
The Silk City Series

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THE SILK CITY SERIES

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One Night in the Rail Yard

My father once said to me, "I don't care if a Paterson cop bites it," and I thought it was the funniest thing ever. He didn't get the joke. I guess he was being serious. It's amazing how much influence both environment and parents can have on children. We never realize it until we're older and look at the choices we've made.

One winter morning, soon after I turned fifteen, I was getting dressed for school when I heard a knock at my bedroom door. I knew something was up. I finished buttoning my jeans.

"It's open!"

"I just called the school and told them you're sick. You're not going today."

My mother wasn't in her waitress uniform. She stood at my door wearing pearl earrings and a dress I had only seen her in for important dates. I jumped for joy, but reluctantly. Something was definitely up.

"Change your clothes! We're going to visit Grandpa and you have to look nice! Think church."

We hadn't gone to church in years, but I knew what she meant. While I changed, she started the car to warm up. I looked out the kitchen window to see her swing the door open, a cigarette dangling from her lips. It was funny to see her in that polka-dotted dress with makeup in our old Buick. She looked beautiful, but I could read the anxiety in her face. I hurried up. It wasn't the day to be funny or slow. The last time we visited was several years ago, when she was still cleaning houses. My

only memory of was that before we left, I came out of the bathroom and saw Grandpa handing her cash. Did she need money again?

Half of the money I made from landscaping went to her, but I didn't work in the winter.

I was brushing my teeth when she came back inside. From the corner of my eye, I could see her pacing back and forth and checking her lipstick in her compact. Lately she had started talking about moving into a one-bedroom apartment and how the landlord was raising the rent once the lease was up.

She finally sat at the kitchen table and lit another cigarette with her coffee. The pot on the stove was empty. The mug had her lip imprint, bright red. I stepped out of the bathroom and said with the toothbrush still in my mouth,

"Hey Ma, is everything okay? Why we leavin' so early?"

"Everything's fine. Grandpa is older and wakes up very early so I thought it'd be best to go early. We can spend more time with him that way."

"Okay, but I mean is everything okay? Are you in trouble?"

"Yeah, honey, I am. The diner's been slow and I can't find a second job at night. You're not working, so yeah I need to borrow money."

"I'm sorry. I'll get another job now until spring, I promise!"

“Well we need money now, and not what you could give me. I’ve already started looking at one-bedroom apartments. You’re just going to have to get a room divider for the living room.”

I spit, rinsed and put a tie on. Tying one was something she taught me.

“Lemme take a look at you. Oh, you look so handsome!”

“I hate wearing a tie.”

“I wish Daddy wasn’t so nasty....”

“Grandpa’s funny!”

“You’re old enough to hear certain things, but not everything.”

”Please, I’m fifteen, I can handle anything.”

I didn’t realize until years later what she meant.

The car was still cold and smelled like stale cigarettes and fake pine. I wasn’t embarrassed to be seen in it. Our car was the cleanest on the block despite its age and two-door girth. It was the best we could do, since I never had a father. We drove down Union Avenue into Paterson. For the first time, I realized how close we lived.

“This is the Totowa section of Paterson.”

“But we live in Totowa.”

“Yes, we live in Totowa Borough. This is the Totowa neighborhood of Paterson, right next door. See those buildings back there? Those are projects. That’s where I grew up with your grandfather.”

“Are your relatives in that cemetery back there?”

“No, my relatives and ancestors are buried out near East New York.”

We drove through the entire city through the downtown area, passing blocks of stores and people out walking. It was morning rush hour so we sat in traffic behind public busses loading and unloading handfulls of people. People were on their way to school or work. Except us.

The car pulled up to an intersection in an industrial neighborhood. One building was a Halal meat business with pictures of chickens and sheep on its sign.

“We’re almost there.”

She changed the radio dial. We drove past a railroad full of steel rail cars. A few turns later and we were out of the industrial park and surrounded by row houses and brick apartments. On the corner was a tavern with dead neon signs in the window and chipped brown paint. The sign read “O’Toole’s Sportsman Lounge.” It didn’t look like the type of place that did a lot of business. She pulled around a corner and parked against the curb. A pickup truck sped past, dangerously close to the car.

“Jesus Christ, I forgot how everyone in this city drives like an asshole. Well, there’s nowhere else to park and we’re right in front.”

“Grandpa lives above this bar?”

“Yeah...”

“He knows we’re coming, right? He’s not asleep, is he?”

“I called him last night. Don’t worry, he’s been up for hours. You better not mouth off to him; he will belt you...”

“What? You wouldn’t let him hit me! That’s abuse...”

“Shhhh!”

And she rang the doorbell. We waited for a few minutes and she rang it again. Still nothing. I was relieved, thinking we’d have no choice but to turn around and go home. Then the door opened.

I recognized him from the last time I had seen him, a couple years ago at a funeral.

His face was pockmarked and dotted with liver spots. He looked bloated, but his skin sagged everywhere. His button down shirt was off-white, stained and wrinkled with a leather eyeglass case in the pocket. He still had hair in places, stringy and gray.

I shook his hand. He had a tight grip that took me by surprise. His hands were huge.

“Hi Grandpa.”

“Hello there, Matthew! You’ve grown! And you’re so thin! Thank Christ Almighty. You’re lucky he didn’t turn out a fat ass like your sister.”

I started guffawing.

“Dad! That’s not nice. You always picked on Florence about her weight. Can we go upstairs please? I’m freezing.”

We walked up a long flight of stairs, very slowly behind him.

“I put a pot of coffee on. Does the boy drink coffee yet?”

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“Nonsense! I started drinking coffee when I was seven.”

We finally got to the top and went inside. The only light came from the kitchen and the streaks of sunlight through a window in the living room. I could see dust hanging in the air that smelled of mothballs. We stood in the kitchen while he shuffled to get mugs and spoons. I didn’t like the powdered creamer, but drank it with a straight face.

“Please, sit down.”

We all sat at the kitchen table, the three of us silent. My mother wore a nervous grin. Grandpa smirked.

“So Matthew, what grade are you in now?”

“I’m a freshman in high school!”

“Good for you! Finally somebody in this family will graduate from high school! That’s real good. I want to give you something.”

He stood up slowly, supporting himself with the table. He pulled out two envelopes from his back pocket and tossed them on the table. One of them was marked “MARY- \$2,000,” another “MATTHEW- \$100.”

“This one, no this one is for you. I’m sorry I never remember your birthday, but now I’m getting old. And this is to congratulate you on your studies. I didn’t get to go to school like you.”

“Wow, thanks Grandpa!”

“Come here and shake my hand.”

As I felt his grip tighten, I looked over to see my mother’s face had turned bright red.

“Daddy, that was real nice of you.”

“Grandpa, were those boxing gloves in the living room over there?”

”Those old things? Yeah.”

”Mom never told me you were boxer.”

“Yeah when I was a little older than you.”

“Daddy, I don’t think he wants to hear about this.”

“Oh, but I do!”

“Well, I don’t want you to hear about this.”

She lit a cigarette.

“Still smoking, Mary?”

She glared.

“Matthew, why don’t you go into the living room and excuse us for a minute? I need to talk to Grandpa alone.”

“Go try on those gloves. See how they fit.”

I left my coffee and walked away. Their voices became lower, but I could still hear bits and pieces of the conversation as I looked around at the furniture.

“The boy knows what’s happening, doesn’t he?”

“Yes Dad, but that’s not the point.”

“Look, Mary I’ve been in your shoes before...”

I gravitated toward the mirror atop a chest of drawers where the boxing gloves lay. I slipped them on, the gloves feeling heavy and huge on my hands. Looking into the mirror, I imagined myself a young boxer like Grandpa and threw a few sloppy jabs.

“...I don’t want you telling him about your rotten childhood.”

“Don’t worry, smartass. His virgin ears are safe here.”

“Look, I just don’t want him to make the same mistakes I did.”

“I didn’t want you or your sisters to either.”

A black-and-white photograph was taped to the upper right corner of the mirror. I pulled off my right glove and took it down. It was a picture of him, dated September 17, 1948 on the back. He wore boxing shorts and had a fighter’s stance. A scar ran under his right eye. He looked like a furious animal. He was ready to jump out of the photo and beat the shit out of me. I stared at it and the talking stopped. I figured it was safe to walk back in. Mom was standing with her purse.

“Honey, I have to go across the street and buy cigarettes. Do you want to come with me and get something to drink?”

“No, I want to stay here with Grandpa.”

“Okay.”

She shot him a warning look and closed the door behind her.

“So Grandpa, how’d you get into boxing?”

“I was in reform school at the time and an Italian guy got me into it.”

“You were in juvie? What’d you do?”

“Well, it’s a long story. When I was a little kid here in Paterson, I didn’t have a father either. He died in a railroad accident right after I was born.

“Annnnnnd my mother liked to drink...a lot. It was the Depression, see, and we never had nothin’. We kids hadda steal coal from the rail cars in the yard. And there was a cop who walked the beat, a real fat, nasty sonofabitch name of O’Malley. A mick like you and me. He’d chase us away and once in a while he’d catch one of us and you’d take a licking. I mean he’d whip you like a dog.

“So one day, I’m coming home from school. Guess I was about ten. I hear my mom screaming ‘No, stop!’ I walked in and there’s this cop, this piece of shit manhandling my mother.”

“What happened?”

“Well boy, he got off my mother. I knew he was hurting her in some way. Everyone in the neighborhood hated my mother because they said she was a whore. I never had any friends growin’ up because of it. So O’Malley says he has to get back to work and he put his hand on my mother’s face.

“Well, I grabbed his wrist and told him to get lost. Little ten-year old kid telling a cop to scram!”

“Wow, that’s crazy.”

“Yeah, well O’Malley didn’t think it was hot shit. Told me he’d skin me the next time he saw me. Then he left. I went over to see if my mother was okay. Know what she says to me? She says ‘We’re out of coal. You need to get coal before it gets cold.’”

“So what’d you do?”

“Well I tried to get out of it. But she was able to convince me otherwise. So I run down to the rail yard by myself, after all the other boys left and it was starting to get dark. I climbed into a car and figured I was home free with my bag. Well boy, lady luck wasn’t in my corner that night. Soon as I gets out, O’Malley was waitin’ for me. Knocked me down and starts beatin’ on me like a drum. When I came to, my clothes were all torn and my two front teeth knocked out. See?”

He removed a bridge with his two front teeth and put it on the table.

“And the coal was gone. Well I couldn’t go home empty-handed so I grabbed a coupla pieces and went home.”

“What’d your mom do when you got home?”

“Boy, wouldn’t you believe I caught another beating for my clothing bein’ torn?”

“So what’d you wind up doing?”

”I’ll tell you what I did. I waited. I waited a month to get back at that sonofabitch. My Uncle Charlie gave me a string of firecrackers for New Year’s and I saved them. So one night I knew he was workin’ the yards and I go down there by myself. I set ‘em off and then hid. Of course he shows up, screamin’ and lookin’ around for who did it. Well he couldn’t see me and I had this slingshot see? Soon as that fat bastard was in view, I nailed him. Right in the head with a shooter marble!”

“Woah! Did he go down?”

“Damn right he did! Not only that, but he had a heart attack. Died on the spot.”

“No shit.”

“Hey! No shit!”

“So what’d you do?”

“I grabbed my bag out of his back pocket, loaded it with coal and ran all the way home. I didn’t tell a soul what happened. Next day, my mother gets the paper and there it is ‘Sergeant O’Malley Dead from Heart Attack.’ That was one of the few times I saw my mother happy and sober at the same time. We had hamburger for dinner that night, a real treat. I knew from that day on I wouldn’t take no shit from nobody, especially a cop. And that no guy would ever do what he wanted to my mother.”

“So is that how you went to juvie?”

“No, I went to reform school and then jail later for other things.”

“What happened with that? What’d you do to get arrested? What was prison like?”

“I don’t want to talk about that. And I don’t want you to start pullin’ shit and getting arrested because I was a punk. It’s not worth it. You gotta take care of your ma.”

And he leaned in closer and looked me square in the eye.

“And don’t take no shit from no cops, understand me boy?”

“Yes, sir.”

The door opened. It was Mom. Grandpa’s teeth were still out and I could see how it registered on her face.

“I don’t believe this, Dad! I asked you not to tell him that story!”

“Mom, Grandpa has an amazing memory!”

“Yeah, for all the wrong things...I think we better go. Come on, Matthew.”

“Matthew!”

“Yeah, Grandpa?”

“Don’t forget what I told you. Take care of your mother. You gotta be a man now.”

“You can’t tell him stories like that, Dad!”

“I’m an old man and I can say whatever the hell I want.”

“We’re gonna leave, Dad. I love you. Thank you again.”

“Be good, you two. I love you, Mary.”

“Bye Dad.”

“Bye Grandpa!”

When we got to the car, she stopped and screamed, staring at the passenger side door. I walked over and saw a large scratch on the door.

“No one in this family can ever catch a motherfucking break! EVER!”

She started to cry. I put my arms around her and held her. She pulled away and dried her eyes. We got in the car.

“Come on, let’s go. We’re done here.”

A Screwjob in Hillcrest

A buddy of mine told me to write about Italian-Americans from New Jersey who talked like the people we grew up with. We always loved seeing people on television shows like "The Sopranos" throw slang around like "stunad" (meaning stupid) because while some people took it as a stereotype, we considered it a shoutout. Hillcrest, a largely middle-class neighborhood of mostly owner occupied houses, lies near the border of Totowa, both sections sharing Union Boulevard. While demographics have changed, the neighborhood remains the same: neatly kept and the most desirable of the city.

