

EQUAL AND OPPOSITE

by

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A NOVEL

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PROLOGUE

1982. Spring is in bloom, the sun high and warm an hour before post time. The neatly tilled dirt rows are as fresh as they'll be all day, moistened and dragged clean by tractor-drawn harrows. The lush carpet of infield grass is in swipes of alternating silver and green, and a bed of yellow Black-eyed Susans near the tote board spells out PIMLICO. At the grandstand's side entrance, under the embossed brass etching of horses, which today seems to shine brighter than usual, handicappers of all shapes, sizes and colors file through the admissions turnstiles in waves. Up the stairs and into the vast, low-ceilinged grandstand they march, hopeful. Anything can happen today.

A boy of twelve, blond and fair with a face still as pure and pretty as a girl's, sticks close by his father, who guides him gently toward a few empty tables near the windows. "This looks good, Dad," he says quietly.

His father, offering only a distant nod, looks around one last time before taking his seat, opening the *Form* and folding it into a tablet, putting on his half-circle reading glasses, and getting down to business. This is quiet time, the boy knows, time his father needs to study all those columns of past performances. He waits a few moments, then asks if he can take a walk. "For some ice cream?"

"Already? We just finished lunch." His father presses together his lips in mild annoyance but then nods. "Just be careful walking around. And don't spend all your money."

"OK," the boy says, and then he is off on his own, his favorite part of spending the day at the track, a time when, unlike at the mall with his mother, he feels a very

specific kind of independence and maturity. Mostly he just walks, studying the men he passes but averting his eyes each time one smiles or looks as though they might speak.

His first order of business is to pee, those lunchtime sodas running through him like water through a sieve, and he knows his father will only tolerate so many trips to the bathroom.

He hurries past a wall of teller windows and concession counters and down a short flight of stairs to a men's room—still empty!—where he pees quickly and then stands before a mirror smoothing his shirt and the waist of his pants, checking the alignment of his belt buckle and shirt button, and making certain his hair is still neatly parted and held in place with spray. Finally, he glances quickly at the dulling shine on the tops of his shoes. Not mirrors, but they'll have to do. His father is a stickler for neatness, a military trait, and looking sloppy, even at a place like the racetrack, reflects poorly on them both. He forces a smile, tells his reflection that today is going to be a good day. They need this. He looks up at the ceiling, scrunches his toes, whispers "Please."

Looking at his reflection a final time, he squares his shoulders, bends himself into a running stance, and jogs in a circle flushing each urinal until the din of rushing water roars. If he manages to flush each one before the first finishes filling, his father will have a winning day. As he depresses the final plunger and looks back at the first, over the din of rushing water he hears a deep and raspy voice say, "Hell you doin' that for, boy?"

Emerging from a closet beyond the wall of stalls is the attendant, a reedy older black man with a saturnine face.

Heat washes across the boy's cheeks. Usually the attendants aren't out until fifteen minutes or so before post-time. He thought he'd be safe.

"What if one of them start overflowing? Then what? Then we gonna have a damn mess in here before the day even get started."

There was no excuse for what he'd done, except that in the moment he felt he needed to. "Oh," he says, considering briefly a lie but unable to come up with one quickly enough. "Sorry."

The old man waves him off, shakes his head, and begins filling the mop bucket from a short length of black hose. From this angle, it nearly looks as though the old man were peeing into the bucket, which the boy finds mildly amusing.

"Where's your daddy at today?"

"Up by Willie's bar."

The old man grunts. "Gonna help him pick some winners?"

"Yep," he says proudly. When he was younger his father used to call him his good luck charm.

"Thatta boy."

Hesitating as though there might be more, the boy smiles politely and turns. But before he leaves, he waits until the man isn't looking, and then creeps back along the sink to place a dollar in the tip basket.

CHAPTER I

2005. Morning along the East Side stretch of Baltimore's North Avenue, still slick and shiny from last night's rain. A chill lingers, but the sun has cracked its way through the low ceiling of clouds, promising warmth. It finds the rear windows and bumpers of westbound cars, their tires emitting soft sprays of rain water as they pass red neon Checks Cashed and Bail Bonds signs, a massive billboard depicting a happy young couple enjoying Newports, a McDonald's on the south side of the street, and abandoned storefronts too numerous to count. Just above North Avenue, perpendicular rows of homes stretch out like teeth, many crumbling and decayed. Row after row, street after street, they lean into one another as though frozen in a state of collapse. On 21st Street, the sun turns pink the procession of homes and throws everything into sharp relief: pockmarked façades, chipped brick and mortar, a few plywood doors and windows. And yet their smooth marble stoops remain largely untouched; flecks of granite still spangle in the light. The ground is littered with flotsam: flattened butts, smashed forties, burger wrappers, crushed cigarette packs, twenty-five-cent plastic juice barrels, old syringes, spent vials, broken capsule halves, mini Ziplocs, and tiny wax envelopes.

It's calm now, but it won't stay this way for long.

Faces peer out from behind crooked curtains; silhouettes surface in doorways all along the block. They rub their eyes and hug themselves against the morning chill. They blow breath into their hands, massage them. They shift from foot to foot, steal quick looks up and down the block to see what's happening and who's out, anxious to get things underway. A few front doors creak open, though no one steps out just yet. They're

still surveying, awaiting confirmation. No point going out if there ain't nothing to be got. A small and battered pickup carrying two thin and hungry whiteboys eases down Barclay, turns around at North Avenue and circles back just as slowly. A white cruiser slithers along 21st, making its first of three daily rounds. A few teenage boys, faces still creased and pasty from sleep, fall out of their houses and congregate on the corner like day laborers. A few more figures, gaunt and disheveled, shuffle out from the alley between Barclay and Greenmount, their movements slow and achy. A skeletal little woman hobbles across 21st and joins a small group forming at the alley's mouth. Farther down, an old-timer with swollen Popeye hands and a meatless frame, bolsters himself against a car and quietly hawks the action. Another man leans against the brick front of a vacant house, one with charred-black gaping holes for windows and a splintered piece of plywood for a door. He cracks his knuckles, spits, curses, paces to and fro, rubs his hair and face, then returns to his spot.

“What up, yo?” a man shouts, arms raised, as he rounds 21st from Boone.

Someone else makes police siren whooping noises from his second-story window, and someone else tells him to shut the fuck up.

“They late this morning,” grumbles another voice, and a collective groan traverses the block.

Then silence.

A gleaming black SUV rolls up. Two men slide out, scan the street, take their time climbing the steps of a partially vacant federal. Moments later they're back out, then gone. Another moment and three youngens step out, boys no older than fourteen. One

hikes up his oversized pants and takes a seat, while the two others, chins pushed out and lips nearly puckered, stand on either side. The seated one clears his throat. “Ah’ight, y’all, you know what this is. Line the fuck up.”

There is a moment of chaos as half the fiends in East Baltimore seem to fall out of the woodwork at once, limping, hobbling, or shuffling as fast as their tired and sick bones will allow. Then there is order and silence as they wait patiently for their next orders.

“Ah’ight, then. Step right up. Take one and bounce. Body Bags, ya’ll. Get ‘em while they hot.”

One after the other they step forward, accept their gifts, and scurry back where they came from to tie off and show the beast who’s boss for the time being.

#

Across 21st and past the nameless alley sits another sagging two-story federal, one in a dozen-long row, its exterior stenciled with NO TRESPASSING warnings and haphazardly sprayed epitaphs. The house was deemed unfit for human habitation by the city some fifteen years ago, yet down in the basement, dismal, dark, and dank, Calvin Thompson is awake. He groans, rubs moisture and sleep crumbs from his eyes, runs a hand over his high uneven hair, and spits a phlegm oyster on the damp concrete floor. “Dag,” he says, surprised by the guttural sound of his own voice, the snapping of mucous in his throat. He longs for more sleep, another hour at least, even if it is only that half-assed, in-and-out dope sleep.

But Calvin is up. He kicks away the soiled blankets twisted around his legs and slowly, gently, rocks himself up and off the mattress. Cool air pushes through the cracks in the walls and boarded windows, chilling and then tightening his skin.

On the floor beside his bed sits a chipped piece of pressboard, a crude nightstand. With a shaking hand, Calvin fingers through spent vials, capsules, and wax baggies. Seeing nothing of interest, he moves on to the floor and roots around for a half-decent butt or, better, though he is too afraid to admit this for fear of jinxing it, an overlooked or forgotten corner, a pinch, some dust clinging to the sides of a bag, something, anything, to get things started. But there's nothing here, nothing but the empty evidence of last night's makeshift party: him and two other corner fiends—James and Carty—lying around Calvin's cave talking shit about better days, bygone days. He sighs, angry at himself but too weak for anything but an irate exhalation, and sits back down, exhausted. Having found a half-smoked Newport on the floor, flat and yellowed, he smoothes it, strikes a match, and sucks back a few drags. But it provides little relief.

He rubs his face again, looks around, takes stock: Not good. Not good at all. Eyes tearing up, yawns coming one after the other. Won't be long now—another hour, maybe two—before it comes on for real, before the beast is clawing and tearing at his insides with the ferocity of a feral cat.

He wipes the dried salt from the outer corners of his eyes, stands, stretches, and groans again. No use crying about it. Like his daddy always says, crying don't change a got-damn thing. Time to get out there and get something going.

Pulling a tattered sweatshirt over his head, Calvin steps over, around, and between the hordes of debris he has collected these last few years—a broken transistor, stacks of water-logged books, rusted pots and pans, mismatched dishes, an old sewing machine—and then slowly climbs the rickety staircase, pushes against the rear plywood door, and squeezes around the bowed wood into the hazy glare of morning, careful to keep his face angled at the ground until he's through the yard and into the alley. Most everyone around here knows where Calvin Thompson lays his head, but no sense attracting any extra attention.

On 21st, he turns north toward the old house. He wonders if his daddy is yet awake, seated in his chair at the front windows where he'll most likely stay all day, quietly watching the block while the local jazz station blows softly in the background.

Calvin shakes his head. He doesn't know how the man does it, sitting in there all damn day with nothing to do, nothing to look forward to. Like doing time, he thinks, though he wouldn't know firsthand. Unlike most of the fiends out here who have been in and out of lockup more times than they can count, Calvin has yet to see the inside of Eager Street, has yet to experience the pleasure of spending a weekend kicking on the cold, unfriendly concrete floor of the Maryland State Penitentiary.

The sun is especially bright this morning, high and blinding, making it difficult at first to discern the muddled figures huddled at the corner. He squints, holds a hand to his brow. Orange Cap crew is out as usual, slinging that tired old B-mo dope that takes two to do what one should. Same with that Just Do It package across the way. Garbage, all of it. He shakes his head. If these people had any damn sense they'd band together and

refuse to buy it. Organize some kind of a boycott. There's still power in numbers, even out here. Might show them New Yorkers something, let them know B-mo boys ain't as stupid as they look. Calvin smirks at the thought of trying to organize a bunch of sick and sorry-ass East Side dope fiends, how they'd all—junkies and slingers alike—laugh his ass right off the block.

He trudges across Barclay and continues along 21st toward the gathering of haggard figures. By the looks of things, these early birds have already had their first worms.

“Yo, Cal,” says James, an old friend from high school. “You late, baby boy. New York boys done threw out testers already. Body Bags. Shit got a little kick to it.”

“Dag,” Calvin says. “Why you ain't come get me?”

“Shit. You know how it get when them boys be throwing out freebies. Ain't no time to be goin' to get nobody.”

A boy no more than eleven rides past on a bike. “Body Bags,” he calls. “Bodies and Yellow Tops.”

“Yesterday them Yellows was on, too,” says James. “Good shit. New York boys got the dope and coke locked up this week.”

“Dag,” says Calvin again, and curses himself for being late. He sucks his teeth, shields his eyes from the sun. “Bright out this morning.”

“Don't complain,” says James, eyes barely open. “Spring finally coming in and chasing out that gray ass winter. 'Bout time we had the weather on our side.”

Calvin is envious of the weight of his friend's lids, the rasp in his voice, the itch he keeps tending to on his neck. "I don't guess you could help me with a little something? You know, just to get out the gate?" He already knows the answer, but still he touches a finger to his nose and then scratches at the back of his head.

James shakes his head, twists his mouth. "Ain't got nothing left, Cal. You know how it is. But, yo," James says, and looks around. "Might have a line on some work later on, little somethin' down the cemetery."

"Kind of work?"

James shrugs. "Cleanup. Picking up garbage and shit." He swivels his head up and down the block. "Don't tell nobody, but a man come around yesterday talking about meet him down the cemetery at noon. Ten a hour in cash."

"Word?"

"That's what he say. But don't tell nobody, else every niggah in Barclay be down there trying to get paid. Won't be none left for us."

"You going?"

"Fucking right I'm going. I'll pick up garbage rest of my life for money like that. Shit. This niggah ain't proud."

Calvin arches his back as the ache settles deeper into his muscles. A chill scurries up his spine, and he grits his teeth. "I got to go find me something. But I'll catch you down there later on."

James' mouth is turned down and his lids have flapped closed again, but he manages to say, "Bet. And, yo, bring work gloves."

“Work gloves? Where I’ma get gloves at?”

James offers a limp shrug. “Steal them shits.”

Calvin plods on down to North Avenue and stands watching the morning cars rush from one side of town to the other. The withdrawal beast is wide awake now and growing more impatient each second. His stomach churns and then breaks apart with the promise of diarrhea, and his muscles tighten and cramp with each step. For some it isn't that bad—a few days of aches and pains no worse than a flu—but for Calvin Thompson, opiate withdrawal is something to be avoided at all costs. It owns him both physically—nausea and vomiting, cramps, cold sweats, diarrhea, a dull ache from head to toe—and emotionally, the painful memories of his old life and his fall, the shame of his mama passing on before he could get himself cleaned up, his daddy all alone in that house day after day. He understands why his daddy won't allow him in—he'd made that bed himself—but the last time he was there the old man practically shunned him, which was always the worst. No backhand, belt, or wooden spoon ever stung quite as much as Daddy's cold shoulder.

He pushes on, hobbling now with the strained movements of a wounded animal, face pointed down. He crosses to the south side of North Avenue, finds an empty house, and perches on the steps, hands clasped and held against his lips as though praying.

Ten is all he needs. Then a pair of gloves. With any luck, that'll be good for at least forty. With that, if he's smart about it, he can set himself up for a day or two. Just one bag tonight and then another in the morning. Better yet, half tonight and half tomorrow, if he can manage, then tomorrow he'll get washed up, put on a change of

clothes, and maybe go see his daddy's friend out at Pimlico about a job. His daddy had been telling him to go out there for years, but he'd at first been too proud and then, finally, too ashamed. Now, though, he'll take just about anything they'll give him and be happy to have it. *Yes, sir, I'll clean them stables, sir. Yes, sir, I'll scrub them toilets 'til they shine.*

He nods, mildly pleased. Hell, maybe while he's over there, if he's got anything left from this cemetery work, he'll try his luck on a pony or two, see if he can't parlay a ten into something larger—sixty or seventy, maybe—enough that he won't have to worry about his habit for a few days, won't have to feel like this for at least another couple of mornings.

Calvin Thompson had been a hell of a handicapper when he was younger. He practically grew up at the track in the summers, waiting out his daddy's shifts down in the grandstand by earning tips fetching beer and snacks for the old white men too busy studying stats to leave their posts. They, not his father, were the ones who'd taught him about handicapping, who'd turned him on to his first taste of a win, his first rush. And despite his father's protestations and philosophies on gambling and gambling men, Calvin sees nothing wrong with laying the occasional wager. It's something, at least, a chance. And Lord knows he's due some damn luck. Some *good* luck.

He nods again, but a chill settles into his bones and he shivers, hugging himself against the breeze.

There are other options, of course, for a man of forty-two who has been running and drugging on these streets for nine—no, ten now—solid years with scarcely a break.

Though Calvin has begun to show signs of wear—sallow eyes, dark and dusty skin, a yellowing and crooked smile—he is still in fairly decent physical shape, a powerful man, tall and broad shouldered. He could easily rob someone, make off with a purse or wallet, or walk into a store armed with a gun or something resembling one and demand cash. But he can't. If nothing else, Calvin Thompson still insists on living by a code, one that says anything is fair game as long as no one, other than himself, gets hurt. He will steal if he has to, lie when necessary, cheat as needed to get his blast, but he draws the line at putting an innocent person in harm's way.

He cranes his head up to that bright blue sky, but there are no answers up there, and the beast will not be placated by prayers or wishes now. Fuck it, he thinks, I need to do something. He stands and ambles back across North, crooning a few Marvin Gaye lines:

*I don't think I'm gonna pull through
Everything depends on you
Only your love can save this poor heart of mine.*

#

Due north on Calvert and across the 25th Street divide the landscape makes an abrupt transition from the dilapidated federals of Barclay to the wider and slightly more attractive three-story Victorians of lower Charles Village. On the top floor of the second house from the corner, carved, like so many of these old homes, into four separate apartments sometime back in the 1980s, a phone's ring pierces the morning silence. Paul Wilkens' first thought is to ignore it, roll back over, and surrender to the weight of his lids. But it could be Bob Catchal calling about work, and he needs the money.

“You still sleeping?”

“No,” Paul lies, and tries to sound awake and alert.

“Got a small job,” Bob says. “One man, few hours tops. Just some boxes going out to the County. Ain’t much, but it’s yours if you want it. Could probably milk it a little longer if you take your time.”

“I’ll take it.”

Bob clears his throat. “Job’s easy but the neighborhood ain’t. And you’ll be alone.”

He sits up. “Where’s it at?” he asks, surprised how quickly and easily the dialect returns even after so many years.

“Not far from you, actually. Just south, down in Barclay.”

Work has been slow—a day here, a half-day there—and his cache of money is dwindling too rapidly to ignore, even though he’s been enjoying slogging through the yellowing pages of fat old novels, sleeping, smoking too many cigarettes and enjoying perhaps a few too many beers at the local pub. And while moving isn’t his—or anyone else’s he imagines—first choice for employment, it is work he mostly doesn’t mind doing. Some days, depending on the job and client, he actually finds some enjoyment in boxing up lives and transporting them from one place to another. It’s a chance to glimpse life not his own, to see how others do it. Sometimes it inspires him to try to do better; but mostly, working for a small cut-rate moving company in Baltimore serves as a reminder that things can always be a whole lot worse.

“Fine,” he says, and jots the address.

“They want you there early. Early as you can make it.”

He looks at the clock. “I can be there in half an hour,” he says.

“Good. Just one other thing. The old man don’t wanna leave. Daughter’s putting him in a nursing home, but he’s reluctant. Might have some trouble with him.”

Paul runs a hand over his face and through his hair and sigh. Despite having a knack for it, defusing potentially volatile domestic situations is not exactly what he’d signed on for. Nevertheless, it is a job he cannot afford to pass up. “Thanks for the warning. I’ll check in later this afternoon.” He hangs up, yawns loudly, and stretches his way to the bathroom.

He has been back only a few months, returning to Baltimore in the last weeks of a wholly dreadful year—beginning with losing his job and culminating in losing his fiancé—for just that reason: it is home. And he’d needed a change. Of pace, scenery, people. He needed out, so he crammed what would fit into his car and headed south out of that too-massive concrete tangle called New York until the exit names—Eastern Avenue, O’Donnell Street, MLK Boulevard—made him nostalgic, and the houses and buildings, low and successive, filled him with part pride and part shame: this was home, but Paul never expected to come back. Now, after a long and useless journey spanning his twenties and early thirties, he has returned to find himself a kind of stranger.

Following a shower and a glass of lukewarm, metallic-tasting tap water he hopes will dull the vice-grip pressure behind his eyes, he thumps down the stairs to the street.

Save a muddled figure on the horizon trudging toward Paul, Calvert Street is still mostly quiet. A few northbound cars sail past, but the majority of the morning traffic

moves south toward the taller, cleaner buildings of downtown. Paul heads for the new coffee shop on 25th. He calls it new, though he doesn't know if it actually is. It wasn't here before; before there were only houses, a corner grocery, the Northeast Baltimore VFW where his father used to drink.

The tall redhead with the nice eyes and smooth skin is working, and Paul is certain she brightens just a little when he steps in. "How's it going this morning?" she asks. Her hair is down and straight, framing her narrow face, the tips brushing her chest. He wants to touch it, smell it. It's been so long since he's breathed a woman's scent that the mere thought of it weakens his legs and sends a flutter through his midsection.

"Not bad," he says.

"Blueberries are fresh. They just came out, so they're still warm. Want your usual?"

He is surprised she remembers, even though he has become something of a regular. More, he is flattered.

"Actually, I'll take two today," he says, in case he can't get lunch until later.

Abruptly and a little clumsily, she says, "Oh, here," and hands him a glossy three-by-five from her apron pocket. "There's a little show starting this weekend, and I have a few pieces in it. We're doing an opening Saturday night." On the card is a photo of a pair of stone legs in fatigues and combat boots, cut off at the waist, one straight and the other bent. Paul thinks of the lumps of shrapnel and bullet holes in his father's legs, what he called his Korean War souvenirs.

“Be cool if you came.” Her gaze darts to the floor. “You know, if you’re not busy or whatever.”

