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Tuffy and Smush

When Winston Foshay found himself on the hardwood floor of a Brooklyn drug den regaining consciousness, his reflex wasn't to open his eyes but to shut them tighter.

Instead of blinking until he reached a state of alertness like a normal person, he stood up, and eyes still closed, hands splayed out in front of him, blindly searched for the full-length mirror he knew was somewhere between the leather couch and the halogen lamp. Feeling like a birthday boy playing pin the tail on the donkey, Winston found the mirror, gently touched the glass with his fingertips, and slowly opened his eyes, his suspicions of what the donkey looked like confirmed in full.

The jackass staring back at him has the drum-weary, heat-darkened face and heart of a Joseph Conrad river native. A thin beard of nappy curlicues worms from his chin. Deep worry lines crease his forehead. His eyelids droop at half-mast. His thick tight lips hint at neither snarl nor smile. Winston's is a face that could just as easily ask you for the time as for your money. So impenetrable, so full of East Harlem inscrutable cool is his expression that usually even he doesn't know what he's thinking, but this time it's different. This time his thoughts are as plain to him as the cracked likeness in the mirror. He probed the bullet hole that had smashed his nose into a shock-white dimple of crushed glass and thought, *Niggers will be niggers.*

Moments before he'd been as unconscious as a white heavy-

weight and, like the boxer, a debit to his race, so he didn't quite trust the healthy appearance of his reflection. He frantically patted himself down as if he were looking for a cigarette lighter. Finding no bullet holes, Winston thumped a fist on his chest. "Damn, a nigger still breathing like a motherfucker."

Scattered about the small Brooklyn apartment were three other ghetto phenotypes, soulless young outlaws posed stock-still, mouths agape, eyes open, like figurines in a wax museum's rogues' gallery. The room was Zen silent, save for the sound of the tattered curtains flapping against the wall and the steady gurgle of an aquarium filter. The cocksure composure Winston had lost only minutes before, during the shooting, was returning fast. Cupping his testicles with his left hand, Winston strode over to the nearest body, a man he'd known only as Chilly Most from Flatbush. Chilly Most was slumped over the coffee table, his forehead resting midway between the baking powder and the metric scales. Five minutes ago Chilly Most was fiddling with the dram weights, waiting for the base cocaine to arrive, pontificating on the idiocy of the incumbent mayor guesting on a radio talk show, taking credit for the city's falling crime rates. "The mayor think rhyming sound bites, community policing, and the death penalty going to stop fools from getting paid. Don't tell me, a criminal, eight credits shy of an associate's degree in criminology, that stupid slogan 'Stop the heist, love Christ,' a cop on a moped, and the gas chamber will make you think twice. Please, once you decide to commit the crime you've already had two thoughts. Sneak attack or frontal assault? Should I say 'Run your shit, nigger,' or the more traditional 'Stick 'em up'? You put the gun barrel up a nigger's nostril, you think, *Damn, I shouldn't put skylight in this motherfucker's dome*, then you say, 'Fuck it.' That's two more thoughts, right there. Man, the death penalty make you kill more. You spark one fool, you going to smell the vapors, might as well not leave no witnesses. Any fool with a modicum of reasoning ability would draw that conclusion. And if the city is so safe,

why the mayor still traveling with nine bodyguards? All this empty election bullshit—if crime is down it's only because niggers killing other niggers. Like when food gets scarce, alligators eat other alligators, trimming the population.”

Chilly Most had indeed been trimmed. There was a golf-divot-sized cavity in the crown of his head and a thick layer of blood and junior-college brain tissue seeping over the charcoaled entry wound. Recoiling from the carnage, Winston sucked his teeth, popped a piece of gum in his mouth, and muttered, “Goddamn, I hate Brooklyn.”

To celebrate Winston's eighth birthday, his father had taken him and his rowdy Brooklyn cousins on a day trip to Coney Island. Winston's present was the entry fee to the annual hot-dog-eating contest. He won first place only to be disqualified for washing down thirty-three foot-long frankfurters with his father's tepid beer. Instead of a year's supply of all-beef wieners, he received a fifty-dollar citation for underage drinking.

