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Lux ex Tenebris (Light from Darkness)

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“...lux ex tenebris.”
("Light from Darkness")

A Novel by David T. Boyd

Thesis Advisor: Lyn Di Iorio

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“Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing can ever be made”

Immanuel Kant 1724-1804
Book One: "Ab Irato"
December 7, 2006. 7:30pm. South Side.

A scoundrel hid behind the front door. He heard a car enter the driveway. His heart beat louder and faster with each second. Oxygen rushed to his brain and he saw stars dance before him; the knot in his stomach throbbed and ached. He became a statue in the darkness, his left hand a vice-grip as it clenched the baton above his head. He took a deep breath and held it as the doorknob turned; lips quivered, eyes opened so wide they felt as if they might pop out of his head. The air enveloped him with its thick, glueyness; time moved in slow motion.

The moment to attack had finally arrived.

***

Shane entered a quiet house; his son David was away visiting his grandparents overnight in Hyde Park. He placed his keys onto a small table and dropped a leather briefcase to the floor. He loosened his tie and was surprised by a tall, husky African-American man in a white shirt, black pants and a black mask standing in front of him.
The scoundrel finally exhaled.

"Good evening, Mr. Robinson," he hissed. A wild smile covered his beet-red face.

He brought down the baton with such force that it whistled, making a soft 'thunk' sound. Shane was unconscious before he hit the floor and the scoundrel let the baton drop and loomed over him like a lumberjack who'd just cut down a tree. Each meaty hand took an ankle and hauled Shane into the living room, where everything was ready.

He began whistling. He liked to whistle. It gave him pleasure.

***

An hour or so later Shane finally woke up. He tried to rub his eyes, but his wrists and ankles were tied in leather restraints. A ball gag was tightly strapped to his face. He tried his best to move, to escape the chair that had effectively become his prison, when he heard a voice from across the room.

"There's no escaping your fate, Mr. Robinson. You are indeed stuck here with me, so save your strength."

Shane stopped moving; his eyes fixed on his obscure captor. He was completely gripped with fear, shaking. Something on his forehead felt warm, his eyes burned as blood trickled from his wound.

Shane's captor rushed to his aide with a bottle of peroxide and a
paper towel, carefully wiping Shane's face.

"Sorry about that, Mr. Robinson, but this damn thing keeps bleeding. I guess I should watch my own strength, huh?"

Shane winced from the sting of the peroxide and gradually slid back into his chair. "There you go. Good as new."

The barrel of a .38 Special was pushed into Shane's forehead.

"I'm going to make a deal with you, Mr. Robinson. If you promise not to scream I'll remove your mouth guard so we can have ourselves a nice chat. However, if you do scream, Santa won't be coming down your chimney this or any other year. Do you understand?"

A visibly frightened Shane nodded, coughing as his unknown house guest removed the restraint, offered him water and returned to his seat, once more becoming swallowed up within his surroundings like a phantom nestled deep within the shadows.

"Who are you? Why are you doing this to me?" Shane stammered.

No answer. Instead the scoundrel dialed a number from a pre-paid cell phone, listened, then hung up, repeating this step several times until someone finally answered. "Hi there, good evening...yes ma'am, I do have a request...yes, would you play my favorite song for me?...it's 'Bang, Bang' by Nancy Sinatra...that's right...how long do you think that'll be?...an hour or so?...great, take your time...yes, you
too…goodnight!

He used a remote control to locate a particular radio station on Shane's BOSE surround system. "Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps" by Doris Day added some levity to the moment, though not much. Shane appeared baffled at his circumstance, not sure of what was happening nor why. This hulking man had attacked him in his own home and gave no reason for his intrusion. One thing he did know was he must never see his captor's face. If Shane did, he was a dead man.

The volume lowered and the scoundrel shifted in his chair. Again he crossed his legs, appearing stately and forthright, perhaps even Presidential. But Shane knew better.

"Let's set a few ground rules for the evening, Mr. Robinson. We're going to sit here and talk for a while. You are going to tell me why I'm here. Once you do, then you'll have to convince me why I shouldn't kill you tonight. If you are able to put together a truthful and convincing argument, I'll walk out of here and leave you with your life. If not, you die. Catch my drift?"

"How long do I have?" Shane asked.

The scoundrel leaned forward in his chair.

"You have until the song 'Bang, Bang' comes on the radio. For your sake, I hope you're successful."
He returned to his relaxed position.

"But that shouldn't be hard for you, since you're a defense attorney. Hell, since you've had such a successful career in screwing people, this should be a breeze. I think it'll be a lot of fun, don't you?"

He happily rubbed his gloved hands together, and as Shane tried to think his way out of this as the scoundrel began singing:

"So talk to me, Mr. Robinson - Jesus knows you've got a lot to say...hey hey hey...ahem...sorry. I'm an old Simon and Garfunkel fan," he snickered. "So...you were saying?"

"I Only Have Eyes for You" by the Flamingos played on the radio.

"Are you someone I was in court with? A victim of one of my clients, maybe?"

"You're getting colder."

"Um...well, how about a competitor of mine? I am about to run for judge, you know."

"Nope - ice cold, my friend. Keep trying. You'll get it."

Shane became more frustrated.

"I would guess you're here because of someone who really doesn't like me, right?"

"That would be obvious, sir," the scoundrel chuckled. "But you're getting warmer."
"My brother?"

"No."

"My sister?"

"No."

"My Cousin Steve?"

Shane's guest couldn't help laughing.

"Not very well liked, are you Mr. Robinson? No, it's not cousin Steve, although you're still fairly warm."

Shane gave it more thought, then plainly asked: "My ex-wife?"

Silence. Then a soft round of applause.

"Bravo, Mr. Robinson - Bravo. Yes, I am here because of your recent divorce. Now comes the easy part. You must tell me - having cheated and lied to her, taken her son away from her, leaving her with a bunch of debts that you sneakily assigned to her in your divorce - WHY you shouldn't die right now!

The rise in his voice made Shane quiver in his seat; he was too frightened to speak. The scoundrel continued grumbling under his breath until finally he composed himself. Shane watched as he returned to a relaxed position, thinking his eyes had lit up like hot red coals behind the mask.

"Traces" by the Classic IV played next.
"Mea Culpa - Mea Maxima Culpa, Mr. Robinson. Please continue."

Tears rolled down Shane’s face.

"I...I...don't know...what you want me to say. It just didn't work out between the two of us. Listen Mister..."

"Cupid...you may call me Cupid."

Shane barely stifled a laugh.

"Cupid...I didn't do all those things you said I did. See...we made some bad financial decisions and it ruined our marriage...you know...s-s-so I said I had enough and left. Dawn couldn't handle it, so she started taking drugs. The judge gave me our son. I didn't want to cause trouble; I just wanted to move on with my life. That's all. Really - it's the truth."

Cupid was unimpressed.

"Oh I see, Mr. Robinson. Well, let's forget about it and act like nothing happened, right?"

Cupid rose; he looked taller than before. "I know you're lying to me, Mr. Robinson."

"But it's not a lie, sir! It's true, I..."

The gun clicked in Shane's face.

"Didn't I tell you Cupid was my name? Do I look like a goddamn Knight to you, Mr. Robinson? If you call me 'sir' again..."
"CUPID! I'm sorry. I promise you I didn't do what you're saying. I loved my wife...I really did."

Cupid slid behind Shane and yanked his head backwards.

"Time is running out and I'm not here to get jerked around. You're gonna be honest for once in your shitty life, or its lights out."

He sat again, crossing his legs. "Strangers in the Night" followed on the station's play list. Cupid loved Sinatra, totally ensconced in the elegance that rolled from The Chairman's lips; words spreading across the air as easily as margarine does on bread.

Again Cupid whistled. The gentle flow of each alluring note reminded Shane of his grandfather, a poor laborer born in Ireland with very little education. He often fibbed to Shane, saying he could whistle and sing so beautifully because he was part Irish Crow. Shane would privately snicker at his Grandfather, fully aware that crows couldn't whistle, nor were they known for their "singing".

"Tick-tock, tick-tock, Mr. Robinson. Time's a-wasting."

Shane shook his head. "I don't know what you want, Cupid. I tell you the truth and you refuse to believe, so I..."

"Vincit Omnia Veritas, Mr. Robinson. I don't believe you because your actions and body language say otherwise."

Cupid rushed from his chair and knelt before Shane, who nearly
jumped out of his skin.

"Do you consider yourself a Christian, Mr. Robinson?"

He nodded, still trembling.

"Then surely you must know your Bible, right?"

Shane seemed clueless. Cupid glared at him with disgust and knocked hard on his forehead.

"HELLOOOOOOO! Newsflash, Mr. Robinson! If you’re going to call yourself a Christian you should know these things, so pay attention. My favorite passage is Psalm 23, verse 4, where it says: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." Now...what does that passage tell you?

Cupid appeared excited as Shane prepared his response, reminded of his days in Catholic school. Sister Mary Henrietta had often glared at him with a similarly disturbed look espousing "salvation," usually while clutching the most vulgar of rulers in her extensive collection. That, plus the quick tapping of her black penny loafers, prepared her for deliverance of a fitting penance: one swift whack across the knuckles for each incorrect comment. The unfortunate part of his present circumstance was Cupid wasn’t Sister Henrietta, nor was he holding a ruler.
"I guess it means with God on my side, I have nothing to worry about."

Cupid smiled and nodded, his eyebrows perked up at the response. Shane smiled back at him. "Maybe I'll get out of this yet," he thought.

"Well done, Mr. Robinson. Well done. You are correct. Now here's the hundred-thousand dollar question: how does Psalm 23 apply to you right now?"

Shane knew to choose his words carefully, though with Cupid's manic behavior nothing was certain. He quickly hatched a plan to get Cupid to open up more. Maybe if he picked his brain a little, he could better negotiate his release, meanwhile the crooning of Elvis Presley and his ubiquitous rendition of "Can't Help Falling in Love" had filled the room. Shane had long hated Elvis; but now there was a new reason to dislike him.

"Cupid, I hope you don't mind - but before I answer your question I'd like to ask you something. Would that be alright?"

Cupid was puzzled; lips pursed, eyebrows furrowed. Clearly he was thrown off balance by the request. He nodded.

"What made you choose this passage as your favorite?"

Watching Cupid stand was like watching an elevator rise to the
top floor. A deep, sinister laugh emanated somewhere near the summit of this mountainous man that echoed throughout the room.

"So you want to know something about me, do you? And maybe later we can have a few beers and split a plate of hot wings? Okay - I'll play along Mr. Robinson. I'm a nice guy, in my own crack-brained way."

Cupid eerily stepped backwards, reminding Shane of Samara Morgan from "The Ring." He reached his chair and deliberately lowered himself into his usual spot.

"I read that passage many years ago shortly before I went into court, Mr. Robinson. It was around the time my wife had divorced me."

Shane appeared interested. Indeed he was, for he saw this as a possible way in.

"Did she ever explain why?" he asked. Cupid shook his head.

"No - nothing that made sense, anyway. I always went to work and school without complaints. I gave her everything she wanted, yet still I caught her trying to fuck some guy in our own home. I guess I wasn’t enough for her."

"Well there had to be reasons why, Cupid - don’t you think?"

Cupid's head lowered; his free hand covered his face.

"At the time I had no idea what was going on, Mr. Robinson. But eventually I found that she was hardly ever truthful with me to begin
with. Years ago I got slapped with a DUI, so during our divorce hearing she told some feminist judge that I was a drunk and didn’t feel safe around me anymore. Truth is I rarely drink anything because of that night, but it didn’t matter - my past had caught up with me."

Cupid slid forward in his chair, his body hunched in shame.

"Shortly before our first day in court she announced she was pregnant, or so she claimed. After the child was born, she didn’t have the heart to say it wasn’t mine. Instead her mother broke the news to me...as she was laughing in my face."

Shane turned away. Cupid noted this and smiled.

"Something wrong, Mr. Robinson? Cat got your tongue?"

Shane nervously looked in his direction.

"I'm ready to answer your question, Cupid."

"Alright - go ahead."

"Your passage says to me that I should come clean, even at the risk of my own life, so here goes - I've lied and cheated to get my way for so long. I lied to keep my money. I lied to keep my son. I lied to get respect. I've lied to everyone in my family. I've lied even when it was unnecessary. And the truest person to me...my wife Dawn...I've crushed her beyond repair. I...I...can't get any of them back. They're gone, and I'm alone - as I should be, I guess."
Cupid coolly clapped his hands.

"Congratulations, Mr. Robinson. To be honest, I didn't think you'd make it, but you've wiped the slate clean. I'm so proud of you..."

Cupid rose from the chair and strolled around a now despondent Shane, rubbing his chest, neck and back with the silencer of his gun.

"Didn't I (Blow Your Mind This Time)" by the Delfonics piped through the speakers, though neither one heard it.

"...but I'm afraid it's too late, my friend. The jury has returned with a verdict, and it doesn't look good."

"What? I don't understand! You said you'd leave if I told you the truth!"

A crooked smile coated Cupid's face: "Guess what, Mr. Robinson? I lied!"

Shane was immediately incensed.

"Bastard! You played me? You..."

Cupid moved swiftly; the baton hit Shane's knees and there was a sickening crunch. He re-attached the ball gag and backhanded Shane across his face.

Fury rushed through Cupid like a drug; his body tightened and throbbed with delicious excitement. A dark energy flowed through his pores and reverberated off the walls, filling the room with its rancorous
stench. His rage was now in full bloom.

"Here comes the verdict, Mr. Robinson! Are you ready?"

Cupid leaned forward onto the chair, eyes tightly locked once again. The heat of Cupid's breath nearly made Shane sick.

"You have been found guilty of crimes against humanity. And being that you are guilty as charged, I hereby sentence you to ME!"

Shane was so frightened he wet his pants. Cupid could see them gradually becoming soaked, the scent of urine made his nostrils flare. He flashed Shane a toothy smile.

"Shall I get you a diaper, Mr. Robinson?" Cupid knew it was over. Shane was his for the taking. Both men turned to the stereo, the strumming of an electric guitar caught their attention as "Bang Bang" began to play.

"Graviora manent!" he hissed. "Your time is up."

Cupid lit several candles throughout the room, singing:

"I was five and he was six, we rode on horses made of sticks...he wore black and I wore white, he would always win the fight..."

Inside his mind, Shane escaped from Cupid, the room, the house, and drifted into the past. He thought of his wedding day and how happy he'd made his new bride, their honeymoon in Bermuda, the family gatherings in Florida and Wisconsin. Once there was a time when their
life together was happy and gay and blissful, a "spring-summer" kind of love that once lived and breathed inside of him. There also was a time when success had pierced his heart, making it as black as the darkest sky.

How Shane longed for a return to the safety of Dawn's companionship. How Shane longed for a return to love.

_Si vis amari ama!_ Shane had learned the meaning of this phrase too late.

Cupid stroked his hair with the gun, still singing as the music played:

"...bang, bang...he shot me down, bang, bang...I hit the ground, bang, bang...that awful sound...bang, bang...my baby shot me down."

Shane trembled in anticipation of his death. Deep inside his mind he begged and begged and begged again. His tears became so heavy they blurred his vision, but when they finally cleared he saw Cupid wearing a laminated photograph of Dawn that covered his face like a mask, his lips protruding where her mouth was on the picture.

"Now he's gone, I don't know why. Until this day sometimes I cry. He didn't even say goodbye, he didn't take the time...to lie. Bang, bang...he shot me down, bang, bang...I hit the ground, bang, bang...that awful sound, bang, bang..."
Cupid went down on one knee, returned the .38 to its holster and took out another gun stuffed inside his belt. He pointed it at Shane's chest. The 'click' of the chamber was the last thing Shane heard.

"...my baby shot me down!"

Shane closed his eyes, a horrible scream echoed inside his head as two stabbing jolts from Cupid's gun pierced his chest, just above the heart.

"Phifft, phifft!"

***

As usual Cupid was up early and promptly dressed for work at 6:15, going through the usual humdrum of sipping his morning tea and reading the Sun-Times before catching the Red Line downtown. This was his favorite part of the day. Total silence. No loud music or talking or honking cars with rude people in a hurry to move ten feet ahead. This was one of two places in his life where he had complete control, and he cherished these precious moments before heading out into the City of Broad Shoulders, also known as Chicago.

The tea seemed unusually strong today. He preferred brewing actual green leaves instead of tea bags. It smelled like hot grass, but it gave Cupid the necessary jolt his body craved after having such a late night. So much went into preparing for each "Client" on his list, from
studying their daily routines to following them around for weeks, or even stealing their mail if the situation called for it. For the Robinson case, breaking into Shane's home, carrying all the items for his "project," mentally preparing for the work ahead - all of this and more took its toll because this one hit so close to home. But somehow Cupid felt his work was important, that it truly meant something. An observer might call him a tragic hero - someone who managed to save everyone else, yet sadly enough could not save himself. In his mind, he would always be alone; doomed to walk the earth with no one to love him ever again. Most times, on the inside, he felt like a bag of broken glass.

Shane Robinson had survived the night and soon would find himself untied and lying on his dining room floor, clothes filthy and wreaking of urine. He would wake up and remember Cupid’s words shortly before he passed out from the tranquilizers.

"Mr. Robinson...let me make a few things clear. First - I have granted you a second chance. You will make up for lost time by settling with Dawn financially and awarding her joint custody of your son. Second - I am no murderer! I've never killed anyone. Once I came close, and I vowed to never become like that again. Whatever you do, don't make me come back here because of your non-compliance - do you understand?" Those were his final words and hopefully Shane would
adhere to them.

It was almost time to leave for work, but before Cupid made his way into morning traffic he stopped in front of a mirror, winked and gave it a ‘thumbs up’ for a job well done last night.

"Good morning, Mark," he said to the reflection just before heading out the front door.

There were a lot of files to prepare for court today, and it was his job as supervisor to make sure everything was ready. For twenty-five years Cupid worked as a law clerk for the Circuit Court of Cook County, the only job he had ever known. He did it well, and would often whistle as he put away old files and retrieved new ones. Occasionally he would sit in a quiet place and read a few old cases to pass the time, whistling a vast array of tunes from Ella Fitzgerald to Frank Sinatra - clearly his favorite, by far. So time and again, Cupid would sit and read the files and whistle away in his own little world.

He likes to whistle. It gives him pleasure.
December 7, 2006. 7:30pm. North Side

“Alright, here’s what we’ve got,” began Detective Antonio Cuppicciotti, Jr. “Bennie Molina is inside with at least seven members of his crew. Our guy says two men guard the place up front, two out back. Three guys guard the perimeter of whatever room Bennie’s in. Cesar Sanchez, his meanest sumbitch, is always right next to him, except when Bennie goes to the can, and even then he sits right outside.”

Ripley asked: “But what if Molina’s in the can when we find ‘em, Tone?”

Tony Junior rolled his eyes. “We’ll ask if he needs toilet paper, you idiot. What the fuck do you think? We take him down. Peterson, Rainey - you two guys head down the alley and get into position out back. Jones - you and Corelli cop-a-squat behind those bushes in front of the house. Me and Rip are going in the side door. Chances are we’ll
hit Molina first, so I want you guys through those guards nice and quick. Got me?”

They nodded. “Okay fellas, let’s do it.”

Ripley drove their black van roughly a block away from Bennie Molina’s usual hangout spot on North Cleveland Avenue. Everyone hopped out, scrambling in different directions. Tony checked his watch.

7:43pm.

As Tony and Rip quietly made their way through the darkness toward Molina’s place, the frigid wind pierced their jackets like bullets. The temperature was somewhere in the low-teens, sidewalks still icy from Sunday’s huge snow storm, with more due just after midnight tonight. Unlike most Chicagoans, Tony actually liked the cold weather. He’d loved it all his life, especially since his days at Gonzaga Jesuit High School where his philosophy teacher would open the windows of his classroom in the middle of January and usher in the cold air like a doorman, much to the chagrin of drowsy students who clearly didn’t do mornings.

The crew separately made it to the house and took their positions, lying in wait of eight o’clock. Tony could tell Rip was cold from his fluttery breathing and reached out, firmly touching his shoulder in an effort to ease his partner’s trembling.
Watching Rip battle the frigid weather continued to remind him of Good ole Brother McCade, by far the most popular teacher in high school. Whenever he would be so bold as to freeze the class in the middle of winter he would put on his Shakespeare voice and loudly proclaim: *the cold is what makes one come alive!* He was a remarkable teacher who was so well-liked that he managed to develop lasting relationships with kids whom he never taught.

***

January 15, 1978

“What is cold?…what is its nature?”

No one spoke. Brother McCade patiently waited until Tony finally raised his hand. “Miiiiiiisssssstter Cuppicciotti, what plethora of knowledge would you like to share with the class today?”

Tony said: “Cold is nothing more than the absence of warmth, Brother.”

Brother McCade grinned. “Please stand up. And what is the nature of warmth, kind sir?”

Tony rose from his desk, smug as a crooked politician. “Warmth,” he began, “is merely *having or giving out* heat to a moderate degree.”

Brother sensed a challenge. His graceful saunter toward Tony put the entire class on edge. Everyone knew he was sizing up his student for
a battle of wits. He said: “Dead of winter. Cold hands, warm heart. As pure as the snow. Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. Now is the winter of our discontent, left out in the cold.”

He stopped in front of Tony, who braced himself for a battle. “So, if warmth is merely having or giving out heat, as you astutely have noted - how does something get heat in the first place?”

“Well, in order to have heat, something must first either create it or have the ability to retain it.”

“Exactly. Now let’s focus on the second part of that answer. Where does one get heat from, Antonio?”

“It comes from things around us that generate heat. The sun, for instance.”

“I see. So what if I’m an Eskimo in the middle of the North Pole? There’s nothing sunny or warm about the North Pole, is there?”

“No, Brother. But that doesn’t mean heat cannot be created. To use your Eskimo example, that same Eskimo can generate warmth through the creation of a bonfire. After man first figured out how to create fire, they eventually figured out how to retain it.”

Brother McCade took a step closer. “Very good, Antonio. Now let’s examine this from a subjective point of view, shall we? Take man, for instance. How does man have warmth?”
Tony chose his words carefully. “Warmth, as in human emotion, I assume?”

“That’s right.”

“Well...man can show emotional warmth through being affectionate or empathetic.”

“Example?”

“If someone dies, we can feel empathy for those who have been left behind.”

“Why?”

Tony cleared his throat again.

“We feel empathy because human beings supposedly understand what it means to lose something or someone close to us. Our empathy doesn’t fit another’s feelings of loss, but it does enable us to align ourselves with them.”

“And how exactly is this ‘warmth’ created within us, Antonio? Surely we can’t strike a match and swallow it, now can we?”

The class erupted in laughter. Tony was nervous. “No Brother, we can’t.”

“Then where does it come from? Can we buy it from a store? Borrow it from a neighbor? How does it get there?”

“It...it’s just there. It’s inside us.”
Brother McCade stepped back; a stern look covered his face. “So it’s just like having the ability to sing or dance. To write. To act. To speak in front of large audiences. In other words, it’s either inside us to give warmth to our fellow human beings or not. Is that what you are saying to this class, Antonio?”

He nodded. “Yes, Brother, that’s correct.”

Brother McCade didn’t move for several seconds. His stare seemed to bore right into Tony’s forehead. The student had regretted challenging his teacher.

“Do you consider me an evil man, Antonio?”

The question confused Tony. “Uh…no sir. Not at all. In fact, I…”

“Based on our discussion, would you say my heart is warm or cold?”

“Why…warm, sir. And…”

Brother McCade didn’t wait for an answer. Instead he abruptly turned from his student, marched to his desk and rummaged through the top drawer until he found what he was looking for. A thermometer.

“These windows have been open for nearly fifteen minutes. It’s freezing cold in here, and for the first time this semester ALL of you are wide awake.”

The class laughed again as Brother McCade shut every window in
the room, repeating his earlier words: “Dead of winter. Cold hands, warm heart. As pure as the snow. Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. Now is the winter of our discontent, left out in the cold.”

He stood in front of Tony and put the thermometer in his own mouth, staring at his watch. Eventually he dropped his wrist, handed the thermometer to Tony with his left hand and extended his right.

“Read this, and while you do, shake my hand.”

Tony shook Brother McCade’s hand and took his temperature.

“Ninety-eight point seven,” he said. “Normal.”

“And my hand?”

“Warm.”

“That’s right. Warm. Warm hand, warm heart. Well done, Antonio. You may sit down.”

Tony smiled. Several of his classmates gave him ‘thumbs up’.

Taking on Brother McCade was never easy. Many had failed before him.

The Admired Teacher leaned against his desk. “The old adage of ‘cold hand, warm heart’ is not a true rule of thumb, my dear inquisitors. Over the years I’ve come to understand that warmth of heart leads to warmth of spirit. Warmth of spirit leads to warmth of mind. Warmth of mind leads to warmth of body. Warmth of body leads to warmth of life. Humans are connected to each other, and as our fellow inquisitor
succinctly pointed out to all of us, an *emotional* warmth is either something you have or don’t have. Remember that.”

He paused. The class beamed at him. “Now don’t go swallowing any *matches*, hear me?”

Brother McCade’s students laughed as the final bell rang.

“Class dismissed.”

***

Rip nudged Tony and tapped his watch.

7:59pm.

The two men braced themselves by the side door and waited for Jones and Corelli to make their move; Tony’s heart pounded so hard inside his chest he thought it would burst through; meanwhile Rip stood fixed in the shadows like a statue. These moments were never tough for him, one reason why they made a good team. Tony could certainly handle himself, but having one reliably calm partner usually settled down the other, and Tony knew it was *he* who always needed settling down. The sound of his own breathing now fluttered, as it always did before every major bust. To Tony’s crew, this was all about doing their jobs; they went after the bad guys and brought them to justice because these guys were hard core NARCs through and through. However, in Tony’s case, something had been lost along the way. At one point in over
twenty years on the job he was a true believer, someone who thought they made a difference by getting the bad guys off the streets. As a rookie he was naïve enough to see himself as Superman – saving a neighborhood from drug kingpins with one hand while getting the local cat out of a nearby oak tree with the other. His favorite show from the 1980s was The Equalizer, and quietly he would go around thinking he too could be like Edward Woodward and save the day just before the sixty minutes were up. But as is the case with all heroes, they have their “kryptonite” that somehow makes them vulnerable like anyone else. Tony indeed had his, and inside this house was the antidote. At least a small portion of it, anyway.

