

The New Jerus Blues

Volume 1

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Chapter One

Mix-Tapes

The night suddenly becomes quiet as my brother turns the music down to a whisper.

“Yo, is that a cop behind us?”

I look into my passenger-side mirror as casually as I can and study the shape of the headlights that invade our darkness. Behind us is the machine that captures, silently inching closer to our bumper to detect any signs of a rebel presence. Me and my brother both inhale and hold our breaths simultaneously- him out of fear, me with the weed smoke in my lungs. We’re doing anything we can to avoid making any noise while this red light traps us, keeping completely still to avoid any movements which might incur a raised eyebrow, keeping the windows closed to trap that incriminating smell. The smoke swims around our heads like jellyfish illuminated from the bluish-white light of a deep-sea submarine. Indeed, it’s the cops. The eyes of the beast are upon us.

We’re in this together you and I. From now on, there’s no more you and me. It’s just us. I sometimes forget that. But we’ve been in this thing together for as long as I can remember. If you go down, I go with you. Same goes the other way around. It seems we were a little

too eager to celebrate our freedom, which ironically now threatens to put us both in jail. I never understood the meaning of irony, but I feel that somehow, this could be it. It wasn't more than an hour ago we were taking those steps on the grass, doing all those things that the dreams and movies show you it's going to be like. And I still feel the big dinner in my stomach. I wasn't even hungry but I ate too much anyway, just to show mom that I was happy. Mom was real happy.

We got showered and ready for the night in the same way we always do, always moving with a purpose, trying to get out of the house as quickly as possible while taking good time in front of the bathroom mirror. Mom and dad, Aunt Fuddy-duddy, Aunt Gracie, and Grandpa were watching T.V downstairs. I leaned into the stairs to make sure I could still hear everyone talking. They were talking about college. You went in the shower first as planned, that way I could break the weed up and roll the blunt while I waited for you to get out. I sat at the desk with the door open so I could hear the shower water running in the bathroom and the sound of any footsteps coming up the stairs in case mom decided to bring up some oranges or something, which would've been weird because we just ate tons of food, but mom's just like that- always popping in with fruit while I'm doing some bad shit.

It was one of those rare nights when mom and dad couldn't give us shit about going out. We just graduated high school so of course we were going out. We let them know that we were letting everything go tonight, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it. They just smiled and told us to have a good time, which made us uneasy, and we left the house cautiously like terrorists who were surprised at having their threats so easily met.

As soon as we started backing out of the driveway, I lit the blunt. The first hits of a freshly rolled blunt are always sweet; a harmonious marriage of cheap cigar paper and the finest piff, always re-

fined and never stepped on, still puffy in the bag with the crystals shining. We rolled down through the neighborhood riding with the windows down halfway letting the easy summer flow in with the scent of gardens at night. My mind went all the way back to green Africa and Amsterdam dawn where the seeds first came from as the paper burned. Clouds began forming in the sky and then I passed it on to you.

The smoke had just started creeping on us. We started laughing and felt light-headed as the lights grew brighter and we were just talking about how we knew it would be a good night because of the way the night smelled. And then, as we slowed and stopped at the red light, you said that terrible thing to me. *Yo, is that a cop behind us?*

There's no denying it. We're sitting in front of the cops smoking, and all they have to do is throw the switch on suspicion and let those lights spin. How long have the pigs been tailing us? I'm sure it's pure coincidence. I glance at my brother and appraise his emotions. He seems steady. Good. We're going to need to wear a straight face and keep a cool head if they tap on our window or if we decide to smash the gas and run. It's a tight spot to be in. We're crammed between signs- one that says stop, another that says run. But we're not going to do anything. That's right. We're just going to sit tight and hope for the best. Because I know, if there's anything I've learned, it's that there's nothing left to do, except to do nothing.

Since sophomore year I learned to study cop movements: the way they turn corners slow sniper scoping, the way they wait under trees next to exits outside the city, the way they converse in vacant gas-station parking lots after-hours parked head to toe like a 69 sex position. But right about now those lessons are useless. I can feel the beast breathing hot coffee and donuts down our necks. I look away from my window quickly and pretend to flip through the radio stations as if I

could somehow jam the signal on their Sentinel scanner. I got the four white ladies psychokinetically charged underneath my trench-coat and I'm ready to throw.

"We'll wait for them to strike first," I hear myself say steadily, "is your window rolled up? Good. We'll box for now. If they flash us, I'll eat the blunt. It's cool, don't worry. They're probably just going to Dunkin Donuts, see? I can see the sign over there."

I feel myself beginning to ramble, but it was my job to keep us cool. Gambit is always cool. Wolverine is a tight adamantium ball of insane nerves and rage. We'd need to get out of this one quietly. Follow my lead.

"Should we go straight?"

"When the light turns? Yeah, go straight," I confirm immediately, the mutant instincts taking over, "if we turn right, they'll follow."

I knew that to be the absolute truth. Cops can be so goddamn predictable. Yes, they've potentially caught us. But what's worse is if we were to be sitting here at the light, and five seconds before it turns green, now we signal right? It doesn't make sense. It's something someone who is scared would do. And we're not scared. We're never scared. The pigs devour the scared.

"You bastards, we're not falling for your tricks!" my brother yells at the darkness. This light is taking forever. The red light seems to grow brighter and more oppressive as the seconds tick away with every heartbeat, the light at the cross section turns yellow on the other side, stuck in that godforsaken color while sweat begins to trickle down my armpit like a cold, icy water-snake. My brother growls to himself quietly, almost inaudibly, like an animal confronting a distant noise in the darkness. Back in middle school, back when the X-Men cartoon was hot, he used to just growl all the time like Wolverine. It made him feel better about things, like he could just grit his teeth and pretend

the claws would come bursting out of his flesh and metallic knuckles and he could slash his problems away. If it was up to him he would run out in the open berserker-style and sever the heads of these robot giants, right before the floodlights and the metal tentacles get him.

“Dude, take it easy. Any second now, any second now...”

And just like I said it, the light turns green, freeing us from the incriminating weed-scented stillness that we sit in; my brother hits the gas with anxious haste, speeding us through the cross-section of Bloomfield and Passaic Avenue as I watch the unmarked Caprice make that right.

“Damn, that was a close one,” I say in relief, “I could feel their eyes burning into the back of my skull. Good thing I used my telepathy to increase their overwhelming desire for donuts.”

“Yeah, they were definitely on to us. Imagine if we got arrested like, two minutes after leaving our house!”

We start cracking up.

“Yeah, that would’ve put a damper on mom and dad’s spirits.”

“I can see our faces on the front of the newspaper like this.” You turn to me and make a funny face of shock and surprise, like someone who just got caught taking a dump in the bushes.

We start laughing even harder.

“Oh shit, that’s good. Where’s the blunt?”

“I put it out.”

“You put it out? Why?”

“There was a cop behind us.”

“You’re getting soft Wolverine.”

My brother growls.

I laugh feeling relaxed as we get closer to the highway. We’re free now, so it’s safe to keep the windows open a crack to let the sweet night air come swirling in. Everything feels good as we fly

through green lights sparkling above the black streets and the night begins to open her blouse and show us what a thing looks like coming. My brother relaxes with the sight of the night's titties and lets his foot lie heavy on the floor.

Once we get to the highway, we'll be shrouded in deep space and rolling at a high speed. That's when we can really start releasing the chief into the night and blow freely out the window. But until then, we're cruising at a smooth altitude through light traffic on Passaic Avenue, past the Caldwell airstrip on our left side with those random warehouse and office buildings on the right. The orange streetlights bathe the night in that nighttime glow, the clock on the dashboard glowing also- time that stays broken and never changes. I feel myself getting lifted; breathing out the good smoke slow and the street looks colorful in the night. It must've rained just before we left the house.

Chapter Two

Fifty Yard Line

Earlier today we were there on the fifty yard line wearing blue graduation gowns and sitting in white fold-out chairs on the freshly cut grass, waiting for our names to be called to walk. The air was humid and the sky a hazy blue as the town gathered just before dinnertime at the high school. Parents, friends, and family members stood from the bleachers with cameras flashing, cheering in a scene reminiscent of the day Noodle freaked out only a month before. I wasn't there but I heard about it. It was during the Powder Puff game, the big closing event of the year, right up there with prom when the juniors go up against the seniors in a friendly football match. Everyone gets customized jerseys made with their nicknames stitched on and the whole town comes to watch them duke it out. The whole high-school was there cheering on the sidelines as the girl captains of each team played quarterback and carried on our school tradition. Everything seemed to be going fine, but then right there, in the middle of the game, Noodle came out of nowhere and ran into the field, right in front of the bleachers where everyone was sitting- moms, dads, kids, friends, priest, and plumber and started screaming, "FUCK YOU- FUCK ALL OF YOU!" throwing up wild middle fingers. Somehow,

he lost his shirt in the process. Maybe 10 seconds of profanity and madness before he got tackled and stomped out in front of the whole town by the police. The town cheered as Noodle was led out in handcuffs, shirtless. It was fucked up. But he was a crazy kid from the start.

It seems like forever, but it was only a few hours ago since we took that walk. We sat there in those white lawn chairs and waited through the boring speeches with mixed emotions for the biggest moment in our lives. I looked around and wondered what everyone around me was thinking. Jamie Corte sat in front of me, and as I stared into the straightened falls of her chestnut brown hair, I started to figure she was wondering to herself whether she had accomplished everything that she wanted to in these past four years of her life. I wondered if everyone was thinking that. What do most kids try to accomplish in these four years of their lives? If television has taught me anything, it's been a quest for sex and good grades. Some try to accomplish both, though, most seem to succeed at one or the other. Judging by her good grades, varsity volley-ball playing status, and girl-next-door style, I ventured to guess that she had let herself be kissed and felt up in terms of first and second bases, by senior year had given head at least a few times, and on prom weekend had given it up to a guy she will think she still loves until she goes to the college of her choice and finds more intellectually and sexually stimulating characters. Good job Jamie! I felt like tapping her on the shoulder and congratulating her on a successful life so far. But I soon lost interest in her hair and started to scan the blurry profiles of faces across the grassy graduation aisle. Over there waving in the wind, I thought I could almost see the top of your big head all the way on the other side.

The principal finally stood up at the stage behind the podium letting our names crackle out into space like thunder and one by one,

student by student, we were all called up to the stage to receive our ticket to freedom. As each name echoed, a roar of applause from family members in the stands rose up across the lawn and the band played *Pomp and Circumstance* over and over in endless fervor. And as I sat there in my white chair half-listening to the names that echoed out into the field, I wondered if when my name was called out if I would hear my name screamed out by the girls and a great shower of applause from my friends. But more importantly, what would I do when my time would come? Would I walk quiet and dignified? Would I dance and put some funk back into this dead ceremony? Or would I take control of the microphone and throw it up one time for the revolution.

You were called up first. Born seven minutes before me, so I guess like birth, you were going to go in and give me a few minutes to prepare before I would hold my breath and go into that terrible light. There was something I had never seen in you that I saw when you took your walk. The way you walked wasn't like a man being presented with an award. It was like a man coming out of prison. It's been a hard four years for us. We never imagined that we would ever see this day in our life. I guess that's what happens when you one day realize all you can do is wait for the future. In waiting, I don't know which one of us waited more. But I hope you had some good daydreams staring out that window.

There was a long pause in between your name and mine and I guess they were trying to throw in the drama, but to good effect. I was standing there in silence, dumb, not knowing whether to sit back down for those three seconds or just keep standing. Keep on standing, I decided. Don't have to sit down for these bastards anymore. Maybe the principal was messing with my head, but it seemed like the pause between your name and mine was extra juicy. Finally, the drama was

stretched as far as it could go like mozzarella sticks and I heard the sound of my name echoing on the field from the speakers and the microphone followed by a roaring applause. Everybody knew who I was.

I had imagined this moment for at least the past month, thinking about how I was going to go out, what kind of bang I would finally pop with at the end. You don't know the things I was contemplating. Not even you would suspect what was racing through the crazy street of my mind. I thought about doing what mom said, to be dignified and to please, please not do anything crazy. Make the family proud. I knew I should've done that. But something just took over me like an out-of-body experience as I walked down the grassy aisle. I saw the platform and all the smiling faces in moments between frames of darkness. There was the warm air on my cheek, the blue stormy sky, and the orange ball glowing behind the clouds in the distance.

Reaching the end of my walk, I slowed down and heard myself breathing like I was underwater. I walked up onto the stage. Every step I took seemed to echo with the sound of my hard-bottoms moving slowly across the wooden planks of the platform. In one hand the principal held my diploma, in his other hand was an open palm waiting to shake mine in congratulations. It was a final reckoning, an offer to let this be a day of peace and remembrance, a day of forgetting the past and looking to the future. Yes, the future- that was what was at stake.

'Congratulations, son,' he said as we met eye to eye and I stood there and stared at him motionless as the wind rustled the fabric of my graduation gown. I could feel the tension thick in that moment, his open palm waiting for mine, a trickle of sweat glistening on his temple, the sound of his heartbeat picking up pace with every passing millisecond that I stared at my own reflection in the lenses of his spectacles. And then I turned, and to my left I could see the podium,

and in its center a live microphone, dripping, vibrating with electricity coursing through its wires at full blast.

I turned my gaze slowly back upon his face, his hand still waiting, desperately seeking to offer me the olive branch and let me go. Let the terror be finished, his hand begged me. Let this be a happy day.

I blinked slowly, as a gangster does when some snitching underling that lost their way begs for a second chance, right before they get popped in the head. I looked at his hand, and then back at his now quivering smile, that smile that said ‘congratulations’, but in his eyes I could see a curtsy of a different tune. Behind those gold wire-rimmed glasses I could see what he was really saying. ‘No hard feelings, right?’

I wanted to tell him that on the other side, perhaps we could’ve been friends, comrades. But in this life, we were pitted against each other on two sides of a revolution, a social war that could not be resolved with detentions or bathroom stall denunciations of the Establishment. We were both equally powerless against our fates. I wanted to tell him these things, but I already knew he would understand.

As I took his open hand of peace and truce, I smiled and said, ‘Yeah, no hard feelings.’ And with that, I pushed him backwards just far enough to catch a spinning roundhouse kick to his face, making him twirl like a top before toppling off the platform. The band fell suddenly silent with the last resounding note of brass, a deflating trumpet followed by an absolute hush falling over the entire field like a shockwave. In two seconds, the principal had fallen onto the ground and lay there with his spectacles smashed crooked against his face in the grass. An old woman with a flower-hat fainted. Then someone shouted out, *Holy Shit! He just roundhouse kicked the principal!*

I seized the moment and grabbed the microphone throwing up a fist for Black Power, telling the class of 2001 that the revolution would not be televised. The revolution is here!

Police began to rush the fields as some graduates started going crazy from the scent of anarchy in the air. What would follow would become a messy battle of Bruce Lee verses everyone else proportions. Roundhouse, roundhouse, roundhouse. Double jump-kick two cops and flip off the stage to make my wild escape.

I played this scene out in my head just before they called my name. I don't know why I imagined my graduation playing out like this. But it was funny to me and I walked down the aisle with a smile, listening to the cheers that surrounded me as I considered the actualities of what would happen if I stepped up there and did it. Maybe it would be so chaotic after the principal fell off the platform that I would be able to escape in the commotion. I would slip past the pigs and jack someone's car- probably one that said "Congratulations Becky!" written all over the windows in blue and white shoe-polish, and peel out of the parking lot yelling 'Happy Graduation Motherfuckers!'. I would start heading towards my new life in Mexico. I imagined you would break a chair over someone's back to ensure my escape and while everyone watched my getaway car speed off in a puff of smoke into the distance, one of my classmates, most likely someone who was merely a casual acquaintance of mine, the type of person who had a deep insightful side of him that nobody really appreciated, a wit that girls did not understand- that person would look at the puff of smoke in the distance while standing in the anarchy of the scene I had created and he would say softly to himself, 'There goes the craziest bastard I've ever known.'

Chapter Three

Return of the Gangster

It's the return of the gangster who can defeat a jump with chopsticks in the dirty Chinese restaurant. Where the hoes at, give me my money. It's the return of the kung-fu hero on a mystic mountain meditating too disciplined to masturbate. Fuck it. It's just you and me riding through this life in a two-door hooptie with tints and rattling speakers, wire hanger antennae and a marijuana-scented interior.

I don't know how long I've been in this car; the slow creeping sensation of getting high that only good weed can give you. That clean high where it just dances up behind you and before you know it, the streets and the night is washed with electric dew and every gas-station or convenience store we pass somehow seems magical and worth exploring.

I look at my brother and he looks like he's good, a smile on his face that's still faintly there though he doesn't know it, and if I tell him, he'll start laughing and telling me how good he feels. The blunt con-

tinues to hang from his teeth, plumes of marijuana smoke billowing from his smile. I feel like he's forgotten about puff, puff, pass and decide to break this high silence.

"You know what I just realized? Usually, today would be like, the first day of summer. But tonight feels like the last summer we're ever going to have. It feels like after tonight, we're never coming back."

"Damn, what the fuck kind of weed is this?" my brother bursts out laughing, "I think I'm hallucinating man,"

"Me too, man. I'm getting all these flashbacks listening to this tape right now. It's awesome!"

"God, I'm so happy! You know, I was afraid that once this day came, it wouldn't be as good as I had hoped, but I was totally wrong. It's better than what I thought it would be. Fuck everything! I'm so happy!"

We start laughing like idiots and looking into the darkness at the approaching highway, I realize that I'm going to miss you my brother. But we're only about happiness tonight. You deserved it. After seeing you the ways that I've seen you sometimes through a window watching you. The night you finally get to see, the celebration that you fantasized about during those lonely nights running suicides up and down our street. This was the night you told me would solidify your freedom. This was the night you always wanted, the night when you could get drunk with the boys on Broad Avenue in the bar we knew so well throughout high-school, to sing in a karaoke room until they kick us out, then drive home piss drunk and we'll smoke a fat blunt rolled with nothing but the piff and the haze and get high as a motherfucker on our porch until there's nothing left. That's how you wanted to go out, and you could finally kiss our little town goodbye pack your bags and

Fly.

My glassy eyes look a little sad looking back at me, two reflections on the same mirror staring out the window. The sky is purple-black and time doesn't so much tick as flashing lights and the night become the negative to pieces of a picture of a moving life.

We say nothing for a few moments and silence surrounds us as I draw impressions slowly, like a gangster should. Before us stretches the whole New Jersey kingdom, and we speed on towards a midnight sun riding low to the ground, and we won't stop until there's no more light on the pot or we get window-shopped by the cops. The blunt begins to burn with a life of it's own and as my brother presses hard on the pedal we fly through space and we're time traveling on the piano scales of the song, when the atmosphere grows thick with music and inspiration creeps into the backseat, an open window releasing flower petals into the night. I inhale deep in my breath and hold it in as the silence between the old song and the next song play out its time. On our way to Broad Avenue to get wasted, sing like drunken karaoke champions, and stand slanted on some corner.

Chapter Four

Fight

She was there in my dream and I should've known it was a dream all along. There I was, walking in the green garden of the governor's mansion, strictly a tuxedo affair with a lively jazz band and women with veils and parasols. It was like I was inside of an Impressionist painting where even the ice-cubes that clinked in pink drinks seemed a shade of semi-reality. And she was there, with her back to me and only recognized by the shape of her body and the long cascade of black silky hair that poured down her back. I walked up to her and took her in my arms without saying anything as if I truly believed in nothing but that moment, and of course at this point, I should've known it was all a dream. I took her in my arms and held her tightly, I kissed her, and I remember the way her lips felt- so wet and soft and melting into mine; I remember how her lips felt without ever having kissed her or any other girl. I remember how her lips felt, because I had never kissed her before. I even grabbed her ass and squeezed tight while I held her there. It was the best dream I ever had.

The room was still sort of dark and light was creeping in from the window. It was Friday. There was about fifteen more minutes before mom would come storming up the stairs to shake us out of bed so I

went back to my dream. I went back as deep as I could go wrapping myself tight with the blanket and hugging on my pillow. A second leg pillow in between my thighs with my dick extra-hard from the combination of Annie and morning wood, and for the moment it was all I had and all I wanted- a pillow and the residual golden flakes of her pretty face, those lips, all those things, drifting down to me while I try to catch them with my tongue where they melt like snow.

The last fifteen minutes, I could feel it, comes sneaking up like a robber and catches me between broken sleep and another cold school morning. It was November. I remember that because of the sound of autumn leaves falling against our bedroom window.

I woke up that morning without opening my eyes. I laid there with my eyes closed meditating in between the dream state and the morning, breathing the crisp air deeply and feeling the sun shining on my face gently as I slowly began to rise from bed. Mom was calling us from the stairs to say she was starting breakfast, a sign in her design to tell us we had another fifteen minutes to come down and eat before she would march up and let loose the fury. Then floating in came the smell of butter and the crackling eggs popping next to the spam flipping on the frying pan. The dream was gone and I was starving.