The back of the card reads: “WAR: Images and Emotions,” and Paul recalls the photo from Korea that used to hang on his bedroom wall: his father’s broad chest, bare but for the silver glint of his dog tags, an M-16 in one hand, the other draped over another Marine’s shoulder, one who would be killed in combat some weeks later. Somewhere Paul still has it, the edges soft and curled from the years he’d carried it, but just where it is now he isn’t certain.

“I’d like that,” Paul says, feeling a bit awkward, the discomfited teen to which he often regresses in the presence of attractive women. He’s had a crush on her for weeks now, but afraid of those old reactions—jealousy and paranoia, guilt and shame and doubt, things that have a way of doing a number on relationships—he’s done nothing about it. Damaged goods, he’s been called on more than one occasion by more than one woman. Incapable of intimacy. Wary of love and terrified of abandonment. This was at least partly why he’d come home in the first place—for answers, perhaps an antidote.

“Cool, then I hope I’ll see you there.” She smiles, tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. Paul feels himself blush. Surprisingly, she does too.

“I should be getting back to work,” she says.

“Right.” He thanks her and offers a small wave as he outside and starts along Calvert. He is half a block away before he realizes he doesn’t even know her name.

He cranes his head toward the sun, lets the warmth spread over his skin. Spring is finally emerging from the long cold winter, and in the air is the promise of regeneration,

transformation, growth. Soon, this part of the world won't seem so gray. Something in the air, a smell, a feeling—reminds him of being young, of a different time, back before the pink slips came raining out of the factories and mills, before things with his father went so wrong. But that was a different life, he reminds himself, distant now, like the shrunken images in the wrong end of a telescope. And while he'd like to believe that the past matters little, that he has dissociated himself from that portion of his life, he knows this simply isn't true. It is with him always, though visible only sometimes.

He cuts into Hargrove Alley where Bob keeps the company's van and box truck parked. He finds the van key, revs the engine a few times, then joins the rest of traffic.

Idling at Calvert, Paul spots an older man, white and square-headed, bundled thick in layers of mismatched clothing, as though he's been picking things up and putting them on as he wanders the streets. The man hobbles slowly, favoring his left leg and tipping slightly to one side with each step. Halfway through the intersection, he hesitates, looks around confusedly, and then turns and faces Paul.

Cold rushes along Paul's skin, and he feels frozen in place.

It could be him.

While in some ways he never would have predicted this, in other ways it nearly makes sense that his father, the once mighty Marine, war hero, high school football star, husband and father, would end up here, reduced to a shriveled remnant of his previous self, another street person trying in vain to outrun his own remorse.

Paul wants and does not want to know.

His father's death had never been confirmed, but in Paul's mind, the man had been dead twenty years. Of course he'd been curious about just what had happened—was still—but some things are better left buried.

A lump forms in his throat too thick to dislodge with a swallow.

When the light changes, Paul's gaze is still fixed on the man. A horn honks, startling him. He flinches, then eases off the brake, puts on his turn signal, deciding to follow the man a block or two, just until he can get close enough to see his face clearly. He needs to put his mind at ease; otherwise the uncertainty will work on him all day, jabbing him with questions, imagined conversations and arguments, memories he has little interest in remembering.

Even so, there's so much to be said. Twenty years of emotion—rage, mostly, and an indeterminate sadness—tamped just below the surface and held there with nicotine and alcohol, pills when he can get them, cocaine when it is around. It is always right there, rising to the base of his throat like bile, threatening a sudden, possibly projectile, escape.

Paul eases the van to an open spot at the top of the block, thinking he might get out and try for a better look. Before he has time to shut off the van and open the door, the man who is not in fact his father, is at his side, smiling.

“Scuse me, son,” he says gently. “Spare some change?” His face is leathery and his eyes, though narrow slits, are a sharp light blue.

In the short time he's been back, Paul has again become used to the beggars and small-time hustlers—heavyset old booze hounds attached to shopping carts piled high

with cans and bottles, skeletal and toothless ex-junkies from the morning methadone line on North Avenue, wiry old-timers with their pleading and teary gray cataract eyes. They are everywhere in this town, and he's even come to recognize a few, especially the ones who linger on his block, mostly sad-eyed junkies from beyond the Guilford Avenue rise. He doesn't recognize this man; however, there is something vaguely familiar about him, something in the man's facial structure—overhung brow, angular nose, widely spaced eyes—and in the way he keeps his lips pressed together behind a wiry silver beard.

“For a veteran?” the man adds, raising his brow and extending a faintly trembling hand, hard and black with grime.

He's too old for Vietnam and too young for World War II. Maybe Korea. Then it hits him like a swift punch to the stomach. Mr. Jerry. One of his father's old track buddies, a thick-armed ex-Marine whom Paul was convinced never left the track because he couldn't remember a time when the man wasn't there. Paul can almost picture him younger and cleaner, laughing heartily at a joke or story that had found its way down to his end of the bar.

Paul digs into his pocket, produces two singles, and shoves them into the man's calloused hand. “I can give you that.”

The man's eyes widen. “Thank you, son,” he says, and cups the bills like a child shielding a caught insect. “God bless you.” He squints at Paul a moment longer than necessary but then crumples his mouth into a humble smile of thanks and turns to leave.

A familiar cold and empty feeling blankets Paul, and a moment in his past surfaces. His father is seated at the 25th Street VFW's horseshoe-shaped bar, enormous

hands resting beside a deep brown Manhattan, shoulders hunched, the folds of his face sagging under the weight of so much whiskey.

Odd how twenty years of careful distancing can be so quickly and easily annihilated. It seems every day there is another reminder. Sometimes Paul hears his voice. Other times he has smelled his aftershave, whiskey, and cigar smoke scent. And twice now Paul has mistaken a limping stranger for his own father.

“Wait,” Paul says, stepping out of the van and holding up the paper bag. “I have a muffin here, too.”

The man stops, turns back.

Paul points at the bag. “If you’re hungry, I mean.”

The man eyes the bag carefully, looks at Paul, then steps forward.

“I have an extra.” He hesitates a moment, then adds, quietly, “Mr. Jerry.”

The man frowns as he takes the bag and his mouth opens slightly. “How did you— How do you know my name, son? Nobody calls me that anymore. Everyone calls me Gramps.”

“I thought I might have recognized you.”

“From where?”

Paul shakes his head. “Doesn’t matter.”

A swift laugh escapes the man’s mouth and he waggles a finger. “I know you too, son, but I can’t for the life of me remember where from. I thought that when I first seen you opening the van door.”

Paul scratches the back of his head. With some reluctance, he says, “Pimlico.”

“Pimlico?” A look of fear or surprise washes over the man’s face. “Pimlico,” he says, staring hard at Paul, looking as though he might reach out and touch his face. His expression softens and he points. “You’re Frank’s boy, ain’t you. Christ, I remember you when you was this tall,” he says, and holds a hand a few feet from the ground. “Used to come out with your daddy on the weekends.”

Paul is suddenly a boy again, smiling wide and on his best behavior.

“Son of a bitch. I ain’t seen your daddy in, Christ, I don’t know how many years.” “What the hell’s he been up to? He still here in town? Last time I seen him he was doing something down the pen. He still there?”

“Down the pen?”

“Penitentiary. Eager Street jail. He was down there few years back working with that Eye-talian friend of his, one who was a cop.”

Paul’s brow furrows and his eyes thin. Couldn’t be. Not his father. If the man were still alive, Paul imagines he’d be too old and frail to work anywhere, let alone somewhere as notoriously dangerous as the Maryland State Pen.

“Couldn’t be. You must be thinking of someone else. My father’s been gone a long time,” he says, and just hearing himself say it nearly chokes him up.

“Oh, it was him, all right.” Mr. Jerry nods resolutely. Without warning, he winces and clutches at his side. He groans faintly, then re-straightens himself. “You know me and Frank known each other since high school? Crazy bastard convinced me to join the Corps.” Mr. Jerry smiles and again points a finger at Paul. “Which was either the best goddamn thing I ever did or the worst.” He laughs. “I’m still trying to decide.”

Paul smiles uneasily, scrunches his toes.

“You end up going in?”

Paul shakes his head. His father and father’s friends used to tease him about his blonde hair and long eyelashes, how he was too damn pretty to ever be a grunt. Too pretty and too soft. “Better plan on being a reservist,” they’d joke, and how he’d hated them for it, for being able to see what he really was. And even though he’d had no interest in following in his father’s footsteps, there remains an upright part of Paul’s character that wholly respects authority and rectitude—servicemen and police, shined shoes and crisp uniforms.

“You look just like him, you know. It’s like I’m seeing him again, only younger. God-damn if I didn’t think you was familiar when I first seen you.” Mr. Jerry grimaces again and rubs his protruding belly.

“You OK, Mr. Jerry?”

“I’ll be fine. Just got to keep moving. Look here,” he says. “When you find him, you tell your daddy Jerry was asking after him.”

“I’m not looking for him,” Paul says.

“He was a good man, your father. A damn hero. Hope you know that.”

Paul nods, and the two stand there a moment before Mr. Jerry turns and shuffles off, offering behind him a small wave.

In his wake, Paul allows another memory to take shape—Pimlico Racetrack when he was still a boy, seated at a table with his father and Mr. Jerry.

“Got any big winners this time, sport?” Mr. Jerry had asked.

Paul blushed, said, "Maybe. I like one." He shot his father a glance, but the man wasn't listening.

"It's like that time out at Timonium, Frank. Remember that? Kid liked that forty-to-one long shot and you wouldn't give him the two bucks for the bet? 'I'm not letting you waste your money on that shit horse,' he says. So *I* ended up giving it to you. Remember that?"

Of course he remembered. How could he forget when he heard the story every time he was at the track?

"Talk about luck. Horse hadn't seen a win in his last twelve starts. But god damn if he didn't pull out and take it." Mr. Jerry shook his head and smiled. "So? Who's it gonna be this time?"

Now was his chance, but he wanted to be sure his father also heard what he had to say. He slid forward to the edge of his chair, rested his hands on the table, cleared his throat, and said, "I like the seven some."

"Muzzle Tough?" his father said. "What about him?"

Paul shrugged, but his father hadn't taken his eyes off the paper. "I don't know. I like him a little."

"What's to like? Horse hasn't shown in his last six outs."

"Maybe he's due." Paul swallowed hard and put forward his most serious face.

Still his father didn't look up. "I've told you before, pal, you don't handicap on hunches. That's not handicapping. It's guessing." His father was growing impatient,

possibly annoyed. Often his father got like this at the track, but usually it didn't happen until much later, following too many drinks and too few wins.

“Kid's got a point, though, Frank,” said Mr. Jerry. “Not to mention a proven track record.”

Bolstered by Mr. Jerry's support, Paul sat up straighter and added, “I think he could take it, Dad.”

Finally, his father peered over the edge of his paper, took off his reading glasses, and said, “Don't waste your money, pal. Sit it out if you're not sure.” Then he returned to studying figures with a look of hard concentration, clearly not planning to sit this one out himself.

“Well, I don't know about youse, but I'm heading outside for the first race, boys,” said Mr. Jerry. “Soak up some of that sunshine while it's out.”

Before Mr. Jerry had left, he'd leaned over and said, “Go with your gut, kiddo.”

Now, as Paul watches the older Mr. Jerry disappear down the block, he looks at his watch and climbs back in to the van. “A damn hero,” he says to no one and drives off.

CHAPTER II

“Ain’t shit to it,” Calvin recalls Veronica V. saying at one time or another. “They ain’t expecting nobody to be stealing meat, so they ain’t watching for it. Just walk in, grab that shit, and walk the fuck back out.”

Standing on the edge of the parking lot outside the new St. Paul Street Safeway, Calvin moistens his thumbs and smoothes his brows, pats his hair with both hands, then forces himself to stride through the lot and into the store. He looks around, then walks quickly toward the meats in the back, just a man in a hurry to get his morning shopping done. He fingers a few packages of steak, does the same to some sausage. Acting like he can’t make up his mind, he scratches his chin, looks around, and then in one fluid motion shoves two packaged T-Bones under his sweatshirt, as though he is invisible, as though no one would ever notice a tall, dirty, raggedy-ass black dope fiend wandering the aisles of a new and well-lighted grocery store empty-handed.

And no one does. Calvin makes his way down the soda aisle, stops to examine a bottle of Canada Dry, then strolls right past the check-out lines and back out into that bright, bright sun.

Ain’t shit to it.

Still shaky but already feeling better, the beast forced into hiding from the rush of adrenaline, Calvin rounds the corner onto St. Paul, scurries into Hargrove Alley and makes the four-block walk down to 21st in record time. He stops to catch his breath and examine his take: two sizeable steaks, each priced at eight and change. Should get him a

ten-spot easy. Maybe even an extra dollar or two for later. Angling his head toward the sky, he allows a small smile. Relief will find him soon.

But then a familiar niggling voice, faint but discernable, takes over. "Every action bring an equal and opposite reaction, boy. That's how it works."

Spotting a plastic grocery bag stuck in the claws of a short metal fence, Calvin stops to free it, drops in the steaks, and knots the handles. Better he carry them around in a bag like normal folks instead of under his shirt or in his hands. He emerges from the alley, cuts a hard left at 21st, and begins that long two-block stretch toward home. At Guilford, he crests the slight incline where Barclay's grid of sagging homes and garbage-strewn streets comes into view.

Suddenly, Calvin hears and feels the unmistakable staccato pulse of an approaching police helicopter. It vibrates beneath his feet and throbs in his chest. He freezes, about to take flight, the bag handles hot against his palm.

"Five-oh up top," someone shouts. "Comin' down the way, y'all."

The helicopter, like a strange and massive insect in search of its prey, materializes above the block-long line of crown moldings but then continues farther east.

On the next corner, everyone has scattered, running, walking, or limping back to their hiding places in the walls and alleys. Two young boys roll down the block on bicycles, modern-day Paul Reveres, shouting, "Five-oh comin' down. Five-oh comin' down." An unmarked white cruiser screeches around the corner and guns its V-8 past Calvin and over to the next intersection.

Calvin shakes his head. “Same shit every day out here,” he mutters as he crests the Guilford Avenue rise and snorts a small laugh. “Don’t never change.”

Just ahead, Tyrell Briggs leans hard against the Formstone front of a vacant house, waiting. He scratches himself, fights to keep his eyes open in the bright light. Terminators must be right, thinks Calvin as he slides past, grocery bag swinging.

“What you got there, Cal?” Tyrell asks.

“Just some dinner.”

Tony Phipps, short and thick, a pit bull of a man, stands with one foot against the bricks of the corner store, arms folded, hat brim low to shield his eyes. “Got them nickels, Mo. Got them Reds.” Calvin shakes his head. No thanks, Tony. Not today. You can keep your weak-ass, watered-down nickels for some other desperate sucker. I got me something going.

Just outside the door, Calvin clears his throat, spits, gives his hair a pat. Then he pushes inside and steps up to the steak-thick bulletproof Plexi. The young girl behind the counter, the owners’ daughter, eyes him suspiciously but pretends not to. “Morning,” Calvin says. “Where Mr. Kim at? I need to see him.”

The girl shakes her head, looks away.

“Mr. Kim,” he says louder, and points toward the back of the store.

The girl stares a moment, sizing him up, and purses her lips. “He’s not here,” she says in surprisingly unaccented English. “He’ll be back later.”

“Dag. How long? This important.”

She shrugs.

“How ‘bout Miss Kim? She in?” Must be. Kims wouldn’t be stupid enough to leave the daughter alone, even though it’d take a got-damn grenade to get behind that counter.

The girl glances toward the back and yells something terse. A moment later, Mrs. Kim, short and pinch-faced, with the stern look of an angry teacher, appears from the back. “What you want?” she asks quickly. She no longer smiles at Calvin as she once did, no longer asks how his father is.

It’s risky making an offer to the wife. With Mr. Kim there’s at least a chance he’ll hear out your offer. In fact, a few years back, before the state went to those plastic bank cards, Calvin used to bring food stamps in to Mr. Kim for seventy cents on the dollar. Never to Mrs. Kim, though, who wouldn’t even let a regular customer slide on a penny.

“When he back?” Calvin says, his English suddenly broken. “When Mr. Kim back?”

Mrs. Kim shakes her head. “No here. What you need?”

Calvin looks down, rubs the end of his nose. Dag. He holds up the bag. “Look here,” he says too loudly. “Got some steaks. T-Bones. Real nice and real fresh.” He removes the packages, holds them to the glass. “Each one cost eight and change.”

Mrs. Kim shakes her head, says something to her daughter, turns to leave.

“Wait,” Calvin says. “Hold up, now. This a good deal. I’m only looking for twelve for both. That’s a good price. They cost seventeen together.”

“No,” Mrs. Kim says. “You steal.”

“No, no,” Calvin protests. “My daddy buy. He no want, so I bring to you.”

She shakes her head. "You steal meat. Leave now or I call police."

"C'mon, now. Don't be like that, Miss Kim. Ah'ight, ten. Ten dollar," he says, and taps on the Plexi. "Ten dollar for you."

Mrs. Kim waves a hand and disappears into the back.

"Aw, don't do me like that," he says, but no one listens. The daughter is busy restocking green and white packs of Newports in a rack above her head.

"Dag, fuck y'all, then," Calvin mutters as he back out into the sun. "Trifling Chinks don't never try to help nobody out. Got damn." He has an urge to throw the bag of steaks at the store. Instead, he kicks an empty cigarette pack to the street, curses.

Despite the warming rays of the sun, Calvin is suddenly cold, nearly shivering. His bowels flutter, then squeeze. He shuffles a few steps down the block, finds an empty stoop, and folds himself down, head in his hands. No damn good at all.

From his pocket he removes a bent, yellowed cigarette butt. He smooths it as best he can, lights it, lets out a wispy exhalation of smoke. When he looks up, he sees Veronica V., scratching her chest and shuffling right toward him, smiling wide.

"What you doin'?" She stops, shakes her head. "Damn, baby, you lookin' rough."

"Tell me something I don't know. Ain't even got started yet. One of them days, know what I'm saying?"

She nods a yes, but she's clearly high. Her lids flap open and closed in slow-motion, her mouth hangs slack, and her fingers, seemingly involuntarily, tend to an itch under her chin. "I hear you, baby."

Calvin sucks his teeth. "You ain't hear nothing, girl. You high as shit."

Veronica laughs. “C’mon, baby,” she says, reaching out for his hand. “Come home with Mama and I’ll get you right.”

“Don’t play with me, Vee.”

“I mean what I say. Come down the way and I’ll get you straight.”

Something stinks here. Veronica Vines doesn’t offer to get anyone straight, not without strings, sharp ones. Still, anything’s better than sitting here waiting for nothing. He follows her east across Barclay to Greenmount, ignoring the comments and occasional whistles from passers-by. “Aw, shit, Cal, where you off to?” or “What you two lovebirds got going on this morning?” or “Yo, where the party at, y’all?”

Veronica Vines calls a sagging, abandoned Greenmount Avenue storefront home, which in another lifetime had been an Italian-owned pharmacy back when Calvin was a boy. Now it’s little more than a hovel, a single story urban shack buttressed by slightly taller brick structures on either side. The floors are still small black and white hexagonal tiles, but little else from its former days remains. As he looks around at the piles of debris—wood and glass construction rubbish, mostly, as though someone stopped work in the middle of a project, a makeshift milk crate table, a torn and duct-taped car bench seat, and a frayed sleeping bag—he can scarcely picture what it looked like before.

Veronica crouches before the table, drops a small white rectangle in front of her, and extends another out to Calvin from between her fingers. “This you, baby. This that Hey Ya! shit from over Boone. Got a little kick to it.”

Despite a now pounding headache and cold beads of sweat running down his back in tiny rivulets, Calvin asks, “What’s the catch, Vee?”

“Catch? Ain’t no catch, baby. I’m just looking out for your sorry ass is all. You know I got a soft spot for you from back when we was kids. Couldn’t just leave you sitting there like some busted old stray dog nobody want.”

Nobody helps nobody out here without a catch, even if they do have a history. Histories matter little in the face of the blast. “But I’m saying, why you looking out for me all the sudden?”

Veronica smiles, Calvin’s salvation between her fingers like the dull edge of a blade. He reaches for it, but she pulls back.

“I ain’t say it was *free*, now, baby. Ain’t nothing free out here.”

“Why you playing with me, Vee? I ain’t got time for this. I’m sick, and I got shit I need to do.”

She recoils. “Niggah, please. What you got to do?”

Calvin holds up the bag. “Gotta sell these here steaks. Then I gotta someplace to be at two.”

“Where you gotta be?”

“Work,” he says almost proudly.

“*Work?*” She sucks her teeth. “Kind of work?”

“Just work. Picking up garbage someplace. I don’t know nothing about it, but I know I got to get myself right ‘fore I even try to go down there.”

“Where’s it at?”

“Down the park.”

Veronica eyes Calvin hard, looking to catch him in a lie. “What park?”

Calvin turns out his hands. “What the hell, Vee? You tryna be my mama now?” He shakes his head. “Patterson. Dag. Now, you gonna get me right like you said, or you just gonna tease me all got-damn day?”

Veronica purses her lips. “I’m a take care of you. But I need a favor in return.”

“See? I knew there was a catch.”