Tony tapped Rip’s shoulder, gestured toward both their eyes with his fingers, then gave a thumbs up. Ready? Rip nodded, an unfamiliar look on his face as he returned the ‘thumbs up’. He turned away, but not before Tony saw what he had hoped was not true. He became angry and disappointed at the same time.

“Bastard!” he thought as he checked his watch.

8:00pm.

“Police! Get down on the ground now!” Tony and Rip heard a crash and movement from inside the house. Tony held up his left hand. Rip snapped to attention. Tony dropped it and through the side door
went a six-foot four inch narcotics officer, smashing his way inside the house with Tony charging in right behind him.

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“Officer down! Officer down!”

Tony removed his navy blue coat and pressed it against Rip’s neck as blood gushed from everywhere. Rip fought with his partner, his huge hands reached out, frantically trying to grab Tony. Despite being shot in the neck, Rip was livid. To keep him under control, Tony shoved a thumb into the bleeding man’s wound and smiled as Rip howled in pain.

Tony got close enough to growl in Rip’s ear: “You think I’m gonna let you rat me out to I-A? I thought you were my friend, you cocksucker!”

With that, Tony applied extra pressure while looking deep into Rip’s eyes, meanwhile all around them lay the carnage from tonight’s siege. Back in the hallway was Cesar Sanchez, dead from two shots to the chest. Two doors down, toward the front of the house, were Bennie Molina’s guards - Ramon Alvarez and Mario Serrano. Alvarez was sprawled out against an easy chair, his gun still tucked inside his crotch. Serrano managed to retrieve his weapon and fire off two shots, though both missed. Instead he took two bullets to the stomach and one to the head, the third shot threw him against a wall-length mirror, leaving a
trail of blood from five-feet high down to the floor. Both men were dead before Jones and Corelli had checked their pulse. Molina’s remaining henchmen were either wounded or had already surrendered.

Nearby Tony and Rip was Bennie Molina lying flat on his back, shot in the arm, too afraid to move. As hardened a criminal as he was, Bennie never had a cop force him to shoot another cop at point blank range before, which put the fear of God inside of him. If a cop was crazy enough to have one of their own taken out in cold blood, there’s no limit to what he could do to another criminal. He stayed still, hoping there was something to be worked out with all of this.

Tony kept pressing Rip’s neck, but relaxed his grip just enough to appear in assistance when the crew had arrived. Rip exhaled; he searched wildly for his fellow officers, but was unable to speak.

“Please don’t leave me,” his eyes begged. If they left, it was all over. He knew it.

“Molina shot him! Get an ambulance quick!” Tony shouted, waving them off. Corelli tried to assist, but Rip shoved him away.

“GET A GODDAMN AMBULANCE NOW!”

As soon as they all left, Tony’s eyes returned to Rip. “Goodbye, traitor!”

Tony let go of Rip’s neck, grabbed Bennie’s gun, put it in the
dealer’s hand and pulled the trigger, turning away as Rip’s head exploded against the floor.

   Bennie Molina began crying. Tony pulled his own gun, pointed it at Bennie and hissed in his ear, just as he did to Ripley.

   “You see that, you fucking immigrant? You wanna be like that asshole? Then tell me where you keep your private stash right now!”

   Bennie whispered something in his ear, foolishly believing honesty would keep him alive. Instead, Tony smiled, lay near a headless Rip and pointed his gun. Before Bennie could say anything, Tony fired.

   The Shot could be heard from as far as a mile away in the cold, crisp winter air. Shortly thereafter, the sound would be replaced by sirens.

   ***

   Karl Artur Ripley’s Funeral. One Week Later

   The Pipe and Drum crew just went by, playing the same tune much to Tony's displeasure. “Can’t these guys ever do anything different?” he thought, tired of hearing ‘Danny Boy’ being played at every funeral. To be honest, Tony was sick of the bullshit that came with doing this job. All he wanted was to go to work, finish his shift, go home and figure out how he would make it through the next day.

   He couldn’t take being a cop anymore, and since he only had a
few weeks left until retirement, he grew increasingly impatient. Twenty-seven years of being on the force only to leave the same scumbags behind that he had as a rookie. The only difference was now their kids roamed the streets more frequently instead of their parents.

"He was a good cop. A credit to the force."

Cliched remarks like these always came at cop funerals. Captain Bill Marzano often bragged about Tony's crew, but usually that 'piece of shit', as Tony often called him, went out of his way when talking about Rip. Tony loved him too, until he found out Rip's plan to serve him up on a platter to the Rat Squad.

"This is how I get treated after all I did for him? For his family? I took Rip under my wing when he was still a rookie, and he smiled in my face while about to stab me in the back."

Unforgivable. Tony felt if The Boss knew this, he wouldn’t brag so much about Rip. The Boss was old school. He went through the academy with Tony Senior back in the good ole days when people feared the police. Marzano knew better than to rat out another officer. Back then, if word got out there was a snitch around, that guy would quickly be ostracized, or worse. In Rip’s case, the ‘worse’ had to happen. No weak links on Tony's crew. Not now, not ever.

"The captain is going on and on about that rat-fink bastard? This
is the respect I get for years of chasing these niggers and ‘spics all across the city? Fuck him! Fuck all of ‘em. In a few weeks they’ll all be road-kill as far as I’m concerned, anyway.”

Rip’s wife, Gloria, and their family passed by. Tony always thought she was a sweet gal, too sweet for a nimrod like Rip. She was a pretty lil thing, too; and though she was black even he wouldn’t have minded doing her. He’s known cops who’d actually hit it off with another cop’s wife on the side. Not a good thing, in his opinion. Besides, Gloria was related to guys with lots of juice: two brothers in homicide, an uncle named Frank - one of the most respected loo’s on the west side, plus a cousin that worked the beat over in Wicker Park. Too much drama, though. Best left alone.

A short time later a huge crowd had come to Rip’s place. The Boss looked at Tony strangely when he said he didn’t wanna stay long at the gathering. He’d gotten a clean bill of health on their bust, but he was somewhat leery being so close to Gloria. It wasn’t right. Normally Tony wouldn’t be here, but it would look bad if he skipped out.

Standing alone in a corner of Rip’s front room was Don Hennessey, longtime neighbor to the Ripleys, who recently lost his wife of nearly forty-two years. He and Eileen were high school sweethearts and were rarely apart the entire time they were married. The neighbors spent a
lot of days laughing and chatting away about a myriad of topics in this very room and became close friends. Tony knew him well, though their contact had become limited in recent years.

Tony approached the sixty-seven year old, extended his hand. Don hesitated, accepted and looked off into the distance.

"Hi Don. Good to see you again. Sorry it has to be like this."

"Yeah. Shame, isn't it? Man works all these years and loses everything in such violent fashion. Sad."

Tony nodded, uncomfortable with Don's matter-of-fact response. The elder man's eyes looked everywhere except at the man standing next to him.

Tony cleared his throat and said: "not a moment goes by where I don't wonder if it's gonna be..."

"You know something, Antonio?" Don interrupted. "That former partner of yours was one of the most remarkable individuals I'd ever met in my life. Marrying a black woman for love and having two beautiful boys who have gone on to do great things. And until recently, he rarely ever brought his job home with him. Rip had a loving home and lived a life of integrity and honor."

Don turned, looked at Tony. "That's why I have no idea what the fuck he ever saw in you."
Tony was surprised by his remark, but did not speak.

Don continued: “Funny how just a few months after he starts telling me internal affairs is crawling up his ass with a microscope over some recent bust that he ends up dead.”

Don was seething; his eyes locked in tight until Tony looked away.

“Excuse me, Detective. I need to step outside for some fresh air.”

Don bumped him as he passed by, meanwhile Tony didn’t move until someone tapped him on the shoulder.

“Tony…Tony…hi. Thanks for being here.”

Gloria shook him out of his fog with a nice warm hug, her ‘brave’ face beamed at him. She felt good in his arms and was the perfect blend of perfume, shampoo and natural body scent that came nicely together with every breath he took.

Tony really needed to leave.

“Oh my, you’re as cold as an ice cube. You must be freezing, hon. Can I get you a sweater? Karl has plenty you can use. I’m sure he…”

She stopped short of crying, somehow regaining her composure. Tony could only imagine what she would be like after everyone had left.

“…I’m glad to see you here, Tony. He...he really loved you a lot. It gives me comfort to know he was with you when he passed.”

Gloria was a short, petite woman with heart. Tony wondered
what she would think if she knew the truth of what happened that night. It wouldn’t surprise her to know that Rip never boosted any extra cash off these scumbags, but then again, Rip’s family didn’t need the money. Playing the horses as Tony had done had put him in a world of hurt, and he nearly lost it all. His wife had left him, house nearly foreclosed and pension almost blown if not for Lenny bailing him out financially. Now he owed ‘that cocksucker’, as he liked to call him. Surely his father would disown him if he ever found out the truth, but with Rip gone it was almost a given that he never would.

“No need to thank me, babe. Glad to be here. Um...look, I don’t know what to say and all. I mean...me and Rip...we were like brothers, you know? I blame myself for what happened, Glore. I really do.”

“There’s no need to apologize, Tony. By the way, how’s Cheryl?”

Tony knew it was only a matter of time before she asked that question. Gloria and Cheryl had become best friends over the years, but he knew Gloria was being polite by acting as if she wasn’t in his personal business. The ‘best friend’ always knows.

Tony shook his head. Gloria rubbed his shoulder.

“I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“No. It’s my own fault. Took too long to marry her, took too little to show her how much a moron I was. Ran her away, Glore. Plain and
simple. She ain’t never coming back.”

“You still in recovery?”

“Yeah. It’s helping. Haven’t gone to the track in almost a year, but it was all too late. Cheryl’s already served me with papers and I signed them. It’s best for both of us after what I put her through.”

Gloria nodded. Tony wished she hadn’t agreed so fast.

“You’re right. Probably so. Come with me. I want to give you something.”

Together they went into Rip’s den. The wall opposite his desk had a built-in bookcase. There had to be at least a couple hundred books, mostly fiction: *A Catcher in the Rye, Dante’s Inferno, Sense and Sensibility, The Sun Also Rises, Murder on the Orient Express, Catch-22, To Kill a Mockingbird*. There was also a part of his library dedicated strictly to German literature: *The Third Reich, Das Leben der Anderen* (The Lives of Others), Thomas Mann’s *Der Erwählte* (The Holy Sinner), Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (The Sorrows of Young Werther). Tony knew without looking these books were all in German.

Rip’s father, Victor, was in the Army and was stationed in Idar-Oberstein, West Germany back in the early fifties. Karla, his mother, was a native of West Germany and met his dad while working at the Army commissary. They got married and lived on the base until Vic
finally retired and relocated the family to Chicago. By that time Rip was already fluent in German and English and continued to visit relatives oversees after his mom’s death five years ago. That was the funny thing about Rip. In some ways he was a smart guy, but in others he was an odd duck. Oh well. None of that mattered anymore.

Gloria handed Tony an old picture they took together at a barbecue shortly after she and Rip bought their home. The usual suspects were together in the backyard, the Ripley household looming in the background: Tony, Cheryl and Rip stood in front of Gloria and Karla, who were both seated. Stefan and his younger brother Lukas stood in-between the two women. Karla, who was fifty-three years old in this photo, had the look of a proud mother and grandmother on her sweet face. This picture had been taken twenty-two years ago.

“This was Karl’s favorite picture. He especially liked it since it was the first barbecue after buying the house. You helped us with the down payment, remember?

“It was my pleasure, Gloria. You know I’d do any…”

“I know, Tony. I know. But it really meant a lot to him…to us...what you did. We couldn’t continue living in that ratty old apartment in Morgan Park, not with two young boys and an older woman living there. He deeply appreciated it and we made sure you got your
money back.”

Tony felt uneasy while looking at the picture.

“That was a gift, Gloria. You didn’t have to pay me back.”

“I know, but we did. Karl insisted.”

She handed him the picture, her left hand on top of his with the same 18-karat diamond ring Rip bought for her years ago. It sparkled as brightly as it had back then. The warmth of her tiny hands gave Tony goose bumps. Or perhaps it wasn’t her warm hands that made him uneasy, but the fact that he’d murdered this kind woman’s husband in cold blood.

“I want you to have this picture as a reminder of what you mean to us. You’ve always been a member of this family. You’re a godparent to our boys and they need you. We need you. Please take this as a token of our love.”

Tony stared at her, caught off guard.

“Thank you, Gloria. I really appreciate it.”

She gave him a tender smile as she searched Rip’s closet. “You’re quite welcome. Now let’s get you a sweater to wear under your coat and a pair of gloves for those cold hands.”

“Thanks.” In truth, he knew full well there was nothing she could do to make his situation better, despite her efforts.
Winter was Tony's favorite time of year; a time of barren trees, icy roads and heavy snow. Lake Michigan would freeze to the point where hypothermia could strike in seconds. And similar to the weather he so desired, Tony found it difficult to warm up to anyone who really loved him. Frankly he didn't care because he came from privilege as the son of one of the most powerful figures in the Chicago Police Department, knowing full well that he could get away with almost anything. Contrary to popular belief, Tony's goal never was to be a standout cop like his dad, but instead to look out for himself. The money he gave Rip years ago was drug money that he boosted from some low-level crook he threatened to bust right after making detective.

So here he was years later - a gambling addict in recovery who was divorced, child-less and on the verge of retirement at age forty-six. He owed money to a guy named Lenny Ferruccio, son of Gino "Big Fish" Ferruccio - formerly one of Chicago's meanest crime bosses until Tony's father brought him down years ago. And on top of everything else, Tony had taken out his own partner, turned his wife into a widow and left his grown children without a father. The saddest part of all this was despite everything that had transpired, there wasn't a single thing that he would change.
Tony envisioned himself in philosophy class once again, trying to challenge his former teacher by placing the thermometer in his own mouth and asking Brother McCade to take his temperature. Brother would read the thermometer, shake his head and announce to the class: “I’m so sorry, my fellow inquisitors. I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do to save this poor young man from his fate.” Then he would release Tony’s hand, stand in front of everyone with a profound sense of pity flickering in his eyes and plainly whisper “cold hands, cold heart” while the class stared at Tony as if he weren’t wearing a stitch of clothing.

The bell would sound. Everyone would quietly file out of the room with Brother McCade being the last person to leave. He would give his doomed student a disgusted look, turn out the lights and leave him standing with nothing but piercing winds and grey skies surrounding him.

“Class dismissed,” Tony quietly whispered to himself after Gloria handed him one of Rip’s favorite sweaters and left the room so he could try it on for size.

END OF BOOK ONE
Book Two: "Ab Initio"
May 8, 1953

Once the bell had rung, Joss, Nadine and Claudia jumped out of their chairs and made a mad dash toward the girl’s bathroom. Giggling all the way, Joss handed her friends a cigarette each from the pack of Lucky Strikes she stole from the corner convenience store. Once they were safely inside the now-crowded bathroom stall, Joss lit each cigarette with one of her father’s lighters that she managed to swipe from his pants pocket while doing his laundry. Fred was always losing his lighters, and since they were cheap he would simply go out and buy a new one. They wouldn’t be missed. Joss knew that, so taking one every now and then wouldn’t matter.

The three girls would take turns puffing and blowing the smoke into an air vent that was just above the toilet seat. In between each puff they engaged in their usual pastime of gossiping about which boy had made a pass at them that day. Most of the time they would ‘fudge the truth’, as Claudia’s mom would often say, but Joss actually had
something interesting to report. Something that neither Nadine nor Claudia had expected.

“Say ya’ll, guess who passed me a note in English class today?”

Joss went quiet, knowing that she had everyone’s attention, and instead of coming out with it right away, she held her secret close just to watch them suffer. Joss took an extra-long puff of her cigarette, then removed it seductively from her lips and fancily extended her hand as she made circles of smoke that floated gently into the air. Clearly she was showing off and both girls knew it. Nadine couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Okay, so are you gonna tell us or not?” Nadine remarked.

“Yeah! What gives? Tell us already!” Claudia agreed.

Joss giggled, then said: “Roy Brown.”

Both Nadine and Claudia covered their mouths in disbelief. At that time Roy Brown was the biggest name in school. He was six-foot three, handsome and the captain of the men’s basketball team at Chicago Vocational High School. Scouts from colleges across the state had come to see him play, and it was rumored that he was going to Illinois University on an athletic scholarship. Every girl in school was dying to go out on a date with him. Especially Joss.

“Oh my gaaaaawd, girl! How’d you manage that?” Claudia gasped.
“Whaddaya mean, how’d I manage that? Girl, look at me! What boy in their right mind could pass up all this?” Joss replied, opening her blouse, exposing her bra. All three girls giggled.

“Wow! How do you know he’s interested in you?” Nadine asked. Joss reached into her book bag and came out with a folded note with her name scrawled on the outside. She unfolded the note and handed it to Nadine. Both she and Claudia took a huge drag from their cigarettes and dropped them into the toilet. Once the note was unfolded both girls huddled close so they could read it together:

Hey baby!

I just wanna tell you that I want you as my girl forever. I don’t know why you like that fool, Greg Williams. He ain’t got nothing on me, always carrying books like a big nerd. Forget him! Let’s you and me go to the sock hop on Saturday night then over to The Point in my new car (ok, it’s my uncle’s car, but I’m gonna borrow it). I really wanna be with you and I think when you get to know me better you’ll like me. I’m not just some dumb jock. I know how to treat a woman, and girl - you fine as hell. Let me know, okay? Did I tell you I was funny too? I am, see! I just made you laugh! Ha ha!

Roy

Both girls lifted their heads in unison and looked at a beaming
Joss, who took it all in. The most popular boy in school was interested in going to the sock hop with her. She would be the envy of everyone, and what made all this cool was she hadn’t done a single thing to get his attention. At least she didn’t THINK so, anyway.

“Jocelyn Shirley Tibideaux! How in the world did you pull this off?” Nadine asked. Her eyes sparkled at her friend in awe.

“Like I told you, girl – no boy can resist these gold-plated titties,” she replied, rubbing her chest as all three of them giggled, trying not to make a lot of noise as other girls were now in the bathroom and smoking in the adjoining stalls. The fog became so thick the trio could hardly see the ceiling above.

Joss stopped kidding around. “To be honest, I had no idea Roy was ever interested in me. Most of the time he’d act as if I weren’t alive, that is until I caught him staring at me in homeroom this morning. That was right before I got that note.”

“Lucky you,” Claudia remarked. “So are you going to the dance with him or not?”

“Yeah! Weren’t you supposed to go with Greg Williams? I thought he was taking you.”

Joss nodded. “He asked me already and I agreed to go. But now I’m having second thoughts. I mean, this is Roy Brown we’re talking
about. I think it would be a mistake if I passed that up. But I don’t wanna hurt Greg’s feelings either. Besides, my dad would have a fit if I told Greg no. He likes Greg, says he’s gonna be somebody someday and I should date him. Oh I don’t know. What do you guys think?”

Nadine and Claudia looked at each other, smirking. To them it seemed to be a no-brainer. “What’s the problem, Joss? What? You want someone else to go with Roy to the dance? Girl, you better get some of that good thing before he changes his mind,” Nadine remarked.

“Yeah,” Claudia agreed. “Besides – you ain’t married to Greg. He probably won’t go if you don’t, so don’t tell him the truth. Make something up. Say you’ve got a sore throat or something and cancel. Then go to the dance with Roy.”

Joss shook her head. “No, that’s not right. I can’t lie like that. It’s dishonest.”

Nadine frowned. “Okay, fine - you can’t lie. Don’t mess around with it, then. Tell Greg up front and get it over with. Otherwise take this note and flush it down the toilet.”

Nadine handed Joss the note and for the first time all three of them remained silent. The eighth period bell rang and a flurry of girls extinguished their cigarettes and scurried out to their last period classes; everyone except for the three friends still huddled in
conference inside the bathroom stall. Nadine and Claudia waited patiently as Joss continued her deliberating. Greg Williams certainly wasn’t the nicest looking boy in school, but he was definitely the smartest. He had an academic scholarship to the University of Chicago. He was captain of the debate team and president of the Latin club, which is how they met since they both loved studying Latin. Greg’s dad owned three soul food restaurants on the South Side and was friends with her father, one reason why Fred wanted her to go out with Greg.

It was true, Greg was a nerd. A BIG nerd. But there was something sweet about him that Joss couldn’t quite put her finger on, something that appealed to her in ways she couldn’t describe. He was kind of romantic in his own way, leaving her love notes in her locker or slipping snippets of poetry into her books as he carried them while walking her home. To this day, Joss remembers finding a poem in her book bag by Langston Hughes titled Bouquet:

Gather quickly
Out of darkness
All the songs you know
And throw them at the sun
Before they melt
Like snow
That moment left her covered in goose bumps. On the outside,
Joss was thrilled that Roy Brown, the B.M.O.C., had shown an interest in
her and was quite tempted to take him up on his offer. But on the other
hand, she was being true to her feelings about Greg, feelings that she
had never shared with anyone. Not even her two best friends in the
whole world.

“So? What’s the verdict, honey? We’re late for class,” Claudia
demanded.

Joss swallowed hard. “Well - I guess one date with Roy would be
all right. What harm could it do?”

Nadine and Claudia shrieked with glee. Both girls gave Joss a
warm hug and bolted out the stall, running toward their next class. And
while everyone else in college algebra remained focused on Mr. Class,
their teacher, Joss was stuck on how she would look - arm in arm - with
Roy Brown as they marched into the school gym together.

Everything would be in slow motion. Joss would walk close to
him, holding his hand while waving at all her friends, especially Nadine
and Claudia. Every girl would have a look of both jealousy and
admiration on their faces, wishing they were the ones being courted by
Roy. They would clear the way and watch them dance slowly to some
sappy love song, noting every turn, every swivel of their hips, every
whisper and snicker shared between the two of them. Joss could clearly see it all, and she intended to savor every moment possible. It would be the greatest day in her life.

From behind her, she felt a tap on her shoulder. She waited until Mr. Class turned his back, then reached behind her and took a folded note from Wanda Leek, once voted the ugliest girl in school in an “unofficial” poll conducted during lunch period last fall.

“What’s it say?” she asked, as her barbed-wire teeth and red pimples shined under the fluorescent ceiling lights. Joss chose not to answer her, and chose even harder to not look at her. Instead she took the note and carefully unfolded it, using her math book as a shield for the piece of paper.

It was from Greg. She looked over her left shoulder and saw him sitting in the back. He waved and winked at her as he pushed his glasses further up on his face. ‘Who waves and winks at the same time?’ she thought. But that was Greg. Nerd extraordinaire.

She nodded back at him, then carefully opened the letter:

Looking forward to the sock hop tomorrow. What time should I pick you up?

Joss balled up the paper and stuck it in her pocket. This was going to be harder than she thought.
Once class was over, Joss left without saying a word to anyone, not even Nadine or Claudia. She knew Greg would ask to walk her home, so to avoid him she practically ran out the door and was in such a hurry that she nearly left her book bag inside her locker. As she made her way toward the school bus she kept searching around like a spy on the run, eventually boarding and taking a seat in the back in an attempt to avoid being seen. At first she thought she’d made it, but then as more kids piled in she remembered the bus driver wouldn’t leave until three. With every student that entered the bus Joss became more nervous. First Nadine, then Claudia. Even pimply-faced Wanda made her way toward the bus and had the nerve to take a seat in front of Joss, smiling with a fresh zit that had grown in the middle of her forehead since class ended ten minutes ago. It was also clear that she’d been eating a chocolate bar; there were bits of it caught in her braces.

“Wow Joss, you sure got here fast! You must have wheels on your shoes, huh?”

Nadine and Claudia caught this and immediately put a stop to it. “Get lost, metal-mouth, before I feed you a knuckle sandwich,” Nadine barked. Wanda seemed unfazed by her threat. She merely stuck out her tongue and moved to another seat. Joss’ friends took her place.
“Hey! Why’d you leave so fast? I thought we were gonna walk home together?” Claudia asked.

Joss didn’t hear a single word because next onto the bus was Roy Brown. He was so tall that he ducked to keep from hitting his head on the roof. He wore his navy blue letterman’s jacket, a big orange colored ‘C’ for Chicago Vocational High School (or CVS, as it was called by the students) shone across his left breast. He was neatly dressed, wearing a pressed white oxford shirt, blue jeans and black Converse All-Star gym shoes. His complexion was a soft cocoa brown; his hair a close-cut, faded style, or what Fred would call a “collegian” - typical for most young ball players of his time. Roy’s brows were thick and his hazel-colored eyes easily commanded the attention of anyone in his presence. Every girl thought he was the dreamiest guy in school; one look and it was clear. He quickly scanned the bus and was about to turn back when he found the person he was looking for.

He smiled and continued toward the back of the bus, his sparkling eyes met hers making it hard to focus on much else. His ‘scooched-down’ saunter and hard gaze was like that of a King Cobra. With each move, Roy had every female on the bus under his spell. Joss tried her best to maintain control, but on the inside she clearly could not resist. There was no turning back.
“What’s up, ya’ll?” he nodded at the star-struck girls. “How’re you ladies this afternoon?”

“Fiiiiiiiiiine,” said Nadine and Claudia. Joss was speechless.

Roy cleared his throat. “Uh, would ya’ll two excuse us? I gotta talk to Joss right quick.”

Nadine and Claudia wore matching “Cheshire Cat” grins as they moved to another seat on the bus. Wanda took a break from picking at her braces and stuck her tongue at the girls a second time. Neither one noticed. They were too focused on the show in front of them as Roy slid next to Joss and made himself comfortable. Joss shook like a leaf.

“Did you get my note?” Roy asked.

“Mmm hmm.”

“Well?”

Joss shrugged her shoulders. “I dunno Roy. I’ve already been asked by someone else. It would be awful of me to back out now.”

Roy frowned. “Greg Williams, right?”

She nodded.

“I don’t know what you see in him, Joss. A fine lookin’ girl like you can do so much better.”

Joss smiled, faced Roy. “Someone like you, perhaps?”

“Well, yeah - someone just like me. I mean look around you.
Check out all these females looking at us. I’m a star player on the basketball team and I wanna be with you. Any of these chicken heads would love to be with me.”


“See what I mean? Chicken heads. But you’re different. You’re not fazed by all this, you know what I saying?”

Joss rolled her eyes at Roy as he stood and “exhibited” himself in front of her. She laughed after he took off his coat and started flexing his muscles. He was sweet and goofy and funny and serious all at the same time. A heavy sigh came from somewhere near the front of the bus. Surely some “chicken head” girl who admired Roy from afar.