In the early-morning stillness, the deadbolt still made a deafening *click* when I turned the key. I expected to see Anna waiting for me on the easy chair, asleep in her bathrobe. But when I walked in, the living room was empty and dark. It was 4 a.m., and the drive home from the bar had been eerie on the highway with no traffic. A cloud of silence had settled over the entire family in the weeks since Paulie and I were forced to quit the supermarket.

It was no longer limited to the apartment; we spread ice like hoses in winter everywhere we went. Not that we no longer spoke. My new job as a bar back required me to talk to customers at least a little. And we still talked to each other. But our gift for never-ending conversation was in trouble. The sound of raucous laughter had gone missing. Had something broken?

I knew nothing was physically wrong with the apartment. It had been a family joke that it was our good luck charm, before everything escalated. A second-floor apartment in a four family building in the Hillcrest neighborhood of Paterson.

Our backyard and balconies were well kept. The façade had new aluminum siding, and rent for a two-bedroom was cheap because of the zip code. We knew the neighborhood was a diamond in the rough.

The only problem was in the summertime, as I came to find out. I moved in with Paulie and Anna after Mom moved to Point Pleasant Beach last fall. Dorming at the Newark campus of Rutgers was out of the question for me.

“No brother of mine is gonna live in Newark. You gonna transfer to Rutgers, dat’s fine. But come on, live there? Don’t be a stunad, you get stuck up and ya car stripped. You move in wit Anna and me. I’ll take care a ya.”

Paulie was five years older and had just married Anna, his high school sweetheart. They were complete opposites, in both personality and appearance. But they took care of each other and she treated me like I was her brother in blood. Soon after we moved in a year ago, Paulie had taken the place of my father and Anna my mother, even though I was twenty-one. The two of us even worked at the same supermarket for a few years.

The eldest of three brothers, Paulie was always our default father figure. Physically he was the shortest, but also the strongest. Everyone else in the family towered over him, including his Puerto Rican wife, but in the midst of chaotic hollering, he only needed to yell once for us all to quiet down and listen. Tony was the youngest, a freshman at Fordham on scholarship, who spent breaks on our couch. Luckily he was back living at school so I had the couch to myself.

I cracked open a beer and sat down. What set the original chain of events in motion was the old wiring in the apartment. This wouldn’t be a problem except that the smaller bedroom, mine, in the back grew

incredibly hot during the warmer months, making sleep impossible. We came prepared with used air conditioners when we moved in, but mine proved to be too powerful and constantly blew fuses. The heat settled in by May that year. Night after night, Tony and I alternated between the couch and reclining chair, the living room being the only cool spot. Finally in June, Tony couldn't take it anymore.

"You gotta goddamn room! Why do I have to keep sleeping on the recliner?"

"Because my room is too hot, dipshit! If you don't like it, go get Paulie! I'm working extra hours at Save Now to get an AC that won't blow a fuse."

"By the time you do that, I'll be back at school! I want the couch now!"

"You know what? Why don't you go spend the night in my room then? The sheets are clean; go see what it feels like!"

"No, no, no...."

"Look, you're gonna keep bitching at me about the couch, go spend the night in there."

"No...."

"I said you fuckin' do it. Do it or I'll tell Paulie you and that girl were smoking weed in here when they went to the movies last Saturday."

"You're a real rat bastard, you know that? Fine you miserable fuck. There better not be cum on the sheets."

I smiled smugly as he slammed the bedroom door.

The next morning I was eating cereal in the kitchen when he stumbled in. He wore briefs only, showing the cross he had tattooed over his heart. He looked like he had stepped out of a sauna. He was clearly defeated and in a nasty mood as he poured coffee.

“Surprised to see you drinking hot coffee after last night. Ain’t you hot, Mr. Sunshine?”

“I’m gonna throw this cuppa coffee in your fuckin face if you keep smartin off.”

“Ah! So then I’m guessing you’re admitting I was right. Hell’s Kitchen kills another. We back to the original arrangement then?”

“Fine. Yeah, you win.”

”No more bullshit?”

”No more bullshit, we alternate.”

“Good, good. Glad you see it my way. By the way, there’s iced coffee in the fridge. Knew you’d be hot.”

He looked surprised at the gesture. Still too naïve to know I was rubbing it in his face.

“Yeah? Well, thanks! Yeah, I’ll have some.”

“No problem. Say, as an apology for being an asshole, perhaps you’d like to make the initial gift to the Bobby Fadducci Air Conditioner Fund?”

“Get the fuck outta here....” He walked into the bathroom, shaking his head.

It was morning in early June and already hot. I figured it would be a short summer, or hoped so. Of course I was dead wrong; summer seemed to last forever that year. The water from the spray bottle felt good on my chest and face. I grunted as I rolled an undershirt on, thinking about the extra shifts I’d have to pick up. It wouldn’t take much time. Finding a small air conditioner on the cheap should be easy, or so I thought.

I walked down and got into my car, an old Civic that I put a system in with help from Paulie’s and his friend’s auto-parts shop. The air conditioner had broken in there too.

I cranked the windows down while the subwoofers rattled the car frame. The palms of my hands burned on the steering wheel for the short ride there.

It was a Monday, so while Tony went back to bed on the couch, Paulie and I went to work at the Save More. He went in earlier to begin his day of chopping up dead animals as a butcher in their meat department, while I hauled milk and cheese. We took cigarette breaks together on Mondays at scheduled times on the loading dock. I’d only been there two years, while going to William Paterson University, which we called Willy P. Paulie’d never charged me rent, but I helped when I could and paid for school. In the summer, Tony and I always kicked in more for the electric bills and food.

Despite the four of us in a moderately sized place, things were off to a great start for Anna and Paulie. Anna was from a large Puerto Rican family in Passaic. A tall curvy woman with a skin tone that matched our Sicilian color, she acted as loud as she looked and fit in well. She had grown up with brothers, so our sense of humor was never lost on her. There were no fathers at the wedding, but the service was in a Catholic church with a party in a rented hall. We all lived in our mother's house in Garfield still, with Anna and Paulie in the basement, until Mom decided to move to the Shore.

"Youse all should be out on your own anyway. I'm tired of the city."

"What about me? I'm still in school and I'm gonna transfer next year to Rutgers."

"You better talk to Paulie."

Which is how, of course, I wound up moving out with them last September. Now it was June and I was hot. I worked later on Mondays, leaving at five while Bobby was already out an hour earlier. A cop waiting in a parking lot on Route 46 heard my system at a traffic light. I knew I was fucked, raw meat to pound with a ticket book.

"License, registration, and insurance, please."

I also gave him my Paterson Police PBA card, courtesy of our cousin Johnny. He came back after a few minutes.

"Really I should have this car impounded. Your insurance sticker is eight months overdue."

“I know officer, I just don’t have the money....”

”Well, I don’t care. Look, I’ll cut you a break and keep this card. Next time, I’m towin the car. Turn your radio down, maybe then you won’t get my attention....”

”Thanks officer.”

”Have a nice day.”

I let out a sigh of relief. I knew I’d never pass inspection until I had the brakes and muffler fixed, a whopping \$700. An air conditioner seemed impossible.

“Paulie what’s the name of that mechanic you went to in high school with who can pass me for inspection?”

“Willie McKay? Yeah, he does that sometimes.”

“How much would Willie charge me?”

“For that piece of shit? Geez, Bobby, like four hundred.”

“Fuck.”

“What, did a cop finally get you?”

“Yeah....”

“Ha ha! I knew it! Anna owes me twenty bucks! Look, I’ll loan you the money. Get it taken care of and pay me back. It’ll cost you less than if you got it impounded. What’d I tell you about that fuckin stereo, dinny

dimwit?”

Of course, Tony wasn't pleased.

“Whaddya mean you owe Paulie four hundred dollars?? I thought you were gonna buy an air conditioner? Four hundred bucks? Christ, you'll be out here all summer!”

Which is exactly what happened. It took me a little over two months to repay the debt. In August, a new guy named Jorge started working in the seafood department, a man equal to my brother's size, but from Peru and leaner. He had a teardrop tattoo on his face and a swallow on his hand. He started to join us on our Monday smoke breaks. I didn't like him much. He talked shit and made up bullshit about beating people for money, the drugs he sold and the girls he screwed. But Paulie liked him and stopped by the seafood counter to shoot the shit. One night at dinner, Paulie looked up from spaghetti to say, “Hey I know where you can get a AC real cheap.”

“Oh yeah? A little one? Is it a little one?”

“Yeah, I asked, it's small.”

“Does it work? Where's it from?”

“Of course it works! You know Jorge from work? He's got one. Says he'll let you have it for seventy-five.”

“I dunno, I don't trust that guy....”

“No, he's cool. He's cool. It's a good deal and you're all paid up with me.”

“I’d like to see it first, but if you say it’s good, then I trust you. Lemme give you the money. You work with him tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll call him tonight and tell him to bring it tomorrow. Good, good.”

“Yeah, that’s great! Now I don’t have to share the couch with this smelly foot motherfucker over here!” yelled Tony from the bathroom.

I grabbed the cash from my sock drawer. There were bricks, wood pieces and weather stripping ready in my room for my new AC.

The next day he came home from work and I rushed downstairs to greet him. I saw him carry a monstrous metal box from the trunk.

“What the fuck is this? It’s gonna blow a fuse!”

“No, no. Let’s try it. I’m sure it’s good! Move or help me!”

“You stunad! Look at it! Did you even look at the BTUs on the side??”

“It’s gonna work.”

He set it on the floor of my room and installed it. I knew it was fruitless, but I had to prove we’d been ripped off.

“Alright, turn it on.”

It started up and the lights went off. Anna ran to the fuse box in the kitchen.

“Goddammit! I knew it!”

“Well, whattya gonna do?”

“You better get my money back from that ex-con, Paulie. Paulie, I need that cash. Whatta bastard.”

“Well, he’s on vacation for a week. I’ll talk to him next week.”

“Next week? Shit! I told you to make sure it was a small one!”

“I did! I asked him if it was a small one and he said yes!”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive! I swear!”

“Shoulda just waited to buy a new one....”

“I’ll get your cash back.”

And it was left at that. A week later, I saw Jorge walk into the locker room at work. I ran to catch up with him.

“Hey Jorge!”

“Yo, Bobby! How’s the air conditioner?”

“Didn’t Paulie tell you? It keeps blowing the fuses in our house!”

“What? He never told me this.”

“Whattya mean, he never told you? You sayin he hasn’t called you about this?”

“No, man! But no worries, you can use it for another room.”

“No man, I don’t need it if it don’t work in my room. I really need a small one and I thought that’s what I was getting.”

“Well, I’m sorry that happened. Maybe you can sell it to someone?”

“Yeah well you sold it to me and you told Paulie that it was a good deal. Now I wanna sell it back. I’d like to get my money back.”

“Sorry, that sale’s final. I don’t have it on me anyway.”

“Whattya mean the sale’s final? Look, Jorge I just want my cash back.”

“Too bad, homes. Maybe you need to get back to your little milk maid station. I got shit to do.”

“Scuse me? Milk maid? I aint your *homes, esse*. I don’t want no trouble, I want my cash.”

“You better watch your mouth, little man. Cuz I got something back here that can make that fucking smile on your face get real wide real quick.”

Suddenly this bullshit artist was threatening me with a Colombian necktie. Of course Paulie had the day off. I went back to the loading

dock to call Paulie. His phone was turned off. Later that night I told Paulie and Anna what happened.

“Shit, that’s no good.”

“Fuckin, A, ‘Shit’s no good!’ The guy fucking threatened me!”

“You didn’t say nothing to anybody, did you?”

“No, I didn’t say shit. Paulie, you gotta do something about this. I mean, you got me into this, now get my money and get this asshole the hell away from me.”

“I’ll talk to him about it on Monday.”

“Why wait til Monday? Call him now! You’re supposed to be friends with the guy, call him now!”

“Phone’s still charging.”

“You’re unbelievable. Where’s your balls?”

“What’d you say to me?”

“Look, please get my money back. We shoulda never done this. This is your fucking fault!”

I stormed out of the kitchen and went out to catch a drink at Friday’s.

At the bar, while I sipped a beer and chatted with a bartender, my phone vibrated. The message read: “got ur money. No need to thank me. In envelope on kitchen counter.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Thank Christ he got it back, I thought. For a minute I thought he was going soft.

I tried to avoid Jorge completely after that. I still had no air conditioner, but at least I had my cash back and our family honor. The first weekend of September sent Tony back to the Bronx for school and had me working both days. Jorge passed me in front of the store on his way in and my way out.

“How’s that AC workin, homes? Ha ha ha!”

“Fuck you Jorge, at least I got my cash back!”

“How’d you do that? I didn’t ask you to suck my dick.”

“Look, no bullshit. Paulie got the money back from you, we’re cool.”

“I don’t know nothing bout no money. I didn’t give him shit.”

“Whattya mean?”

“Figure it out, homes. Your brother’s a punk!”

I shoulda kicked his ass right there, in front of the middle-aged mothers, the seniors pushing carts in the parking lot. But I needed the job. Something was fishy. I had to talk to Paulie about this. I sped home to find both Paulie and Anna in the kitchen. She looked pissed, but nowhere near my level. I didn’t even say hello, but went right for the throat.