The party moved to the sideshow tent, where Harry Hortensia, the Bearded Lady, let all the other children parade over her stomach as she lay on a bed of nails. When Hortensia spotted Winston out of the corner of her eye, trundling toward her like a baby hippopotamus, she shot up, rubbed his tummy for a cheap laugh, and gave the disgruntled boy his first kiss. While Salamander Sam, the Amphibian Boy, juggled flaming trunchcons, Cousin Carl, imitating a talk-show host, ran up and down the bleachers, shoving an air microphone in the faces of strangers and asking, “Since the bearded lady kissed my cousin Winston . . . does that make him a faggot?” Then it was on to the Hellhole.

The Hellhole was an upright metal cylinder that by spinning at high speeds used centrifugal force to pin the riders like refrigerator magnets against its metal walls. The operator took Winston's ticket and glanced at the roly-poly black boy and then at the rusty guide wires dangling overhead. “How much you weigh, son?”

“Not that much,” Winston answered, tears welling in his eyes. “Please, mister, it’s my birthday.” Against his better judgment the operator waved Winston through. “Make sure you stand away from the door. The rest of you little shits stand opposite Buddha Boy to balance things out.” Winston placed himself against the cold steel wall, trying to avoid the glare of his thrill-seeking cousins. “See, Winston, your fat ass going to slow the ride down.” There was a high-pitched whine and the Hellhole began to turn, gaining speed until the g-forces stuck even big Winston to the walls. All was forgiven, and his cousins shrieked and laughed, yelling for the operator to “drop the floor!” With a pained mechanical groan the floor began to recede, and for a moment Winston’s weight was not a hindrance: he was sticking to the wall like a swatted fly, just like the rest of the riders. Then, almost as soon as he allowed himself a smile, he began slowly sliding down the wall like a drop of paint. What, the ride was over? No, Cousin Julie was still horizontal, swimming her way around the cylinder. “Look at Winston,” she yelled, “he falling like a motherfucking dead bird!” The kids spun around and above, raining insults down on the helpless pudgy eight-year-old caught in the vortex of the metal eddy. Winston coughed up a ball of saliva and spat in the direction of his effeminate cousin Antoine, the loudest of his tormenters. The wad of mucus hung in the air for a tantalizing second, then snapped back, splattering on the bridge of his nose. Even his father laughed. Winston began to cry. The tears didn’t run down his chubby cheeks, but streamed backward, past his temples, canaling through the ridges of his ears. The sounds of ridicule from thirteen summers ago replaced the reverberations of gunplay in Winston’s ears. “Fuck Brooklyn, and fuck all you Brooklyn niggers!”

Now on this, the last cool night of summer, Brooklyn was short three more niggers for Winston to hate. Although he addressed all black men as “God,” Chilly Most, apparently less than divine, was unable to resurrect himself. Zoltan Yarborough, who was always running off at the mouth about his proud Brooklyn roots, “Brownsville, never ran, never will,” had become the rigid embodiment of his slogan. He had one leg over the windowsill, and a bullet hole in him that, like everything his mother ever told him, went in one ear and out the other. Demetrius Broadnax from “Do-or-die Bed-Stuy” was shirtless on the floor with a column of bullet holes from sternum to belly button in his muddy brown torso. Winston gloated over Demetrius’s body, looking into his ex-boss’s glassy eyes, tempted to say “I quit” and ask for his severance pay. Instead he walked to the aquarium, pressed his nose against the glass, and wondered who was going to feed the goldfish.

Like most of the jobs Winston had taken since graduating high school, this one also ended prematurely, after a job interview only two weeks ago where the look on his face was his résumé and two sentences from his best friend, Fariq Cole, were his references. “This fat nigger ain’t no joke. Yo—known uptown for straight KO’ing niggers.” There was no “So, Mr. Foshay, how do your personal career goals mesh with our corporate mission? Would you consider yourself to be a self-starter? What was the last book you read?” Demetrius simply handed Winston the inner-city union card, a small black .22 Raven automatic pistol, which Winston coolly, but immediately, handed back.

“What, your ass don’t need a burner?”

“Naw.”

“Look, fool, maybe you can body-slam niggers out on the street, but in this business, people don’t walk in the door shaking their fists in your face.”

Winston shrugged.

Demetrius studied him up and down and asked, “You ain’t

shook, are you? You don't seem the scary type."

"Never back down. Once a nigger back down, he stay down, know what I'm saying? Just don't like guns."

"Well, when some niggers do come in blasting, your big ass be in the way and shit, two, three motherfuckers can hide behind you. Be here tomorrow afternoon at four."