“Okay, okay. I got it, alright? You’re cute and all, but why me? Before now you’ve never said a word and all of a sudden you’re interested. What gives?”

Roy sat next to her again. “Like I said, you’re not like the others. Besides, I’ve had my eye on you for a long time. Just didn’t wanna take the chance of lettin’ you get away from me, know what I mean?”

Joss smiled. “You’ve been keeping tabs on me, huh?”

“Yep, so I decided to suck it up and speak. Besides, anyone that would go out with Greg Williams must be looney tunes or somethin’.”
Can’t let that happen to you.”

Joss’ demeanor quickly changed. “What did you call me?”


He began stammering. “W...well...uh...yeah, I said anyone who’d go out with Greg must be loon...”

Joss slapped him in mid-sentence. The entire bus gasped.

“Don’t you EVER call me looney tunes again, Mister! Not if you know what’s good for you!”

And with that, Joss grabbed her bag and stormed off the bus, shoving the driver who’d finally arrived to take everyone home. Nadine and Claudia went after her, followed by a stunned Roy Brown. No one spoke except Wanda, who giggled while picking her teeth. The driver fired up the bus, leaving behind the school parking lot and the growing spectacle on the sidewalk. Joss had turned her back on Roy. Claudia comforted her while Nadine pushed a bewildered Roy further away. Something like this had never happened to him before, but actually he was less concerned about his image and more about what he said that had offended her.

“What’d I do? Why’d she hit me?” he asked Nadine. She pulled him over to a fence and whispered to him: “Don’t call her that again,
not if you wanna go to the dance with her.”

“But I don’t understand...what happened?” he begged.

Nadine raised her hand to calm him down. “Look...let’s just say Joss had a few issues to deal with not long ago, okay? I ain’t sayin’ nothin’ else, except I wouldn’t repeat what you just said ever again. Got me?”

Roy nodded, looked over to Claudia. Joss had finally settled down and faced the star ball player. He dropped the swagger and came to her far differently than he had before. This time his approach was humble, his manner demure. He took her hand, his eyes never leaving hers and said: “I’m sorry, Joss - I didn’t mean that. Look, I know you like Greg Williams and all, but I wish you would reconsider and go to the dance with me. It would mean a whole lot. I don’t know what else to say.”

Nadine and Claudia smiled. That was the nicest proposal they’d ever seen, and the fact it was Roy Brown saying it made the moment more special. From that moment on, there was mystery and enchantment in their eyes; it was clear that a threshold had been crossed. And as natural as breathing, Roy pulled her close and kissed her gently on the lips.

“Will you go to the dance with me?” he politely asked again.

Joss softly exhaled: “Yes.”
Claudia elbowed Nadine, who returned the favor.

Job well done.
May 9, 1953. 6:50pm.

Roy arrived in front of Joss’ house in a two-toned, white and navy blue Oldsmobile Super 88 sedan with roughly ten minutes to spare. He looked at himself in the mirror, checking to make sure that everything was letter-perfect. Clean shaven, fresh haircut, killer smile; he was ready to go. Before he got out of the car he took a moment to look around. Nice neighborhood. Trimmed front lawns and hedges, fresh flowers, recently painted homes. Nothing at all like the neighborhood he used to live in, known colloquially as the Black Belt, one of the poorest neighborhoods on the South Side that stretched some thirty blocks along State Street. No one from Roy’s old stomping grounds could ever imagine living in uppity Chatham. Most would say the black folks that lived there were bourgeois, or booshie, but Roy was different. He grew up wanting out a long time ago - alcoholic dad, prostitute mom. He knew early on that he should leave it all behind, but didn’t quite know how - another reason he was glad his uncle took him in. It was his
uncle’s car he was driving.

Roy became nervous. This was the first time he’d ever gone into Chatham alone; he’d never seen the inside one of these houses and Joss’ place looked to be the largest on her block - a two-story, red brick bungalow that loomed majestically over the others on South Eberhart Avenue. Its wide front porch and expertly manicured lawn put Roy on edge, making him feel unequal. Out of place. *This ain’t no place for someone like me*, he thought. For a moment he considered driving off before it was too late, perhaps going home and making up some story that he was grounded or had a death in the family or something like that. But it wasn’t true. There was no one else. No siblings, no relatives, or ones that actually cared enough to visit him. It was just him and his uncle and he didn’t want to lie to Joss, especially since the smack he talked about Greg Williams caused her to break their date. He couldn’t do it. So he did the next best thing; inside the glove compartment was a flask he’d taken from his uncle’s liquor cabinet filled with whiskey. He grabbed it and took a healthy swig, wiped his mouth and chewed on Dentyne gum. He coughed from the spicy combination of alcohol and cinnamon, but once both had settled he could feel the edge come off, a weight had been lifted. He took another look in the mirror, the sudden rush of hard liquor made him tipsy.
“Show these booshies what you’re made of,” he whispered in closed quarters.

A more confident, but slightly inebriated Roy stepped out of the car and strutted toward the front door. He lost his footing at first, but quickly caught himself, went back into his bravado and rang the bell. Roy peered into the glass and did one last check in the reflection, but stiffened up as a tall, stern looking man opened the door. Clearly it was Joss’ father, who had no semblance of a smile on his face. On the contrary, he looked quite upset.

Roy wished he had taken a second sip from the flask.

“Uh...hi, sir. I’m...uh...Ro...”

“Yeah, I know who you are. Get in here, already. It’s cold out here!”

Fred Tibideaux half-shoved the shaky young man into their front room, slammed the door behind him. Without speaking, Fred pointed to the couch, essentially ordering him to sit down, which he did without being told.

Roy looked around him, taking a mental inventory. Leather couch and love seats, a huge mirror encased in a garish looking wood frame, plush wall-to-wall carpeting that smelled brand new, silk drapes that hung in front of a picture window facing the street. They actually had a
television set...in color, no doubt! All this was the exact opposite of what he was used to, for he didn’t know a single person who had a TV, let alone in color. Roy thought of taking off his jacket, but could feel the perspiration roll down his back. He decided to keep it on.

“So what’s this I hear? You’re on the basketball team?” Fred asked. He stood over Roy like a lumberjack about to cut down a tree.

“Uh...y...yes, sir.”

“And? What position do you play?”

“I’m a guard, sir. Shooting guard.”

“A what? You don’t look like a shooting guard. How tall are you, boy?” Fred fired back.

“Six foot three, sir.”

Fred huffed. “That’s a surprise. You look rather scrawny to me. I was a forward back in my day, and I was a mean sum-bitch too. You got too close when I drove to the basket and you got an elbow upside the head, you know what I mean?”

“Uh...yeah, I know what you mean, sir. See...”

“What does your father do for a living?” Fred interrupted.

“...uh...for a living, sir?”

“Yes, young man. What kind of work does your father do?”

“My father?...well...”
Fred frowned. “Yes, your father! You do have a father, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“So? What does he do for a living?”

Roy swallowed hard, now visibly sweating. “He doesn’t work, sir. He’s out of a job. I live with my uncle.”

“Your uncle? Where in the hell is your father?”

Roy looked down, ashamed. “I don’t know.”

The room grew silent. Roy was fixed on the dark brown carpeting, too afraid to look him in the eye. Fred sighed, sat across from him in his leather recliner.

“Look, you seem like a nice boy. I’m sure you mean well, but…”

“FRED! Aren’t you going to introduce Joss’ date to me?” Shirley Tibideaux, Fred’s wife of twenty-two years, entered the room and thus interrupted his line of questioning just in time. Roy was less than thirty seconds from being kicked out of their home.

Fred was upset. He rose from his recliner and marched toward the kitchen. “Name’s Roy,” he mumbled as he stormed by. Shirley gave her meddling husband an even meaner look than his, which quickly disappeared as she walked toward Roy and extended her hand. He shook it, finally looking someplace other than the floor.
“Hi Mrs. Tibideaux.  Roy Brown.”

“Nice to meet you, Roy.  Joss is upstairs getting ready and she’ll be down in a minute.  Would you like something to drink?”

*Whiskey would be nice.*  “A glass of ice water, please?”

She smiled again.  “Coming right up.  I’ll be back in a minute.”

The moment she left the room her face had tightened up, and it only got worse when she saw her grumpy husband frowning in the study behind the early edition of the Sunday Chicago Tribune.  The newspaper was upside down.

Shirley quietly closed the door, snatched the paper away and stood over Fred.

“I heard every word.  What the hell are you doing?  Trying to ruin your daughter’s evening?”

“You heard that boy.  His people aren’t anywhere around.  Daddy’s probably a drunk or a dope fiend or something.  And I don’t even wanna know about his mother.”

“So what?  He’s a nice looking young man who’s taking Joss out to a dance.  Can’t you at least be polite?”

“The hell with polite.  There’s something funny about that kid, coming in here all glassy-eyed and shit.  I don’t like him.”

“Look, I know what this is about.  You don’t like him because Joss
decided to go to the dance with someone else.”

Fred huffed again. “And? So what if I do feel that way? That Greg is a nice young man for our daughter. My parents didn’t have to worry about this with me. You and I didn’t go through this with Bobby.”

“That’s because boys are different. This is Joss we’re talking about.”

“Oh that means nothing, a kid is a kid. And another thing...”

“We can’t keep making decisions for her, Fred. She should go with whomever she wants.”

“But...”

“But nothing.” They both took a moment; Fred sank further back in his chair, pouting. Shirley made a half circle around him, threw her arms over his shoulders and nuzzled his ear, knowing how to get her husband’s attention.

“And don’t go thinking that’s gonna work, hear? This changes nothing.”

“Oh it’s gonna work, all right. It always does.”

Shirley kept nuzzling at his ear until Fred couldn’t hold it in any longer. He snickered and pulled his head away to stop her tickling.

“All right, all right. One date! But when she comes home I’ll be waiting, and he better have his ass here, with her, on time. Agreed?”
“Agreed, Mister Grumpy.”

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“So? How did it go?” Joss asked, as they made their way to the dance.

Roy hadn’t said much after they left. Fred’s ominous presence loomed over him despite the fact he didn’t say a word, except “don’t be late” for the remainder of their visit. He didn’t need to know what would happen if he did bring Joss back past the requested hour. It would be the first and last date he would ever have with her.

“Fine,” Roy mumbled.

Joss stared at him. “You sure about that? You look like something’s wrong. Lemme guess, he badgered you about your parents, right?”

Roy was surprised. “Yeah, how’d you know?”

Joss rolled her eyes, snickered. “Daddy has done that to almost every boy I’ve brought home, except Greg, of course. You poor thing, you must be traumatized.”

The news actually made Roy feel better. He turned left at Eberhart and 87th Street; his posture had relaxed, left wrist over the steering wheel, right hand stroking the few hairs on his chin as if they were many.
“Naw, Joss. I had it all under control. Your pops didn’t scare me at all.”

She looked at him. “He didn’t?”

“Nope.”

“He was pretty upset with me for breaking it off with Greg so you and I could go to the dance tonight.”

“Really?”

“Mmm...hmm.” She looked quite serious. “Right after I told him he started whistling.”

“Whistling?” Roy asked.

“Yep. That’s how I know he’s mad, I mean really mad. I asked him about it once. At first he denied it, but later said it helps relax him.”

Roy seemed interested. “What does he whistle?”

“I don’t know. Jazz songs, I think. Stuff by Coltrane, Thelonious Monk. Frank Sinatra.”

“Frank Sinatra? Now I know ya’ll are...uh...”

Joss turned and faced him. “Are what?”

“Look, we’re almost at school.”

“Are what, Roy Brown?”

He gulped, became fidgety. “Well...uh...you know what they call
black folks in Chatham...”

Joss frowned, sighed. “Booshie?”

Roy was surprised. “Uh...yeah. Booshie.” Joss laughed so hard Roy thought she had lost her mind. She was that way all until he parked in the school parking lot a block away.

“Booshie? Is that what you think I am, Roy?”

“Well...you live in Chatham, right? Everyone knows that Chatham is full of uppity black folks.”

“Trust me, my folks are FAR from booshie.”

“They didn’t seem like it.”

“Why? Because they have good manners? They came from the South. Our people were sharecroppers in the Delta. We didn’t always have it this way. Trust me - my parents and I were in The Belt like everybody else until I was twelve. Daddy finally saved enough money to open his dry cleaning business, and when things got better he bought that house you were just in.”

“Really? And where is his business?”

Joss pointed. “We passed it on the way up here. It’s right off the corner of 87th and Stony Island; has been for the past four years.”

This both impressed and depressed Roy at the same time. He had Joss’ family all wrong; he too had southern roots but his parents took a
different direction.

Joss slid closer to Roy, her head resting against the seat cushion, brown eyes sparkling in front of his. She wore a pink cashmere sweater over a white, silk blouse and matching white pleated skirt that went just below the knees. Her soft hair flowed like water down to her shoulders, a slight curl along the ends. She was absolutely beautiful, and the more he stared at her the more uneasy he became.

“So what do your parents do?” Roy didn’t speak at first. What was it with these people and their obsession with work? Joss laughed again. “I’m just kidding, baby.” After her revelation, Roy decided to tell her anyway.

“Well, my mom hasn’t been around in years. She was, you know, one of those kinds of women from what my father told me. As for him, he had a job working for Western Electric, but he got into drinking and lost his job, started getting into trouble, hanging out until early morning. I got tired of it and called my uncle. I’ve been living with him in Auburn-Gresham ever since. Right now basketball and my uncle are all I got.”

This was harder than he thought it would be, especially after meeting Joss’ parents in their nice house and nice neighborhood. How could he compare to her?
Joss reached out and took his hand, truly moved. “Well don’t you worry, Roy Brown. You’ve got me now.”

“I do? You still wanna go out with a street urchin like me?”

Joss slid closer to him, kissed his firm lips and nodded:

“Mmmm...hmmm.”

The two of them hugged and kissed for a while in the front seat until Joss pulled away from him. “C’mon, let’s get inside before we forget there’s a dance going on.”

He nodded and got out the car, running over the other side to open her door. “Right this way, Miss.”

“Why thank you, kind sir.”

Roy was about to close the door when he remembered the flask. He opened the glove compartment and was about to put it away when Joss took it from him.

“What’s this?” she asked. He tried to take it from her, but she pulled back.

“Whiskey. You don’t want that.”

“Oh no?” Joss unscrewed the cap, took a healthy swig and handed it back to a very surprised-looking Roy. She caught this and simply remarked: “what’s the matter? Never seen a booshie girl drink before?”
He laughed and drank out of the flask, then put it back in his pocket. They both enjoyed a casual stroll, hand-in-hand toward the gymnasium. Every now and then one would lose their balance while the other kept them steady, which happened nearly all the way until they made it to the gym entrance. Charlie Martin, the senior class president, sat at a table on the inside collecting a quarter from each student, the proceeds from the dance going toward the Chatham Homeless Shelter on 83rd and Dorchester. Charlie was flanked by Principal Bullard or “Big Head Buzzard” to the other students. He was as black as night, or ‘blue-black’ as the saying went, bald like an eagle and undoubtedly the meanest person in school. Even the teachers were afraid of him. It’s alleged that he once fought off three hoodlums who tried to rob him late at night while leaving school, all three of them needing medical attention before they were arrested. Some kids called him “Black Devil.” Surprisingly the only person not intimidated by him was Greg. Joss had actually seen this first hand.

She immediately put gum in her mouth when she saw him. But before she could offer some to Roy, Big Head Buzzard approached him, extending his hand without cracking a smile. “Congratulations on your scholarship, young man. You’ll be the first colored ball player in Illinois University’s history. Did you know that?”
Roy’s eyelids were half open. He snatched them up when Buzzard spoke, but it was clear the whiskey had rushed to his head.

“Thank you, Principal Bullard,” Roy replied. Joss was on pins and needles with every word he spoke, fearful that Roy would give himself away. Fortunately for both of them his adrenaline kicked in when it did.

“We’re all very proud of you, son. You’re going to do great things at that college.”

With that, Big Head Buzzard gave Roy a heavy-handed slap on the back, and like the predator that he was, took his usual perch over Charlie Martin’s shoulder, eyes wandering back and forth, scanning the area as if searching for food.

Joss whistled, wiped her brow. She stuck out her hand. "I think you’d better let me hold that flask," she whispered softly in his ear. As the two of them neared Charlie’s table she slid her hand behind his back and smoothly dropped it in her purse. Roy reached into his pocket and handed Charlie fifty cents.

The Buzzard winked and nodded at the young couple as they passed by on their way through the gym doors. At that moment Joss thought of Greg Williams, who was probably sitting at home, heart broken because she’d dumped him at the eleventh hour. But once she saw Claudia and Nadine, who both were excited and a tad jealous of
their dear friend, thoughts of Greg faded away into the night; a night she had always dreamed would come true.

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It was eight-thirty and the dance was still going strong, though the disc jockey had slowed things down a bit with "I Only Have Eyes For You" by the Flamingos. The Buzzard made a point to walk through the crowd of dancing teenagers, occasionally breaking apart a few whom he deemed too close.

"What do you think you're doing, young man! Arms extended!" he barked.

The boy nervously complied. Roy and Joss caught that and giggled, spreading further apart as The Buzzard walked by them. Once he deemed it safe, Roy grabbed her hips and gently turned her body so he could keep an eye on his principal's shiny head off in the distance. He immediately kissed Joss and swung her around like a ballerina, then pulled her close and kissed her again; the roving eyes of Principal Bullard caught their last embrace and he was headed straight for them.

Nadine, who had been dancing most of the evening with gangly Brook Powers, poked Joss on her arm.

"Buzzard alert! You'd better get outta here!" she whispered. Joss saw him kneading his way through the crowd, so she ducked and grabbed
Roy - heading toward the bleachers.

"Get down!" she ordered. Roy complied, crouching low and scooting around other dancers like a rat running through a maze. That, plus the fact he was six-foot three, made the scene all the more funny to witness.

They kept going until they made it to the bleachers and snuck underneath, waiting until the coast was clear. The two of them faced each other. Joss reached into her purse and brought out the flask, taking another swig from the metal container. She handed it to Roy, who threw his head back and drank until all the whiskey was gone. The sudden rush made him blink, dazed. She looked deep into his eyes, as he did hers, and with each passing second Joss felt her body become more snug against his. She pushed Roy against the gym wall and kissed him, feeling his hardness press against her thigh, which turned her on even more. They were wild with passion and stepped away from the wall, Roy moving her around underneath the bleachers, both of them stumbling over girders that supported the structure. They laughed. They didn't care. It was the moment she'd always dreamed of: being swept away by her lover in the heat of passion.

The two of them were so caught up in the moment that they failed to notice someone walk by. Big Head Buzzard.
"Alright you two, break it up before I throw you in detention."

Roy was now visibly tipsy, though Joss could see he was trying to get his act together.

"We're sorry, Principal Buzzard, we..." Roy snapped wide awake, realizing what he'd just said. Joss covered her mouth in shock. The Buzzard was clearly not amused.


As the now irate principal came closer, Joss tried to hide the flask in her purse but dropped it on the floor. Before she could pick it up, Principal Bullard snatched it away and started sniffing, clearly repulsed by the scent. His eyes bore deep into Joss'.

“You’ve been drinking, have you?” he snarled at her. His eyes were bright as hot coals, spittle dropped from his lips and rolled down to his chin. The Buzzard appeared on the verge of slapping her; his body shivered with rage, fists balled up. Before he could say another word, Roy came out with: "It's not Joss' fault, sir. The flask's mine. I'm the one drinking."

The irate principal stopped in his tracks, surprised. He held the flask up where Roy could see it. "This belongs to you?"

"Yes, sir. My uncle's initials "JB' are on it."
The Buzzard took a close look at the flask and noted the initials 
JB, Jason Brown, were indeed there.

"I want both of you to leave right now," he ordered, stopped Roy 
as he tried to pass. "And as for you, Mr. Basketball Star, tell your uncle I 
wanna see him right away. You're in deep trouble!"

That shook Roy to the core. He apologized repeatedly.

"You're not going to suspend me or anything, sir?"

“You should’ve thought about that before you started drinking, 
Mr. Brown.”

"But please…I’m really sorry, sir. My scholarship…”

“Boy, you’d better get outta here before I have you arrested!”

Roy’s face crumpled with rage. He shoved Bullard hard to the 
ground and ran away. Joss ran after him, the sounds of Bullard’s curses 
grew louder than the music near the dance floor. People stopped 
dancing and noted the growing spectacle, watching Joss chase after Roy 
until both of them made it through the gym doors and out into the night. 
Nadine and Claudia tried in earnest to see what had happened, but they 
were too late. Before anyone could find out what was going on, the 
couple had already left. By Monday morning this undoubtedly would be the biggest news of the year: “CVS High star basketball player 
suspended for drinking and assaulting Principal Ray Bullard.”
Roy’s face was soaked in tears. He shook like a leaf and was unable to drive. Joss got behind the wheel and took them to The Point, a hangout spot in Hyde Park nearby the University of Chicago. The parking lot was full of cars and kids milling about, taking walks along the Lake Shore as the tide crashed along the rocks below. It was a perfect night for everyone present, except for the couple inside the brand new Oldsmobile. Roy was terrified that The Buzzard would suspend him, or worse. Joss felt horrible, blaming herself. Perhaps if she hadn’t encouraged him by taking a drink out in the open he wouldn’t have been caught. She rubbed his shoulders in a meager attempt to console him, but nothing worked. Finally she held him tight against her and stroked his face much in the same way that her father used to do when she would cry as a young child. His breathing was heavy and he appeared to be all cried out. He had no idea what to do.

“Joss, I fucked up. I fucked up bad. If he suspends me I’m finished. The coaches had to fight the university to get me in there. If they get wind of this, they’ll never take me.”

“Shhh, baby - it’s gonna be all right. He won’t do that to you. How could he? And ruin your chances of going to college? He’s an asshole, but not like that. You have nothing to worry about.”
“I called him Buzzard. He caught me drinking. He doesn’t give a shit about me. I won championships for his school and my playing days here are over. He got what he wanted.”

“I still don’t think...”

“You don’t understand, Joss! I’m the first colored basketball player ever recruited in Illinois University’s history. Do you know what that means? Every white person there will look at me funny, watching everything I do until I graduate. They ain’t gonna take some nigger that got suspended for drinking in high school. It’s over, Joss. I’ll be stuck washing dishes or picking up trash for the city. I ain’t gonna be nothin’ Joss. Nothin’ at all!”

He pulled away, leaning against the window. Joss too began to sob, the makeup her mother spent time helping her put on ran down her cheeks and below her chin, light brown droplets stained her pink sweater.

“You think your life is over, Roy?”

Roy jumped. The tone of her voice frightened him. The last time he heard something similar was when he witnessed his parents fighting in front of him, just before his mother walked out their house seven years ago, never to be heard from again.

“Nine years ago, before we moved to Chatham, my grandfather
took me to the store to get some groceries for Thanksgiving dinner. The store in our neighborhood didn’t have some of the things on my mother’s list, so we drove to Bridgeport because Poppy knew a kindly white man who worked in the deli section that would sneak him groceries out back since the manager didn’t like having colored folks inside. He called the man and when he brought our food the manager followed him, trying to take it away from my grandfather even though he offered to pay him double for it, saying: ‘ain’t no nigger taking anything from this store, ever!’ My grandfather threw the money at him and took it back, so the man got two of his store keeps and they beat him to death with bricks from behind the store. When the police got there they said Poppy had broken into the store and tried to steal from them.”

Roy didn’t know what to say. He’d never thought someone like Joss would ever experience something as horrible as this. She struggled to continue, so he held her close as she did: “I was sitting in the car while they beat him and started to get out, but he begged me not to. There was nothing I could do, Roy. Nothing!”

He continued holding her, rocking her against him until he remembered: “The Bridgeport Riots? That was because of your grandfather?”

She nodded. “And the men that did it were never arrested.”
That’s what made daddy work so hard to give us a better life; that’s why he badgers every boy I bring home. His dad was tough on him, but Poppy could also be very gentle and kind, and when he was murdered, daddy took it hard.”

They looked deep into one another’s eyes, a faint trace of moonlight shined down as if only meant for the two of them. They kissed and kissed and kissed again as the whisper of the lake calmed their fears.

“It took me a while, but I made it through. And no matter what happens to you, I promise I’ll always be here to help.”

Roy stroked her silky hair and caressed her back as she had melted in his strong arms. It was clear that her heart now belonged to him.

“Thank you, baby. Me too.”
February 14, 1957

Joss looked into her newborn son’s angelic face, still exhausted after fourteen hours of being in labor and finally giving birth. Her hair was frayed, matted against her forehead from the sweat and soap caked to her face by the attending nurses. Rather than wash her properly, they patted her down with washcloths, insisting that she rest for now and they would attend to her later. Perhaps they had a point to their methods; perhaps they were lazy and put off by the post-delivery smell that crept slowly through her sheets. Maybe so, but Joss didn’t care. All she was concerned about was this six-pound, eight ounce infant that gurgled and cooed in her arms, his pink fingers and toes moving about - reaching, searching for something. Perhaps it was his absent father that he was looking for.

Joss had given birth to their son alone, and hadn’t seen Roy since Friday morning. He promised that he was going to work and would come straight home, just in case she went into labor. The plan was between
Roy, Joss’s mom and Nadine and Claudia, someone would be with her at all times. Roy said he was ready for the responsibilities of a being father, but then again - she’d heard that story before. She wanted him there with her. Someone. Anyone. But instead she went through this alone, grateful that she had the presence of mind to have everything packed in advance. Her parents were in the hospital waiting area, her father pacing and puffing cigarettes - angry that Roy hadn’t come in time. The young couple had discussed possible names for their child, but since he hadn’t arrived yet, she had refused to name him, so instead she would refer to him by the nickname she gave until the boy’s father showed up. She called him Cupid. Her obstetrician and staff had laughed, but they certainly understood - after all, she had given birth on Valentine’s Day.

Joss watched Cupid continue with his gurgling and rubbing of his closed eyes with his balled-up hands. He stretched them out and pulled them back toward him as if he were reaching for something just beyond his grasp. She cried as he kept trying, wondering what she should do. Did Roy deserve to know the truth about this beautiful child, or should she keep it to herself? No one - not even her parents - knew what had happened. For several months, Joss practically begged Roy to be at her side while she had her regular visits with the doctor, but gave in to his
indifference and made her own way. Now she was glad he hadn’t come. Given his conduct as of late, he didn’t deserve to know the truth, and in the end if no one ever found out it wouldn’t matter anyway. There was nothing anyone could do to change things, and she didn’t want people feeling sorry for her precious child, who was normal and healthy. And alive.