“Ain’t a got-damn catch, niggah. I said it was a *favor*.”

A favor, a solid, helping out a sister—whatever she’s calling it, he wants no part. Calvin, and anybody else who’s spent more than a few days on these corners, knows to maintain a certain wariness of Veronica Vines, whose dope fiend acts have become legend around these parts. Like the time she sold a ten-bag bundle that contained only two actual bags, one on top and one on the bottom, to a pickup full of whiteboys down from the County. The boys came back sometime later waving a shotgun out the window, to which Vee simply smiled and said, “Go ‘head, if you think you gots the balls. Otherwise, take yo’ narrow asses off mah block and don’t come back.” Or the time a late model Benz traveling north on Greenmount just happened to nick Veronica as she was stepping off the curb, and the driver, not wanting police or insurance companies involved, paid Veronica \$200 to keep it quiet. Once word got out, for weeks after half the fiends in East Baltimore were accidentally stumbling out into traffic in hopes of a similar payoff.

“You know I don’t get down like that, Vee. That ain’t how I roll.”

“That’s exactly why your sorry ass be dope sick every damn day.” She cocks her head. “You know, Cal, you ain’t no better than anybody else out on them corners. You a dope fiend just like the rest of us.”

Calvin shakes his head, smiles uncomfortably.

“I’m serious, Cal. It’s time for your ass to stop pretending and accept the fact that this your muthafuckin’ life.”

Never. This was temporary. He’d detox, go to them meetings, get himself another job, maybe move to a new part of town. She’d see. They’d all see. “Ain’t about that, Vee. I know what I am. It’s about being able to put my head down at night knowing I ain’t do no dirt that day. Maybe I told a lie or two, maybe I got over a little on somebody, but I ain’t hurt nobody to get my shit.”

Veronica laughs. “You really believe that tired old mess? That shit *sound* good, Cal, but you know same as I do any muthafucker out here wouldn’t think twice about slicing your ass up if it meant getting that blast. You know that. And it ain’t like the rest of the world give a fuck about another simple-ass nigger dope fiend. Sooner you die and get your sorry ass off the street, the better, far as they concerned. Shit.”

Calvin repositions the bag of steaks still dangling from one hand. He knows she’s right, but what Veronica doesn’t understand is that this is how he needs to live, the only way he will survive out here. To go against his code, though at times it has proven elastic, is to go against himself, his family, and his family’s values. It is one line that so far he’s been unwilling to cross.

“Time to wake-the-fuck-up to who you is and the life you living, Cal. Shit ain’t changing no time soon.”

Calvin eyes the folded wax envelope still between her fingers, but it’s still so far out of reach. He scratches his scalp, says, “So lay it on me, then.”

Veronica smiles, leans forward, rests her forearms on her thighs. “It’s some real easy shit, Cal. Surprised somebody ain’t do it already.” She looks around and edges forward, as though someone else might be listening. “You know that clinic I be going to up on 25th? Yeah, well there’s a place across the street—bakery or coffee house or some shit—that I been watching.” Veronica looks around again. “Every day before lunch—’round eleven—they make a bank run over to St. Paul. And most days a little white girl doin’ it.”

He waits for more; when there isn’t, he says, “So you talking about robbing her.”

Veronica smiles. “You got that shit right. Be wrong not to.”

Calvin shakes his head. “You know I don’t be messing with stuff like that, Vee. Ain’t in me.

“Serves them right, Cal. Ain’t like it’s our money.”

“What you mean?”

“That shit all white money. Upper Village be going there, not us. Know what I’m saying?” She sucks her teeth. “Why they don’t open something *we* can use?”

“Neighborhood got enough pawn shops and liquor stores already,” Calvin teases.

“I ain’t talking about that. I’m serious. How many niggers you know be drinking lattes and shit? None I know of. They talk about tryna make shit nicer down here, but nicer don’t necessarily mean whiter.”

Each breath is starting to hurt now, aching in his ribs and back. He can’t hold out much longer. Soon it will have him entirely in its grip, squeezing him dry. “Ah’ight, Vee, so then what you need me for?”

“Cause I can’t do it myself. And who else I got to trust?”

Vee holds up the wax rectangle and smiles.

There it is, the cure. It’ll take it all away, allow him to get himself together enough to get down to that job and make a few more bucks. Then, with any luck, he’ll be straight all day tomorrow. Calvin bounces a leg on the ball of his foot and presses a fist to his mouth. “Fine,” he says.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m talking about.” Veronica claps once and giggles. “Ain’t shit to it, Cal.” She tosses the bag onto Calvin’s lap. “Now here, get yourself together.”

Calvin holds the soft rectangle in his fingers a moment, looks at Veronica, then the steaks, and shakes his head almost imperceptibly. No good; no good at all.

CHAPTER III

The job is a mid-block federal just inside the Barclay section of town, another neighborhood marred by collapsing brick-fronted homes and denizens huddled at its corners. They glance in Paul's direction. The sidewalk is mottled with debris: fast food wrappers, twenty-five-cent chip bags, bits of broken glass, the occasional vial and spent wax dope envelope. Somewhere a car stereo thumps, beating inside his chest, rattling the ground.

He removes a slip of paper from his pocket and checks the address again.

Black iron security bars shield all the windows, and the exterior molding wilts into an odd grin. Paul stares down the symmetrical wall of connected façades in both directions. He has always appreciated how Baltimore neighborhoods maintain order in their architecture, how the symmetry of the city sometimes masks its decay.

He pulls open the dented aluminum screen door and raps lightly against the heavy front door, curious. No doubt the resident is black, but will he be friendly? This is always a concern when he works in neighborhoods like this one—will they welcome or resent him?

Hearing neither movements nor voices, he knocks harder.

“Yes? Hello?” He is surprised to hear a woman's voice. At first he imagines her frail and elderly, frightened of the outside world. Then he recalls Bob saying something about a daughter.

“Catch-All Moving and Storage?” He refers to the note in his hand. “Is this the Thompson home?”

The door opens with a sucking whoosh, air pulling against the sheet aluminum of a screen door, and a woman appears, veiled behind the screen's mesh. "You must be Paul," says a friendly voice.

"Yes."

She opens the door. "I'm Carla." She is younger than he expected, early-to-mid-thirties, like him. She has a warm face, soft hazel eyes, and her hair is dreaded—thin black sprouts pulled tight against her scalp and gathered in a bunch. Her face is smooth and brown, shiny on the forehead, and a galaxy of small brown freckles covers her nose and cheeks.

He extends his hand. Her skin is silky, her grip firm.

"Come in. Come in," she says.

He steps into the warm house, its air thick with the odor of fried fish. Quickly he surveys the place, scanning it as a mover does, taking in the faded-orange scallop-backed sofa and loveseat set, oak coffee table, black lacquer and glass hutch holding framed photos and knickknacks, an old upright piano against the far wall—heavy items, things he'll need help with if they're planning to move them. Past the old oak staircase and through an archway is another room roughly the same size as this one. A large dining room set occupies the middle, coated in a layer of whitish dust, and a silver candelabra sits in the center, each of its arms joined by thin ropes of cobwebs. The floor space is organized into small heaps of clothing, books, records, dishes and pans, random items that have no fixed category. And beyond the dining room is the light of the kitchen, its yellowy glow spilling onto the worn shag carpet.

“This is my father’s house.” She raises an eyebrow. “Such as it is.”

Despite its unkemptness, the house is soothing, cozy. Not like some of the places Paul’s worked: the ramshackle Edmondson Village duplex that smelled like rotting flesh, the Reservoir Hill home-turned-shooting-gallery with its floors of piss and shit and dried blood, the narrow roach and rat-infested Pigtown federals, the eviction jobs, the public housing tenant relocations, the homes of elderly people who’d passed away unnoticed.

The woman rests a hand on her hip. “We’re moving Daddy out to Worthington, an assisted living complex out in Woodlawn, because, well, as I’m sure you can see, he’s not been taking very good care of himself.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Paul says.

She nods, awkwardly—maybe momentarily flustered. “So, most of the stuff you see in here *isn’t* going. We’re either getting rid of it or putting it into storage. Today we just want to get out all the stuff that’s going to the home, most of which is already in boxes.” She points to a short stack in the dining room. “There are those there against the wall and then a couple more upstairs. And then, probably tomorrow, we’ll have you back to haul out the rest of this junk. Unfortunately, I was called into work today unexpectedly, or I’d stay and help.”

She’s so sure of herself, so confident in her speech and mannerisms that she must be a lawyer or a businessperson, someone paid to talk, to persuade, to sell.

“Is your father still living here?”

She folds her mouth into something resembling a smile but not quite one. “He is. We can’t get him into the facility for a few more days, so he’s here for now. Upstairs.”

She points at the ceiling. "And I'm sure that's where he'll stay." She lowers her voice, touches her thumb and forefinger to her neck. "He likes to sit in the upstairs bathroom. I know it sounds a little odd, but that's what he does. There's another one down here off the kitchen if you need it."

Carla heads for the stairs, her stiff bundle of hair appearing to trail along. "I'll show you what's going from upstairs."

Paul follows her, running his fingers along the ornate oak banister. Small mats of old pile carpet protect the hardwood treads ascending in a series of angles. Ten steps, then a small angular landing, then four more, another angle, then six to the top. A difficult course for anything large.

Piled along the upstairs hallway walls are more boxes, forty or so in all he figures, new ones, the cardboard still rigid and clean-looking, all of them labeled either "To Worthington" or "To Storage."

"And this here is the rest." She faces him. "Any questions?"

He glances down the hall at the closed bathroom door, a white strip of light escaping beneath. "Nothing I can think of," he says, and looks around. "I'll bring everything downstairs first, then load up the van. Should only take a couple of hours."

"OK, then." She smiles politely. "If there's nothing else, I really need to rush off to work. I should be back in a few hours, but I can't promise." Carla moves down the hallway to the bathroom door. "Daddy, I'm going to work now. I'll be back by a little later on, probably around two or three. The moving man is here, so don't be alarmed. He knows what to do. Just let him do it. OK, Daddy?"

Paul hears only an indiscernible grunt.

“I left my numbers downstairs on the dining room table,” she tells Paul. “Call if you need to. Otherwise, we’ll probably see you out here again tomorrow.”

“All right, then.” He listens for the front door to click shut and then hefts two boxes and makes his first run down.

This could be a nice house. Probably was in its day. It’s smaller than the house he grew up in, narrower, but similar. On his way back up, he stops to examine the hand carved newel post in the banister and runs a finger along the stairwell’s textured paint. Paul’s always needed to touch the things his eyes hook onto—walls, flowers, paintings—it’s how objects cease being obscured by the limits of vision and become real.

He gets back upstairs before realizing that he’s left his work gloves in the van, sitting on the front seat, clasped together as though praying. He bounces back down, leaves the front door ajar, and slips out to the truck. He sets the gloves on the roof, and as he’s locking the door he hears something from the house, an upstairs window being opened and a faint voice on the other side. “Hello?” Paul thinks he hears. He looks up at the window, but the glare of the sun makes it impossible to see. He darts back inside and waits at the base of the staircase.

“Hello?” a voice, deep and raspy, calls.

“Yes, hello?”

“Who’s there?”

“Paul. From the moving company.”

“In here,” the man says. “In the bathroom.”

Paul climbs the stairs and stands outside the bathroom. The door is half open now, and Paul can see the elderly man seated on a small metal folding chair, hands folded in his lap. He wears a flannel shirt and faded green work pants, each worn soft after so many years of washing and wearing. His skin, though a deep brown, looks almost pallid, ashy, and his white hair is spongy and uneven, higher in some places than others.

Unlike the rest of the house, the bathroom is immaculate, practically shimmering. The floors have not a stray hair or speck of dirt on them, and the white ceramic and brass fixtures sparkle under the morning light easing in through a multi-paned window. The deep old clawfoot appears as white and pristine as Paul imagines it had when it was brand new, and the partially-tiled walls, mostly white with a rectangular band of black running along the top, are spotless and shiny. The grout too is clean, the metal trim around the mirror polished, and all the glass is free of smudges and prints.

Paul scratches at an invented itch on the back of his head, clears his throat. The frail old man looks up, nods once, then returns his gaze to the floor. Gingerly, Paul speaks: “Mr. Thompson? Did you need something?”

The old man says nothing, rapt in the black and white tiles. Paul wonders if he might be suffering from dementia, if this is why they’re moving him to assisted living.

“I’m here to move a few things out for you,” he says. “Just a few boxes. It shouldn’t take too long.”

Mr. Thompson, an odd semblance of a smile now playing on the folds of his mouth, nods but remains silent.

“So I’ll just be doing that, then,” Paul says and again fingers his imaginary itch.

Mr. Thompson looks up through cloudy and watery eyes, which makes it difficult to tell where he is looking or what he is seeing. “My daughter told you what to do, I guess.”

A question or a statement? “Yes. Carla explained everything.” Paul arches his foot inside his boot until the muscle ache travels up his calf.

Mr. Thompson waves a dismissive hand, lets it fall limp in his lap, which Paul takes as a sign to return to work, which he does steadily for the next thirty minutes. Once half of the upstairs boxes are stacked down near the front door, he steps out for a smoke. The sun is high and bright now and the rows of homes cast long rectangular shadows over one side of the street. Paul takes a seat on the front stoop, lights a cigarette, closes his eyes, and cranes his face toward the sun. Somewhere in the distance another siren wails, dogs bark from the alleys, and the ubiquitous thump of bass continues unabated.

“Wha’s up, baby?”

Paul opens his eyes to a woman in sunglasses and a red tank top, hands on her hips and her jaw working a piece of gum. Her hair is wild, unkempt, and the bends of her arms bear the unmistakable purple-red worms of an intravenous drug user.

Paul shakes his head. “Just working.”

“Oh, youse a working man, baby?” She smiles and runs a curled tongue along her front teeth.

“Something like that.” He’s trying to be nice, though not too nice.

“What kind of work you doing, baby?”

“Moving.”

“Oh, good. That’s real good.” She touches a finger to her lips. “Look here, sugar.” She bends forward, uses her wrists to push up her breasts. “You like that? Wanna go around back and have some fun? Only take a minute.”

He smiles and looks away, embarrassed.

“I’ll suck your dick, baby boy. And whatever else you want.” She leans closer, and through a soft moan, whispers, “I likes it all, sugar.”

He feels himself stir. For a junkie or a crackhead, she doesn’t seem as bad off as she could be. Her skin is a soft bronze, her thighs are thick, and her eyes are a deep liquid brown. He pictures her kneeling before him in the alley, eager to please. Then bent over, spread and waiting. An odd buzzing moves through him. Part of him wants it, wants to hear her moan, feel her writhe, smell her odor. He has never been with a black woman, has rarely ever even considered it, which now strikes him as odd.

“I see you looking, baby.” She runs her hands up the sides of her belly. “You want some of this, don’t you?”

He shakes his head slightly. It’s something else he wants, something darker, something just out of his mind’s reach. “Oh, no. No, thanks,” he says, practically apologizing.

“You sure, baby?” she asks, sucking on a finger.

“I’m sure.” He turns away, afraid to look her in the eye.

“All right, baby boy. You change your mind I’ll be out here. Name Vee.” She blows him a kiss, winks, sashays her way to the corner.

A shadow of resentment passes over him when he thinks of the men who will, today, accept her advances. He feels dirty now, coated in a layer of grimy shame, the neighborhood's depravity on him now like a stench.

He pitches the remainder of his smoke and returns to the boxes on the second floor. He estimates eleven, maybe twelve more trips. On his third, halfway down with a large box in his still gloveless hands, he hears a rumbling sound above, like a hum or the murmur of a far-off conversation. It is Mr. Thompson again, his coarse voice thrumming along the walls. Paul drops the box and dashes back up, surprised at his own urgency.

"This is it, then," Paul hears outside the door. "The final stretch." The man's voice is softer now, barely perceptible. A tinny trumpet blows softly in the background through a small handheld transistor.

Paul edges closer to the door until he is visible. "Sorry?"

Mr. Thompson shoots him a quick look, startled. "Sorry? What *you* sorry for, boy?"

"No, I mean I didn't hear what you said."

"That's cause you wasn't supposed to. Wasn't talking to you. Wasn't talking to no-damn-body."

"Oh, I thought—"

The old man waves him off and looks away, annoyed. Then, when Paul doesn't leave, he turns back and looks Paul over. "So what's your story, boy?"

"My story?"

"You heard right."

Paul shrugs. "Don't really have one."

"Everybody got a story, boy. Fact, that's *all* we got. Specially in the end."

Now that Mr. Thompson faces Paul head-on, Paul is certain he knows this man. He tries picturing him younger, healthier, even a bit heavier, but nothing shakes loose in his mind. "I suppose that's true," he says.

"Course it's true. Goddamn true." The old man nods to himself. "Wait 'til you're my age, boy. You'll see." He lifts a lightly trembling hand to his neck and cinches closed his shirt. "See, my story coming to an end here. My daughter thinks it's already over. They don't think I'm fit to take care of myself no more, that this here ain't no place for a old man like me to be living on his own." He shrugs. "Maybe they right." He looks to Paul with raised brows.

"Maybe. Or maybe they're just worried about you being all alone."

Mr. Thompson sighs and returns his gaze to the tiles. He pats the top of his hair, says, "They probably just don't want to have to come down here no more and look after me. I know I ain't been right since my wife died. I know that. But I ain't lost it yet. I stay in here cause it's comfortable. That's all. And I stay in this house cause it's comfortable. Cause it's mine. Ain't a goddamn thing wrong with me."

"Sounds like they're just concerned, Mr. Thompson."

The old man runs his thumb and forefinger over the corners of his lips. His skin is dry and pasty, looking as though he's just woken from a deep sleep. He takes in a deep breath and groans lightly through the exhalation. "This wasn't supposed to be how it was,

you know. Francis should be here with me still.” The skin around his eyes seems to wither a little more, and he slumps forward in the chair, resting his hands in his lap.

Paul scrunches his toes inside his boots. “I’m sorry, Mr. Thompson.”

He snorts. “Why you say that, boy? What in hell *you* got to be sorry for?”

Paul’s cheeks fill with heat. “I mean I’m sorry for you. I assume you’re talking about your wife, so I was just saying I’m sorry she’s gone.”

“You ain’t even know her,” he grumbles.

“No, but I can tell you loved her.”

“I did that,” Mr. Thompson says with a nod. “I did that.”

Paul thinks of more questions to ask—how Mrs. Thompson died, how they met, how long they were together—but all he gets out is, “Where you moving to, Mr. Thompson?” although he already knows the answer.

“Damn County someplace. Out Woodlawn. One of them warehouses they put old folks in to die. Assisted living or some goddamn thing they call it. It’s a damn holding cell till they can ship us to the grave is what it is.”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” Paul says, thinking that Mr. Thompson just wants someone to listen, someone who hasn’t heard it all before.

The man screws up one side of his face. “How the hell else am I supposed to look at it, boy? Ain’t a goddamn vacation.”

“No, but it’s not a sentence either.” He shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe it’ll be fun.”

“*Fun*? Now how the hell could it be fun to go someplace where you know you gonna die? Tell me that.”

“How much fun is this?” he asks, surprised at the ease and quickness with which the question leaves his mouth. “At least there you’ll be around other people—residents to talk to, meals and recreation times, maybe even field trips. That seems a lot better than sitting in an empty house day after day. It might not be so bad.”

Mr. Thompson grins. “So why don’t *you* go, then, boy?”

Paul nods. “I might if I could.” Might be better than this, his own life, which has begun to seem less like living and more like killing time.

Mr. Thompson makes a clucking sound, then says, “Damn place probably ain’t even got a decent bathroom. Probably got to share it with some other old fool.” He leans forward and picks something off the floor that Paul can’t see. Once he has whatever it is between his fingers, he drops it into a waste basket under the sink. “And what if my boy come back around? He ain’t gonna know where I am. Carla ain’t think of that. And there ain’t no way to tell him.”

“You have a son too?”

“Sometimes.” He rubs his eyes, looks up at the ceiling, rolls his head around on his neck. “Far as I know, I still do. He’s around someplace, running them damn streets. Got hisself mixed up with that her-ron mess number of years back. Ain’t been able to get back on track since. Shame, too. Boy had potential. Smart, good-looking, good ball player. Could’ve been something.” Mr. Thompson coughs, clears his throat, leans over, and spits into the toilet. “Damn drugs. Done took so many of the boys out there.”

Mr. Thompson sighs and runs a hand along his stubbly cheek. “Boy ain’t been around in a while now. Probably my fault for not talking to him much last time he come by. Probably still thinks I don’t want him around. But it ain’t that.”

For a moment, Paul sees it all painted in the old man’s eyes: his dead wife, his estranged son, his daughter forcing him out of his home before he is ready. He wishes he could say something to make it better, something other than that he is sorry.

As though snapping himself out of his reverie, Mr. Thompson brightens and says, “Need to wash up, son? Hands dirty?”

Paul looks at his hands. Working without gloves has left them dirty and dry. And despite the strangeness of the question, he wants to be polite. He nods.

“Well, come on then. Sink ain’t gonna come to you.” The old man groans his way up and out of the chair, turns on the water, and waits until it reaches just the right temperature—warm but not too hot. From a pump bottle he gives Paul two shots of liquid soap. “Wash them up real nice,” he says.