I got out of bed suddenly with decisive catlike quickness, somersaulted off the sheets with a sharp warrior cry, dropped down to the ground and started doing push-ups. The room by that point was filled with morning light and a blue glow from the shining sky reflected off the plain white walls in our room. Downstairs I could hear mom humming church hymns. I tried to push a growling stomach out of my mind as I continued to push up and drop down, pushing for that limit, do ten more, ten more! During the past week, we had been training together for this day. We practiced kick and punch combos and bench-pressed in the basement. I started eating cans of tuna even

though I hated the smell. I had to be the strongest I could be in seven days. And that morning I felt depressed. The seventh day had come. But win or lose, I wasn't going out like a punk.

“What're you going to do?”

It was about a couple of minutes before the homeroom bell would ring, our usual arrival time. My brother walked with his bag slung over his big shoulder with one strap while I walked beside him carrying nothing but my graffiti covered notebook. The seniors were still in the parking lot hanging out by their cars, smoking cigarettes and bumping their music. In the cafeteria, girls were getting their morning bagels and a couple of teachers were chatting together at a table drinking their morning coffee. The hallways were buzzing with the excitement that could only be felt on a Friday, as if anything that happened today couldn't possibly matter. It was a certain kind of happiness, a care-free air that couldn't be described in one person. It was something that existed in the hallways themselves. But on that note, I was an outsider, a stranger to this happy town. I was some kind of cowboy whistling. And at high noon, I'd be shot dead in the street. *What're you going to do?*

“I'm going to see him at lunch-time,” I replied.

“Wait a second, I thought you were going to see him after-school.”

“Nah, too many people. We're gonna do this thing during lunch when nobody can watch us. Just me and him. That was the arrangement.”

“What about me?”

“What about you?” I said real tough as we paused at our crossroads. Me and my brother had reached the point in the morning where we usually departed without saying a word. He would go to

his A.P classes and I would go to the bathroom stalls to smoke a cigarette.

“You seriously don’t want me to go with you?”

Instead of answering, I snapped some cool mint gum and stared off into the other direction. The homeroom bell rang and I grew increasingly apprehensive. In an instant, everything got pushy and kids began opening and slamming lockers in waves running up and down the halls. Circles began breaking up and people began departing ways until lunchtime. Girls kissed their boyfriends goodbye. The day had begun.

“Do you want me to go with you or not. I’ll skip class if you want.”

“Forget it, what’re we going to tell mom if we both come home fucked up?”

“You’re going to get your ass kicked if you go alone,” his voice strained growing annoyed.

“Just go to class,” I said wearily and ended the conversation there with my headphones on. There was nothing he could do. I was a little hard rock and just as stubborn as he was. My brother looked at me worriedly before nodding in samurai silence, giving me a fraternal smack on the back letting me know that I didn’t have to go to my showdown without him. And with that he turned and walked down the hallway alone.

And then I was back alone. The feeling I felt with that morning’s dream was gone. As I walked down the hallways, I tried to bring her back to me, but she was too far away and I wasn’t in the mood for romance. The hallways were jam-packed and people were pushing to get around me. I tried to bring her back to me as to calm my mood and bring a sense of peace and clarity to my thoughts. But it was hard to do with people shoving around me and laughing and talking shit

to each other while they made with the herd and headed for their homerooms. It was as natural a feeling to be bumped and caught in the morning traffic as it was for a fish to be swimming in circles in an overcrowded aquarium. But that morning, it was really starting to piss me off. I turned my music up louder to escape the noise of the hallways trying to go back to my own world where I could focus on my dreams and also visualize the duel at high noon. I wanted to picture myself victorious, pictured in many different outcomes and finishing moves as to make it seem like something tangible, something that could actually be done. But the more I thought about the fight, and the louder the music was in my headphones, and the more I felt the crowd pushing around me, the more I felt like a leaf floating in a crazy stream. I couldn't even get to my locker. I was stuck at stones at a standstill, just trying to get back into the river's flow to get where I was going, uncontrollable, invisible, at the mercy of everything else around me. Suddenly, I heard a screeching, squealing, terrible noise in my headphones. I took the tape out of my walkman to find the film was unwound and pouring out in long strands like devil's hair. I stood there holding the tape, just looking at it- a broken mess in my hands. I stood there silently as the world passed around me. I just stood there with my head down, completely defeated. I wanted to break that thing into pieces, glue it back together again, play one more song, and then smash that motherfucker again.

I launched back, bringing the walkman all the way above my head into outer-space and then sent it back down with the burning speed of a meteor headed towards Earth. It was like watching the footage of an airplane crash in slow-motion. The walkman split into three main parts, the heavy case separated from the smaller, more delicate parts in a spinning motion, spinning out of control back into the air. The

smaller parts shattering into sharp fragments into the crowd like the shrapnel from a plastic grenade.

Instantly, the space cleared around me. I was the terrorist, the bank robber. I was the person in the middle of the room with the gun firing into the air telling everyone to shut up and get down. The first person who moved would be the first person to get shot. Hey you, in the Abercrombie sweater, don't try to be a hero!

But no demands were made. I simply stood there and stared at the broken pieces so I wouldn't have to face the curious stares burning into my skull, the probing wonders of 'is he going to freak out'? A freak-out this early in the morning? Awesome!

No, my friends. That's all you get. The show is over. Now, I will go into my mime act. Look, I'm trapped in a box. See? See? See how my hands are like, flat against the air. And you know, it looks like, uh, I'm trapped in a box. Tada!

The hallways were almost dead silent for a whole second, absolutely frozen like an audience waiting in a magic show. But then after the crowd realized the danger was over, somebody pressed play and they all continued to move on in their usual parade to homeroom as if nothing had happened. The tape clattered back down the hallway to my feet, kicked back in my direction by someone who had stepped on it and I could still see the unwound film tangled it up in broken pieces.

"What a fucking psycho," some girls muttered as they passed.

"Take it easy Kid," an anonymous passerby said softly.

"Yeah, take it easy," I said silently to myself. When I saw my favorite tape on the ground, lying there with broken wings like a bird who had just gotten hit by a baseball, I was filled with regret. An exasperated sigh escaped my lungs as I picked up the broken tape rewound the film breathing slowly, and then rewrapped my heart in the bubblegum and masking-tape that held it together. Everyone who saw me now

thought I was psycho, but I didn't care. It was already turning out to be a frustrating start to a day that was already bound for terrible destiny. Pretty soon I would start talking to myself saying shit like, *just get through this day and before you know it, you'll be back in bed sleeping and it'll be Saturday and you can forget this ever happened.*

Another sigh escaped me as I popped my locker open and started rustling through the random crumpled papers floating at the bottom pretending to look for something. It was a weird habit of mine. I couldn't go to my locker without looking for something that wasn't there. Sometimes in the morning, I just liked to stare into the back of my empty locker until there was nothing. Until I couldn't feel the kids in the hallway swimming around, until I couldn't even hear the music in my own headphones. My locker was like a vacuum of all substance, an empty black hole that existed stuck in the school's concrete structure. There were no calendar girls to dream of, no calendar to mark the days I looked forward to, just a rusty hinge with some old graffiti left behind from the days before I was even born into this world. I stopped thinking and stopped breathing and everything I was staring at inside my locker became like outer space, untouchable and beautiful in its own distance from mine. And just when I began to feel my mind grow clear like a perfect blue sky, I would hear that voice.

It was the voice of the Shogun of Harlem, Lord of the Forgotten Dojo. Before his spirit entered my consciousness, he used to run Lennox Avenue, terrorize the chicken shack and the movie theater, known all around as the prettiest motherfucker breathing. He would always come to me in these moments, when I just couldn't take it anymore and felt like smashing a chair to bits and turning the wooden legs into nun-chucks. I let the voice of the Shogun speak to me, calm me; let me know that all the bullshit was just bullshit; learn to appreciate the value of bullshit. That's right baby, you are the Shogun. You're

the Shogun of Harlem. You the prettiest, baddest mofo lowdown around this town. Show these motherfuckers the pulpit and take them back to church. Too many nonbelievers up in this sorry-ass square, we need to keep the funk alive.

Then in comes the seventies funk band playing in my head and I put on my black shades and stepped to the business with my hair kinked out. A pimp walk to handle every problem with extra cheese and I'm calling out the names of my enemies to come see me back out on the dance-floor. We can do this with a B-boy battle. Shit, we can do this without a crew. I got the dice in my pocket and the blade in my shoe.

Alright, I'm ready. Time to let the world know this kid would do whatever standing pretty just holding my shine. Take back and get that from all the motherfuckers who try to take mine. I'm the Shogun of Harlem, Lord of the Forgotten Dojo. Showing the world who the prettiest and baddest mofo low-down around this town. Stepping into the neighborhood movie theater to throw popcorn at the movie screen and then challenging the movie to a fight. Now I'm on talk-shows to talk about it. Televisé it. Let the world know I'm back with an autobiography and a new dance single.

Coming up next, we're pleased to have a very interesting character. He's the author of the new book, Shonuff!! The Legend of the Harlem Shogun. Please welcome to the stage, Shonuff!!

The brassy band made up of stoned skeletons from the dope era brings me out with that signature Shogun music, some 1980's synthesized funk. I step onto the stage in full battle dress, black football pads on my shoulders and two decorative katana blades held at the waist by a length of orange extension cord knotted ceremonially and Michael Jackson shin-guards tied up over my sweatpants. My shirt is torn in Frankenstein tattered-fashion at the belly to reveal a plastic six-pack which mismatches my natural skin-tone. I walk into the bright stage

lights and wave to the freaks and weirdos in the studio audience; shake hands with Johnny and take my seat next to his and he goes back behind his desk. The clap machine fades out.

It's an honor to finally meet the real Harlem Shogun. You're here tonight to introduce the world to your new book, a tell-all and an intimate look into the times and trials of the Harlem Shogun.

That's right Johnny. It's been quite a journey.

So why don't you tell us a little bit about your story. I mean, who do you have to kill to become the Shogun of Harlem?

Hahaha (I laugh coarsely as only a true Shogun can), I was always destined to be the Shogun of Harlem, Johnny. I just didn't know it.

Well, it's quite a story. And after reading it, I'm convinced, and I'm sure the people watching at home will agree, you are indeed, the prettiest and baddest mofo low-down around this town.

Sho'nuff! (the audience proclaims in unison.)

In the book, you talk a lot about destiny. So tell us, when did you first realize it was your, uh, destiny to become the Shogun of Harlem?

"Hey, watch it," I heard a girl's voice say annoyed.

I looked up with surprise and backed up bashfully before staring like a deer in the headlights as the fine petite little body turned around and gave me a look. There she was. Another girl of my dreams. Standing there with her hot little stare, making me want to apologize so smoothly before inviting her to lunch in the cafeteria, a private table with me. Was it just my imagination or did her sassy look just soften a touch, as I stare into her eyes... about to read her poetry and shit...

"What're you lost?" a gruff voice says breaking in. I looked up and took off my headphones and thought about saying something, but no words came out. I felt my chest harden like I was being buried in cement, one last moment of pride before the bastards bury the kid in their hate. He looked at me with that look of *you ain't shit*

contempt staring down at me from his chin stubble and toothpick, those stone brown eyes looking down at me from his comparatively massive height.

“That kid’s always lost,” I heard someone else say in disgust behind him. I ignored the side comments and locked my aim. How long did I lock eyes with that fool, who knows? Probably not that long, but a second longer would’ve led to more bullshit. And that’s just how it is in the hallways. You got to understand that before you know where you want to go in life.

“Hey, be nice,” I heard the girl say softly. It didn’t take much more than that to make me crumble. How does a battlefield suddenly spring open with roses and daises, shit... but I broke my fierce two-second gaze feeling so pitifully released by the soft voice that half humiliated me and half made me love her more. Not this time motherfucker, not this time. Burning, I walked off quickly and put my headphones back on even though they were connected to nothing in my pocket, just to show a sign that I couldn’t even see them. They didn’t want to see me.

I was burning. Rekindled was my fury to fight. It could’ve been any of them, I didn’t care. I was ready to take them all on at the same time without saying a word, just a beckoning gesture with a gleam in my eye. Who want it and where? Name the spot, I’ll be there a half-hour early doing push-ups and strange Shaolin stretches you never seen before. Not going to play me like I’m just another fish to release into the water. I felt like they had my girl, and I didn’t even know her name.

Everyday I saw her in the company of ball players leaned up against the walls with jerseys and gold chains up in the senior lounge where the upperclassmen held mad swagger next to bitches with mass appeal. Light-colored eye-shadow blazing chinky eyes with blue contacts

blowing bubblegum looking fine, blowing a lot of things: mind, brain, and frame- beautiful student of life. I wished I could freeze time like Zack Morris and explain myself before her bubblegum popped. Lord knows my scrawny ass wasn't going to convert her back to our side. Listen to you, talking all that but you all up in it. The popular Asian girls had a taste for vanilla and I'm not even talking ice cream. And it was like if you were that Asian dude who was lucky enough to find that Asian girl, shit, you two will be together until graduation- Believe that.

Chapter Five

Real Name Alyssa

Before that day, a lot of the older heads didn't recognize my presence in those hallways and most of them still didn't know my real name. An Oh My God beauty queen's lips in full delicious mode spells my name slowly across the reflection of a compact mirror as she fixes her lip-gloss.

"Kid?" her friend asks hearing the name for the first time.

"You know, Kid," she confirms.

"Who?"

"Kid. That little ghetto Asian kid," she explains.

"Oh my God!"

Yeah I was that kid. That kid they called Kid. Yeah, you know, like Kid from Indiana Jones. Asian kid with the dark blue Yankee on. The white boys thought I looked like him. And I could see chicks looking at me as if they would be seeing me for the last time. It was as much recognition as the kid could get I guess. They knew I was the kid, the Asian kid, that kid they called Kid that was going to fight a senior. People were talking, betting nickels bags of weed and a number six at Wendy's on the outcome of the fight.

I was kind of a nobody in the school before all that happened. I didn't know if that was the kind of attention I wanted, but when I walked down the hallways that week, and even after that, it was like people didn't have to know my name to know me. Truthfully, I was a lot happier when I was just unseen and tolerated, just another underclassman slightly more respected than the next chameleon. Short little skinny something just riding shadows like a skateboard, getting by on two fly rides, quietly but evidently even my shoes got soul. But what can you do when you feel the stares as you walk by? Just walk slower. Walk harder.

“Kid, are you really going to fight him?”

I glanced up from my book and saw Lisa looking at me from across the scarred writing table. She was looking at me teasingly with a hint of concern in her penciled eyebrows. My stomach was growling. Almost lunchtime.

At some point, while smoking my morning cigarette in the bathroom, I decided I would cut all of my classes that day and spend the last un-bruised hours of my life in peace sitting in the library. It was like a holy sanctuary in the morning for me to sit by the river and focus my chi. The early autumn light descended gently on the row of writing tables and bathed their battle-scars in warmth, the bookcases seemed bright and happy with their sleeping volumes resting in shadows, and not a soul was in there except the old librarian, who seemed to be unaware of my presence as I came sneaking in past the reference desk.

I had long been familiar with the library, as every proper Asian kid should be. Me and my brother used to get dropped off every Saturday against our wishes before our mom went to work. We were too young to fight back and were still scared of her wrath, so reluctantly we let ourselves be pushed into the children's section where we would be left for hours until she returned at dinnertime to pick us

up again. I would always head straight for the comic book section. I read and reread every issue for hours studying the words like Bible verses, absorbing every punch, every line, and every sound effect in all of their colored expressions caught in the inked frames. Peter Parker was going through some kind of identity crisis and weaved himself into a cocoon on the ceiling, and while he stayed in there having a nervous breakdown, New York City was being run amuck by all kinds of psycho villains. Batman was finally declared crazy and locked up in Arkham Asylum with all the psychopaths that he had put away. He still had his mask on when they put him in the straitjacket. It seemed like all my superheroes were going crazy. Except Archie. Archie was doing fine. Still struggling to ménage with Betty and Veronica.

Comic-books became my life for awhile. Me and my brother both had our separate obsessions during that time. Mine was comic-books, his was basketball. But mine was a secret obsession, a love affair I stole for, a love affair I could not get away with. While my brother was out there in the winter cold dribbling and practicing free-throws, I was in our room pouring over my secret hoard of comics, turning each colored page as if it was made of the most delicate crystal. I had to hide my comics in secret places spread throughout the darkest recesses of our closet to the most unreachable corners behind the dresser. My mother was a born-again Christian, the craziest kind there is. I didn't even want to think of what would happen if she saw those villains with demonic glowing eyes, dudes in tights with bulging muscles and impossible six-packs, busty heroines flying around in bikinis. What would she think? What would she say? She would say it was the devil! Everything was the fucking devil!

But my obsession with comic-books put me on a path to becoming a super-villain. Before I finally take over the world with evil laughter, the media will note that I used to steal money out of my mom's purse

and ditch Saturday afternoon sessions at Kumon math academy so I could ride the bus over to the comic-book shop on the upper-side of the avenue. Even after my mom came in storming into my room one tragic afternoon, beat my ass and tore up my sacred comics, those sins would die harder than the delicate crystal pages I saw shattered in front of my eyes.

I had been there before, in the library. On the days when class didn't seem to be part of my plans, I would just duck into the library for an hour or two and hang out until I was ready to return back into the noisy hallways and back into the classrooms. I started cutting class more and more when I realized that the whole system was a lie. I was skipping a lot those days. It seemed like everyday in homeroom, I did this dance with the Man. He'd come around to serve me my detention papers on Monday for skipping Friday. And then he would come back Tuesday to serve me with more detention for skipping detention on Monday afternoon. By Wednesday, he'd slap me with some ISS papers. That's In-School-Suspension, that's where they lock you down. Some kids couldn't handle ISS. They'd come out naked and mumbling, covered in their own feces before getting thrown in the cold showers, squinting at the daylight they hadn't seen for what seemed like a month when it was really just a day. But if you didn't mind being quiet for 7 ½ hours it was a holiday. When you had In-School Suspension, they locked you in a little room inside the library and made you do homework. If you did all your homework, then they would tell you to just keep quiet and draw. For me, it was a place to cool out and sit in the dark, a place to hide away from the barking guards and that stinking no-good warden. I'd come out and my friends would ask where I'd been all yesterday. I'd laugh and tell them I was in the hole. Easiest time I ever did.

They say it's funny in prison how sometimes a book can choose you. You don't know why you reach for a specific title from the spine, because from the back, all the books look pretty much the same. But I was standing there one day, cutting class of course, and wandering through the bookcases in the far corner of the school library. I was just sort of wandering through the bookcases enjoying the feeling of being lost among all the dusty books. I just liked looking at the books, touching them and walking around in the shadows of the shelves. The dark and enclosed spaces made it sort of feel like a maze. At some point, I was letting my hands brush across the books like a child does when he walks along a chain-link fence, and as my fingers went on drumming across the rows of spines, a book sticking out fell onto the ground. I knew enough to know that when a book falls, it's really just trying to jump into your hands. The book seemed like it was calling me closer to my destiny, the book made me think about the road and what was out there, the book that made me seem like destiny was closer than I thought. So here it was: the book that began my Education and introduced me to the man behind the Revolution.

I was really moving through the pages when my World History class came in. I knew the class was scheduled for library that day, but it was one of those reading sessions when you start reading a book that seems like it's singing your song, and before you know it, you're only 50 pages in and two hours have passed easily. I was planning to be out of the library before my class showed up, a day free of any academic effort, marked only by the bloody nose that awaited me at lunchtime. But the book got me, and I couldn't put it down.

Our assignment that week had been to research a figure in history, write a brief report and to do a presentation. The main part was the presentation. I figured I would play my usual position, stay out of the actual research, and when my team was done, I would contribute

an awesome poster. But as fate would have it, this project would be a little different from my usual sleepy slacking. On Monday four days earlier, all the kids in our class were put into pairs. It was pure imagination that I might've been but reality had that I was, paired up with Lisa Vanessa. When the teacher called our names together my heart began pounding instantly. It was the type of situation where I just didn't know what to do, and my mind immediately began playing with alternate realities. Without saying, she was the prettiest girl in our class, perhaps, the prettiest girl in our grade. I wouldn't venture to say she was the prettiest in our school because she still had two more years to take that crown. But she was so pretty she was once on a Neutrogena commercial, you know, the ones with water splashing on the girl's face in slow-motion. I felt a sort of nervous happiness, something warm doing a little diddy-bop inside my soul with a little spin at the end. I never figured we would actually be engaged in any sort of conversation just the pattern of my life the way it had it, but here it was a perfect opportunity to talk to her and get to know about all the things that made the eyebrow on her pretty face get a little higher.

It was soon after the names were finished getting called that our class packed up and headed over to the library. In the hallway, my classmates started whispering to me like mice in a dark kitchen to try to get Lisa Vanessa into the closet. I brushed them off like so many tsetse flies to my hippopotamus. They were idiots. True, I had never been in the closet before but I knew enough to know that you don't just take a girl like Lisa Vanessa into the closet. You got to do more than that to win a kiss from a girl like Lisa Vanessa. But I wasn't even thinking that far ahead. That would just be arrogant. I was more like picturing us up in the library sitting close together with our heads almost touching, reading over huge pages with tiny little words. We

could act frustrated and say out loud how boring it was and talk about how much we hated World Cultures. And I would be able to find out and share in all the things that she hated and say funny things about them and she could touch my arm while she laughed. I would hold her hand over ice-cream, touch her leg in the winter, and then we could kiss in the end. I don't know.