She decided to keep the secret to herself.

"My precious little Cupid. My beautiful baby boy. Someday I will tell you about yourself, and it will indeed remain a secret between you and me. Mother and son."

She kissed his forehead, and to her surprise he opened his eyes and smiled. Joss took a deep breath, absorbing the moment, when she was interrupted by a loud conversation in the hallway. Into her room burst an inebriated Roy, followed by Fred and Shirley. Her dad was livid, grabbing Roy’s arm.

"Get your fucking hands off me, man!" Roy snapped. "I’m his father! I have a right..."

"You have right to shit! You’re nothing but a goddamn drunk!" Fred roared. His wife got in between the men as Cupid began crying.

"Look what you’ve done. You’ve upset the baby. Fred...FRED...let’s go, we’ll deal with this later," Shirley ordered, taking her angry husband
by the arm.

Fred’s eyes were locked into Roy’s face; his lips were twitching. He wanted to tear him apart. He said: "Joss, I’ll be right outside if you need me" and left in a huff, walking past Shirley into the corridor. Joss’s mother remained behind, equally upset but more in control. Her face was devoid of emotion. Sheer anger flowed through her as she said:

"Being the boy’s father means having your ass here while your wife is giving birth. It means not being stumbling-over drunk in her presence. It MEANS being a man, Roy! I suggest you start remembering that, or I’ll think twice about holding Fred back in the future."

Shirley may have been the quieter of the two, but when she spoke it was usually to the point. She left the room, leaving Roy in shame. Joss continued rocking Cupid, who had settled down once again.

"Of all days for you to do this, you picked today. I gave birth to your son this morning after being in labor damn near since you left home. Where have you been?"

Roy hadn’t moved; he still faced the door.

"I'm sorry, Joss. I'm sorry I let you down and..."

"AGAIN...you've let me down again, Roy. I'm so tired of this. If it weren't for the baby I would leave you right now."

Roy sat in a chair in the corner. He couldn’t look at her, let alone
his son.

"I'm afraid, Joss. I'm scared of being a father for that boy. I know I ain't no good to nobody. I'm just like my daddy was with me. I had a chance to go to college and play ball, but I blew it. Now I ain't nothin'."

Tears rolled down Roy's face. He looked at her through blood shot eyes.

"I don't mean to hurt you, baby. I wanna be good for you and our kid. I want him to get the best, but I'm afraid I'm gonna end up disappointin' him."

Joss softened her stance a bit, though she was still upset.

"You don't have to be like your father, Roy - not if you don't want to. Besides, you have the two of us to think about now. You got yourself a good job at the plant, and someday soon we can get us a bigger place over in Bronzeville. Momma offered to help with the baby so I can work part-time. When I finish college I can become a teacher. We've got a good thing going here, but you've got to stop your drinking. She's right you know. You need to start being a man, Roy. Otherwise you're no good to us."

Roy wiped his tears, nodding. Having spoken her mind, Joss mustered a smile.

"Don't you wanna come see your son?"
Roy nodded again, and she made room for him on her bed. Joss ignored the pungent sweat and alcohol for the moment - offering the baby to him. Roy shook off nervousness as he held the child.

"He ain't got no name, does he?"

"No, though I gave him a nickname. I waited for you to show up so we could decide - just as we discussed."

"Good. What's his nickname?"

"Cupid."

"CUPID? Why Cupid? That's a...oh...I get it now. Okay then. Cupid he is...but let's pick him a real name. I don't think Cupid is a good name for any son of mine."

"Alright then, let's talk about it."

Shirley watched through the cracked door as Roy kissed his wife and son. She took a deep breath and smiled, then sat next to Fred, who was still agitated by his son-in-law's negligence.

"Well, they've made up for now. Let's hope this wakes him up."

Fred took Shirley's hand. "He'd better wake up, or else."

Shirley nodded, not needing to hear the 'or else'. They've been married for twenty-two years. She already knew the answer.
October 18, 1965. 10:27pm. Near West Side.

Antonio Cuppicciotti, Sr. checked his watch, making sure he was on time. He sat alone in his black ’63 Pontiac Grand Prix coupe, waiting for a sign to come into Lombardi’s Auto Body Shop on West Roosevelt Road and South Damen Avenue. Despite his usual ‘cool-as-a-cucumber’ appearance, Antonio - now known to everyone as Tony Senior since the birth of his son - was quite nervous. Two and a half years of undercover work was about to come to a head, by far the most dangerous situation he’d ever been involved in since making detective.

Tony Senior had long wanted to be a cop ever since he was a kid growing up in Little Sicily near North Harlem Avenue. Almost as soon as he had graduated from high school, he went straight for the police academy against his father’s wishes. Since then he’d made a name for himself. He worked the beat in his old neighborhood and through private agreements with guys he knew, all ‘business deals’ were allowed to continue as long as they were kept private and didn’t endanger the
residents. Meanwhile, the mob guys he knew would report if any factions were trying to enter the neighborhood so Tony Senior could get his precinct involved. It was a great system, and Little Sicily continued to thrive under his watch.

He remembered what he told a room full of wise guys in a crowded, smoky back parlor at The School Street Social Club in Fall of '59:

Look, you guys have known me since we were kids. You know I’m a stand-up guy. I don’t give a shit what you do, as long as I don’t see it and it doesn’t affect the neighborhood. So why don’t we work this thing out so all of us can thrive here, eh? Keep your deals away from me and away from the good people of Little Sicily and I’ll keep out intruders. Capish?

From that day forward it was clear Tony Senior was a leader, someone who wasn’t afraid to go head to head with anyone. He shook hands with every wise guy in the room, and though he didn’t socialize with them, he was always respectful and would acknowledge the men and their families on birthdays, anniversaries and holidays. They, in turn, watched over his house and family and kept their promise to keep things out of sight-out-of mind. Within two years after Tony Senior became a cop, crime had taken a dramatic nose dive in Little Sicily and
remained that way for years. Shortly thereafter Tony was promoted to detective and managed to schmooze his way into narcotics. After spending three years in deep cover, this was the moment where all the contacts he’d made on the street were about to lead to the biggest highlight of his career - a showdown with Salvatore “Sonny Bats” Bracco, a highly-respected Capo in the Ferruccio Crime Family.

Right now, Sonny Bats was somewhere inside of Lombardi’s with probably four or five of his biggest and meanest henchmen. At his side would be his Louisville Slugger that he would keep standby just in case something *unfavorable* should occur during this deal. The bat was legendary, not because it once belonged to an actual baseball player, but because of the number of heads Sonny had knocked for home runs over the years. It’s once rumored that back in ’59, Sonny - a White Sox fan - and a former associate - a Cubs fan - got into a minor disagreement over which team was better. Sonny had just come in from a neighborhood softball game, grabbed his bat and hit the associate so hard that a permanent imprint of the “Louisville Slugger” logo was mashed into his forehead. From that moment on it was clear, when speaking to Sonny “Bats” you were a Sox fan, even if you really weren’t.

Point taken. Loud and clear.

Tony Senior knew all of this. He’d heard the rumors. He’d
examined Sonny’s case file. There was nothing he didn’t know about this guy. Everything he needed to know was inside his head, and he was ready. Under the guise of Nicky Roselli, Tony had managed to get involved with a member of Sonny’s crew named Agostino “Fat Gus” Cantone and ran a couple of jobs with him that went well. If ‘Nicky’ could deliver on this heroin deal the CPD would pull him out of deep cover and systematically go after the Ferruccios; probably offer Sonny a cake deal to turn on Gino. All of that was riding on tonight. Tony’s career could be set in the next hour, but right now he was merely trying to keep it together long enough to pull this off. He’d already said three Hail Mary’s and two Our Fathers while waiting and was in the middle of his third when he saw the light flash on and off by the front office door of the shop.

‘Nicky’ took a deep breath, cut of the ignition to his Pontiac and grabbed a laundry bag filled with dirty clothes and about five kilos of smack. The rain came down as he made what was the longest street crossing in his life. If this went down the way it should, he would be home with his wife by midnight and in time for his son’s third birthday party tomorrow afternoon. It’s been a long time since Tony spent time with his family, sneaking in and out of his house in the middle of the night, leaving Loretta groceries, money or candy and flowers as soft
reminders of his love for her. Every now and then, Tony would come home, quietly undress in the darkness and crawl under the covers with her where they would make love for hours. And almost as soon as they had finished, he would hold her in his arms, kissing the nape of her neck and whisper countless ‘I love yous’ into her ear, then leave as he had arrived; sometimes in tears, sometimes angry that he had to go.

He hoped that he’d be able to do that again in just a few short hours, only this time there would be no need for him to sneak out ever again. A promotion, special commendation and a huge notch on his resume awaited him, provided that Sonny found no reason to use his Louisville Slugger. ‘Nicky’ wisely decided to say one more Our Father for good luck while waiting for someone to answer the front door.

Though he would never say so, he could use a little bit o’luck of the Irish right about now.

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“Hey Nicky! Che cosa è questo, una lavanderia automatica?”

*(Hey Nicky! What is this, a Laundromat?)*

Sonny Bats and five of his men cracked up when a pair of red shorts with white polka dots hit the table, the same pair Loretta had bought Tony Senior last Christmas. In a way, he was a little hurt when they laughed at them, especially since they came from her, but Tony
remembered something others deemed insignificant in Sonny’s file: Sonny knew very little English being from the Old Country, but loved slapstick comedy like *The Three Stooges* and *The Honeymooners* and was once rumored to have dehydrated himself from laughing so hard.

That’s why Senior swallowed his pride and stuck some of his funniest looking underwear inside the laundry bag. One way to keep Sonny happy was to make him laugh, and every time he pulled an odd item out the bag it only made Sonny crack up even harder.

Tony smiled, saying in Italian: “Potrebbe pure fare la mia lavanderia dopo che vado qui, no?” (I might as well do my laundry after I leave here, right?)

Sonny’s face now matched Tony’s red underwear, his eyes bulged and tears ran down his cheeks. Sweat flew from his forehead; his fat hands smacked the table, drinks, cigar butts and poker chips repeatedly bounced up and down. Sonny may have been obese but he had the strength of an ox. He was someone you did not want to get a hold of you. Once he had you, he had you.

By now Tony Senior had piled several small plastic bags filled with smack on the table. Sonny finally settled down and nodded for one of his guys to check it out, never taking his eye off of Tony. A pock-faced man with bad teeth picked up one of the bags and cut into it with a
switch blade, dipped his finger into the powdery substance and dabbed a sample onto his tongue. He nodded back at Sonny, who snapped his fingers and motioned toward Tony. A second man approached him and opened a briefcase filled with cash, took a bundle and flicked through each one, showing Tony they were real.

“Non è necessario da contare, Sonny. Se lo fido.” (It’s not necessary to count, Sonny. I trust you.)

Sonny waved him off: “In questa cosa di il nostro, non si fidi mai di chiunque.” (In this thing of ours, never trust anyone.)

Once the man had finished counting out ten thousand dollars, Tony Senior nodded at each of the men in the room, then looked directly at Sonny Bats.

“Grazie,” said Tony.

Sonny nodded. “Prego.”

They stared at one another, eyes locked. Sonny’s expression was quite different from earlier; there was life in his eyes, a joyfulness of a good-natured man with a sense of humor. Since that moment, the look had turned colder by the second; the red flush once in his face and hands was now gone and in its place was a pale, emotionless glare of a hardened criminal, the likes of which Tony had never seen before.

He remembered the countless nights of pouring over files and
crime scene photos of Sonny’s work with former enemies that tried building a rep against this evil man, only to suddenly disappear forever. Their mangled images made their way into his dreams so much to the point where Tony could see himself as a victim, strung up by a rope thrown over a rafter at one end, Sonny Bats hoisting him up into the air. As Tony Senior filled his head night after night with these At what point did someone like Sonny become what he is now? What turned him into the vicious sociopath that eventually led to this moment in time? Tony never thought of such things before and avoided it at all costs, remembering what Sergeant Isiah “Skip” Rainey, his former instructor in the academy, had told the class on their first day: “the very moment you’ve humanized these animals is when you’ve lost your edge.” That was the cardinal rule, especially for undercover detectives out on the street. For the most part Tony Senior managed to keep the two separate, but he sensed this whole thing was about to end and was afraid of making a mistake.

And just like that, Tony’s eyes had given him away. He knew it. Quickly he began to size the others in the room, noting Sonny’s right hand was sliding under the table, no doubt reaching for his Louisville Slugger.

“Get him!” Sonny screamed in accent-heavy English. The biggest
of his men pulled a rope from his pocket and ran at him. Tony Senior dropped his laundry bag and reached for a small handgun taped under his shirt collar against the nape of his back, the same place where Loretta would routinely go crazy when kissed. He took three quick paces backward against the door and rapidly fired, killing three of Sonny’s guys. The other two tried to make a run for it out the back door, but Tony got to them, forcing them to the ground. Sonny stood perfectly still, his trademark bat in his right hand.

“Indichi sulla terra, Sonny!”

Sonny dropped the bat and laid down flat, or as much as his huge gut would allow him to do. He laughed while doing as he was told; meanwhile Tony Senior held them all at gunpoint as he searched the men for weapons, used duct tape from Sonny’s desk to tie their hands behind their backs and dialed his precinct for backup.

Tony Senior hadn’t slept, now in the unusual position of hero just a few hours after almost getting himself killed. The list of those grateful for his service had grown now that Sonny and his guys were behind bars, “Big Fish” being next in line on the DA’s wish list. He knew the Chief would probably be calling him today, congratulating him on a job well done. To be honest, he’d rather not hear from anyone. For the last few years Senior had been a cop 24/7 and would prefer to be ‘dad’ and ‘husband’ for a little while, even if for a single day. His lieutenant thought moving them to a safe house might be best, given the circumstances, but Tony Senior knew Loretta would kill him if they were forced to celebrate their son’s fifth birthday anyplace other than at home. Besides, every crook in Little Sicily was now indebted to him for sticking it to the largest and most powerful outfit in Chicago. After the news broke early that morning, in addition to the morning paper and
refills from the milkman, there were several bouquets of flowers on
Loretta’s doorstep, each with a simple message: *Thanks*. No signature,
of course. Senior’s name wasn’t mentioned in the newspapers, and
wouldn’t be until the DA had their case ready for trial, but all the wise
guys from the neighborhood knew what went down. That’s what they
did. And with local crew members as well as the CPD on post at
different points in Little Sicily, staying at home was the safest place to
be.

Tony Senior milled around his son’s party, smiling from ear to ear,
his living room full of neighborhood kids running around, playing games,
dribbling grape juice and cookies onto the wood floor. He was glad he
had listened to Loretta about refinishing the floors instead of buying new
carpeting, especially since they wanted kids. “That’s why I married
her,” he thought, taking a moment to wipe stepped-on chocolate chip
cookies from the floor. “She’s always thinking ahead.”

Despite having all of his neighbors, close friends and family
present to partake in the festivities, Tony felt a little out of place.
Three years of watching his back, slipping around corners, switching cars
and sliding in and out of his own house in the middle of the night had
made just being here all the more strange. He felt like he’d been away
for so long that he almost needed Loretta to re-introduce him to his
guests, but given the alternative he clearly would have chosen to be here, gradually making his way back into his old life all over again. He truly felt blessed.


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“Did you see Sayers return that ball? Ninety-six yards for a touchdown. I tell ya, that guy’s got a GTO motor stuck up his keyster, for sure,” Freddie remarked.

Federico Cuppicciotti, known by family and friends as Uncle Freddie, was the biggest and most vociferous member of the Cuppicciotti Family. He was six foot five inches of die-hard Chicago Bears fan and hardly a day went by without the brawny twenty-six year old talking about Mike Ditka or Dick Butkus, but running back Gale Sayers had been on his mind quite a bit. Anyone within ten feet of him would get a good dose of Bears fever whether they liked it or not. Chicago is a Bears town, and talking about the team wasn’t as arduous a task as one might think. Everyone loved them, and George “Papa Bear” Halas was still the toast of the town, having recently won the 1963 championship.

“I tell ya,” Freddie continued, “The Bears are on their way back. They’re heatin’ up, and this guy Sayers is gonna lead the way.”
“Nah, Freddie, this is Butkus’ team. They gotta get through him first,” said one neighbor.

“Yeah. Besides, they’re the Monsters of the Midway, Freddie. Defense is what wins here,” replied another.

Freddie waved them off. “You don’t wanna give ‘em credit because he’s a colored kid. Trust me, that guy is gonna be a Hall-of-Famer someday.”

Tony Senior smiled at his younger brother, whom his father lovingly called ‘buccalone’. “Damn, I’m glad to hear that big mouth again.” He felt a sharp tug at his pants leg. Junior smiled at him from ear to ear, dressed in the same police officer costume that he had begged his mother to buy for a month. It came complete with a holster belt, blue long-sleeve shirt with the City of Chicago flag patch on the right shoulder and matching trooper cap. Though Senior would’ve preferred being with them when she bought it, Halloween was coming up and he would be able to take his son trick-or-treating in his costume for the first time in three years. Until now, that role had belonged to Uncle Freddie.

Guests ‘oohed and aahed’ as the little boy showed off his outfit to his proud father, who scooped him into his strong arms and gave him a soft kiss to the cheek. Junior stuck out his tongue and wiped his face
while Tony Senior fiddled with his son’s tin badge.

“You look pretty sharp there, Officer.”

Senior kept poking his son’s tummy. Junior giggled.

“Thank you daddy.”

“You wanna be a police officer like me someday?”

“Uh huh, and we can catch bad guys together.”

“And what do officers say when they arrest bad guys?”

“Stick ‘em up!” The room burst out in laughter. Junior clapped and covered his face, giggling with glee as Senior turned to his guests and said: “Just like his old man, eh?”

“That sure explains a few things!” Freddie cracked, which stoked the laughter even further until Senior held up his hand, silencing the crowd.

“Okay, okay, so I got some work to do over here. But since I have everybody’s attention I’d just like to say it’s a great day for both of us. Being away from my beautiful wife and kid for so long has been tough. I’m just glad I can be here on his birthday, something I’ve missed for three years.”

Senior put his son down, knelt before him. “What say, kiddo? You glad to see your daddy again or what?”

Junior gave his father a tight hug, his gentle brown eyes closed
and tearing, while Senior patted his son’s trembling back. He thought of the fleeting moments where they spent time together, usually someplace indoors and with a select crowd of him, Loretta, Junior and Uncle Freddie. The visits were never more than a few hours, usually once or twice a month, followed by one of his patented quick exits. As he did with Loretta, Senior would steal a few rare, precious moments and arrive home in time to read *A Cat in the Hat* to him before he went to bed, noting Junior’s widest smile would always come when he read:

*Think left and think right and think low and think high. Oh, the thinks you can think up if only you try.* The Dr. Seuss tale was Junior’s favorite story, and Senior would relish the opportunity to read until the book was finished or his son had fallen asleep, and even then he would continue on reading for a while, aware that he may never have this moment again because of his grueling double life. No father should ever have to leave their wife and child behind like that; Tony Senior deemed it unnatural and needed to end as soon as possible. Thank God it finally did.

“Love you,” Senior whispered.

Junior kissed his dad’s cheek and went back to their warm embrace. There wasn’t a dry eye in the room.

Loretta came out of the kitchen; the quiet crowd made a way for her as she reached out to the two favorite men in her life. Despite
having worked all morning in the kitchen, her sandy brown hair was still in place. She wore her favorite red rayon dress with her mother’s cultured freshwater pearls that gently hung around her neck. She hadn’t bothered removing her ruffled white apron because she wanted to see what the commotion outside was all about, only to be pleasantly surprised by the sight before her. Tony Senior needed this to happen more than anything, which she was well aware of.

“Who’s ready for cake and ice cream?” she asked. Father and son had separated; both raised their hand. Half the room raised theirs including Uncle Freddie, who wildly waved his.

“Alright everyone, follow me.”

People filed into the dining room where chocolate cake and Neapolitan ice cream awaited them. Mom and Dad led the group in singing Happy Birthday and helped Junior blow out his candles. And as everyone got in line to get their ice cream and slice of cake, Freddie caught Senior’s attention by bumping into some poor kid, knocking him out of the way so he could be first.

“God, it feels good to be home again,” he chuckled, handing Freddie his hard-earned piece of cake.
July 4, 1966

Roy, Joss and Cupid spent their Fourth of July Holiday visiting with Joss’ parents in Chatham, a neighborhood located on the South East Side of the City. Like most of the south side, thirty years ago Chatham was all white, but many black owned businesses and residents moved into the area, causing the “white flight” to the suburbs.

Fred and Shirley Tibideaux were a part of the first wave of black folks to move into Chatham years ago. Fred opened a dry cleaning business on 87th and Cottage Grove Avenue, an intersection that became a hot spot for black owned barbershops, restaurants and grocery stores late in the decade. Like his residence, he was one of the first into the area and quickly became a known commodity throughout the southeast side. Fred was instrumental in setting up the Chatham Black Business Association, was the Worshipful Master of his Prince Hall Freemason lodge and recently was invited by Monsignor McMahon to become active
on the parish council at St. Sabina’s Church in the nearby Auburn-Gresham neighborhood. Everyone, from the Alderman to the bus driver, knew Fred and Shirley Tibideaux. Folks nearby tried to get Fred into local politics, but he would have nothing of it. When asked, he would usually grunt: “I’ve got enough bullshit, don’t need more.” True enough, as he was quite a busy man, yet still the thought of it tugged at him every now and then. Fred had lots of ideas and had the clout to get things done. But for now, he would concentrate on what was in front of him. Shirley knew of his intentions, and though they never spoke about it, she knew her husband and figured he would bring it up when he was ready.

The young couple arrived at noon to help with setting up the party, as Fred had invited everyone from the neighborhood. During the last few years the cookout turned into an annual event, and the Tibideaux household would be busy. Cigar smoke, chattering kids, the groovy sounds of the latest Smokey Robinson tune and the occasional thwap of cards smacking a folding table would fill the air very soon. That plus the redolence of barbecue ribs and chicken on the charcoal grill made it impossible for anyone to remain indoors. Whether you wanted to or not, you found yourself heading over to join the party. As always, Fred needed help with setting up the grill and getting the meat
ready, while Shirley asked Joss for her assistance in the kitchen, preparing cole slaw, macaroni and cheese, collard greens and her specialty, Devil Jack’s Sweet Rolls - always a crowd favorite.

Down in the basement Fred handed Roy ten four-packs of hamburgers and he collected three bags of Vienna Red Hots. The ribs and chicken were already by the grill, so they made their way up the stairs to the patio out back. Fred’s spacious deck and freshly cut yard had plenty of tables and chairs for their guests, and the swimming pool and volleyball net was all set for the kids. Roy took a moment to look around while Fred poured in Kingsford Charcoal and lit the grill. He put on the lid and began setting up the hamburgers when he noticed Roy looking around the yard, then returned his focus to the meat, seasoning it with garlic and salt.

“I know what you’re thinking, Roy.”

Roy faced his father-in-law. “Sir?”

“I said I know what you’re thinking. Right now you’re wondering how does a black man in Chicago get a house like this for his family, right?”

Roy looked away, staring at the pool. “Yeah...yeah, that’s right sir. I mean, this place must’ve cost a fortune. I just don’t see how you did it, ya know?”
After placing a few burgers and hot dogs on the grill, Fred wiped his hands and approached his son-in-law.

“I got it because I worked hard for it, son. When we moved into this house it took some sacrifices - real sacrifices. I can’t tell you how many times Shirley made me stay away from buying her expensive clothes and taking her places. I wanted to do these things for my wife - for my family; give them all the things I never had - things my parents only dreamed of.”

Fred threw up his hands and looked around him. Roy followed his glances.

“Son, this neighborhood just a few years ago was one-hundred percent white. There wasn’t a Negro for miles and miles. And look at it now; neighborhoods full of hard-working black folks like me and Shirley, like Mr. and Mrs. Weaver over there and Mr. and Mrs. Gipson in that bungalow across the street. They worked hard and sacrificed so that we can pass on what we have to you. To you. You understand what that means to us, Roy?

The uneasy son-in-law dropped his head; Fred crouched down until they made eye contact, placing his hand on Roy’s shoulder. The younger man shivered.

“You’ve got a promotion over at Morton Salt, I hear. Congrats.
Joss tells us you’ve long gone without a drink. That’s good too. I’m proud of you. That’s what you’re supposed to do. As head of the Brown household it’s up to you to provide for your family. You’ve got a smart boy in there, and someday he’s gonna grow up and be somebody, but it’s up to you to teach him how to become a man. Understand me?”

Fred cracks a smile; Roy flashed a sheepish grin back at him. This was the first time the two of them ever spoke like this, and it only made Roy more nervous.

“Thank you sir. That means a lot.” The men shook hands; Roy watched his fingers disappear beneath Fred’s giant fist.

“Don’t mention it, son. But I’m gonna hold you to your creed - the creed of all real men. They handle their business, treat their wives with respect and take care of their children, hmm?”

Roy nodded. “You got it, sir. No problem.”

The elder man tightened his grip, then released. “Please call me Fred - you’re allowed. Now Shirley and I have something we want to give you before people start showing up.”

Fred faced the rear of the house and shouted: “Hey babe! Bring Joss and the boy out here, will ya! Let’s give them their package!”

“Okay!” A few seconds later Joss and Cupid came outside with Shirley and joined the men by the swimming pool. Shirley handed Fred a
thick yellow envelope.

“Since you’re making more money and Joss has finished college, we’d like to give you something special from both of us.”

Fred handed the envelope to Roy, who opened it. Joss could see a look of surprise on Roy’s face, as he pulled out two thick stacks of hundred dollar bills. He also came out with a business card to South Shore National Bank, a local Negro-owned and operated bank in Chatham. On the card was the name of a loan officer and a telephone number to call.

“There’s about five thousand there, which should be plenty to cover your down payment, insurance for one year and some new furniture - especially a new bed for my grandson. Find your new home, then call Gary and tell him who you are. He’ll be expecting to hear from you within a week.”

Joss couldn’t contain her excitement. She jumped into her father’s arms and he laughed, patting her back. Roy was still shocked, then shook Fred’s hand again and kissed Shirley.

“Wow…I don’t know what to say, sir…uh…Fred.” They all laughed and hugged each other.

“We’ll pay you back every cent.” Joss exclaimed. Shirley waved her off.
“Absolutely not. It’s actually your second wedding gift. We just waited until now to give it to you.”