“You never got the money back.”

“What?”

“You heard me, Paulie. Jorge told me he didn’t give you nuthin. Whose money was it then?”

He paused and took a deep breath.

“Mine.”

“Yours? What the fuck, Paulie?”

“Look, you got your money back, what the fuck you complainin about?”

“It wasn’t just the money Paulie! It was about defending me. Your own flesh and blood! You know, I used to think you were better than any dad cuz you always stood up for me and looked out for me. I shoulda just got Anna to do it. She wouldn’t a let that asshole rip me off!”

“I give you shelter, you little shit! I don’t charge you shit! You fucking ingrate! ‘Poor me, I never had a Daddy!’ Grow the fuck up! None of us did!”

“No, he’s right! You let that slick little puto rip off your own flesh and blood because you didn’t have the ‘stugats’ as you always say. You chickened out. Maybe you should grow up!” screamed Anna.

“Yeah, chickenshit,” I added.

He lunged for me, Anna between the two of us, holding him back. It was funny to see such a shorter man go after me, but I knew he’d break my face.

“Get the fuck outta my house! You are not welcome here anymore!”

I grabbed a gym bag and threw some clothes in it. Everything was tinted red. My eyes were hot and burning.

“Come back tomorrow and get the rest of your shit! Tomorrow or it’ll be on the sidewalk! Leave now!”

“You are not throwing him out! You should be leaving, you fucking coward. You can attack your brother, but you’re afraid to collect money from that asshole? Fuck you!”

He pulled her off his shoulder and she stomped off into the kitchen. I was literally shoved out of the front door, left in the hallway.

“Fuck you, cock fuck piece a dog shit! I’m leavin on my own! Ain’t a brother a mine fuckhead!”

I peeled out, not knowing where I was going. By force of habit, I drove to work. Jorge wasn’t working and neither were any of the cute cashiers. So I bought coffee and sat alone in a Dunkin Donuts in the same shopping center. My eyes were dry, but my hands were shaking still. The blonde girl behind the counter sensed something was wrong and thankfully said nothing. Halfway through my coffee, my hands stopped shaking and I felt calmer.

Realizing I was hungry, I decided to eat. The Fridays was on the other side of the parking lot, a long walk to clear out my head. We were all friendly with the bartenders there and Paulie gave them meat in exchange for free drinks. I walked in, pushing the door with a sign that said “Help Wanted: Barbacks.”

“Hey Jackie!”

She looked up and smiled. At least someone was happy. My cellphone chirped. The message was from Anna: “Ur bro got arrested. Pls come home.”

“Sorry Jackie! I gotta run!”

I hadn’t even ordered yet. Now I wished I hadn’t parked across the lot. My heart had already dropped to my stomach when I read the message and now it beat furiously as I ran and dialed at the same time. I reached the car door as Anna picked up.

“What’s goin on? Whaddya mean he got arrested?”

“After he threw you out, he locked himself in the bathroom. I start hearing him scream ‘I’m sorry! I’m sorry!’ And he comes out and starts leaving. And he kept sayin ‘I’m gonna do something. I’m gonna take care of this.’ I couldn’t stop him. And then he wasn’t pickin up his phone. And your cousin Johnny calls me a half hour later saying he was getting cuffed at Jorge’s house.”

“Oh shit! What was the charge!”

“They’re talking criminal trespass and battery.”

“Shit! I’m comin home. Are you goin to the station now?”

“No, Johnny told me to sit tight, that Paulie’d get his phone call in a few hours and we can pick him up. Johnny said he’d get em out tonight.”

“Fine. I’m on my way home. G’bye.” I hung up.

“Fuck!”

And here I was, speeding off again. Anna was outside, waiting for me, tears running down her cheek. “Bobby! Bobby!”

“Relax, Anna. Les go inside. C’mon.”

We went in and I poured out coffee for the both of us. It was going to be a long night.

“Okay, tell me as much as Johnny told you. Was Johnny one of the officers there?”

“Yeah, thank Christ. Okay, so apparently your brother drove to Jorge’s house to try and get your money back. Well really he wanted to try and kick his ass because he knew he wouldn’t get the money. Apparently Jorge kicked the shit out of him and his wife called the cops. Since Bobby was on their property, he got charged. Bobby what are you two gonna do for jobs now?”

“Sal’s got that pork store in Totowa and he’s always begged Paulie to work for him. Me, I dunno, I’ll try and find something?”

“Great! There goes the savings! You goddamn men acting like little kids.”

“I’ll give you some cash now to bail him out.”

“Are you sure? What’re you gonna do for gas and food?”

“I’ll be okay. Pay me back, just don’t tell Paulie. I don’t want to talk to him. He owes me an apology.”

“Yeah he does. But he got his ass handed to him and got taken in for you.”

“I know, I know. But I mean, isn’t it too little too late? Why couldn’t he just get my money back in the first place?”

“You’re right, but you’ve never been arrested before. So maybe you owe him a little thank you. I hope he’s okay.”

She started to cry.

“No, but he threw me out!”

“Ugh, the both of you are fucking little kids. I can’t stand it, the both of youse. You need to stop depending on him for everything and he needs to stop leaning on me to get him to take action.”

Her phone started to vibrate.

“Yeah? Oh Bobby! Are you okay? Oh God, oh God! Do you need to see a doctor? Okay....okay....alright I’ll come down and get you....well I’ll wait there. Yeah, he’s here. Okay, good. Yeah I told him. You guys ain’t gonna kill each other, right?”

I walked over to the couch and turned the television on.

“Hey Bobby, you’re not gonna fight with my man anymore, are you?”

“No...too tired.”

“Okay, be strong baby. I love you. I’ll be there soon.” She turned to me. “He says for you to stay here.”

“Okay, that’s fine. Hold up. Before you go...”

I ran into the steamy bedroom to find cash. Tucked away in my sock drawer was my emergency fund. I took out a wad.

“That’s like two hundred dollars right there. See you when you get home.”

“Thanks Bobby.” She kissed my forehead.

I picked up my cell phone to call Tony and then thought against it. It’d be better to wait until tomorrow after quitting the supermarket and cleaning out my locker. Even with the coffee, I still fell asleep before they got home.

I woke up early the next morning and saw the bathroom door closed and Anna asleep still. It was only 7 a.m., but I knew my manager would be in. Forgoing the bathroom, I dressed and chewed some gum, leaving in silence before Paulie could see me. I didn’t want to start the day off seeing his bruised, puffy face, the face of defeat.

He had apologized, but not directly. I thanked him with money to Anna that he didn’t know about. Neither repaired the breach between us. I could see that Anna had forgiven him already, mostly out of pity that he had fought and lost.

I drove to work, found my supervisor Malcolm at the loading dock and quit, explaining to him the situation. He was disappointed, but understood and offered me a reference. I gladly accepted and went to

clean out my locker. The Save More was empty save for a few elderly women shuffling down the aisles. It was anticlimactic: I came, quietly resigned and left. No security guard walkout, no “That’s it, sir. You’re leaving.” I almost wanted to be thrown out.

I stopped and bought breakfast sandwiches at the corner deli in the neighborhood. When I got home, Paulie was in his robe at the kitchen table, already reading classified ads.

“I got you Taylor Ham and cheese. Is Anna still here?”

“No, she’s at work already. Thanks for the sandwich.”

“Your face looks a lot better than I thought it would. When’s your court date?”

“Yeah, I only got a black eye. You should see Jorge, he looks fine. No court date, he dropped the charges.”

“Thank Christ for that.”

“Yeah but I ain’t got a job anymore. Been there six years and *I* gotta leave....”

“Yeah, well I just got back from there. Told Malcolm I was jettin. He said you’d get a recommendation too.”

“Hmph. Looks like Sal’s got his wish. I’ll have to stop by there later today and talk to him. What’re you gonna do for work?”

“I dunno. Maybe I’ll go to Friday’s and see if Jackie can get me a job as a bar back. If I can get that to fit my class schedule, I guess I’ll do

that.”

And that was what happened. I was hired and started training at Friday’s, Paulie got hired by Sal, luckily on the same payscale. I actually made more bar backing and picked it up easy.

September came and went. It stayed warm well into October. Now home from work in the wee hours, I lit a cigarette and turned the television to an early morning news program. I couldn’t take the quiet for another minute longer. I walked into the bedroom, not even caring if they were decent.

“Paulie?”

“Hmmmrrphh.”

“Paulie? Paulie, it’s Bobby, wake up. Wake up, Paulie!”

“What? What’s wrong? Why you wakin me up?”

“Paulie, I gotta talk to you about something. It’s important, you gotta get up.”

“Wha? Yeah, fine. This better be good.”

I turned around and walked into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

“Da fuck’s sa matter witchu? I gotta get up in another hour for work and you’re comin in my bedroom...”

“No, it’s important. I *have* to talk to you. Look, ever since this whole air conditioner bullshit, things haven’t been the same here. And I just want

you to know I'm not mad at you no more. I'm sorry you got arrested for all this. Thanks for tryin to get the money back. Although it took you long enough...."

"You know, I'm sorry too. I'm sorry you got cheated when I'm the one who set it up. Like I said before, I didn't know he'd give you the screw job. And I'm sorry I didn't do anything until it was too late. You're my brother and it won't happen again."

"Okay, I trust you."

We hugged at the kitchen table. I looked up and saw Anna. She yawned and smiled.

"Does this mean we're all cool? You guys ready to act like grownups?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Well as long as I'm up, is there coffee?"

"On the stove."

The three of us sat and watched the news. After a few minutes, I got up and went out onto the balcony. The air was noticeably cooler, enough to make me rub my bare arms. I heard laughter from inside and turned around to see them tickling each other on the couch, my brother's face red. Paulie led her by the hand into the bedroom, the door locking behind them.

I looked out into the backyards of other apartment buildings,
wondering what was happening in their homes. Whatever happened to
us today would at least be great.

One Man's War

Due to a medical condition, my father was lucky enough to avoid service in Vietnam in the mid 1960's. Unfortunately, some of his best friends weren't lucky or rich enough to beat the draft and witnessed their best friends perish in the jungle. When they returned, the lives they knew before were gone. In one case, whole boxes of collectibles and comics were destroyed by family members. Some wounds become infected and take decades to heal.

John rang the bell on his bicycle and stuck his right arm out to signal his turn onto the main street, as he did every morning on his way to work at the Veterans Hospital in downtown Paterson, New Jersey. The neighborhood had long been in decline since the riots twenty years before, but now that he was between youth and middle age, just turning thirty-one, in the throes of daily routine, moving seemed almost an impossibility.

The hospital was ten blocks from his home, a studio apartment above an old tavern and an easy commute for someone who didn't own a car. His last car, a 1968 Volkswagen Beetle, had been totaled in an accident when he had made the mistake of driving home after finishing four pitchers of Schlitz. He had hit a telephone pole and was lucky to have survived. But he lost his license for six months, and decided that not only would he finally quit drinking, he would also quit driving as well. For good.

That was five years ago, 1977. Now he rode his bicycle, an older English model with a rack on the back and a milk crate lashed to the handlebars that he found in an alley to transport his few groceries. He ate dinner every night in the tavern below his apartment, and breakfast was usually Taylor Ham, egg and cheese with coffee in the hospital cafeteria before work.

The days rolled on, each one meshing regularly into the next, to the point that he saw the same people walking their dogs in the shadows and sunlight of early morning, the same store owners sweeping their sidewalks and unlocking metal shutters covered in graffiti, the same tired people walking to catch the buses that take them to their jobs. By this time, complete strangers were familiar to him. This morning, as clockwork, he saw a black woman with a cigarette in her mouth walking a mutt and yelling at the creature for taking his time. A hunchbacked Italian man sprayed the sidewalk with a hose, washing the litter into the gutter in front of his shoe repair shop. The candy-cane striped pole spun in front of the barber shop. A group of men with black metal lunchboxes laughed and hollered on their way to the factory. He waved to the guys sitting on crates on the corner outside the grocery store, as they opened their newspapers to begin their day of talking, arguing and generally doing nothing. On Saturdays he would sit with them for an hour or so while out running errands or waiting for laundry to finish across the street.

Today, something was out of sorts, though. It was a Monday morning, so the streets were a little busier than other days, as was normal. Four blocks into his ride, he stopped at a red light at Broadway. He looked to his right to see the cars streaming past him and, among the people stepping off the curb to cross the street, was a young man, Latino, standing in the middle of the sidewalk. He stood with his feet planted on the cement, staring directly at John as he rode his bike, impassive. He thought nothing of it until he looked back to see the man dressed in a United States Army uniform.

His stomach dropped, and his heart began to pound. He heard bombs dropping and felt the heat from burning homes as his mind became flooded with his tour of duty in Vietnam over ten years before, as a medic. Becoming conscious of the moment, he shook his head and whispered in the midst of car horns, "Stop it."

He got to the VA Hospital on time and walked to the cafeteria to buy breakfast, trying to clear his mind of what he had seen. After finishing his sandwich, he chatted with Becca, a young blonde nurse, as he always did.

“How was your weekend?”

“Pretty good, I went out with friends to bar in Bloomfield; we had a nice time.”

“Oh, that sounds good.”