When Winston started work, he was "in the way and shit," but not in the manner Demetrius had hoped. Winston's job description was simple: four to ten, five days a week, answer the door, look mean and yell, "Pay this motherfucker, now!" at the balky customers. But the trip into Brooklyn made him edgy. His childhood traumas kicked in, undoing his cool. Instead of suavely sauntering around counting his money every five minutes, Winston fumbled about the drug den, stepping on people's toes, toppling everything he touched, and talking non-stop. He tried to lighten the somber felonious atmosphere by telling embarrassingly bad jokes. ("You hear the one about why Scots wear kilts?") After the flat punchlines ("Because sheep can hear a zipper open from one hundred feet away") there would be a barely audible metallic click, the sound of Demetrius switching the gun's safety to the off position.

Winston had trouble keeping track of the Brooklyn drug mores. Which colored caps went with what size plastic vials? Were portable televisions an acceptable form of payment? He was unable to distinguish one crew's secret whistle from another's. How often had Demetrius yelled at him, "You moron, don't flush the drugs! That's the mating call of the ruby-crowned kinglet!" Then Chilly Most and the others would join in with their snide castigations: "As opposed to our secret signal—"

"The flight song of the skylark."

"A gentle *woo-dukkadukka-woo*."

"Good ol' *Alauda arvensis*, indigenous to Eurasia, but common in the Northwest Territories of Canada, if I'm not mistaken."

"You are not, you nigger ornithologist, you."

The last time Winston heard the cherished secret whistle, he answered the door and two niggers he'd never seen before, brandishing firearms, rushed past him and, before they could be properly announced, introduced themselves with a bullet in Chilly Most's newly shorn bald head. Winston did what his coworkers always said he'd do if he ever found himself face-to-face with a gun: he fainted "like a bitch."

Three minutes had passed since Winston regained consciousness, and he couldn't leave the apartment. It was as if he were spacewalking, tethered to some mother ship treading Brooklyn ether. He would clamber for the door and a muffled sound in the hallway or a distant siren would drive him back into the living room. He began to mumble: "This like that flick, the bugged-out Spanish one where the rich people couldn't leave the house. Luis Bustelo or some shit. What is it . . . surrealism? Well, I got the surrealisms."

A creak in the floor behind him stopped Winston's babbling. He quickly about-faced, balling his shaky hands into fists.

"Who dat?"

"Who dat?" came the response. Winston relaxed. He smiled, "Nigger," unclenched his fists, and plopped down on the sofa.

Fariq Cole hobbled into the living room, his crutches splayed out to the side, propelling him forward. Fariq's friends called him Smush because his nose, lips, and forehead shared the same Euclidean plane, giving him a profile that had all the contours of a cardboard box. Each herky-jerky step undulated Fariq's body toward Winston like a Slinky, alternately coiling and uncoiling. A solid-gold dollar-sign pendant and a diamond-inlaid ankh whipped about his neck in an elliptical orbit like a jewel-encrusted satellite. Fariq stopped next to the door-jamb, tilted his head to the side, and cut his friend a dubious look.

"Who was you talking to?"

“Nobody. Just trying to figure out why I was still here.”

“You still here because you couldn’t leave without me, your so-called boy.”

“You is. But it wasn’t you—I barely got to work ten minutes ago, I didn’t even know you was here. Naw, it’s something else.”

Fariq was the coolest of the many cool handicapped East Harlemites. His appearance was inner-city dapper, functional and physically fit assimilationist. Despite the soft spot in his head where his skull had never fused, it’d been a long time since he’d worn a cyclist’s helmet. The bill of his fiberglass-reinforced Yankee baseball cap hung over his left eye, shadowing the surgical scars. The baggy corduroys covered up his leg braces. His clubfeet were squeezed into a pair of expensive sneakers, though he’d never run a step in his life. Fariq ran his tongue over his precious-metal-filled mouth, the front four incisors, top and bottom, capped in a gold-and-silver checkerboard pattern. Etched on his two front teeth were small black king and queen chess pieces, christened “Fariq” and “Nadine” in microscopic handwriting.

“Now look at these no-money motherfuckers—who going to take care of their families?” Fariq said, a rubber-tipped crutch sweeping across the carnage. “That’s why a prudent motherfucker like me has an IRA account, some short-term T-bills, a grip invested in long-term corpo-rate bonds and high-risk foreign stock. Shit, the twenty-first-century nigger gots to have a diversified portfolio—never know when you gon’ have a rainy day. And look like it was thunderin’ and lightnin’ in this motherfucker.”

