

THAT BRIGHT & BEAUTIFUL DAY

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

That Bright & Beautiful Day

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That Bright & Beautiful Day is a magic realist novel submitted to the MFA in Creative Writing program at Rutgers-Camden. The novel examines the contemporary anti-war movement, as seen through the eyes of a Black young man named Eshu; he is named after the Yoruba god of language and mythmaking, and believes that he is an incarnation of that deity. Eshu watches his friends as they become more involved in protesting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and finds himself slowly being drawn in. After an act of civil disobedience goes horribly wrong, Eshu tries to protect his friends through the use of his “powers,” and accidentally provokes an even greater tragedy. Told mainly through flashbacks, the novel is Eshu’s attempt to make amends.

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*“People sit and they look at my albums
like a problem,
they try to solve em.
They don't know, it only leads the way
to a bright more positive day.
By itself, it's NOT the bright day
Sit up straight, and hear what I say
Fear and ignorance, I'm down for stoppin this,

but the bright day is your consciousness...”*

KRS-ONE

*“i am doing a dance/& you can watch/but it's not
entertainment*

you artists are so damn serious/dont you ever have fun?”

Ntozake Shange

for Christy

PROLOGUE

"I am but a messenger

Born to blow up..."

The Roots

My parents called me Eshu, after one of the gods of the Yoruba. They came up with this at the beginning of the end of the Seventies, as they had been late to the whole "Black is beautiful" thing and tried to make up for it with me, and rather than adding some extra letters into an already existing name and ending up with J'Marcus or Shawan they decided to go all out and picked, essentially at random, from a book called "50 Great African Names, Vol. 2." They had no idea what the name meant at first and I don't think it ever really mattered much to them. They didn't have it in them to think that if you call something, it might actually come. Eshu, god of language and mythmaking. Do names matter? I would prefer to say no, but the fact that I am telling this story lets me know, better than I would like to, that they do. Before I could even speak I was set up to be a storyteller, a passer on of half-truths, vague misconceptions, and awkward innuendo. This was an extra hurdle not faced by my friends who were named after saints or national heroes or even The Son of God, people and beings who were if not well known then at least understandable; my name and namesake marked me as strange when I said who I was—and how does one explain that you are a trickster and a liar, but in a holy way? Eshu, yes, the power of a name, the

signifying monkey, the holy con man, the god who brought words to man and deciphers the speech of the higher gods so that mortals can comprehend—are you seeing now why I knew my role, well before I even met Adrienne and Jonas?

Don't worry, we will not be long before we head into the actual story. Allow me this moment of stage setting, introduction, dress rehearsal—whatever. My intention is to start the story where it hurts—and since all stories must either start at the beginning of time or resort to being joined in medias res then I get to get it going wherever I want. Now, I could aim for some new contemporary style and start the story a few hours before everyone wakes, hovering over my characters as they slumber. I don't know. How much would be learned by telling you that Jonas constantly shifts in his sleep, shuffling around the bed like an upturned beetle, or that his girlfriend Maria, ah Maria! who despite never seeming to move, somehow inches her way along his side of the bed, until she is ultimately wrapped around him, swaddling him with her body, as his legs dangle off the side? How much would it set up Adrienne if you knew that she snored, softly, and only when she slept alone—and that she sometimes giggled as she dreamt? Would we discover enough to make up for the endless hours of nothing, for the solidity of sleep, for recording all of those soft and untranslatable sounds that sneak from lovers' mouths as they dream together? Or should I go forward to a night yet to come, to Maria slipping under the sheets, tears slowly sliding down her face, Jonas catching each one with his lips, his fingers, his tongue, his flesh whispering softly to hers?

This is, you must understand, an American story. I, of course, through an

accident of time and birth, am a *true* American, which is to say liar, or at least exaggerator, a self re-creator—and I say this with full love and appreciation of the wonders of my nation’s style. Only my America could birth Mark Twain, Biggie Smalls, and Lady Gaga, a fact that should cause relentless jealousy in anyone that’s paying the slightest attention. And I say my America, because who else could this land belong to but a god of language, and of lies?

Yes, Adrienne, Jonas and I, we three are Americans, real Americans—or rather, we are the real America. The Spirits of ’76, the timing of our births was reason for a nationwide celebration, bicentennial, the re-Birth of a Nation, an attempt to re-believe in the country, in its power and its truth—and if we’re being truthful then what is America if it is not rebelling? If it is not rebellion?