The conversations never went further than chitchat. She was a beautiful girl, but John never brought any of his personal life to work. He never told her of the years he spent as an alcoholic after he returned from the war, the five years spent living with his mother in her public assistance housing, sleeping during the day and leaving at night to wander the streets and drink alone in bars. He never told her about the poetry class he had taken at the Adult Education Center, or that he had never finished the class because he couldn't read his poem about Ray dying and the smoke rising from his body, after a trap blew his legs off. The poem, though his teacher found it “profound and brilliant” wasn't enough to dull the senses. Vodka and beer would, and they did, until the car accident.

It was when he finally went to counseling at the Veterans Hospital and was offered a job as a filing clerk that he found that routine could loosen the war's grip on his mind and dull the pain in a different way. He was hired after passing the Civil Service Exam. When his mother died several months after he started the job, he felt lucky to have saved enough of his government wages to afford his own apartment, albeit small, above the tavern. He worried that he would start drinking again, but kept himself occupied with paperback novels he bought at

Goodwill on Saturdays when he would go out to the bakery, grocery store and Laundromat. The months turned into years and he slowly built a life for himself and began to leave the war behind. It was a chance for rebirth, and he was lucky enough to be conscious of it and take it.

Monday flew by without leaving John any time to think of the soldier he had seen that morning. He soon found himself unlocking his bike and riding home in rush hour traffic, back to the tavern for dinner. He hit Broadway at a green light and looked to his left expectantly, remembering the soldier. No one stood there and he felt a little foolish.

It wasn't until he was a block from home that it happened. He saw the same man, this time standing on the street in front of a parked Chevy Nova. He still wore his uniform and had the somber expression on his face as he gazed directly at John. He stared back, trying to look into his eyes without stopping, but soon found that the young man was behind him, still staring. Before he knew it, he was in front of his building, with the tavern and his apartment, and braked to a stop. He locked his bike to the telephone pole and walked into the tavern.

"Johnny!" yelled the bartender and regulars.

"Hey, Earl, hi guys," he said, quieter than usual.

"Uh oh. Whatsamatta, they givin' you shit at the hospital again?"

"Oh, no, no. Everything's fine. I just need a glass of water."

"Then why you lookin' so glum? Jesus, you look like you just got fired or something."

“No, no. It’s just...ah forget it, it’s nothing.”

“No, no, no. C’mon, spill it.”

“Nah, never mind, it’s nothing.”

“That’s fine, I ain’t gonna pry.”

And the conversation ended there. He ordered a hamburger and found his appetite wasn’t what it had been when he left the hospital. He ate it anyway, to be polite, because the food was always good and he didn’t want to hurt Benny’s feelings, as he cooked dinner for John every night, along with all the other regulars. The fries were soggy, but he stared at his plate as he chewed, wondering about the stranger who looked right through him. He wiped his mouth and threw several bills on the bar.

“I’m goin’ up. Take it easy guys.”

“Wow, you’re leavin’ early,” said Earl.

“Yeah, I’m tired. Long day. Think I’m gonna head to bed early.”

“Alright, take it easy, Johnny.”

“You, too.”

They stared at him in silence as he walked out. When the door closed, they began to talk.

“You know he’s always had a screw loose,” said Mabel, a middle-aged woman who stopped in for a beer every day.

“That’s not nice. He’s a good kid.”

“No, I know. But he’s...” she paused to look for a word. “...different. You know? Something’s not right.”

Earl joined her. “Well, you know he was in ‘Nam, right?”

“He was? Wow, he never talks about it.”

“Well what do you expect? He’s gonna share war stories with you?! Get outta ‘ere.”

“What was he in?”

“From what I know, he was a medic in the Army.”

“Yeah, all those soldiers have problems.”

At which point, Fred, an older drunk in his sixties who sat at the end, chimed in, “That’s a load of horseshit! Why, in my day, in WW Two, I saw all of my friends killed by damn Krauts in Normandy. And when we came back, we all got married and got good steady jobs. Not like these goddamned shiftless layabouts that come back and get hooked on drugs and go on welfare.”

The entire bar groaned, preparing to hear Fred’s complaints for the umpteenth time.

Sleep did not come easy to John. He lay awake for hours, with the young man's face in his mind, and the faces of friends in the jungle, fear in their eyes as they lay dying. When he fell asleep, he was awakened by nightmares that he couldn't remember, his pillow soaked in sweat, the taste of vodka in his mouth. He turned the alarm off in his sleep and awoke half an hour late. He rose in a panic and threw on his clothes. With no time to shave, he ran down the stairs heavy footed and sped away on his bicycle.

Three blocks down, he hit the first of three traffic lights and stopped to wipe the sleep out of his eyes. He looked around and saw the Soldier, staring at him from a different corner this time, with his arms folded across his chest. His blood ran cold and he quickly looked both ways, crossing the street against the red light. He nearly got hit by a Lincoln, which blared its horn at him. The man was again standing on the sidewalk and turned to face John as he passed.

He didn't have time to eat at the cafeteria this morning, so he settled in at his desk. The stack of files didn't diminish as it should have; every time he tried to find a rhythm of working, his mind sputtered and his thoughts turned to the man on the corner. What did he want? Why was he following him? Who was he? He looked far too young to have been in his platoon. And he didn't recognize him from the hospital. As the clock approached five, his anxiety grew and as he exited the building to unlock his bike, he looked nervously from side to side. But there was nobody around.

The entire ride home, John looked around for the man, who was nowhere to be found. He was about to turn onto his street, when he hit a pothole and was flung from his bike. He hit the pavement and scraped his left cheek and ripped a hole in his pants. He was lucky. The corners had been empty of traffic until he stood up to look at his scuffed pants. The man, now only six feet from him, stood and looked at him, motionless. John's face twisted in horror and he screamed.

“Who are you?”

But there was no response.

“What the hell do you want from me?”

No response.

He got back on his bike, and, not noticing he was bleeding on his shirt collar, pedaled quickly to the bar. He slammed it onto the sidewalk and ran into the tavern, shutting the door behind him and looking over his shoulder. By this time he was out of breath. Everyone’s heads shot up and they stared at him.

“Jesus Christ, what happened to you?” asked Earl.

“Some guy is following me. Earl, go out there and see if anyone is there.”

“Uh, okay.” He looked at him strangely and opened the door. He stuck his head out and looked to his left and right.

“No, no! Go out and look!”

“Okay, okay! Christ!”

He walked out into the street, which was empty, and looked around, scratching his head. Seeing nobody, he walked back into the bar, retying his apron.

“Nope. Nobody there. Are you okay? Look at you, you’re bleeding!”

“Yeah, yeah. Gimme a double vodka.”

“Okay.”

He knew John had been sober for five years, but seeing his shaking hands, he poured the drink anyway and served it on a napkin.

Some of the vodka spilled onto the counter, but he finished it in two gulps. It burned his stomach and he felt warmer.

Earl, still staring at John and his wild eyes, took a clean rag and shook some vodka onto it. He walked around the bar and sat down next to him. The television had the evening news on.

“Hold still,” he said as he tilted John’s head and put the rag on the scrape.

“Ow, shit!” and he jerked back.

“Knock it off, it’ll clean it.”

Everyone was still staring.

“Alright, now what happened?”

John explained, still shaking, although not as badly as at first. “...and today, I’m riding home and I fell off my bike and I look up and the guy

is standing right in front of me! And I don't know who he is or anything!"

"Have you called the police?"

"No! I haven't done anything yet! I just want to know who this guy is."

"That's strange. I don't know what to tell you."

"All I want to know is who the guy is and why he's following me. What did I do? I never hurt nobody! Gimme another."

And he downed it the same way. Everyone in the bar sat in silence for a few minutes. Nobody came in.

"So what'll you have for dinner?"

"I'm not hungry. Gimme another."

Around eight o'clock, he stumbled out of the bar drunk, but still looking over his shoulder. Men sat on their front porch across the street, but none of them resembled the young Latino soldier. He walked up the stairs to his apartment and passed out. The next day he awoke to an alarm that sounded like a jackhammer, showered, shaved, dressed and rode his bike to the hospital. His eyes darted everywhere. Where would the man be today? he wondered. But he didn't appear anywhere. He found himself in front of the hospital and breathed a sigh of relief. He pretended nothing had happened, except for the headache he had. It was Wednesday morning. He still had small talk with Becca in the cafeteria.

“Hey gorgeous, how you doin’ today?”

“Good John and yourself?”

“Good.”

He got more work done than he had the previous day and in a flash, the clock on the wall read 4:50 p.m. Seeing that his pile had diminished, he left ten minutes early after saying goodbye to everyone. The ride home was unpleasant as it had started to rain. But even with the rain, he still looked everywhere, scouring his peripheral vision for the strange man. Every approaching corner, he imagined the man standing there, several men standing there, HIM at every corner, standing still, staring him down, waiting for him.

He didn’t go into the tavern for dinner, feeling ashamed of his previous night’s performance and instead stopped into a grocery store, where he bought a jar of peanut butter and a fifth of Popov. He ate peanut butter sandwiches and read the newspaper, trying to keep his mind off the stranger, chasing the stickiness and newsprint with vodka. He was drunk again when he went to sleep, but there weren’t any nightmares, not like the two nights before. The next morning he went through his routine and got on his bike, feeling hungover, but awake with a headache that got worse with car horns.

John was unlocking his bike from the “Stop” sign when, from in front of the white house across the street, the man appeared. This time he was closer to home, across the street from it in fact. His heart dropped into his stomach again, but he stared back at him in the eyes and spoke. His blood was frozen with fear, but it was time for it to end.

“Who are you?!” he shouted.

The man said nothing, nor moved.

“I said, who are you?!”

Again, nothing.

“Fuck off!” he yelled and pedaled away.

He got on his bike, and tried to laugh, to show the man he wasn’t afraid, but his voice cracked. He went a different route to work, thinking the man wouldn’t be able to follow him on foot. He stopped at a stop sign on a side street, when a car pulled up next to him. He looked to his left and the car’s passenger turned his head and smiled. It was him. The car drove off, leaving John standing on his bike.

“Hey! Hey!” he shouted, but the car was far ahead by then.

He was grouchy at work. When his boss came by to drop off more files, he jerked them from his hands and turned around, grunting instead of speaking. His coworkers noticed his foul mood and stayed away. He didn’t even speak to the cashier at the cafeteria.

During the ride home he passed the man again and gave him the middle finger, pretending not to look at him. The man did nothing, not even smiling as he had last time. John walked into the tavern and ate a bar pie, the tavern’s specialty, and ate quickly. Then he walked across the street and bought a handle bottle of Popov. It was eight o’clock when he poured himself his fifth juice glass of vodka. The television had an old movie on, and a distant gunshot brought him to the window. There under the streetlight across the street, was the man.

“Son of a bitch. First it’s during the day, and now this bastard’s watching me in my home! I’ll be goddamned!” and he downed the glass.

He put on his field jacket and walked down the stairs. His steps were heavy and clumsy from drink and he stumbled onto the sidewalk. Seeing the man under the lamppost, he shuffled his feet onto the street and shouted

“Hey you bastard! Who da hell do you think you are!” pointing an accusatory finger.

He was halfway across the street, when a Pontiac, horn blaring, struck him, sending him into the air and knocking him unconscious. The patrons in the bar, hearing the noise, rushed out to find him on the cracked windshield. The street was empty. The man, gone.

“I never even saw him! He was right in the middle of the road shouting at nobody!”

Earl called the hospital.

Days later, John woke up. His head ached and he was in bed. He looked up to see a television attached to the wall and realized he was in a hospital. Noticing the arrangement of the furniture and the presence of a sleeping roommate, he came to a second realization: he was on the receiving end of the VA Hospital. He felt a slip of paper gripped in his right hand. He was just conscious enough to read the three words neatly printed:

“Sorry. You Lose.”

“Help! Help! Someone help me! For Christ’s sake, someone help!”

Within moments, Becca came with a syringe. John struggled, knowing what it was, pleading with her.

“Becca, don’t do this to me! I want to be awake. I won’t make no problems, you know me! Taylor ham, egg and cheese, remember??”

“I’ve never met you before in my life. This is my first week in this hospital. Hold still please.”

An orderly came and held him down.

“Stay still, chief. She jus tryina’ help you.”

“Please, don’t put me to sleep. That guy put me in here. Please.”

“Das alright, chief. Easy fella.”

And as the sedative set in, the nurse walked away, clicking her tongue, almost in time with the fading click-clack of platform shoes. As he dozed off, he heard quips of words come out of her mouth,

“...diagnosed as possible alcohol induced psychosis...history of post-traumatic stress...”

They Don't Live Well

Growing up mostly in multi-family houses, I learned that the relationship between neighbors in the same building can be a real see-saw. With close quarters and thin walls, you often hear more than you care to. As a young latchkey child, our downstairs neighbors kept an ear out for me. Years later, in a different house, we were the downstairs neighbors, all of us longing for our ears to close. Night after night the soundtrack alternated between loud music, laughter, screaming, and crying children. To my surprise and heartbreak, they were evicted months later. I'll never forget the sad eyes of the live-in boyfriend as I bought a compact disc at their garage sale before they left.

Monique put down the newspaper and went to the fridge.

“Shit. I knew it.”

There was no milk in the house. Debbie would be over any minute for tea. Monique's boyfriend had drunk all the damn milk the night before and didn't buy more. Barry was his name. He was a janitor at the parochial school her son went to, working nights.

She stood there, unsure of what to do. What if Debbie got there while she was at the store? It was just around the corner. She could picture her standing on the steps, knocking. Still, they both had cell phones. She grabbed her keys and ran out.