Winston and Fariq had known each other since the subway cost seventy-five cents. Fariq was an enterprising shyster who dragged Winston, the muscle, along on all his moneymaking schemes, the first of which was a fifth-grade dognapping operation so immense it required the use of every rooftop pigeon coop on 109th Street between Park and Second Avenues for kennel space.

The idea was to stalk the parks and streets of Manhattan luring unleashed dogs into the bushes with whistles, kind-hearted “Here, boy”s, and hickory-smoked slabs of beef sausage. The poor, whining creatures left tethered to parking meters while their owners kibitzed over cappuccino were liberated with garden shears. Then the boys waited for the rewards to be posted and returned to collect the bounty. “Yeah, lady, the dog was wandering the streets of Harlem. Some crackheads had put an apple in his mouth and was fixing to skewer him with a barbecue spit up the ass, talking about ‘pooch du jour’ when we rescued him and brought him here. Would fifty dollars be enough? Well, frankly, no.”

Winston ran up to Fariq and with one flabby arm buried his friend’s head in a boys-will-be-boys headlock. Fariq’s eyes bulged with pain, “Ow, Tuff! You know better than to do that shit.”

“Sorry, man—just trying show you some love, glad you alive and shit. Was it the spina bifida or the rickets flaring up? I can never remember which one you got.”

“Both, nigger, both. But I’m just sore from hiding in the tub. Heard that first shot, I belted my pants, fell into the tub, and pulled the shower curtain closed. Thank goodness those niggers didn’t have to piss.”

“We need to be out, son. Rollers going to show up any minute now.”

“The po-po ain’t here by now, they ain’t coming.”

“Well, them shoot-’em-up cowboys might be back to get me—don’t want to leave no witnesses behind.”

“Man, after they sparked up these clowns, I could hear them laughing at your big ass passed out on the floor. They ain’t worried about no swooning motherfucker coming back to get them. I thought I was going to come out and have to splash water on your face. Slap you around a bit, James Cagney style.”

“I didn’t faint. I was playing possum and shit.”

“Yeah, right. Let’s get ghost.”

“Who you, the leader now?”

“Fuck you, Tonto. Hi-yo, Silver, and away, nigger.”

“Robin.”

“Batgirl.”

“Al Cowlings.”

“Oh, a low blow.”

They left the apartment with a bravado that belied their fear. The halls normally filled with kids and the sounds of blaring televisions were silent. The refugees were holed up in their urban-renewal hovels waiting for the occupying forces to leave. A little girl, wearing a belled choker, peeked out of a doorway, stuck out her tongue at the two boys, and was snatched by her ponytails back inside so quickly the bell didn't even tinkle. The building's elevators never worked, so Winston carried Fariq in his arms down twelve flights of stairs, gently setting him down next to a battered block of mailboxes. Readjusting the collar on Fariq's shirt, Winston stepped back and snapped his fingers. “Wait here. Now I know why I couldn't leave—I forgot something. Be right back.” Before Fariq could say, “Naw, nigger, don't leave me,” Winston was springing up the flight of stairs two and three steps at time.

Fariq was nervous about being left alone, but pleased to see Winston's famed agility return. *Nigger was fumbling around the spot telling jokes like he Henny Youngman and shit. Talking to himself. I know the boy don't like Brooklyn, but goddamn, fainting? Many times fools pulled guns on him? Tuffy be like, “Shoot me, motherfucker!” I guess the good thing about fainting in the face of death is that it keeps you from begging. That's the old Tuffy, running them stairs like the big Kodiak bear of a brother he is.* Fariq grinned, recalling how during the summer-long games of tag, only the fastest kids on East 109th Street could outrun Tuffy, avoiding his painful, heavy-handed tag back. Fariq's toes began to tingle. He could feel the vibrations—the vibrations from the scraping of his corrective shoes as he dragged them over the craggy pavement, trying to run. Fariq was It for an

entire summer: lumbering after screaming hordes of children on his crutches, feeling like the neighborhood leper, never catching anyone. On the first day of fifth grade Fariq had to resort to ringing Sharif Middleton's doorbell at six-thirty in the morning, tagging the unsuspecting mope with a crutch in the gut as he answered the door wiping the sleep from his eyes. *Tuffy, my nukka, where you at?*

Winston entered the apartment, stepped over a body, and grabbed a brown lunch bag from the rear of the refrigerator. He reached inside the sack and gobbled down a cold, soggy ham-and-cheese sandwich. His mouth still full, Winston flipped the plastic sandwich bag inside-out, walked over to the aquarium, sprinkled the crumbs into the water, and when the fish rose to the surface, deftly scooped it out, barely wetting his hands.