The young couple looked at one another and hugged; Roy scooped Cupid into his arms and thanked them both again as they heard people coming to the rear of the house. The first set of guests had arrived.

Joss and Shirley went to the house to finish their preparations while Fred went back to the grill. Roy started toward the car so he could lock the package in his trunk.

“Oh Roy,” Fred called out.

“Yes, Fred?”

Fred flipped over the burgers, removing some of them from the grill. He put on the lid, wiped his hands again and stiffened up, seemingly becoming taller, looming over his son-in-law like a giant. There no longer was a smile on his face as before.

“That’s my little girl and grandson you’re watching over, and I’m expecting you to act accordingly. Don’t disappoint me, son. Understand?”

Roy swallowed hard and began fidgeting.

“Oh yes sir. Everything’s going to be real good.” Roy did an immediate about face. That time he hadn’t been reminded to call him Fred.
Roy put the package safely in the trunk and, after looking around, reached under the spare tire and pulled out a small flask, still filled with bourbon. It had sat in the car - untouched - for well over a year. He stared at it, trying in earnest to decide whether to take a swig. At first he seemed to fend off his temptations, but he glanced at the package and thought of his new found responsibility to his family. He thought of the pressure of being the man of the house, of being the major breadwinner, the husband, the father - all the things his own father had never been to him.

Roy thought of all of this, then opened the flask and took a healthy swig.

He slammed the trunk shut and headed to the bathroom to wash his face and hands, not realizing that Cupid stood nearby, watching him from the front room window.
February 17, 1967

“Ready?” Joss asked.

“Mmm...hmm,” Cupid replied.

“Okay. In nomine Patris…”

“In nomine Patris…”

“...et Filii…”

“...et Filii…”

“...et Spiritus Sancti, Amen.”

“...et...uh...Spiri...Spirius Sacti, Mommy?”


Speeerrrrreeetooose Sannnk-teeeee’. Got it?”

“Uh huh. ’...et Spiritus Sancti, Amen’. Right?”

“Very good, my lil Cupid. Now when we say that, it's just like when we say it in English, so we cross ourselves while we do it, 'kay? So let’s try it together.”
Both Joss and Cupid readied themselves in their seats. Backs straight. Eyes forward. Hands folded and resting on the kitchen table. Joss had spent most of the morning working with him on his prayers and was surprised in how fast her son picked everything up. Since Cupid had shown such an interest she figured she might as well continue teaching him. Learning prayers in Latin was how she got her start as a sixth grader at St. Dorothy School. Besides getting used to teaching the subject herself, she got such a kick out of watching him learn. Cupid was a great student.

They raised their right hands, tapping their foreheads in unison as they began: “In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti, Amen.” Mother and child bowed their heads and calmly recited the Hail Mary in Latin, Joss taking the occasional peek at Cupid whose head was bent, eyes closed, forehead ruffled in total concentration. Eventually she stopped speaking, only mouthing her words as she listened to him, amazed at his clear diction and sense of confidence. The more she observed the more proud she became. Her son was going places, she thought. Someday he could become a writer like Ralph Ellison or a celebrated doctor like Charles Drew or perhaps invent something that could save the sick and the poor, but Joss believed the beginning of this long journey was possible through the power of language, being able to
articulate thoughts and ideas with precision and clarity. If Cupid could communicate well with others, no matter who they were, he would always have the advantage. She could see it in him.

“Very good, baby. Mommy is very proud of her Cupid.”

She reached across the table and pinched his cheek, laughing as he blushed.

“Mommy, that’s for kids,” he frowned.

“What do you mean, ‘that’s for kids’? Aren’t you a kid?”

Cupid shrugged his shoulders, giggled. “A silly boy is what you are. Now eat your lunch before it gets cold.”

As a reward for all his hard work Joss made Cupid’s favorite lunch - boiled Vienna hotdogs with mustard and relish with Jay’s potato chips on the side. A while ago Cupid got the bright idea to smother ketchup onto his chips. He said that it was no different than putting it on French fries, which made sense in a way. One night when Joss had the munchies she slid downstairs and grabbed a bag of Jay’s and put ketchup on it too, chagrined that she actually liked it.

“Pass the ketchup please,” she asked, much to her son’s surprise. Joss gave him a sly grin. “Mommies can put Heinz ketchup on Jay’s too, you know.”

Cupid smiled while cramming the last bits of hotdog into his
mouth when he heard the back door open. Roy stumbled in, not from ice and snow that coated their sidewalk, but because he stunk of whiskey - the first in a long time since Joss had seen him this way. It was half past noon; Roy didn't arrive home from the plant until after four.

The heavy scent of alcohol greeted them as he entered the kitchen. Roy flopped into a chair and hugged Cupid; his eyes were hazy, bloodshot. A guilty look covered his face and he turned away from her; a near empty bottle of Wild Turkey within his grasp. Something had happened at work; otherwise Roy never would have come home like this. Not in front of their son.

Joss smiled at Cupid, saying: "Sweetie, why don't you go upstairs and play. I'll bring up your hot chocolate in a few minutes."

"Okay mommy." Cupid gave his father a wet raspberry and did the same to her before heading upstairs. Joss waited until Cupid left the room. Her pleasant demeanor immediately changed once they were alone. Roy still wouldn't look at her.

"What's going on Roy? You walk in here early and drunk, so something's up."

He slunk further back into his chair, spinning the condiment rotisserie on the table. His hands shook just as they always did after one
of his heavy binges.

"I got laid off today. One of them negro-hatin' white boys didn't like takin' orders from me. He said 'I ain't doin' what you say, nigger' and pushed me. So I hit him, knocked his ass down. By the time my boss got done with me I was lucky I didn't get thrown in jail."

There was a long period of silence as Joss tried to choose her words carefully.

"Roy...I'm not gonna tell you how dumb that was. I'm sure you already got a clue. But what I wanna know is why you decided to get drunk? You've not done this in a long while, and never in front of our child. Why would you come home smelling like you've been in a bar all day..."

She paused. "...or perhaps you’ve been drinking again all along and I’ve not known about it?"

Roy still wouldn’t look at her, which only confirmed her suspicion.

Joss turned her back on him.

"Look - I know, alright! I'm sorry! I'm the damn breadwinner in this family and I messed up. Are you gonna piss all over me? Kick me while I'm down? I don't need this shit, you know!"

"You promised you wouldn't drink again! You said you'd leave that stuff alone and you didn’t, so tell me how I am supposed to feel."
He turned away from her and continued fiddling with the rotisserie; his lips curled, but he'd managed to get a hold of himself at the last minute. Joss grabbed a glass from the cabinet and filled it with water. She handed it to Roy, who almost spilled it due to his trembling hand. She took a seat across the table. Neither one spoke for a while. Every now and then Roy would take a loud gulp of water, the base of the glass rattled against the table just as he would put it down. Though still quite upset, Joss remained patient until he'd finished it, her usual method in sobering him up. On a few occasions, when Roy was too far gone, she had shoved him into a cold shower with his clothes on. Even then he wouldn't move until several minutes later, not realizing where he was or how he'd made it home.

He coughed a few times, cleared his throat.

“So now what are we gonna do?” she asked.

“I dunno. I thought maybe asking a few buddies of mine about whether Western Electric is hiring. They make pretty good money over there.”

“Less than what you made at the plant, though. Right?”

He nodded. Prolly 'round $2.25 an hour. Not as much, but we can still afford to live here. I hear they pay for lots of overtime, too.”

Joss nodded, her feelings guarded. “Think you have a pretty good
chance?"

"Yeah...yeah, I think so. Hell, anything's better than sitting at home."

"And once you're working again, what are we gonna do about you, Roy? You can't do this again, not in front of our boy. I don't want him seeing this, understand?"

Roy pounded the table, his fist knocked over a small bottle of Morton Salt. He picked up the bottle and turned it with his fingers, examining the logo of a little white girl wearing her yellow dress and walking in the rain with her umbrella. She left a trail of salt behind her that certainly would dissolve in the storm.

"I wish I could be like her," he whispered.

Joss looked at him, concerned. "Like whom?"

"Like this little girl, right here," he said. "I wish I could be like her and all the other white kids who don't have to live like us. Walkin' around, afraid all the time. Trying to fit in with folks that don't want nothin' to do with us. I hate livin' like this, honey. I'm always afraid I'm gonna screw up something, just like I did today."

"Then why would you drink, Roy. Why? Things were fine before today...at least I thought they were, anyway."

Roy put down the salt shaker, finally looking her in the eye. "It's
hard, baby. It just is. I can't explain it. I feel like I'm always being watched by someone. Like…”

"Like what?” she asked.

Roy appeared as if he were struggling with something. Joss heard a sound, as if steam were escaping from a tea kettle, but it was from him. For the first time Joss felt he was trying to express something that was truly on his mind, something he had never shared with her before. She reached over and caressed his hand.

"I feel as if someone's waitin' for me to make a mistake. They sit around and wait until the time is right, then take something away from me. Something they know I love."

Joss was taken aback by his remark. "I don't understand, Roy. What do you feel's been taken away from you? You've got me, your son, this house. My parents love you. What more could you want?"

He pulled away from her, eyes looking into the distance somewhere behind her.

"My momma? Haven't seen her since I was nine. Dad? Dead now because from drugs. Uncle Jason? Heart attack."

He looked at her, eyes still cloudy but tense. "They're all gone now, Joss. Gone. Basketball was the one thing I had, the one thing that belonged to me. To me! You know what that means? I was the king of
the entire school, the first negro to be accepted to Illinois University's varsity team. I had a scholarship to play ball. I would have been the best scorer and rebounder in school history if I'da gone there. But I didn't, Joss. And you wanna know why?"

Roy became flushed with anger; he trembled as he rose from the kitchen table, but not from drinking. He pointed at her, his index finger inches away from Joss' face.

"It's because of you, that's why! You! You did this to me!"

Joss slapped his hand out the way and got directly in his face.

"What the hell do you mean by that, Roy Brown? Have you lost your mind? How dare you accuse me of such a thing!"

He took a step back, but the rage in his eyes was clear. "If you hadn't dropped that flask, none of this would ever have happened. None of it! I'll bet you even did it on purpose."

"So this is all my fault? As if you did nothing to cause it to happen? It was your uncle's flask that you stole, you put in your car and you showed me! And if you think I'm gonna let you blame me for your screw ups, you've got another thing coming!"

Joss shoved him and went for the phone.

"Who are you calling?"

"My father, to come get me outta here right now!"
Roy slapped her and threw her against the wall.

"You fuckin’ looney tunes bitch! You ain’t callin’ squat, see? Especially not that uppity nigger daddy of yours! I ain’t takin’ his shit no more, ya hear!"

Joss wiped her bloody mouth, grabbed the bottle of Wild Turkey from Roy’s pocket and smashed it upside his head; an explosion of glass shards and bourbon flew everywhere. Roy dropped to the ground, stunned. Joss pointed the broken end of the bottle at him.

"I done told you about callin’ me looney tunes, Roy Brown. You ever hit me again it’ll be the last thing you ever do, now get out of this house!"

Roy crawled by her, then scrambled to his feet and grabbed his coat, hurrying out the back door. Joss was upset, but remained in attack mode until she was certain he was gone. Nearly a minute passed before she realized Cupid was standing by the kitchen entrance, scared out of his wits. She dried her tears and went to him, but he pulled away from her - still unsure of what was going on.

"It’s okay, honey. Everything’s alright now." She made another attempt to reach out to him, but this time Cupid ran away from her, upstairs. Joss thought it best to let him go for now. Instead she took a few moments to collect herself and clean up the mess. Afterwards she
made two cups of hot chocolate filled with marshmallows, heading up the stairs to her son’s bedroom. She slid into his room where he was facing the mirror on his closet door, staring deep into his own eyes, whispering.

"I dunno. Mommy said…"

"Sweetie, are you alright?"

Cupid’s whispering stopped. He faced her, surprised. He didn’t respond.

"I brought us some hot chocolate...with marshmallows."

Nothing again.

Joss decided to sit "Indian-style" on the floor and scoot closer to her son, placing a steamy mug in front of him. Cupid stared at the mug, shivering. He wouldn’t touch it, even as Joss slid it to him. In fact, he didn’t move a muscle for nearly five minutes.

"You know what they call hot chocolate that silly little boys let sit too long?"

Cupid faced his mother. "What?"

"Warm Chocolate," she deadpanned. Joss took a heavy slurp from her cup and smacked her lips together. For a moment mother and child stared at each other until neither one could hold back laughter. Cupid grabbed his cup and joined her in a series of slurps and smacks.
He snickered, pointing at her face, "Mommy, you got a brown mustache."

Joss smiled, daintily wiping the sides of her mouth with a napkin. Her stance became very prim and proper as she held her cup, pinky finger extended. Cupid imitated his mother with the same highbrow demeanor.

"Humph. Well...I do declare sir that you indeed are right. A many thousand thanks to you for being so kind. So tell me, my dear boy...what shall we do today? Shall we take a stroll along the garden this afternoon and watch the birds sing happily in the trees or shall we have tea in the study?"

"Why don't we invite our friends for afternoon tea, mother. We can gossip about this and that and drink our tea while we do it."

"Capital suggestion, my boy. Capital. We shall have the fire ready in the study and prepare the hors d'oeuvers for our guests, who should arrive at four-ish. And..."

The sound of a door slam came from downstairs, followed by a series of heavy crashes. Joss' expression went from surprise to anger; she stood and marched toward the door.

"Stay here, sweetie. Lock your door and don't come out until I call you!" she ordered, closing the door behind her. Cupid did as he was
told, the side of his face pressed against the crack. He heard his mother and father arguing downstairs for what seemed like hours; their words were loud but unclear.

Suddenly the screams came. Cupid had never heard his mother scream before, but the sounds were so shrill, so piercing, that had she not gone downstairs he never would've realized they were coming from her. This would be the cause of his nightmares for many years to come; her pain-filled shrieks and sounds of slaps and punches and things breaking filled the air, followed by a blood-curdling screech from Roy. A loud *thud* seemed to shake the entire house.

Silence.

Cupid didn't know what to do. He ran to the mirror and looked deep into his own eyes, his breath fogged the mirror.

"What happened, Mark? Wha...NO!...No, she said to wait...but I don't wanna go...will you come with me?...I won't go unless you come with me...okay...please don't leave me...please don't!...okay...you better not leave me, Mark!"

Cupid's trembled so hard to where he appeared on the verge of snapping in two. He took a deep breath and headed to the door; the sound of the lock clicked in his ears. He felt nauseous and found it difficult to breathe, but still he moved forward into the hall and down
the stairs.

The entire first level of the house looked as if it had been trashed by looters; a steady flow of broken glass, overturned furniture, pictures, books and even food from the refrigerator made a trail into the kitchen. Cupid had never seen his house in such disarray, and though he knew his parents were still here somewhere, he became nervous because of the silence; the long, deafening silence. Eventually he could hear some semblance of movement as he sidestepped several cracked eggs and broken glass from a milk bottle.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap...

Cupid stepped over his grandmother's broken china into the kitchen, where Joss sat tapping the handle of a bloody steak knife on the table. Her face was scratched and bleeding, hair disheveled and left eye puffy and black from where Roy had punched her. Her blouse and skirt had nearly been ripped from her body, exposing her bra and panties. Joss appeared insane; her panting was quick and loud, eyes locked on Roy's motionless body sprawled out across their newly tiled floor.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap...

Cupid screamed as he saw his father’s twisted corpse; his blood was sprayed across the kitchen cabinets, sinks and stove behind him. It
appeared as if Roy had been stabbed in the chest, face and stomach. Deep gashes seemed everywhere, pools of blood continued draining through his clothes and head. Skid marks were all over the floor near where the body lay, red stains on the soles of Roy's shoes.

"Mors tua vita mea, Roy. Your death, my life," said Joss, who broke out into hysterics, the sound echoed inside Cupid's head. He covered his ears, but still couldn't keep her wild shrieks from being fused into his memory.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap...

Joss eerily turned and looked at her son. The strangest smile he'd ever seen crept across her face.

"I told him if he ever put his hands on me it would be the last thing he ever did. Maybe now he believes me." Joss stopped tapping the blade on the table, her frayed hair cocked to the left.

"What do you think, ‘lil Cupid?"

He didn't answer. Instead he passed out - leaving his mother with two bodies sprawled across her kitchen floor; the sound of sirens blaring off in the distance somewhere beyond this scene.

While she waited for the police to arrive, Joss held her son in her arms and stroked his face. She began whistling to herself.

She liked to whistle. It gave her pleasure.
April 5, 1968. 6:03pm.

“Good evening, I’m Walter Cronkite. Yesterday Dr. Martin Luther King, the apostle of non-violence in the civil rights movement, was shot to death outside a motel in Memphis, Tennessee...”

Loretta’s eyes were glued to the television, still unable to quite grasp what was happening. Walter Cronkite’s words almost sounded like a death sentence, the anger and fury that unleashed since King’s assassination yesterday was unlike anything she had ever seen before.

“...as you can see, the amount of fires blazing in major cities across the country are rapidly growing. In Chicago rioters on the city’s west side are setting fires faster than the fire department can put them out. In a moment we’re going to hear from Mayor Richard J. Daley, who is expected to announce assistance from President Johnson in dealing with these rioters...”
“My word,” she whispered to herself.

For nearly three hours Loretta sat glued to the television, ever since Tony Senior left the house. Every police officer in the city had been summoned to set up blockades around the fires to prevent more people from causing damage. Understandably she was quite worried about him. In her lifetime nothing of this magnitude had ever occurred. There had been riots, the most infamous one being the Bridgeport Riots of 1943, but today people were out in droves, looting, setting buildings on fire and destroying their own neighborhoods. Loretta didn’t understand why this had to happen. That man had never hurt anybody, as far as she knew. He just wanted better things for Negroes, just like she did for the folks in Little Sicily. Was that really so bad? Apparently it was, since someone decided to kill him.

“Hang on, Dan. I’ve just been told that the Mayor is ready to make his announcement. Here we go to Richard J. Daley at City Hall in Chicago.”

Tony Junior sat next to his mother on the couch, a glass of Nestle Quick held firm in his tiny hands. He took a few sips, leaving behind a chocolate mustache that he licked off with his tongue. He’d tried getting his mother’s attention, but she seemed not to feel his nudges, so he took a huge gulp of his drink and blocked her view, his chocolate
mustache thicker than ever.

“Look at me, mommy.” She pulled him back into his seat and put her arm around him.

“...sales of ammunition within the City of Chicago are prohibited commencing immediately and continuing until the prohibition is removed by subsequent order.”

“Mommy, when is daddy coming home?”

Loretta shrugged her shoulders. “I have no idea, baby. Soon, I hope.”

“...I would also like to impose a mandatory curfew for all people under the age of twenty-one from 7pm to 6am that will continue until also removed by subsequent order.”

Loretta shook her head. “Well I sure as hell don’t plan on going anywhere for a while. Certainly not outside of the neighborhood.”

“Why not, Mommy?”

“It’s not safe right now, Sweetie. I don’t want you to get hurt, so we’ll just sit here and wait for daddy to come back, okay?”

Perhaps now was the right time for a conversation of this magnitude. She could tell by her son’s face that this was going to be a difficult one.

“Baby, remember when daddy took you in his squad car to the
South Side and drove around. You saw all those Negroes who live over there, remember?”

“Mmm...hmm.”

“And remember how he told you that there are people who aren’t as lucky as you are?”

“Yes.”

“Well, daddy wanted you to understand something. He wanted you to see things so that you would know that there are good people in the world who are very poor and don’t have the kinds of chances that you do. Remember that?”

“Yes, mommy.”

Loretta was being quite careful with each word, trying to make this as clear as possible. Images of Dr. King flashed on the screen; Loretta pointed at them, saying: “See that man, sweetie? His name was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He tried to do good things for Negroes everywhere, but some bad person shot him and now the Negro people are very upset. That’s where daddy is right now. He’s trying to help calm things down.”

“Why did that person shoot him?” Junior asked.

Loretta took a deep breath. This was harder than she thought.

“Well...remember how Grandpa used to tell us how hard it was
for him when he came to America? People didn’t like him because he was different. It’s almost the same thing here.”

“So that’s why he got shot? Because he was different?”

“Yes, kiddo.”

“That’s dumb.”

Loretta smiled, nodded. “I agree.”

Junior slid off the couch and stretched across the floor, staring at the television. The room was quiet except for the evening news and faint sound of sirens off in the distance. Little Sicily was safe as far as where the fires and rioting were taking place, but still Loretta’s thoughts moved between CBS News and Tony Senior’s whereabouts. Reports that rioters were throwing bricks at the firemen and the police had her quite concerned. Junior remained quiet until he rolled over and crawled next to his mom’s legs. Dr. King was on the screen again, photos of his march through Cicero, Illinois showed him and members of his entourage being pelted with rocks. King himself was struck with a brick; an angry looking gash from his forehead was caught front and center by the photographer.

“Mommy, what does the word ‘Nigger’ mean?”

The look on Loretta’s face was one of complete shock. In one swoop she picked him up by his arms. “Where on earth did you hear that, Antonio? Who said that to you?” The only time she ever called him
by his full name was when he was in trouble. Junior was shocked by his mom’s outburst and nearly burst into tears.

“I’m sorry momma. Some of the kids at school were saying that. They don’t like Negroes. They say they’re dirty.”

“Well I don’t ever want you to say that word in this house again, do you hear me? Never again!”

“Yes, momma. Sorry.” Junior started crying; Loretta felt bad.

“Mommy didn’t mean to yell, sweetie. I just don’t want you going around saying such things. It’s not nice, and it’s not true.”

“But they’re burning buildings and stealing,” he begged.

“I know honey. You’re right, it’s not nice for them to burn things, but they’re angry. They’re angry that Dr. King is dead.”

Loretta paused, thinking of a different approach. “Remember last week when I took you to the store and you wanted me to get you some cookies? Remember that?”

“Mmm…hmm.”

“Remember what you did at home after I told you no?”

He nodded. “I broke a glass on the floor.”

“Actually you threw a glass on the floor, just to be spiteful. It’s kind of the same thing. These people are frustrated, just like you were. They are frustrated and decided to break things without thinking of what
they’re doing. If King were still alive he wouldn’t approve at all, just like I didn’t approve of *your* behavior last week.”

Loretta wiped her son’s eyes and lifted up his chin so she could look directly at him. She leaned forward, her forehead pressed against his, brown eyes never wavering: “Mommy and Daddy love you very much and wouldn’t ever want anyone to say such awful things about you. We also don’t want you talking that way about other people. Okay?”

Junior nodded. “Mmm...hmm.”

“Good. Now do me a favor and go wash all that Nestle Quick off your hands. Dinner will be ready soon.”

She watched as Tony Junior made his way to the bathroom down the hallway, both proud and afraid for him at the same time. Loretta had hoped he could stay away from that word longer than he had. Both her parents as well as Tony Senior’s had lived in poverty and fought as hard as they could to keep their children fed and clothed as best they possibly could. Loretta remembers the long hours her father used to work at the Union Stockyard on Exchange and Halsted Streets; ten to twelve hour days, six days a week that were spent in some of the worst conditions possible just so he could bring money into the house. But they were lucky; most people didn’t have the luxury of a job that made enough to feed a family and, eventually, own a home. After a while, her
father was able to afford better things for the family and eventually retire, but as long as she and her two sisters live, they will never forget the sacrifice, the nights her mother spent wrapping his shredded hands and soaking his tired feet. But most of all, Loretta will never forget the vile names her father was called. It pained her to this very day.

She turned up the TV so she could hear in the kitchen while checking on her home-made lasagna, now cooking in the oven. She took it out and spread more hand-shredded Mozzarella across the top. Perfect! She smiled, memories of her mother teaching her to cook and stressing the importance of keeping the meat tender, the pasta ‘Al dente’ and using only fresh tomatoes, garlic and onions for the sauce.

She was a little older than Junior when she began cooking, and though she would try to teach him, she could tell he wasn’t much for that kind of thing. Not yet, anyway.

Though she had no idea when her husband would come home, she decided to set the table for three. They were blessed to have an eat-in kitchen with enough room for a good sized table. She laid out the placemats, silverware, glasses, napkins and finally three plates.

Afterwards she stared at her work, smiling. Loretta looked at her stomach and began rubbing her belly; recent good news from her doctor and the empty spot on her table, big enough for four, had reminded her
that she was expecting, as her mother used to say, ‘an addition’ to the family in the near future. Both she and Tony were hoping for a girl, but just to have a healthy baby was enough for them. Junior could care less; a sibling ‘to play with’ was all he wanted, according to him. She loved his simplicity.

Loretta was about to check on Junior when the telephone rang.

“Hello?...yes, it’s me...oh hi, how are you?...no, I’m just here getting dinner ready...is something wrong?...(gasps)...WHAT?!...when?...which one?...okay, I’m on my way...no, I don’t need anyone to drive me, I’ll take the car...okay...okay, I’m leaving now...thanks...”

Loretta slammed the phone to the cradle and turned off the oven, reaching for her purse. Tony Junior was nearly knocked over as she rushed by him in a mad dash for her coat and keys.

“What’s wrong, Mommy?”

“Get your coat, sweetie. We have to go right now.”

“Where are we going? I thought we were staying here because of the riots?”

“Never mind that now. C’mon, let’s go!”

She helped him put on his coat and ran out the front door where everything was turned off except for the television, a clip of Dr. King’s
final speech played in the background as the six o’clock news began to close: “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land...”

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Presbyterian-St. Luke’s Hospital. One hour later.

Loretta hurried through the hospital emergency room searching for her husband; Tony Junior close alongside her. Her eyes darted back and forth around the perimeter; partitions surrounded the central help desk with nurses and doctors coming in and out, each time making sure they closed the curtains behind them to allow patients their privacy. There wasn’t a single quiet place anywhere; more than likely those needing care were victims who had become caught up in the riots. Loretta couldn’t help but think the worst of this had not yet manifested itself; she prayed in the car that somehow tensions would be resolved sometime soon, but due to the number of fire trucks and police cars she saw flying about as she neared the hospital, it seemed that everyone was in for a long night. But she didn’t care about that right now. All
that was on her mind was Tony Senior, who was somewhere in this crowded emergency room.

Finally she saw Senior’s former partner Danny Covelli along with lieutenant Eugene Donatello standing outside a closed off area, the sheet drawn across a large bed where people appeared to be inside. They were talking to a tall, handsome black man, shaking his hand as they saw Loretta approaching them. The men ended their conversation, Danny and the lieutenant greeting her with warm hugs.