Know this: as Adrienne slid down into her mother’s birth canal a re-built giant schooner slipped into the Philadelphia harbor, an early tide of cheers from the viewers standing at the waters edged rocking the sides of wooden ship, its sails snapping and crackling as it tried to join the crowd in its joy. Above it a defiant Cooper’s Hawk soared, no bald eagles today, it was swiftly joined by another, and Astaire-like they dropped down low swooped back up and danced across the blue ceiling and kept watchful eyes on everyone below. And the boat could only look back and smile. Now, there were other ships, in other harbors, in other cities, but this was a return to the beginning, to the birthplace itself; the nation’s DNA is scattershot blasted from all corners of the globe, its life was conceived in the woods of Virginia and the waters of Boston’s harbor, but it entered our world here, in Philadelphia (and we have never been allowed to forget it). And as Adrienne’s head poked out into the hospital room and from

there the planet, the people shouted and waved and the hawks cheered, the boat came to a halt up against the dock and the two of them made it home together.

But—a few months earlier, when those first bangs of fireworks sneaked out, red and blue (the whites weren't ready yet) taking over the sky, those first ones fired off prematurely, Jonas snuck out as well, two weeks before his due date. It was a time for a celebration, for a reclamation—the battles of Vietnam ended, at least as far as we were concerned, Nixon out of power, his legacy destined to ensure that no president would ever dare to lie to his people, and that the people themselves would remain vigilant forever and ever and on. So why wouldn't they celebrate? Slip some sparks out early, set the sky afire with gunpowder and soot and coloring; nothing says "I love you, America!" like blowing some portion of it sky high. And these pre-shots, dropped pops of flame and fascination, these were the only cue this eager and impatient young man needed to squeeze his way past his mother's thighs and up into his father's arms. Jonas was so eager in fact he did not bother even making it to the hospital, his first sight being bathed in sky-borne red and blue lights peeking in the ambulance window, his first screams rising higher and higher, drowning the siren in a shriek of homecoming and self-naming, a flock of very American robins singing him on his way to the hospital.

And I? Well, I am a storyteller, as I have said. So I did what storytellers must do. I waited until the party was over. I sat there curled up into a ball, watching and waiting, taking in everything from first spark to final cleanup, making certain that I had a story worth telling before I sought an audience to listen. A single pigeon perched on the ledge outside my parents' room, letting loose a purr-like warble from time to time, a sound that set me to jumping and

rolling in my gradually shrinking pre-birth room.

And now—this story?

Those who tell stories have a multitude of reasons. Some spread tales in search of glory, some talk for honor, others seek to earn respect or absolution, many lay out their legends to get into one bed or out of another, while the best are passed along simply to entertain, and to teach. And some reveal their truths merely because the storyteller needed to be heard.

This is my story, for while it is not about me without doubt I have created it.

With three simple actions.

Indeed with just a few simple words—and only one of them felt like a big deal as it happened—I made this story. There, that is the first secret I have to reveal: all the great stories, those epics, legends, histories, lies, myths, bibles, and ballads, they are all constructed in their various ways from the smallest, most elementary, boring, and seemingly meaningless decisions that lead their heroes, villains, participants, legends, gods, and monsters into their unique and utterly inevitable confrontations.

Things happen, all these tiny things, they pile onto each other not in the rush of a hurricane but in the steady patter of a weeklong drizzle. Until you are suddenly faced with the rage of the long forgotten river.

This is that kind of story.

CHAPTER ONE

Remember To Write It Down Later

*“If you don’t like
The world you’re livin’ in,
Take a look around,
At least you got friends...”*

Prince

The best advice another writer ever gave me about actually living life as a writer was fairly straightforward, and I will share it with you now: always be seen writing. It covers all holes. If, for example, you are forced to confront a room rolling in tears with your own solidly dry eyes, the best plan is to slip a look of passionate concentration onto your face, pull out a pen and notebook, and rapidly scribble something in the sincerest, most writerly manner you can come up with. And not too often, maybe once a minute or so, take a pause and squint up at the ceiling, perhaps bite the pen, gently, just a little. Do this until some perfect sentiment or layer of words strikes you. If it does then write away. If, as is more likely, it doesn’t, then you can sigh, making sure to sound sad but satisfied and appear to struggle as you put it down on paper—but this is a risky tactic, as it encourages people to wander up to you and attempt the read-over-your-shoulder move. Because of this, in the end the better option is simply to begin to write—

until the pen halts itself immediately and you can only smile a teeny tiny smile and shake your head at that pen, as if signaling that no writer, even one as dedicated and moved as you, could possibly hope to capture all these overwhelming emotions, at least not while you remain heart deep in the middle of them.

With this in mind, while I waited for The Memorial to begin I found a spot close to the corner and did my best to peek up from my notebook and keep an eye on the rest of the room. It was a large room—in fact, in the efficient and no nonsense manner of the Quakers, it was simply named The Large Room—and most of it was filled with mourners and well-wishers wandering around, gathering in small groups to organize future actions and to connect long term goals to short term plans. The Memorial wasn't scheduled to start for at least another half hour and that's only if things went on time.

It is a well-known and accepted fact that things never go on time.