Winston was knotting the plastic bag and on his way out when he heard a tinny ringing sound. The girl from the hallway was cowering in the corner of the living room, holding three puffy wallets, some jewelry, and Demetrius's .22 Raven pistol in the folds of her dress. Winston bristled. "You little vulture, these fools ain't cold and you rifling pockets."

"Finders keepers, losers weepers."

"Christ, everybody and they mama got a hustle. Give me the gun."

The girl scrunched her face and backed even further into the corner, sticking her tongue out again. Winston walked up to the girl and took the gun from her hands, then lifted her to her feet by the elbow.

"Go home."

She skipped down the hall to her apartment, the door opened, and a thin hand reeled her inside by the hem of her dress. The door slammed shut. Winston waited for the click of the lock, stuffed the gun into his pants pocket, gently placed the fish into the lunch bag, and hustled back down the stairs.

"Where you been, man?" Fariq said in a nervous whisper. "Somebody's out there."

“I told you, I forgot something,” Winston answered, holding up the bag.

“You forgot your lunch? Here we are . . . niggers trying to kill—”

“Shhh! *Cállete*, man.” Winston peered around the corner. The security guard was sitting at his desk, scribbling phony names on the visitors’ sign-in sheet. The putrefied zombies of Al Capone, King Kong, and Mao could have entered the building, loading tommy guns, pining for Fay Wray, and talking about a Cultural Revolution, and this minimum-wage watchman was going to wave them through, no questions asked.

“Ain’t nobody out there, just the rent-a-cop—let’s see if he know what the fuck up.” Winston, still out of sight, called the guard’s attention. “Hey yo, Barney Fife, couple of niggers come this way telling war stories?”

“Yup, came through a few minutes ago saying they now have to find and kill some crippled motherfucker. Asked me if I wanted to feel the guns. I did, and they was hot as a preacher’s brow Sunday morning.”

Fariq’s body buckled at the pelvis, the crutches slipping out from under his arms. As he righted himself, his peptic ulcer rumbled like an active volcano and a small accumulation of warm, lumpy excrement flowed into his underpants. “Shit.”

“Which way did they go?” Winston asked the guard.

“No way.”

“What?”

“They’re right out front, smoking Phillies and talking to some honeys.”

Fariq’s yellowed eyes closed softly as every affliction kicked in at once. His arrhythmic heartbeat grew more erratic, pumping his sickle-celled blood in stops and starts. Bracing himself against the broken elevator, he cursed his mother for drinking, smoking, and shunning prenatal care during her pregnancy. Swallowing hard, he repeatedly pressed the Up button and castigated his father for thinking that his two-month-premature

birth meant that he was born “ready for Freddy.” *That boy don’t need no incubator. He’s not no chicken.*

Winston chewed his bottom lip and watched his friend shake, then suddenly zipped past the guard and raced for the fire exit. He pushed on the latch, swinging open the heavy door into the dusk. A zephyr of spring air gusted in and, for a moment, cooled Winston’s sweaty face. The alarm sounded, its deafening ring filling the cinder-block hallways. Winston hurried back to Fariq and in one motion hoisted his friend onto a shoulder and ran toward the front door. Pausing in a cranny, he watched the gunmen head for the back of the apartment building. Carrying Fariq like a wounded war buddy, Winston tore out for Bushwick Avenue, hurdling bushes and slipping around the mottled Brooklyn trees like the tag player of yore. The clap of the gun pounding against his thigh, the jingle of loose pocket change, and the squeaks of the metal brackets holding Fariq’s body together at the joints sounded to Winston like the score to the climax of a Hitchcock thriller. He stole a glance behind him, half expecting to be buzzed by a crop duster.

At the intersection of Bushwick and Myrtle, a line of public buses were impatiently queued up behind a lone drunk ranting in the middle of the street. Like a column of Tiananmen Square tanks, the buses tried to maneuver past the man, but he halted each advance, stepping in front of the buses and boldly waving them off with a raggedy sports jacket. From his drug errands Winston knew the man usually confronted his pink elephants about this time of night, and he counted on him being there, challenging the powers that be with non sequiturs. “I am black, it is raining. Warren Commission, I presume. Incoming!” Winston and Fariq skirted past the man (“You men, return to your positions”), hopped on the third bus, and headed for the back. They sank low in the plastic seats, gasping for air and waiting for the bus to move. Fariq was wheezing. He frantically removed his inhaler from his jacket and took two long hits.