It was June and already hot, funny for a Jersey summer. She glanced at the older multi-family houses smashed next to each other and the brick apartment building on the corner. It was a nice neighborhood, better than her childhood block in West Philly. The corner store, part of a local chain, wasn't on a corner, but next to a laundromat and a party goods store. Her child, a boy of ten, always wanted to go in, and they

did sometimes. She didn't have to worry about him stealing. He did that once three years before when they lived in Staten Island. It was the only time she had ever whipped Frederick. When she stopped she hugged him while they both sobbed. The boy was scared and she squeezed him against her large breasts.

"Don't ever steal again Freddy. I did that outta love, baby."

"Don't hit...me no more, Mama."

She hadn't since, but she had never needed to. Now she was paying the Pakistani man behind the counter. She decided to get cigarettes at the last minute besides the milk. She only smoked with friends or when stressed, she told herself. And Fred was at her sister's house in Fair Lawn. And the day qualified.

"How are you today, Mrs. Jones?"

"Fine, Sabu. And you?"

"Good, good."

She rushed out, certain that Debbie was waiting for her. She hurried up in her flip-flops. The street they lived on was the border of Paterson and Totowa Borough. So her house sat in the aptly named Totowa section of Paterson. They lived on the first floor of a brick house with no porch, but a little patch of grass out front.

"Reminds me of Queens. I like that." She said that right before signing a one-year lease. There was another black couple on the block and the landlord, an old Italian named Frank, lacked that look of suspicion, the look she saw on owners' faces when looking at other apartments in

New Jersey. And now Frank had a reason to be nice to her. She had made Freddy help her clean out the apartment upstairs. It had turned into the city dump in two months time. Even the walls had been stained. Now in the third week of June it was still empty, despite its sparkle.

Nobody was waiting on the steps when she came back. Their dog, Oreo, a terrier mix, got up and licked her hand in greeting.

She switched on the television in the kitchen and shook a cigarette out. She had already prepared a little tray for tea and now she had to wait. It felt funny to have time to herself, time when she wasn't with Freddy, or working at the library, or at class, or doing homework. The boy had spent the first week of summer in the apartment by himself in the morning while she worked. She trusted him enough now. Barry wasn't much of a father figure; she never pushed him to be. They hadn't had sex in weeks.

This led her to think of the old neighbors, the white folks. She couldn't stop thinking about them and didn't know why. She took a drag off her cigarette and gazed out the window. It was annoying not knowing. A rapping on the door startled her.

"Hey girl!! What's up?" screamed Debbie.

"Hi boo! Damn you look good! You lose some weight?"

"I sure did! I got on one of them diet meal plans you see on TV. You lookin' fine yourself."

Monique knew this was a lie. She had put on more weight since having Frederick. Lately she had been starving herself, and sneaking cigarettes

more often, hoping it would curb her appetite. She was twenty-nine; she should have been slim still. It wasn't fair. But a lot of things hadn't turned out "fair." Like the nasty, white trash neighbors upstairs. That situation hadn't worked out fair at all. For anyone. She even now found herself thinking about the woman who had lived upstairs while giving Debbie a once over. 'She's skinny now...like the white woman,' she thought.

Monique was so glad to have called Debbie even though they'd just seen each other over the Memorial Day weekend. She had to tell someone about the crazy lady, her and her dwarf boyfriend. She turned the burner on under the kettle and turned the television off. The two sat down and waited for the water to boil.

"So what's up? You just had me and Ralphie over for a cookout. Now you want me to 'tea.' Honey, we never drink tea! Now in my mind something's up. So spill it!"

They had been friends since Monique lived in Staten Island. They met in an Afro-American Women Writers class at the College of Staten Island. After dropping out and later moving, they still kept in close touch. Debbie eventually moved to North Newark. Their schedules got busier, but they still talked on the phone once a week. Despite this, she still hadn't told the full story. Not even at the cookout, held in the small sideyard, since the men were there and the windows upstairs were open.

"Aight, aight, it's like this. So like, I dunno, bout two months ago this white lady and her kid move in upstairs, right? Now wait, yeah, it was April when I first told you bout them."

"Yeah, I remember you talking bout her. You used to listen for her kid."

“Okay, yeah I’m gonna hafta repeat myself and say sorry now.”

“That’s alright. You look like you about to bust out the seams.”

“I know! *I am*. That’s why I hadda finally call you!”

“Well go on girl, two months ago the crazy lady moves in upstairs.”

“Yeah, it was a Saturday, first weekend a April. So Frank had told me that new people were movin’ in a week before, a lady witta son. I remember prayin’ he was Freddy’s age so they could play together.

“So on Saturdays I like to sleep in a little bit, it’s my only day to. Freddy turns on the TV, I don’t hear it. Thank the Lord for these thick walls! You know what I’m talking bout!”

Debbie laughed and nodded.

“But then how did you hear everything upstairs?”

“Well now that’s the thing. See, I can’t hear stuff in Freddy’s room and he can’t hear in mine. Sure enough you hear everything upstairs in all the rooms!”

“Oh my God. That’s soo funny! I’m sorry, go on.”

“Yeah so this Saturday I wake up at seven and hear this guy yelling on the side of the house.”

“Sorry to interrupt again, but before you start jabbing about this white lady, I need something stronger than tea.”

“I got Kahlua and just got milk.”

“Good girl!”

“I dunno what I was thinking. I shoulda just brought this out first. I just wanted an excuse you tell you this!”

“I know, honey it’s okay. I can only have a few since I’m driving home anyway.”

She brought the bottle out and poured drinks over two glasses of ice.

“Okay, *now* I’m ready to listen. Mm, this is good.”

Monique took a gulp from her own glass and continued, touching Debbie’s arm.

“So, I throw on a robe and go outside and introduce myself. You know how I am, so nosy and cheerful. The woman’s name was Margie, the son was Harry and this guy, this midget, who I knew right away wasn’t the husband, was Rodney.

Now I see the furniture in this pickup truck, so I offered to help. Told ‘em Barry worked nights and was asleep. Well she got excited, I could see it. But *he* got crazy pissed. Like his face turned purple. He didn’t say shit, not even “hi,” I guess cuz I was a woman...and black. I dunno, he just didn’t say nothing. This guy was small, Debbie. Like a munchkin.”

She topped off her drink and took another sip. Both of them lit up cigarettes.

“So I slipped back in and changed real quick and we carried the heavy stuff up. He got the boxes with the boy. Guess they didn’t have the money for movers. So after the sixth or seventh trip, I felt my back starting to give, so I hadda quit. But she had this look on her face, like she was all annoyed I wasn’t going to finish. I know she said “thank you” a buncha times, but I knew. She be thinking ‘Finish what you start, bitch.’”

“You ain’t exaggeratin’ a little are you? Because last time you told me...”

“A little.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“But still! She had that look! They didn’t have nothing cold to drink, neither. Nothin’. And *he* didn’t say anything. The boy did. Midget man just drank a beer. Bright n’ early. I knew then to be careful.”

“Obviously you didn’t stay away from them otherwise you wouldn’t’ve told me bout watching the kid.”

“Yeah and it gets worse beyond that. That’s just the beginning. I’m getting up to what I haven’t told you yet. So like I told you before, she shows up two weeks later knocking at my door and I invited her in for coffee. I didn’t have to ask much, she just started talking. The midget was her boyfriend and they were separated and her son was asthmatic. How she worked days at a store in the Willowbrook Mall. She had this bright blond hair and real tan skin. Told me they were from Florida.

But she looked like she was from a trailer. Said she was our age, but she did look older. Starts telling me about moving to have a better life for the kid and work things out with Rodney. Starts crying about things: life bein' hard and such and I'm patting her hand thinking 'what did I get myself into *this* time?' Then she asks me about how I balance work and childcare? Like who watched Fred? And I stopped that girl dead in her tracks and told you what I already said before. 'I ain't gonna babysit for free. But I'm home in the afternoon and can keep an ear out.' And we exchanged numbers and she gave me a spare key. Told her Henry would be fine. He was quiet enough and Fred had done the same at his age.

"And like I told *you* before, you shouldn't a done that with strange people you just met. Specially redneck lookin' people. So that's the last you told me." She poured out more Kahlua.

"Oh, okay so the kid never calls or anything, and neither does she. Thank God! So another week or two goes by and I go upstairs to check up. He doesn't play with Fred cuz he's older and plays with the neighborhood kids. I knock on the door and say 'It's Mrs. Jones,' but he don't come. Finally, I let myself in and the place stinks to high heaven! Debbie, this funky white trash bitch's apartment was a mess! Stuff was still in boxes and there were bags of garbage in the kitchen. It smelled like a shitty pair a drawers! There's the furniture alright, but it looked like they hadn't brought more shit than what I carried. So I'm lookin' around, you know, checkin' on Henry..."

"That wasn't all you were doin'!"

"Okay, yeah. But damn if that child wasn't quiet! Cute as a button, but filthy and quiet. Like the smelly-ass kid in the corner. He was laying on the couch in the living room. Said he was reading the encyclopedia. Nothing was even hanging on the walls. I asked him if he needed anything, but he said no.

‘How’s your mama?’

‘She’s okay. She cleans people’s houses now.’

‘Oh. Tell your mom I stopped by to check on you. If you ever need anything, I’m downstairs and you can call me too. Okay, sweetie?’

“That child didn’t look up from his book, Debbie. He was weird. Prolly got some brain damage from his momma. I walked into the kitchen and there was this big ass bag fulla beer cans. And a sink full of dishes to match.”

“Oh that poor child!”

“Mmm-hmm. So I was about to leave, but then I figured I’d do some more investigating. Now there’s two bedrooms up there, just like here. Now I seen her bedroom, cuz I saw the mattress I helped carry and the set of drawers. But then I go into the other room and there’s nothing but boxes. So I asked him,

‘Honey, where’s your room? Where do you sleep?’

‘I sleep on the couch. Mommy says the other bedroom is for when she gets her rabbits from Florida.’

‘What do you mean rabbits? Where’s your room?’

“But he didn’t say nothing. Like he turned me off. So I left. It was just getting weirder and weirder.”

“You mean that child didn’t have a bedroom?”

“Nope. I didn’t see any toys either. Imagine that? Seven years old and no toys! No way in hell was I goin’ back.

“So I’m goin’ to bed that night and I start hearing screaming. That nasty dwarf came over before and I guess they got drunk. Ha, Barry called him ‘the Angry Munchkin.’ But anyway, I had Barry call the cops.”

“*You* called the police? You of all people!”

“Hey, anytime we was at a house party in Shaolin, white folks call police. Rednecks be screaming, two o’clock in the morning and I got work and little Freddy? Nah, fuck that! Let ‘em be on *Cops*.

“So we both fall back asleep, I guess no one got hauled off. Or maybe Wee Man did, I don’t know. What I do know is we got peace and quiet for a week. Then I’m folding laundry one night, still early and Freddy’s still up watching baseball with Barry. So I hear voices and then this big crash, like a shatter. And I hear this lady screaming. So I turn the TV up and send Freddy to his room and tell him to close the door. And girl, was we both in for a surprise! I hear the little man scream,

‘But baby, I didn’t do anything!’

‘Yes you did! I told you not to talk to them! Do I have to repeat myself? Am I your fucking mom, little boy? You see this shit? This fucking fancy glass shit? It’s all goin out the window!’

“And I hear this glass break on the cement out back.

‘Who needs ya, you little prick?? I won’t be calm! Get out! Get the fuck out!’

“Then I hear these footsteps and the storm door on the side slam. And then a car started and peeled out. We waited a coupla minutes and then Barry and I went to her door.

“You wasn’t scared?”

“Hell yeah I was scared! Crazy-ass, drunk bitch attackin me? S’why I brought Barry! She comes downstairs and I look her right in the eye and say ‘Ma’am I’m gonna hafta call the police. You got a child in there...’

“And she starts screamin’ and cryin’ about not wanting DYFS to come and take Henry away. Told me Rodney was gone for good. She was drunk as hell, girl! Swayin’ back and forth and shit. Smelled like sweat and booze!”

“Sounds to me like girl’d be better off lettin’ DYFS take the child...”

“You ain’t got kids, Debbie....Anyway, I left and didn’t call the cops. Figured one last chance.

“So we all come and go and it’s quiet again, right. I get home from work and she’s sittin’ on the steps to her place smoking. She look like she crazy again, but she gave me a cigarette so I took it. Then of course just like last time she starts talking a mile a minute. Bout how Rodney was no good and she had to bust his ass once in a while. Starts crying again and how she’s a bad mother and how she might just drop off Henry at her momma’s place in Baltimore and find herself out in California. Starts muttering about rabbits or something, only like

talking to herself. Then you know what this woman asks me? Crazy white lady asks me, 'Monique, you ever wonder what your life'd be like if you never had a kid?'

"I said 'No, I can't do that.'

"Well, I finished smoking and wanted to get in the house real quick after that, honey. This bitch be like freaking me out. I excused myself and last thing she said was 'I can.' That woman was gonna leave her child. I guess that's what happened because this was at the end of May and last day of the month they were gone, week after the cookout. Like they disappeared! Poof! Moved out at night! Honey, was I happy for a hot second! But it was funny. Like a bad way, know what I'm sayin'?"

"Well what I didn't tell you *yet* was since this whole thing started, Barry and me got real hot, like burning. Girl, he ate my pussy like honey was comin' out. And I'd be nudging *him* in the middle a the night! We'd be fuckin' for hours, girl and each time it was better!"