Paul rubs his hands together and bends to scrub them under the stream. Slowly and carefully, he lathers each hand to the wrist, washes each finger individually, and even goes so far as to scrape the broken lines of dirt from beneath each nail.

“That’s it, boy, take your time and get them nice and clean.” The old man seems more at ease now; in fact, he appears to be enjoying himself, as though he’s been waiting for just such an opportunity.

Once Paul finishes rinsing, Mr. Thompson hands him two unfolded paper towels. Paul dries his hands, and then Mr. Thompson gives him a shot of lotion in each palm.

“Rub that in real good. It’ll keep them nice and soft for the ladies.”

“Thank you, Mr. Thompson.”

“Welcome, sir,” he says, and returns to his seat and to staring at the floor, which Paul takes as a sign to get back to work.

CHAPTER IV

Calvin makes his way slowly up Calvert, toward 25th, face angled at his feet, searching. Physically, he is well again, sated for the time being; but that single bag from Vee wasn't quite enough to quiet the noise, to allay his fears or quell his guilt—guilt for something he's not yet done. And there is something else hovering in the periphery of his thoughts, something he is forgetting.

“Something I gotta do,” he mutters, and stares up the block, eyes thin, trying with all he has to remember what. But still he draws a blank, too preoccupied with what he's agreed to do tomorrow.

The plan is simple enough: they'll wait for the girl to leave with the bank bag in the morning. Once she's a few blocks away from the store, Veronica will come up and distract her with some sob story about being stranded and needing bus fare out to the County. At that point, Calvin will come around from the other side, grab the bag, and head straight into the alley. The two will then separate and meet back up at Vee's place later. “Nothing to it, Cal,” Veronica had assured him. “Long as you keep cool, we ain't got nothing to worry about.”

“How much you think's in there?”

“Few hundred, easy. Maybe close to a G.”

A life-changing amount. With that kind of cash, which he hasn't glimpsed all at once in God-knows-how-long, he could get himself out of this mess. He could stay on top of the beast for a few days, take care of some things, then start seriously looking into that detox program out at Hopkins. Maybe then he could get into one of those halfway houses

he's heard of, something up in the County, someplace far away from here. With a little luck and a lot of hard work, he could actually be out of this in a month's time. A semblance of a smile parts Calvin's lips. Yes, indeed, soon enough this'll all be over.

First thing he needs to do, though, before anything else, is see Daddy.

He stops and finds his muddled face reflected in a car window. He's been looking more and more like his father lately, which wouldn't be such a bad thing if Daddy didn't have thirty years on him. Calvin's face is dusty-dark and sallow, eyes gray, hairline running away like somebody's chasing it.

Once upon a time, Calvin Thompson was a fine specimen: tall and broad-shouldered, muscular and trim, with a natural athletic build most men would be proud to possess. Now, looking back at him is a man he scarcely recognizes. It is still him—the unmistakable shape of the eyes and brow, like his father's; the bump of nose cartilage from his years of boxing down on North Avenue; his expressions—but so much else is missing, as though for years he's been dropping pieces of himself in the streets and forgetting to go back to retrieve them.

But things are about to change.

Veronica urged him to acquaint himself with the store and the block. “Make sure you know where the fuck you going to before you take off running,” she advised. “Things only go bad when shit ain't planned out right in advance. So now that you well, do yourself a favor and get familiarized with shit—where you gonna make the grab, where you gonna run to once you got it, and how you gonna get back down here without being seen.”

He is out of his league, but if he can just get away with this one thing, he'll be done with doing dirt, done with this life and these people, done with killing himself for a tiny bag of powder that hardly does a damn thing except make him want more. Detox, get work, find a place—

“Shit,” he says, and stops in the middle of the sidewalk. “The cemetery.”

Calvin does an about-face and breaks into a jog back down Calvert. Damn. Damn. Damn. How could he forget? A chance to get paid straight-up for some honest-to-God labor and he forgets about it. Got-damn.

Maybe he's not too late. Maybe they still need a few hands. If he hurries, he might get there in time, even though, judging by the high position of the sun, it must be near noon already, if not past.

He picks up his pace until he is at a fast hobble, lungs fighting to get and hold air. Dag. When did running get so hard?

Normally, Calvin makes it his business to steer clear of 23rd and Guilford, sometimes going the extra block up to 24th and back down on Barclay so as not to run into his sister, or, worse, his father, who often sits at the front windows and surveys the neighborhood, muttering curses about how this was once a nice place, back before drugs and guns and rap music ruined it for everyone.

As the old corner rises up to greet him, he notices a white van parked outside. He slows his pace to a sluggish walk. Running's not doing him any good anyway, except to kill off what little still lingers of that bag. Any more hard exertion and he'll be completely sober before he hits Greenmount.

But hold up just a minute.

Calvin stops and locks his sights onto what looks to be a bit of limp cloth on the van's roof. He squints, rubs his eyes. Got-damn if it don't look like a pair of gloves just sitting up there. He looks around, sees no one, no one close enough to see or identify him, anyway, and slowly moves to the edge of the row, shielded behind the exterior wall of the old Watkins place next door. He has to be careful here, up where more than a few sets of eyes could likely still recognize him from a block away. He can hear them now: "Ain't that the Thompson boy?" Miss Betty across the street might say. "I thought they put him in jail."

"Not yet, but they gonna," Miss Roberta, another neighbor, might reply.

"It's a damn shame, boy putting his family through all that mess. He used to be one of the good ones. Used to come over and do work for us around the house when he was a boy. Damn shame is what it is."

Miss Roberta might then put a hand to her ample chest, look up, and say, "Lawd, please help that boy find his way back."

But there's no way of rescuing those gloves from the top of the van without being in plain sight of the whole block. Fuck it. He'll do it in one quick motion, won't stop running until he's down the block and out of sight.

He rocks forward on the balls of his feet and then launches himself into a stooped run, recalling his days as a high school track sprinter at City. He circles the front of the van, reaches up and grabs the gloves on his way around, and keeps running east until he hits the mouth of the alley halfway between Guilford and Barclay. Stepping in, he drops

to a knee and tries to slow down his momentum with deep wheezing breaths. Once he has, he slides on one glove, then the next, and smiles. Like a glove, he thinks, and then stands and makes tracks for the cemetery.

Greenmount Cemetery is a city unto itself, a low-slung miniature of its landlord. Built above street level, it is a walled-off sanctuary bordered by some of the worst blocks East Baltimore has to offer. Yet, inside its four high stone walls, among its headstones, statues, and mausoleums, exists another world, eerily quiet and old, safe from its surroundings.

But the job is not in the cemetery. About that, James was wrong, and about the ten an hour in cash, James was also wrong. The pay is seven an hour, and the job is an alley cleanup behind a bombed-out strip of homes a block south of the cemetery. The backyards and the alley itself have become a vast public dumping ground, all junk and trash and stink, ignored by the city and residents alike for so long that one can hardly get from one side to the other. It's no wonder, though: the stretch of alley sits between two major dope and coke spots—Holbrook Street to the east, dotted with slingers from Hoffman to Preston, and Valley Street just west, where back in the fall they had those bomb Believe bags—and it's nearly impossible to take a single step without landing on the spent vials, capsules, bags, and syringes of the last few months. It is a veritable sea of dope fiend flotsam.

From where he stands, Calvin can see red, yellow, green, blue, and purple caps; thousands of empty glass vials shimmering in the sun; crushed and broken orange, white, and red plastic capsule halves; and countless little wax envelopes thrown or blown into

piles like autumn leaves. There on the ground before him must be tens of thousands of dollars in dimes of drugs, seconds-long rushes and minutes-long highs. Unpaid mortgages and rents, car payments, phone and utility bills, credit cards. Groceries, school clothes, bus fare for work, gas money, meals. Payday and title loans, desperate pawn shop negotiations, traded sex. “It’s a got-damn wonder we still making it out here,” he mutters, and returns to raking debris and stuffing it into a thick black bag.

“What you said?” James asks, only mildly interested.

“Just wondering at some things.”

The work is about as boring as can be, especially now that the dime from Vee has worn thin. But it’s work— real work for real money—and he’s grateful for it. Even if it is for less than he was told. In another hour and a half he’ll be twenty-one dollars richer than he is now, and without doing any dirt.

“Don’t get to wondering too damn much. You know what they say: thinking is a dope fiend’s worst enemy.”

Calvin spots a can in the pile, old but not yet rusted through, a leftover from a different era. He picks it up and holds it against the sky. “Check this shit out,” he says. “Natty Boh can.” He spins it in his hand, reads from the side: “‘National Bohemian Beer: From the Land of Pleasant Living.’ Damn, I ain’t seen one of these since I was a kid.”

“You should keep that shit. Clean it up. Might could sell it for something.”

He isn’t interested in selling the can; he wants it for himself. He likes it; it reminds him of boyhood, of a different Baltimore, and he has just the spot for it near his

bed. He wipes the rest of the dirt away with saliva-dampened fingers and drops it into a paper bag near his feet. A souvenir to add to his collection.

James pauses, palms the end of the rake handle, and rests his armpit on his hand. Using his teeth, he slides the glove from his free hand and runs it across his brow. “How you holding up?”

“How you mean?”

“I mean, you was wrecked when I seen you earlier. You got right?”

“Little something. Enough to hold for now.”

“All it ever is,” James mutters. “Ain’t been no real her-ron out this bitch since the eighties. Back then, dope was still dope. Shit had a smell to it, even. Shoot you up a little something and you was high all damn day. Now, the shit’s all chemicals. Got it so it lasts about a hour, then you need more.” He spits, slides the glove back on, rakes a pile of trash toward his feet.

“Too true,” Calvin agrees, and scoops up the pile. Now it’s his turn to rest. He fishes another fetid butt from his shirt pocket, one he found in the street on his way here, and lights up. Calvin studies the older James. The man’s forearms are cruelly swollen and scabbed to the point that they hardly resemble arms at all anymore but something more akin to large sausage logs. He is looking thinner too, sicklier in these last weeks, his body finally showing the signs of a near lifetime spent on these streets. It should come as no surprise—the body can only take so much running and gunning—but seeing his old friend like this is unsettling.

Back in the day, late-seventies and early-eighties, James Turner was a major player in the East Side heroin game, a house dealer whose supply ran the length of North Avenue from Greenmount to Aisquith. James Turner was big time, cruising East Baltimore in a big money green ragtop LTD, more money in his pockets than any one man could spend, and enough excess heroin to keep him and his crew from ever knowing what it meant to be dopesick.

Now James Turner's past is little more than neighborhood lore, James himself but a fraction of the man he was.

"You ever cleaned up from this mess?" Calvin asks.

"Few times. Was out eighteen months once back in '93. Went to meetings and all that. 'Nother time I was locked up for a few months. Forced my ass to clean up."

"What happened?" Calvin asks.

James wipes a screen of sweat from his brow and looks down at the heaps of garbage. "For real? Shit got boring. Know what I'm saying? Wasn't no more excitement left in the day." He shakes his head. "I s'pose an old fiend like me just don't know no other way."

"How you did it? When you wasn't locked up, I'm saying."

"One time I kicked that shit out on my own. Locked myself in my room for four days. Rough? Shit. Thought I was gonna got-damn die. But that one ain't keep, neither. I stayed straight only about two weeks. Second time I did a detox out Key Hospital. Stayed there five days kicking it out, wishing them muthafuckers would just put me out of my misery. Then they sent me to a place down South Baltimore for a few months. Place

where fiends go to learn how to live and shit without gunning dope. After that, I was straight-up clean for a whole year and a half,” James says, almost proudly.

Both men at once notice the ruddy-faced white foreman coming toward them, and they bend down and start raking and bagging garbage. Once the man passes, they break again.

“Why, you looking to get out?”

Calvin shrugs a shoulder. “Been thinking on it some.” He wipes his neck with the back of his glove. “Tired of it, know what I’m saying? Shit don’t never change out here.”

“It damn sure don’t, boy. That’s one thing you can count on. Game don’t never change. Some days is harder than others, for sure, but the shit be the same day in and day muthafuckin’ out. Problem is you can’t be thinking on it too much. That shit make it worse.” James lowers his head and looks Calvin in the eyes. “Look here. Man either got to accept this as how it is and how it’s gonna be, or he need to take his ass out and do every-damn-thing possible to stay there. It’s that in-between shit that fuck a niggah all up.” He points at Calvin. “Either be a dope fiend or don’t.”

Calvin nods. It’s not a question for him. He knows he wants out. But having never been clean, having never even made it past day three, he fears it. More than the full-on withdrawal itself, though, which he knows will pass in time, he fears failing, getting clean only to find himself back out here in a few months or a year, doing the same things all over again. He’s seen it time and again: a fiend disappears from the corner for a while, then comes back around months later looking good, damn good—cheeks thicker, eyes sharper, skin smoother. They linger for a while, talking to old friends, showing

themselves off, laughing it up over old times, as though they're strong enough now to handle it. Few are, though, that Calvin has seen. The ones who make it rarely, if ever, show their faces again. They know better. But for those who start standing on the corner like the old days, mainly because they have nowhere else to go and nothing else to do, it's only a matter of time. It may take a few days, a week, even as long as a year, but like they say, hang out in a barbershop long enough and eventually you'll get a haircut. Same with the corner: stand around a dope spot long enough, eventually you'll get high.

Take Curtis from 20th Street, a lowdown, stash-stealing, flour-selling fiend who managed, somehow, to get himself hooked into twelve-step meetings and stay clean for seven whole months, only to then start coming back around asking after old running partners. At first it was reunion of sorts, friends clapping him on the shoulder and saying how good he looked, how they wished they could do what he was doing, how he was an example to everyone out there of how a fiend could turn his life around. But once the novelty wore off, Curtis was just another man, no longer part of the action, no longer a cog in the corner dope machine. He was just a sober man who had no business being out on the corners he'd fought so hard to escape.

Wasn't long until Curtis decided he could handle one, just a dime for old times' sake. He'd already proven to everyone and himself that he could quit; surely he could do it again. Now, over three years later, Curtis is worse-off than ever, a wraith of a man who wheels himself around town in a broken down wheelchair, muttering barely intelligible curses as he tries to hustle his next blast. Ask anybody and they'll agree that Curtis' days are numbered; if he lasts another season, it'll be nothing short of a miracle.

“It’s the guilt that gets you, you know,” says James. “You let that shit eat at you and then you done for. Ain’t enough dope in the world to take it away. That’s why I don’t be doing no dirt no more. I done my share, but now, I *earns* my blast money. If I can’t, then I do without till I can. It’s the only way to live.”

Guilt and shame. Seems like Calvin’s been trying to outrun one or both of them forever. His sister can’t stand the sight of him. His mother passed before he could get clean. His ex-wife settled down with a new man out in Randallstown. And Daddy won’t even let Calvin in the house.

Still, he needs to do this thing tomorrow. This is his ticket out.

James rakes together a pile of debris, uses his foot to hold it in place. “Seen you walking with Veronica Vines earlier. What was you two up to?”

Calvin shakes his head. “She was getting me straight’s all.”

“For what?”

“What you mean?”

“I mean, what you had to do to get a blast from Veronica Vines? Vee don’t just be helping brothers out, not without something in return.”

Calvin nods. “Told her I’d help her out with a little something.”

James stops, cocks his head, stares at Calvin. “Help her with what?”

“Some little job she got in mind.”

James snorts out a derisive laugh, bends down and scoops his pile into a bag that Calvin holds open. “Boy, lemme tell you something, the last damn thing you want is to get mixed up in Veronica Vines’ mess. That bitch a train wreck with feet. Whatever she

trying to get you to do—and I don't even want to know what it is—it's gonna be trouble. Believe me. If not now, later.”

Calvin runs a hand along his chin, scratches his cheek. “It ain't like that. It's something small. Quick and easy job. She saying it's a sure thing.”

James smiles wide to reveal dark spaces in his mouth. He shakes his head. “You know, boy, sometimes you still act like that same wet-behind-the-ears niggah you was when you first started coming around these corners, you know that? Ain't no got-damned sure things in life, man, 'specially out here. And 'specially involving Veronica Vines. Damn, boy, you oughta know that by now. Anything that woman got going on got disaster written all over it. Believe me.”

Calvin stares at the street.

“Plus, I ain't got to tell you what come around go around. Every little bit of dirt you do gonna come back on your ass, you know.” James sucks his teeth. “I don't know about you, but I don't need no more bad luck.”

Sounds just like Daddy, always talking that nonsense about the universe having to right itself, how everything has to cancel itself out. Calvin dismisses James' warnings and takes a turn scooping a few piles together and hefting them into the bag.

After a few minutes of silence, James wipes his mouth and says, “But, yo, don't be forgetting who been looking out for your black ass all these years now, hear?”

CHAPTER V

When Paul returns from hefting boxes into the van, he is surprised to see Mr. Thompson downstairs, seated in the wingback chair before the window, legs crossed, a silver framed photo in his hands. “Look here,” he says to Paul. “Me and my Francis in 1960, year we bought this here house.” He taps the glass with the edge of a nail. “That was one fine woman,” Mr. Thompson says.

In the photo, Mr. Thompson is thin and smiling. A pencil moustache lines his upper lip, and his arm rests around his wife’s shoulders, who is nothing short of stunning, her face a delicate porcelain, doll-like, wide-eyed and hopeful.

“She’s very beautiful, Mr. Thompson.”

“She was that. Even in her later years she was still turning heads out there.”

The young couple is standing on this very street, in front of this house. The brick façades are all sharper, clearer, and the marble steps are all a stark white. The windows are only glass—no plywood, slatted security bars, or city notices. Even the street and sidewalk are clean and pristine, proof that it wasn’t always like it is now.

Mr. Thompson, appearing more lucid now, more content and relaxed, almost happy, folds his hands on his lap. “You from here, son?”

“Sort of. I’ve been gone for a while but I grew up not too far from here. Twenty-seventh Street.” He gestures north. “But we moved out to the County in the eighties, when I was still young.” Just like every other white family who could.

“Ever been out Pimlico?”

“The track? Not in a long time, but when I was a kid I used to go with my father all the time. He was a regular.”

“That’s where I’m from. Worked out there almost twenty-two years.”

“Twenty-two years,” Paul repeats. “Didn’t think people worked in the same place that long anymore.”

“Most of ’em don’t. I was lucky. Took it as a weekend job while I was working down the Point. Then the layoffs came. Wasn’t much, but at least we still had something coming in. Lot of families didn’t.”

“My father was down there, too. Worked in sales, but they cut him loose after ten years. May ’82.”

Paul remembers how the news had descended on the city with the force, quickness, and unpredictability of a punch to the stomach, one that left everyone gasping for air. It was all over the TV and radio, all anyone talked about on front stoops and barstools. The steel plant was closing.

Paul’s father didn’t come home that night, and his mother spent it pacing the house, crying, calling friends and neighbors in desperation. “It’s not like him,” she kept saying. “It’s not like him not to come home.” And it wasn’t. Even though his father had a penchant not just for drinking but for the camaraderie of drinking in bars, surrounded by longtime friends or potential ones, he always managed to find his way home, often unbeknownst even to him.

The next afternoon Paul spotted his father parking out front. “He’s home, Mom,” he yelled down from his bedroom. Paul waited for him to climb out. Only he didn’t. He

just sat there, his hands gripping the wheel at 10:00 and 2:00 and his face set, staring straight ahead. The windows were down, and the radio was blasting Jay & The Americans' "Only in America."

*Only in America
Can a guy from anywhere
Go to sleep a pauper and wake up a millionaire.*

After a while, his mother went out and stood beside the car. "You coming in or what?"

Paul's father kept staring straight ahead, eyes veiled behind dark sunglasses, one finger tapping the steering wheel.

"Where the hell have you been, Frank? You had us worried sick." Her arms were folded and she had one foot turned out to the side. Before she spoke she looked around to see if anyone was watching. "You don't come home, you don't call. We have to hear it on the news."

*Only in America
Can a kid without a cent
Get a break and maybe grow up to be President*

"Frank, answer me."

Finally, the song ended and he stepped out and headed for the door.

"Frank, tell me what the hell is going on. I deserve to know."

Paul's father stood still for a moment on the sidewalk as though considering what she'd said, then reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. Paul could tell his father was drunk, either still or newly, just by the way he swayed like a building in high winds. The paper was neither pink nor a slip; it was a letter-sized sheet of white

paper. He held it up, crumpled it, and threw it at Paul's mother. "There," he said, and stormed into the house. "Now you know."

By the time his mother found her way in behind her husband, shaking and bleary-eyed, wrinkled letter in hand, Paul's father was at the kitchen sink washing his hands. Paul was perched on the stairs, where he could watch and listen without being seen.

"So what are we gonna do now, Frank?"

Frank kept washing.

"Answer me," his mother demanded.

Frank toweled off, seemed to ponder something for a moment, then returned to the sink and began washing again.

"Frank, answer me, goddamn it!"

But Paul's father had kept his gaze fixed straight ahead, lathering and rinsing, rinsing and lathering, until his hands had turned pink and his wife's words had died between them.

Mr. Thompson grunts and shakes his head in sympathy.

"Things were never really the same after that," Paul tells the floor.