“Shit, nigger, you didn’t have to do all that! You should

have told me you was going to make your move, I could have followed you on my own.”

“Hah,” Winston snorted.

Fariq moved to whack Winston with a crutch, but it was wedged underneath the seat in front of him. “Naw, money, I’m serious. Shit is humiliating. I can take care of self, know what I’m saying, Tuffy?”

“Spare me, bro. I’d had to rescue your ass like in *Deer Hunter*. Wasn’t for me you’d be in a bamboo hut playing Russian roulette with the Brooklyn Viet Cong. Didi, mau! Mau!” Winston sniffed the air, then checked the bottoms of his sneakers. “Hey, did you poot?” he asked Fariq. Fariq said nothing, rolling his tongue in his cheek. For most young men this gesture was the sign for oral sex; for Fariq it was code for “I had an accident.” Winston reached under the seat and freed Fariq’s crutch.

The bus rolled onto Broadway, honking its way out of Bedford-Stuyvesant and into the fringes of the more cosmopolitan Williamsburg. As the projects receded into the distance the two survivors straightened in their seats, looking out the grimy windows. On the crowded sidewalks the people looked tired and angry, fighting for space on their way home from work. Bohemian whites weaved in and out of traffic, heads down, pissed off they couldn’t afford to live in Manhattan. Pairs of Hasidic men, dap-per in black pin-striped coat-and-tail suits, walked like dandies, holding attaché cases and rehashing last night’s Knicks game. The only people Winston could differentiate as individuals were the Puerto Ricans. To Winston the whites, Jewish and Gentile, had the same general physiognomy. With callous, tight-lipped expressions, they marched as one, lockstep, arms linked at the elbows. The Puerto Ricans reminded him of people he knew. They were more or less from around the way, more or less niggers, more or less poor. The Puerto Ricans had faces he could say hello to. And he said a big silent “What’s happening?” to the woman in the green rayon

sweater. *Yes, you, honey dip, with the shopping bag. Why you walking so fast? Hurrying to help the kids with their homework? I feel you. The capital of Kansas is Topeka, that's all I remember.*

Winston peered into the flitting eyes of the colored boys who had sprouted and grown up along market walls like vines. He could tell which ones were filial home-by-eleven mama's boys, which ones were walking the tightrope between rebellion and sainthood. Some, like the young man about Winston's age, diddy-bopping against the foot traffic, had surrendered to the streets. Winston knew that one well, a lost warrior looking for an arena to test his skills. Winston grinned and delivered a whispered challenge: "You lucky I ain't out there. We could bump shoulders and squab. Wax that ass, nigger." Then a bit louder: "Sucker."

Winston pressed the expanse of his back against the engine-warmed seat. The motor's churning caused the seat to vibrate and he relaxed for a moment, enjoying the free massage. Fariq looked at his friend. He knew that smirk, the satisfied look after Winston had beaten the crap out of someone. "Tuffy?"

"Mmm."

"You really did faint back there, didn't you?"

"Battle fatigue, I guess. Saved my life, though. Maybe it was God reaching down and touching me. Saving me for some higher purpose." Winston laughed. "Quick, Smush, cheer me up." Fariq drummed his fingers against his jawbone. "Remember the cat-ass punk you beat down last week in front of the Old Timers' Lounge?"

"Yeah, waving that box cutter, *'En garde*, motherfucker, like he going to do somethin'."

"I heard to avoid the neighborhood embarrassment the punk tried to join the armed forces. Been to all the motherfuckers—Navy, Marines, Coast Guard—but he can't pass the psychological. You bruised his brain or some shit. Every two minutes for no reason at all he yells out *'La Mega!*' like he a DJ

on that Spanish station. He be taking the repeat-after-me oath, 'I solemnly swear to uphold *La Mega!*' 'Yes sir, I'm really interested in flight mechanics and *La Mega Noventa y siete punto nueve!*' Nigger a permanent radio jingle."

Winston smiled. "So let's call that nigger La Mega from now on, okay?"

"Yeah."

Tuffy pulled a crinkled brown paper bag from his jacket pocket and offered it to Fariq. "You hungry?"

"What you got?"

"Pork rinds and fish."

"You might has well got shot. The way you eat, you killing yourself anyway. How much you weigh now?"