The funeral had been a quiet affair a few weeks before, with only the immediate family and a few friends, Adrienne among them—but not Jonas, to his sorrow and shame. However, The Memorial was meant for everyone. Memorials for activists, if you've never been to one, are always bizarre and emotional affairs. People laugh, sing, dance, cry, shout, bang on drums, yell at cops, get drunk, fuck, prepare to fuck—pretty much do anything and everything that could conceivably fit under the heading of either mourning or celebrating, and often they do more than one at any given time or else switch between two or three seemingly different states or activities with the ease of someone trying on different outfits before they head out for the day. Actually that's a little more accurate than it

seems: we are always looking for that moment, that action, that thought that can convey what we felt, what we feel for the departed, and for those that remain. Why not try a few things on until we capture the emotion running free inside of us?

Adrienne was by the door with a large woman dressed in flowing and regal looking African robes, who wore along with them a kind, relaxed manner and an elegant smile. Two large Black men stood with them and from the intent looks on their faces it was clear that Adrienne was giving them instructions. She finished and the two men nodded and headed out. The woman smiled, and drew Adrienne in for a slow, affectionate hug. As the woman faded away from her a young woman with a clipboard and an awkward smile came up asking questions before Adrienne had even turned to face her. As I looked I could tell that my friend was actually surrounded by quite a few people, all seemingly dealing with insurmountable issues they were anxiously waiting for their chance to have her solve. I couldn't tell how long this process had been going on but from the tired and determined look on Adrienne's face it wasn't a recent development.

I caught her eye and she smiled and swam through the room as quickly as they let her. She got through the room and as much of the line of people as she could then groaned and sat beside me. I hugged her and she returned it.

"Don't worry, I won't be long," she said, "you can get back to your masterpiece."

"Hey," I said, "you're the one who taught me that trick."

"Eshu, my man," she said, "how else would I have known what you were doing?"

She put her arm on my shoulder and leaned her head against me. Her hair was intricately braided and smelled faintly of rosemary, and I could feel the rigid strength of her, honed from holding so much in, constantly, this internal emotional Nautilus that kept her always pushing against herself. Her arm weighed my shoulder down, the thick meat of its muscles rising mountains against the mere hills of my significantly smaller arms—a fact that no longer made me feel anything but a faint and impotent desire to dust off the bench and barbells currently sleeping in my basement.

I looked from her arms to her face. Her eyes looked blankly out in front of her without blinking or moving. She shed no tears either—but no one would have questioned how sad she was.

“Seen Baxter?”

“Adrienne,” I said, “he’s not coming.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“There’s a more important question,” I said.

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“Is Big Momma here?”

“You know, she always loved that you call her that,” she said, and a smile pushed its way onto her face, a thin sliver of grass breaking through a sidewalk of polished obsidian. “And that you got my little brother doing it too.”

“Still? Good for William.”

“Eshu,” she said, “you have noticed my grandmother’s like 4 foot ten and maybe 100 pounds?”

“Black Grandmothers,” I said, “that run their community should always be

called Big Momma.”

“And your grandmas?”

“My grandmothers don’t do anything but watch Tyler Perry movies and make twenty foot quilts for kids’ birthdays.”

“Well,” said Adrienne, the smile slowly eroding from her cheeks, “she did a crap load of cooking, she’ll be back for the cleanup. You know how my fam gets.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I do.”

Behind us the family of the deceased was trying to relax, as best they could. We were sitting near them, in a little alcove set off from the rest of the room; I had wound up sitting here as I was just tangentially enough connected that I was expected to stay close, but not important enough to have to actually do or say anything. Adrienne, of course, was considered family. Sitting here should have been a perfect set-up for me: avoid the herd, yet have no expectations or demands. Simple. But the world has never been a place that appreciates the simple and I alone knew that my lack of tears was not from any lack of emotions but from the fear that if tears came they would rinse out any disguise I tried to wear, and that once the guilty fountain had been tapped it would pour it all out of me, leaving me drained and alone—naked—and if anything was gonna do that, it would be the words—my words. That was what they were for.

I glanced around the room. On one half there was the food Gramma had gotten together, platters and bowls and pans filled to overflowing, and people bounced from table to table, starving antelopes released onto a bursting savannah. I could smell it from where I was, collards and baked macaroni and cheese, pies, sandwiches, the scents a sharpened knife aimed not for the nose but

the heart. My stomach rolled and locked itself tight and I tried not to think about it.

“How you feeling?” I asked.

She stared at me and I waited, like I did every time she looked at me nowadays, for her to find something, some layer of blame I hadn’t bulldozed over yet, some undiscovered country that would let her suddenly see the events of the last few weeks in a different light. But then, for only a second, her eyes surrendered, and the tears crept up to the edges—they never fell, but they were there, they were there.

“I’m tired, Eshu,” she said, “just tired.”

“You eat?”

