's hat. Jimmy is a drag queen, who performed in various venues in the San Francisco area.)

Jimmy Lee Simpson

That summer of 1963 was a hot one for San Francisco. Those of us who had moved to the new projects on Potrero Hill were glad to have escaped the old military barracks at Hunter's Point. Those of us who qualified, that is.

We were proud of the new projects with the recreation center where my son, Orenthal James Simpson, was one of the boys who played tag football there. I had heard talk about gangs being formed on Potrero Hill so I was glad to have that recreation center as a place that might become a gang-free area in the future.

Many days, I watched those tag football games. There were the Etheley boys, Bubba and Derrald. Bubba had some potential, but Derrald had just entered his teen years and didn't seem to be too motivated by tag football. Then there was Ollie Cowlings. Ollie was big and strong and athletic. Ollie had the stuff you'd need to play pro ball. But Ollie had a temper. I thought my Orenthal had a temper, but Ollie was way ahead of my son in that category.

And I do recall one afternoon when Ollie spotted me watching their game. Ollie's younger brother Allen and my Orenthal were great friends. Wherever Allen was, James Orenthal Simpson was close behind.

Allen Cowlings would later own a white Ford Bronco that was seen from news helicopters as Allen drove it wildly on Los Angeles freeways. O. J. Simpson was in the back seat of that Bronco, always behind Allen Cowlings. Always close behind Allen Cowlings.

(Jimmy Lee Simpson leaves the stage as lights go up full on stage. Two Black male teenagers run on stage, tossing an old worn-out football between them. One is young Bubba and one is young OJ Simpson. Young Derrald enters, waving his hands in the air.)

Young Derrald

Bubba, throw me the ball.

Bubba

I would, little brother. If I thought you could catch it.

Young Derrald

I caught a ball before, Bubba. Come on! Let me have it.

(Young Bubba and Young OJ continue to toss the football back and forth. Young Derrald tries to grab the ball unsuccessfully as both other teens shove Derrald away.)

Young OJ

Hey Jughead, run out there and I'll toss you the ball.

Young Derrald

You mean me, OJ?

Young OJ

No, Jughead, I meant your Momma. And here she comes. Your poor mother, Jughead. Comin' up from the big store down the hill. She be luggin' your dinner, Jughead. Git yo' little ass over there and hep her!

(Norlean Bee enters from stage right. She is trudging along, carrying grocery bags that seem to weigh her down. Young OJ gives Young Derrald a shove in the direction of Norlean Bee's entrance.)

Young Derrald

Then you throw me the ball, OJ?

Young OJ

Sure, Jughead. But, don't piss me off now. I take my ball an' go home if you piss me off! Git over there and hep your po' Momma.

(Young OJ and Young Bubba continue to toss the football back and forth as Young Derrald runs toward Norlean Bee. Derrald takes two bags from Norlean. Both trudge toward stage left.)

I14

Young Derrald *(yells)*

Hey OJ, see? I be heppin' my Momma.

Young OJ

She the only Momma you ever gonna have, Jug...uh...Derrald. Mrs.
Bee, good to see you.”

Norlean Bee

Orenthal James. How do? You boys bein' mean to Derrald again? Huh?

Young Bubba

(Young Bubba has fumbled the ball twice but successfully catches on the third try.)

“Third Time's a Charm”, OJ.

No, Momma. We don't want Derrald to git hurt, Momma.

Norlean Bee

OK then. You toss the ball to Derrald every now and then. How he gonna learn if he got no one to teach him?

(Derrald and Norlean Bee trudge off stage. Ollie Cowling enters from stage left. He is the largest and oldest of the teens. But he tends to look older than he really is.)

I15

Ollie Cowlings

Well, well. If it ain't Orenthal Jughead Simpson. And his girlfriend Beulah. I mean, Bubba. You two queers ready to play some ball?

Young OJ

Ollie-Ollie Oily, me and Bubba is always ready to take on yer ass.

Ollie Cowlings

That's what my brother Allen tells me. Stay away from my ass and from my brother's ass.

Young OJ

Where's Allen today?

Ollie Cowlings

(Mockingly) Where's Allen today? You always be asking about my brother. You two gonna get married after high school? Huh?

Young OJ

Naw. I got you in my sights, Ollie. You be real pretty. Make some man a nice wife.

I16

(Ollie and O.J. have been moving closer together and appear aggressive. Derrald enters from stage left, running.)

Young Derrald *(yells)*

OJ! OJ! I did it. I hepped Momma with the groceries. Throw me the ball!

Young OJ

OK, Jughead. Run out there and catch a hot one.

Young Derrald

(running downstage while looking back with arms_outstretched.)

Throw it, OJ! Throw it!

(Young Derrald trips and falls as OJ tosses the ball to Bubba who drops the ball.)

Ollie Cowlings

Your Jughead tripped, OJ. Now c'mon. Let's get this game on. I'm ready to take you three fairies all by myself.

(Ollie, Young Derrald, Young Bubba and Young Derrald pantomime various possible football plays. Finally, Ollie runs past the other team with Young Derrald standing closest to the running Ollie who runs offstage left.)

I17

Ollie Cowlings *(re-enters from stage left still holding the football)*

Touchdown, bitches!

Young OJ *(yells at Young Derrald)*

Hey Jughead! You just stood there and watched that SOB run right past you. You was supposed to tag him, Jughead!

Young Derrald

Ollie was runnin' too fast, OJ!

Young OJ *(yells at Young Derrald)*

Bitch! All you had to do was reach out and tag him, bitch!

(Young OJ stomps toward Young Derrald. Young OJ picks up Young Derrald and slams him to the ground. Young Derrald yells out in pain and slowly stands up, holding his right arm with his left hand.)

Bubba runs to aid his brother Derrald. Bubba tries to move Derrald's arm. Derrald yells in pain.)

Young Bubba

I think it's broke, OJ. OJ, I think you broke my brother's arm!

I18

(Lights fade as the team exits stage right with Derrald limping along behind the other three. Jimmy Lee Simpson enters from stage left wearing full drag and makeup. Jimmy's dress is an elegant evening gown. Spotlight up on Jimmy Lee Simpson as he walks to center stage.)

Jimmy Lee Simpson

That was the day my son, Orenthal James Simpson, broke the arm of a younger neighbor boy named Derrald Etheley. For months after that, my Orenthal would meet Derrald's mother, Norlean Bee as she climbed up the hill from getting groceries at The Four Corners. For a while, my Orenthal would carry Norlean's groceries home to her family. And then he stopped.

In later years, Derrald Etheley would head up the housing authority. Bubba got a good job. Allen Cowlings and my OJ would play professional ball. Allen would drive his white Ford Bronco, with my OJ close behind him in the back seat, swerving through LA traffic with LAPD at their heels.

But Ollie Cowlings, who everyone agreed would have a great career in the NFL, overdosed when the heroin epidemic hit Potrero Hill.

After OJ had received the Heisman trophy, my son would complain to the press that he wished he had a father while growing up.

I19

But you see, my son, Orenthal James Simpson, had a father - a father who slaved away daily as a custodian in the financial district. OJ had a father who was always just a few steps behind him, sweepin' up the dirt that accumulated over the years in OJ's wake. But OJ didn't know his father was even there, because OJ never once recognized me, his drag queen father.

(Lights fade as Jimmy Lee Simpson exits stage left.)