“How is he? Is he alright?” she asked.

Lt. Donatello, known by everyone as ‘Gino’, nodded. “He’s fine, Loretta. Banged up and sore, but he’ll pull through just fine. The doctors are busy with him right now, so we’re waiting for them to come out.”

Gino smiled at Junior and rubbed his brown hair. “How are ya, kid? You being a good boy or what?”

Tony Junior didn’t respond. Instead his eyes were focused on the black man standing behind them.

“What happened? How did he get hurt?” Loretta asked.

“Tony was over at Madison and Flournoy with the rest of us,” Danny began. “He was trying to help keep things contained until the fire department arrived. A huge crowd rushed us, but we managed to stop
‘em. Tony went to his squad car to get some flares and got into it with a few rioters, one of whom shot him in the arm.”

Danny turned and introduced the black man behind him, saying:
“This kind gentleman jumped out of his car, pulled Tony out of the crowd and brought him here to the hospital.”

Loretta approached the man and hugged him.

“Thank you so much for helping my husband, sir. And pleased to meet you. My name is Loretta and this is my son, Antonio, Jr.”

“You’re quite welcome, Ma’am. Name’s Fred. It’s a pleasure.”

Fred smiled at Tony Junior, who took a step behind his mother.

“Surely you weren’t looking to become a hero, were you?” she asked.

“Hardly. In fact, I was picking up supplies on the west side for my business and drove right into it. Nearly reminded me of my days in the war. I suppose it’s been a hard day for all of us.”

“Yes, I suppose indeed.”

Junior kept tapping his mother in the back until she swatted his hand away. “Excuse me a moment, sir...Junior, what is it?”

“I wanna see daddy.”

“The doctors aren’t done yet, sweetie. We’ll see daddy in a moment, don’t be rude.”
“I wanna see him now!” He started to cry, never taking his eyes off Fred. Loretta sighed, grabbed his hand.

“Excuse me gentlemen, I’d better get him to his father before he loses it. C’mon, kiddo.”

Loretta hauled off a now-quiet Junior, opened the sheet and stepped inside, joining two doctors who were busy chatting with one another. Senior was unconscious; an oxygen mask covered his face. His chest was exposed, save his right shoulder which was heavily bandaged. His breathing appeared normal. Junior pushed in front of everyone and stood in front of his dad, wanting to touch his hand but resisting at the last minute, scared that he might make things worse. Tony Junior had never seen his father like this: mask on his face, huge bandages wrapped around him. He looked pasty, his skin flush of color, lifeless like a doll – the sound of oxygen being pumped into him and the steady heave of the respirator being the only sounds that Junior could hear. He quickly turned away and grabbed onto his mother’s right leg, holding her as tight as he could; his tears blotted her light blue dress.

Loretta felt horrible for bringing him here.

“You must be Mrs. Cuppicciotti. I’m Dr. Rogers and this is Dr. Taylor. Why don’t we step outside and let your husband rest?”

Loretta nodded as she loosened Junior’s grip and pulled him
through the curtain, re-joining Fred and the officers.

“‘I’m glad all of you made it here safely; Lord knows we’ve had a rough twenty-four hours,’” Dr. Rogers remarked, turning his attention to Loretta. “‘Ma’am, your husband was shot in the back on the right side. It appears the bullet fractured his shoulder blade and was lodged inside his chest. We’ve already removed the bullet and sewed him up, so he’s resting right now. We were concerned about the loss of blood given the location of the injury, but thanks to this gentleman’s quick thinking and nice patch-up job we were able to stabilize him. Thank goodness no major arteries were hit or he might not be with us right now.’”

“‘T’was nothing, Doctor. I was one of the few Negroes to work as a medic in the Army. I guess some things never quite go away.’”

A grateful Loretta thanked Fred once more for his valiant rescue. She offered to invite him and a guest over for dinner, which he politely refused: “Not necessary, Ma’am. I just hope one of these officers remembers this the next time I get a parking ticket.”

That remark put a smile on everyone’s face except for Junior, who held on to his mother for dear life. He continued hiding behind her, looking at Fred as if he were truly frightened. Junior had seen Negroes before, but never up close. And never this large.

“‘Sweetie, say thank you to the gentleman for helping your
father.”

Tony Junior didn’t say or do anything. Loretta had to peel him off her, twisting his arm so he stood in front of this man. He began shaking, so much to the point where he appeared ill.

“Sweetie, are you alright? What’s the matter?”

“He looks just like them, like those bad people on TV!”

Her face flushed red. “Antonio, you apologize to this gentleman right now!”

“NO! He shot my daddy!” Junior ran away and had almost made it out of the emergency room when he ran into his Uncle Freddie.

“Hey, hey, hey there! Where do you think you’re going, little guy?” Freddie asked. Junior tried to wrest free of his uncle until he gave up and sobbed in his arms. Loretta ran to Freddie and asked him to take the boy outside for a while. As she went back to the men she couldn’t look Fred in the face.

“Sir, I’m so sorry. My son never acts that way. It’s my fault; I should have left him with his uncle before coming here.”

The officers and doctors were both sad, but Fred’s demeanor hadn’t changed.

“There’s nothing to worry about, Loretta. He doesn’t understand all of this and to be honest, I can’t blame him. Someone that looked
like me actually *did* shoot his father.”

“Yes, but it wasn’t you,” Gino replied. Loretta agreed: “He’s right, sir.”

Fred nodded. “I know, but regardless, your husband is safe. If nothing else I’m glad I was there and I’d do it all over again, without a doubt.”

He looked past them and started to leave, but Loretta got in his way. “Please let us make it up to you, sir. Is there anything we can do?”

He paused, thought hard. “Yes you can. Say a prayer that all of this anger comes to an end someday. That will be reward enough.”

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Fred Tibideaux left the emergency room without saying goodbye and stepped outside. Even after dusk he could see dark clouds of smoke billowing into the night air, the repeated sounds of sirens blaring off in the distance a stark reminder of all that had happened within the past two days, which by now had felt like weeks. He took a moment and glanced to his left, where Uncle Freddie was walking alongside the building, still holding on to a now sleeping Tony Junior, exhausted after such a terrifying experience. Fred meant what he said about not blaming him for feeling the way he did, and it indeed was a true statement, but he’d be lying if he said it didn’t hurt - even just a little
bit. He whispered something to himself as he searched his pockets for change to make a phone call and let his wife know that he was fine and on his way home.

“Shirley’s gonna kill me for being late, and caught up in this mess to boot,” he thought while inserting his quarters and dialing the number to his home in Chatham.
November 28, 1968. Thanksgiving Day.

Cupid sat in the back seat of his grandfather's Turquoise 1969 Chevy Impala and looked out the window as cars crept along the Eisenhower expressway through the first snowstorm of the holiday season. He was on his way to visit his mother in Cook County Psychiatric Hospital, a trip he had dreaded making for the past month.

Ever since the death of his father, Joss wasn't the same. Despite acting in self-defense, she hadn't fully recovered from the shock, and according to Fred, it was only within the last few months that she even acknowledged his presence. From the beginning of this entire ordeal, Joss needed a lot of care - more than her family was able to provide. Fred and Shirley managed to sell her home and took Cupid in with them, hoping that Joss would recover soon and reclaim her life. Her progress was slow, but there were signs as of late that a turnaround was possible with the hope that sometime in the near future she could go home and start over. Until then, Cupid's grandparents determined it best that Joss
not see her son unless she could handle it. After their last visit, Fred and Shirley felt Thanksgiving would be the perfect time to reunite the two of them. There was a reason to give thanks, for this past year and a half was difficult for everyone: Roy's death, getting used to raising a child again, including the many nightmares Cupid would have because of that awful day. It was tough on everyone, and now was as good as any to begin looking for closure.

Fred carefully took the Ashland exit from the Eisenhower and made his way into a parking lot across the street from the hospital. Luckily he found a spot nearest the sidewalk and carried his Grandson while holding hands with his wife as they made their way through the fiercely cold weather. Though Cupid could walk on his own, his Grandfather was quite strong and enjoyed picking him up. He did it with ease and Cupid loved it, feeling as if he were sitting on top of a mountain that rose and fell. While in his Grandfather's arms everything seemed so small in comparison, and because of Fred's commanding size and presence Cupid could see how his employees felt when he gave them orders. Despite his age, Fred Tibideaux was not one to play with; he either loved you or was against you. There was no middle ground.

Fred asked the attending nurse a few questions while Cupid waited with his grandmother. Occasionally they would look back at them
and continue on with their conversation. Eventually both nodded and Fred returned, smiling.

"Beatrice gives it the green light. She checked in on Joss this morning and she appeared to be in good spirits."

Fred knelt down in front of Cupid. "Are you ready to see mommy, kiddo?"

Cupid nodded. "Yes, Grandpa."

"Okay, young man. Let's go."

The three of them held hands as they walked down a series of hallways into a sparsely furnished room where white was the only color, even on the tiled floor. The room had an antiseptic look to it. Everything was in its place; the bed made, the floor spotless. Aside from a mirror across the bed, nothing hung from the walls. The only thing missing was Joss, who should be on her way back to the room from her visit with the therapist. Fred and Shirley stood in silence by the window while Cupid sat on the bed. They all appeared somewhat anxious; Cupid hadn't seen his mother in several months, while his grandparents were worried about both of them. Prior to today, the couple was well informed that this visit had the potential to be either a turning point in Joss' treatment or a severe setback. The matter was touch and go, for it all depended upon her present state of mind. One could only hope for
Joss entered the room a few moments later with her therapist, Dr. Raymond Huff - a short, bearish looking white man in his late thirties. He stepped aside while she stood before the three of them, her smile peaceful. Fred came and embraced her; Shirley followed suit. Both made a way for her son, who remained perched on his mother’s bed, his dangling feet rocked back and forth.

The group stared at Cupid. Dr. Huff whispered something in Joss’ ear, nodded and stepped back. He beckoned Fred and Shirley to follow him into the hallway, closing the door behind him.

Now only mother and son remained.

Joss grabbed a chair and pushed it closer so she could hold her son’s hand. Cupid trembled at her touch, still unable to rid himself of the nightmare in seeing his father on the kitchen floor. Dr. Huff had to remind Joss that this vision would be difficult for Cupid to forget, and depending upon how he felt about what happened, which was still a mystery, it could either help or hinder their reconciliation.

Fred and Shirley made sure that he spoke with a social worker on a regular basis to relieve some of the laden trauma, and as of late it appeared to help him with his bad dreams. There was no way of telling for certain whether this had done any good. Cupid appeared to have
come through the worst of it thus far, but how much could one expect from such a young child who had seen things most adults couldn’t handle? Fred and Shirley were against the idea of a reunion at first, but eventually they changed their minds in light of the nearing holiday season. ‘Perhaps Thanksgiving is exactly what all of us need in order to move on’ Shirley told her anxious husband just last night; meanwhile, it took all that Fred had to keep himself calm. Prior to leaving for the hospital he appeared out of sorts, and given his back-and-forth pacing at the nurses’ station down the hall, not much had changed in the past hour. Joss also was nervous, having not seen her son for so long.

"Hi honey! How’s my little Cupid doing these days?"

Cupid mumbled, "I’m OK, mommy."

A long, uncomfortable pause.

"Your grandma tells me you’re doing really well in school. I’m not surprised. You’re a smart little guy."

Still nothing. Joss had no idea what to do next, until Cupid asked the question she knew would come at some point.

"Ma, why did daddy try and hurt you?"

Joss turned away trying to regain her composure and didn’t speak until she felt under control. "Daddy was sick, honey. I don’t think he really meant to hurt me. Something bad happened to him that day and
he couldn’t control himself.”

Cupid pressed on: “he hurt you, Ma. He made you hurt him back.”

Joss almost burst into tears, but she managed to fight her way back. “Yes sweetie, it happened and I’m sorry it did. I didn’t mean to hurt daddy, and someday I will explain it all to you. But now - I’m sooo glad you came to see me with Grandma and Grandpa. They’ve been telling me how you’ve been doing and I’m very proud of you.”

Cupid smiled for the first time. “Did they tell you I got a goldfish? I named him Poindexter.”

Joss nodded. “Yes they did, but why Poindexter?”

Cupid frowned, shaking his head. “Ma, don’t tell me you forgot! From Felix the Cat, remember?” Joss laughed out loud.

“Oh yeah, of course. How could I forget? Good choice of name, honey.”

She reached out to her son and smiled at him in a manner reminiscent of better days. For a brief moment she could see herself sitting at their table in Bronzeville, just the two of them, hard at work on the latest prayer or text in Latin, autumn foliage giving her kitchen an orange and brownish glow as leaves whisked across the window pane. Joss could hear Cupid whispering the Act of Contrition, the Hail Mary, the Our Father. She could hear him as if he were speaking in front of her
for the very first time, remembering how she marveled at his command of the words. While it was true that she missed Roy and would forever be strapped with the guilt of his death, the thought of not being with her son on a daily basis had hurt even more.

The two of them continued chatting for the better part of an hour. Cupid went on and on about playing basketball in Avalon Park and summer camp and the trip to Detroit that his grandparents took him on last August. Joss smiled in an attempt to hide her growing remorse over putting him through this, leaving him to fend for himself while she remained stuck inside this ivory-colored room filled with nothingness. No books, no pictures on the wall, no fresh flowers at rest in the window sill. No reminiscence of a life that had once seemed right. The only consistent remainder of her life flashed before her every time she looked in the mirror; an image that seemingly changed with each passing day. Though in her early thirties, she could already see long strands of gray hair that went from their roots all the way to her shoulders. Her once smooth, cocoa brown skin now appeared dry and as wrinkled as an unmade bed. Dark circles and bags from a seemingly incurable battle with insomnia had replaced her usual sunny disposition. Her hands were brittle, fingernails chewed down to the nubs because of bad nerves, raw skin exposed and stinging whenever she washed her hands in warm,
soapy water. And despite all that Joss had gone through as of late, this was perhaps the best she had looked in months, which was precisely why Dr. Huff believed he could see light from darkness. But Joss couldn't tell one way or the other, because all that existed within the mirror was a woman whom she hardly knew; a woman who looked far older than she was. A woman full of regret for things she had no control over in the first place.

At some point she held onto Cupid, staring into the mirror as he continued rattling away at what he'd been up to as of late, the reflection of her beautiful child brought a rare smile to her usually sullen face. She was captivated by what she saw while caressing his back; lovingly clutching a calm little boy who looked and dressed as Cupid, but she knew better. In that same mirror she had seen this little boy before, doing and saying things that she knew were true about her son. Saying prayers in Latin and behaving as he would if he had been here all along with her. But the truth was the little boy she saw in the mirror wasn't really Cupid at all. And he knew it every time he visited her, making her pay in spades by taking away what little sanity she had left. In real life, Cupid continued to talk about his adventures. In the world beyond the mirror on her wall, the little boy had stopped talking and smiled at her, and had continued to do so for almost a minute, then
waved at her reflection.

"Hi Mommy!" said The Little Boy, his face twisting in a devious smile, mocking Joss. Making her feel bad all over again.

Joss dropped Cupid to the ground, screaming. Dr. Huff, Fred and Shirley burst into the room. Everyone froze as Joss continued her wild shrieks, clawing her way across the bed. Her behavior was bizarre, her speech incoherent.

"I've killed my little boy...killed my little boy..."

She was delirious, pointing at the mirror and sobbing, causing Dr. Huff to yell into the hallway for assistance. Seconds later two men rushed in and restrained Joss in her bed while the doctor ushered the remaining family down the hallway and into a private waiting room.

"I'll be back in a minute," the Doctor replied, closing the door behind him. The shocked family heard Joss' continued screams, then silence. Cupid began to cry and ran into Fred's strong arms. For the first time in a long while, Fred appeared on the verge of tears. He continued patting Cupid's back, trying to settle him down. Shirley came near in an attempt to assist her husband, when Dr. Huff returned with a young nurse at his side.

"Excuse me, Mr. Tibideaux. Uh...this is Nurse Stevens. I've asked her to sit with your Grandson for a while so the three of us could talk."
The doctor focused his attention to Cupid. “Would you mind if I borrowed your Grandparents, young man? I promise I won’t keep them long.”

Cupid dried his tears, nodded. Nurse Stevens had a few books with her. She sat next to him and spread them across a table as Fred and Shirley followed the doctor into his office.

"Doctor, she said 'I killed my little boy'. What did she mean by that?" Fred asked.

"Have a seat, please," the Doctor replied.

Shirley took a chair while Fred continued to stand, incensed by the recent spectacle. Dr. Huff tried again to get Fred to relax.

"I'm not sitting down for shit! You told us everything would be alright with our daughter. Now she looks as bad as ever, and our grandson..."

"FRED! Please sit down!" Shirley demanded. He grumbled while lowering himself into the soft leather chair.

"Thank you, Mr. Tibideaux...Mrs. Tibideaux. First of all, I can’t say enough how sorry I am about this. Certainly Joss had been looking forward to seeing all of you. Even I was surprised by her outburst. She’d given me no indication that anything was wrong other than normal jitters."
Shirley nodded. "Look, we believe you. We just want to know what that was all about."

Dr. Huff signed. "In light of what just occurred, I suppose now is the time to discuss something that happened to Joss, something that she's never told anyone, not even her husband."

"That's bullshit! Our daughter tells us everything!" Fred barked.

Dr. Huff gently raised his hand until Fred became quiet.

"I understand your frustration, Mr. Tibideaux, but Joss recently opened up to me about something I’m certain you both did not know. A month ago during one of our sessions she shared this with me and lately she's seemed favorable at the idea of sharing it with the two of you. I’ve never breached the confidence of a patient, but since you've already heard part of it I think I should make you aware of the rest. My only concern is whether you're ready to hear it and keep it between us. No one else should know this, especially your grandson."

Dr. Huff sat back in his chair, silent. Fred looked away from them, out the window. Shirley rolled her eyes at him, then said - "please continue, doctor."

He leaned forward. "Okay, here's what we discussed..."

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Fred lay in bed that night, trying to read as Shirley brushed her
teeth in the bathroom. He tried to take his mind off of today's debacle by reading *Native Son* by Richard Wright, but instead he found himself stuck on the same line:

"Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight."

Over and over again; that was all he could do after the day's events. Occasionally he would put down his book and stare at his wife, who was still preparing herself for bed. He would look at his wife and smile, then feel guilty thinking he'd been a lousy father to their daughter. Fred began to wonder if Shirley were upset with him for not protecting Joss, keeping her away from losers like Roy Brown. He should have been a better man for his family as his father had been for him. He should have protested more against being married to a drunkard, but he had given in to his daughter's wishes. As much as Fred was a big man to those who knew and worked for him, he was like butter in the hands of the women in his life. There was nothing he wouldn't do for them; both Shirley and Joss knew how to bring out his best. At times that would work in his favor; in others it gave him a heightened sense of ineptness,
just as it had at this moment.

Shirley shut off the light and came to bed; the sweet aroma of cocoa butter graced the air as she slid next to him. He kissed her forehead then went back to reading his book. Though they appeared to be relaxed, that couldn't be further from the truth. In actuality both of them had a hard time dealing with what happened to their daughter today, both in what they saw and what they were told. They lay together, silence deafening, uneasiness abound, wondering how all of this was possible? Fred continued feeling guilty, though Shirley hadn’t blamed him for anything in the least. As parents they considered themselves attentive to the needs of their children. Whenever Joss needed something, which was rare because of Joss’ free spirit, Fred and Shirley were always right there with support. Bobby, their oldest child who had just celebrated his fifteenth year in the Army, was the same way. A few days ago they had received a letter from him that came all the way from Germany, wishing them a Happy Thanksgiving. Fred and Shirley didn’t have the heart to tell him what had happened to Joss, or Roy, for that matter. Instead they considered themselves lucky to have raised two ambitious children who desired to be a well-rounded individuals. Bobby wanted to be a career military man. Joss had finished college and was on the verge of becoming a teacher, until this
incident with Roy derailed her plans. They still had hopes of her bouncing back, which Dr. Huff believed she would in time, but after today neither of them knew whether there ever would be a ‘bouncing back’ for their daughter.

Poor Cupid. To be taken away from his mother and lose his father in such fashion had to be devastating.

"Sweetie...you awake?" Fred whispered.

"Um hmm."

"You're thinking about her?"

"Yes...it's all so hard to believe, isn't it?"

"It's my fault Shirl...I...I should've been there for her. Maybe I could've prevented her from marrying that nut had I been more..."

"You stop that right now, Fred! You did tell her that he wasn't the right man. You told her and she still didn't listen. Hell - I didn't even listen to you, so there's no need for blame. None of us can predict the future; we can only go with what we have. Joss thought so and so did I."

Shirley raised her head, looking directly into Fred's eyes.

"I'm hoping she recovers from this someday. I don't want her to stay in that place forever."

"Neither do I, sweetie. The doctor thinks she'll be alright with more care. But if she must stay there, then it has to be. We're going to
have to raise the boy. I'll bring him up right if it comes to it."

Shirley kissed Fred then lay back on his chest.

"We can't tell him the truth, can we?"

Fred placed his book on the nightstand and removed his reading glasses. He exhaled, saying: "No...we can't tell him anything about it. It would be too much for him to handle."

Fred kissed her again and turned off the light. "Good night, babe."

"Good night."

Shirley turned to her left side and Fred pulled her close to him, taking a deep breath of her fragrant skin. He kissed her shoulder, then caressed her breasts and intertwined his legs with hers. His eyes remained open for several minutes until he was on the verge of falling asleep, whispering "...can't tell him...too much..." before he passed out for the night.
October 19, 1972

Break-ins had recently occurred at several storefronts along the major business thoroughfare in Chatham; however, Fred’s was one of very few that had not been hit. He was friendly with several police officers in the Gresham Sixth District who kept a special eye out for Fred’s cleaning store and also would wait in their squad car at Seaway National Bank while he or one of his assistants would make their evening deposits. The Chatham Black Business Association didn’t have a written agreement for police escorts, nor would it be wise for that kind of thing to have a paper trail, but what they did have was Fred’s support for several of their charities throughout the year, which often led to substantial contributions in the name of “Tibideaux Professional Cleaners, Inc.” Police protection at night was one of the “unofficial” perks of having certain connections, something that Fred had at his disposal.

To keep things fair, after the break-ins began, he made certain
that his “departmental benefit” was extended to the other nearby businesses. The police eventually made an arrest and had conclusive evidence that their suspect was indeed the one who committed these crimes, so people in the area were able to rest easy once again.

Until now, Joss hadn’t any more outbursts like the one on Thanksgiving a few years ago, but over time she gradually sank into a deep depression - often going days or even weeks without speaking a word to anyone. She was emaciated and often shook as if she were trapped outdoors during the winter months. Gone was the vivacious young woman whose eyes were filled with dreams of doing something with her life; they now were replaced by someone who hardly seemed alive. Dr. Huff had remained her therapist, and though little had seemed to work, he pledged to keep trying. “Recently she’s shown a few signs that she’s still with us, but it’s much too soon to think about anything other than continued therapy,” he told the Tibideauxs during their last visit. As Monsignor McMahon explained to the grieving couple, all that could be done was to keep her in prayer, hoping that someday God would bring her back to them - especially to Cupid, her beautiful, loving son who needed her.

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Fred and Shirley made their way along East 87th Street toward
Chicago Vocational High School, or “CVS” as it was called. Neither one said a word from the very moment they left home, as they weren’t looking forward to this kind of visit based on the leery tone of the Dean of Students. Fred drove his crème-colored 1972 Buick Electra 225, or his “deuce and a quarter” as he loved to call it, into the visitors parking lot. Upon finding a spot, he removed the key from the ignition and blew out a heavy sigh. The phone call didn’t sound good, although at this moment, neither Fred nor Shirley knew what could be wrong. ‘I think it’s best if you both come in so we can talk’ the young man told them over the phone, which was enough to put anyone on pins and needles. How much more could the two of them take? The Tibideauxs were good at masking their grief from everyone around them, sometimes even from one another, but they both had moments when they had broke down on their own. The trouble with always being perceived as strong is dealing with the equally high sense of vulnerability that often comes with moments like these. “Strong” people will deal with life’s traumas with an innate, and perhaps unusual, sense of bravery, while their biggest fear is appearing weak, as if they are beyond such mundane qualities. This whole thing was new to Fred and Shirley, who had survived hardships of all kinds while growing up in the Deep South, and later making their individual journeys with their parents to Chicago during the
early part of the century. Now here they were, learning once again how to improvise, adapt and adjust during their golden years. Not a fun time for them at all, to say the least.

They continued to sit in the car, the *whooshing* sound of traffic made its way behind them. Fred did his best to appear as a statue while Shirley began gathering her things.

“We’d better get moving Fred. We don’t want to be late for the meeting.”

Her disconsolate husband muttered something under his breath and yanked open the door. Shirley made a beeline around their vehicle and grabbed his hand as they walked along the neatly landscaped grounds of the school and up the marble staircase that led to an exquisite looking six-story, Gothic-style building. As they entered the lobby, passing a series of stain glass windows on either side, they came to a sign that said ‘Dean’s Office’ and followed an arrow that pointed to their left, leading them through what was known as “The Great Hall” - a long corridor decorated in traditional art deco style. It appeared almost as if they had entered a museum instead of a high school, for above the Mahogany trim were portraits from every graduating class since the school opened in 1930. What caught Shirley’s eye was how the portraits changed the further they walked down the Hall, for the classes gradually
went from all-white students, faculty and administrators to all black. Shirley smiled, taking some ownership for the change that she saw along the walls of this great institution. It was clear from the expression on her face that she was glad to have been a part of this, having been one of hundreds of black people to move into the Chatham area during the great “White Flight” of the late 1930s. Fred seemed too preoccupied to notice much of anything, despite all the interesting scenery and history that surrounded the two of them. His mind was focused only on what was in front of him, which was the bottom-line. Plain and simple, the phone call was why he was here in the first place and it was the only thing that mattered to him.

Outside the dean’s office there were two notices posted on the glass windows: “Dr. Gregory H. Williams - Dean, Barbara Felder - Associate Dean,” and “Please sign your name and have a seat.” The secretary was away, so in her place was a note that read “Ring bell for service” on her desk. Fred took a seat and hunched over in his chair, rubbing his hands together while Shirley hit the bell.