"No, course they wasn't. Take away a man's livelihood and he don't got a whole lot left to work with. Nothing was the same after that. Hell, whole damn city wasn't never the same after that. That was the beginning of the end," Mr. Thompson says with a huffing sigh and a wave. "That's why I don't go out that door no more. Ain't nothing but trouble out there nowadays."

Paul waits a few moments until he's sure the old man is finished and asks, "What'd you do out at the track, Mr. Thompson? Were you a teller or did you work out in the stables?"

"Nope. None of that. I was a men's room attendant."

That hard fist feeling from this morning returns. Paul rubs his stomach, as though he can keep it from spreading, but it swells into his chest and groin, growing heavier by the second. He takes a deep breath, studies Mr. Thompson more closely, allows the memory of him, still vague and shadowy, to take shape. He pictures him seated in the corner near the rows of sundries. He sees his little basket of coins and bills looking up from between the sinks, hears the small handheld transistor radio playing softly between races, smells the cheap drugstore aftershaves, the aerosol deodorants, the candy and gum in meticulous rows to the left of the sink mingling with fresh urinal cakes.

Couldn't be. Surely this couldn't be the same man Paul remembers from when he was a kid. Baltimore is a small city, but what were the odds that this was him? There must have been other men's room attendants at Pimlico, other old black men just like Mr. Thompson. Or was it Mr. Otis? Suddenly now something else takes hold—something far more troubling—that day at Pimlico with his father, the tip, the wager, the winning horse.

"What's the matter, boy? You look like you seen a damn ghost."

Paul hesitates, wanting to know but not at all wanting to know.

"Nothing," he says.

Mr. Thompson, still holding the picture of he and his wife, hoists himself off his chair with a huffing sigh, pats his spongy hair, and slowly heads for the stairs. Paul waits

for the man to say something else, but Mr. Thompson climbs the stairs and closes himself back in the bathroom. Paul props open the front door with a small box, and starts back making trips to the van.

#

His eyes flutter open, burning for a moment and causing him to blink repeatedly until the familiar little room returns to focus. Porcelain and chrome shine in his blurred vision, and he waits another moment for his mind to engage and remind him that Francis is not downstairs waiting with his lunch, that he is not a young man, and that his children are not playing quietly together on the living room floor. Often, and much to his delight, his dreams come from memory and can return him to simpler, better times. Though to his chagrin, sleep offers only brief glimpses and indistinct snatches of feeling.

Still clutching his picture, he lets out a sigh, smiles at his wife and his younger self, and gently touches the photo of her face. “That’s him, ain’t it?” he says. “The boy from all them years ago.” He nods. “Always knew he’d be back.”

Few days, if any, have gone by since without that particular one at least passing briefly through the outskirts of his mind, if not wholly occupying its main thoroughfare. And now that the boy has returned, just as he suspected he someday would, Otis Thompson is certain this means his time is up. He does not believe in coincidences.

He stands, levers open the small window to allow in a rush of cool air, carrying on it, beneath the scent of garbage and hot tar, the olfactory indications of an early spring. He breathes deeply, trying to fill himself with something, to shake off the confusion of sleep, and lets the sun warm the backs of his hands on the sill. The days have been getting

steadily warmer, with the promise of summer just around the corner. But it's this time of year he finds most difficult—the transition from gray skies to blue. The smells, the feel of the air still crisp against his skin, the reemergence of neighbors, all remind him of Francis. Every year it's the same, and every year he's certain he'll collapse under the painful weight of memory and regret, that this will be his last. But each year he sees the change through, emerges on the other side the same as he was, another season stretching out before him.

Returning his gaze to the photo in his hands, his Francis bathed in golden light, he smiles and speaks in a gentle voice. “Never told you about that day. Couldn't. Didn't think there was much use worrying you over it too. ‘Sides, I never was positive. But I should have told you back then when it happened. But I didn't think...” He shrugs. With thumb and forefinger he squeezes his chin, rubs the stubble there. “I didn't think nothing of it, ‘til things started happening.

“He's still out there. Nothing change. But I guess you already know that. He staying down the street somewheres, last I heard. I know what you thinking. I should go find him, bring him home, get him some help.” He shrugs. “Carla still doing good like always, working hard, looking after me best she can. And I know what you thinking now, too, that I oughta tell her that.” He sinks back against the tank. “I don't want to go. If it's time, then I want to die right here in my house. *Our* house. Why the hell would I want to go to a strange place with strange people to live out my last days?”

Thing is, Otis Thompson feels no less healthy than he has for years. Sure, the aches and pains in his joints are worse, he sometimes has difficulty urinating, and he can

neither hear nor see as well as he once could, but these are all normal manifestations of age. Which is not to say that he couldn't keel over and die right here on the toilet— anyone could. But who is he to argue with Fate? If it is his time, then it is his time. But there are a few things that need his attention first: he must find Calvin, and he must get back out to Pimlico one last time. First, though, he needs somehow to delay his going to Worthington.

Gently he brings the photo to his lips, kisses Francis through the glass, and stands to go find the boy.

#

Packing is Paul's specialty; he has a knack for seeing how things fit together and an affinity for symmetry. When only three or four trips remain, he decides on a break, thinking he can eke out another full hour from only thirty minutes of work.

Outside, he lights a smoke, bends himself onto the stoop, lets his head rest against the door. The houses here are low. Baltimore is low. The buildings of downtown, only slightly taller, rise up behind the processions of east- and south-leaning homes. Perhaps he'll buy a house here someday. Nothing fancy, but something all his own. Even a house like this one, only a little farther north, a little more removed from the blight. He and Kate used to discuss buying a home back when things were still promising, back before the apartment door slammed behind her with a predictable finality. It was only a matter of time before she left, he knew, before she gave way to his pushing, but it had taken longer with Kate—nearly five years—enough that he thought he was in love.

He closes his eyes and in the darkness—or, rather, beyond it—he sees her, tears rolling down her cheeks and plopping onto her shirt. “Why don’t you trust me?” she asked. “What have I ever done that would make you not? I don’t understand you, Paul. I love you, but I can’t—I really can’t—keep doing this,” she said through stifled sobs.

“So just go, then,” he told her matter-of-factly. He was bluffing, wanting to see if she would really go. It was a boundary test, one she failed miserably. That night she was gone; the next day so were all of her things. But it wasn’t as though he hadn’t known it would happen, hadn’t been preparing for her departure from day one. The moment always came eventually.

The ache in that small space between his chest and stomach finds him, and he is suddenly cold and mildly nauseated. But he opens his eyes at the sound of shoes scuffing sidewalk. Two men are coming this way, each clutching a brown-bagged forty ounce, one tall and heavysset, the other shorter and thinner. They laugh at something and then stop in front of Paul. “S’up?” the taller one asks.

Paul nods.

“Got a extra smoke, Lightskin?”

Paul removes one from his pack, hands it over. The teller man lights up and then passes the smoke to his shorter friend, who takes a long deep drag.

“What you got goin’ on, yo?” The taller man gives Paul a quick once-over, then glances at the parked van. “Somebody movin’?”

These two don’t look like junkies or slingers, but neither do they look like men who earn their money honestly. At this last thought a vague feeling of shame creeps over

him, but Paul tells himself that he'd think the same if he were in, say, Pigtown or Highlandtown, and these two men were white. "Just moving some things around and putting stuff in storage."

The taller, heavier man pours back a swallow of beer, and his partner does the same. "Word? He paying you?"

Paul nods.

"See, that ain't right. All these broke niggahs around here and this man hire a whiteboy to do his work?" He spits on the sidewalk. "Nah, that shit ain't right at all."

Paul tenses. He is entering dangerous though familiar territory. He glances down the street, wondering if they'd catch him if he just took off running, if they'd even give chase. But he can think of almost nothing more shameful or humiliating than not standing his ground. He'd made this mistake before—backing down from a fight back in eighth grade—for which he still hasn't forgiven himself.

"Ain't this some bullshit?" the taller man tells his partner. "Black family in a black neighborhood in a got-damn black city, and they hire Whitey. That's fucked up."

Behind him, Paul hears the sucking sound of the front door pulling against the screen door, followed by Mr. Thompson saying, "Leave that man alone 'fore I call the police. He ain't bothering nobody."

The tall one looks up and says, "He bothering *me* by working over here. *We* should be in there cleaning shit up for you, not some County whiteboy."

"I'm not from the County," Paul says.

“Well, wherever you from. You ain’t from this here block.” He turns back to the door. “That shit ain’t right, Mr. Oh.”

“Don’t you be talkin’ to me like that, boy. You and your friend here need to keep on walking ‘fore I have youse both locked up. I got the phone in my hand.”

The tall man sucks his teeth. “Ah’ight, chill,” he says, raising his hands. “Alls I’m saying is that you oughta be looking out for your own, Mr. Thompson. Things might not be so bad if niggers looked out for other niggers.” He gives Paul a tight-lipped stare. “Let’s roll,” he says to his partner, and the two turn to leave.

Leaning halfway out of his screen door, Mr. Thompson tells Paul to get back inside, and then bolts the front door and pulls closed the curtains. He snorts contemptuously. “Known them boys since they was small. The one been robbing stores and stealing cars damn near since he was old enough to walk these streets on his own. Been in prison longer than he been out. Surprised he even on the street again.” He shakes his head. “Got to be careful out there, boy. Them crazy-ass people’ll prey on a nice young man like you. They don’t care. All they worried about is their damn dope money. You got to watch yourself.”

“I don’t think they were going to do anything.”

“Think what you want, boy, but people getting shot at every day out there. Don’t you read the papers? There’s a goddamn war on these streets.” The old man coughs, brings something into his throat, spits it into a handkerchief, and returns it to his pocket. “This city used to be a nice place once. But not no more.”

Paul can hear his father saying nearly the same thing but for different reasons.

“Look here,” Mr. Thompson says. “How about you do an old man a favor?”

“What kind of favor?”

Mr. Thompson, seated again in his wing back, crosses one leg over the other, folds his hands in his lap, and says, “I need to get out to Pimlico. And I need your help.”

Paul stares back confused. “Why?”

“Something I need to do.”

“Why with me?”

“‘Cause I can’t go alone.”

That hard fist forms again. Paul hasn’t been to Pimlico, or any other racetrack, since he was a boy, perhaps fearing what it might unleash. In his mind the memories have lingered there all these years with all the same power and intensity as the moments themselves. Until this very moment, though, he has neither wanted nor thought he could handle them.

“Hell, boy, help out a old man before they lock me up in that home for good.”

“What about your daughter?”

“She don’t have to know. But it’ll have to be tomorrow.”

“I’m supposed to be working here tomorrow, finishing this up.”

Mr. Thompson smiles wide. “Perfect. You come here and work for a few hours, then we’ll go. Post time at one, so we’ll leave around noon, for the traffic.” The old man is visibly excited, and Paul doesn’t have the heart to tell him there’s not much in the way of traffic on Northern Parkway at noon, let alone that he wouldn’t dare try sneaking a frail old man out of his house for a clandestine day at the races.

“Come by early tomorrow. Get your work done, and then we’ll go.”

“All right. I’ll be here early tomorrow and we’ll see how things go.”

“Thatta boy, Paul,” Mr. Thompson says, beaming now.

Paul smiles. For the first time since they’ve met, Mr. Thompson has referred to him by his given name.

CHAPTER VI

Once the small section of Baltimore City alley is swept clean and contained in large black garbage bags too numerous to count, the crew of men lines up to receive their pay. James steps forward, signs something, folds the bills into his front pocket, and tells Calvin he'll see him around the way. "I gotta step. Something I gotta do."

"Oh, all right, then." Calvin had assumed they'd stay together for a bit, cop, get high, talk shit some more before parting ways. Calvin shrugs. A little surprised, if not a little hurt.

Once Calvin receives his pay—two tens and a single—he moves away from the small crowd, lights a previously-flattened and half-smoked Newport he'd rescued from the rubbish, and takes a seat on a vacant stoop to gather his thoughts. He inhales a drag of smoke, holds it in without realizing he's doing it, and sighs through the exhalation.

Out on Greenmount, the evening rush-hour is on, as lines of cars crawl slowly north, out of town. The majority of the drivers are white, with few exceptions, and most of the cars are decent ones—late model foreign jobs with sleek lines and rounded curves, made to look expensive even if they aren't. He stares as they roll past. What do they do when they get home? How do they live out the remaining hours of the day? What do they look forward to? What motivates them to get up tomorrow and do the very same thing? What the hell do people do who don't get high?

The bigger question, though, is what Calvin would do. Following a detox up in the County somewhere, they'd send him home and he'd be right back here, expected to stay clean in the midst of all this dope and coke and dirt. And when he doesn't—because

who could?—it will simply reinforce his sense that he is indeed a failure, a dope fiend doomed to live and eventually die for the blast. It is a system designed to fail those it claims to serve.

Still, this, he tells himself, ain't living but something more akin to killing time.

Calvin just got paid is in no hurry to bring his hard-earned money to the corner just yet. If he can get away with buying just a dime tonight and saving half until morning, he'll have a ten-spot to take out to Pimlico tomorrow. A vaguely satisfied look finds his face, but then he remembers Veronica Vines and his frame slumps slightly.

Abruptly, the light around him changes and a voice says, "Things pretty rough for you?" It is the ruddy-faced older man in charge of the work here.

Calvin shields his eyes from the sky's glare. "Oh, me? Oh, no, sir. Things just fine."

The man nods. "Don't have to be like this, you know."

Calvin closes an eye and scrunches one side of his face from the glare. "Like what?"

"You don't have to keep doing this day after day. You have options. Even when it seems like you don't, you do. It don't have to keep being like this."

Calvin nods, waits for the bit about accepting Jesus Christ as his lord and personal savior, or how he needs to first admit he has a problem. But the man simply says, "Just thought you could stand to hear that. There was a time when I didn't think I had choices. Somebody had to tell me." The man starts to leave but then stops and turns back. "We'll have some more work here Friday if you want it. Be here at ten and don't be late."

“Yes, sir, I’ll be here,” Calvin says with great alacrity. He stands and walks briskly up Greenmount. At North Avenue, he slows his pace and casts a long glance east along the wall of three-story brick federals leaning into a sky so blue and crisp it seems out of place here.

Got-damn if there ain’t still some beauty left in this town.

#

Somewhat to Paul’s surprise, the old house is scarcely different than all the others: a brick-fronted Victorian in a ten-house row of brick-fronted Victorians. What he expected to see Paul isn’t certain, but surely something more than just the brick and wood and concrete that was always there, as though some houses, like some people, could wear their pasts on their sleeves.

Not surprising is that the house has fallen into disrepair over the years—the trim is all cracked and peeling, a broken upstairs window has been taped into a crude star of brown packing tape, a front door pane has gone missing, rusting and flaking security bars shield the two front living room windows, and weeds push up from the cracks in the front stoop. Paul shakes his head, imagines what his father might say if he saw the old house like this. “What’d I say? Soon as they come in, that’s it.”

They, he thinks. Always *Them* and *Us*.

He moves closer, wraps his hands around two flaking porch balustrades, and presses his face to the narrow opening. This was how he’d gotten himself stuck in there as a child, a story he doesn’t remember but knows well from hearing his father tell it over

the years. “His big ears got him stuck. Wouldn’t let his head back through. Head went in fine, but those ears wouldn’t let him back out.”

His father had large ears too—large everything, in fact—but they didn’t stick out quite as much as Paul’s. And his father could wiggle his, something he’d tried to teach Paul for years. “You have to think ears,” he’d say. “Try to separate them from your head.” His father could flap his back and forth, keeping his forehead perfectly still and his eyes fixed straight ahead. But whenever Paul tried his entire face moved with them. “Ears,” his father would say again, his face taut and his expression alert. “Think ears.”

One night he figured it out. He sat at the kitchen table alone and thought *ears* until he could feel how they were actually separate from the rest of him, like fingers in relation to hands. After a few attempts he felt them flutter without anything else moving in tandem. “Look, Daddy,” he said. “I’m doing it. I’m wiggling them.”

“I knew you could do it. But be careful, pal, with those ears you’re liable to take right off.”

Now, his hands still around the railing, he fixes his eyes on a dot of dried paint and concentrates. *Ears*. The right one wiggles some. Then the left. Then, with some focused coaxing, both at once. Like riding a bike.

Paul looks up at the peeling porch roof supports, and notices a small square of rusted metal, the bracket that once proudly displayed his father’s unrivaled patriotism.

Suddenly he is twelve again. His father is charging into his room like some rabid bear, flecks of saliva at the corners of his lips, tongue pushed to one side of his mouth. He

grabs Paul, backhands him across the right cheek. Then another. Then two to the back before Paul drops and covers his face.

“Your teacher called me today. A Miss Young. Told me you haven’t been doing your math work. Know what else she told me?”

“No, sir.”

“Oh, you don’t? No? Well let me tell you, you little bastard. She told me that you refused to get up for the pledge to the flag.”

His father hits him three more times, twice on the back and once in the ribs.

“Refused,” his father screams. “*My* fucking son!”

Paul lifts his head and tries telling him it wasn’t like that at all, that he’d only been talking to the kid next to him when it came time to stand, and that he’d stood as soon as Miss Young had looked over.

“Shut your goddamn face!” he growls, and the back of his hand strikes Paul again, this time across the mouth, his father’s knuckles making a popping sound as they connect with his jaw. “I almost died in Korea for that flag, you miserable, spoiled little sonofabitch!” More smacks come down against the back of Paul’s head, then his back once he curls into a ball. “I get a call from your teacher telling me that my son, *my son*, refused to stand up for the flag!” His father takes a fistful of Paul’s hair and lifts him against the wall. “Stand up! Turn around! Take your hand down!” He grabs Paul’s arm, forces it away from his face. “Didn’t I teach you to always respect that flag?”

“But I didn’t dis—”

“Yes or no?”

“Yes, but—”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I can’t hear you!”

“Yes, sir!”

He wraps his thick tentacles around Paul’s throat and squeezes. “You’ll respect that flag yet,” he says, and leads Paul down the stairs and out the front door by his hair.

“Face front. Put your hand on your heart. Look up at that flag and say it.”

Anchored in its bracket on the porch support, an American flag flutters in the breeze. “Say it goddammit!”

“I pledge allegiance to the flag...”

“Again!” His voice bounces between this row of houses and the row across the street. “I said again! And louder this time!”

Paul said it again. And again. And again. For three straight hours, he performed the Pledge of Allegiance over and over, his father standing guard like an MP: chin down, chest out, hands clasped behind his back. Neighbors stole glances as they came home from work, and a few passing cars slowed to get a closer look, until the boy’s mother finally pulled up and told him to get in the house before the whole neighborhood saw what was going on.

Now the inner door creaks open to reveal a silhouette of a man behind it. Startled, Paul turns and heads south along Guilford toward 25th, passes by the old Chaswick place, once home to Billy and his older brother Charlie, then Mr. Charlie’s place at the end of

the row, the friendly old black man who lived alone and always gave the neighborhood kids candy and quarters. Across the street is the unlucky old Lynch house, where one year a tree was struck by lightning and fell through their roof and another year they had a small fire on the top floor. But it wasn't until the house had been burglarized six different times that they finally packed it in and went north. Then there's Stacy McDonald's old house, whose family moved up to the County when she and Paul were in fifth grade—Paul's first heartbreak of many.

He crosses the street to the spot where in 1983 Charles Perkins, a forty-two-year-old man from Whitridge Street, had staggered over with a fist-sized knife hole in his stomach, his blood dotting the sidewalk in a steady line until it ended here in a large cherry syrup stain and he died.

He stops before the old Gadezio place, once home to Danny and Philip, twin brothers, both gay and both notorious dope fiends. He can still picture Mrs. Gadezio sitting out on her front porch in a green housecoat, her thick olive legs rocking her in an old metal chair turned south, as though at any moment she might see her two boys trudging back home from the wars, long after they'd found Danny dead in an abandoned house on Greenmount, a hype still clinging to the ditch of his arm, and a distraught Philip headed out to San Francisco. Paul can still see Mr. Gadezio, a short, unexpressive man, quietly tending to his flowers and grapevines, always so lost in thought he seemed hardly aware of the world around him.

At the end of Guilford he rounds the corner onto 25th Street and hesitates only briefly before pushing against the heavy door and stepping inside, closing out the noise of the city behind him.

“Help you, son?” a square-headed bartender asks from behind the giant wood and brass bar, his gray hair still military-short and bristly.

Paul feels ten again, here to tell his father it’s time to go, that dinner is ready and Mom is waiting and worried.

He clears his throat. “Was wondering if Frank Wilkens still came in here at all.”

Paul tries to recognize the man, tries seeing him as he might have looked twenty years ago or more, but nothing comes up. There was a time when he knew everyone here and everyone knew him. “Hey, there’s little Paul,” they’d say. “Hey, little Marine, come over here and have a seat.”

“Wilkens? Christ no, he ain’t been here in years. Why, who’s asking?”

Paul looks around, but no one else appears to be listening. “His son.”

The bartender smiles, as though he knows Paul or has at least heard of him.

“I’m Paul,” he says, and pumps the guy’s hand twice while looking him right in the eye, just like his father taught him.