I don't know. Because when I glanced across the room to gauge her reaction to us being paired up together, she was working on lacquering her perfect French manicure. I attempted a little eye smiling and was met with a cold look coming from her blue eyes and spent half the class just trying to recover from the breeze.

When we arrived at the library, it was a mad race for most of the kids to get the best computer in the lab. Lisa nonchalantly chose a writing table for us instead and proceeded to then work on smoothing out her nails with the soft side of a file. Quietly like an obedient dog, I sat down across from her and stared blankly out towards the sunny window behind her which gave a mediocre view of the woods behind the school. I couldn't think of anything to say to her, and so I proceeded to stare in silence at a couple of birds fluttering around a bird-feeder.

"So, who should we pick for our project," I said finally deciding to speak.

"What?" she asked. It seemed I had already troubled her enough with my presence, and the effort of responding to my questions was an irritating chore.

"Who should we write the paper on?" I asked more cautiously.

"It's up to you," she replied and then added, "I'm going on the computer."

As I watched her leaving me, I could feel myself sinking deeper into my chair hoping nobody witnessed our lame exchange. I felt like the

kid at prom whose date abandons him to hang out by the punch bowl. I immediately began to bury my sorrows in the project. I got up from the table and headed over to the bookcases where some other kids were pouring over the books so at least I could look less alone and seem productive. But soon, after trying to read over their shoulders and being met with discouraging glances, I retreated back to the far corner bookshelves of the library so I could regroup my position with Lisa.

As I wandered back and forth between the bookcases, the Shogun suddenly struck me with the hard slap of a kung-fu master.

I see what you doing. Yeah, I see you. You trying to be real cordial and nice with that fine little thang. Don't give me that, I seen you looking. Well looka here, boy. You need to stop being nice, and start getting nasty. Show her that dance move we been practicing. Yeah, that's the one. Uh-huh, uh-huh, to the left, to the left, to the right, to the right, now dip, now glide. You got it! Show you right!

Thanks Shogun! I knew he was right, but it made no sense. What dance move? Anyways, why was I trying to be so nice to her? Pretty girls don't want that. I had to impress her somehow. Damn it. I wanted to just stop caring so much, because who am I, that I should be trying so hard to win her attention. But then again, just looking at her made my heart ache. No, be strong. Ok, we'll compromise. We'll be ourselves. You be Frank and she'll be Susie. Do the project, and if you happen to impress her and make her fall in love with you, then so be it. But we're not going to do all this, being sweet and super-nice guy act. We know and she knows it's just weakness, for soft skin and perfect shampoo-commercial hair. Alright Frank, do what you do and be Frank.

I was all charged up when I came back to the table ready to show this girl how indifferent I could be to her beautiful bitch. But no sooner

did I approach our table and see her in plain view then did my sudden rush of bravado begin to deflate. Rocky, one of the football players in our class was sitting in my seat. As I approached our table with an armload of books, I suddenly felt so weird and useless.

“What’s up Kid?” he said congenially and pulled out the seat next to him.

“What’s up,” I replied and carefully placed the huge stack of volumes on the table.

“Whoa! You gonna read all these?”

“Nah. Just breeze through them, find some good pictures I guess. Who’s in your group?”

“I don’t know, Melissa and Steve,” he replied. Rocky was that kind of kid. He would always begin a thought with I don’t know, and then tell you the answer. It just so happened that he and Lisa Vanessa were part of a club. It was the good looking club where members never did any school work because they were so goddamned good looking and other kids would do it for them. How I longed to be in that club.

“So what’re you doing?” Lisa teased him.

“Me? I’m the leader. Leader gets to take it easy, ya know?” he sat back smiling. “What about you, you’re just doing your nails.”

“No Rocky,” she said playfully, “Kid was getting our books. Right Kid?” and then she looked at me as if we were sharing a secret. My heart froze and I couldn’t speak.

“Kid, is it true you’re fightin’ Bassanio?” Rocky asked suddenly.

“Yeah, you heard about that?”

“You’re fighting who?” Lisa asked with her eyes growing wide.

“Kid’s fightin’ Bassanio. Kid, are you for real? You’re going to get murdered.”

“Maybe,” I said quietly, “but some of us choose to die standing up.”

“I don’t know Kid. I don’t know. You’re one crazy kid.”

On the day of our presentation a week later, I attempted to bring the Revolution to our World Cultures class. My quiet attempts at insurgency up until that point, though appreciated by the knuckleheads, were unmet with the results I was searching for. It wasn’t until a week after the fight, the day of our presentation, that I finally brought the Establishment down a few notches. Ms. Canton was so overwhelmed by the strength of guerilla posters and street knowledge that she tripped and fell backwards into her desk. It was on that day that the class finally went crazy. After that, we lost all respect for her. World History was like *Lord of the Flies* everyday, which we had to read for English and were perhaps unconsciously inspired by. Paper wars would be waged and homework had completely ceased to come in. Even the nerdy kids found themselves making excuses as to why they didn’t do it. Ms. Canton became exasperated and would at some points, completely abandon her lecture and have us constantly working together on group projects just so she didn’t have to raise her voice anymore. She became an empty shell of a teacher and would find any excuse to bring us to the library just so we would shut up.

At some points I looked at the meltdown our classroom had become and felt a little bad about it, but I stood firm in my rationalization that I was boycotting history for its ridiculously brief dedication to Asia and Africa which focused, for the most part, on wood-carving and the art of jar-making. *See kids? See how much you can learn from this broken jar?*

“I don’t know.”

“Come on Kid, are you really going to fight him?”

I still remember the way she was looking at me, like I had never seen a girl look at me before. Since that moment Rocky asked me if I was really going to fight Bassanio, Lisa couldn’t let it go. We sat close with

our heads almost touching and I felt my spirit waving its head back and forth like it was Ray Charles playing the piano. She touched my arm on Friday, and I got to look down her shirt a couple times.

“Kid, are you really going to fight him?”

I looked at Lisa Vanessa and smiled.

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll tell my brother to do something,” said Lisa taking one of my hands into hers all melodramatic.

“Don’t worry about it.” I said.

Lisa and I used to make fortune-tellers out of notebook paper and made up stupid futures like ‘you will eat a monkey’s butt and die’. Our futures always resulted in death. Why that shit was funny I can’t remember. You know that feeling when something is so stupid but somebody makes it funny for you. Life is funny like that.

Lisa did her nails and I drew on the desk.

“Blow,” she said as she held out her hand. I blew on her French manicure lightly until she said harder, harder!

Chapter Six

Cold Words, Jim

The fight. Yeah. I said some shit about his sister... and his girlfriend. Nothing bad. If he thought about it, he would've found that I was actually *complimenting* his girlfriend. But when you talk about somebody else's girl like that, you should always expect those kinds of repercussions. But I wasn't thinking straight. I was in one of my moments, damn near standing up on the table, saying some wild shit. A week later, in the sports section, an article appeared announcing our fight to the school.

I guess a part of me deep inside just wanted to make people laugh. For all the hardness and scowls I've learned to wear like a zip-up hoody, a part of me just wanted to make people smile. But I assumed when I was face to chest with this dude that my jokes were worth biting and word had gotten out to bite me. He caught me in the empty hallways while I was walking holding a T-square for a bathroom pass. I instinctively paused, not moving until I was sure he had seen me, before he took those Tyrannosaurus stomps over to me. I actually tried to walk past him acting like he wasn't looking for my ass.

“Yo Kid. I heard you were talking shit about me.”

“Where’d you hear that from?” I said trying to size up his seriousness. He was very serious. I could smell a turkey sandwich on his breath, he was standing so close. He was a carnivore to the core, probably didn’t even bother with tomatoes or lettuce, the bastard.

“Who gives a fuck, I heard it. Now, you wanna fight me, is that it?”

“I don’t want to fight you, but I will.” I heard myself say.

“So you wanna fight me then.” His eyes were soft, with no trace of anger, and perhaps some admiration for the size of my balls. But I had no doubt that he would proceed to fuck me up on principle if nothing else.

“I’ll fight you.”

“Friday. At the Gate.”

I considered ending it right there with the T-square, but then I thought better of it. It would probably just make him stronger somehow. Instead I watched him walk away as if nothing had happened. Then I turned and continued on my own path.

Aw naw! This sucka think he bad! This sucka think he nasty! This sucka think he got the moves to dance with the Shogun? This sucka must be crazy! Hey boy. I said hey boy. You need to go home and iron your shirt, because that’s what they gone bury you in!

I played out different scenarios in my head while I stood at the urinal. I could see myself walking past the La Familia lunch tables. One of them says something smart. I say something fly like... I don’t know, (insert one liner here) and I’d flip onto the tabletop dumping my lunch on one of them before using my tray as a weapon Jackie Chan style. A chair breaks over my back and its nothing. I turn around and they back up against the wall like *Oh No you made him mad!* My eyes look psychotically worried as I tremble with fury like

Bruce Lee. Without warning, I sidekick the first chump through a brick wall. After that, they all rush in. Roundhouse, roundhouse, roundhouse. Every swing I take makes a *whoosh* sound like my arm was an old wooden baseball bat. The last one gets flipped over my back onto the ground and I stomp on him without looking, twisting my foot at the end making a sickening cracking noise indicating maximum bone destruction. As they lie there moaning and holding their legs, or otherwise unconscious among the trays and spilled food on the floor, I light up a cigarette and say something flashy to finish them off lyrically. Of course, I walk out with all their girls filling the back seat of a drop-top and I jump in and drive on three wheels out the parking lot. How you like me now, I muttered flushing the toilet.

In class, I could hear the announcers:

Well Jim, whattaya think of Friday's fight?

Well Dick, I gotta honestly say, Kid might have a chance.

The kid might have a chance?!

Bassanio is sure to be hesitant coming out, knowing that he outweighs his opponent by at least 75 pounds-

And he has an extensive record at that-

Yes, his numbers are impressive. Kid could use Bassanio's hesitance to his advantage, and pull out a butterfly knife to an unsuspecting Bassanio.

Are you suggesting that Kid shank Bassanio?

No, not at all. I'm merely suggesting an element of surprise.

But what about his legendary chi?

What about it?

Ouch. Cold words Jim, cold words.

Chapter Seven

K-Town

Me and my brother sat on the porch on Thursday night after a training session. We stared into the street breathing heavy through the mouth, trying to catch a slow down through the nose. The evening was falling fast and the smell of orange snails and fresh fallen rain filled the blue light falling from the sky. That week, I started to join my brother in his daily workouts, bench-pressing in our basement and working on punch-kick combos in the backyard. We watched enough kung-fu movies to feel like we knew what we were doing. We were really into martial arts for awhile. We had purple belts in fifth grade and every Halloween for at least five years straight we were ninjas. We used to talk about forest training and meditating under ice-cold waterfalls. We watched all the Fists: Fist of Legend, Fist of Fury, Fist of the North Star. Who remembers The Last Dragon? Bruce Leroy son, Bruce Leroy. *Sho'nuff!*

“Is he bringing any of his people with him?”

“I don't know man. I don't even know how serious it is, you know? But now it's been blown up by everyone at school, so we kind of have to.”

“What are you saying? That you’re going to fight him just because everyone at school expects you guys to fight?”

“Pretty much.”

“That’s the dumbest shit I ever heard.”

“Hey, I’m fighting him because I have to, ok? And besides, this is the fight you should’ve fought last year, but you let it slide. So now I’m fighting for both of us.”

“Alright, that’s what I’m talking about! Let’s kick these guys’ asses and shut them up.”

“Nah man. You can’t fight with me.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll get us both embarrassed. Just leave it up to me. I’ll take care of it.”

“You go in alone and you’re going to get killed. Just fucking squash it then and let it be.”

I cracked my knuckles and yawned.

“What’s done is done. I think I can win if I just use the chi.”

“Forget the chi. You’re done son”

“Whatever. I’ll stab his ass.”

My brother took his cleats off and wiggled his toes through a holey sock. He did everything in his cleats. He used to be convinced wearing his cleats in and around the house would help him make first-string on the football team, just like in the winter when his fingers stay smudged and grimy from never letting go of a basketball to touch the rim, break the sky, and make it rain. After one year of football, he quit the team. Still wore those cleats when he worked out. Guess he got used to the feel.

“Hey do you ever think about moving?”

“Yo, your feet stink.”

“Let’s move,” he said not hearing me, “let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Sometimes, you have to fight. And it’s true the way it works you see, when we were ten, little Jimmy and little Frankie Capilano called me and my brother chinks as we passed their house walking to Cliff’s. They demonstrated what we looked like to them by using their pointer fingers to make their eyes into slants. We knew that melody all too well- *ching chang chong*. The sound of those chinky-ass bells make my blood boil to this day. My brother wanted to fight them but I was too scared of their big brother Joey. But those things never really seem to stop echoing in your mind, so when we turned thirteen, I punched Frankie in the gut on a moving school bus while my brother held him in a half-nelson from the bus seat behind.

As I sat there and contemplated his words, I remembered the year before watching my brother kick in the front door one time after football practice, splintering it down the middle with his cleats still on. Even after my father beat his ass, he still ran his nightly suicides up and down our street.

The grass is the only friend he had. I was never part of anything so I’ll never know exactly what it felt like to feel alone on a team. And I’ll never know what it’s like to be called out into the middle of a circle of death holding a pig-skin, shuffling your feet in nervous spasms waiting for that first unseen hit to come. I’ll never know what it’s like to be hit relentlessly from the back and from the side, trying to spin just in time to catch it, only to get the wind knocked out of me, catching an extra jab in the back of the helmet to keep my face in the grass, trying to catch my breath. All I know is that I would take it extra personal. And I would be like my brother, lying in the backyard at night staring up at the stars thinking about how about

how some dudes turned me into a punk. And I wouldn't be able to sleep about it.

My brother wanted to move away ever since the end of his freshman football season. In the showers, it got worse. I bet he wondered if he should've just been easy, if he should've had a few laughs with the boys, let them rib him a little bit and let it roll off his shoulders like cold locker room shower water, drown out the jokes and just listen to the metallic water beat onto the rusty green tiles and the gurgling of the small gray drain. I bet you wished you could crawl inside that drain. Or become a Dragonball-Z cartoon and summon a fireball to leave a smoking crater where there was once a football locker-room; wishing they would hate you and attack you and give you a reason. *Open your eyes and maybe you'll catch a pass this year. You see how he's looking at me? You see this fucking guy? Jesus Christ ... Ay, take it easy, we're just bustin your balls. Ay, what's this kid's problem anyway?*

Sometimes it must've felt like he was just fighting for a place to stand let alone walk the way he wanted to walk if he felt like walking.

Gentle giant. It was his towering size over mine that made us an odd couple, a natural wonder. How the hell did you get so big, they wondered. We had the world wondering, how the hell you could be so big and me so small. Must've stole all the milk was the old joke. But it wasn't just our size differences that were funny. My man Tek once told me I would end up in prison, and my brother would be the pastor to come see me. He had the size to be a monster on the basketball court but his heart was just too big to throw blows when the punks crept with the fouls. He would just get mad and go even harder on the driveway with the ball while I sat on the trunk of a car talking trash for him. I did enough talking for the both of us. Had to act crazy and talk a lot back then. Trying to be tough, cause you know, it ain't all peaches and waffles. Sometimes you got to fight or run. Sometimes,

you get into a fight with the whole world. I think everybody's got to fight something or somebody. You'll never know what you are if you don't.

I watched the pink almond and yellow leaves float down along the street. The grass on our lawn a cold shade of green. Smell of apple pie in the air. One of those days where the sun is so warm on your neck and the wind leaves you cold anyway.

"I'm down."

"You down?"

"Yeah, I'm down."

Mom came out onto the porch with a tray of sliced apples and Polly-Yo string cheese telling us dinner would be ready soon. I could smell the bubbling fish soup and kimchee jjigae wafting from the kitchen behind her as the screen door shut again. We dug in and stuffed our faces with the snack and watched as the next-door neighbor's little kids played basketball in the street, the sun glowing sublime like the last embers in a fire. The autumn owl hooted its lonely call echoing across the New Jersey suburbs.

"We gotta beat that kid," my brother said in a low voice.

"Bassanio? Let's go do a drive-by on his house."

"What're we gonna do, pull back into our driveway afterwards?"

"Hey man, I was just trying to make you feel better."

"Thanks."

"You think they did that shit to David Lee?"

"No way man! No fucking way! He was their lead receiver man."

"So you think they did it to you because you're no good?"

"I don't know why they did it. And I'm not that bad!"

"Ok, ok. So you quit, it's over."

“I didn’t want to quit. I like football.”

“I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“Let’s just move so I can play somewhere else.”

“Ok.”

“Don’t you hate it here man? How come you’re not with me on this?”

“I’m with you. I’m with you. I don’t know. School’s not that bad for me. I just don’t give a fuck and fly through my day and then I’m here eating my after-school snack and watching my cartoons. So fuck it.”

“Nah man. Fuck that. Because you’re not out there trying to do something is why they don’t d shit to you. But when you make moves and you try to be something- they fuck you up man, they fuck you up. I don’t want to live somewhere where I got to be different all the time. I want to just be me!”

“You are you! You are you.”

“Are you you? Are you really you?”

“I don’t even know who I am.”

We both chewed thoughtfully for a moment.

“Have you talked to any of these fobs yet?”

“No. Do you?”

“Yeah, all the time. They’re not that bad.”

“Whose they?”

“Seung-gee, Minnie...”

“Yeah, you’re talking to the girls cause you want some ass!”

“Nah. Come on,” my brother said chuckling, “hey, I talk to Ping.”

“Ping?”

“Yeah, he’s the other dude in the Christian Club. You should come by. Ping’s my wingman. Me and Ping just mack it! Mad Asian bitches in the Christian Club”

We cracked ourselves up.

“For real though, some of these girls never go out. All they do is study! Except Bella, she goes to the city a lot. Yo, this girl was telling me like, she drinks herself to sleep every night.”

“What grade is she in?”

“She’s a senior.”

“Damn, we should hang out with her.”

“Yeah, I’m going to the city with her this Friday. You can come if you want.”

He bit into the last slice of apple.

Chapter Eight

Dimes

It was lunchtime. The time was closing in and I was to see my fate like a fish on the yard's soil. I walked down to the art wing and made my way past the thugs staring me down and slipped into the bathroom. The bathroom was stale and the white tiles yellowed from the heavy smoking that went on in there. There were naked sluts strewn about on the floors courtesy of some kid who wished to share in his porno treasure before they would be swept up and confiscated by the janitor. He probably kept them all in a rusty metal drawer and ogled the kinky pictures inside the custodial office.

The stalls and even the mirrors were covered in graffiti. I stood in the bathroom stall drawing in slow inhalations of fiber-glass and menthol from the Newport dangling in my mouth. I fantasized about meeting him out there and flipping open the butterfly all flashy like in the movies and shit. But as I stood there in the bathroom stall, I realized I couldn't draw my blade. I didn't even want to throw the first punch. I was afraid of living out those recurring dreams, the kind where I'm standing there and I have to fight, but all of my throws feel like I'm underwater.

I shook my head trying to shake those thoughts. Samurais were never afraid to die. I began meditating in a spiritual energy that lingered like shampoo. I was one with the elements, breathing in the stale smoky piss air, bringing myself mentally to a place of peace, a place of morning with soap-scented vapors, heightening my killer-instinct awareness. I stood in a horse-riding stance in front of the toilet and continued waving my arms in great big circles, visualizing myself moving the air around me like strokes of water, waves of neon blue and purple and green electricity, gathering the chi and drawing it into my center. I pushed out and formed my hands into a triangle and exhaled slowly.

I stopped for a moment as I heard someone else break the solitude of the bathroom shrine and I stood like a stone statue in my broken meditation, trying to act like it hadn't disturbed my concentration at all. I listened for him to leave, but whoever he was had lit up a cigarette. I took a few more breaths, trying to salvage whatever chi I was able to gather and stored it deep in the center of my being. I would need to summon the fireball, and I hoped the dragon would be there when I called.

I took another drag of my cigarette and let the ashes flutter carelessly onto the tile as I withdrew a black permanent marker from my pocket and I began making my mark next to other kids' fake gay phone-sex numbers, tasteless drawings of cocks and naked ladies. I thought maybe if I died, they would have something to remember me by- this cool little thing to look at while you sit on the can and think deeply about life. I had the black marker in my hand and like a phantom in the booth I stayed there mixing up the vapors getting light-headed off the fumes and the smoke, this scripted pseudonym on the wall. And that's why we write our names on the wall, because when we're gone, no one will know we existed.

The cigarette hushed in the water as the toilet flushed and smoke lingered in silky spider webs around the bathroom as I opened the stall door. Sitting directly across on top of the sinks was Dimes, a senior who was smoking a cigarette of his own. I met his eyes and blinked. When I was a freshman, I used to admire his style. But I never spoke to him until then. He flipped grams and kept his head shaved, wore an R.I.P B.I.G T-shirt and Timberland boots kicking around the hallways with untied laces, him and his gang of slouched tough guys moving in their blacked-out demeanor. I respected that shit. I wanted to be like him. Nobody fucked with him.

“Yo, you’re that kid, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“I heard you and Bassanio bout to get into it.”

“Yeah, it’s true. A couple minutes from now actually.”

“Damn, that’s some shit son. Bassanio’s a strong dude. He’s a bad dude, yo.”