"I don't know—three-ten, three-twenty. It's been a while since I've been to the meat-packing plant on Edgcombe to sit on the scale. Anyway, these are fat-free pork rinds."

Fariq threw up his hands. "You idiot! Pork rinds are pieces of pig fat deep-fried in pig grease. How can they be fat-free when they're one hundred percent fat? See, dumb niggers like you keeps the white man in business."

Winston shrugged his shoulders and pulled out a small clear plastic jug of a light blue syrupy punch. "And now you drinking a Thirstbuster? How many times I told you the Klan owns that shit. That junk will make you sterile. How you think the company can afford to charge only twenty-five cent for the stuff? CIA subsidizes that fucking poison. You ever see Thirstbusters in the white neighborhoods? Hell no. What, white folks don't want a bargain?"

There was something to what Fariq was saying. Whenever Winston was in Midtown, doing the things he couldn't do in Harlem, such as seeing a movie or shopping for logo-free clothes, and got a craving for a Thirstbuster, his favorite drink was impossible to find. Stocked with colas and nectars, the shelves in the clean East Side delicatessens had natural waters from every lake in Europe, but no Thirstbusters.

Winston would ask the shopkeeper for a grape or pineapple Thirstbuster and get a blank stare in return, forced to exit the store examining his two-dollar bottle of melted glacier water for mastodon hairs.

Winston downed his prized drink in two gulps, slowly pulled the container from his mouth, and let out a loud “aaaah-hhh.” “Dag, Fariq, you right, my sperms is fizzing.”

“Fuck you.”

Winston crushed the empty plastic container in one hand and bowled it down the aisle. The bus continued down Broadway.

“I got an idea how to make some cash. You down, Tuff?”

“Don’t know.”

“This drug insanity is played out. Shit is a hassle. You have to develop a regular clientele, the inventory is all complicated, one connect is LIFO, the other is FIFO. Too many unorganized crazy motherfuckers to deal with. We need to be into some self-contained shit. Make a quick strike and be out. Hit and quit it.”

“LIFO and FIFO? What the fuck you talking about?”

“Last in, first out; first in, first out. Man, I’m talking about revolutionizing the drug business. Inventin’ a product that if you look at it for more than two seconds, you’re addicted. Something that stays in your system forever, like PCP, and maybe throw in some trace amounts of Prozac to make it attractive to the upper-class-white market—ta-da, a drug that keeps losers high for life.” Fariq touched Winston lightly on the forearm like some used-car salesman with the deal of a lifetime. “A one-time, mind-altering gold mine. I’d call it Eternal Bliss, the dope fiend’s Everlasting Gobstopper. I’d be Willie Wonka up it this motherfucker. I’m tellin’ you.”

Winston pushed Fariq away. “You tripping.”

Undaunted, Fariq continued, his voice rising a couple of octaves to an overzealous infomercial pitch. “Tuff, think of the long-term savings for the consumer.”

While Fariq rambled on about his marketing strategy, Winston ignored him and watched the Manhattan skyline creep closer, lapsing into a funk somewhere between semi-alertness and sleep. The images of the dead bodies he'd left behind flickered in his head like science-class slides. He closed his eyes and began counting the number of dead bodies he'd seen in his twenty-two years. Including Fariq's grandmother in the funeral home: sixteen.

After a warm weekend night, at 109th and Fifth Avenue, the border of Spanish Harlem and black Harlem, bodies turned up on the streets like worms on sidewalks after an afternoon shower. Sometimes the coroner pulled junkies stiff as Styrofoam from the abandoned apartments on 116th Street, or a group of kids on their way to school found a homeless person frozen to death under the brick railroad trestle of Park Avenue. Two weeks ago, on his way to buy an Italian ice at the pizza shop at 103rd and Lexington, Winston heard the screech of truck brakes. He looked up to see little Ursula Huertas, seven years old, flying across Lexington Avenue as if she'd been shot out of a circus cannon. She lay there in the gutter, a crumpled, unmoving ball of black hair and bony brown limbs, her mother and the purple flowers on her bleached white Sunday-school dress doing the screaming for her. Winston planted a sandalwood punk in the cardboard shrine Ursula's relatives erected on the spot where she died. Filled with burning candles, assorted kitsch pictures of the Virgin Mary and angelic saints Winston didn't know, the shrine was one of many forever-flame memorials that pop up on Spanish Harlem's street corners and last for about two weeks.