Footsteps came from behind a large door in the rear of the office and out came Dr. Williams, a tall, handsome black man in his mid-thirties. He was dressed in a charcoal gray suit, a crisp white oxford shirt and a black and silver striped tie. His appearance, as always, was
neat; his disposition was friendly, yet efficient. Besides the physical appearance he was the same Greg Williams that both of them had known prior to Cupid coming here; the same one that Fred wished to this day had taken Joss to the school dance at CVS many years ago.

Fred rose from his chair as the handsome young man approached them.

“Mr. Tibideaux...Mrs. Tibideaux, it’s good to see you again and thanks so much for coming at short notice.”

Fred forced a smile, Shirley spoke: “Thanks for calling, Greg. We appreciate you getting in touch with us.”

“You’re welcome, Ma’am. Please follow me; your grandson is in my office.”

Cupid was sitting on a couch by the window, staring out into space. He hardly acknowledged his Grandparents’ presence. Shirley sat next to him, holding his hand; Fred took a seat nearest the desk. Dr. Williams reached for a file next to his word processor and placed it in front of him. He put on his glasses and took a deep breath.

“Folks, the reason I called you is strictly out of concern. Between you and me, since your Grandson is Joss' child, I’ve kept a watchful eye on him since he first arrived as a student. His grades were excellent his first year. He was active in school activities and sports, and he was well-
liked by the other students. Perhaps the most amazing thing I’ve seen from him was being voted in as President of the Latin Honor Society, the first time ever for a freshman in school history. He beat two of our best senior students for that position.”

“His mother started teaching him Latin when he was four. Just short phrases at first, then long prayers and some poetry. He took to it quickly,” Shirley remarked, giving Cupid’s hand a tight squeeze.

“Yes, Joss and I had Latin classes together when we were students. That’s good. I hope he continues showing an interest.”

Dr. Williams paused.

“So far there’s been a bit of a change. His grades have taken a slight dip and he confided in me that he’s thinking of quitting the basketball team. Now don’t get me wrong, I’ve seen other students go through this kind of thing and rebound quickly; I believe he can do the same and he’s in no real danger of failing. But what concerns me is this.”

Dr. Williams opened his file and slid a piece of paper that appeared ripped from a notebook over to Fred. Shirley stood and looked over her husband’s shoulder; she covered her mouth in disbelief. The letter said:

*My momma’s a crazy fucking bitch!*
My daddy’s a dead nigger!

My momma’s a crazy fucking bitch!

My daddy’s a dead nigger!

These words went all the way down the page. Dr. Williams mentioned the janitor found this stuck at the bottom of his locker and it was confirmed that it belonged to Cupid. Fred slammed the paper back on the table and gave his grandson a menacing stare; Shirley returned to his side, very concerned.

“Sweetie, why did you write such horrible things?” Cupid didn’t answer her. Fred shoved back his chair; his immense shadow loomed over his grandson.

“Answer your grandmother, boy!” he demanded.

Dr. Williams intervened by asking Cupid to wait outside. Fred and Shirley were embarrassed. Dr. Williams sat along the edge of his desk, trying his best to comfort them.

“Mr. and Mrs. Tibideaux, you may find this hard to believe, but this isn’t the first time I’ve seen a student write something like this.”

He paused. “I guess I’m concerned because I’m aware of what happened to your family. He’s had it pretty rough, and I’m wondering if this is related to the sudden change in his attitude. Just a few months ago he seemed like a happy kid. Now it’s like night and day. Like I said,
he’s not failing anything, but his work isn’t quite like what it was last year.”

Dr. Williams turned his other desk chair around and pulled it close to the irritated couple.

“Look, you guys have known me since your daughter and I were classmates. I’ve long cared for Joss, and yes I’m saddened to see what happened with her and Roy. All I want is to help your grandson in any way I can and I believe this note is trying to tell us what he’s feeling. If you’d like, I could speak to him at a scheduled time each week, just to make sure he stays on track.”

“Thank you, Greg. That would be great,” Shirley replied.

Greg picked up Cupid’s letter. “Once I caught him smoking in the bathroom. It wasn’t a big deal to me. Lots of the kids sneak a cigarette here and there. What caught my attention was...well...he was kind’ve...*talking* in front of a mirror. He seemed to be engaged in a conversation with someone named Mark.”

Fred and Shirley looked at each other, confused. Dr. Williams continued:

“He said he was preparing for a speech in one of his classes, but I got the feeling he wasn’t being truthful with me. Have the two of you ever seen this kind of behavior from him before?”
“No!” Fred said abruptly. “No, never before. He’s a normal boy. There have been some problems that he’s had to overcome with all that’s happened, but he’ll get through them sooner or later.”

Shirley looked as if she wanted to explain more of her grandson’s pain, the horror of finding his father dead and his mother badly beaten and bloodied. The savagery of what he’d witnessed was something he would never forget, no matter the number of passing years. The two of them were glad that their grandson hadn’t turned to dope or alcohol as a way of masking his problems from the world. Cupid cried often, but would always sneak off someplace and do it alone. His former therapist told both of them it was good thing to cry, even if it were in the confines of his bedroom. ‘Allowing oneself to grieve allows oneself to heal’ is what the therapist would often say. Fred didn’t understand all that ‘therapy stuff’; he wasn’t from the school where people would talk about what bothered them, especially men; but even he couldn’t deny that it seemed to be doing Cupid some good. Once he saw the results they both encouraged him to go until he felt he didn’t need to anymore. This entire thing was truly a surprise to both of them.

“No, we’ve never seen anything like this before,” Shirley replied. “In fact, he was preparing for a something in his speech class. I helped him with it last week. That must’ve been what you heard.”
Dr. Williams nodded. “Alright, as long as he’s okay; but in regards to this letter, I would suggest you speak to him - encourage him to get back on track. I’d hate for him to mess up his chances on going to college. He’s much too bright to waste his talent, and I promise to keep an eye on him for you as long as he’s here.”

“Thank you, Greg. It has been rough on him and we’re doing all we can. We certainly appreciate your help,” Fred replied. He shook his hand.

“My pleasure. Again, I appreciate you coming in to see me, but before you go I’d like to ask one more thing, if you don’t mind.”

“Please.”

“How is Joss these days?”

Shirley looked at her husband, then said: “Not too good, Greg. Joss had a bad episode after she was admitted to the hospital and we’re not sure if she’s ever going to fully recover from it. That’s about all I can tell you right now, but we keep praying that someday she will be strong enough to come home.”

Dr. Williams nodded; he appeared disappointed. “Okay, thank you much.”

Fred stormed off in a huff, marching toward the Great Hall, while Shirley stayed behind and held her Grandson’s clammy hand until they
made it back to the car. Fred was pacing and puffing a cigarette - his usual outlet when he was stressed, but once they had arrived, he snatched Cupid around his shirt collar and slammed him across the hood. Shirley tried to break it up.

“What the fuck is the matter with you, boy? How dare you write that crap about your mother! I ought to kick your ass right here!”

Cupid didn’t struggle. In fact, he appeared to be smiling, which only angered Fred further.

“Fred, let him go right now! This boy has been through a lot and he needs us. NOW, Fred!”

Fred released him, but continued to snarl in his direction. “Get in the fucking car!”

Cupid ran to the other side and jumped in the Buick, where he began crying in the back seat. Fred felt bad and started walking away; Shirley followed him.

“I’m sorry, babe. That wasn’t right for me to do that.”

“Correct! It wasn’t, but I understand how you feel. Come on, honey. Let’s go home and put our heads together. I don’t want to leave him like this. We’re all he has right now.”

Fred nodded and went back to the car, fired it up. Before leaving the parking lot he turned and faced Cupid. “I’m sorry son. That wasn’t
nice of me. I love you and your mother and...it’s just difficult for all of us right now. We only want what’s best for both of you. Understand?"

“Y…..yes Grandpa!”

Fred had spent days on end seeing this similar look of pain in his grandson’s eyes; a look that desperately asked the difficult question ‘why’. Why did I have to lose both my mother and father at such a young age? Why did I have to be the one to see my father bloodied on the floor of my own kitchen? Why am I the one left behind to sort out all this out for myself? These were not questions that a fifteen-year-old should be forced to answer.

Fred thought of his own experience growing up; the constant moving from place to place, times where the family could hardly afford to put food on the table, plus the blatant racism that harangued his father for years. Despite all of these difficult moments, his family stayed together and his parents never allowed what happened outside the home to affect how they treated their children or one another. No matter where they were, a profound sense of “home” was always prevalent in the Tibideaux household. Neither of his parents was well-educated. They worked their fingers to the bone until the day they died, but every night when one came home the other was there to run a hot bath and massage sore muscles with Efficascent Liniment Oil until
the pain of another difficult day had faded away. It was a house filled with love from “all sides, up and down,” as Gladys Tibideaux, Fred’s mother, used to say time and again: “Hard times come and go, son, but the love of family is what makes it bearable.” Fred believed his mother’s pronouncement, and it was this same philosophy that motivated him to be a devoted husband for Shirley, a good father for Joss and Bobby, and now a dependable grandfather to Cupid, who needed him more than ever.

“Hey - I have an idea. Let’s go to Army and Lou’s for dinner tonight. I think all of us could use a good meal and I’ll pick up the tab, but on one condition.”

“What’s that, Grandpa?” asked Cupid.

He smiled. “On the condition that you stay on the basketball team and get your grades up to snuff. Got me?”

Cupid nodded. “Yes sir! For Army and Lou’s, I’ll do anything.”

“Bribery, I know, but it’ll get the job done,” Fred remarked.

Shirley leaned across the seat and kissed her husband, taking his hand as Fred guided his “deuce and a quarter” out of the parking lot and headed west on 87th street. Cupid looked out the rear window, watching as CVS disappeared behind the array of office buildings and single family homes along the busy street. Thanks to his Grandpa’s announcement,
already he had forgotten about their visit in Dr. Williams’ office and set
his sights on Louisiana-style gumbo, fresh mixed greens with smoked
ham hocks, candied sweet potatoes and fresh baked peach cobbler for
dessert. Army and Lou’s was his favorite place to eat. He couldn’t wait.
November 12, 1974

Loretta sat at the kitchen table, her eye fixed on a pouting Tony, Jr. who had just arrived early from school. From the moment she received the phone call from Gonzaga Jesuit High School, where Tony Jr. was now a freshman student, her stern look had not changed. Under normal circumstances she might have felt fatigue in her cheeks and forehead from keeping it scrunched up for as long as she had, but on the inside she was seething. Tony, Jr. knew it, and he knew as soon as his father got home for lunch he would be in real trouble. Again. Loretta had grown tired of dealing with her son's issues and was so angry that she nearly slapped him when they made it to the car. It took everything she had to keep her cool., but Junior didn't see what was the big deal. After all, who gave a shit if some dumb nigger got his face slammed into a locker?

"Besides dealing with your father, you and I are going directly over
to that young man's house and apologize! You understand me?"

Tony, Jr. didn’t say a word and continued staring out into their backyard, watching a Cardinal fly from tree to tree, or what was left of it given the time of the year.

The autumn season was now in full swing. Even though there was no sunlight, a golden brown aura filled every inch of their backyard; leaves that ranged in color from yellow to a rich burnt orange lay scattered across the grass and pathways that led toward their garage. Twenty years ago Tony Senior had planted three oak trees that had grown and expanded across the yard, every year making their deck a perfect place to cool down and relax during summers. Tony Jr. would certainly have to get out there and rake leaves, which he found to be a somewhat futile task given how windy the fall seasons usually were in Chicago. One day all the brown, yellow and orange leaves would be all raked and put away; the next day they would be scattered throughout the yard once more, given the trash-ripping raccoons and squirrels who seemed to have an affinity for digging into hefty bags. That plus the fact that the neighbors could care less if their lawns were raked or not made for doing extra work, which he certainly did not want to do.

But that was the least of Junior’s problems at the moment. His father had been called at the station, but he couldn’t get there right
away so Loretta had gone instead and ever since they had arrived home
she sat there with her arms folded, stewing. Tony Jr. never turned in
her direction because he was clearly afraid; Loretta's piercing stare was
so strong that she looked as if she could turn someone into stone.
Between that and his equally upset and soon-to-arrive father, Tony Jr.
had preferred to rake every lawn on the block for nothing.

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME, ANTONIO?!

"Y...yes, mother. I understand, and I'm...

SLAM! Tony Jr. had a half-empty glass sitting in front of him; the
vibration from the door caused the water to shake and the sound of Tony
Senior's heavy boots came closer. Before Tony Jr. could get up the
newly-appointed lieutenant snatched his son from his chair, fired a crisp
slap across his face and shoved him against the wall. The glass
bounced, then rolled on its side. Water sprayed across the table.
Loretta caught the glass before it fell to the floor.

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR GODDAMN MIND, BOY?! WHAT THE FUCK
DID YOU THINK YOU WERE DOING?"

Tony Senior grabbed his son's shirt collar so tight that Tony Jr.
began to choke. The teenager's face was rife with fear; his face beet-
red and forehead dripped with sweat. He had never seen his father so
angry before and a fleeting wonder if this was what it criminals saw of
him when he was a detective. Junior figured his father to be a nasty sum-bitch but he had never seen it in person before. That is, until now.

"ANSWER ME, GODDAMMIT! WHAT THE FUCK WERE YOU THINKING OF?"

Loretta stood nearby, arms folded and still visibly upset. "Let him go, honey! He can't talk and I wanna hear what he's got to say!"

Tony Senior snatched his son forward until father and son butted heads, shoved him against the kitchen wall a second time and pointed at Loretta.

"Answer your mother or you're gonna get a fresh one, you understand me?"

Tony Jr. nodded. "Y...yes sir."

Senior tilted his head, his dark brown eyes bore into his son's head like a scalpel. Senior's hand was poised to strike again.

"Well? Let's hear it!"

Tony Jr. swallowed hard, his face quivered like soup on the verge of a boil. His eyes darted between both his parents as he thought of what to say. They had been upset with him before regarding this "racial" issue, but it was obvious he had crossed a line, especially since neither parent had raised him that way.

"I...I don't know what I was thinking, sir. I just got caught up,
Senior slapped him a second time and yanked him so close that Tony Jr. could tell his father had been smoking, a usual trait when he was highly upset. Loretta had made him promise he wouldn’t smoke, but she could still taste tobacco despite the Dentyne gum and Scope mouthwash that he used regularly before coming home. Loretta could only imagine the things he had seen over the years; the danger, being shot, interacting with the lowest common denominator on a daily basis. So despite her preference, she allowed him to continue with his nasty habit. He would quit when he was good and ready.

"How many times do we have to talk to you about this, Antonio?"

Tony Jr. looked at her because he couldn’t sum up the nerve to look at his father. He was afraid Senior would hit him again.

"I'm sorry, Ma. It won't happen again, I promise!"

Tony Senior stepped closer to his son, forcing him against the wall once again, repeatedly poked his chest.

"It better not or I'm gonna fuckin' kill you, you understand me? Now get your ass to your room and don't come out until we call you. You're gonna come with us and apologize to that young man directly!"

Tony Junior slid past his father and ran upstairs while both parents straightened up and took a collective sigh. Loretta gestured toward a
chair and grabbed a paper towel to dry the table. Senior took off his uniform hat and tossed it in disgust. He ran his fingers through his hair, accepted a glass of water from Loretta and drank it all the way down. A wet smack, another sigh and he sat exhausted, staring at the empty glass. They sat together in silence, the tension slowly dissolved allowing the two of them to relax, recover. Neither one liked to speak to their son in such harsh tones, but they were at their wits end with Tony Jr.'s bigoted tendencies. This had been the third incident in the last eighteen months, and the first at Gonzaga.

Senior reached out to his wife, caressed her hand gently with his thumb.

"You okay, sweetie?"

She nodded, still somewhat frazzled. "Yes, I'm alright. Frustrated, but alright. I don't like what I'm seeing from him, honey. We didn't raise him or Dawn to be hateful and angry like this."

"I know," Tony Senior replied. "I don't like it either, especially given all the shit I went through to get him into that school. He wasn't the greatest in grammar school, you know. There were other students more qualified."

Loretta slid her chair closer, wrapped her arms around him giving a tight squeeze, not saying a word for a while. She nestled her soft
brown hair against his shoulder, the same one where he had been shot a few years prior.

"I know, honey, but he still got in. It's early, but so far he seems to be doing well. As for this other thing, I don't know what to do anymore. He's not been the same since the riots."

"Yeah, well he needs to get through that. Besides, it was a black man that saved my life. Had he not been there I'd be dead right now."

Loretta nodded, remembering back to when she met the tall, handsome gentleman. Ever since that fateful evening she had wondered what had become of him. The only thing she remembered about him was his name -- Fred.

Tony Senior nuzzled at his wife's hair and kissed her forehead.

"C'mon. Before we go to that young man's house I wanna play something for you."

Loretta raised her head. "Really? What?"

"Not tellin'. It's a surprise." He pulled his wife away from the kitchen table and lead her to the family room, taking a seat in front of his black Steinway upright piano. As a child, Tony Senior was forced to endure hours and hours of piano lessons by his parents, both of whom were musicians in Sicily. He stepped away from it when he became a teenager but eventually came back to it shortly after becoming a cop.
Music became his passion as well as a good way to release the stress that came with being on the job. At his precinct Tony Senior took an empty meeting hall and turned it into a community room where, at his insistence, the department hosted after-school events for kids. Whenever there was down time Senior could be found playing the piano, often catching the attention of a small group of onlookers who would give him a round of applause upon his conclusion. By far he was one of the most well-respected officers in his district, especially after the "Sonny Bats" collar a few years ago.

Tony Senior slid across his padded piano bench and stretched his hands for a few seconds while Loretta sat in her favorite chair, waiting to see what he had in store for her. There was nothing finer than seeing her husband's muscular frame fill out his blue and white uniform. He looked as majestic as King Lear, but there was something about this combination of stateliness and passion that she was now witnessing that took her breath away. His back upright, shoulders apart, fingers loose and ready, she smiled as he began to play "Sue Ann" by Antonio Carlos Jobim, her favorite piece. She moved forward in her chair, her eyes focusing in on Senior's fingers as they moved with rhythmic precision, tenderly striking the keys and producing the most beautiful sounds she had ever heard. Together both of them rocked back and forth, Senior
swaying in unison with the piece and Loretta closing her eyes and smiling—absorbing the moment. She remained that way as Tony Senior continued with the piece. Occasionally her hands reached out in space, not in an attempt to touch anything in particular, but almost as a way of releasing an unseen energy into the air through her fingertips. Loretta was in heaven; enraptured by the melody, blown away by its subtle beauty.

Senior continued to sway as the piece reached its peak, then gently came down the mountain, his pace slowed and finally came to a stop. His head down, he left his fingers on the keys, the sound gradually fading away. For a moment the married couple didn't move, eyes remained closed as they absorbed the moment. Meanwhile, Tony Jr. had come downstairs after hearing his father play the piano. He had tears in his eyes, now red from crying. His parents had snapped out of their trance, aware that they weren't alone.

"I thought I told you to stay in your room?" Senior barked.

Tony Jr. went right for his father and hugged him. "I'm sorry for what I did, Pop. I was wrong."

Senior choked up and kissed his son. "I know you are, but I'm not the one you should be saying this to."

They separated, the father gripped his son's neck, pointing: "And
another thing - I don't ever wanna hear you using that word again, hear? The rest of your beghina friends might say that but not you. I work with a lot of hard working police officers who are black and I would never allow anyone to say that about them. My son ain't gonna do that neither. Got me?"

"Yes Pop," Tony Jr. replied.

"Good. You're grounded for a month and you're coming with your mother and me to apologize to that young man, then I gotta get back to work. Alright?"

Junior nodded and went to get his coat as the two of them watched him leave the room. Loretta looked at her husband, nodding her head in approval.

"Was a month too much?" he asked.

Loretta shook her head. "I would've given him two months, but one should be enough."

She rose from her chair and reached out for Tony Senior, wrapping her arms around him. "By the way, thank you for my surprise. It was quite lovely."

They kissed, he pinched her backside. "You're welcome. Been working on that one for a few weeks at the precinct."

"Just for me?"
"That's right, sweetie. Just for you."

He rose from the bench and took Loretta's hand. "Let's get this over with, okay?"

Loretta nodded and went hand-in-hand with Senior as they made their way to the front of the house where their son was waiting.
March 1, 1975

Fred had stopped smoking roughly a year ago, but it was during times like these where he regretted it. He went from rubbing his hands to looking at the Zenith television on the wall, then over to Cupid, squeezing his shoulder. He’d get up and pace the waiting room, the heels of his wing-tipped shoes “click-clacked” along the tiles; the rhythm reminiscent of their clock in the upstairs hallway. Shirley didn’t feel well, and hadn’t for some time now, so she decided to stay home. Fred wished she were with him, but felt it was best she didn’t come along this time, for both he and Cupid noticed she complained of fatigue more often than usual. Fred insisted she speak to a doctor soon. She agreed, and had an appointment scheduled for the following week.

Still, he missed her calming presence and bragged to people that she was his “protective cage within a sea of sharks” - a line that would elicit huge laughs from the listener, but was nonetheless heartfelt. Fred always believed that he would make something out of his life, that he
was bound for better things beyond his own imagination. His parents could see it early on, and they actively encouraged him ever since he was a young child, helping to foster a magnanimous presence that attracted everyone that came in contact with him. And while Fred always took things in stride, the first person he would always credit as the force behind his success was his lovely wife. He was desperate for her reassurance and thought of calling her just as Dr. Huff entered the room.

“Good morning Mr. Tibideaux. And good morning to you too, young man. My, but you’ve grown since I last saw you.”

“Yes he has indeed. You’re looking at the captain of the varsity basketball team,” Fred replied, patting Cupid’s shoulder. “I think we might have ourselves a college ballplayer right here.”

Cupid smiled, somewhat embarrassed. Dr. Huff nodded.

“I’ve been reading the papers. You’re having a very good season. Think there’s a chance you’ll go downstate for the IHSA tournament this year?”

“I sure hope so Doc,” Cupid replied.

Fred beamed. “Oh you will son, and you’ll have the chance to show those college scouts what your made of, too.”

“Yes, and I wish you all the luck,” Dr. Huff replied. “Let’s have a
seat before we continue.”

The three of them pulled up a chair and sat down; Dr. Huff opened a file.

“Joss had some trouble here and there, but I do see signs of real progress. If she continues at this pace I may allow you to take her out from time to time. My hope is that home visits will help her adjust to being in the city again and seeing some familiar sights. From there we can see if she’s ready to transition. Do you understand what I mean by transition?”

Cupid and Fred nodded.

“Good. She’s really come a long way, gentlemen, but I think we’re beginning to see a bit of light at the end of the tunnel.”

Dr. Huff stood. “Alright, if both of you are ready, let’s go see Joss.”

***

Cupid lay on the cot inside his cell, his mind cloudy from the shots of alcohol and beer that he’d consumed earlier that evening with his teammates on the basketball team. Through a former CVS ballplayer, who now worked as a bartender at Club Zanzibar on Cottage Grove Avenue, they were able sneak a few drinks despite being underage.

Fred allowed Cupid to use his car, unaware that his grandson's
intention was to go drinking with the boys that evening. He called his grandfather and told him which district he was being held in and where the Electra was impounded. From the sound of Fred’s voice Cupid knew he was in deep trouble, but to be honest he didn’t care. Not about anything. All that was on his mind was something his mother told him this morning when they had the chance to be alone; something that Dr. Huff had shared with his grandparents on the day Cupid saw his mother go into hysterics.

Something they all had hoped he would never find out!

***

Fred left Cupid with Joss in the community room. They sat next to each other, Cupid holding his mother’s hand. She appeared much older than her 38 years; her hair was graying in certain spots and he noticed dark circles under her eyes – probably from lack of sleep. Still – she appeared pleasant and was genuinely glad to see him. She was told of the possibility of leaving the facility for extended periods of time, with the hope that she could eventually go home. She even spoke of getting a job as a teacher - something she’d long wanted to do. Though Cupid believed this to be a pipe dream, he liked the fact that she spoke of finishing what she started; so did Fred and Dr. Huff. It meant she had something to look forward to.
Cupid spoke of finishing strong at CVS and had a lot of schools interested in him playing basketball – Chicago State University, University of Illinois - Chicago Circle and Western Illinois University being among his top choices. He was on track to finish with a B+ average and had recently earned his driver’s license. He told Joss about how Grandpa was “lending” him his Buick to drive since he’d just purchased another new car. Cupid even spoke about his desire to become a lawyer when he completed college, all of which caused Joss to beam with pride. He worked summers as a camp counselor, earning a good chunk of money that his grandpa put in a savings account under his name.

Everything about their visit seemed to go well, and for once Cupid believed the mother he once knew had finally returned to him.

That is…until she told him their “secret.”

“Sweetie, remember a few years ago when I got so upset while visiting?”

Cupid nodded.

“Well, I want you to know that I’ve not mentioned that day anymore to anyone. You hear me? NO ONE! I want to get out of here and come home and talking about that day isn’t going to help me any.”

Joss looked at Cupid with great concern. “No one’s told you the
truth, have they? About you and the little boy I saw that day in my mirror? Well I wouldn’t tell you about him either, but I’ve watched you ever since you were little. I think you’ve seen him too! You’ve talked to him, haven’t you?”

Cupid was reluctant to admit it, for fear of sounding as crazed as she did, but she was right. He HAD seen a little boy and had spoken to him ever since he could remember. He nodded.

"I knew it! I just KNEW I wasn’t crazy...see I..."

Joss paused briefly, looking around as if she were some spy about to whisper a cryptic message. An odd looking smile covered her face as she crept closer.

“"I promised you when you were first born that this would be our secret. Son, the boy I saw...the same one you’ve been talking to all of your life...is your dead twin brother!”

***

For the remainder of the day, those three words rang through his head: “DEAD TWIN BROTHER.” Cupid hardly remembered anything else regarding their conversation. The only thing he could recall was that his “twin” was stillborn. Only the medical staff and Joss knew the truth that day. Fred and Shirley were in the waiting room and Roy was out someplace getting drunk. No one else was present.
For years Cupid always felt different from everyone else. There was a longing for the presence of someone close to him, an unshakable feeling of separation that he never could quite understand. No one, not his teammates or coaches, his teachers or counselors, not even his grandparents were able to replace this feeling of loneliness. He often thought something was wrong with him, that he was on the verge of losing his mind, but in recent years - with basketball and getting good grades and the prospect of going to college nearby - he actually began to feel more complete. Alive.