“Yeah I know. I’ll be alright.”

“You got heart kid. You Korean?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Yeah. You speak it?”

“A little bit. I understand more than I speak.”

“I like the food. Korean food is off the hook son.”

“Yeah.”

“Even if you get fucked up kid, you stood for something. That’s the true shit.”

That was some true shit. It had me thinking sometimes.

Chapter Nine

Church Music

On Sunday morning we met in the same spot before service, the spot across the parking-lot with my brother dribbling his basketball over the blacktop, towards the woods under the autumn shade, through a short wooded path and into a quiet street where an elementary school sat, and there behind a brick corner covered in red and green ivy was a bunch of us dressed to kill and pray, smoking cigarettes like tough guys posted up next to some empty kindergarten classroom cursing.

“Yo, what happened after I signed-off last night?” my brother asked, pushing Ripper lightly on the shoulder.

Henry and Slim began to laugh with the very mention of it. Ripper exhaled heavy-hearted in his usual moping way and spit, letting the glob of drool hang and blow slightly with the wind. We watched with anticipation, slightly grossed out as he waited for it to splat before answering. It obviously went badly and he was readying an account that would make him feel less stupid.

“I finally asked her last night,” he began, “I said fuck it, it’s now or never.”

Ripper was engaged in a series of instant-messaging flirtations with a girl that was in his math class. He would express adoration for his crush in the subtlest of ways, using red to express his passion, in size fourteen Chicago font to seem casual, for internet conversations with a girl he was too shy to sit next to in class, who made him lose sleep analyzing what had been said, what she might say.

“So? What happened?”

This went on for weeks from September to November when he finally found the courage to IM her. The autumn leaves were starting to set fire to the romantic sways of a girl’s heart and caused the world to sigh every now and then. The homecoming dance was coming up, and in Ripper’s case, timing was everything.

In classic Ripper-style, he spent nights pacing back and forth in the bluish glow of his computer, pausing in front of the mirror and lifting up his shirt sucking in his stomach, trying to hype himself by grabbing the jelly-rolls and repeating to himself, ‘*I can lose this, I can lose this*’, like some kind of chubby-boy mantra.

Somehow Henry got involved as a middleman to casually talk up Ripper, to sort of use his reputation to become Ripper’s representative, a strategy which backfired and only resulted in the girl asking Ripper questions about Henry.

“Bros before hoes”, Henry said to his reflection solemnly probably, swearing in front of the bathroom mirror before returning to a computer screen and a desk chair with a little swivel, gracefully stepping out of the way by telling the poor girl to “lose some weight”, sending her crying for days under the comforting wing of a conveniently, and perhaps strategically shoulder-ready Chewy.

“And now she’s going to the dance with Chewy.”

“Wait, what?”

“She’s going out with Chewy,” Ripper replied, and a sad bubbling noise rose from his throat.

It was dead silent for a moment... and then we all started cracking up in his face. We pointed right in his face while he wiped some spray off his nose and mouth as my brother began doing that thing where he buckles over and shakes without making any noise.

“*Goddamn*, I haven’t laughed that hard in a minute. Thanks Ripper,” I said as we collected ourselves.

“That’s rough man,” Slim said, his voice sputtering from one last burst of laughter.

“Where is this guy?” my brother asked, looking around as if expecting to see Chewy hiding behind a tree, “when did this happen? How?”

“Perhaps we all underestimated the power of Chewy,” I suggested quietly.

We all took drags from our cigarettes and thought about it...

“No”, Henry decided, “Chewy just goes after vulnerable girls. He has no game.”

“Hey man, why you always hating on Chewy?” Slim started in.

“Yeah, why you always talking trash about Chewy?” my brother said, cornering Henry and poking his chest jokingly.

We knew damn well why Henry was always bashing Chewy. I mean, we all liked him because he was a nice kid and everything, but sometimes he overdid it. One time he came to church with bright white pants and a tight baby blue short-sleeve shirt, and we were all just like, *aw Chewy, what are you doing?*

See? It’s funny. But Henry would forever bust on Chewy, ever since they were little. Who do you think gave him that nickname? And everyone must’ve thought it was funny because everywhere

Chewbaca went, the nickname stuck. Kids at church called him Chewy. His Bible Study teachers knew him as Chewy. Kids at school called him Chewy. I bet his mom even called him Chewy at least once. Henry's nicknames just had a way of sticking. He really was a genius at nicknames. If there was any kind of oddity in your personality, if you resembled any kind of animal, if you reminded him of some kind of TV character he had seen, it would only be a matter of time before he would be giving you a nickname and we'll probably laugh about it for the rest of our lives.

"I don't give a fuck about him," Henry said riled up. "D-u-ur, d-uur, I'm Chewy, d-urrr."

"You know that's pretty good. He does do that."

We all laughed as we took final drags from our cigarettes and flicked them into the street taking our sweet time getting over to service.

"If you want a real girl, you got to do real things," I said.

"Yeah, he's right man," my brother agreed in all seriousness.

"Whatever, I don't see you guys with dates." Ripper returned.

"Monkey, what's up with Christine? Are you guys going?" Christine was a girl from Paramus that my brother was considering taking to the dance. Not that he had anything real special for her, but he didn't want to go to the dance at our school.

"I don't know," my brother said exhaling slowly.

"Yo you gotta go! It'll be mad fun if you go," Ripper insisted.

"I didn't say I didn't want to go. But I think we're just friends."

"Forget that friends stuff man," Henry grunted.

"What?! That's the perfect angle!" Slim cried.

"What about you Henry? When are you going to fly Soo-jeung up from Atlanta?"

Henry stopped picking his nose for a second and breathed in dramatically. We could feel it coming- he was going to start dancing in the

rain with his white-shirt open. Soo-jeung was a girl he had met that past summer at a retreat. He felt her up, according to his ever-changing account of that magical night, and they ‘kept in touch’ chatting online. The remark was completely sarcastic, but Henry decided to overlook this to once again reveal the truths of his aching soul.

“Yo, I might never see her again...but some moments last forever...I still remember us sitting there on that dock--”

“Dude, you’re so gay.”

“When you guys understand a true moment...”

“Yo, that bitch had herpes on her lip.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Henry said laughing, “You guys are too immature understand love.”

“*What?*” our voices cracking, “you don’t know shit about love!”

And with that we slap-box.

“*Soo-jeung!*”

The windows and glass doors of our church seemed to sparkle in the morning sky. We could see the waving reflection of the rustling autumn trees behind us and the air was crisp and filled with the kinds of possibilities that only exist when you’re deep inside of a weekly infatuation. Every week I would wait to see her. It was damn near sacrilegious. But this was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen in my life. When she came to our church that summer, and every Sunday thereafter, I was never able to speak at church again. I smiled and closed my eyes and breathed in deep trying to make my eyes come alive, knowing that I might see her that day.

When we went inside, we saw Jane and her bubble-tea gang hanging out at the bottom of the stairs. They looked like church moms in the making, standing in a circle awing and cooing a shy little boy in the middle of them.

“Hey, what’re you doing to my brother?” Slim demanded jokingly.

The girls broke apart revealing Slim’s little brother Mickey, standing with remnants of kisses on his cheek and holding a lollipop looking confused. He never talked. If he wanted something, he tugged on your sleeve.

“Hiyee!” sang cheery Jane.

“Hiyee!” The rest of them said, waving and smiling in their Hello Kitty ways.

“Your baby brother is so cute!” half the girls sang.

“I know!” the other half sang agreeing.

“Yeah Slim, what happened to you?” Henry said, slapping Slim on the back.

“Ha ha. Look, take your hands off my brother”, said Slim sarcastically as he

unhooked all female claws from his baby brother’s baby fat body, “he’s too young for you Jane. Sorry.”

“I just want to take him home with me.” Jane cooed.

“I bet you do.” Ripper muttered under his breath, sick of the baby talk, probably

feeling bitter off the attention little Mickey could get from girls saying nothing while he couldn’t seem to get any saying everything.

“Oooh! I got new sticky-pics! Wanna see?” Jane burst suddenly.

“Sure,” we shrugged.

The guys gathered around Jane and her bubble-tea gang as they took out their Sanrio planners and began showing off their latest sticky-pics that had them super-imposed on different backgrounds like a sunset beach or one that said “Friends Forever” above their cheesing faces. I knelt down and wiped the lip-gloss off Mickey’s cheek as he smiled and tried to shy away from me.

“Give me five. Come on.”

He turned his feet inwards and hugged himself with a shy smile on his face before giving in and slapping my hand. I tried to get him to do it again so I could pull back with speed, leaving him with nothing but air saying too slow. But he kept getting me. The little bugger was quick.

“Get out of here, go find mom.” I heard Slim command from over my shoulder.

“Wait, let me hug him one more time,” Jane said kneeling with her arms open. But Mickey obediently took off at the sound of his older brother’s order and left Jane pouting. I watched as he ran around the corner in search of another adventure and was brought back seconds later, being dragged by his mother’s hand into the kiddy service. As she opened the doors of the elementary sanctuary, the easy piano and sing-song chorus of the kids filled the air, and then muffled again as the doors closed. We laughed at the sight of Mickey being captured and dragged to his doom. He was a cute fucking kid.

The music of the kiddy chorus filled the air and while Jane carried on about her latest blueberry candy obsessions, I found myself going back in time to a construction paper Eden, a place under a magic marker rainbow where doves fly above and lions with manes of yarn and crayon colored bears and giraffes live in complete harmony amongst the trees that glow in a time when it was easy to be loved, and to love, and to not be hurt by love. When I was little I used to sing. Before I started to care what I sounded like. For now I just listen. To the sound of church music. To the sound of my own heartbeat. The sound of rain. Water drops. Daydreams. She reminds me of all those things and I felt no sin when she came in. She was so beautiful every Sunday. It was more than lust, a crush, or infatuation. If there was any sin in the beauty of that, then I was the artist. Remembering the way she looked when she would walk through those glass doors.

And I might as well have just been standing there, holding a bouquet of roses while a couple of hummingbirds hovered around me, sipping on nectar with the anticipation of my heart keeping their wings in flight. The way she was coming through those doors was like she was coming out of a pool of pure morning light with the luminescent drops falling from her body in slow motion, her lips parting slightly and her silhouette finding color as she walked through the glass doors holding her baby sister's hand. Finding my eyes for a moment, she smiled, and I almost collapsed...

"You like Annie?" Jane teased.

"What?" I said, coming back to everyone smiling and looking at me in anticipation.

It was one of those moments where you awaken and wonder how long you've been gone. I looked around and she was gone, departing from me on long-legged grace stepping to inspire my dreams. Waking up soaking wet.

"You like Annie. I can hook you up if you want. I talk to her online." Amy offered.

"No, I'm ok."

"Don't be shy. Go talk to her." Jane urged.

"I don't know what you see in her, I don't think she's all that." Henry snorted.

"She's gorgeous!" sang the girls.

"Anyways, let's go to service already, huh?" my brother said saving from my bashfulness.

"Don't worry. You'll get her." Jane said, and with that, she stuck a sticky-pic on my cheek.

We all walked up the stairs together into the mezzanine where organ music began to play with pushier insistence and the adults began funneling into the glass doors of the main sanctuary looking for good

seats. Jane and her friends left us, running up to some of their other girlfriends, hugging sugar high style. Some of the older sisters stood with their own cat-woman stances talking shit in a way where from a distance it only looks like pretty girls discussing fashion and not pretty girls discussing fashion. The eyebrows got raised a little high on some of their pretty faces, no doubt irritated by the bubble-gum popping of Jane and her hyper gang of mall-rats. Jane and her girls, feeling the cold stares upon them from the older sisters, began to quiet down and went inside the sanctuary to take their seats where they could giggle and gossip beyond earshot of the older girls.

It was funny to see Jane and her friends ever act uncomfortable. It wasn't their style. But when it came to being around their *unnies*, they had to act right, just like we had to stop talking stupid when we were around the *hyungs*. I looked up to them, the seniors popping and locking with the fly girls always by their sides. I was always carefully watching from a distance, trying to copy their fashions and just listening from a few conversations away to see what they were about, what they were into. Mostly, my brother and I got it from Henry, Slim, and Ripper who could walk up to them and say what's up cause they were from the same neighborhoods where you could be American, but you were always Korean first.

I went to a youth group full of Koreans that couldn't speak Korean. Where kids came to service with beepers, baggy jeans and dress-shirts; girls walked with an open-toe shoe game singing with miniature Bibles in a Coach bag. The youth group was like high-school with the different cliques and all, and though some of the stuck-up girls wouldn't give you the time of day, or you made fun of some of the kids there because they were queer, there was always a familial closeness with everyone in the church right there if you wanted it.

We are Korean. We believe in God.

We sat in the back, slouched in the pew, talking shit and scooping on the pretty girl praying a couple rows in front of us, church just another place to hang out and practice the newest dances in tough denim and popped collars. And me, my eyes wander also. Mostly I was looking to see where Annie was sitting. She sat next to people, not with them. She was always sitting alone in church.

“Yo, remember when you washed your face with my cum towel?”

Henry was always bringing up old incidents like that, in church of all places.

“Yeah it was nice of you to tell me afterwards. You know masturbation is a sin.”

“No its not! J.O is God’s gift to the single-man,” replied Henry, joking in a manner unfit for Sunday morning. We all laughed way too loudly and several heads turned around to see what was so funny. With that the sanctuary lights shut off completely and only stray rays of sunlight filtered in through the tall windows. Our praise leader, Peter, began strumming the opening chords.

“How’s everyone doing on this beautiful Sunday? God is good, Amen?”

“Amen!”

The crowd wasn’t ready.

“All the time?” Peter asked louder.

“God is good!”

The pews shouted back. But it was still only half of the sanctuary. Peter stopped the music.

“Whoa, whoa. One more time... GOD IS GOOD?” His voice boomed.

“ALL THE TIME!” We all shouted.

“ALL THE TIME?”

“GOD IS GOOD!”

Amen. And they began to sing.

In the secret, in the quiet place

In the stillness, you are there

In the secret, in the quiet hour I wait

Only for You

Because I want to know you more

I want to know You

I want to see Your face

I want to know you more

I sat in the pew and prayed with my eyes open, too cool to close them. Every prayer to God is kind of like writing a letter. But sometimes, I don't really know what to say. You ask Him to change you, but you don't know exactly what you want to change into. Not them, I know that much. The church boys always go up there and pray the same prayers. They always say the same words, the same pretty and flowery words they save for Sundays. I don't know what I want to be. Dear Lord, please forgive me for my sins...

I started to think about that day I fought Bassanio. It was a strange day. Not because of what happened, but because of how I felt afterwards. We stood in front of each other and just sort of felt the weight of the cold autumn air and sunshine creating a transparent wall between us before we decided we just had to. And we both respected that. I threw a few birds before he swatted me down with a crusher to the temple and I blacked out. When I opened my eyes, he was helping me off the pavement and I remember him meeting my eyes. ‘You should take care of that’, he said and I felt the blood dripping down my nose. I nodded and he nodded and he walked back inside. I ditched the rest of the school day and walked home with my nose

bleeding in my November sleeve and I remember looking at the sky feeling like somehow, I understood myself.

As my eyes stayed open I glanced over at Annie again and saw she was praying too. I flipped the prayer and asked for the right words to say when I would finally find the courage to talk to her. I prayed for a girl I could love, a girl who would love me too. A nudge in my side interrupted these fantasies and the offering basket was passed into my lap. I gave the dollar my mother had given me to give and wished it wasn't so hard to be a gangster.

As the sermon began, I leaned back in the pew with my eyes drifting towards the windows, the sky became my blanket and I slept on the preacher. Clouds passed over a beautiful autumn and I felt the leaves rustling outside as the quiet breeze came in. The sunshine passed over the trees and I saw a path that was stained with broken shadows where the leaves above glowed in their peaceful satisfaction.

I remembered the day I first saw her in summer, when we were at the church picnic. Everyone was there.

I was with my boys smoking a cigarette away from all the adults and Bible Study teachers and then headed back towards the smoky smell of charcoal that filled the air. My brother was dribbling his basketball on the grass, crossing and switching his legs as Ripper tried to steal it from him. A group of kids ran by, one of them holding a kite like a football because it wouldn't fly, the air was thick and completely still. The other boys behind him echoed excited laughter and little girls chased the boys not caring about grass stains on their dresses. It was Sunday at the barbecue- you know how that goes. Everyone who's been at one of these things knows immigrants just show up out of nowhere, take over a park, and roll crazy deep, 100 Koreans hopping out of vans, 150 more pulling up in sedans. Fuck it, bring the yellow bus. Pop the trunk; grab the cooler, a blanket, and the watermelons. Suddenly the

air smells like bulgogee, tarp-like blankets are laid out with rice cookers all over the place, and everywhere you look there will be ahjuhmas with really big visors.

Under the trees, people were walking this way and that among the picnic tables with generous chopstick servings of kimchee, pan-chan, potato salad, bulgogee, and bab all heaped in their designated areas of the sectioned Styrofoam plates. Everywhere I turned, ahjuhmas were trying to hand me a plate. I wasn't even hungry but you know how they are- you have to eat. My brother forgot about basketball for a few and went right over to the bab-tong and broke a pair of wooden chopsticks apart. We all sat down and stuffed ourselves with Korean food and soda.

After we ate, we strolled over to where most of the Youth Group kids were hanging out. The praise team sat on the grass and jammed on the acoustics while others sang along. Some lost themselves in simple conversation and the feeling of cool grass on their bare feet and toes, relaxing and laughing under a great tree whose branches hung over the edge of an open glade where the a volleyball net was being set-up not too far away. I leaned against the trunk of the tree for a moment and listened to the music while Henry and my brother began rallying the guys to play so they could get a decent game going on the half-court blacktop that stood on the other side of the lake.

As we walked over, they were all horsing around and trying to throw each other in the lake. I remember I was acting quiet that day, my brother and Henry called me out on it earlier, but I didn't know what it was. It must've been a premonition, because something in the silence led me away from our usual loud games of trash-talk and fighting. I sat on the edge of the court and watched instead. My brother crossed the small blacktop in three giant bounds with a basketball cradled in his right arm and he jumped into the air and froze

there in his own mind. He was almost there, almost to the rim. He wanted to touch the metal, grab it, and snap it off with the chains rattling and the rusty ring in his hands.

After they stopped shooting around and started playing for real, I lost interest and wandered away. I kicked up dandelions and watched the seeds fly through the air like tiny white birds as little girls gathered small flowers and pretty weeds in teeny fistful bunches. As I walked alone along the outskirts of the picnic area, the air became alive again with a light wind, tossing plastic cups from the wooden tables and sending them to where I stood, in front of a partially flowering bush with hundreds of small white butterflies coming in and out and about the thorny branches. The paper insects fluttered delicately from pink flower to pinker flower, resting only for a moment before fluttering away into the sky where another butterfly would take its place from somewhere within the thorns.

Feeling a tug on my shirtsleeve, Mickey smiled and held out his hand to give me five. I tried to give him five but he quickly withdrew his hand laughing. Too slow.

“Come here you little...” I said turning my voice into that of a gravelly monster. I picked him up, flipped him upside down, and shook him.

After I set him back on his Nikes, he looked at me with puzzled eyes. His expression changed and he took off smiling, chasing one of the nearby butterflies. I watched him run around for a minute, jumping and clapping his hands at the delicate little butterflies.

“No, no, no. You’ll kill them that way. Like this.” I said.

Taking two plastic cups from off the grass, I held them close together and walked up to the butterflies carefully, watching quietly and barely breathing as one touched down on a flower. With my cups

parted just inches apart, I closed them together, gently capturing the white butterfly inside.

Mickey's eyes grew wide as I showed him my capture, and he touched the plastic with his tiny fingertips as if the butterfly had just made a friend. The butterfly fluttered desperately back and forth within its plastic cell.

“Now we have to let it go.”

“Let it go”, I said again and released the butterfly, watching it flutter away into the suddenly stormy sky.

The clouds passed over and the sunlight began to fade on the sweat that glistened off the foreheads of Henry, Ripper, my brother, and Slim. The sun began to fade on the gold wire of Pastor Joe's glasses as he discussed theology with young disciples, doubters, and philosophers. The sun began to fade on the glittery ink Jane and her friends were using to write each other best friend letters. The sun began to fade on the swinging chains of the hyungs popping and locking acapella as their fly girls sat in the grass doing each other's hair and nails.

The sun shined on the butterflies like wild diamonds escaping on fragile wings into the breeze. The sun shined on me as I met the eyes of Annie.

I stood with little Mickey as he clapped at his butterflies with the two plastic cups I have given him. I could see her smiling slightly, sitting with her legs crossed so casually at a picnic table facing out towards the world as she sat alone. Her shoelace was untied. I could see myself on bended knee knotting and double-knotting that thing as if it could express my sincerity. How a shoe could stir up that madness. She shook a wisp of hair from her eyes, letting her thoughts flutter like eyelashes on my skin before her eyes wandered away. I felt some rascal bump into my leg laughing, too young to understand

the complexities of ‘a moment’. Inside the plastic cups were two tiny white butterflies dancing together in desperate circumstances.

“Two? Good job Mickey. Now what did we learn?”