The encroaching skyscrapers of the city began to look to Winston like tombstones for giants and he grew strangely homesick. Niggers die everywhere, Winston knew, but he longed to be back home among the tragedy of the familiar. Drinking brews on a corner where he knew or had at least heard of the names mentioned in the spray-paint cenotaphs

that dot the neighborhood. Watching the children flick skelly caps over the sidewalk epitaphs where so-and-so's nigger got dropped. Mourners with money to spend hired local graffiti artists to paint huge murals on handball walls or tenement sides. A larger-than-life-sized portrait of the deceased accompanied by Day-Glo renditions of luxury cars and the stylized signatures of his friends. The neighborhood women were never memorialized on the walls. Winston wished he could draw. He would have painted a three-story mural dedicated to his older sister Brenda. Winston was twelve when Fariq called up to his window, "Nigger, you better come on, Brenda getting dogged up on Seventeenth." Winston arrived on the scene just as the ambulance was leaving. He walked to a public phone, one from which, thanks to deregulation, he could call anywhere in the United States and speak for thirty seconds for a quarter. Winston dialed local, his mother's work number. "May I speak to Mrs. Foshay? . . . Ma, go to Metropolitan. I'll meet you in the emergency room."

Winston took out an indelible marker and absentmindedly scribbled his grade-school tag on the bus's frayed upholstery: TUFFY 109. "So you down, kid?" asked Fariq, elbowing Winston in the ribs. "We talking goo-gobs of money. Scads o' cash."

"Shit ain't going to work."

"And why the fuck not?"

"Because addicts is looking for a reason to get up in the morning, and crack, heroin, whatever, is the reason. Lipping that pipe like falling in love every day—maybe a little better. Can you imagine what it's like waking up in the morning and knowing that soon as you hustle up ten dollars, you going to be in always-and-forever love? To do that you can't wake up already in love. You got to get up in a cold room, mad as fuck you been sleeping on a flat pillow, or without a pillow, convinced that life hates you, and you hate life. Then you can cherish the high. You want the high to last, but not forever, yo."

Fariq punched his friend in the shoulder. "You sound like

you know what you talking about.”

Winston thought about confessing to the time, the fifth anniversary of his sister’s death, he experimented with crack and spent four days in his bedroom closet tweaked out of his mind. Like an addicted jeweler, he held powdery rocks to his eye with a set of tweezers, examining each brownish-white marbled facet for imperfections. When he ran out of cocaine he pronounced the bread crumbs and balls of lint flawless and stuffed them into his pipe. On day four Winston realized he’d been masturbating with paper-towel rolls and petroleum jelly for entertainment, and quit his mini-addiction out of sexual shame. But whenever Winston heard the line “I wanna rock right now” from Rob Base’s hip-hop classic “It Takes Two,” his throat parched. Turning away from Fariq, Winston mopped his brow. “I don’t know nothing about it, but I’ve heard people talk.”

Fariq paused for a moment. “Maybe what Eternal Bliss needs is some type of time-release-cold-remedy-type mechanism.”

Winston groaned, and the bus jolted to a stop. “Broadway Station, last stop.”

From there it was the J train across the bridge to Canal Street, then a long walk through the dank algae-laden tunnels to catch the uptown local. Once on the train, Fariq leaned down and glared at a middle-aged man seated next to the door. “Can’t you read, motherfucker?” he shouted, pointing to a sticker that read, THESE SEATS RESERVED FOR THE HANDICAPPED AND ELDERLY. The embarrassed man rose and politely offered Fariq his seat. Winston laughed, and the tweed-jacketed man standing next to him nonchalantly checked his wallet. Winston took a deep breath and, to keep from slapping the man upside the head, grabbed him firmly by the wrist, digging his watchband into his skin. “I had a long criminal-activity-filled day. One more crime ain’t going to hurt me none. Crime down, but it ain’t stopped.” The man rushed out at the

next stop. A woman two seats away tucked her brooch beneath her blouse and twisted her engagement ring so the stone's brilliance was doused in the dark of her palm.

"Uptown bound, yo."

"No more Brooklyn Rambo niggers in camouflage pants."

"Word. Fuck Brooklyn."

"Spike Lee, Jackie Robinson, Barbra Streisand, Woody Allen, Mary Tyler Fucking Moore can all kiss my black Manhattan ass."

Winston tossed the last piece of bubble gum into his mouth, unfolded the comic that was, as usual, unfunny, and then read the fortune. *Don't carry grudges—they can weigh you down.* Unmoved, Winston blew bubbles till the subway doors opened at 116th Street.