“Fred,” the man says in return. “Sorry to say your old man ain’t been in here for a long time. For a while he was working behind the bar, but you know, his legs got to bothering him so much he had to give it up. He don’t really come in no more at all. Not for years.”

“He worked here?”

“For a while, sure.”

“How long ago was that?”

Fred, tending to something beneath the bar, asks, “Can I set you up with a drink, son? It’s on the house for Frank’s boy.”

Paul climbs onto the stool, rests his forearms against the beveled oak. “Sure, I’ll have a beer.”

Fred pours a small plastic cup full of draught and sets it before him. Paul places a dollar on the bar and sips at his drink. Strange how the body remembers things, how he feels now the same heaviness on his chest and the same nervous feeling in his stomach that he’d get when he’d have to come down here and cajole his father into coming home. The place still smells the same, too: beer and whiskey and stale cigarette smoke only slightly obscured by pink men’s room deodorizer disks and the cheap perfume on the necks and wrists of the wives and widows perched at the bar. In fact, the place has barely changed at all.

“Just passing through are you?” Fred asks.

“Something like that,” he says a little too quietly.

“Hey, Bill, c’mere a minute,” Fred calls out to an old-timer seated at the other end of the bar. “Know who this is? Frankie Wilkens’s boy.”

A gray-haired, saggy-faced old man slides off his stool and hobbles over. “I’m Bill, old friend of your father’s,” he says. “Where the hell’s he been? We ain’t seen him in years.”

Paul shakes his hand, tells him it's a pleasure to meet him. "Not sure. Thought maybe someone here would know."

"You probably don't remember, but I knew you when you was only this high," Bill says, his hand down near his knee. "I remember you and your old man sitting right over there when you were just a little guy."

Paul smiles politely, trying not to breathe too much of the sickly-sweet smell of alcohol oozing from the man's pores. Yet the smell is so familiar it's almost comforting.

"Where's your old man hiding at these days? Out at Pimlico?" Bill laughs. "Man used to love them horses."

Paul shakes his head. "Don't know."

"He still around the corner on Guilford?"

"No, we haven't lived there since I was a kid." Paul turns back to Fred. "How long ago was it that he worked here?"

Fred stops wiping down the bar, scratches at the back of his head. "Oh, I'd say it's been close to ten years now."

"Ten years?" Paul asks, doing his best to appear calm, though his stomach churns and a strange current seems to ride along his skin.

Fred nods. "I'd say that's about right."

"Then he just stopped coming in?"

The two men look at each other. "Pretty much, that's how it was. Worked here Sunday to Tuesday every week for years, then one day he said he couldn't do it no more.

His legs was bothering him. So he stopped. Then, eventually, after another year or so, he just stopped coming in altogether. Ain't really seen him since then."

Ten years, Paul repeats in his mind, and then he finishes his beer and moves to the rear wall where the photos hang. There he is, in the same place as always, chin down and eyes staring out from behind thin dusty glass. Paul can almost smell him, can just about hear him barking commands: "Stand up straight. Fix your collar. Do something with that hair."

Slowly, Paul backs away and moves toward the door.

"You might want to ask around Pimlico," Bill calls out from the other side of the bar. "And when you find him, tell him to get hisself down here. His friends miss him."

Paul nods. Then, when no one appears to be watching him, he quietly slips out, wondering if the men think him as strange as he feels.

He moves west a few feet and folds down onto an empty stoop. He lights a cigarette, savors the taste of it mixing with the beer on his breath.

He could almost cry. Almost. It's right there in his eyes and nose and throat, but he tamps it down with a long and hard pull of his smoke. A part of him wants to give in to it, to let it out (and that same part knows dimly that eventually he must), but it scares him. It is these very emotions—the rage and sadness surrounding his father—that he fears most. Once he opens the tap, he may never be able to shut it off again.

He flicks his butt, watches the orange ember fly end-over-end until it lands in the street. Then he stands, crosses 25th to the north side, and heads for the coffee shop.

CHAPTER VII

It is nearly nightfall, a pale sky giving way to a low-hanging blue-black ceiling, the last bits of light struggling against their own demise. The buildings of downtown rise up in the background and cast a hopeful glow above the rows of homes ranging out in every direction like derailed train cars. All along the block overhead streetlamps have clicked on, throwing eerie halos of ginger-colored light over the neighborhood. The thud and rumble of bass rings out into the night from passing cars, and every few feet stands another crew working another package.

“Yo, Black, we got you over here.”

“Got them Reds. Got them Blackjacks.”

Someone else whistles, another makes a whooping noise.

“Yo, hold up a minute,” a voice says. “Lemme hollah at you.”

“Got them Gladiator joints.”

“Got them Yellows.”

“Hold up. Where you runnin’ off to so quick?”

“Black Stars from N-Y-C.”

“Yo, yo, we got you over here, dawg.”

Up on the next corner, just down from the Korean grocer, Calvin spots Frankie-Frank, neighborhood tout and oracle, using a bloated arm to point two fiends down the block. He holds up two fingers to a baby-faced slinger leaning quietly against an abandoned house wearing his hardest expression. He nods once, pushes off the bricks and walks a few steps to a hole in the wall. The two fiends leave their money with another

boy, and then step down for the handoff. Calvin watches two more transactions before deciding that this is where he'll spend his money. They got something decent, he thinks, watching O.D. Odell, a fiend who turns blue more than the damn sky, dance down the block and cop himself a bag.

Calvin gets that old sparkle in his stomach and starts up the block.

“What you need, Black? Body Bags out,” a man says, sidling up to Calvin's side and touching a thumb and forefinger to his nose. “Shit's the bomb, if you lookin' to get right. My man got me toutin' out here today.” The man's skin is cracked and worn, eyes bulbous and eager. Calvin Thompson shakes his head. “I'm good, Mo.” He breaks away and continues toward the spot, his eyes trained on Frankie-Frank, wondering what package he's on tonight. Can't be Body Bags. Got to be something new, something good. Out of the corner of his eyes he notices another man leaning hard against the Formstone front of a vacant house, jaw slack and eyes closed tight. The man's lids barely part as he continues to work at an itch under his chin, scratching at it with a wide smile, as though nothing in the world felt as good.

Calvin slows to a stop, rubs the back of his head, waits for the man to take notice. When he doesn't, Calvin says, “S'up tonight, Red? You lookin' like you right as rain.”

Red smiles, scratches at a different spot on his chest. “Got that shit right,” he says, and slides a hand down the waist of his pants. “Finally something worth a shit out here for a change.”

“What you got going?”

Red, an East Side fixture who's been out on these blocks longer than the overhead sodium streetlights, massages the sinewy folds of skin on his neck and grins, eyes still closed. "Got some bomb shit going, is what."

"I can see that. I'm saying, where it at? This what Frankie-Frank working up the block?"

Red opens one eye and grunts. "That shit all right, but it ain't nothin' like this. This shit just come down from New York, raw like a mufuckah."

Electricity skitters up Calvin's spine and nestles in his shoulders, making him hunch. "Who holding, Red? I want me a taste of that."

Red, still smiling, says, "C'mon, now, youngen. You know how it is." He opens an eye. "Thirty on the hype, I'll get you much as you need."

Fucking dope fiends. Man couldn't possibly get no higher, but still he wants thirty on the hype just to point Calvin down the block. "C'mon, now, Red. You know I ain't got it like that. I got to make my shit last."

Red shrugs a shoulder and returns to his dreams. "That's my price, youngen. You think you can do better'n that, gone ahead."

Casually, both men crane their faces toward the line of rooftops as a helicopter lifts up and throws a triangular shaft of light over the street, making the block suddenly bright as day.

Red holds up a hand to shield his eyes then shakes his head. "After some unlucky nigger down here," he says, and spits on the sidewalk. "Glad that shit ain't me." Once the helicopter's searchlights switch off and it lifts up and away, mission accomplished, Red

says, “So what’s it gonna be, Mo? You killin’ my head standing here making me think about shit.”

“I’m saying, Red, let me hit you next time. I need my whole shit tonight. I ain’t been right since early yesterday.”

Red snorts. “Ah’ight, twenty on the hype. But then you gotta leave my ass alone so’s I can enjoy it.”

Reluctantly, Calvin agrees, wanting a taste of that good shit, wanting to feel something other than that tired and weak old B-mo dope coursing through his veins. He pulls up one of the tens from today’s paycheck and hands it to Red. Then, thinking better of it, he fishes out the other ten. “Get me two.”

Red smiles, folds the money into his shirt pocket, says, “Wait right here. I’ll be back before you can say ‘Big Betsy Brown’s Beautiful Black Booty’.” Red steps off, appearing newly alert and aware of his surroundings, looks east and then west, and scurries across Barclay where he disappears behind a wall of people into one of the houses, though Calvin can’t see which one.

He backs up and perches on the edge of a stoop, rests his chin on a clasped-hand shelf and tries to settle into the wait.

Two dimes. He’ll dump half of one to do up with Red, then he’ll have a half for later and a whole for tomorrow which he’ll also do up in halves since this shit is supposed to be so good. Should be enough to keep the beast down in the morning, at least enough to do this thing with Vee. At this last thought, his stomach tenses and begins to

churn. At this point he'd rather go without the money and not do this thing at all. But then what? He's got nothing until Friday.

His mind drifts back and bumps against what James had said earlier: *I ain't got to tell you what come around go around out here. Every little bit of dirt you do can come back on yo' ass, you know.* He knows, his father's been saying the same thing for as long as he can remember.

Still, what's the harm as long as no one gets hurt? What's a little robbery in the midst of all this? Calvin clasps his hands together tightly, closes his eyes almost as tightly, and angles his face toward the night sky. *Please.*

Maybe he'll leave this place for good, take Daddy out of that house and get them both somewhere safe once and for all.

It occurs to him suddenly how long Red's been gone—long enough to have copped and come back, two or three times even. Calvin stands and squints farther up the block, but there is no sign of the man. Now, abruptly, his stomach is a nest of writhing snakes. What if Red never comes back? What if he comes back with some bullshit? What if all that scratching and nodding was a front, an act to make Calvin think the man had a line on something right? Got damn. He could kick himself. He's gone and broke not one but two cardinal rules of the game: Never trust another dope fiend; and never, ever, under any circumstances, trust another dope fiend with your blast money. Trusting is another of his shortcomings, a character flaw that will prevent him from ever being on par with some of the truly lowdown bottom-feeders out here. Calvin needs to believe that people are still basically good and decent, that it is only under circumstances such as these that

they are forced to do things like lie and steal and rob and sometimes harm others. It's the drugs that drive people to do what they do, not the people themselves. If he lets go of this, he might as well give up on everything else.

Calvin stares hard at the small crowd on the corner into which Red disappeared. Still no sign of the old fiend.

To many of the old-timers, Calvin Thompson is still just a newbie, an outsider who doesn't belong, who never should have crested the hill to the spots in the first place. It was as though at first, by not accepting him into this world, they were trying to do him a favor, trying to tell him that this was no place for a man like him. But he wanted to prove them wrong, sinking as low as anyone does on these corners. He'd mistakenly believed that that was precisely what they'd wanted: to see him down on their level, same as they were. But even that wasn't enough. After years of living for the blast just like them—hell, even worse than some—they still keep Calvin Thompson at arm's length. Funny though, back when he'd had it and shared it with all these dirtballs, they treated him right, the same dirtballs who now—now that he is down on their same level, now that he has nothing to offer but similar complaints—don't think twice about trying to water his shots, trying to pass off Arm & Hammer as dope, or just plain running off with his money. It's got-damn trifling.

Hearing the scuff of shoes against pavement, Calvin says a little prayer and turns north slowly, fully expecting to feel the swift flow of relief at the sight of Red. But it is no one; no one he knows, anyway.

Spent and achy, he sits back down and tells himself to be patient. He is stronger than his obsession, than the drug, the sickness. He pulls his knees against himself, stacks one fist on top of the other, and rests his forehead

Maybe Daddy will let him come back and stay in the basement, which, up until last year when Daddy and Carla put him out for good, had been his home for the better part of two years. The basement was unfinished and prone to flooding during heavy rains, but it was a legitimate place to rest his head every night (for a while he'd paid Daddy \$50 each month in rent), and it worked to support his belief that, despite his situation, he hadn't fallen that far down; because he could still rely on his family for help, he couldn't be that bad off. He had his own entrance—a backdoor down a few concrete steps below the rear kitchen door—so that he could come and go as he pleased without having to cross paths with his daddy. It had been his mother's doing, mostly, her gentle way of convincing Daddy to do something he didn't want to do. "This way," she'd contended, "at least we'll know where he is most of the time." It was her way of protecting her son, giving him shelter so that, at the very least, he wouldn't have to sleep out in the cold. They boarded up the doorway leading from the top of the narrow basement staircase to the kitchen and changed the locks on the front and back doors, acts that were like salt on already open wounds.

But then when Mama passed and Daddy started acting strange—muttering to himself and sitting all alone up in the bedroom—and Carla came back to take care of things, it wasn't long until she'd insisted that Calvin get clean or get out. When Calvin balked, explaining how Mama had made these arrangements and not her, she threatened

to call the police and get a restraining order against him. The next night, Calvin found himself holed up inside the empty shell he now calls home, huddled in a dark corner with wide eyes. Once out of the basement, things went from bad to worse in no time at all.

Calvin nods to himself. If nothing else, maybe he can convince Daddy and Carla to let him come back.

“Bet you was startin’ to get worried. You was probly thinkin’ ‘Dag, that old nigger done took off with my shit’,” Red says, and laughs, startling Calvin. “Man was tied up is all. Made me wait till he was ready.”

Calvin brightens. “You got it?”

Red opens his palm. Inside are two wax envelopes. Calvin smiles and then stiffens as pre-shot excitement flits around in his stomach.

“Got a little girl, too. Tell you what: I’ll do up the whole nickel with you if you dump a whole one of them. We’ll do that shit up right.”

Calvin doesn’t want the coke. All it’ll do is make the dope weaker and make him want more of both. He knows this. Every fiend knows this. “Ah’ight, bet,” he says, standing up and running his hand along the dirt-stained fronts of his jeans.

“C’mon up, then,” Red says, and leads Calvin down the block into the brick swell-front shooting gallery known simply as The House. Red bangs hard on the front door and then lets himself in. “Red here,” he says. The two climb a rickety staircase, past smoke-filled rooms filled with sleepy-eyed men and women. An old-timer, toothless, peers out from a doorway, a syringe behind his ear. “Hey, hey,” he says. “Got a little somethin’ for the host? Oh, it’s you, Red,” he says, and goes back inside.

In another room are mattresses on which coke and crack whores turn themselves out throughout the day to make their blast money, sucking dick or enduring intercourse for a mere thirty on the hype or a few good hits of that Ready Rock. A few more fiends lie around staring at the ceiling. A woman, dark and dusty-eyed, crawls out. "What you boys got goin'?" She sucks on her finger. "I'll hit you both off for a little somethin'."

"Ain't got it today, sister," Red says. He fiddles around in his pocket, pulls up something shiny, a key, and unlocks a plain white door at the end of the hall. Inside there is a mattress, a chair, and a milk crate for a table, on which sit a cup of water, a bottle-top cooker, and a few syringes in a line.

Calvin looks around. The place is surprisingly clean and orderly.

"Had me a cleaning fit other day," Red says, smiling. "Coke got me so high I had to clean my room. Shoulda seen all the junk I carried outta here. Muthafuckahs musta thought I was crazy."

Calvin folds down before the table, removes a hype from his pocket. "How long you been staying here, Red?"

"Oh, for a little while now." Red grins. "This my house."

"What you mean?"

"I mean this my house. Bought this shit back in the early eighties when they was giving houses away over here for a muthafuckin' song. Had it fixed up real nice for a while too." Red shrugs. "But you know how shit go."

Calvin nods, sets to work emptying the bag into the cooker, pinching a tiny bit of powder in the corner to keep for later, which he folds quickly and slides into his back

pocket. With a new hype, he sprays the cooker until the powder dissolves, holds a match under it briefly, then uses the black rubber end of the syringe plunger to mix up. “All right. Got that coke, Red?”

Red, his hand trembling, dumps in the contents of a small glass vial. The powder liquefies, and Calvin holds out the bottle cap. “Do it up, Red.”

Red sticks in his gimmick and draws back thirty. Calvin does the same to the rest, pushing around a small piece of cigarette filter with the needle tip to be sure he’s gotten every last bit.

“We even up?” asks Red.

Calvin inspects his syringe and gives it a single flick to chase away the bubbles. “Look like it to me.”

Red sits in his chair, crosses one leg over the other, finds a small vein in his calf, and fires the shot all at once. He blinks a few times before his eyes flare wide and he sinks back, a hand clutching the arm of his chair as he rides out the blast.

Calvin, on the other hand, likes to toy with it. He pulls back the plunger until the tiny red cloud of his own blood curls into the hype. He squeezes some in, pulls back again, squeezes some more. The coke rushes in, fast and furious: his heart pounds in his ears, lights flash in his eyes, a deafening ring fills his ears, and the taste of fuel washes across his tongue. His frame tips forward just as his eyes roll backward. After a moment, his index finger finds its mark and slams home the rest. Calvin eases himself against the wall. A smile finds his open mouth, and his body involuntarily slumps into a useless heap. In moments everything drifts away—worries, fears, doubts, memories—leaving

Calvin Thompson in a warm opiate bath. The needle drops from his fingers and clatters softly on the floor.

Calvin grunts. “You wasn’t lying, Red. Shit is a bomb,” he grumbles.

But Red hardly stirs.

Then, out of nowhere, Calvin remembers something. His lids flutter open.

“Almost forgot about them steaks I got for later.” He nods to himself, then lets his head bump back against the wall.

“What you said?” Red asks after a few moments, but Calvin is elsewhere now, floating somewhere high above East Baltimore.

#

But it never lasts, no matter how much of a bomb it is, and it’s never enough, no matter how much he has or does. Before the high should even begin wearing thin, Calvin’s mind is already hard at work, convincing him that he’s no longer there, that he’ll need to tap that other bag before the night’s through. And what about tomorrow? What about this thing in the morning? What about later? A week from now? He gives in and opens his eyes, rubs his face, shakes his head. Dag. It’s getting so that he can hardly even enjoy a good blast any more, can barely escape the noise in his head, which is at present working overtime to convince him his high is done and that there are things he needs to be thinking about.

“Dag,” he says too quietly to be heard.

He’s devoted his life to the high, has given everything to it, and now he can barely manage to keep it going. And it’s getting so that no amount of dope or coke can get

Calvin far enough away from himself, which had always been at least part of it for Calvin—that a good shot of dope could take him far away from all this, his past, his present, these streets, and his own goddamn thoughts. Time and again he has to fight to try and stay in the haze, sometimes going so far, as he is right now, as to pretend he is high, hoping he might somehow return to where he was. But it's no use. Frustrated, he looks around.

At his side, Red sleeps soundly, hands folded across his chest and mouth gaping as though trying to catch flies, an expression Calvin's daddy liked to use from time to time. Red stirs, farts, lets out another strange noise from his throat, then returns to his slumber. Calvin sits forward, puts his hands on his knees.

It's that in-between shit that fuck a niggah all up.

Dag. He stands, gathers himself for a moment in the darkness—patting empty pockets, rubbing his nose, smoothing his hair—and moves quietly to the door and down the narrow hall. At the top of the steps, he hears a small voice behind him. “Where you sneaking off to?”

The voice stops him cold, sets his heart racing and his stomach flipping. His shoulders hunch slightly as though prepared for something to drop.

“Surprised you even stopped.”

Blinking repeatedly, he waits for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. When they refuse, he whispers, “Leena? That you?”

Coming toward him now, she snuffles, scratches at her nest of hair, which, despite the lack of light, Calvin can see is wild, big and uneven and unkempt. He can also see that Leena's looking worse than ever—gaunt and ghastly.

“What you doin’ up in here, Lee?”

She takes it as an accusation and sucks her teeth. “Hell you think I’m doin’? Same damn thing everybody else doin’, Cal. Same fuckin’ thing you doin’.” Her voice, like the rest of her, is cracked and worn but familiar.

This is not the first time they’ve crossed paths—it’s nearly impossible to run the same streets and not—but it has been some two years, and Calvin is at a loss for words for his former fiancé. It should come as no real surprise to see her here, and yet he can hardly believe his own eyes and ears.

“Dag, Leena,” he whispers. “What happened?” As soon as it leaves his mouth, he wishes it hadn’t.

“Ain’t nothin’ *happen*. I stopped doin’ my thing and got fuckin’ high again. Simple as that.”