Without a word, he opened the cups ever so slightly as if to make the butterflies believe that something above had saved them. The butterflies fluttered wildly liberated out of their plastic prison, still fluttering together into the sunshine, into that sunshine that would then fade on me.

Chapter Ten

Somewhere Near Paterson

“Yo, am I driving ok?”

“Yeah, you’re fine. We’re going suspiciously slow though. Better speed it up a little before we get the wrong attention.”

“Shit, I’m too blazed man. I can hardly drive. Feel like I’m going all over the place.”

My brother was stuck with all the driving, officially anyway, as I had never gotten my license. Regardless, I would occasionally take over in situations like these, when my brother would utter those famous words- *Dude, I’m too high. Can you drive?* He was taller than me by about six inches and outweighed me by almost one hundred pounds but I could still drink more than him, and when it came to smoking, forget about it. Halfway through anything being passed, his face would be lit up like a pumpkin.

“Dude, you’re fine. Just relax.”

“You know what it is? It’s the goddamn speedometer. It keeps staring me in the face.”

“You mean, you keep staring at it?”

“Yeah, but it’s staring back at me.”

“Maybe you should let me smoke on this for awhile. We got a long night of drinking ahead of us and I’m going to need you to be at full power tonight. I’m pretty sure I’ll be unconscious by closing time.”

“Don’t make me carry you outside again.”

“Don’t worry about it man. I think once we get there, we should just drink until we pass out there. And if they tell us to leave, well, so be it. It’s a warm summer night. We can just sleep in the park.”

“Hey, you ever think about like, what if you were a drifter. Like, you just wandered around the world like Final Fantasy, helping people you meet along the way.”

“I wish I could do that. But I got to get my sword skills up. Actually, I think you would be having the sword skills. I would have magic.”

“I wish we lived in the old days when people used to just walk around with swords.”

“Yeah, that’d be pretty sweet.”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know about the whole wandering thing though. We might need a destination first. Life in the streets is hard.”

“Dude, you were only homeless for a day.”

“I know! That’s all it took for me to learn that shit. Fucking walking around in freezing-ass rain... I had to try to break into some cars to find shelter and shit. It was terrible. Worst running away experience of my life.”

“I wanted to run away a couple times, but it never happened. One time, I packed a bag and even made my bed to like, let mom know

I wasn't coming back. But then I stopped at Bobby's house and ended up just going back home."

"So instead of mom thinking you ran away, she just thought you made your bed."

"Well, I realized I should've eaten a big meal before I left. And then I realized I didn't have any money. And then I gave up and just ate my troubles away."

"That always does the trick, doesn't it?"

"So what was it like, sleeping on the street?" you repeat the question, searching for better details.

"The street? Honestly man, I felt weird. Kind of scared, and kind of wild. Like an animal, or a stray dog or something. But not in a cool way. Like wandering around with circles in my eyes with nowhere to go. It sucked. But I didn't want to go to jail. And plus, I don't know. I just wanted to start over."

"What did you do while you were wandering around."

"Nothing. Everything was closed. I just wandered around from neighborhood to neighborhood riding buses and getting off randomly. But all the neighborhoods, they all look the same at night."

"Did you bring anything with you?"

"Nah. It wasn't planned out at all. I just left the house like I was going out, cigarettes, some money, that's it. And I walked across town like a superstar and got on the bus."

"That was weird when you did that. We had no idea where you were. Mom was pretty worried."

"Yeah. I don't know, I just ended up just riding the bus all the way, up and down, up and down for awhile. And then I just got off randomly and started walking."

"Where were you?"

"I think I was in River Edge, but I'm not really sure."

“Didn’t you say you went to Henry’s house.”

“Yeah, I went there. But then I changed my mind and just slept in the street. Kind of wished I just threw rocks at his window. It would’ve been a lot warmer.”

I take a big hit and motion for a pass to my brother.

“Nah man. I’m good for now. Let’s put it out for like fifteen minutes.”

“I don’t know about putting it out, but we can chill for a while. We’ll spark it back up once we pass Patterson. Where’re we now?”

“I have no idea.”

As the smoke drifts quietly in my hand, we pass the green and pink neon lights of the Marcal Paper factory with its thick industrial billows forming clouds of pale-grey smoke in the night on the opposite side of our highway. I know where we are, but I don’t know where we are.

I still remember the night I ran away. I think I’ll tell my brother about everything that happened that night after a few drinks. It’s the kind of story that’s better to tell over a cigarette and some liquor shots. I’m too high right now and can’t get into detail. Everything in my mind is just drifting endlessly from one place to another. But when we sit down and order our drinks, and I light my cigarette and listen to the melodies playing in the background, I’ll tell you all about it. I’ll tell you how I rode the buses everyday for awhile, just riding and getting off at random stops just to see where God would take me. The night the rain came pouring down on my skinny frame as I ran from driveway to driveway, seeking out a car to sleep in. The alleyway I finally settled in, the shivering cold concrete that I had for a mattress, dreams of Annie for a pillow. The sky when the storm clouds cleared and the stars and the silver moon and the silence that followed...

“Yo, I got an idea,” I say suddenly, “turn up the music and turn off the lights on the dashboard. Let’s ride in the dark.”

“Oh shit!” my brother exclaims excitedly. “We should’ve done this earlier.”

He twists the dial behind the steering-wheel down to the lowest degree, dimming the glowing interior of our car down until there is nothing but darkness. The light from the speedometer fades out. We have no idea how fast or slow we are going, but it doesn’t matter anymore. It feels like we’re floating now. The only thing that’s left in this liberating black darkness is the headlights shining our way to our final destination and the tiny glow of a clock that never changes, now piercing through all else that is invisible as we turn up the volume on the radio and ride through the sounds of outer-space.

I’m already getting in too deep, feeling my voice drift away as you start singing with the radio. I feel good right now. But I can’t stop thinking about sad things that kind of damper the celebratory mood. On a summer night like this, I can’t really help it. It’s just a part of everything else. And fuck if the weed will let me stop thinking. Suddenly I feel myself thirsty for a drink. I want to pour out the first sip for someone gone and throw the second one back hard, let it make my face cringe as the music and mood get me sentimental. By the end of tonight, somebody I never met before is going to be my best friend, and I will tell a girl that I love her as her face blurs out of focus.

Chapter Eleven

New Jerus

“Damn, we got the good stuff today, huh?” Bobby said impressed.

“It’s so green,” my brother said in a trance, “it’s like a tiny magical forest.”

“Truly said poetic,” I said as I held the twenty of light-green nugget sitting fat and majestic with orange hairs shedding onto the bottom of the gram bag in my hand so we could all gaze upon its glory.

It was one of the first times we had ever copped green that green before. Before that, we could only manage to find dirt-sellers flipping red and blue nickels, colored plastic to hide the seeds abundant inside. But after I met Dimes, those dirt days would slowly fade out into haze. It was rare that we ever had twenty dollars between us. I was the only one out of us three that had a part-time job. My brother’s only vocation was basketball, and Bobby was Bobby, always broke and ready to smoke. But three people in the world I wanted to share that sack with was right there with me in that garage. It was the place we used to hide out way everyday after school until his pops came back from selling TV’s for G.E. It was cool till about 6, and then by that time we had to act straight and stay chilled out in the basement and

not say anything too funny. His dad was Clint Eastwood, sharp as they come with a remote control gun. It was alright though- the high laughter was on cruise control as long as we didn't say anything to spaced out or smell funny. Lord knows we did whatever we could not to smell funny. In those days, I used to carry around mints and eye-drops and spare sheets of fabric softener to rub down my clothes with.

It just so happened that that day was a day we had no worries. Bobby's step-mother and Clint Eastwood had gone up to New Hampshire on a Valentine's Day weekend to do a bed-and-breakfast. We didn't know what that was exactly, but New Hampshire wasn't a one day trip, and that was good as gold. We waited around in the cold playing basketball with numb fingers in the driveway for about half-hour just making sure it wasn't a fake. The whole thing could've been a charade, a test to see what we would do under the false pretenses of freedom. We didn't put it past Clint for one minute. But finally, after watching the failed return of the blue Chrysler on the horizon, we decided it was safe and celebrated by jumping up in the air and whooping like crazy into the snowy grass to roll around and throw powdery handfuls into the most beautiful setting blue sky that winter could find us, and before our hearts finished racing we charged the kitchen for cokes and set up shop in the garage for a rolling station, a music box, and three plastic milk crates flipped for chairs. We all had our roles to fill: Bobby broke up the weed, I broke up the dutch, and my brother set up the music or else fulfilled some other miscellaneous duty.

Me and Bobby started smoking together from the beginning. My brother's journey into the world of the mystics was tough to break through though. He had long been a follower of books of logic and scholars of reason. A good-natured obedience to the law had long been in his nature before he had ever seen the other glimmering side

of the forest. It was I, who had broken his stubborn and foolish innocence, and brought him deep into the forest of sprits at the dead end of our street. In his ignorance of my true design was I able to lead him in under guise of wanting to show a new species of newt. Ha ha! The lovable fool would not for the world have given up the chance to eye a scientific specimen such as the one I had described with such excitement! A samurai, I told him, must delve into the dimensions of confusion to listen to the sounds of the forest with clarity. He became befuddled at this remark and demanded to know what I was doing as I withdrew the pipe from my pocket. He thought I was smoking crack.

My brother learned to let go after that. I thought that was a real sign of growth for him. A samurai he aspired to be, but what hindered his development in that path was the weight of his own shoulders. He worried too much about the future, about life. He had, at times, even more troubles than me. Learn to just forget. And such was the path I desired to take, so for all these things, I can't say anything except that I was a part of it, as we all became a part of it. It seemed to be a road that would lead me to the place where I needed to be. But even as Bobby sat in the backseat and I rode passenger-side with Dimes into the Bricks to re-up on Isabella, I never let my brother go with us on those trips. Never wanted him to get too mixed up.

The blunt saw a few turns of the circle as we started to talk about what to do with the empty house when suddenly Bobby had a moment of realization.

“Wait a second, guys...”

We looked at him.

“My parents are gone.”

“Just hit you, huh?”

“We can smoke *in* the house.”

“Yeah!” I agreed excitedly.

We didn’t know what the point of this would be, but there was a sense that it only made sense because perhaps, we had never been that high before. There was something about passing a blunt around the kitchen table that seemed like we should do as proper gangsters. We liked the idea very much.

“Wait, wait, you idiots,” my brother interjected with reason, “Bobby’s parents could come back any minute. What if they forgot something?”

“You’re right,” I agreed.

“Damn. What could they forget?” Bobby asked. The atmosphere was instantly thrown into paranoid tension. My brother got and walked over to the garage window to give the street some surveillance.

“What would you need on a bed-and-breakfast?” I pondered.

“I don’t know. I don’t even know what a bed-and-breakfast is!” Bobby exclaimed with new-found worry.

“You fools!” my brother hollered, “didn’t you do any research?”

“Hold on. Let’s calm down,” I said calmly, “did they pack suitcases?”

“Yeah, of course they had suitcases.”

“How many suitcases?”

“I don’t know. Two? Three?”

“Two suitcases? Hmmm.... His and hers? That makes sense. But three? Sounds a little suspicious.”

“How is that suspicious?”

“Doesn’t it seem a little, *excessive*?” I asked leaning close to Bobby.

“What’re you talking about?” my brother snapped, “They’re gone for the weekend. It’s cold. They packed sweaters and blankets. You know how many sweaters you can pack in a suitcase?”

“How many?” asked Bobby.

“Not a lot. All those layers add up!”

“Guys, guys, listen. We know they’re gone for the weekend. Unless Bobby’s dad is giving Bobby some kind of ridiculous test of discipline, which we all know is possible, but he’s been gone for an hour already. He wouldn’t play this game *this* long, right?” I looked at Bobby for confirmation to my logic. He looked doubtful.

“Alright,” I said switching course, “let’s put this thing out. Are you guys high?”

“I’m fucking high as hell,” my brother said nodding.

“I’m hungry,” Bobby said.

“Alright then, let’s go to the kitchen. A man can really do some thinking in the kitchen.”

“Let’s open the garage door and air this place out,” my brother suggested fearfully.

“Wait,” I said stopping Bobby from pushing the button, “what if the ‘kid’ smells it.” I meant the little 4 year-old boy who lived next-door, the one who terrorized my state of mind with the sound of his approaching big-wheel. I had faced-off with the ‘kid’ in the driveway once before. It was a terrible memory that I someday wish to be purged of through psychotherapy. He was there, like a pale-faced haunted little bastard, staring at me with those eternal eyes. Something in his eyes *knew*, and it shook me ridiculously.

“Dude, he’s not even in kindergarten, he doesn’t know what weed smells like,” Bobby chuckled, “I’ll just open it halfway then.”

“Halfway seems reasonable,” my brother concurred, anxious to go inside as we all were. Inside would be safe. No parents

or neighbors, empty house, television, snacks. That was just what we needed to calm ourselves before the absurd possibilities started ruining our high.

“They’re not coming back,” Bobby said to himself with a chuckle.

“They’re not coming back,” we repeated. And it made us feel much better to say it aloud as we headed inside. What a relief, we thought, and let laughter shake the fear from our shoulders as the warmth of liquid kitchen light guided us up the stairs.

It was a good night to be alive on Friday. The sun was setting outside the kitchen window and the snow on the ground began to look blue reflecting the winter afternoon twilight. I leaned over the sink for a minute just to look up at the sky which reminded me of frozen pink lemonade, with orange and blue ice cubes. Inside Bobby’s kitchen, it smelled like fresh-baked cookies in the oven glowing in a dark night. We were feeling nice.

“Damn Bobby! Your parents hooked it up!” my brother said excitedly with his head in the freezer. We started cracking up as he turned around with a TV dinner in each hand, comparing cooking times to see which one would be the first to fall victim. Bobby started imitating my brother at the table, pigging out on invisible food making cartoon-noises as we laughed. I sat down at the table next to Bobby, popped open a soda, and then started digging into the chips.

“Which one do you guys want?” my brother asked.

“Ay, take it easy, that’s Bobby’s food for the weekend,” I scolded with my mouth full.

“Nah, it’s ok. Just don’t touch the macaroni and cheese. I love those.”

My brother decided on the Hot-Pockets and got to work.

“So what’s up for tonight?” I asked.

“I don’t know, what do you guys want to do?” Bobby replied crunching pretzels.

“Wait a second, isn’t it Valentine’s? You should probably call Katy,” I suggested.

“Yeah,” my brother agreed as he slipped some Hot-Pockets into the toaster-oven, “you should definitely call her up. You’re going to have the house all to yourself.”

“Nah,” Bobby said shaking his head, “I’d rather smoke and get drunk.”

I knew that would be Bobby’s response. And a part of me wished I didn’t have to be the one to bring it to the table, because I didn’t know shit about girls. But I knew enough to know that an empty house on Valentine’s Day was like... destiny or something.

Bobby was always mysterious when it came to her, and he wasn’t the mysterious type. He always had some crazy chick who was trying to get with him. Anyone who knew Bobby like we knew Bobby figured it was his easy-going nature and those blue-green eyes that attracted library cuties with dominatrix intentions for his ass. It was seriously a strange pattern of girls we had seen since the boy hit high school. I think it all started with Rosa, our gym teacher. We all wondered, secretly or publicly in the locker room, what kind of pelvis bone-crushing love she could give in bed. She was a strong woman, a beautiful Dominican former track star with a big healthy ass that was still feminine, yet contained the ability to crush steel beams with a meringue twist and turn them into a metal bowties. Everyone in our grade swore she and Bobby had something going on, which Bobby adamantly denied. Nobody understood why he would deny something like that except for us. It could’ve made him famous. But Bobby wasn’t trying to be famous. Bobby was Bobby. And that’s why we were friends with Bobby.

“I don’t know why you never went for it, man,” I would say to him joking.

“Dude, I don’t know, maybe I should’ve.”

“Nah, but you definitely could’ve. I mean, shit, how many times was it just you and her after track practice?”

“Almost everyday. She would call me up so we could run,” he replied almost guiltily.

“Is that why you quit the team?”

“Nah, I quit because I couldn’t quit smoking.”

Bobby was me and my brother’s first friend ever since we moved onto the block in first grade. Since then, there was no fronting between us. But the Katy situation was different. When Bobby would talk about her, which was never much in detail, I could see through the veils of purple marijuana smoke something in those simple blue-green eyes become something I never knew in my friend before, something unspoken and complicated.

“Did you get her anything?” my brother asked.

“Well, yeah,” Bobby stammered, “it was nothing really...”

“What’d she say?”

“I don’t know... she liked it.”

“Did you ask what she was doing?”

“Well, actually I told her my parents were going to be gone for the weekend.”

“And?” we asked expectantly.

“She said she would call me later,” he confessed.

“Damn kid, you’re good! All you have to do is call her up!” I proclaimed.

“I don’t know...”

“Dude, you got to make moves,” my brother said in words solid as stone.

“You can still smoke and get drunk,” I added, “just call her up and tell her to bring some friends. We can call up other people too. Have a little get-together, know what I’m saying?”

“I don’t know...” he repeated, but I could see the gears in his head turning.

“Think about it. You call her up, say hey I’m having some people over, bring some people over, we have a few drinks, pass a few L’s, have a few laughs...” I let it trail off from there and let his imagination do the rest.

“Bada-bing,” my brother added in his best goomba-voice.

“Can we get liquor?” Bobby asked with growing interest.

“Can’t you ask your sister?”

“Dude, she’ll kill me,” Bobby squeaked. His voice always got high-pitched when he got nervous or excited.

“Oh yeah, I forgot you’re terrified of your sister.”

“Terrified,” my brother confirmed.

“Anyhow, we should be able to get liquor,” I said confidently, and then to my brother, “yo, can you call Seung-jee? She’s got a fake right?”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t have a car,” he answered as he observed the Hot-Pockets’ progress in the toaster-oven.

“Damn... well, it looks like I’m going to have to steal the car later,” I said stretching my hands above my head.

“Dude, you can’t steal the car!” my brother exclaimed.

“How’re you going to steal the car?” Bobby chuckled.

“My mom won’t even notice,” I said casually, “all I have to do is wait for the opportune moment. Shit, how long could it possibly take to get liquor?”

“Dude,” my brother began to bitch again, “don’t be an idiot.”

“It’s nothing,” I replied easily.

“Dude, if you get caught, you’ll get us all screwed,” my brother warned.

“You’ve gone soft Wolverine,” I said in my best Saber-tooth voice. My brother was not amused.

“Forget the liquor. We don’t need liquor. And I don’t want to ask Seung-jee for that favor.”

Bobby looked back and forth from me to my brother. He was used to being in the middle of those brotherly disputes. He knew it was better to sit back and watch than get involved with our bickering.

“You’re being a bitch.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Hey!” I snapped back, “this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. Are you going to stand in the way of Bobby’s happiness? Tonight, he’s got a chance to get with his dream-girl.” I noticed Bobby about to bashfully protest and say something like, ‘it’s for all of us’, so I quickly added, “well, anyhow, she’ll bring over some hot friends and we’ll all get stupid.”

“Alright I’ll call her,” my brother said giving in. He wasn’t about to stand in the way of Bobby’s happiness and saw I was right, in principle anyway. So it was set. Later that afternoon, right before dinner, I would wait until my mother was busy cooking in the kitchen, and I would slip out and be back in twenty minutes flat before she could even realize what had happened. Before returning our Camry to the driveway, I would drop off a big brown-paper grocery bag to Bobby’s house full of all the biggest and cheapest bottles of liquor we could scramble with our wrinkled dollars and handfuls of change.

The sound of the toaster-oven opening brought new warmth to the light of the kitchen and the room filled with the delicious smell of golden-brown crispiness. There was new excitement buzzing in our heads, and it wasn’t just the usual ecstatic praise of Hot-Pockets that

filled our hearts. That night would be far from the usual, far from us smoking a twenty-sack and wandering around for hours. That night, we had something to do. We had girls. We had liquor. We had a mission.

“But yo, we gotta smoke a blunt in the kitchen tonight,” Bobby said in all seriousness.

“Well, that just goes without saying,” I smiled.

“Alright I’m in!”

“Let’s make some calls, make some moves!”

“Tonight’s going to be crazy.”

Crazy.

I still remember the day Darryl got locked up. He was dragged into the street wearing a wife-beater and boxers, his grandma following his police escorts down the front lawn all the way to the cop car hollering Jesus and baby. It’s fucked up but somehow I knew, just like all the other neighbors standing in their robes and slippers knew, eventually, he was going to get locked up. Can’t be from around here and live peacefully. Not if you dropped out and don’t do nothing but hang around. Bad enough to be a black kid in our town, even worse to be seen getting shoved into a cop car.

Ever since back in the days when neighborhood kids used to ghost-ride down hills on bikes, Darryl was like Bobby’s older brother. I used to sit out on the side and watch while the other neighborhood kids played basketball together. We all grew up in the same neighborhood, at the bottom of the same hill, next to the same dead-end,

next to the same sewage plant and the same woods. We used to shoot pool in Darryl's basement while we listened to his rap collection. We were all young then and Darryl, to us, seemed like he knew everything about everything. He was about four years older than us and taught us everything he knew about the world, which was basically pussy, weed, and stealing cars. Darryl dropped out before his junior year, but he still came around to pick Bobby up from school and also to parking-lot pimp the freshman girls, the type to giggle themselves hot around older guys with cars. So in that case, Darryl was a star. It seemed like he had a different car everyday.