But now that the truth was known, he felt worse than before. There was so much that he could have done had his brother been alive. They could have played basketball together, hung out, double dated and all those other things that twins like to do together, but it was merely a pipe dream that Cupid was forced to live in for the rest of his life. In many ways it felt like being in jail and the visitor could only see their loved one through a five-inch thick piece of bulletproof glass. His "brother" was essentially a figment of his mother’s imagination, a specter that he could never discuss with anyone beyond he and Joss. He knew that if he ever tried to share this with others no one would believe him.

“Okay son, your grandfather’s here to get you,” said an officer, unlocking his cell.
Cupid grabbed his coat, walked through a series of dark tunnels until he came to a door leading to where he was booked. And in the center of the room there was a seething Fred Tibideaux, who watched as Cupid’s handcuffs were removed. Once he started rubbing his hands, Fred charged, grabbed his arm and yanked him out the front door.

***

Fred had a cab drop him off at the police impound, where he picked up the Buick and drove to the station. Instead of heading home, Fred drove on the Dan-Ryan expressway heading further south. When he reached 119th Street he turned west. Until now neither man spoke.

Cupid looked out the window into the midnight darkness. Even the streetlights weren’t working, and if not for the Buick’s headlights Cupid would’ve had no sense of direction. He cleared his throat.

“Grandpa, where are we going?”

Fred pointed at Cupid. “Boy, if you say one more word I’m putting your black ass out this car and you’ll walk home! Is that understood?”

“Yes sir!” He didn’t speak again because he knew his grandpa would indeed put him out. Fred Tibideaux was very much a man of his word, and the last thing Cupid needed was to be walking home in the darkness from the far south side of the city.
Fred continued west until they read a sign that said “Holy Sepulcher Cemetery.” He pulled the Buick into a driveway and flashed his headlights, then moments later the gates opened and an elderly black gentleman that Cupid recognized from his neighborhood came, handing Fred a flashlight.

“Hey ya’ll - twelve-thirty on the dot,” the man said. “Whatcha doin’ out here this late at night?”

“I just wanted to show my Grandson something before heading home, Clyde. How much time do we have?”

“I ain’t leavin’ for another hour or so, so you fellers got some time. Just come on back when yer done with whatever yer up to.”

“Thanks Clyde - here’s a little for your trouble.” Fred handed the man a fifty dollar bill. Clyde refused.

“Don’t worry ‘bout it, Fred. Just make sure you two are back here by one-thirty or I’ll need a whole heap more cash than that!”

Fred smiled and drove off; cruising through several pathways until he found what he was looking for.

“Get out the car, now!” Fred ordered, turning on the flash light.

Cupid did as he was told. Fred grabbed his arm and as they walked, Fred’s voice barked louder at him with every step.

“The problem with you young niggers these days is you think you
know every fucking thing. You look at your pile of shit and swear it
doesn’t stink! Well let me tell you something, boy - it does...REAL BAD!”

Tombstones passed by the beam of the flashlight as Fred yanked
Cupid to the left; their walk became more brisk as he continued: “The
last man I saw drunk in my presence promised he would never do this
around me or my family again. He promised that he would become a
better man for the sake of his young family. He said that he was on the
right path and wouldn’t end up like his daddy before him. Well, like all
young punk ass niggers, he broke his promise.”

Fred finally came to a stop and grabbed Cupid by the collar.

“That man was your daddy, boy! And he’s dead because he
couldn’t keep his fucking hands off my daughter and your mother! To
this day we’re still trying to get our lives back!”

With that he shoved Cupid to the ground; his head struck a
tombstone. Cupid was lying across a grave! Fred played the flashlight in
his direction.

“Look and see where you are!”

Cupid turned and faced the stone. It read: “Elroy Demetrius
Brown, Jr. - Born November 8, 1936 - Died February 17, 1967. ‘The Lord
is My Shepherd’.”

Cupid gasped: “Dad!”
Fred kneeled and snatched Cupid.

“That’s right, boy! Your father! He’s here, in this place, way too early because he couldn’t get his life together. He took the cowards way out instead of being a man for you and your mother, and this is exactly where your narrow behind is headed if you don’t get your shit together fast! Ya hear me?”

Cupid burst out in tears. “Grandpa, I’m so sorry…I didn’t mean to hurt anyone! I was just upset about this morning, that’s all!”

Fred looked at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Momma told me I had a brother and he died when I was born! I didn’t know I had a brother all these years and she kept it a secret from everyone…even you!”

Fred was shocked. He hoped this was something his Grandson would never discover, but the worst has happened. His stance softened; he sat next to Cupid and for the first time tonight gave him a warm hug.

“I’m sorry you had to find out about this, son. Your grandma and I hoped you would never know.”

Cupid pulled away from him. “You…knew and didn’t tell me? Why?”

Fred sighed. “Your mom never told us about this; Dr. Huff did. When he saw what happened to Joss that day and witnessed your
reaction he thought we should know. We weren’t trying to deceive you, son. We wanted to protect you. You were so young and had been through so much. The last thing we wanted was for you to find out about this.”

Cupid continued to cry. Fred hugged him again.

“You’re a good boy, and we love you. We just want what’s best.”

From that moment on, Cupid and Fred continued to hold each other. Fred rocked his Grandson in his arms just as he did when he was a newborn baby, sharing in his grief for the remainder of an hour until it was time for them to leave.
August 31, 1977

"Okay, that'll be $3.99 plus tax," said Tony, Jr.

He reached out and accepted four dollars and five pennies from a pimply-faced kid whom he figured to be some nerdy freshman. The kid smiled at him, flashing a mouth full of metal and rubber bands with bits of what appeared to be a messy combination of cherry taffy and potato chips.

There was a tradition at Gonzaga High where all upperclassmen who would take quarters and exchange them for pennies, then hurl them at some unsuspecting, wet-behind-the-ears geek who thought he was big time now that he was in high school. Usually the biggest violators of this were sophomores and seniors; sophomores because they finally had left the bottom of the totem pole and seniors because they were now the new 'kings of the hill'. Now that Tony Jr. had finally become a senior, his stock had improved, but unlike his fellow classmates, he had always been more selective than the others. He actually handpicked his targets
and was so ridiculously anal about it that he would only hit freshmen with pennies that were minted on the year of their arrival to school. Of course he never told this to anyone, but that was beside the point.

Tony looked at the pennies the newbie handed him and smiled: *1970, 1967, 1962, 1956 and 1977.* He reached in his own pocket and switched the 1977 penny with a 1968 one, realizing he had just found his first target for the start of school tomorrow and would have the added pleasure of striking him in the head with his own penny. *WAY* too cool. In his mind you just couldn't make this stuff up.

"What's your name, kid?" Tony asked.

"Peeeeter. Peter Seymour Green," he replied, extending his hand. Tony didn't bother extending his; instead his smile increased. This kid made a huge mistake in telling him his middle name.

"I'll be seeing you real soon, Seymour," Tony snickered.

"My name's..."

"Get lost, Seymour!"

The doomed freshman slowly dropped his hand, crushed. He turned away and nearly bumped into a tall, thin man who wore a brown-hooded cassock with a white sash around his waist. Peter took a step back and looked at the man, whose infectious smile had rubbed off on him. The man, clean shaven, thinning black hair and large, black
glasses, had a certain calming effect that surprised even Tony, Jr. He extended his hand to Peter.

"Miiiiiiiiissssssster Peter Green, pleasure to meet you, young inquisitor. I'm Brother Michael McCade. I believe you have an appointment to see me this afternoon, am I correct?"

Peter flashed his braces a second time, shook his hand. "That's right, Brother. How did you know my name?"

"One thing you'll find out about me, young inquisitor, is that I know more than most - but you'd never know it because I won't tell you, even though I just did. Understand?"

Peter was completely confused. So was Tony, Jr for that matter.

"Not at all, Brother."

"Not to worry. By the end of the class, you will. Now run along, my dear boy, so I can speak to Antonio here, another fellow 'Zags' inquisitor. I'll see you later."

Peter turned, a sly grin on his face. "Antonio?" he said, snickering at Tony, Jr.

"Goodbye, young man!" Peter kept with his snickering all the way out of the bookstore. Tony was mortified. Brother McCade stood perfectly still for several seconds, almost as if he were trying to size up an opponent before a boxing match. His hands were tucked inside of his
sleeves so Tony couldn’t see his arms or wrists, the cassock was so long that it appeared as if he were floating on air. A large, wooden cross hung around his neck. The Brother was no longer smiling.

"May I have a word with you, kind sir?" he asked.

"I...I can’t leave the register, Brother. I’ll get in trouble."

"‘Trouble? Well we wouldn’t want that, now would we? Stay here and I’ll be right back."

With that, Brother McCade picked up the arm of the counter and walked toward the rear of the store, looking for Mr. Adler - Tony’s supervisor (and former math teacher). Within a few minutes both Brother McCade and Mr. Adler came up front; their chatter was friendly.

"Sid, may I borrow Mr. Cuppicciotti for just a few minutes please? This young man will be in my classes this year and I’d like to talk to him about a few things. I promise to return him unharmed."

Brother McCade’s comment caused Tony to swallow hard; he looked at his boss hoping he would say no.

"Oh sure, Michael. He’s all yours for now, just promise me you won’t kill him, alright?" Mr. Adler chuckled.

"Kill him? No. Maybe a little maiming, but no killing. Thanks Sid. I’ll return him as soon as I’m done."

With that, Brother McCade gave Tony a firm pat on the back and
led him out of the bookstore to his office down the hall. Neither one spoke the entire time, though Tony Jr wondered what this could be about. His mind raced to a million possibilities within seconds, but one he most feared was the respected teacher might be some sort of queer. He had no idea, but he remained patient and ready.

Brother McCade slammed his office door and pointed toward a chair that faced his desk.

"Sit down. I'll be right back."

Tony did as he was told as McCade opened a different door that led to a dark hallway. Tony could hear the 'click-clack' of McCade's hard-soled penny loafers echoing as they went further away and eventually stopped. The sound of something being dropped, followed by a series of squeaks became louder until he reappeared with a cart that carried a box filled with textbooks.

Brother McCade parked the cart in-between his desk and Tony.

"Before I start my classes I like to meet one-on-one with my students so I can set proper expectations for the upcoming year. I would have met with you earlier, but I found out something quite interesting, so I decided to wait until my suspicions were correct."

The teacher reached into the box and pulled out a used textbook, holding it in front of Tony so he could see it: "Man's Search for Clarity"
by Victor Frankelstein. It was the assigned book for his class, which Tony had recognized. He looked away.

Brother McCade moved back into his line of sight, still holding the book.

"Recognize this, young man? Is there something you'd like to tell me about this book? No? Well perhaps you'd like to talk about this one…or this one…or this one…or…"

Brother McCade repeatedly reached into the box and pulled out more copies of "Man's Search for Clarity" until he had dumped twenty-seven copies, all used, onto the floor. Tears ran down Tony's face.

"Where did you get these, young man? Did you steal them?"

Tony's lips quivered. "Y...yes, sir. I did."

"You stole them from other students, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Wanna know how I figured it out?"

Tony didn't move, so Brother McCade continued: "As I said, kind sir, I like to meet with my students in advance and required they have a copy of their book with them when they come see me. If this were any other year, I wouldn't have noticed, but after last semester I ordered the third edition of this book for my class."

He pointed to the books on the floor. "These are all second
editions. Every last one of them. So I asked my students where did they get these and all of them said they bought them at the bookstore and purchased them from a young man that fit your description to the 'T'."

All that ran through Tony's mind was what his father was going to do to him when he found out. He had heard rumors on how tough Brother McCade could be and feared he would be another casualty; one that would become another notch on this teacher's belt - probably THE notch of all because he was the son of a, now, well-known captain of the Chicago Police Department. Tony would flash his dad's name around, even to other teachers at Gonzaga High, and usually get his way. Brother McCade was different - a lesson that Tony had just learned.

"Miiiiiiiiissssster Cupp-a-che-ot-tea," McCade said, deliberately, "so what should we do about this clear infraction of our school honor code? Shall I call the principal? Or how about the police? Maybe your daddy will show up and put handcuffs on you in front of the entire school? How 'bout that?"

Tony burst out, and subsequently regretted: "how about we forget the whole thing?"

For the first time the teacher appeared to have lost his cool. He got real close to Tony's face and growled: "how about you stop fucking around with me before I make your decision FOR you!"
Tony leaned back, his hands held up. “I'm sorry sir, I'm sorry. Please don't tell my father or he'll kill me.”

Brother McCade appeared unmoved. Tony felt his searing eyes bore further into his like a needle into a balloon; he turned away again, only for McCade to repeat his earlier move of gaining his attention. After what seemed like minutes, the man's normal features returned, satisfied that his point had been made.

"I'm quite sure your father will kill you, young man. If you were my child I'd tie you to a rack and whip you with a wet noodle."

Tony found that expression odd and stifled the urge to smile. He was already in enough trouble and didn't need any more right now. Brother McCade walked around his desk and took a seat in his leather chair that leaned back so slowly that every creaking sound it made was clearly audible. All the while, the man never took his eyes off his student.

"I have a suggestion that I believe makes sense. Let's see what you think, shall we?"

Tony nodded.

"I rarely see you on Sundays at Holy Trinity Church next door, though your parents and sister are always in attendance. That will change. Your ass will be in one of those pews every Sunday for the
remainder of the year. You also will take all the money you swiped and
donate it to Catholic Charities. When you do, get a receipt and slip it to
me at church next Sunday and don't LIE or I'll know, understand?"

"Yes sir."

"Yes, Brother McCade!"

"Yes, Brother McCade!"

The teacher propped his feet up on his desk, reached into a
drawer and took out a pipe with a small pouch filled with Marbella
tobacco. He took a few pinches and dropped them into his pipe,
reached for his lighter and took enough puffs to cloud up most of his
face. Tony could see the lick of the orange flame curl and stretch,
dependning on the strength of Brother McCade's inhaling, which he
continued until there was a sustained glow from inside the pipe. A trail
of smoke streamed from his nostrils followed by a cotton-like tuft that
drifted from his mouth.

"One more thing - in my class you had better be prepared
everyday, young man. Now that you and I have a certain 'understanding',
I'm going to expect perfection."

McCade picked his feet off his desk and started writing on a piece
of paper. When he was finished he marched to Tony and handed the
note to him. It read: "Out of the crooked timber of humanity no
straight thing can ever be made.” Tony looked back at Brother McCade, puzzled.

"Have no idea what that means, do you?"

Tony shook his head. "No, Brother McCade."

"I didn't expect you to; not yet anyway. This is a quote from Immanuel Kant. Have you ever heard of him?"

Tony shook his head a second time. Brother McCade frowned. "Good Lord, young man, don't you kids read anything besides Tiger Beat? That's partly why some of you are such nincompoops right now! Now look, I want you to spend a few days thinking about that quotation from Kant and write me a three-page response, including Kant's biography. You will deliver it to me here, in this office, by the end of next week, understand?"

Tony nodded. "Yes, Brother McCade."

The teacher nodded and pointed to the books on the floor. "Good, now get these things down to the building super right now. I've already taken the liberty of replacing your handy work, and as long as you keep to my rules this will remain between us. Screw up and it's 'bye bye birdie'. Dig?"

Brother McCade smiled, as did Tony. "Yes, Brother McCade. Thank you, sir."
Tony picked up the books and wheeled them down to the trash room while McCade sat in his chair and continued to puff away on his pipe, the aroma from the tobacco filled the entire hallway, making its way into the bookstore where Tony was just about to take his next customer.
January 15, 1978. 2:55pm

"...warmth of heart leads to warmth of spirit. Warmth of spirit leads to warmth of mind. Warmth of mind leads to warmth of body. Warmth of body leads to warmth of life. Humanity is connected to each other, and as our fellow inquisitor succinctly pointed out to all of us, an emotional warmth is either something you have or don’t have. Remember that!....now don’t go swallowing any matches, hear me? Class dismissed.”

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Brother McCade took his usual perch by the door as his students filed their way out toward their hallway lockers, chatting about whether they were going to Al's for an Italian beef sandwich or to the local 7-Eleven to play Super Breakout. Braving the elements outside paled in comparison to these treasured after-school delights, especially after being cooped up in one boring class after another all day. Freedom was
what these kids desired more than warmth, though none of them would remember the snowy forecast while ensconced in their leisure after-school activities anyway. Such was the life of a high school student: carefree, bliss, complex and terrifying. In other words, a complete paradox of terms that never changed, no matter what particular era the student might have grown up in.

Brother McCade offered a brief nod and wink at each student that left his classroom, until Tony happened to walk by with his friends, more than likely spinning one lie after another, quite typical for him. Whatever he was talking about, it had been dismissed by his teacher as “Antonio’s perpetual prance into the pig-stye of puerility”. The only time he ever heard Tony say anything worth noting was when he was in class, where Brother McCade would make wild hand gestures at his students, stating he preferred keeping ‘tom-foolery’ on a date with ‘riff-raff’ so life could remain ‘peachy-keen’, then follow up with a loud ‘clack’ of the tongue that would elicit scattered snickers throughout the room. The Brother’s classes were strange, funny, thought-provoking, intense, educational and somewhat annoying; however, boring was never a word used to describe this most unusual teacher, who thrived on being deliciously eccentric.

"Miiiiiiiiiiiiister Cuppicciotti. Might I have a word with you before
your daily 'grazing' with the rest of the herd?"

Tony was a little miffed. After being grilled by his teacher for the latter half of the class, the last thing he wanted to do was spend more time with him, but after being on the hook since the beginning of the year, Tony didn't feel he had much choice in the matter.

"Sure."

Brother McCade led Tony to his office, and after opening the door he held up a lithe hand, preventing his student from entering.

"Wait here. I'll be back in a moment."

Brother McCade slammed the door in Tony's face. Though his door was closed, he could see his teacher's movements through the frosted glass. McCade moved back and forth, then stopped a while and appeared to be changing out of his cassock, though Tony wasn't quite sure what was going on. This went on for about a minute until he left the office. The teacher was dressed as before, except his hood was drawn over his head and his arms were folded inside the long, draping sleeves of his cassock. His gaunt face was obscured by the hood. He reminded Tony of some creepy, sadistic character from a horror film.

"Follow me, kind sir."

Brother McCade led Tony down the long hallway, where the two of them passed the bookstore, the principal's office, the dean's office and
the switchboard operator. They went through the foyer of the main building and McCade appeared heading out the front door of the school.

"Uh, shouldn't I get my coat, Brother?"

No answer. Instead McCade used his shoulder to push the front door open and stepped out onto the dual staircase, leaning against the door to hold it open for Tony. The crisp winter air whipped Tony across the face as he crossed his arms, trying to warm his shoulders. Once he was safely outside the door, Brother McCade stepped away from the heavy door and allowed it to slam. Both men stood across from one another, the wind blew Brother McCade's cassock from behind; he looked as if he were about to fly away like Peter Pan.

Roosevelt Road was busy at this time of day. Cars rushed by, honking their horns at school buses that had lined up to collect Gonzaga students, demanding they hurry up and get these kids moving. There was a fire truck backing into a station across the street from the school; a lone fire fighter holding motorists at bay until the area was secure. Tony's ears were filled with chatter and screeching and whistling from the wind. He covered them, trying to keep them warm, but found himself going between his head and his arms, both of which appeared pointless. Brother McCade, on the other hand, hadn't moved an inch. He remained still the entire time, his clothing flapping about like a flag
at full mast. All that had reminded Tony that his eccentric teacher wasn’t a statue was the stream of cold air that came though his nose and lips.

“So, my dear boy, I received something in the mail from the Chicago Police Department; a questionnaire that asked me to give a thorough evaluation on you. I assume you gave them my information, yes?”

Tony nodded and shivered at the same time. “Yes, Brother McCade. May I...”

“No, you may not, sir. And we shouldn’t be out here for more than a minute, depending - of course - on what you have to tell me about Cletus Jones.”

Tony continued to rub his shoulders. “Wh...who?”

“Don’t play games with me, Mr. Cuppicciotti! You should know better than that by now. Now let’s try this again, shall we? What can you tell me about Cletus Jones?”

“H...he’s that b...bl...black kid in my gym class.”

“And where is he from?”

“Over on the South Side. Englewood, I think.”

“That’s correct, Mr. Cuppicciotti. He’s dirt poor and from the South Side. But you know something? He’s probably going to graduate at
the top of your class this June. Or at least he was going to graduate."

McCade closed the gap between he and Tony.

"I say was because his mother came to me a few days ago and said she wants to pull him out of this school. And you know why? Because some sick person got a cute idea to hang a noose in his locker. She came to me because her son enjoyed my class and, quite frankly, I found her and Cletus to be the kindest folks I've met since I've been teaching here."

Brother McCade took another step into Tony, who now shivered out of fear. "Cletus also told me just before he found the noose that he saw someone running away from his locker. Care to know who that was?"

Tony's eyes gave it away. He knew he was caught.

"Sir, I..."

"Shut up, boy! Four years at Gonzaga and you're still up to the same bullshit, just like when you first got here. Yeah, I read your file. Five demerits for threatening black and latino students. And you have the audacity to want to be a cop? If I were black I wouldn't trust you to tell me what time it is."

He paused, seethed. "So now here I am again, in the middle. On one hand I have you here, playing games and being a moron; on the other, if I do what I'm supposed to do, my actions could get you kicked out and fuck up your chances with the police department. To be honest,
with five demerits you shouldn’t even be here anyway, but since you’ve got some clout your ass is still in school.”

Brother McCade stepped back, the lower half of his face twisted in a rage. His arms were still inside his sleeves.

“You want to be a police officer, young man, which means you are a public servant. When there’s danger out there, you are the last line of defense and have to be willing to give up your life to serve and protect. Besides the clergy and the fire department, that’s probably the most selfless occupation there is, but this callousness that you have inside you gravely concerns me and I’m not sure if I should write any recommendation.”

“Please, Brother McCade. I need this recommendation, otherwise I’m sunk.”

“Can’t you find some other nitwit to do this? Surely daddy can fix things for you!”

“I already told him I had that all covered. If I don’t have this turned in by the end of the month I’ll miss the deadline!”

“Well maybe a good dose of reality is what you need right now. Make you humble. You’ve been getting away with murder since you’ve been here, so it’s time to pay the piper, young man!”

With that, Brother McCade headed to the door when Tony jumped
in front of him.

"Get out of my way, Mr. Cuppicciotti!"

"I swear to you - I had nothing to do with that. Honest. If you tell
the principal I'll never get into the Academy. I'll be an embarrassment to
the family. Please, Brother - don't do this to me!"

"I've not done anything to you, young man. You've done it to
yourself, now move!"

Tony wouldn't move. "He saw me running down a hallway, that's
what you said. Right?"

Brother McCade stopped, realizing where this was going. "Yes, Mr.
Cuppicciotti, that's correct."

"Was there anyone there who actually saw me go into Cletus'
locker and hang the noose?"

For once in his long career of teaching, Brother McCade realized a
student had pushed him into a corner. He could tell by the look in Tony's
eyes that he had done it; his body language and nervousness no longer
had anything to do with the elements outside and everything to do with
how close he'd come to having his life unravel before his eyes. But
somehow this kid, whom Brother McCade had sensed was up to no good
when they first met earlier this year, had now gotten the best of him,
and without a witness who clearly saw Tony put the noose inside Cletus'
locker, there was nothing he could do about it.

"No one saw you inside his locker, Mr. Cuppicciotti. The hall was empty, until Cletus had arrived."

"Then you can't prove anything, nor can you make allegations based on conjecture, can you?"

Brother McCade again closed the comfortable distance between them. "No, I cannot make unsubstantiated allegations, Mr. Cuppicciotti, but I'm saddened that you are continuing with your deceptive practices. It was my hope that as your teacher I could help you understand a few things about life, about yourself, but I was wrong."

The exasperated teacher took a step closer. "But one thing is for certain; since you and I both know you did this, I cannot, in good faith, write you a recommendation. Go have your fuckin' daddy fix things like he always does, because you sure as hell ain't getting it from me."

At first Tony was hurt by his comment, but then his lips curled into a sneer: "fuck you and your recommendation, Brother. I'll do it on my own."

Tony rolled his eyes and snatched away from his teacher, until he heard from behind the familiar words: “Dead of winter. Cold hands, warm heart. As pure as the snow. Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. Now is the winter of our discontent, left out in the cold.”
Tony stopped in his tracks, those words from their earlier confrontation bounced through his head like an echo. When he turned around, Brother McCade had his hand extended.

“You and I have been outside for a while now. Shake my hand, Mr. Cuppicciotti.”

*Warm*. The two of them had been standing in twenty degree weather for the past five minutes and this man had hands as if he’d been out in the sun all day. Suddenly the bravado was gone and Tony’s prideful sneer had now vanished. Even though he had lied and done such a horrible thing to a fellow student, he also knew he had to keep the truth of this matter under lock and key.

Tony let go of Brother McCade’s hand. “Warm as always, because as I mentioned earlier in class: *warmth of heart leads to warmth of spirit*. *Warmth of spirit leads to warmth of mind*. *Warmth of mind leads to warmth of body*. *Warmth of body leads to warmth of life.*”

A look of sadness came over the teacher’s face as he turned and faced Roosevelt Road as he said: “I want you to remember that with everything you do, you not only add to your punishment, but you also increase the likelihood that payback will be significant. I’ll pray that you come to your senses before it’s too late.”

Brother McCade didn’t address his student directly, and by the
time he finally turned around, Tony was already gone.

The disappointed teacher took a deep breath and went back inside, hood still covering most of his face and his hands tucked within the sleeves. He walked through the halls of the now vacant school. The remaining few teachers at Gonzaga were in their offices, talking on the phone, visiting with parents or just trying to catch a break after a long day. Brother McCade knew he would have an even longer day, since Cletus Jones and his mother were both looking for an admittance of guilt. He was going to have an awful time explaining all of this to her, but he had promised to do whatever he could to keep Cletus from leaving school, especially not now, not when he was so close to graduating with honors.

"I won't give up on Cletus," McCade thought as he entered his office, slamming the door behind him. He was busy formulating a plan to keep everything together as he partially disrobed, removing the heavy sweater, "Gonzaga Bulldogs" knit cap and matching gloves that he'd put on while having Tony wait in the hallway, now upset that his usual "outside cold" trick had proved unsuccessful.

"First time that's not worked. Guess I'll have to make a few changes," he thought as he took a seat behind his desk. He reached for Cletus' telephone number so he could call Ms. Jones and provide her with
a full report of his findings. He would also reassure her that a diploma from Gonzaga would open more doors for her son than she could ever imagine.