"Damn!"

"I know, right? But check this, soon as the white folks moved out, nothing. *Nothing*! My man didn't care. I didn't care. We just. Wasn't. Havin it."

"You mean you two? Still?"

"Mmm-hmm. I know, weird right? Like what the fuck? And this devil lady has been on my mind day and night since. I felt bad for her, I hated her and when that lady told me about dropping her kid off and she took off, I got jealous. Jealous of this white trash."

“You still jealous now that you told me everything?”

“You know something, honey? I am. I mean, Lord knows if I hadn’t a had Fred or passed him off I’d be doin better. You don’t have no child and you’re drivin’ a BM. I’d die for Fred, he’s the best thing that ever happen to me. Damn that white bitch for sayin’ that. I mean, she live in a pig sty, but it’s hers, right?”

She slurred her words but made sense. She needed this. This reminder.

“You jealous that she’s selfish? That child’s gonna be a fuck up because his momma’s a crazy drunk. He got no one. Honey, they don’t live well. Your child is a genius, gonna be a rocket scientist. You gotta degree and still takin night classes? Psh, he won’t be a Willie. We’re all lucky you had him and are raising that child.

“We got good lives, honey. Count your blessings. Better’n our mommas by a long shot. Do you love your boyfriend?”

“Yeah I do. We ain’t got much but...”

“Who cares? Honneyyy....” said Debbie in a pleading voice. She looked across the table at Monique’s glassy eyes and put her fingers on her arm.

“You right. I’m sorry! I’m so glad you came over today. Debbie, you make everything right outta this! That’s why I called you! I love you so much!”

“You a little tipsy, girl? I knew it!” She squealed for a second and laughed.

“Yeah, yeah I am. But I’m a good mother.”

“Sure enough. You deserve it. Well honey, I gotta go. I gotta cook dinner for Ralph and I’m making pork chops.”

“Oh my God, I am so sorry! I spent the entire time gabbin’ at you and you didn’t get two words in! Then I go bellyaching..”

“It’s all good, boo. I knew you had to get that off your chest. That’s why we been friends for so long. We like sisters, right?”

“Right.”

They got up simultaneously. Monique felt a bit light-headed, but pleasantly so. They hugged for a long time, and Monique didn’t want to let go. Debbie knew it and let go first to save her friend the embarrassment.

After Debbie left, waving goodbye from her car, Monique went back inside. The neighbors were now off her mind and she thought of Willie instead, Freddie’s biological father. She ran to the bedroom and pulled out the only photo of him from her bedside stand.

Willie, who got her pregnant while she was going to community college. A bad man who put a dude in the hospital one day while she was still pregnant. He told her the man had disrespected her. Of course, he was thuggin and the man was a basehead who owed money. Once the baby was born, she saw less and less of him and she liked it just fine. She told Fred years after he was born that his father died on Staten Island, out of pride and to hide the child from that past.

So that's what happened. After several moves, she wound up in Paterson and then met Barry outside of a PTA meeting at the parochial school. The next thing she knew she was here in the kitchen, drunk in the now early evening with her ten-year old son at her sister's in Sussex County for the night. Drunk and alone. But she felt good, like she had accomplished a big project. Barry would be home soon.

When he got home, she'd shove him into the living room to fuck on the couch, like they had before, whether he felt like it or not. She'd pull his hair and scream, take control of his big cock.

The white woman was out of her life forever.

She lit another cigarette and crossed her arms, leaning back on her chair. Yes, this was just fine, she thought.

Uncle Punk Goes to Gowanus

In the mid 1990's, Rudy Giuliani was elected mayor of New York, changing the landscape of the city forever. Meanwhile, across the Hudson River, Several blocks of downtown Paterson, NJ were destroyed in a large fire. The city was broke and forced to cede control of its schools to the state of New Jersey. The economic boom that would occur several years later into the new millennium brought prosperity to New York, but passed over the city of Paterson. Immigrants continued to pour in and set up small businesses, proving there is hope.

My eyes were on fire with a hot sauce/vinegar combination burn when the phone started ringing for the second time. I jumped upright as if somebody had shaken me, disoriented and still a little drunk from the night before. It was still dark and the clock read 5:54. I fumbled for the receiver on the bedside table.

“Yello?”

“Wake up Sean!”

“Jimmy? What time izzit?”

“Well you little asshole, you don't return the messages I leave on your machine so I knew you'd be home. You don't give a shit about this family...”

“Listen, who the hell do you think...”

“No, shut up. You listen. You listen! I talked to Mom a coupla days ago and Uncle Joey is in Intensive Care.”

“Uncle Joey? You call me at, at six, wait is it six? Yeah, six a.m. because Uncle Punk is sick? We’re not even close with him and he's been sick for years. He's old. That’s what happens.”

“Yeah, well, Ma wants to bury the hatchet with him and she says that we have to go and see him. He's got pancreatic cancer.”

“Okay. I'll go see him. For Ma.”

“Good, you're finally getting involved.”

I ignored the comment, the fat fuck. “Where is he?”

“St. Joseph's Hospital in Paterson.”

“In Jersey? I have to go back to Jersey?”

”Yeah, that’s where he lives, remember?”

”I remember him living above that tavern, The Rusty Penny, near Bunker Hill.”

“How do you remember that?”

“Remember that time when we were little and he let us drink beer in the bar with him and I got sick and he paid me off to keep my mouth shut to Mom?”

“No! Where was I?”

“Oh! I dunno. Probably some gay Eagle Scout thing. So when are you going? I'll go with you.”

“You never told me that story. Is that why when you were always begging to go back to Uncle Punk's and Ma would never let you?”

“Yeah I guess she figured it out. But I never told her. I just stayed on his couch and he drove me home the next morning. I still felt sick.”

“I guess Uncle Punk was one of those things we just weren't allowed to talk about.”

“Yeah, yeah. So when you goin so I can get a ride from you?”

“Oh I can't go until Monday, buddy. You're on your own.”

“Yeah but you have a car. Why do you have to go Monday?”

“Because I have the kids this weekend and we're going to the beach today through tomorrow. Take the train.”

“Well are you planning on going during the day on Monday and I can go with you? I have to work that night.”

“No, I have work. I'm leaving right from work. Clear your calendar for today. Walk off your hangover.”

“Fine, I'll go.”

“Listen, I gotta go. I gotta pack the car and wake the kids up.”

“Jimmy, wait...”

Click

He always hangs up on me before I can get a word in.

I lay back down in hopes of catching some more sleep. Maybe I'd get lucky and would drift off accidentally and sleep through the whole day. Just pretend like the request was never made and ignore it. Surely sleep would at least provide some sort of cover, albeit a piss-poor one, but an excuse nonetheless. Unfortunately, the all-too-familiar sensation of the dull but noticeable ache in my legs ensured I wouldn't be drifting back to sleep. An impurity-driven side effect of the hangover, specific to cheap beer. One of the culprits was half full on the dresser. I walked over, picked it up and pondered whether or not to drink it. Looking up at the mirror, I saw in my reflection the face of a street crazy, eyes cracked and red, a sweat-stained undershirt and bedhead consisting of a cowlick of the peacock variety. No, better to let that one go, I thought.

The bedroom smelled like sweat and dirty clothes, cigarette smoke and alcohol. Crumbs were in the bed. It disgusted me, but rather than start cleaning in the wee hours of the morning, I had the sudden urge to leave the apartment. Now it was 6:22.

“God knows how long it'll take to get out there. Fuckin Paterson!” I said aloud and stuck my head out my bedroom window. The street was deserted but would be full in a few hours of tourists looking for counterfeit handbags and kids looking for fireworks.

Still, the earlier you get there, the earlier you get back, I thought.

I threw on a brown hoodie from the pile in the corner. Jeans were conveniently located underneath. Uncle Joey probably wouldn't notice or care. Still, you had to brush your teeth. No matter what. I left the a

apartment like someone making a jailbreak.

The sun was coming up over the Manhattan Bridge. My eyes began to water as soon as my feet hit the cement stoop. It was going to be a long morning, one that required sustenance in the form of grease soaked bread and coffee. Coffee that declared, in no uncertain terms, “We take pleasure in serving you.” The woman at the counter of the Cup and Saucer Luncheonette didn't seem to take pleasure at all, in anything, the first disappointment of the day. I took my bacon, egg and cheese and matched her frown. My regular waitress worked in the afternoons, a sweet, smiling Polish woman with shiny black eyes and hair to match. My usual booth was occupied by an old man with a rotting nose reading the Racing Forum. I was an anomaly at 6:30. While the ray of sunshine who was my waitress poured coffee into its paper container, the headline of the Post called out to me: “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Racist.”

No shit, tell me something I don't know about fuckin' Giuliani, I thought. If I were going to be a stranger in a strange land, might as well read the tabloids of the batshit crazy.

What I didn't know was how strange it would actually get.

For once Jimmy was right. It might be a good idea to walk it off, I thought as I walked through Tompkins Square Park. I figured I'd catch a cross-town L train to the West Side for the transfer at Eighth Avenue. The park was waking up to face the remnants of a summer Friday night. Junkies in stained t-shirts slept the sleep of the living dead on benches. A long, heavily tattooed man without a shirt reigned supreme over the dog walk, throwing a stick to his pit bull. A pair of old women with faces like worn leather chattered in Spanish. None of them have to leave the city today, I bet. Seeing them reminded me to call my mother. Jimmy still called every Sunday.

This little fact was brought to my attention by both of them. One time, about a year ago, when I did remember on my own to call, in the middle of another marathon diatribe on the evils of landlords (Yes, Mom. I know, Mom. Yeah, all landlords ARE rat bastards Mom...) my call waiting clicked in. I was relieved until I actually picked it up. Of course it was Jimmy.

“Hey Black Sheep, it's big brother. Have you called Ma lately?”

“Yeah. You just made me hang up on her.”

“Oh, okay good. Because you know I call her every Sunday and every Sunday I gotta hear her complain about how you never call. It's almost like you don't care.”

“I care! I was just talking to her! You know, it's bad enough to hear her complaining, now I gotta hear your mouth? Jesus Christ...”

Click

And he was gone. I did call her back, though, to listen to her pick up right where she left off. She was still sharp and lived alone in a studio apartment in Bayonne. She moved there "to be closer to her boys," three years after I moved from Boston to New York. She never visited Jimmy, though several years my senior, whined to her while we carried boxes to the van we borrowed.

“But Mom, I've lived in New York for years now and you never talked about moving closer before!”

“Well, you're both here now.”

That made him mad. Once we had moved up the Passaic River to Elmwood Park as children, he'd always find a nasty trick to play on me.

One day just after he'd turned thirteen, we rolled a rusted barrel we found along the river to see if it would float. I had no idea that the purpose of going wasn't to float a barrel or to stare at the neon sign of the Marcal paper plant. It was to trick me into going to the river so I would "accidentally" fall in, leaving me wet and reeking and Jimmy in the clear. While the first part worked, Mom was no dope. She came home from work late that night, furious already at her boss for making her stay late in the E.R. of St. Barnabas' Hospital. I woke up to hear my brother's screaming and the slapping sounds of a penny loafer on skin, the preferred weapon of choice. I've never had to stifle laughter so hard in my life. We shared tears in our bedroom that night, his sobs of hurt pride, mine of joy. I may have been the favorite, but I received my share of beatings.

I laughed out loud thinking about this and then continued to chuckle while passing a homeless man asleep in front of a closed store, his sign, which read, "Spare change so I can buy a gun and shoot all the junkies in Tompkins Square Park."

The attendant in the booth at Fourteenth and First was reading a book and didn't look up when I dropped a token into the turnstile. A Hasidic Jew and an overweight aging hippie stood on the platform. Both of their offending bad odors kept them at a far distance. Luckily the train pulled up within a few minutes. It was my first, and as I found out later, only break of the day.

The subway car was empty and I wondered why until I saw the man lying down across several seats, his pants soaked in urine. I walked to the other end of the car but no luck: The door to the next car was locked. The car had no working fan in the middle of July. I'd just have to deal.

After making the transfer at Eight Avenue and catching the A train to Port Authority, I wandered amidst disheveled passengers, walking upstairs and passing every gate, stopping to see which bus route was

posted, turning down corridors and scratching my head until I finally reached it: Gate 266. I'd taken a bus to Bayonne several times for Christmas. I might not have called that often, but I damn well did holidays.

Port Authority, inside and out, is a festering eyesore, a transportation hub designed, built and maintained with the same loving care as an outer-borough public housing project. I passed a bathroom with the knowledge that the grill at the Cup and Saucer had probably not been cleaned well that morning. But I knew of the horrors that would await me in a bathroom here. If the toilets could speak, we'd be regaled with tales of crackheads, junkies, stoners and drunks; powerfully obese tourists taking off their fanny packs, having eaten double orders of sausage at the truck stop on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. The variety of sex to be had in these bathrooms was a story of its own. Using a stall was the diciest of dice rolls. At least three would be out of order, the handicapped stall occupant passed out. Of course, this was only the morning variety. Whoever sat or hopefully squatted during the rest of the day surely had to run, and quite badly. That was the only logical reason.