Before he got locked up, Darryl was going out with this one girl named Katy. She used to hang out by the payphones near the bathrooms in the art-wing with her girlfriends- the type of girls with frizzy hair and pale-pink eye-shadow- the type that looked like a teenage pregnancy was crystal-balled for them in the near future. It wasn't hard to see what the thugs all saw in her, the way she stood with an aqua-blue pager clipped tight to her hourglass cut, the way her hair hung over one eye when she talked to you. But she was untouchable. Even when dudes would try to kick something to her by the payphones, she would just do that sort of look to her girlfriends and smile because she knew they couldn't do shit for her. Everyone knew Darryl, and everyone knew she was Darryl's girl.

Bobby and Darryl go all the way back to the time when Bobby's parents got divorced. I guess it was easier for Bobby to talk about it with Darryl because Darryl didn't really have parents. But I don't know anything about Darryl. To me, he always just seemed like he was cruising around in one of his borrowed cars, stopping us on the street randomly to roll down the window and say some funny shit, and then peel off with a squeal of the tires to terrorize the old ladies in our neighborhood. But Bobby and Darryl were pretty close. When

Darryl picked up Katy from school, he would always make her go find Bobby and then take them all out to lunch. And when Darryl got locked up, he told Bobby to take care of her.

Darryl to me seemed like he didn't give a fuck about anything. But right before he got locked up, he put some knowledge on me. It was just some random day, so random I can't even recall whether it was spring or fall. I was riding my bike down into the woods so I could smoke some weed. The woods were always a place of mystery and escape for us when we were kids, but as we grew older, it just became another place to get high. The woods surrounded the sewage plant and the abandoned sanitarium. So at a time when all the trees were being cut down to make room for new neighborhoods, those woods would never go unless people wanted to know where their shit went. We should've been more afraid of the rainbow-tinted foam that bubbled up on the muddy banks but when the sun would start to glow orange and break between the trees, the woods were really something that seemed to make everything at peace- that scent of wild freedom in the air at dusk.

I had the joint in my pocket, a skinny little twisted thing hiding among the Newport's in my cigarette pack. The light broke in through the trees and gave the woods a tranquil effect and I lit up and leaned against a tree. As I smoked, I thought about something of little importance very deeply and then out of nowhere, I felt two hands grab me and say in a cop's voice, "Drop it."

I froze for a second. And then I heard that familiar laugh, the same one I would hear from the car window right before the sound of screeching tires and the smell of an unhealthy exhaust filled the street. It was Darryl.

"Yo, what the fuck man? You scared me."

He continued to laugh and slapped his knees a couple times before reaching for the pass.

“Master Ninja my nigga, Master Ninja. I came up on you with the *sneak!*” He proceeded to take a hit and began making ‘sneaking’ sound-effects while holding in the weed smoke. “I thought you were a Master Ninja. But I guess every Master meets his death by a Master. I believe you are using the old Snake-style, why don’t you show me?” he said imitating an old-school kung-fu movie, and then began waving his arms and fingers into the movement of a snake, striking suddenly with two fang-fingers right before my eyes making me blink.

“Your brother know you smoke weed?” he asked in a serious tone as he passed it back to me. He was like that. He would say some funny shit one second and then get serious the next. I never knew if he was being serious or not. I treated everything he said seriously, and he would always tell me to stop being so serious. But then he would get serious on me again, and I wouldn’t know whether to laugh or take him seriously. He was a confusing character.

“Nah,” I replied with weed on my breath.

“How come he don’t know? You think he’d be pissed if he found out?”

“I don’t know.”

“You just got to show him the joint and let him try it. I remember first time I tried weed I thought it was some bad shit. But after you try it, you realize it’s not that bad.”

“How old were you?”

“I don’t know. Eleven?”

“Damn, you started early.”

“Yup,” he said with some pride and leaned back and hit the joint again. We were sitting on some rocks at that point and leaning against a big tree near the edge of the brook. The sun was getting a

little lower in the sky making the horizon seem pink and orange from what we could see through the expanse of the trees.

You and your brother ain't too close, huh?"

"No we are. We're just different. He's like, you know..." I said letting the silence speak for itself.

"Word, I know what you mean," Darryl replied nodding, "me and my brother were like opposites too. But brothers are brothers, you know?"

"I didn't know you had a brother."

"He used to live in Philly."

"Where is he now?"

"Locked up."

"Oh. I didn't know that. What'd he do?"

"He got hit with conspiracy."

"Conspiracy? What do you mean? Like he was going to kill the president?"

Darryl started laughing that raspy laugh of his and passed the roach back to me.

"Nah Kid. He was not going to kill the president. You're crazy, you know that? Only you would say some shit like that. Nah, he went in to do a job on this place and his partner shot somebody."

"So you mean he was an accessory to murder."

"Yeah, but I call it conspiracy. Some bullshit."

I exhaled and passed the shrinking joint as I stared across from us where a metal shopping-cart lay on its side like a silver skeleton. Somebody had kicked its metal cage in and lit it on fire. The steel was charred and there was ash and black stuff all around where it lay in a wavering spot of sunlight.

"When I was your age," he reminisced, "we used to just cop bricks of dirt weed and chill on that for like a month, just smoking till

we got stupid. But this shit here..." he took another hit and passed it back to me before closing his eyes and exhaling through his nose with his eyes closed. The sound of the babbling brook suddenly filled the woods as a high silence rose up from between us.

"You know what I like about you Kid?" he said after a minute.

I looked at him.

"You know what I like about you Kid?" he continued, "you and your brother. Y'all got like, a different flavor to you. Like... you not black, you not white... but you cool, you know?"

"I guess so."

I looked at him, wondering what he was getting at. It's kind of funny how you could know a person but not really know a person, and then all of sudden, in the woods, in the middle of the afternoon smoking weed, that person could just tell you everything on their mind.

"Like, I got this theory. I realized this shit the other day. I was in this same spot as a matter of fact, when I thought of it. Probably why that shit just came back to me. I was chilling out here, smoking, and then it just came to me. Like America the most racist fucking country in the world. But America also got the most opportunities. Like, we being trained, nah fuck that, we being born into this world where we got to compete with each other to be on top. And whoever on the bottom got to get shitted on. You know what I'm saying?"

"Yeah, I do. It's because we're capitalists."

"Word up. I knew you would appreciate this shit. It's the dollar that does it to us. But why then, Kid? Why only in America you got to be white or you got to be a nigger."

"What?" I asked. I was startled to hear the n-word said like that, so explicitly, so ugly, from a black man.

“In America, don’t matter if you Puerto Rican, don’t matter if you Mexican, or Arab, or Asian,” he said punching my knee for emphasis, “don’t fucking matter if you black or white. I mean, you see white boys who try to be black just like you see Uncle Tom’s in this motherfucker. In America you got to choose. What you want to be, black or white?”

“Yeah, I see what you’re saying.”

“Alright then, so let me ask you. And be honest with me. I want to be real with you for a second. Are you black or white?”

“What?”

At that point, Darryl got up and walked slowly over to the shopping cart and began kicking it with his big boots casually, not so much out of anger, but just sort of something he was doing to work out his thoughts. I started to think it was him who had dragged that thing in the middle of the woods and set it on fire.

“Before you got here, I had a little something to smoke so I could chill and smoke and meditate, focus my chi next to the rivers,” he said facing the brook. He was always making kung-fu references when he was around me or my brother, probably because it was natural to him that we would understand these things.

“I used to be just like everybody else growing up. I was never a bad kid. My brother, he was always bad. And when I went to visit him in the hood, I was the one who was different. Like I’m black, but in the hood, they hood, you know what I’m saying? They don’t give a fuck about anything. But I was with my big brother, so it was cool, you know? And then coming back here, I start to realize that I’m the black kid in this town. But I wasn’t even tripping off that. You know, I’m not even the only black kid in this town. You got some straight up Uncle Tom niggas walking around listening to rap, but they ain’t

black. And I didn't even really start to see myself until they all started treating me different."

"Once I got to high school, it was like coach kept trying to make me play sports, but I didn't want to play. And all the knuckleheads wanted to be down with me so they could say they had some black friends. And they my niggas, but sometimes, even they don't see me, you know what I'm saying? And all the preppy little white bitches want to be on this dick cause they daddy would kill themselves because of that. And all them other dudes always talk to me different, like to talk to me you got to throw some ghetto in your conversation, but I'm like nah, why can't we just talk normal, you know what I'm saying? So Kid, you got to ask yourself, what do you want to be? Are you going to be white, or are you going to be black. It's fucked up Kid. But you know what? You get to choose my nigga. You get to choose."

At about 8:30, me and my brother got finished getting fresh for the night. We put that church time into our grooming because we knew, or at least we hoped, there would be some girls there that we could perhaps have a conversation with. I think about this time in my life and realize how much I knew about sex but how little I knew about how to talk to girls. You learn early from the older dudes that talk about taking girls in their whips over to the lake where they would probably get romantic in the backseat, and then with their boys and around us talk about how they got it in. It all seemed simple enough once you had a girl and a car and a destination, but all of those things had to come from something- like, hello, hi, hey, what's up?

Which one should I choose? It was so much more complicated than a hairstyle and comb.

As we stepped out the front door into the cold, we speculated on who would show up. We put together our knowledge of what Katy's friends looked like and who would be going to be there. Besides the girls in her grade, Katy was friends with a lot of thuggish characters, some of them not even thuggish but just straight out of juvenile hall. Some of them were Darryl's friends too, and the more Bobby hung out with Katy, the more they became his friends as well. Me and my brother had discussions about it privately on nights where we would just walk our dog and say all the little things that were satellites orbiting the small worlds we shared. My brother especially didn't like Bobby hanging with those guys. I was sort of neutral at that point, but I had to admit, knowing those guys were going to be there sort of fizzled the excitement that we felt that afternoon.

We were, of course, the first ones there. Bobby had cleaned up the house while we were gone and was in the middle of arranging the cups and liquor on his kitchen table. We walked in and took off our coats and joined him in the kitchen.

"We still got the rest of that blunt. You guys wanna smoke?" Bobby asked.

"Not yet," I said pulling out a chair, "I can't talk to girls when I'm high."

"Really? It helps me feel more relaxed."

"I can talk to girls high," my brother said with a shrug, "or at least, I feel like I would be able to."

"I don't know. I'm going to wait until I have a few drinks in me," I said with uncertainty. It wasn't in my nature to not smoke if something was being lit. But there would be girls later, and I didn't want to be shy.

The truth is, I can't even count the opportunities that I let pass me by in my short life. The girl walking on the streets, in the mall, in the hallways. I would think about those things when I lay my head down at night and dream while I was still awake in the dark placing myself back in the moment but this time, instead of walking two steps behind, I would pick up that beautiful girl's notebook and offer it to her with her surprised eyes burning back into mine.

"Are we going to christen the kitchen?" my brother asked Bobby.

"Nah," Bobby said thoughtfully, "not yet. Let's go to the garage."

"You guys go ahead. I'll be there in a minute," I said.

"What're you going to do?"

"I need a drink," I replied.

They left the kitchen to go to the garage while I stood alone in the kitchen. I needed a lot of drinks. In about an hour the girls would be walking through the door with their softly shampooed hair, tight jeans and perfume. The thought of it made me anxious. I didn't even know what girls were coming or even care. But it felt like the night was so full of possibilities and it could be different, different from the nights I would find myself like an accident in the room saying nothing, saying nothing while the girls giggle with each other on the other side of the room. Like a girl I never even seen before would come through those doors shaking snowflakes from her long lustrous hair, and it would just be me and her in that moment.

I timed out shots on the clock, throwing back by myself and chasing with the coke. Ten minutes later, I got up from the kitchen table feeling loose, though with a burning sensation in my stomach, and moved to the living room and started looking for music.

By the time Bobby and my brother came back from the garage, I was Bogart throwing no religion or politics into the mix and quick with the hands pouring Shaps and Jeff their first drinks. A weed cloud instantly filled the room as Bobby and my brother walked in wobbly cheering to the sight of our old friends. The kitchen was becoming a cocktail of smells, all of us smelling like Christmas cologne, each battling for atmospheric supremacy. There were also rum vapors being spread with every breath.

“Dude, what the hell is this?” Bobby asked, fingering Jeff’s woolen fabrics.

“What?” Jeff asked defensively backing up.

Jeff had come dressed in a stiff collared shirt underneath a Christmas sweater- very different from his usual school attire of blue sweatpants and grey sweatshirt. The effort was kind of hilarious, but only if you knew him, and Bobby wasn’t about to let him walk in there and think he wouldn’t catch some shit for it.

“You look like Mr. Rogers.”

We all laughed.

“Did your mom buy that for you?”

“No, my grandma did.”

We laughed even harder. We all knew he was going to try hard as hell to get laid that night- which meant he would stare at one of the girls until they felt uncomfortable. He was a horny kid according to Bobby. There was some story about how Bobby and Jeff were hanging out at this kid’s house and Bobby had found Jeff watching porn by himself. He wasn’t jerking off, Bobby said, but he had his hand down his pants and a pillow on his lap. Bobby loved to tell that story. And that’s pretty much why Jeff was the horniest kid we knew.

Shaps and Jeff were part of our old neighborhood gang, the part that Bobby was still good friends with. We had a big neighborhood

crew growing up. All of us riding bikes and playing basketball everyday, sleepovers and Nintendo all night. Somewhere along the line, all our members started breaking up. One half of our crew started hanging with cool kids at school who I didn't think were really that cool, but I was still cool with them so we hung out after school together. And then there was the other half of our crew that split off into the half that wasn't that cool, the half that didn't care about being cool, and Bobby was in that group so I hung out with them too. I think Bobby stayed such good friends with Jeff and Shaps because they made him laugh. Jeff because he was so horny and Shaps because he was such a pussy. We all watched Shaps drink his rum and coke and tried to suppress our laughter.

"What?" he asked annoyed, but he knew what we were laughing about. "Fuck you guys," he said smiling and shaking his head. "You're such an asshole Bobby. I hate you guys." And with that he began pouring rum into his drink. We all started cracking up.

Two years before that night, we were all hanging out at Cliff's house with him and his older brother and his older brothers' friends. We were all drinking that night, some of us for the first time. At some point in the night I was chilling in the kitchen with Cliff, Shaps, and some of the older heads. They were all drinking beers and doing shots. One of the guys decided us young-bloods weren't getting drunk fast enough and decided to pour us some rum-and-cokes. And after a few of those, we all started having fun, being loud and acting crazy, especially Shaps. He kept talking about how drunk he was- telling us how much he loved us with his arm sloppily wrapped around our shoulders. He even started hiccupping at some point and stumbled outside onto the back porch. That's when the whole room started dying with laughter and we found out that that older guy didn't pour a single drop of alcohol into Shaps' glass. We never let him forget that

performance. And two years later, we were still busting his balls about that.

After a few more drinks were put away, the heads started to roll up. We were all feeling warm and welcoming, my brother's face was red and I could feel my speech growing lush. The girls came in twos and threes, and some of those dudes that we knew showed up too. By 11 o'clock, the house had filled up with more people than we had anticipated. But Bobby didn't care at all. He had Katy. When she came through those doors, she looked like an angel. Her cheeks were rosy against her olive skin, her dyed auburn hair done so perfectly, I could see her in front of her mirror doing it that well and feeling embarrassed because she knew she would kill every guy in the house that night. A snowflake was caught in her eyelashes, and when she came through the door, it melted into a solitary crystal tear.

The mood was great, and though my own angel never came, I was drunk and everyone was having a good time. There were girls in the living-room grinding against each other in front of the TV as the music played and Shaps and Jeff on the couch watching with open mouths and ice melting in their glasses.

In the kitchen, I was concentrating hard trying to roll up the bud and I admit, having a difficult time with it. My fingers felt thick and clumsy and I remember worrying about how I would be able to take the bra off that chubby chick with that kind of coordination. At the same time, I felt excited to be a part of such momentous gangster occasion. We loved acting like we did this all the time- especially in front of the girls- and maybe it was because I was drunk but I felt like they were impressed. Cigarettes were being smoked in the kitchen like it was nothing. The thugs that my brother strongly disapproved of were actually really good guys once you got to talk to them, and my brother was bonding with a cat named K-Hole who was trying to recruit him

onto their Recreation Basketball Team. Katy was sitting on Bobby's lap and I was talking freely with my eyes half-closed pouring shots and spilling liquor on the table in a manner so cheerful that nobody cared as long as some of it ended up in their cup. We toasted for the thousandth time and drank, all of us reaching at the same time for the nearest chaser.

I was talking and she was talking and I didn't know her name or even understand it after asking twice. Another glass was knocked over by an over-zealous handshake and we were all thrown into alarm until one of the girls threw a handful of napkins on top of the spill to mop up the mess, at which point the party continued in such a way it was hard to comprehend what any of us were going on about. But it seemed like whatever it was, it was just right. Around the kitchen table it was hilarious and as the girl next to me started laughing I felt almost bold enough to stick my tongue in her mouth right there. At the kitchen counter where more drinks were being mixed it made so much sense that I heard my brother give an animated 'You're so right man!'

Two dutches were being passed around the room in the kind of rotation where after one was puffed, puffed, and passed, it would only be a minute or so before someone would nudge me to take the other one. I was getting carried away with myself. Especially the way the room was spinning. I inhaled deep like oxygen and passed it to the girl next to me. As I exhaled, I started sinking into myself as the table grew taller and taller above my head. I looked at Bobby, my brother, and everyone around me, all seeming to still be having a good time and, not wanting to appear as some kind of lightweight, continued to inhale the weed and cigarette smoke like breathing was just a hobby. But after the third time the dynamic duo left my hands, I felt the room beginning to spin and something was bubbling. The room continued

to be merry as I tried to hold on, tried to remember the rule. Was it don't smoke after you drink or was it don't drink after you smoke? What about at the same time? I couldn't put the steps together as I left the hazy room mumbling I had to take a piss as the jubilant laughter and drunken conversation faded out behind me.

When I opened my eyes again, I was slumped against the toilet, a thin line of drool wetting the bottom of my chin. I wanted to go to sleep right there, just say fuck it, tuck me in. But it wasn't a minute later that I realized I wasn't alone. Leaning over the bathroom sink was AJ, a kid in my grade I knew since middle school. I watched him for a moment, trying to focus on the general shape of his body to steady the world. I wasn't sure if I had thrown up or not, but the more I kept my eyes open, the more I had to resist the urge to put my head back in the can. I closed my eyes some more, ignoring AJ and whatever he was doing five feet away from me, and tried to just concentrate on not having the spins. But the effort made me feel even more fucked up. So I opened my eyes and this time tried to focus on his sneakers. I wanted to tell him to get out, but I felt any effort to speak would make me puke.

In my fucked up state of mind, I tried to recall my steps. I could remember seeing the blurry stumble I made up the stairs to the nearest bathroom. It was occupied, which brought me into Bobby's parents' bedroom where I now sat, in the master bathroom. Nobody was supposed to be there under Bobby's orders, and though I knew he wouldn't mind if I was in there, I was sure Bobby would not approve of AJ being anywhere near his parents' bedroom. I'm not saying AJ

was a bad kid or a thief or anything, but he was fucked up. Everyone in our grade knew he was fucked up. I didn't know why Bobby was friends with him.

"Yo," I heard myself say for no apparent reason.

"Hey, Kid!" he said cheerfully, "you awake now?"

"What the fuck are you doin in here?" I slurred still leaning against the porcelain.

"I didn't want to bother you, you looked so peaceful," and then he gave a high-pitched giggle.

"Did I throw up?" I asked now looking up to find his eyes. But he was busy doing something on the marble counter.

"I don't think so. But I don't know how long you've been up here."

"What time is it?"

He didn't answer. Instead he took a dollar bill out of his pocket and rolled it up and snorted in deep, using his other finger to close the open nasal passage. He coughed and breathed out deep, as if in relief.

"Don't know," he replied. He sat on the edge of the bathtub next to me, lit a cigarette and made himself comfortable.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I asked feeling annoyed he wasn't leaving.

"Flying baby. I'm flying high as a bird," he said to himself as he flapped his invisible wings. Fucking idiot, I thought to myself. Couldn't you come up with a better metaphor for doing drugs?

"Where's Bobby?"

"I think he's with Katy, in his room."

"Shit. Who's watching the house?"

"Don't worry about it," he dragged from his cigarette and blew all in my face without realizing it, "Almost everyone's gone. Some people are passed out on the couch."

“Nobody’s awake?”

“Some people are. They’re just hanging out.”

I had a bad feeling. I didn’t like that motherfucker all up in my space, in Bobby’s parents’ bathroom, Bobby god knows where, and everyone else probably passed out. I didn’t like it at all. I tried to get up, but the effort finally made me break and a surge of coke and foul tasting alcohol splurged out of my mouth and out of my nose, burning my nostrils and making my eyes tear. I felt that dumb bastard slapping me on my back as if to help me vomit.

“That’s it, let it all go,” he said. His voice was calm, almost maternal. And I continued to vomit profusely under his gentle encouragement.

“You ever think about where you’re going in life, Kid?”

What the fuck? I thought. But I said nothing and instead continued to gag the last remains of what was in my stomach and liver and let it all hang with a long string of drool connecting my mouth to the toilet water.