“Man, I ain’t never been that tired,” she said, and we shared a laugh. Then she stopped, staring.

“What’s up?” I said.

“Just watch,” she said, nodding towards the far side of the room.

That side of the room was filled with tables loaded with books and pamphlets and flyers and everything else needed to advertise a cause or movement or whatever name it was that people wanted to give to what they were trying to do. The family had been very clear that the tables could be used by organizations to promote themselves and their actions and to take freely-given donations but they could not be used to sell anything. Surprisingly, no one, except, you know, the Maoists, seemed to have a problem with this. Even the anarchists, in an apparent tribute to the deceased, appeared to have polished their piercings, washed their dreadlocks, and laundered their black outfits; as a

result, the smell emanating from their corner of The Large Room was significantly diminished, as it was limited to only what arose from their bodies that day.

The Maoists—well, I shouldn't really call them *the* Maoists. They were actually one of the newer of the organizations on the scene. I could never remember the names of any of those groups. The People's Revolutionary Socialist Worker's Party Tendency, or The PRT, is close to what they called themselves, I think. But no one ever called them anything but PRe-Tend, sometimes right to their face, which seems like it would be dangerous but never really mattered, as they were usually too busy trying to shout over everyone to actually hear what people said to or about them. There was only one person left working their table, a long haired redhead pouring out a thick stream of rhetoric intended to baptize the two teenage boys clutching pamphlets and standing before her. They were riveted, consumed, frozen in place, their eyes zoning in on the ample cleavage of her taut, emotional, heaving chest, and as she smiled and leaned in to hand them a clipboard with a sign-up list, I could see that, for the moment at least, these two boys could think of two very strong reasons to sign anything and everything that she placed in their hands. Having had my own experience with an improperly tight-clothed Jehovah's Witness, I felt for them, though there was little I could do, besides remember to write it down later.

The other two Maoists had started working the room, like Depression era newsboys, stacks of papers under one arm, using the other to jam a paper under everyone's nose with an expectant, demanding thrust.

"Support the people's revolution!" shouted one, a short curly haired

brunette, in her early 40's, dressed in coveralls and with thick industrial strength glasses on her chubby and excited face. The other, a 20ish blonde grinned and stared at everyone from underneath his new blue Mao Tse-tung cap, which matched the hat Mao wore on the young man's brand new official Party sweatshirt, which I guess was as close as he got to any sort of "formalwear." I had seen him before but at first I couldn't place it. And then, it came to me. I knew him. The Young Man.

I groaned. There was no way these people could be let anywhere near the family. As I started to rise Adrienne's arm stayed across my shoulder, forceful and tender, holding me in place.

"Nah," she said, "that ain't all that I wanted you to see."

"Than what?"

"Less talking. More watching."

I gave her a shove with my elbow and she chuckled. We both kept our eyes on The Maoists making their deliberate way across the room until, with the stunned suddenness of a bird ramming into a perfectly clear glass window, they found themselves abruptly, carefully, held in check. Before them, having slid in place as quickly, easily, and nonchalantly as a window slamming shut were five frighteningly large young Black men, in black suits with blindingly white shirts and tiny, innocuous black bow ties. Standing with them was the woman who'd been talking with Adrienne, and she smiled again as she took The Maoists by the arm and began slowly guiding them towards the door.

"Why," I asked, "is the Nation of Islam doing security for a Quaker memorial service?"

“Because the grandson of the deceased asked them to.”

I swiveled over to look at him, sitting in the corner, his head hanging almost to the floor. Keith's grandson took deep, heaving breaths, each one slipped out in time to a tear dropping down his cheek. I remembered Keith mentioning how excited his grandson was that he finally had to start shaving those cheeks. On one side of the young man was Keith's daughter, the boy's mother, tall and blonde, and on the other sat his father, short, with dark African features. The young man made an effort to lift his head, to shift, and his mother reached a hand along his neck, massaging his sorrow up and out the way poison is squeezed from a snakebite, and his head flopped again. His father leaned up to him and kissed him gently on the cheek. The boy collapsed into his arms.

“When did he convert?”

“Last year,” said Adrienne.

“I didn't know.”

“Started out, you know, as rebellion, I guess.”

“Rebellion?”

“Think about it,” she said. “If you're an essentially decent kid and your mother is a Quaker hippie peace activist and your father's a beatnik African poet and they both actually love and understand you, your options for doing things you think will piss them off are fairly limited.”

I watched them, huddling together.

“It didn't,” I said, “appear to work.”

“Of course not,” said Adrienne. “Keith called a big meeting, the boy's mother made a beautiful dinner, and then his father read everyone poetry and

taught them how to play his drum. They were all like blood within the hour.”

We both threw back our heads and laughed and laughed. Others around us, not knowing what the laughter was about, simply enjoyed the fact of our laughing, and joined in. We sat, chuckling and smiling, as we watched The Maoists exiting as slowly and with as much of a “this is totally our idea” attitude as they could pull off.