Nope, I told myself. Hold it. The schedule on the wall said that the next bus left in ten minutes. There were four people already waiting for the bus, two older Latina women and two obviously hung-over bridge and tunnel kids in cargo shorts. It was getting to be a hot and sticky day, one of those summer days when you wake up sweating. The urge to go grew as I got nervous wondering about whether this particular bus stopped at the hospital. Time slowed down and I stood there with no Walkman, only the Post that I knew I had to save for the bus. The Saturday edition wasn't exactly thick. The lack of sunglasses would surely be a problem. I was leaving the city completely unprepared. The bus pulled up and I got on.

"St. Joseph's?"

"Wha?"

“You stop at St. Joseph's?”

“Yes, yes. \$3.25.”

I paid and got on, hoping to see a bathroom. This wasn't a Greyhound or a NJ commuter train, so a row of seats faced me instead. Resigned to waiting until my destination, I sat in the front and sighed. More people got on and I put my seat back. When we left the Lincoln Tunnel the sun was shining in my face and would do so for the rest of the way there. I closed my eyes hoping to forget the urge to shit and the sun in my dry, bloodshot eyes.

I woke from a dream a half hour later when a child started kicking my seat. I only remembered standing in front of an abandoned factory. I looked out the window to see the bus approaching a sign that read “Welcome to Paterson — The Silk City.” The urge to go had gone.

“Hey, we stop at the hospital yet, sir? Sir? Sir, we stop at the hospital yet?”

“Nope. Nother coupla minutes.”

“Oh, okay.”

The bus roared down the main drag, as business owners rolled up their shutters covered in graffiti. A barbershop's shutters had “Paperchasers,” “Crazyface” and “Little Oogie” written all over. A pair of worn Reeboks had been thrown over telephone wires. People waved to each other. The side streets were lined with row houses. At one red light, a garbage truck was stopped and two men in bandannas and reflective vests laughed as they threw bags into the back. At a bus stop in front of a Rent-A-Center across the street, a police officer talked to a guy in a ragged white t-shirt while he poured a paper-bagged bottle of

malt liquor into the gutter, no doubt about to issue a ticket or invite him for a ride in his car to Central Booking.

Man, ain't that a bitch, I thought.

"St. Joseph's Hospital," the driver called out.

I stood up and stumbled when the bus screeched to a halt.

"Thanks," I mumbled as I stepped off into the bright morning sun.

The hospital was different from the one my mother had worked at years ago. I half expected to see something resembling St. Elsewhere, especially considering the state of the surrounding neighborhood. An older model Chevy Malibu passed blasting the chorus to an Ice Cube song.

I looked up at the building and counted ten floors. A parking garage and barbed-wire fenced lot were in the back. Walking in, I turned right and followed the signs to the main lobby. The floor had cracks in the tile and the painted walls had begun to peel. Apparently my first instincts were right after all. A heavy black woman with braided and beaded hair smiled flatly when I asked here for the room number.

"Visit hours in ICU don't start for nother fifteen minutes. I'll call you when you can go in. You can sit in one of the chairs over there."

"Ugh."

The table had no magazines but it did have an old issue of the Herald News. I had evidently left my Post on the bus; I didn't remember it being in my lap when I awoke. The headline read "City Budgets in

Crisis: Police Threaten Strike" and was dated July 5, 1993, three days before. No wonder Uncle Punk's dying, I thought. He was the last person in the family to be in this town.

I read the front-page article to pass time. The city was out of money and could no longer afford to pay its employees. The garbage men were threatening a walk out. I imagined a 1977 New York scenario. Many of the stores I passed were already boarded up. Another article talked about the state of New Jersey taking over the schools. Where the hell was Joe Clark when you needed him?

I looked up at the clock. It was 9:05. Usually I'd be asleep for another five hours on a Saturday. Before we moved to Elmwood Park, we had lived here, on Seventeenth Street and Sixth Avenue. Saturday mornings, and every day in the summer we'd be thrown out of the house to let Mom sleep after working the graveyard shift. Our friends were Arab and black and lived in the apartments on the block. They had colorful nicknames like "Earthquake Ricky" and "Alpo Dog Food." We'd play Manhunt, burn punks in the vacant lot or ride our old bikes. When I was ten, we moved to Elmwood Park to a garden apartment whose residents didn't have kids. We still went to the same parochial school, but the car rides were longer. We were told there would be no trips back to Paterson.

"Those kids were bad news. You know Mrs. Fiarrelli, the old Italian lady who lived across the hallway? She told me your little friend Ali killed that alley cat that used to hang out near the dumpster."

"That wasn't him, Ma! That was one of Jimmy's friends..."

"Well his older brother is in jail and I don't want you going back there. I want you kids to have a better shot. So don't expect me to drive you back there to play. You'll just have to make new friends."

This forced Jimmy and me to play together, at least until he turned fourteen and discovered girls the following year. I stood up and walked back to the fat woman.

“Is ICU open to visitors yet?”

“Yeah, just opened five minutes ago. What's the patient's name again?”

“McGinley. Um, Joseph McGinley.”

She handed me a laminated tag to wear and looked through a computer.

“McGinley. Room 645. Visits are limited to thirty minutes. Elevators are broken right now. Go down this hallway until the end and make a right. Stairway is at the end of the hallway. It's the sixth floor.”

“So all the elevators are broken?”

“The freight elevator is working but that's reserved for transporting patients.”

I sighed. Typical. I walked down the long hallway, past closed doors. A young man, Latino with a teardrop tattooed under his right eye, was asleep on a gurney outside of an X-ray room. I found the staircase and began my ascent.

The Jamaican nurse, a woman with large breasts and a thick accent, pointed me down a hall to the last room on the left. Breakfast was being served, but from the covered trays in many of the rooms I passed, it didn't look like most people were hungry or even capable of ingesting solids. I stopped at the end of the hallway.

Inside, Gershwin played softly on a radio. A nurse was checking a chart and a very old-looking man with oxygen tubes in his nose and an IV in his arm was sleeping. His heart-rate monitor was steady. The Filipino nurse looked up and smiled.

“Are you his grandson?”

“No. I'm his grandnephew.”

“It's so good to see someone visiting. Nobody comes to see him. He hasn't spoken in days. Maybe he'll speak for you.”

“Yeah, well, we'll see.”

She placed her hand on my shoulder and left. It was just me and Uncle Punk. I pulled the only chair close to the bed. His mouth was open in a crooked frown and the corners of his lips were cracked. His face was pale and wrinkled and also in dire need of a shave. I didn't know what to say. Would I wake him?

“Hi Uncle Punk...I mean Uncle Joey. It's your nephew Sean.”

There was no response. I leaned in closer and put my hand on top of his.

“Uncle Joey, it's Sean. I came to visit you.”

He smacked his lips and stirred.

“Jimmy and Jenny are coming to visit you too Uncle Joey.”

He opened his eyes, the whites tainted with pale yellow and looked at me. He groaned.

“Oh. Ohhhhh. God it hurts. It...hurts.”

He clenched his teeth and clicked a button he held in his hand. A machine clicked. I stood up, scared, but stopped short of searching for a nurse. His breathing slowed and he closed his eyes after a minute. But he never took his eyes off me until they closed. I gathered that the button released a heavy-duty painkiller. He stayed asleep. I sat in silence, watching him. The phone at the nurse's station rang several times and the song “Lullaby and Goodnight” played over the PA system. Fifteen minutes passed on the clock on the wall. It had been a long journey to get here and there would be another one back, but it was time to go. It was too much for me. I hadn't seen Uncle Punk since the wake of a distant relative ten years before. Now he was at death's door and I was his only visitor.

“Alright Uncle Joey, I think I'm going to go now. I...I love you.”

I wasn't sure what compelled me to say that last part, but it felt like it was the right thing to do. His eyes opened again and so did his mouth.

“Gowanus,” he said in a strained voice.

I was shocked.

“What's that, Uncle Joey?”

He grunted. “Gowanus. How...how do I get to Gowanus? I need to get to Gowanus from Paterson.”

He was clearly doped up. But what was in Brooklyn? He had always lived in Paterson.

“Why do you want to go to Gowanus, Uncle Joey? Is there something you want there?”

“No...no.”

He shook his head and drifted back to sleep. It was puzzling. I decided it best not to wake him to ask. I turned around and walked out of the room to face the Filipino nurse.

“He spoke.”

“Really? What did they say?”

“Brooklyn. He wants to go to Brooklyn.”

She paused, just as puzzled as I was. “I see.”

“Well, I have to get back to New York. Thank you for taking care of him.”

“You're welcome. Please come back. He needs visitors. They all do.”

“I will.”

But I knew I wouldn't and she did too. The walk down the stairs turned into a sprint. I gave my plastic badge back to the woman at the front desk and mumbled a thank you.

When I stepped out of the hospital, I saw that clouds had covered the morning's brilliant sky. I considered hailing a taxi and going to see the

old neighborhood, but I felt suddenly tired, as if a tank of gas had just been siphoned from me by the hospital. I crossed the street and waited in front of a corner store for the next bus back to New York.

After several minutes, I heard the rumbling of thunder. Dark clouds covered the sky as I stared at the hospital across the street. I felt several big drops of water on my shoulder. Of course it would start raining. And it did. A downpour began and soon enough the gutters were full and people on the sidewalk ran for cover. I moved to a spot underneath the bodega's awning. Just my luck. I walked inside and bought the local paper. I hadn't had a chance to read the Post, so the stories wouldn't repeat.

As soon as I walked out, the bus pulled up. I ran out from the awning as fast as I could, but I was still soaked as I waited for people to step off, hesitating at the bottom step to open their umbrellas, as I got wetter. I finally got on and paid the driver. At least I had the sense to slip the newspaper under my t-shirt to keep it somewhat dry.

I sat down and stared at the drops on the window. The wave of exhaustion passed over me again. I couldn't help but close my eyes and fall asleep with my head against the window and the unread paper in my lap.

I was wakened by an elderly Latino woman saying, "We here, mister. Wake up."

I thanked her and discovered that, once again, my newspaper was gone. I stumbled off the bus and stood on the escalator, the last passenger, wiping the sand from my eyes. I walked through Port Authority in a near daze; still, finding the subway was like a mouse finding cheese. A train headed downtown, back to Canal Street, pulled into the station just as I stepped onto the platform. The morning's diarrhea returned. I knew I'd be home soon. When the train finally reached my stop, I bolted out of the station, running through the

crowds. It wasn't raining yet in Manhattan, but I dodged tourists and occasionally bumped shoulders. This was an emergency. It was a photo finish as I ran up six flights of stairs, almost dropping my keys as I reached my door. Once relieved, I immediately called my mother. She picked up on the third ring.

“Hey Mom.”

“Sean! What a surprise! How are you? How's work?”

“Work's fine, real busy at the restaurant. But Mom, I called to ask you about something...”

“Oh Sean, I'm glad you're getting along better at work. I wish you would consider going into advertising like your brother...”

“No, Mom, Mom. I just got home from St. Joseph's. I saw Uncle Punk. Mom, you have to go see him.”

“I will dear, I will. You were in Paterson? How does he look?”

“He looks awful, Mom. You really should go. I mean, you made Jimmy go and he told me, so you should really go. But why did we call him Uncle Punk? I mean, I remember you saying he was a drunk and I saw him drunk all the time, but I thought there were tons of drunks on your side of the family too.”

“You don't remember the story I told you about your Aunt Mary and Uncle Punk?”

“No I don't.”

“Well my father and Uncle Punk were best friends growing up. He's

not your blood uncle, you know. Grandpa took him in and his parents raised him as one of their own. When Grandpa had me, he still lived with us and he used to tease your Aunt Mary, my sister, all the time, especially when he was drunk. Well one day she hit him in the head with a frying pan.”

“Wow!”

“Yeah knocked him out cold.”

“Jesus. But I guess Uncle Punk had it coming. Punk, that's really funny. Uncle Punk said something about Gowanus.”

“Gowanus?”

“Yeah, he said, ‘How do I get to Gowanus from here?’ What does that mean?”

“Your grandfather told me he came from Brooklyn and was living with his uncle who was a drunk and got hauled off to jail. That’s why they took him in.”

“Oh. So this entire time we never talked to Uncle Punk because he was a drunk?”

“Well, not exactly. See a year or so after Aunt Mary hit him with the frying pan, Uncle Punk went to jail too.”

“What'd he do?”

“Statutory rape. They said he had sex with a sixteen-year-old girl. But I don't know, I don't think he did it. But after that, none of us were allowed to talk to him or about him in front of your grandparents.”

“Jesus.”

“Your grandfather started calling him ‘Uncle Punk’ after that because of, *ahem* what the say happens to men in prison. Men with other men.”

“Oh God, Mom! And we all called him that? To his face?”

“Well, your grandfather was good at keeping the real reason a secret. That's why I told you never to call him that to his face.”

“So what happened to him?”

“Uncle John got him a job with the Sanitation Department as a garbage man after he was released. After that we very rarely saw him and never talked. Aunt Mary was actually the one to tell me he was sick. I always felt bad for him.”

“Wow, this is a lot, Mom.”

“Well, you're an adult and you need to know what's going on. Did you see the old neighborhood while you were there?”

“No, it started to rain. I'll go back another day.”

“No, it's good you didn't. Don't go back, it's even worse. Now that crack is everywhere. You'd get held up.”

“Alright. Well, we'll see.”

“Listen, so when you gonna come visit *me*?”

“Soon, Mom. I promise. Mom? Mom, I gotta go now. Can I call you later?”

“Okay, sure.”

“Love you, Mom.”

“Love you too, dear.”