“What?” I managed to echo from inside the bowl.

“I mean like, where are you going to go, you know? What are your dreams?”

“I don’t give a fuck right now,” I sat back up and wiped my mouth with my sleeve. I looked at him, still teary eyed and saw he was gazing happily at the ceiling. He got up and flushed the toilet for me.

“Thanks,” I mumbled and finally drew the strength from my own self-disgust to get up and rinse out my mouth and wash my face. I turned the faucet on full blast and splashed the cold water onto my face. The water did wonders for me and I began to feel better instantly. But I still couldn’t regain hold of gravity as I studied my reflection in the mirror.

“You know, you’re a pretty good looking guy, Kid.”

I felt the skin on the back of my neck prickle and turned to look at him to see if he was going to try and kiss me on some gay-shit.

“I ain’t no faggot,” he said roaring with sudden laughter, “I’m just saying. Forget it. Don’t tell anyone I said that.”

“You got fucking problems,” I told him. And then as I looked back down at the sink, I noticed a small plastic packet. Empty.

“What the fuck is this?” I asked flinging it at him and then watching as it floated harmlessly to the floor like an autumn leaf.

“I know you like to smoke weed Kid,” he said picking up the packet and putting it in his pocket, “but weed ain’t shit compared to this.”

I now turned and faced him completely, watching him sit back down as ash fell all over the floor. He took no notice of the mess. He was looking at me with that same blissful expression, smiling, as if we were now sharing a secret.

“What is it?” I asked steadily.

“Dope. White horse. *Heroin*,” he said emphasizing its true name, and with that he leaned back in satisfaction, falling into the tub, reaching out and grabbing the shower curtain on his way down, pulling it down ring by ring until it fell and draped him like a blanket. I could see him laughing at himself under the pink shroud.

“I don’t fuck with that shit,” I said.

“Yo Kid, help me up,” he said laughing, reaching around blindly trying to take the curtain off himself. “Yo Kid!”

I left him alone in the bathroom, still calling my name.

“Yo Kid, I was looking for you. Where the fuck you been?”

I turned at the bottom of the stairs and saw Dimes walking out of Bobby’s room.

“Yo, what’s up Dimes,” I said giving him a pound and a hug. In a weird way, I was relieved to see him. I felt like if he was here, there wouldn’t be any bullshit going on.

“Is Bobby in there?” I asked confused. I had no idea what was going on. It felt as if I had awoken into some kind of strange dream where everyone who was there before was now asleep or gone, and those who were awake were ghosts walking the house after-hours.

“Yeah. We just smoked a little bit. He in there with his girl now though. You know how it is, when it’s time to go, it’s time to go.”

“What’re you doing here?” I asked as we walked together into the kitchen, his hand still on my shoulder.

“Ah man, your boy was looking for trees, you know I’m saying? You know how I do. I’m always there whenever you should call.”

We sat down at the kitchen table. The kitchen was trashed. There were glasses and cups everywhere. A handle of rum and a handle of vodka sat there empty in the middle of the table like defeated giants. Broken tortilla chips were scattered all over the floor, paper-plates with microwaved remnants of something or other sat in still wet puddles of beer and liquor amongst the spillings of blunt guts- the product of drunkenness and munchies.

“But where have you *been*? I haven’t seen you in mad long.”

Dimes didn’t come back to school after Christmas Break. I looked at the kitchen clock. It read 1:40. Dimes lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair smoking for a minute before he answered me. I could feel my own voice echo in the emptiness of that house.

“I’m on my grind Kid. Making that money. Just living I guess.”

“You alright though?”

“Shit, your man cool as a fan. Don’t worry about me Kid. Besides, I should be asking you. You looking kind of pale, son.”

“I fucking threw up. I drank too much. Been drinking since 8 o’clock.”

“No doubt,” he said chuckling. It was good to see him again. But I still felt sick.

“Yo, come on. Let’s get you some fresh air. You’re looking like you about to hurl again,” Dimes said rising from the table.

I nodded at his suggestion and followed him to the front door. The bluish-silver moonlight bathed us in its lunar luminescence as we sat down on the top steps of the front porch and took deep breaths of the winter night.

“Yo, I’m glad to see you,” I said to him still slightly drunken.

He exhaled and sort of snorted and nodded in amusement and offered the roach to me. I hesitated for a moment, but decided it would make me feel better and accepted pinching the roach with my slowly freezing fingertips.

“What’s up with that girl?” he asked nudging me lightly.

I let the question linger for a moment as I hit and inhaled and held the hit until tiny rainbows exploded in the darkness. The icy wind began to cut across us at a sharp angle and I watched the flurries suddenly pick up into a chaotic tribal dance under a streetlight. It had been several weeks since I had gone to church. Several weeks since I had let myself think of her.

“I don’t know,” I said faintly.

There was a pause and I could feel him studying the distance I was staring into. The wind blew against my cheek as I held in another hit and all I could see was the embers scorching the icy wind I contemplated my own words.

“What’re you waiting for?”

“I don’t know.”

Another moment of winter silence passed. The night was full of those, winter silences. Like we both knew things the other didn’t want to say, and so we just let the winter talk for us instead, like the return of the wind and the distant sound of bells dancing on somebody’s front porch far away. I looked at him for a minute and nodded thoughtfully. He was studying the shadows of trees and the layer of pure white lining the darkness, blowing out smoke slowly from the side of his mouth.

We hit that shit to the bitter end, then stepped it into the snow. Our dead end street was empty and the night was silent and neither of us wanted to say it, so neither of us said anything, but the night looked kind of pretty, like a winter wonderland. We lit up Newports instead and bitched about the cold. I guess some things just can’t be expressed properly in the moment. I needed to find my brother and go home.

“Yo man, you seen my brother?”

He started laughing.

“Yeah, I seen your brother. *You* need to see your brother. He face down, son. Word up!”

“Where?” I said feeling relieved, relieved that he still existed in this strange dream world.

“Downstairs. I think he was waiting for the bathroom and passed out or something. Anyway, he was knocked out next to the bathroom door. Your brother is shot the fuck out, son. You need to take him home.”

“I should.”

“Come on, I’ll help you get his monkey-ass up.”

We walked back inside and went downstairs and saw my brother exactly as Dimes had described him. Face-down like a beached whale, both arms at his sides. It took both of us with jabs and other methods

of softly violent rousing to wake his ass up. He gave a moan and looked at me without opening his eyes and said, let's go.

Back into the winter night, the moon was shining a brilliant silver crescent, the sky was a dark blue, but seemed so filled with light that it glowed. The stars twinkled faintly beyond the streetlights as me and my brother stumbled together out into the driveway, Dimes following slowly behind us, smoking his cigarette and looking up into the heavens.

"Fucking beautiful," I heard Dimes say to himself.

"What're you going to do?" I asked.

"I got my whip out front," he said nodding to the beat-up Acura Legend parked down the street. "I'm gonna chill out here for a minute and then take off."

I wanted to ask him where he was going to go, but I knew that I shouldn't. So I took his hand and said I would call him later, and we gave each other a quick pound letting the winter dust rise from our backs and blow free into the suddenly fierce night wind. My brother and I walked up the snowy hill, and when I turned around to glance back at the driveway, he was gone.

Chapter Twelve

Wet Dreams

I rode right up onto the grass under her summer window and looked up to her bedroom light glowing dim like the only fire still breathing in an infinite night.

As I leaned my bike against the side of her house, I moved on a creep like a thief to the back of the house. The moonlight bathed the crisp blades of grass in silvery tones and midnight stretched before me as I proceeded to the glass door. I put my hand to my chest, feeling my heartbeat, trying to remember if I had ever been there before.

I tapped on the glass door softly, waiting for the curtains to rustle and part- that moment when she would open the door with a finger to her lips- that moment when I would want to kiss her and would feel her hand lead me through her kitchen instead.

“Take off your shoes”, she whispered, and I followed her soft steps through the tile and past the living room where there were family photos and plastic on the couches, up the steps and I watched her ass tip-toe up the stairs. I felt myself ticking in my jeans, anxious to kiss her lips and let my fingertips trickle down from her back to her stomach to her softest places, watch her panties drop satin to her

thighs to her knees to a silky little tangle around her ankles she could step out of.

When we entered her room, she closed the door behind her with the knob turned so there would be not even a click to awaken any souls from the depths of the dark hallway that was her parents unaware of a male presence in their daughter's room. She slowly released her hold on the doorknob and I stood behind her with Nikes still in my hand just watching her.

As she turned around, she smiled and exhaled slowly as if she were holding her breath the whole time. Maybe I was too. For this moment. Standing here, inside her bedroom. With her. Before she would take two steps forward and put her arms around my neck. I dropped my shoes and they fell silently onto her floor as I placed my hands on her hips, and kissed her.

It was still the middle of the night, but a steady drizzle woke me up shivering. I sat there trying to absorb the pain of tiny raindrops and go back to the sweetest dream for at least one moment, to escape that concrete place and go back into her soft bed, back onto her pillow where I could lay my head and touch her long black hair. But it was useless. I became wide awake. Why was it always summer in my dreams with her? I sat up and hugged myself sitting on the ground in an alleyway, in a neighborhood I had wandered to in the insomnia of my journey, running away.

So, let me get this straight. She even followed you to your dreams?

Yes, especially in my dreams.

You'll have to excuse me. I just find it surprising to hear the Shogun of Harlem talk about romance.

Do not I bleed Johnny? Shogun I may be, but the love of a woman do I also need.

Well ladies and gentlemen, that should quell the rumors that Shon-uff was gay.

(I begin to draw my sword.) What rumors?

Take it easy there, champ (Johnny Farter adds nervously) you're in show-biz now. Everyone is gay.

Then I shall be the gayest of them all!

So let's recap, for the folks at home just tuning in. You got into some trouble, well, I should say, a lot of trouble, with the law.

Yes, one of my darkest hours.

And you then ran away, is that correct?

Yes.

Why would the Shogun of Harlem run away? It seems a bit out of character.

Johnny, I am like all men. And like all great men, there are times when you must retreat into the wilderness, escape the world that you know, and enter a state of solitude.

Sort of, uh, finding yourself, is that it?

Yes, I suppose you could say that.

So what did you discover about yourself during this time of retreat and solitude?

I do not enjoy the rain.

Chapter Thirteen

Art Class

I dreamt of her during class, even tried to imagine her naked, drawing that luscious body shape while my mind wandered in the back of the room before my embarrassment caused me to scribble furiously, clothing a sexy girl in a lead-pencil spider-web skirt. Clearly, the rain was getting to me.

It was getting harder and harder to stay in school those days. It was the worst time of the year. That time between March and April everything is still grey and cold and wet and dreary and the whole world is waiting impatiently to see the tiny green buds open up again. When the magic of winter is over, it's just muddy grass and dead leaves and the year seems like it just started and summer is nowhere in sight.

ISS was starting to get over-crowded. On one particular Thursday in April, I was led by the Man to the room where the cupboards are chained and the drawers are locked. As he opened the door, I saw the room was full. There were some familiar faces, and others I had never seen in lock-down before.

“Word life,” I said slapping the hands of Bosky and Johnny as I sat down at our table. I glanced around at the room full of other juvenile delinquents. Some new faces had actually brought their books with

them. I figured them for freshmen; they didn't know the score. The whole point of ISS was to *not* do work. The best way to kill time in lock-down was to draw. It was in that room of dusty magazine stacks and broken desks that we would stay for the whole day and pour all that pent-up adolescent misunderstood poetic shit onto paper and shade it all in with the psychedelic flows of Prisma-Color pencils until it hurt our motherfucking hands. That morning, Bosky was in continuation of an insanely detailed city of mutants and circus-freaks. I think he must've spent several weeks of ISS time working on that one picture. And because of the craziness going on in his imaginary carnival of dopes and half-animal city slum dwellers, he spent an hour a week talking with Dr. Francine, the school psychologist. Johnny was drawing anime girls on some strange alien landscape with block graffiti sprouting out of the ground like trees. I was drawing a series of images which showed the metamorphosis of a human fetus into a .38 revolver.

ISS wasn't just a place for the no-shows. It was where they landed you when they just didn't know what to do with you, to take you out of population for awhile to see if the walls could do you some good. You had your stoners, your loners, your punks, your perverts, your pickers, and your pushers. A bunch of anarchists trapped in one room.

We were allowed three bathroom breaks throughout the day. Like a chain-gang, we marched down the hallway together while the guard waited outside the bathroom for us to do our business. We were also allowed to buy a lunch and bring it back to the ISS room. It was during those breaks in the hallway, in the bathroom and quietly to each other on the cafeteria line that we would talk our usual shit and otherwise spread whatever news we had heard. There's always fresh rumors and information floating around for the price of an extra cigarette.

“Yo Kid, you still talk to Cooper?”

“Bobby?”

He took a drag of our shared cigarette and nodded.

“Yeah. Why?”

I saw Johnny hesitate. He wasn't a talker and definitely not the type to stick his nose where it didn't belong. But he always seemed to be around when shit happened. If a fight broke out in the middle of the hallway, and someone took a snapshot, you would see Johnny somewhere blurred in the background looking on with a cool indifferent expression on his face while everyone else would be screaming and getting excited.

“Just tell me.” I insisted.

“I'm only saying this because he's your boy...” he said with returning hesitance. He waited until we heard the rest of the ISS chain-gang empty out of the bathroom and into the hallway. As he broke it down I could see the scene unfold.

Johnny is riding in the backseat of Big Lou's Caprice, Frankie rides shotgun. They're listening to Liquid Swords as they pull up into the Lower Dunkin parking lot. The traffic proceeds in light volume at the intersection at the late hour. Inside the parking lot there are several parked cars with their headlights on or off, some of them running, some of the engine sitting silently with shady figures chilling inside them. Big Lou waits impatiently for his guy to come up to the passenger-side window as his beeper continues to vibrate. Big Lou says something smart that makes them all chuckle as Frankie pulls the tinted window down a quarter to peep the scene with a gangster lean and let his cigarette smoke flow out into the night. They just got done burning, so the interior of the cab smells like smoke. Johnny says he needs to get a drink. Lou asks him to get him something while he's in there. Johnny checks to see if Frankie wants a Snapple or something. Frankie says he's cool, but he will probably

change his mind when Johnny gets back and sip on one of their drinks while Lou complains, why didn't you just get a fucking drink?

Johnny gets out of the car stoned. He glances around for undercover agents as he walks to the brilliant glowing light of the Dunkin Donuts window. He looks at the streetlights pulsating and walks past a few of the dope-heads that hang out there. He passes by them with his usual indifference. They notice and recognize him, and quiet down a notch as he passes. Inside Dunkin, Johnny selects two drinks for Big Lou and himself, and considers getting a third for Frankie. He decides to get two, because he doesn't want to think too much about Frankie's thirst. Let Frankie's mother worry about his thirst. He notices Bobby sitting with an attractive Spanish-looking brunette at a table. Between them they are sharing two donuts. A few bites have been taken, and neither of them seems interested in the cream that slowly oozes onto the napkin. They have the vacant look in their eyes that dopers get when they start coming down. Bobby's arm is around the girl's shoulders. She is saying something to him quietly as she looks out the window. Bobby doesn't seem to be listening.

Johnny pays for the drinks and walks back outside. He sees the loiterers notice him again and makes his way to pass by with the same indifference to their presence. They stay in that parking lot all night until they either go home or find more drugs. It is their way of life. Suddenly, AJ calls his name. Johnny is annoyed that someone would call him out by name in that scene. He continues to walk. AJ catches up with him and walks with him and attempts small talk for a few seconds before giving up and asks if Lou is with him. Johnny replies 'yes'. AJ asks if Lou has any dope. Johnny stops and tells him no and coolly warns AJ not to call out his name in a parking lot again. AJ apologizes and asks Johnny if he could ask Lou for him. Johnny ignores the request knowing a junkie never stops asking, even when they hear 'no'. A junkie will always

believe that somehow that 'no' could be transformed into a 'yes' with enough persistence. Johnny gets back into the car. Lou is counting some money, annoyed that his customers cannot simply bring twenty dollar bills. I'm not giving this kid another goddamn bag. You see this shit? He gave me singles. What the fuck do I look like? You got my drink? Lou twists the cap on his drink and takes a long smooth pour down the hatch. As the Caprice rolls back off into the night, Frankie asks Lou for a sip of his drink.

I nodded my head in contemplation at the end of Johnny's story. We walked out of the smoky bathroom and rejoined the rest of our chain-gang. As we marched, I zoned out from the others making jokes in the hallway. Was Bobby doing heroin? Since when was Bobby doing heroin? And then it started coming together- AJ.

As our group walked towards the cafeteria, I stared dumbly into space putting the pieces together. I remembered that night I saw AJ in Bobby's bathroom breaking apart a packet on the sink. That glazed expression on his face. That false sense of whatever the fuck he was feeling emanating towards me in strange vibrations. And I could see now that Bobby had gotten caught up. I knew that he and AJ had begun hanging out more since he started dating Katy. Who knows how far she was in? But I was sure Bobby was right there with her.

I didn't want to believe my friend was doing heroin. I didn't want to believe that he wouldn't tell me. Had we drifted so far?

History, something...

I don't know how my brother managed to keep his faith all during that time. Kept on trying to convince me to go to those Christian Club meetings all through spring when football was over. And he kept hanging out at Friday night service, spent Sundays with our church friends playing basketball and going to diners.

I watched Bassanio and La Famila get into a beef with Seung-Jee's brother Young-Su when he started coming back to school. He spoke no English and had nothing but contempt for Americans. In fact, that was the only English phrase he ever bothered to learn. *Fuck you American!* Young-Su was gang-related in Flushing. The beef continued for a week until Friday during lunchtime, a van full of Korean gangsters from Queens showed up in the parking lot. I heard they had guns. A couple of them even came into the school and walked the hallways staring down all that they saw, laughing coldly afterward. Nobody did a thing. La Famila stayed within the confines of their cafeteria corner talking a whole lot of mess but no one moving. That was about the time I saw *Moresbigae* for the first time, closing my eyes with the luminescence of piano keys raining on my forehead.

You need to go to church. Believe me I heard it from my mother. But after Sammy Chang got caught stealing cars in the church parking lot, she relented, figuring I would only embarrass her with my own act of crime if she kept forcing me to go. I went to the summer retreat anyhow. Those were always fun. You could really fall in love with a girl at one of those things. Just ask Henry.

They called me Master-jipo because I was good at stealing. They called me Turtle because I talked slow like the old turtle in the Tootsie-roll pop commercials. 80's babies know what I'm talking about. There's a lot of things your ass will never know.

Chapter Fourteen

Fly

I look over at my brother with the blunt hanging from his teeth, plumes of marijuana smoke billowing from his smile.

“What’re you grinning about?”

“Damn, what the fuck kind of weed is this? I think I’m fucking hallucinating man.”

“Do you want me to drive?”

“I just, man, I’m getting all these flashbacks listening to this tape right now. It’s awesome!”

“Damn, me too. That’s why we’re brothers; we’re like, always on the same page.”

“Yeah man. Especially when we’re high I feel like.”

We laugh at that.

I’m going to miss my brother. But we’re only about happiness tonight. He deserved it. After seeing him the ways that I’ve seen him sometimes through a window watching him. The night he finally got to see, the celebration that he fantasized about during those lonely nights running suicides up and down our street. This was the night he told me would solidify his freedom. This was the night he always wanted, the night when he could get drunk with the boys on Broad

Avenue in the bar we knew so well throughout high-school, to sing in a karaoke room until they kick us out, then drive home piss drunk and we'll smoke a fat blunt rolled with nothing but haze and get high as a motherfucker on our porch until there's nothing left. That's how he wanted to go out, and he could finally kiss our little town goodbye pack his bags and

Fly.

Chapter Fifteen

Koreans

It was 19seventy-something when they flew across the water
in a plane holding their daughter.

Hands squeezed so tight.

The excitement of my father's imagination
brought me to this life.

My father set up shop right there on Main Street. Like the sound of a steel train that sang on the tracks across the way, the smell of dry-cleaned clothes was the background to his life sweat and tears. I can close my eyes and still see inside that old store. From the late 70's to the day it closed, nothing really changed. There was still that little fitting room where my mom would fit you with her safety pins and measuring tape, that old sign that claimed if you didn't pick up your clothes in 30 days, we weren't responsible. There were a lot of people who never came back for their clothes. My dad usually donated those clothes to our family closet; me and my brother have worn those lost jackets more than a few times. I can still see my father in a cloud of steam with a towel around his neck fiddling with pipes and gauges. My mother cooking *miyo guk* on the hotplate with pins in her hair.

Korean AM radio news crackling in a dusty corner, the assorted cookie tins and boxes filled with every color button, my sisters holding wet rags trying to clean a tarnished mirror that somehow grew dirtier with the effort. My brother and I chasing each other between great racks of suits, coats and dresses and there were people outside our window in the winter streets giving out the holy message hollering THE END IS NEAR! REPENT FOR THE END IS NEAR!