Adrienne stood, slowly and reluctantly. She sighed, and put her hand back on my shoulder.

“I better get back. The Memorial part is going to start soon.”

I stood.

“Let me help.”

She stared at me.

“C’mon,” I said, “I’m sure there’s something that’s gotta be done.”

She seemed uncertain. And at that moment, in that second, it felt obscenely important for me to convince her to let me join her.

“There’s gotta be something.”

“There is,” she said, “always something.”

Usually, this is a statement said as exasperation, frustration, a way of noting that the hard parts are neverending. But here, for me, it was a lifeline casually tossed out by someone who had no idea I was drowning, and I prepared to seize it with all the strength I had.

As I thought this a hand touched my shoulder. I froze, at first; the hand was such a little thing, sitting there yet fluttering, like a butterfly perched on a bending branch, almost unnoticed. And in the feel of that hand was all the things

I wanted that would never be mine, things that sat, golden and joyous, on the other side of a wall of unbreakable glass.

It had to be Maria. Ah, Maria.

I turned to her.

She gave Adrienne a quick and firm hug, then to my surprise pulled me in to a far too brief embrace. She smelled like blossoms that belonged on a strawberry bush—I have no idea if strawberries actually come on bushes or if those bushes have blossoms, but if they do, and they should, they ought to smell like Maria. There were tears, tiny, perfect, unmoving, perched on her eyelashes, looking like they would stay there in the midst of a hurricane, never falling, but never leaving. She touched both of us, lightly, on the arms. Part of me wanted to pull back, to hold firm, as there seemed to be a whole lot of touching going on today. But it was only a small part and it was quickly overruled by some of the other small parts of me.

“You have to get him out of here,” said Maria. “He can’t take much more.”

Adrienne looked at me, confused, but as I knew that for Maria there could only be one “he,” I turned and scanned the room for Jonas. It took me a moment to find him, which is not something I often found myself thinking about my housemate. He was in the farthest corner from the door, tucked in, as if he’d sought out the most secluded spot in order to prevent anyone from seeing him but had only succeeded in trapping himself with no easy or face-saving way out.

He had attracted his own crowd, yes, but it was a very different one from the one that had surrounded Adrienne. Instead of eager worker bees streaming to the well-prepared Queen, it was a constant run of *well-wishers* and *it’s-going-*

to-be-alrighters and even a few *you're-an-inspirationers*, gathering to put an arm around him or shake his hand or drag him into an awkward and a just-a-little-too-long hug. There were tears, earnest proclamations of permanent support, and everything was delivered with the absolute certainty that this comment remark handshake hug was the one that was going to make it all better. It is difficult for some people even in the best of times to face others when they are being approached with, for lack of a better word, love. Jonas was one of those people. And this was not the best of times.

“Wow,” I said. “He’s in the middle of it.”

“Yes,” said Maria, “and you need to get him out of it.”

“Half the people in this room blame him for Keith,” said Adrienne, “and the other half...”

“The other half are telling him he’s a hero, their hero,” said Maria.

“And that’s worse,” I said.

“For him?” said Maria. “Today? Yes.”

When she was worried about Jonas the Spanish inflections in Maria’s speech seemed to grow, like she had left her coping mechanisms for her nervous energy back in Nicaragua and she had to mentally travel back there in the pause between sentences in order to keep speaking.

Adrienne and I shared a glance.

“Maria,” Adrienne started, but was cut off with a look.

There are few things as shocking as when kind eyes stop being kind, and Maria ordinarily had the kindest eyes I’d ever seen. Adrienne’s eyes were not nearly as kind and were usually able to stare down any others that dared to

confront them but this wasn't a battle they could take on. It really wasn't a battle. Adrienne and I shared another glance, this time to acknowledge that like the men in the bow ties we'd just been given our orders.

"Can he leave?" I asked. "I mean, is he allowed to, like, legally?"

Maria looked at Adrienne, who shrugged.

"I'm not sure," she said.

"If you don't know," I asked, "who would?"

"It doesn't matter," said Maria. "He has got to leave."

"And The Memorial?" I said. "What about Keith's family?"

"They love Jonas."

"That's all?"

"That's all," said Maria.

"Family," said Adrienne.

"Oh, that's your answer to everything," I said.

"Exactly," said Maria, as if I hadn't spoken. "Family. Who knows when The Memorial will actually start? They need him here for that. This, the waiting, this is going to kill him."

"And you?" said Adrienne.

"I have to stay," she said. We followed her eyes, back to the young man still wrapped in his father's arms.

"Ahh," said Adrienne, then, turning to me she added, "Maria used to babysit him."

"Oh," I said.

I wanted to say more. But there was nothing.

“Well,” Adrienne said, “it’s time to make like Jill Scott.”