But in Calvin’s mind if there’d ever been a success story to come out of the East Side it was Leena Jackson’s, who went from being one of the few people around here to ever see the inside of a college as a student, to smoking that Ready Rock so hard her name became legend: Lean Leena the Crack Pipe Cleana, they called her. Eventually, Leena got herself in good with the Dy-no-Mite dope crew from the Bronx, who in the early Nineties came to East Baltimore waving semi-automatics until 22nd and Barclay was theirs. And Leena Jackson quickly learned that she also loved her some dope. The

New Yorkers plied her with so much of the stuff that Leena hardly knew what it meant to be dopesick. Shot after shot, bag after bag after bundle she put in her veins, fifteen, sometimes twenty, shots a day. Hers was not a gradual descent but an all-out face-first dive into the endeavor, so that after a year or so of jamming that spike into every part of her body where there might be a tiny tributary of blood, Leena Jackson, at only twenty-two, was as cruelly wrecked as any old-timer on these streets has ever been. Scabbed and scarred, wasted and wraithlike, Leena, incredibly, kept it up another six years, shuffling up and down Greenmount offering two-dollar alley blowjobs to any passer-by, most of whom had the good sense to decline. Then one day she was gone, and when she returned a little over a year later, half the men in the neighborhood wanted to know who she was. “Leena? Leena the Pipe Cleana? Naw, can’t be.” But it was, and Leena would come around once, maybe twice, a year to visit her family, making sure that at least a few people took notice: “Got-damn, you lookin’ good, girl.” “Hell, you a inspiration to us all, Leena. If you can do it, anybody can.”

Leena Jackson was one of the few who chased her sobriety nearly as hard as she chased that blast. She wanted it, and it suited her. Ask any fiend out there a few years back, and they’d tell you if anybody did, Leena Jackson had this shit licked. “She must know something we don’t.” In time, though, her visits to Barclay became longer and more frequent. She began asking after old friends, wanting to know who was still running and who’d gotten out. Where was this one and how was that one? Then over Newports and laughs with old friends, Leena began to flirt with it, under the guise of simple curiosity: “So who got the best shit these days?” “Who running 22nd Street now?” “Them

New York boys still around with that morphine shit?” “That East Side coke still the best in town?” Wasn’t long till Leena Jackson got herself a haircut.

But back before the crack and dope, back when there was just weed and forties of Olde English, Leena Jackson and Calvin Thompson, for nearly a whole year, had been a couple.

“You all right?” Calvin asks.

“I’m makin’ it,” she tells the floor. “You?”

Calvin shrugs a shoulder. “Been better. Worse too, I suppose.”

“Can always be worse,” she says. Then, “Been hearing some things, Cal. That’s why I called you out.”

“What you heard?”

Using her tongue, Leena pushes out her cheek, looks around. “Heard you got somethin’ goin’ with that bitch from up the way.”

Calvin hunches his shoulders again and glances around to see who might be listening. While there appears to be no one even capable of actually comprehending anything, he knows all too well that around here the walls have ears, large ones, able to discern the faintest whisper of gossip, particularly when it involves money.

“Now tell me you ain’t that damn stupid, Cal, that you gonna go and try some shit like that.”

“What you mean?” he asks in a deliberately lowered voice, hoping she’ll follow his lead.

“Don’t play dumb. I’m tryna look out for you.”

Calvin almost smiles, as though Leena Jackson might actually be thinking about someone other than Leena Jackson.

“What? Why you lookin’ at me like that? I’m serious. I ain’t tryna get nothin’, Cal. I’m just lookin’ out is all, ‘cause it sound like nobody else is, including you.”

“How you heard?”

“Seen a friend of yours.”

“Who?”

“Don’t matter. Point is, Cal, you bein’ a damn fool. You ain’t got it in you to do this type shit. You wanna end up down the pen?”

He resents her saying that he doesn’t have it in him, resents them all for still not accepting him being as much of a dope fiend now as any one of them.

“I’m sayin’, Cal,” she tells the floor, “you better than that is all.”

Better than what? Better than her? Better than old Red back there, or any one of these half-dead people lying around the floor here? “C’mon now, Lee.”

“I’m serious, Cal,” she says. “You don’t need to keep doin’ this shit. You can get out if you want. It ain’t that hard.” She snuffles, wipes her nose with the back of her hand.

“And I can help.”

Calvin lets a tiny smile form on his lips. “You? How’s that, Leena?”

“I’m fixin’ to get out this shit again, too. I got me a plan.”

“Kind of plan?”

“A plan to get my ass off dope and out of B-mo for fuckin’ good.”

“How?”

“Going out the County to kick this shit at my sister’s place, and then I’m leaving out for good.”

“Where you goin’?”

“South. Alabama, where my people from,” she says. “What? What you smiling about? I’m for real.”

“The hell you gone do with yourself down South?”

“Got it all worked out, Cal. My aunt still down there on a farm. Daddy used to take us down there when we was little. Nothing but trees and grass and shit far as you can see, Cal. Nothing like this shit,” she says, and gestures toward the street. “And best of all, Cal, ain’t no muthafuckahs tryna sell you dope and coke soon as you come out the house in the damn morning. Tell me how you supposed to stay clean when it’s in your face twenty-four seven. You can’t.”

“A farm?” Calvin says wistfully. “You talking about going straight up country, huh?”

Leena’s expression suddenly turns angry. Her brow furrows and her mouth tightens. “Fuck you, Cal. I’m serious,” she says.

Calvin raises his hands in mock surrender. “I ain’t say you wasn’t. I’m just sayin’, it’s hard to picture you on a farm. That’s all.” Calvin can no more imagine Leena Jackson on a farm in Alabama than himself. Nonetheless, he admires her for trying, for having a plan, despite how unlikely its success might be.

Leena relaxes, smiles vaguely, perhaps embarrassed by her own outburst. “I know it sound a little crazy, but anything gotta be better than this shit, right? I gotta do something, Cal. My aunt getting on in years and need some help, and she got plenty of work to keep me busy at first. That’s what you need in the beginning—to stay busy. Otherwise, all you be thinkin’ about is that blast.” She hesitates a moment, fixes her gaze on Calvin, brings a forced smile to her lips, and says, more quietly, “We could have a nice, simple life, Cal.”

It takes a second to register.

“*We?*”

“That’s what I’m tryna say, Cal. You could come too. We could be there together, help each other through this shit. I know you ready to be out too, Cal. Things ain’t gettin’ no better for you, neither.”

Calvin nods faintly. Of course he’s ready, and Leena’s offer is mildly appealing. Getting out of Baltimore to live somewhere where things are simpler and quieter sounds almost idyllic. But doing it with Leena Jackson is a whole other story.

“You and me, we had something, Cal. Remember? We did. And we can get that shit back too if we could just go back to who we was back then. Back before all this mess.”

That’s the dope talking, Calvin thinks, putting its rosy haze over the past, over reality. Truth is, Calvin and Leena had had something. But what they had was as young and naïve as they themselves and likely wouldn’t have lasted much longer even if Leena hadn’t become the neighborhood party girl when they were still together, or hadn’t found

her way to more than one other man while she was still stringing Calvin along like some goofy puppy. But all that was so long ago that it hardly seemed worth remembering now.

“I done it before, Cal. You seen me. I know what it takes to beat this shit, and I know how I fucked up by comin’ back around here. But I learned from it. I know what I gotta do now, and I can help you.”

Calvin’s mind is elsewhere, curious about just how much dope he’d managed to squirrel away in the corner of that bag when he dumped it with Red. Might be nothing but dust, but then it might also be enough for a taste, a small shot to quiet the noise and put him down until the sun comes back up and he can have a fix for real. Suddenly his stomach sinks and his heart thuds faster until he can slide a hand into his pocket and lightly touch a finger to the two bags still resting safely inside. He breathes a small sigh of relief, relaxes some. Now he simply needs to extricate himself from this awkward reunion.

Leena purses her lips, tips back her head. “What you got?” she asks, and throws a quick glance at Calvin’s pants pocket. “You holdin’?”

“Nah, I ain’t got nothin’. Did all my shit up with Red. I was about to ask you what you had.”

Leena is skeptical, but Calvin stares her down until she backs off.

They fall silent for some moments until Leena scratches her head and says, “What you doin’ now?”

“What you mean?”

“I mean, where you goin’ now?”

Calvin shrugs a shoulder. "Sleep, I guess."

"You still stayin' on 21st?"

Calvin's first thought is to lie and say that he is back home in his daddy's basement, that things for him are again on the up and up, but he fears Leena either already knows better or will be able to tell that he is lying. "Still in the same place," he says reluctantly. "But I'm going back home soon."

"Home? What home?"

"*My* home. My daddy's house. He needs some help, so soon as I get myself together some, I'm a go back home."

Knitting her brow in confusion, Leena says, "Thought your daddy was leaving out for the County. Going into one of them nursing home places."

"Nursing home?" Calvin shakes his head. "Naw, he ain't that bad off yet. He just a little senile is all."

"Damn, Cal, nobody even told you? That's fucked up."

"Tell me what, Lee? What you talking about?"

"I'm talking about your daddy, Cal. He moving out the house, going someplace out the County."

"Where you heard that?"

"Heard it from Anthony and them this morning. Said they was walking past and seen some whiteboy moving shit out the house."

"Out *my* house?"

She nods. "Fact, Anthony said he had some words with your daddy."

“Words? Kind of words?”

She shrugs. “You know Anthony. Something about hiring whiteboys instead of him and his drunk-ass crew.”

A strange coldness pumps through Calvin’s blood. “This today, you saying?”

“Yep. This morning.”

Calvin’s expression slumps, his brow furrows, and he presses his mouth closed. “Dang. Ain’t that some shit.” A million thoughts occur to Calvin at once, and, frenzied, he says, “I gotta step, Lee. I gotta see what’s up.”

“Hold up a minute.” Leena looks at the floor, glances around, and leans closer. “I need a favor, Cal. Lemme stay with you tonight.”

“With *me*?”

“Got no place else.” She pushes an errant bit of hair off her forehead.

“For real? What happened to where you was stayin’?”

“Ain’t had no place for a while now. Got put out a few weeks back, so I just been bouncing from place to place.” She stretches her lips to one side of her mouth and gnaws at a flap of cheek skin. “Just tonight?”

He can’t say no, partly because he can think of no believable excuse in time, but mostly because he doesn’t have it in him to turn her away, despite the enormity of the wrench she has just thrown into his plans.

“I can just curl up in the corner, Cal. You won’t even know I’m there.”

“It ain’t that, Lee, it’s just—”

“Or,” she says, and looks around, “we could have us a little party for old times’ sake.” She pats her back pocket, looks around, and whispers, “I gots two vials.”

“Dag,” he says quietly, then runs a hand down his mug, shakes his head faintly, and sighs. “Something I gotta do first,” he says. “Walk with me,” and the two slip, practically arm in arm, from the dim light of Red’s place into the ginger glow of sodium streetlamps.

CHAPTER VIII

In spite of all else that occupies Paul's mind, her face—her eyes and smile especially—continues to hover on the fringe of his thoughts, a tiny streak of light on an otherwise dim horizon. But he is wary of it, too, of her. Of intimacy and intimacy's potential to become dependency. Women hold a certain power over him that no man ever could, a way of inflicting a particular pain that a hundred beatings from his father could never equal. Yet he is at least dimly aware that some of that pain—most, if not all—is his own and that women merely possess the ability to dig into that wound with their salty hands and stir things up as needed. They've all, at one time or another, inflicted their special brand of agony and left him wounded and writhing and wondering why.

Paradoxically, it is only by letting down his walls of defense from time to time that Paul has ever felt anything like closeness or love.

What he expects to find here, he isn't certain, but he continues to linger on the dusky street outside the closed coffee shop, waiting for something, for her perhaps.

"Yo, you got some change, mister?" says a voice. Paul looks down to see a boy—eight, maybe nine at best—holding out a hand and using the other to hold the waist of his oversized jeans from slipping down. His hair is unkempt—nappy or peasy they called it when Paul was young—and his skin seems darkened with a semi-permanent grime.

It takes Paul a moment to realize that the boy is asking for money. "What do you need it for?"

The boy looks at the street. "For my m—" He cuts himself short. "I'm hungry. My baby sister hungry too."

A spark of anger flashes through Paul as he imagines a mother sending her little boy out to hustle dope money.

When the boy realizes that Paul hasn't yet said no, his hooded eyes brighten some, and he adds, "Please, mister? We hungry."

"What if I buy you something to eat?" Paul looks west toward the Safeway on St. Paul.

The boy considers the proposal and seems nearly about to agree but then thinks better of it. "A little money be better."

"Why?"

The boy readjusts his pants, hiking them higher, only to have them slip right back down. Then he glances over his shoulder and, somewhat hesitantly, says, "Mom need it."

"Looks like you need a belt too."

"Had one. Somebody took it."

Paul lifts his shirt and undoes his buckle. "Here," he says, pulling it swiftly through the loops so that it makes a small snapping sound.

The boy hunches, turns away, and covers his face with his one free hand.

"Easy," Paul says. "It's all right. I'm just giving you my belt to use. To *have*."

The boy peeks out from his bent arm shelter, inspects the weathered black leather belt and the faded silver of the buckle, and then looks up at Paul in near disbelief. He takes one end gently, gingerly, as though it were a deadly snake. "What you gonna use?"

"I have another one at home."

The boy looks at Paul's jeans, which are snug enough that they pose no real threat of slipping, then he looks down at his own jeans, shiny with dirt, and begins feeding the belt through. Each time he passes through a new loop he looks up at Paul as if to ask whether it's still OK.

"Where's your mother at?"

"Home," the boy says, drawing out the O so that it sounds something more like *haiome*.

"Where's home?"

"Twenny-first."

"Kinda late to be out here all by yourself, ain't it?"

The boy shrugs, readjusts his pants, pulls the excess leather through the buckle.

"We need to make a new hole in the leather so it stays on. Take it off for a second and I'll fix it."

He hesitates and looks at Paul warily, a cat about to turn tail and run.

"I'll give it back. I promise."

Chewing on his lower lip, he removes the belt and hands it back to Paul, who uses a small pocket knife to punch in a new hole.

"Where *your* mother at?" the boy asks.

"My mother? Probably at home too, but I can't say for sure."

The boy looks up abruptly, lets his brow fall into a questioning frown. "Ain't you scared?"

"Scared? Of what?"

“Scared that maybe she gone?”

Paul furrows his brow.

“When Momma ain’t at home sometimes it mean she in trouble. She might be hurt. Or down Eager Street. One time she ain’t come home for four days. Me and Chenise—that’s my little sister—ain’t know where she was the whole time.”

“What’d you do? How’d you eat?”

The boy shrugs.

Paul thinks of cops, home visits from Child Protective Services, group homes, foster homes, another family split apart by parental neglect and bureaucratic indifference.

Paul himself once entertained the idea of calling an abuse hotline number he’d seen on an afternoon TV commercial. But the thought of betraying his father to the authorities, of his father possibly getting into trouble for something that probably wouldn’t actually be considered abuse, pained him so much that he lay on the floor of his room, crying silently into his hands. That the man was angry and sometimes prone to violent outbursts was just his way. His father had loved him the best he could and made do with what he’d had and what he’d known. Paul was done with blame and impotent anger, and with using any of it as an excuse for anything. That’s what those therapists had suggested—that what he needed was to bring it all back up and feel it again, one open-palm or backhanded slap at a time. But what good would that do?

Paul has an odd urge to embrace the boy in a hug but knows better. Not here. “Follow me,” he says, and leads the boy into the alley and around to the back of the coffee shop where there stands a new (and therefore out of place) wooden privacy fence

surrounding the dumpsters in the small section of alley belonging to the coffee shop. Paul reaches over and undoes the gate's slide bolt. Just inside the fence but not yet inside the dumpsters are several large, almost-clear bags filled with muffins, cookies, pastries, and breads. "Thought there might be something back here," Paul says proudly. "I know it's not great, but at least it's a little something for you and your sister. And I can help you bring some of it home if you want," he adds before realizing he is talking to no one. He turns fully around, pokes his head back into the alley, but the boy is gone, hardly leaving a trace, save the newly loose-fitting feeling of Paul's waistline. He hoists his pants from the back and takes a seat on an empty cardboard box. Putting a cigarette in his mouth, he lets it hang there, unlit. He thinks of his mother, or rather, a vaguely shameful feeling finds him and her visage enters his mind's eye. *Ain't you scared?* he hears the boy asking, and it occurs to Paul that maybe he should be, that instead of obsessing about a long-absent father, he should be paying more attention to his still-present mother.

Soon he'll call her, maybe arrange a visit, try to be a dutiful son. He doubts she even knows that he's back in town.

He stands, brushes off the seat of his pants, puts the cigarette behind his ear, and walks back into the pinkish halo of the streetlamps. He looks east along 25th, south across Guilford until the rows opposite each other meld into one indiscernible blur somewhere near North Avenue. He thinks for a moment of searching for the boy, but he wouldn't know where to begin, which dark street to follow.

Paul lights his cigarette, bent now from the curve of his ear, blows out a thin stream of smoke, hunches his shoulders against the night chill, and starts across 25th. He

stays on Guilford Avenue until 23rd Street, where the houses turn back to flat, narrow federal-style, many with black window holes for eyes and dark gaping doorways for mouths, looking up only every so often to be certain he has become no one's mark.

When he finally stops and assesses his whereabouts, he sees that his feet, as though one step ahead of his thoughts, have carried him back to the Thompson home. Those earlier beers have worn thin, leaving his head tight and his mouth dry. He needs sleep, something he hasn't had a lot of since his return. Sleeping alone has so far proven more difficult than he'd anticipated. He'd thought he'd welcome it, the freedom of solitude, no one asking when he's coming to bed, or if. Instead he finds it even more difficult to carry his exhausted body to bed where, alone in the dark, he is, well, alone in the dark.

He's about to sit down on Mr. Thompson's front stoop to finish his smoke, when he catches movement in the corner of his eye. He turns to see a man and woman walking toward him, the man holding a small parcel against his side. The sight of them makes Paul uncomfortably aware that he is somewhere he doesn't belong. This is his city, but it is not his neighborhood, not his block, and he has no business being here.

The two notice him now, and they slow their pace. The man mutters something to the woman, leaves her seated on a stoop a few houses up, and comes toward Paul.

Paul's first instinct is to run, but he fears how it will look.

Tentatively, the man comes closer and then stops a few feet from Paul.

The two nod once at each other, Paul quickly averting his gaze and scrunching his toes, and then the man asks, "Got a extra smoke?"

Paul nods, reaches into his pack, hands one over. "Need one for her, too?" he asks and gestures up the block.

"That'd be cool, if you got it." The man puts one behind his ear and lights the other. "Look here," he says and holds out a flat package wrapped in grocery bags. "Got some real nice steaks here I'm tryna get rid of. I can't keep them cause they gonna go bad, so I'm tryna get just a few dollars."

Paul appreciates that the man doesn't have an elaborate tale about why he has them and needs to get rid of them. And while part of Paul wants to buy them simply to help the man, who seems somehow nicer and less threatening than many others around here, he has no use for steak, doesn't even know how he would cook them in his place. "No, thanks," he says. "I don't really have any place to cook them."

The man considers this through an exhalation of smoke. "You ain't got a broiler in your oven?"

"Don't know. Never looked."

The man studies Paul a moment and nods his head a few times. Paul swallows a dry lump in his throat, waits for whatever is next. When nothing comes, he stands, tells the man he has to be getting on home.

The man thanks Paul for the cigarettes, tells him he'll be seeing him around.

CHAPTER IX

Day Two

Baltimore sleeps, cloaked in a bruised morning sky. A lone police cruiser eases quietly along North, slows at Greenmount, then continues on to Barclay Street and turns right. Save that single slow-rolling vehicle, the streets are still and quiet. The barkers and touts have retired their voices, the slingers have stashed their packages, and the fiends—the lucky ones, anyway—are still fast asleep, at least for another hour or so. Even the stickup boys pose no real threat at this time of day. If it weren't for the sagging architecture, the boarded or cindered doors and windows, the flotsam lining the curbs and sidewalks, these streets would seem, in the absence of people, to nearly resemble their old self.

Looking past the blight, one can almost see backward across forty years to the vestiges of another era, one of polished stoops, pointed brick and new Formstone, freshly painted front doors, and clean, intact glass. One can practically picture a neighborhood of mixed race, proud of its working-class rightness, a place where a man with a strong back and dreams of a home and wife and children might decide finally to settle down. Such was the case with Otis Thompson, son of an Alabaman sharecropper, who arrived to Baltimore in 1950 for his slice of the dream. Baltimore was still a booming industrial town, where work in forgeries and mills, on docks and in breweries, for both whites and blacks, was plentiful, and word had it that a black man who wasn't afraid of a little hard work could do all right for himself in the northernmost Southern and southernmost Northern city.

When Otis first arrived, because of still-existent Jim Crow laws, he had little choice but to settle first in a part of town already known as a black slum—Gay Street and North Avenue on the city's far Eastside. He found temporary work in an iron forgery and took a small room in a carved-up rowhouse-turned-boarding-house just off Broadway, which served as his home for nearly two years. He worked, he saved, he steered clear of the temptation of whores and juke joints and card games, and by 1952, when he met Francis, a sixteen-year-old churchgoer who lived with her family in a Westside rowhome, Otis Thompson had himself a small locked box filled with nearly enough cash for a down payment on a home.

Like many black families, Mr. and Mrs. Thompson searched for homes in neighborhoods they could afford but ones as far away from the slums of Gay Street as possible, preferably in one of the more mixed neighborhoods Otis had heard talk of, places where, apparently, white and black lived side by side almost harmoniously. Just north of North Avenue and south of historically white Peabody Heights and Charles Village was Barclay, a clean and quiet enclave of working German, Irish, and now a few black families. Otis and Francis found themselves a two-story brick-fronted Federal that with some pinching and scraping they could just about afford, and in the summer of 1960, Francis pregnant with Carla, the Thompson family moved into 442 East 22nd Street, a modest two-story home a half-block's walk to the stores on Greenmount Avenue and two blocks above North Avenue.