Straight 80's baby like Technicolor cartoons on a box television set catching white lines and static. Things were a lot better back then, my mom says. I guess it's really a matter of perspective. Because all she remembers is putting bows in her daughters' hair and tucking me and my brother into our Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles underwear. She would take us to elementary and pre-school and then go to work, pick us up from school, cook dinner and at night go to church. The only thing that made my mom happy was being a mom. She said things were better in the 80's, even though television and the crack-heads will tell you it was crazy, but she couldn't fully understand the magnitude of a crack epidemic in the ghetto like she couldn't read the Crip graffiti that laced the side of our store, and it was my dad who closed alone at seven, when the freaks would begin to roam and the steel curtains were drawn, thugs hustling in our parking lot from dusk till dawn. But a few years after me and my brother were born, we moved to a place my mother and father saved sweated and froze for. A home on a street where the flowers grew, the scene was lush and an ordinary kind of beautiful. In the suburbs, people care about their lawns. A swing-set and a driveway. For a wood-grain wagon we called Moon-Star because of all the dents. My sisters had Care-Bears and Barbie dolls, thick girly pencil cases and homework. Me and my brother were blowing out candles on a birthday cake. Los Angeles was set on fire. My dad nods to passerby's and exhales smoke from another Kent cigarette.

My father lost his store about six months ago. I wonder if he lost a part of himself as well. We don't bother clearing the dishes for my mother as we never do, and sometimes I resent his lack of affection for her. I try to stand up and hug my mother sometimes. As a son should. As I wish my father would. But what can I say? He gave his life for me and my brother and sisters and watched all his children walk with caps and gowns because of that. But I can't help but wonder if he has regrets sometimes. Does he look back and close his eyes to envision the beaches he could've awakened to instead of a humble store on a corner in the ghetto. I tell him don't worry about it, but he knows what I mean when I get flustered trying to even talk at all. When I really mean thank you. But we're men. How can we express these things properly? We don't even speak the same language. Literally. We curse at each other a lot for this reason. But he knows and I know its all love. And I guess I was born just because.

My mom said to me once that life is always a struggle. When it's not a struggle for money, it's a struggle for love and always one thing or another. I always wished that I could take her pain away. What else could I do but give her aching shoulders an occasional massage and read next to her on the couch. Eat all the food she cooked for me and imitate my father with a deep grunt of satisfaction from the pit of my soul, saying *chal moh gub sum ni dab!* And leave the table to watch TV while she cleared the dishes. Yeah, in some ways I'm a good son. For what I lacked in grades and obedience, I make up for in these areas to bring sunshine to our mornings when we drink coffee at the kitchen

table and I dream out loud about the mansion I'm going to buy for her once I get rich and successful. And I wish God would take all her pain away. But instead, God gave all those things to me.

I can't describe the smell of old air freshener and damp blue velvet inside that old blue Reliant, but that's the best way to describe the man. My father was listening to the static of a barely comprehensible Korean AM news broadcast as we inched along the bumper to bumper, rain diddling the endless miles of commercial congestion, the cemetery next to exit 145. Rain, cursing, honking, followed by angry high beam provocative hand signs. Riding in the passenger-side, I remember using my fingertips to paint pictures on a foggy window. In the back of my mind I could hear my father ramble. My father cleared his throat and said something.

What? I said.

He lowered the volume and the air grew thick. *Study hard...* I heard him saying in Korean... *I'm poor... nobmu-shim-dub-rob... study hard...you don't want to pump gas...*

he paused to ask if I understood what he was saying and I refrained momentarily from using my pointer to paint pictures on the fogged glass and gave him the yeah yeahs. He hissed backwards, something you learn to do if you're Korean and have kids. He would then search for broken English, give up and continue in Korean...

how will you find a wife pumping gas...your friends won't be there for you if you fuck up...study hard...

I pressed the button and my face was no longer hidden by overcast reflections on the window and simultaneously I watched my fingertip masterpiece disappear forever.

As I grew up, these were the things my father said to me. I watched his dream of flying sacrifice itself into my flight. I heard him washing his face in the early morning light as I slept. In words he can't under-

stand I'm going to tell him I was just flying kind of like the way that you flew. With great expectations and a heart raw and tough for when it all turns out to be something only God could imagine.

New Jersey, you could stay your whole life in one place and be happy like a rock, just bearing the weather and growing old with mossy stains forever searching for a North Star. I promise.

When you see me falling, you'll find something shining in the sky. Lord knows the wind would take me far away from home. Yes, I am flying away, towards a destiny, away from all these things I've lost. These things that make me leave everything else far behind. And I bring to life the death of this monster that I've held inside.

When I fly too close to the sun, burning back down to Earth with fire like Icarus. Dreams of touching God this way. The ashes from the feathers fall into the sea. Put out the fire. And it's the sky that drowns me. People have dreams of touching God this way.

My brother quit the football team after freshman year and trained his knuckles on an iron plate instead. In the summer night, he ran his nightly suicides with no shirt on, raining sweat onto the bluish orange illuminated summer streets. He shadowboxed all night under the streetlight while I sat close by on the curb, chain-smoking and smacking mosquitoes. We were always in the street during those summer nights. When we just couldn't take it anymore, our mother chasing us out of the house throwing Bibles and SAT workbooks on the lawn. My brother never stopped dribbling his basketball. I'd drink a bottle of Robitussin and talk shit, cough syrup tripping before I'd fall.

I'd dream of becoming famous while we'd ride, just to ease my mind and pass the time- to see my name never fading from the concrete walls and the tracks that connect these New Jersey train stations, the train tracks looking like a cemetery of spray-cans. I'm trying to live forever someday.

I remember running. I remember walking to the bus stop from my house promising I was never coming back. I was really looking for something in those summer streets. Finding myself in the daily crossings of the street under the shoes that hang from telephone wires and traffic lights that guide you past corners of desire. No streetcar to get there. Didn't pack shit for tomorrow. Didn't tell a soul. Didn't care about the destination, I just rode up the bus somewhere up north and walked around in strange neighborhoods all during those nights, getting on and off the bus at random, just to see where God would take me.

I remember sleeping on a sidewalk, lying there on the concrete in that green alley, the ferns and ivy dripping rain in the night. I prayed nights like that.

You need to go to church. Believe me I heard it from my mother. But after Sammy Chang got caught stealing cars in the church parking lot, she relented, figuring I would only embarrass her with my own act of crime if she kept forcing me to go. I went to the summer retreat anyhow. Those were always fun. You could really fall in love with a girl at one of those things. Just ask Henry.

They called me Master-jipo because I was good at stealing. They called me Turtle because I talked slow like the old turtle in the Tootsie-roll pop commercials. 80's babies know what I'm talking about. There's a lot of things your ass will never know.

I remember watching November pass through my bedroom window, the way me and my brother would put on our socks and shoes

and ninja into the night's changing seasons just to talk about the girls we liked at school and at church, watching the autumn leaves catch the smoke from our cigarettes burning away the time that eventually became ashes themselves, disappearing with the wind into the once blue air, midnight bringing the first snows in the darkness, the white breath of laughter dancing away from us, when the world turns to winter and thorns grow on the branches and we never come back.

A year later, Dimes would enter the Essex County prison system with the fierce longing for opiates and surrender to enter his veins. He hung himself in his jail-cell.

Got me thinking about Noodle. An adopted Korean kid, about two years younger than myself, a kid I used to play with in elementary school. Last I heard, he dropped out of high school and hung around Dunkin Donuts on the lower side of the avenue wearing long-sleeved T's in the summer because of where he'd been, tracks on his arms, buses he'd been taking into the Bricks to find that same sort of surrender. A bus ride up Bloomfield Avenue will get you a stairway in a stamped plastic envelope.

I didn't play sports and didn't fuck with needles. I saw *Requiem for a Dream* before I got into any of that junk nonsense- that movie is more effective than a ten year D.A.R.E program. I smoked a lot of weed and waited for the day I would run away for life; robbing banks, escaping in a non-descript Cadillac with the top down, my beautiful accomplice with her top down- you know, daydreams like that.

I'm not going to act like it was so bad. I was accepted and hung with the white boys- wandered from group to group and had good times in every circle.

But damn, I was really wandering.

I watch the streets through the passenger-side of a New Jersey drive riding with the windows down halfway. Holding in the smoke until I can't see anymore, then letting it all go watching the colors come back to me with milk spelling my mood through the nostrils. Feeling kind of lost in the song playing, this tape that helped us get by on those rides, on a road to fame or some kind of reasonable state of happiness.

How do you know this life isn't a dream? I once asked my brother. We were sitting in the swings with the light of the sunset breaking through the trees, my shoes dangling just above the dirt, his were fully planted.

Because it isn't, he said.

But how do I know?

You just do, he said.

I think about God when I wake up. Moments of yesterday with my brother taking high rides underneath the trees showering the streets with shimmering shadows that breathe, to the sunset, purple in its most faraway and distant places, blue broken by the pink pollution that paints pictures in the sky, streets under heaven and the decent lives that live in them. Live from Essex County, fuck it I'm drifting...

There was darkness. There were windows. There was music.

"Yo, this shit is done?"

"This shit is done. We're here anyways."

The blunt was pinched shut and became a roach flying out the crack of the window to lie somewhere in the street amongst the litter. My brother and I rolled onto the scene, flying through the streets with the taste of invincibility on our cotton lips. We arrived at

Broad Avenue parallel parking somewhat diagonally. Good enough. Love that moment when the bright storefront lights mirror off your window- breaking away as you open your door. Step out into the night and breath the freedom, my friend. I'm pretty sure that's one of the best parts. The stars were the night smiling. We were very stoned.

We walked like gangsters into the dark entrance of the bar where a lovely girl in black led us further into candlelight. We gave the bartender the old nod and followed the girl's light footsteps while she made her decision like duck-duck-goose. She placed our menus down and disappeared with a toss of her dark red Sassoon. It's a Korean ballad. I swear it's in our blood to be sentimental like this. Looking for a concubine or two to stay out with and a wife to call home. Those are the sides of the rippling ribbon tied n the hair of Asian women. Sweet games of chase.

The bar was dim and decorated with small candles glowing softly in glass bowls. Atmosphere like black cherry, we laid back smooth and relaxed like cognac and the blues. We lit our cigarettes with the candle and slouched a little further into our seats. I tipped the pitcher, pouring my brother's glass first, and then my own. The amber nectar cascaded and foamed over the frosty lip. A toast to the ones wandering- walk away from it all, I swear it'll get better.

Most of the kids in that bar were like us, toasting friendship and saying dramatic goodbyes before they went off to college or wherever their travels would take them. You got to love that one over-emotional girl who always cries quietly and needs to be comforted in the bathroom. Maybe all the girls will be crying. But its all love, you got to feel good with that. The strong promises of brothers, whether blood or not, make a person really want to live another year or two- just to do it all over again in different clothes and the same jubilant voices. Chopsticks and shot glasses played percussion to that Korean ballad.

Damn, I wonder if Dimes had ever been to Broad Avenue.

Chapter Sixteen

Graduation

The song ends, then *click click* of the tape flipping sides. I look over at my brother with the blunt hanging from his teeth, plumes of marijuana smoke billowing from his smile.

“What’re you grinning about?”

“Damn, what the fuck kind of weed is this? I think I’m fucking hallucinating man.”

“Do you want me to drive?”

“I just, man, I’m getting all these flashbacks listening to this tape right now. It’s awesome!”

“Damn, me too. That’s why we’re brothers; we’re like, always on the same page.”

“Yeah man. Especially when we’re high I feel like.”

We laugh at that.

I’m going to miss my brother. But we’re only about happiness tonight. He deserved it. After seeing him the ways that I’ve seen him sometimes through a window watching him. The night he finally got to see, the celebration that he fantasized about during those lonely nights running suicides up and down our street. This was the night he told me would solidify his freedom. This was the night he always

wanted, the night when he could get drunk with the boys on Broad Avenue in the bar we knew so well throughout high-school, to sing in a karaoke room until they kick us out, then drive home piss drunk and we'll smoke a fat blunt rolled with nothing but haze and get high as a motherfucker on our porch until there's nothing left. That's how he wanted to go out, and he could finally kiss our little town goodbye pack his bags and

Fly.

After that, me and my brother stopped confiding in each other for awhile. We merely became witnesses to the other's growing pains. He spent a lot of time locked up in our room. While I went to go hang out with friends after-school, he'd be up in our room talking to his diary. His diary was mostly a collection of scrap pieces of paper, an anthology of teenage angst taken to notebook paper, torn from the spiral wire, or else just sloppily ripped from some larger piece of paper that had nothing to do with those depressed confessions and kept all the pages of his diary inside a shoebox. Nobody was allowed to look inside that shoebox. He kept everything in that box. But I can tell you what was in there without ever having to look inside. We shared a room like we shared a womb and we been sleeping in the same walls most our lives.

On that Friday in November, I walked out to the schoolyard with my brother. I didn't want him to come with me. All I could taste was a premonition of disaster in my cigarette-stale breath, and all I could feel as we walked the doors into the cold autumn afternoon was the knife bumping against my ankle with every other step. Bassanio was outside by the Gate waiting with fellow La Familia member Meatball. Bassanio must've just got done working-out or something, because he was looking sweaty and diesel in his sweats, trying to get this thing over with before football practice. Meatball looked fat and full of contempt as usual.

I don't remember exactly what happened, it happened so fast. As we stood there before them on that asphalt, amidst the broken glass and fallen leaves, cigarette butts and discarded cigarette packs, some words were said. Meatball was jocking my brother on some old football memories. I could feel my brother tightening up as they ran their mouths on us, Wolverine growling deep inside of him; the adamantium claws about to burst from his steely knuckles and catch Meatball right in his double-chin.

I recall even less about what happened from then to then. But I started going off from the mouth, dumping curses all over the space between us. Before I knew it, my brother came in sailing with a flying side-kick, catching Bassanio in the jaw. He landed backwards on his hands, and I was already knocked on my ass, trying to regain focus in my vision. I sprang up as I saw Meatball throwing wrestling holds on my brother and found myself in a gorilla squeeze by Bassanio.

“Yo, how did you get your girl?”

My brother and I sat on the curb down the street on the corner so I could smoke a cigarette in peace without being yelled at by our mom and dad. There were plastic skeletons hanging from trees, plump pumpkins sitting on porches, autumn wreaths upon doors, the windows of the houses brightly lit with lamps and the flickering bluish glow of prime-time Tuesday at that after-supper hour in our quiet little neighborhood.

“I dunno. It just kind of happened. She wanted it more than I did, really.”

My brother was seeing a girl from church. Her name was Christine and she was a year older than us and she drove a really fast little red coupe. She picked him up every weekend and whisked him off to the movies where they could make-out without the prying eyes of other

kids from church spotting them. Church gossip was always hot and Christine had a very pure reputation.

“But I mean, what went down? What did you say?”

“Shit, I don’t know. We hardly talked at church, at first. Most of it went down online. You know how she is. She was like, all afraid of what people would think to see her talking to a boy at church like that.”

“She’s kind of prude, huh?”

“No way dude! She’s crazy. She’s just, I don’t know. She gets a lot of pressure from home.”

“Right, right.”

My brother dribbled the faded old basketball between his giant legs crisscrossing as he sat on the edge of the curb. The ball had completely lost its pebbly feel and the leather had gone baby soft and smooth from the countless nights we sat like that.

“So you talked to her online,” I said nodding.

“I’m telling you, bro. You should get her screen-name if you’re not going to call her. It’s a lot less awkward- for both of you. I mean, you have her number, but you haven’t called her yet, right?”

“I called. She didn’t pick up.”

“Did you call back?”

“No.”

“You gotta keep trying, dude. Effort. Effort is everything.”

“I dunno. I don’t think she sees me like that. I’m gonna press up on her all of sudden and then what? She’s not going to be there anymore and I’m gonna feel like a punk.”

“Dude, that’s not going to happen! She gave you her number so you could call her.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“I’m telling you. Effort is everything. Nothing worth having is just given to you. You got to fight for it.”

“What about Christine? She just fell out of the sky for you.”

“Christine? Yeah, she’s ok. But I don’t really love her or anything. I never lost sleep over her, you know... Remember Julianna?”

“Of course. You loved her.”

“I still do.”

“Really? You never talk about her anymore.”

My brother stopped dribbling his ball and signaled for me to give him a cigarette. I quickly lit one up for him and a fresh one for myself as well.

“Did I ever tell you I sent her a love poem?”

“What?! No, you never told me that.”

“I sent her an anonymous love poem once. I tracked her address down in the Youth Group directory and sent her a letter, with a love poem, and I put flower petals inside and everything.”

“*Goddamn*,” I whispered. “So what happened?”

“I think she knew it was me. I mean, I used to just stare at her, all the time. Like shamelessly!”

We laughed.

“There’s no way she couldn’t of known,” he continued, “and a week after, she approached me.”

“*Damn!*”

“Yeah. One day after service, she found me and was like ‘I need to talk to you’.”

“And?”

“Well, it just never happened. There were always too many people around.”

“Fuck, man.”

“I was too scared to let her know. I was afraid she was going to be pissed that I looked up her address and stuff.”

“That’s stupid! She was probably in love with you!”

“Yeah. I don’t know. She’s gone now. But who knows, maybe we’ll see each other again someday. And I’ll recite the lines and reveal myself to her.”

“That would be dope as hell.”

“Yeah man. But you see? Effort. Don’t be afraid. Just try. It’s all you can do.”

“I know. Fuck.”

My brother flicked his half-finished cigarette into the street and began dribbling his ball again.

“You gotta meet Henry’s friend Im-shi. This kid is like, the biggest *yangachi* I’ve ever met!” my brother exclaimed as we both chuckled.

“Dude, every time I see this kid, he’s got a different hair-style, his hair is like red one day and then the next time I see him he’s blond and shit,” my brother continued.

We were both laughing as I imagined this fool.

“And he’s not even a good-looking kid or anything, but he gets so many girls.”

“Really,” I asked perking up. “How does he do it?”

“Effort man. He tries *so freaking hard* to get girls. He has absolutely no shame!”

“What do you mean?”

“He’ll like, get a girl’s phone number from somebody else, and continually call her until finally she’s so annoyed she’ll pick up and talk to him. Or he’ll like, trick girls into meeting up with him!”

We started cracking up.

“And he’s not even good to them! He’ll throw them out as soon as he fucks them for a couple weeks, dude!”

I was dying at this point.

“It’s never like, a clean break either. He’ll be like ‘Fuck you, you whore!’ in public and shit!”

We started rolling on the ground with tears coming out of our eyes. I’m sure some old lady was looking out her windows ready to call the cops on us.

“What’s this kid’s deal?” I said trying to stop laughing.

“No one knows dude! That’s just who he is!”

My brother wiped a tear from his eye.

“I mean, I’ve never had a deep conversation with him or anything.”

“Oh God, that was good.”

“Yeah. So you see what I’m saying? Just be an asshole for this one girl if she’s worth it.”

“I already got a plan. I didn’t want to tell you though because I know you’re going to yell at me and tell me I’m going to get my ass arrested.”

“What is it?” my brother asked sharply, ready to give me a piece of his mind.

“I’m going to break into the school, bring her into the art room in the middle of the night when no one is there, and I’m going to paint her portrait.”

“What? Why? You’re fucking crazy! How?”

“She asked me to draw her something the first time I met her.”

“She was probably being cute man. That doesn’t mean-“

“Every time I see her, she asks me where her picture is. She’s not kidding.”

“I see. Huh. But why the high-school? Can’t you meet at her house or something?”

“One: because I don’t want to invite myself over to her house. Two: because I don’t have enough art supplies of my own to do this thing right. And three: because it’s fucking sexy.”

“You’re a fucking idiot.”

We came a long way since the nights we used to sit on the corner in the summer when it seemed like we had nowhere else to go. On the nights when it was just me and my brother, and we would talk endlessly to each other, because those were the nights we were so alone. My brother would shadowbox all night under the streetlight while I sat close by on the curb, chain-smoking and smacking mosquitoes. We were always in the street during those summer nights, when we just couldn’t take it anymore, our mother chasing us out of the house throwing Bibles and SAT workbooks on the lawn. I’d drink a bottle of Robitussin and talk shit, cough syrup tripping before I’d fall.

And I almost didn’t make it. I almost never came back. I guess I was love sick. But I’m going to lay my tears down gently, before I rock this bitch to sleep.

It was only hours ago that we left the house for the last time as high-school seniors. We took pictures in front of the fading paint of our house, the last of spring’s flowers slowly fading in our garden, the faded image of our little red hootie in the background. Before we came to the suburbs, we used to live in a ghetto apartment above the dry-cleaners that was the only right we had to passage in the American Dream. And the American Dream smells like stain-removing solutions soaked in steam. It smells like short-change getting closer and closer to putting the mortgage down. My father got to smell the smell of fresh-cut grass before the business took his sense of smell away. And we grew up there for as long as I can remember. In a neighborhood where the greenest grass is a love affair and a yellow bus paints the streets mornings when the drizzle is coming down softly on blue

rain-coats. It was a little place in the world surrounded by the woods in the back and the streets in the front and crazy sidewalk stepping horizontally catching us backwards on rollerblades. In my place of all places out of place in the world, the place I knew, a place for places never seen but easily recognized in a classic American photograph, trees shedding autumn and winter driveway snow, it was the old home we grew up in, the quiet street we shared with the Italians and Jews, the birds and the squirrels. And somehow, as we sat in our graduation gowns backing out the driveway in the car, it seemed to me as if we were moving away and never coming back.