“Just what I was thinking. Let’s take/a long walk.”

“Around the park,” she added.

“But yo,” I said, “it ain’t dark yet.”

“Well,” Adrienne said, “we can always fake it.”

“Are you,” said Maria with a cautious and patient smile, “speaking in lyrics again?”

“Yes,” I said, blushing. “Sorry.”

“Just get Jonas out of here.”

“C’mon,” said Adrienne, moving towards the door. There was already a line of people who had found her and were now waiting for her to finish wasting her time with me. She glanced at someone in that line and without a word a young Black woman with close cropped bright blonde hair a stepped out, nodded, and took Adrienne’s clipboard. Sarah. It was Sarah. Their fingers didn’t actually need to touch to make the handoff, but hey, I thought, these things happen.

I looked back. Maria grinned. She had seen the touch.

“We’ll buy Jonas some coffee,” I said over my shoulder.

“Good,” said Maria. She watched us work our way through the crowd.

“That sounds nice.”

CHAPTER TWO

It Is Important To Remember This

*“Oh, oh no,
Johnny was a good man,

never did a thing wrong...”*

Bob Marley

A word about Keith.

When you start a tale at a funeral, it matters. No doubt. But let us be honest, the biggest impact Keith will make on this story is by leaving it—his life affects the story most in the manner in which it is lost. That is an embarrassing thing to say, really, about a good man’s life. And his death—well, his death happens, suddenly, as all deaths must, and it is in the arrival of his death that everything in this story, my story, unravels.

He was a uncomplicated man. This is of course a ridiculous thing to say but we say ridiculous things all the time because they are fun and yet they somehow they remain no less true for being fun and ridiculous. Keith was a uncomplicated man, very old school, at least as old school as a long-haired gay hippie Quaker grandfather could be. But old school he was. The swinging sixties swung all over him yet in his heart he never stopped being a small town Pennsylvania farm boy. This stayed true even when the startling results of an

awkward and drunken swing were revealed to him nine months later. He took to fathering the same way that he took to organizing or mentoring or running a non-profit, the same way that uncomplicated, old school people take to anything: there was something beautiful and bountiful that needed to be protected, raised, nurtured, and he had strong hands and a stronger heart.

But this is not his story: it is mine.

And Keith—what to say—what do you say when someone dies and when you have—

When they would be here right now if you—

When, to put it in uncomplicated, old school terms, things have happened?

Stories have never been fair. It is important to remember this. A few at their heart are about seeking fairness and some are about seeking forgiveness. I must tell you again that I do not write this to seek forgiveness—because who could grant it?

But I do write this to be understood—and for all the things that happened.

CHAPTER THREE

A Little Too Philly For That

*“Cuz it ain’t about who ya love,
no no no!
See it’s all about do ya love do ya love do ya love!”*

Michael Franti & Spearhead

“These people make me sick.”

“I figgered they would, Constable,” said Adrienne, offering her hand. It was quickly wrapped in the large heavy fingers of one Lt. Lamont Thompkins, of the Philadelphia Police Department, Civil Affairs Unit. The hand that enveloped hers was bare, as he would always shake his glove off to take her hand. The one time I offered my hand, he glanced down at it, disappointed, as if he had been promised an ice cream cone and was instead being given a tiny cup of low-fat soy bean unflavored frozen desert. Without bothering to look me in the eye he slipped his glove back on and quickly gave me a harsh shake.

“Morons,” he said now, his voice thick with an embarrassed disgust. As the head of the city’s “political police,” the ones called out to ensure that rallies, events, speeches, marches, etc., went as smoothly as possible, he was pretty much everywhere. Usually, he stayed in the background, invisible, giving unseen orders to the uniformed cops who were the actual face of the police force; as far as any

activist was concerned, he was the mysterious and unknowable brains. His own uniform consisted of dark suits that were subtly expensive and basic to the point of elegance, freshly shined Italian shoes, sunglasses that blocked his blue eyes and hovered over his thick mustache, the aforementioned black leather gloves, and a fedora pulled low over his closely cut and still vaguely blonde hair. With his sharp nose he always reminded me of Sam the Eagle, from *The Muppets*; I have never been able to figure out if he would have thought that was an insult, though I know I most definitely meant it as a compliment.

Jonas, Adrienne, and I were walking past a small park, really not more than a patch of grass with space for some flowers in the spring ringing the sides and a few just purchased but antique-looking benches. We were two blocks from the Memorial, fresh steaming coffee in hand, and had gotten a bit of a stroll through the city. We hadn't really spoken much, mostly chatting about video games and the NBA. A nice, classic walk. Then, as we got closer, we saw some sort of commotion on the way back. Here, in the park, was an inevitable response to our event; while ours was an attempt to celebrate a man's life, this was a call to celebrate the fact of his death.