The Thompsons were one of only two black families on the block that year, but in just two more years the neighborhood boasted 75% black homeownership, and by 1970,

only a handful of whites remained—those who simply didn't have the means to flee their hard-earned nests and begin anew in neighboring, still-white suburbs, or those who simply refused, angrily holding fast to the idea that Barclay—that *Baltimore*—would someday return to its white roots. Those who could hightailed it north across 25th or farther east to the County, and almost overnight Otis Thompson witnessed a drastic change in his neighborhood. Homeownership pride was soon lost to a graveyard marked by countless For Sale signs, and, later, to cheap rental units owned by soon-to-be slumlords. Then the city dropped the Jones Falls Expressway right through the center of town, further dividing the streets along racial lines, halting travel, and therefore much of the commerce, all along Greenmount Avenue, and cutting off center city access to the poorest Eastside dwellers. Barclay would withstand the blight longer than some, but by the start of the 1980s, when the very industrial economy that had brought so many to Baltimore seeking work crumbled like a house of cards, 22nd Street between Guilford Avenue and Barclay Street lay beneath the rubble.

Now a light breeze blows a faded yellow burger wrapper along the sidewalk in short spurts until it catches on the Thompson's front stoop and rests there. Upstairs, Otis Thompson's snores lighten and become deep breaths. He tosses and turns against the dying of night and the arrival of morning. Opening his eyes only partway, he sees not his present surroundings but those of his childhood—likely the residuals of a dreamscape from which he has just emerged. But this time Otis allows himself to drift further inward. He usually steers around the wreckage and continues down the road, refusing even a

glance in its direction. But this morning, he not only slows down, he closes his eyes tighter, eases to the shoulder for a closer look, and allows a scene to take vivid shape.

It is summer in North Carolina, the sun high and searing, landscape brittle and scrubby. He is running. Fast as he can, no feeling left to speak of below the waist, yet he manages to keep putting one foot before the other, focusing on the sounds of his footfalls tapping the dirt road and the one-two rhythm of his breaths. And though he is beginning to feel sick and weak, fearing his body might give out at any moment and leave him stranded on the side of the road, there on the horizon, in view now but blurred by sweat and dust and heat rising off the road in thin waves, is the long white clapboard farmhouse where his father goes to work every morning, though exactly what the man does there Otis isn't certain. He's never actually been to the house—his father forbade any of the children from ever going there, warning that old Bob Brown didn't take kindly to little nigger children being on his property.

But he had to take his chances today, Bob Brown or not. Something was wrong with Mama, and they needed Daddy home. He'd been outside in the yard when he'd heard a deep thud and a pot clanging against the floor. She'd fallen. And though she'd come around, sweaty and dazed, she'd been unable to get up or do much of anything other than lie there holding her belly and moaning, muttering things he couldn't understand. "I'ma go git Daddy," he'd said, once his sister was at their mother's side. Despite his mother's weak protestations, he'd bolted out of the house and down the road, legs spinning wildly, threatening to send him face first into the dirt, but refusing to stop until he reached the Brown house.

When he finally does, nearly at the point of collapse himself, he runs straight around back, past the barn and under the dappling shade of an old elm, until he is standing before a vast expanse of neatly rowed fields where he expects to find his sweat-soaked father swinging a pickaxe or manning a plow. But there is no one out here, and no sign that anyone has been recently.

Panicked, he sprints back toward the house, and passing the barn he hears what sounds like soft voices inside. He stops, slows down his breathing, and listens closely. It is the unmistakable deep bass thrum of a man's voice mingling with the spastic treble of a woman's, he is sure. He holds his breath. "No," he thinks he hears. "Oh, no, no, no." His heart races faster. Something is wrong here. Someone is being hurt. And though he fears that at any moment a large white man wearing a wide brimmed hat will emerge shouting and holding a shotgun, Otis steps forward gingerly and pulls back the barn door. He looks around and sees no one. It occurs to him that the voices, which have quieted for the moment, might not be coming from the barn but from a small building just behind, a old slatted outhouse-turned-tool-shed. He races around back.

Those same sounds again, only now they seem less like words and more like indiscernible grunts. Neither is saying any actual words that he can discern but in unison are moaning and grunting. It grows louder and rises higher, building, gaining speed and momentum. It reminds him of Mama doing the washing, how she'd start out scrubbing each piece slowly then gradually go faster and harder for the last twenty or so seconds before she finished. Then she'd sigh, wipe her brow, and start on the next piece.

Mama.

Gently, he steps toward the door, nudges it with a finger. And there it is: Daddy standing, pants around his ankles, thighs and buttocks slick with sweat, muscles tightening and contracting, while a woman, folded in half over a crate and naked from the waist down, continues to moan as though she might be in pain, similar to how his older sister had sounded when she'd given birth. If not for having seen dogs doing something similar and been told that that was how they made pups, he wouldn't understand the scene at all. It seems at first violent, as though his father is intentionally hurting the woman, which is somehow better than what he is actually doing, which Otis knows from what an older boy told him grown-ups did at night—"Mens takes womens up to they bed and pees between they legs."

He has no sense of how long he stands there, lost in the odd movements, in the flashes of bare skin. He's never seen a woman's leg that high up, and having forgotten why he is here, he can't stop gawking. Something has taken over and rendered him mute and paralyzed, for when the woman catches sight of him and lets out a shrill scream completely unlike those he's so far heard, and when his father, still naked, suddenly pulls back and yells, "Boy, what the good god damn you doin'?" he is unable to move or think or speak. He is aware only that his mouth hangs open and that he might want to say something but can't.

The woman turns over and backs up, trying in vain to quickly cover herself, while Daddy, struggling to get his pants back up on his waist, yells at Otis to get back outside that door, which finally breaks his reverie. "But, Daddy, it's Mama. She fell down. She sick, Daddy."

His father's eyes widen, his nostrils flare, and he presses his lips together in a way the boy has never before seen, as though he is about to cry or collapse like Mama did. His father looks at the woman, whom the boy now recognizes as Miss Jenny, a friend of Mama's who sometimes drops by the house with a fresh pie or a loaf of bread, and he opens his mouth to speak. But like his son, no words come. He turns on his heel and flees down the hill to the road, Otis just a step or two behind the whole way.

But they are too late. Mama's body is in a heap where he'd left her, sister and brother each holding a hand and wailing.

Daddy drops to his knees and hugs his limp wife, whispering apologies through his tears. Then, still kneeling, he looks up and says, "Forgive me. Please, dear Lawd, forgive me. I never meant no harm."

And though he still couldn't form words—it would be two years before he would utter another—Otis knew that his father had killed his mother.

Presently, Otis sits up in bed, plants his feet firmly on the floor. No point dwelling in the past. He stands, and then scratches and yawns his way to the bathroom.

When he eases down the steps, bones still stiff from sleep, Carla greets him. She is seated in Otis' chair, her hands wrapped around a mug of coffee and her gaze turned toward the window. "Sleep all right?" she asks.

"Ain't had a good night sleep since your mama died." Otis clears his throat. "You here early."

"Wanted to be sure you didn't need me here for anything first. And I wanted to see how much progress the mover made yesterday."

Otis studies his daughter for a moment. There is something else, he decides, something she isn't saying. "Why you really here?"

She sips from her mug. "I saw Cal this morning, Daddy."

Otis widens his eyes. "Where?"

"Walking up Greenmount."

"Sure it was him?"

"He's my brother, Daddy. I'm sure."

"Well, what'd he say? How'd he look? The hell was he doin'?"

"We didn't speak."

"Why the hell not? You know I been worried."

"Cause all he'd do is ask me for money, just like always. And I refuse to help Calvin kill himself. That's enabling."

Otis waves a hand. "Ain't enabling just to ask how he doing, is it?" He shakes his head. "How'd he look?"

"Same as always. Thin. Lost."

"How long ago?"

"Earlier. It doesn't matter—"

"How damn long ago was it?" Otis demands.

Carla, a tenseness—or perhaps it is annoyance—now evident in the lines around her mouth, says, "About an hour or so, I guess. But, Daddy, don't get yourself all worked up over this. I'm sure he was just out early trying to get his fix."

Otis removes an old sweater—lumpy and shiny with age—from the small downstairs closet. He pulls it on, fastens the two remaining sweater buttons, and says, “I’m going for a walk.”

As though practiced, Carla gets up from the chair and moves toward the front door. “Daddy, he’s long gone by now. And besides, we need to be here for the mover.” She is blocking the door now, arms folded across her chest, her chin and lips sticking out almost defiantly.

Why at this very moment, he isn’t certain, but it is clear to him that he must, right now, go out and try to find Calvin. It’s what he should have done years ago when all this started, what he should have been doing all along. Instead of giving in to the impotence and the anger, he should have been out there trying to bring his boy back home. For too long he has believed it out of his hands, something beyond his control—fate, destiny, atonement for his own misgivings. He caused this, he set this ball rolling all those years ago. And he now understands that it is only he who can fix it.

“I can’t let you leave, Daddy,” says Carla.

Otis shakes his head and gently moves his daughter aside, opens the front door, steps out, and surveys the neighborhood from his front stoop, as though fully expecting Calvin to round the corner at any moment. But the street is still quiet and empty, save a young man with a duffel bag making his way west, probably on his way to catch the St. Paul Street bus to work somewhere. Otis leans out and cranes his head right, squinting toward Greenmount, but still there is no sign of his boy.

A fast food wrapper at the base of his front steps, Otis bends to pick it up, and then gives a final glance about the streets. When he turns back, defeated, Carla is at the screen door, her head tipped to one side, looking at her father with something like pity. “Come back inside, Daddy. You’re not going to find him today.”

Squeezing the balled litter in his right hand, Otis mumbles, “No thanks to you, we ain’t,” and immediately wishes he could take it back, or, at the very least, clean it up.

He has always been this way with Carla, harder on her than on Calvin or the others. Tough love, he’s heard it called in recent years. But it worked. Look at her now, strong and successful, smart and savvy with words, a big shot down at that firm. He’d seen these things in her when she was just a girl—potential, drive, a knack for negotiation—and made it his business to see that these traits flourished, that they weren’t stolen by some boy from the next block or by smoking grass and drinking beer on the stoop like so many of these girls around here. If she didn’t know growing up, surely she knows now why he was always this way with her.

He could be nicer, of course, could show his appreciation her more, could compliment her once in a while, tell her how proud he is of her. Francis was always after him to be nicer. “She needs to be told you love her once in a while, you know. Can’t just pick, pick, pick all the time, Otis.”

And in the same thought another occurs to him: that neither Francis nor Carla could possibly understand how all this mess with Calvin is his fault. That day at Pimlico, the sure-win bet he never should have made.

He goes back inside, folds down into his favorite chair, the one Calvin called his Archie Bunker chair, and sighs. “My son,” he says and points at the front door, surprising them both. He fights something welling in his throat and nose. Then, frustrated and spent, he shrugs and falls limp, lets his gaze return to the floor.

Carla places a hand on her father’s shoulder. Then, in a moment that at first feels as strange to him as it seems to her, Otis places his hand on his daughter’s, kisses it once, and gives it a tender squeeze.

Carla squeezes back, says, “Maybe before we leave for Worthington, we can take a walk around the neighborhood and see if we see him.”

CHAPTER X

1982. Pimlico's grandstand has filled in the short time Paul's been in the men's room. Lines have formed at all the concession counters, and at the teller windows, with those Wild West bank-style bars, the shades have all been raised. Moving quickly across the vast room, he spots his father's large head, a glass of beer beside him.

"Did you get your ice cream?" his father asks.

"I decided to wait. I didn't want to spend any of my money just yet." He shoots a look at the half-empty glass of beer. His father isn't supposed to be drinking, at least not until things at home are stable again. He'd promised. But maybe beer didn't count.

Sport coat off now and draped over the chair back, sleeves rolled halfway to reveal a faded blue-green U.S.M.C. tattoo on one forearm and the ubiquitous eagle, globe, and anchor insignia on the other, his father thumps a heavy finger on the pages of the *Form* and says, "Take a look at this four horse and tell me what you see."

Paul follows his father's finger down the column of numbers and abbreviations. He knows what most of them mean, his father having taught him years earlier, but his own handicapping strategy still consists of some indefinable combination of horse names, current odds, and where the horses are from. He can't be bothered to study and compare workout and race times the way his father does, which has never seemed all that effective anyway. Like most handicappers, his father loses much more than he wins.

"Not too impressive, right?" Before he can answer, his father adds, "You're missing something, though. Look closer."

He looks harder, hoping the answer his father wants might reveal itself in among all that minuscule newsprint.

“Remember what I taught you now. Look at all of it.”

Suddenly something catches his eye. “Oh, here,” he says, almost proudly. “He won his last race at Monmouth. With pretty good times.”

“What else? What’s different about that?”

Paul stares until the SLY abbreviation catches his eye. “Oh, it was in the slop.” He frowns his confusion. “But today’s not sloppy.”

His father waits, a brow raised slightly, jaw muscle flexing in and out with the rhythm of a heartbeat.

“So then he should be faster on a fast track.”

Paul’s father offers his son a single nod, neither proud nor otherwise, and then says, “Right. There’s hope for you yet, pal.”

“What are his odds, Dad?”

“Good question. And another reason why I like him so much. He’s at sixteen-to-one, which means if I can pair him up with something else decent, we’re talking a nice exacta to start the day.” More quietly, he adds, “Might pull your old dad out of his slump early.”

A nervous twinge travels from Paul’s stomach to his chest to his throat, where it seems to settle. To win big you have to play big. “Gotta be in it to win it,” his father likes to say, a borrowed phrase from a recent Maryland lottery campaign.

His father drains the last of the beer in a single gulp. “While you were gone I was thinking about how your grandpa started taking me to the track when I was about your age. Right here, in fact.” A half-smile emerges in the curled corners of his father’s lips. “I remember the first time he let me get drunk with him. He’d had a winning day—we both did, come to think of it—and he asked me if I wanted a beer.” He taps the table. “That’s right, that was the day I put him onto a horse I liked. He didn’t see anything to like about it, but I finally convinced him. Horse won and we both left richer.”

“How old were you?”

“About sixteen, I guess.” He waits a beat. “How old are you now?”

Paul’s father never remembers things like ages or birthdays; often he barely remembered conversations from one day to the next. “Thirteen next month.”

“Right, right. Thirteen. Good age. Not much longer till you’re having one or two with *your* old man.”

“Nope, not long,” Paul agrees, and coerces a smile. While he longs to have that kind of relationship with his father, he doesn’t believe he ever will.

His father lowers his chin and eyes Paul over the tops of his reading glasses. His eyes are puffy and bloodshot, as though he’s been napping. “So, how the girls at school treating you?”

“All right, I guess,” he lies. In truth, the girls at school, especially the really pretty ones, make him nervous. In their presence he grows shy, embarrassed of his stick-out ears and the high pitch of his voice.

“Got a girlfriend?” His father is especially talkative today. Usually during this time his father demands silence.

He doesn’t, but he tells his father he has a few.

“Thatta boy. And how about those grades, you keeping them up? You won’t get in anywhere decent with Bs, you know.”

“I know. I’m doing pretty well this year.”

“How about ball? Next year’s high school, you know. Next year you’re out on the field with the big boys, not this PeeWee crap anymore.”

“I know. I’m ready.” He shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

Along with his five years in the service, during which time he’d served proudly in the Korean War, his father had also spent his other defining years on the high school and semi-pro football fields in and around Baltimore. He’d even been approached by a scout for the Colts but had been too badly injured in combat—two bullets to his left leg and a hunk of mortar shrapnel in his right from two separate incidents—to ever play professionally. This fact, however, never stopped him from boasting about it regularly after a few Manhattans: “Could’ve played under Ewbank, you know. I could’ve blocked for Unitas in his early years, back when they were just getting started.”

“You’re going out for the varsity club next year, I hope.”

Paul scrunches his toes. “It’s only my first year of high school, Dad. I can’t even go to tryouts until I’m a sophomore.” He is also small for his age and, admittedly, a little timid. The choice to play, however, has never seemed his to make.

“That’s bull. I was on the varsity squad when I was a freshman, and I started in every game at City when I was only fourteen. I don’t see why you shouldn’t too. Don’t tell me you’re chickenshit.”

“I’m not,” he says, and cringes at the girlish sound of his own voice.

“Good, then you’ll be out there for tryouts this summer.”

Once his father returns to handicapping, Paul stands, says, “I have to pee.”

“Again?”

“I didn’t pee before. I just walked around.”

His father tightens his mouth. “Just make sure you tip Mr. O if he’s in there.”

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The glow of morning at the window finds Paul’s eyes, but he squeezes them tighter, trying to return to something, to a dream or a memory, something unfinished. The track, that day out at a Pimlico with his father, it’s right there on the edge of his consciousness. He scrunches himself tighter, trying to return to sleep, but he knows it’s too late. It’s gone, the images having faded into the background of a thousand other memories, thoughts, and dreams.

He throws off the covers, sits up. His back is sore, the meat and sinew on either side of his spine angry with all his recent lifting and a lifetime of poor posture. A hot shower soothes it some, but it will likely stay with him all day.

Climbing into yesterday’s jeans from a pile of clothing beside the bed, something else occurs to him about that day—his father winning that first race big. He sits back down on the edge of the bed and closes his eyes.

He pictures the Pimlico grandstand men's room. On the counter beside the sinks and surrounding the tip basket in which his lonely dollar still sits are neatly arranged rows of aftershave, chewing gum, hairspray, antacids, mints, aspirin, effervescent tablets, plastic combs, and an old dented tin of black Kiwi shoe polish and a stained rag. He can smell the place, too: cheap cologne and fresh pink urine-activated deodorizing cakes. In one corner just past the sinks sits the old attendant reading the daily *Sun* paper. "Back so soon?" the man asks without looking up.

Paul smiles, embarrassed, and hurries into a stall. Once he's finished, he stands at the sinks watching the old man, and a sadness wells in him at the thought of the man having to sit in an enclosed room all day where other men, men like his father, pissed and shat and occasionally vomited.

Surprising himself, he asks, "You play the horses?"

The man peers over the top of the paper, then folds it into a rectangle, and drapes it over his thigh, as though preparing for something serious. He runs a hand over the top of his head. "Not much no more. Used to. Used to all the time, matter of fact. But you know what they say: a gambling man a broke man." He chuckles. "Why you asking? You betting on them horses already?"

"Sometimes. If there's one I really like."

"All right, then. Like anything in the first race?"

"Nothing, yet. My dad likes the four. But he only bets exactas." He shrugs. "I just thought you might know something."

“Maybe this old man know a little something. Fact, I just got a nice tip down the paddock.” The man stands, removes a dingy, once-white rag from his back pocket and leans over to wipe something off the sink. “But, see, I can’t bet it myself. So it ain’t worth nothing to me.”

“Why not?”

“Oh, just some bad luck in the past. Universe working itself out.” He shoves the rag back into his pocket. “One thing go up, another gotta come down. Actions and *reactions*.” He sighs. “If I’d a knowed that when I was your age, would’ve saved me a whole lot of trouble.”

Paul nods though he hardly follows the man’s line of thinking.

“You know something? You remind me a little of my boy.” The old man’s face seems to soften some, and his mouth folds into a sad kind of grin. “I bet you’re a good boy, right? You do good in school? Stay outta trouble?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thatta boy. You keep your nose clean, hear? Lots of pitfalls out there these days.”

Thinking of his father and realizing he is dawdling, Paul shuts off the tap. He wants to reach for a towel himself and spare them both the awkwardness of the moment, but the old man, seeming hardly aware of what he is doing, already has one in hand.

“Everything in life have consequences, son,” he repeats.

Paul waits for more, but the man appears lost in thought.

But then, brightening suddenly, he says, “Hey, how about you do old O.T. a favor and bring him a little drink. Then we can talk about that horse.”

“A drink? What kind of a drink?”

“Don’t much matter. Something with whiskey’d be nice.”

“Oh, I don’t know if they’ll let me do that. I’m just a kid.”

“Sure they will. Just go see Gus on the other side. Tell him Mr. O.T. sent you. He’ll do it. They don’t like the hired help out there on the floor nowadays.

The boy doesn’t fully grasp this, but he agrees to see what he can do about getting Mr. O.T. a drink. He’s gotten drinks for his father before, and this hardly seems all that different. “I’ll be right back.”

And now the memory fades nearly as quickly as it had come, giving way to the sight of warped floorboards and the sound of a siren rushing north past Paul’s building. Paul shrugs a shoulder. Why that day? Why does he keep returning to that particular day? What happened that day that was so different from any other? He rubs his temples, tries telling himself it doesn’t matter, that maybe he should in fact leave the past in the past.

Paul clears his throat and thinks of what he must do today. A sparkle of excitement flows through his midsection when he thinks of seeing the coffee shop girl, of asking her on an actual date. He changes into a clean pair of jeans from a pile three folded pairs tall, applies deodorant and brushes his teeth, throws on a clean t-shirt and a light jacket, and heads up Calvert.