“Bye.”

I set the receiver down. I picked up a pen and wrote down “Call Mom back” and “Call Jimmy Sunday” in big black letters and lay the sheet of paper on top. Even though it was barely afternoon and I had napped twice before, I still felt tired. I had swallowed the weight of someone's lifetime of sorrows in one day. I lay down on my bed and crawled into the sheets. I unplugged the phone and was soon asleep.

Let's Take a Ride to Riverside

Growing up right over the Passaic River from Paterson in the small town of Hawthorne (formerly North Paterson), everyone knew where to buy 40's and where to buy drugs. The drug loops there feel like they're open 24 hours and local newspapers have done extensive coverage to no avail. Everyone knew or still knows at least one crackhead or cokehead in town, someone's cousin or brother. As long as the surrounding suburbia wants to get high, the loops will be running.

The delivery guy was twenty minutes late and turned up in front of the building, one of several in the garden apartment complex five blocks from the Passaic River, looking unapologetic. It wasn't in the least bit surprising. Delivery guys are always late.

"Is that the pizza guy?"

"Probably. I need money."

"Okay. I only have two twenties, so take those."

Rob returned to the kitchen several minutes later with two pizzas. It was a small kitchen in a two-bedroom apartment. Rob lived with his mother, an emergency room nurse at St. Joseph's Hospital in downtown Paterson. Friday nights meant pizza, but for the last year it also meant double shifts at the hospital, where Rob's mom was able to come home and eat between shifts.

"Why'd you get so much food? Lemme guess, there's no change, right?"

“No, here’s ten. And Craig’s coming home this weekend. He should be here by now. He knows now is when you’re home.”

“Christ, the traffic right now on Route 21 must be horrible. I hope he doesn’t speed. I know he will.”

“Well I’m going to eat. He should have left earlier.”

“I don’t want you giving him a hard time when he gets here. He’s going to college. Have you started to look at colleges yet? Nooooo. I send you to Catholic school, thinking it’ll give you discipline, but I don’t see you at SAT prep courses or taking AP courses.”

“I’m in all honors courses, Ma.”

“But not AP.”

“Well at least I’m not a troublemaker.”

“Mmmmmm. How do I know that?”

“The bottles in the liquor cabinet are still full.”

“Oh believe me. I know what you’re up to. I can always tell when you get home at night.”

Rob knew she was bluffing because if she did know, he’d surely get a beating, even at this older stage of adolescence. Then the tears would come and a long period of silence interrupted by brief bursts of

profanity-laced insults spoken to no one in particular. Phrases like “ungrateful little prick” and “let him fuck up his life” were muttered favorites, as was the ever popular “just like his bastard father.” Then after a week or so, all would return to normal.

“I must be high to be working overnight shifts on Fridays with you here. Christ knows how late you’re out until.”

“Don’t worry, Mom. I can’t use your car because you’re at work. Plus Craig will be here too.”

“That scares me even more. Promise me you’ll use your head tonight.”

“Mom, I promise.”

“I’m going to call the house line at midnight to make sure you’re here.”

“You’ve never done that before.”

“I don’t care. Starting tonight I am. I better not get any calls from the police about you in jail like that time with your brother. I’ll knock your teeth out and I mean it!”

“I promise I won’t. I’ll be careful.”

“I don’t want you to be careful; I want you to be good! Christ, what happened to my good little boys?”

He shrugged. Neither one was ever sorry, really. Just sorry to have been caught.

“Look if the both of you are stupid enough to get caught by me, then obviously you’re stupid enough to get caught by a cop. And you better not be driving my car into Paterson to buy that shit!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Yeah, uh huh.”

“Well, what about you Mom? I mean, you’re one to talk!”

“Just because you found a small bag of what you *thought* was marijuana in my underwear drawer doesn’t mean you can do whatever you want! That’s for medicinal reasons for work-related issues that I use as a responsible adult. And I stopped hiding money there when your brother was your age.”

“Is this the talk you wanted to have before?”

“Yeah, but I was originally gonna talk to you about using a condom.”

“Mom!”

“What? You should, forget what they say in school.”

Rob picked up another slice, his fourth, out of the box. He stopped when they both heard the front door jingle. Craig appeared, with freshly grown stubble and dark sunglasses on.

“Oh my God, my big college man is here! Wow, you have put on a little weight, eh?”

“Mom...”

“No, that’s good honey. You didn’t have much of a rear end before. Looks better now.”

Craig turned to Rob, who was laughing with food in his mouth and whispered, “Fuck you.”

“Craig, don’t say those words to your brother!”

“I wasn’t *saying* anything, I was moving my lips.”

“That’s your laundry, I presume?”

She pointed to the bulging bag at his feet.

“Yes it is.”

“Okay. You know what to do. Quarters are on top of my dresser. Soap is under the bathroom sink. I’ll get your sheets for the couch. I’m going back to work soon.”

“I still can’t believe you’re working Fridays with the little idiot at home.”

“I know, I know. But how else am I going to pay for St. Xavier’s and save a little for college? They don’t give scholarships for smoking pot.”

“Hey, I get good grades!”

“Rob honey, honors courses are not the same as AP, we’ve gone over this before. But yeah, watch him tonight, please.”

“Aye aye, captain. Oooh, is this pepperoni?”

“And don’t get in trouble yourself.”

“I won’t.”

“Okay. Well I hate to do this, but I have to get back to work. I love you baby. I’m so glad you’re home. Are you going to be here tomorrow in the afternoon?”

“Yeah I can hang around.”

“Okay. My two babies back in the same home again.”

She looked at them lovingly and felt a slight twinge of worry.

“Stay out of trouble. Be good!”

And the door slammed. The pair sat at the table, staring at each other.

“So how’s your new apartment? Must be nice not to have to come home during breaks and share a room with me.”

“Yeah it’s cool. I mean, it’s Newark so it’s not the greatest, but I like it. Work has been steady lately so it’s gotten easier. Lotta students in the building and on the block, so it’s cool.”

“Cool, I’ll have to visit soon.”

“Yeah, we’ll see.”

“So you said on the phone you were going to Jared Hutchinson’s house party?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t start until like ten or eleven, so I figure I’ll just hang out here, then split. Why, you wanna go? Cuz I don’t think that’d be a good idea. I mean, you made his sister cry...”

“That was her own fuckin fault, but no. Ben is supposed to be pickin’ me up and we’re going to Kirk’s.”

“That’s cool. You still go to Kirk’s? When you going?”

“Not till later.”

They both paused, knowing what the other’s thoughts were and

deciding who would speak first. Craig decided his right came from being born first.

“Still got that retractable bong I got you for your birthday?”

“Under my bed.”

“Bring the soda. I’ll take the pizza. And I’ll pack it.”

The two sat on Rob’s futon, smoking from a three-foot retractable water pipe that compressed to eight inches, a proud hand-me-down from Craig.

“So I actually wanted to talk to you about something. Bobby Fadducci is in one of my classes and he told me that you and his brother Tony have been going to Riverside to buy weed?”

“Well I can explain.”

“You don’t think that some scumfuck could rob you or you won’t get pulled over by some pig for being a white boy in Paterson? Lemme tell you something: You’re looking for fucking trouble. Lemme tell you a story. Remember four years ago when you were thirteen and I was in high school and like, my car’s windshield got smashed? I’ve never told you this and you have to promise not to tell Mom about this ever. Here, it’s kicked. Let me pack it again. Gimme a slice. So anyway, promise me you won’t tell Mom, ever. Big mouth.”

“Yeah, I promise.”

“Okay, well four years ago, Bobby told me and my buddy Nicki Stoli, when we went to St. Xavier’s, about how there wasn’t anything in Riverside and to go to Christopher Columbus Houses instead. So we believed him and we got into my little Civic and were rolling through

Paterson and I got that Russian fuck Nicki wanting to blast ‘Fuck the Police’ and I’m like ‘What the fuck are you doing?’ And it was super super cold out. So we pull up on the corner where there’s some guys hanging around and we tell the guy we want coke and weed and like, a hundred bucks of each. So he tells us to wait in this empty parking lot behind a church down the street. So we’re sitting there and I got the radio on and they’re playing ‘Gimme the Loot’ and I thought it was the fucking funniest thing. Well, I’m sitting there laughing and outta nowhere comes this big fucking black guy on Nicki’s side flashing a piece and screaming at us ‘Empty your motherfucking pockets, now. Scream and I’ll shoot you both.’

“So we’re freaking out and then the guy goes ‘Get out of the fuckin car. I’m takin’ this butch, get out of the fucking car.’

“And Nickie fucking looks at me...”

Craig took a long pull, clearing the bowl and soon turned red, spiraling into a five minute coughing session, with several moments of giving the “one second, please” look until he abruptly continued.

“And he screams ‘Drive!’ So I gunned it and we’re screeching and I’m trying to turn around because the guy is holding onto the car and onto Nicki’s coat and keep up. So I hang a u-ey and he falls off. Then I hear this bang and we both duck. I turned around and the motherfuck shot a hole in the back of my windshield!”

“Holy shit!”

“I know! What the fuck, right? So I turn to make sure Nicki’s okay and he’s got these bags of weed and coke in his lap, plus all this cash.”

“How’d that happen?”

“Well when the guy came up to Nicki, he was holding the gun with one hand and like, had his other hand on the car, so Nicki somehow wound up grabbing the guy’s pocket and when I took off the pocket musta ripped. So it all spilled into the car.”

“Yeah, but-”

“Well I found out from Bobby’s cousin Frankie at school that the same guy was sticking up all the dealers because Frankie’s guy got stuck up when he went to get haze. But we didn’t know that.”

“So this guy never came after you? Even after he shot at your car?”

“No, but we couldn’t go back to Riverside after that. Then a year later they tore down the houses. So I’m driving through P-town around these projects witta bullethole in my back windshield, and every cop in that city knows it’s a loop, with this coke in our laps. It’s a wonder we didn’t get pulled over. Anyway, we went to this house party where we did all the coke and fuckin’ smoked all the weed.”

“Wait, how did you know it was coke?”

Craig paused.

“We didn’t. We just did it and got high. And it was good and all. Oh wait, shit I remember. We gave some to this one girl who OD-ed and her jock boyfriend hadda drive her to Valley Hospital. But she was a freshman, so you know.”

“It was *that* party? That’s where Nicole Rizzatelli’s sister OD-ed. Lorrie, I think her name is. That’s her. Shit.”

“Well, it wasn’t *my* fault. I didn’t tell her to blow a buncha lines.”

Rob looked at Craig. He seemed suddenly unfamiliar and reptilian. Of course Craig caught it.

“Always a drama queen. So here’s the best part. Because you could totally see the bullet hole in the window, what I wound up doin was after the party takin a cinder block we picked up on the road and stopped at Nicki’s to get his car instead. I smashed the back windshield completely and we drove around the block and let me off at the corner. So one person came out and I pretended to be super pissed, even though I was fucking ripped off my ass. Then I told him my mom was sleeping and I would wait until the morning to call the cops and file a report.”

“Did you?”

“No, I convinced Mom it wouldn’t be worth it.”

“Didn’t she give you the money to replace it?”

“Yeah. And the insurance covered it, so I got to keep the money.”

“That’s fucked up, man. Mom never found out?”

“No.”

And he grabbed his arm and blew smoke in younger brother’s face.

“And she never will, understand?”

“Yeah.”

“Look, just don’t go into Paterson to buy weed, alright? Jesus Christ, you look at me like I’m a piece of shit when I’m the one who got robbed. If you need weed...”

And he unzipped his backpack and took out one of multiple filled bags and handed it to him.

“There’s a quarter.”

“I don’t have that money on me, man.”

“Mom keeps emergency money taped under the last drawer in her dresser.”

“I don’t want to do that.”

“Fine, then this is your birthday present. No more Riverside, okay? Go to me.”

“So that’s how you’re able to afford an apartment? You’re dealing now?”

“Don’t ask questions.”

“Are you who Mom bought weed from?”

He nodded.

“She still does.”

“Goddammit, this is weird.”

“Shut the fuck up. Hit this, chief.”

“So are you selling shit in school and like at parties?”

“I let you ask one question. That’s it.”

Rob’s cell phone rang. It was Ben.

“Yeah, you’re here? Aight, down in a sec. Yeah, peace.”

He shoved the bag in his pocket and threw the hood of his sweatshirt up.

“Well, I gotta split. Thanks. I’ll take your advice. What are you gonna do till you leave?”

“I dunno, make a few phone calls, jerk off on your bed. Ha.”

“You’re fucking sick. Peace.”

Rob ran down the flights of stairs and jumped into the backseat of Ben’s Volvo. There were two girls in the car, too. Ben’s girlfriend, Becca, sat in the front, while a familiar looking blonde sat in the back next to Rob.

“Rob, you remember Lorrie, right?”

He felt a quick shudder.

“I’ve heard so much about you, I feel like I know you.”

“So Robby boy, where are we going, right to the party or to pick up party favors, or perhaps someone has them already?”

He paused.

“Let’s go to Riverside and get some blow.”

They all cheered, including Lorrie.

“You heard the man, let’s take a drive to Riverside!”

While Ben made the u-turn, Rob remarked, “my brother is in town this weekend.”

He was trying not to stare at Lorrie.

Ben replied, “your brother is the fucking coolest!”

“Yeah... pretty cool.”

And the station wagon rolled over the little bridge across the Passaic River, leaving suburbia behind.