A flutter in the trees, and we could hear a robin singing softly to us. Its song, so gentle, yet we could hear it cleanly, soloing for us. We appreciated it too much to think about how it should not have returned to this area yet; we didn't want to know if it meant the bird was not that smart or if global warming had made winter journeys no longer so relevant.

On the sidewalks, taking care to stay off the grass for some unfathomable reason, were a little over a dozen screaming protesters, who let out their own

individual yelps and howls, with no concern for any sort of group chanting, marching, or action. Without the signs with matching themes, they would have appeared to be a random collection of poorly dressed mouthbreathing tantrum-throwers. The police had blocked them in, keeping them from actually confronting the folks at the Memorial, which was not the most turn-the-other-cheek group to be found.

“Morons,” he repeated.

“They do,” said Adrienne, “tend to give protesters a bad name.”

Lt. Thompkins sighed, his arms crossed in front of him. He looked down at his feet, and, in an uncharacteristically soft and shy voice said, “I’m sorry for your loss.” A glance at Jonas. “Truly sorry,” he added.

“Thanks,” said Jonas, slowly. He took a sip of his coffee, steam slipping up to slide along his glasses. Then: “Keith spoke well of you.”

Lt. Thompkins nodded.

“There’s Tupac Man,” I said. He was running up to join his friends, though I guess running is a somewhat generous term for the stumbling wheezing oh-God-oh-God-this-block-is-longer-than-I-thought desperate gait that pushed him onwards. Sadly, he looked to be one of the more “in-shape” members of the crowd.

I pointed as he approached and the others turned to see him.

For some reason, whenever these people turned out, Tupac Man always had a different sign declaring that all fornicators, unbelievers, and pagans were going to join Tupac in Hell. This was...difficult to understand, to say the least. Why specifically hating on Tupac? How did he even know who Tupac was? This

was not someone who appeared to have a wide knowledge of hip-hop, or, to be honest, of anything that the average city-dweller of any race might ordinarily listen to. This group of protestors all lived in some tiny town out in the southwestern, rural part of the state, what we in Philly usually referred to as “Pennslytucky,” and they traveled around to whatever place of evil the spirit led them. So: did he only bring these signs to Philly, or did they show up in other cities? When they were out in Chapel Hill, North Carolina or Austin, Texas, did he still hate on ’Pac or did, say, Johnny Cash take his place? These were important questions, ones that kept us wondering and thinking about these protestors for much longer than they in any way deserved. (Do I know his story? Of course. But sometimes it is a lot more enjoyable to wonder than to know, and to convince ourselves that we don’t know something we’d rather wonder about.)

“He had that sign, or one like it, at McConley’s funeral. That’s something, I guess,” said Adrienne, “at least he’s consistent in his crazy.”

McConley was Officer McConley.

Adrienne and Lt. Thompkins shared a look. She, Keith, and Jonas had gone to the funeral, held for an officer shot in the line of duty, to pay their respects, not so much to the man, but to the idea that police should be protectors of the neighborhood, and with the hope that their presence could be a bridge towards that idea. At the cemetery, the protestors had shown up, under the belief that since the Philly police force had no problem with gay and lesbian officers, and in fact offered full benefits to life partners regardless of gender or marital status, they must all be blood-soaked sinners joyously living in a den of inequity and deserving of only shrieking hatred, which was supposed to convert them

somehow. I had joked with Jonas that maybe the gayhaters would riot and the cops would smash them, an essentially hilarious win-win situation, and he surprised me by saying that no one wins when the state smashes.

Tupac Man wheezed, and leaned giddy and wild-eyed on his friends. We stood for a moment, watching. One of the protesters broke from their small ranks and pounded towards us, an elephant released from the herd, a hand-painted sign held high in one hand and a pamphlet held out to us in the other. Her face was red and sweatdrenched from screaming and pulled in a deep breath in preparation for the shrieks to come.

“He’s gonna burn! He should—”

That was all she got out. At some unseeable gesture from Lt. Thompkins bluecoats slipped out of the sidewalk and seized the woman’s arms and guided her back to where her people stood, yelling and singing, and they renewed their energy as they saw her returned to them, limp pamphlet still lodged in her hand. She shrugged the officer off, dropped her “God Hates Fags!” sign and turned to scream in tense, controlled faces.

“Now that,” said the Lt., “is unnecessary.”

“Hateful?” I said. He glanced at me, suspicious.

“Just plain unprofessional,” he said carefully.

“Amateurs,” agreed Adrienne.

“I am sorry,” he said, turning to her, “you had to see that.”

She shrugged. “Seen worse.” She glanced over at his second in command, a bitter faced woman who glared and seemed to pull away, as if expecting Adrienne to either snatch her purse or a kiss; I’m not sure which she thought

would be the bigger loss.

“Maybe,” Lt. Thompson said, “but not on my watch.”

“True enough,” said Adrienne. She shook his hand, and as we were stepping away he made a point of walking with us a bit to make sure we were clear. Then, calmly, as if it was the most natural thing, he kept his glove off and offered Jonas his hand. They stared into each other’s eyes, as their hands clasped, seeking something in an unexpected place, and they both seemed to grow from what they found.

“I’ll never understand y’all,” I said, as we walked away.

“Try,” said Adrienne.

“I do nothing *but* try,” I said.

“True enough,” admitted Adrienne.

“It’s like boxers,” said Jonas.

We headed down the street, nearing the corner to turn onto the block where the Memorial was.

“Yeah,” I said, after waiting for him to continue, “you’re gonna have to explain that one a little more.”

“No,” said Adrienne, “he’s right. They argue, puff up, mock each other, practically kill each other before they even get into the ring. Then someone rings a bell and they try to rip each other’s head off.”

The street was mostly empty. Saturday afternoons in Center City are often somewhat laid back. We strolled along, the sound of the gayhaters fading as the much louder and more joyous sounds of the Memorial crowd grew closer. My coffee was still too hot, but I drank some anyway.

“Then when it’s over,” I said, “they hug and it’s all better, right?”

“Man,” said Jonas, “you ever see some of those old fighters? The ones who had, like, classic matches? Rematches? Built their careers on them? Shit. They’re like brothers.”

“Like Ali and Frazier?”

“Oh, please,” said Adrienne, “Frazier was too Philly for that.”

“You ain’t lying,” said Jonas, and we laughed.

“But I get what you mean,” I said.

Lt. Thompkins was good at his job, and he seemed to respect people who were good at theirs, even when what their jobs were put them at odds with his. He had, like more than a few men of his generation and age, developed a fierce, fatherly affection for Adrienne, and as a result he never tried to argue with her or to change her mind when he could see she was committed to some action or another. Instead, he had become, for lack of a better word, her own personal handcuffer. Whenever she or Keith were at a protest or action, locking down to block an entrance of some building or sitting in some politician’s office, it was an unspoken rule that he would be the one to apply his own brought-from-home cuffs, not the plastic strips that are usually brought out. In the days after Keith was killed, when the feds tracked down Jonas and Adrienne, an overzealous and hostile young up-and-coming cop had shoved Adrienne down and yelled insults as he cuffed her and dragged her to his car. The story of what happened when Lt. Thompkins saw the cuts on her face and bruises on her back is filled with swears, threats, and humiliations, and not one really fit for telling here; suffice it to say that the overzealous and hostile up-and-coming cop is now a humbled and

embarrassed going-nowhere traffic cop.

Jonas stopped, leaned down, lifting the cuff of his pants on his right leg. The monitor on his ankle clung to him, latched on, a giant tick that just couldn't be shucked off. He fidgeted with it, moving it slightly, slipping his fingers under the sock it lay on top of, trying to scratch the skin beneath it.

"Sorry," he said, "it itches when I walk."

"My bad," I said, "we took you out too far."

"No," he said, standing and stretching, "it feels good. Worth it."

"We're not going to get you in trouble or anything? Are we, I don't know, out of range or something?"

"Just don't drag me to Jersey, and I'll be fine."

"You ain't lyin'," said Adrienne, "that should be like our motto or something. C'mon. Let's get back before they miss us."

Would anyone miss us? Or, more honestly, did anyone follow us? Slip behind us and peep over our shoulders as we walked, were there helicopters hovering over our tiniest of steps, street-side cameras recording every twitch, every glance? Or was there a nondescript, boringly suited thin man with thick rimmed glasses, crew-cut hair, and impeccable manners, nodding his permission before we reached the door, jotting a few notes onto a tiny notebook? The truth is, Jonas was not out on parole, or even bail, at this point; he was out simply to attend the funeral service, and there was a cruiser complete with escort sitting out front to snatch him up the minute it ended. Whatever he had to do to get out of the building, we let him do, without comment, the way a teenager will avoid seeing a friend's parents when they're being particularly embarrassing. Jonas

and Adrienne always assumed they were being followed or observed anyway, and by now it rarely had the slightest impact on their actions.

As we approached the Memorial, we all took in deep breaths, donning the armor we had set aside for a few relaxing moments. The sun was bright and high and the wind was subdued, even somber; it usually tore through the courtyard between the street and the Center, making the walk up to the door much more of an adventure than it had any right to be. The Center was only four stories high at its tallest; any building a few decades older than I am can only be so tall, of course. For years nothing in the city could be taller than City Hall, no one could sit in their window and look down upon the bronze head of William Penn standing at the peak of that old building. This has led Center City to develop a style that stretches, not reaches; only its newest places seem to jump, the rest slink along the streets and alleys.

The Center was mostly old and it sprawled across its streets, in the very traditional Philadelphia way—five different and separate buildings had, over the course of time, been bought up and connected, so that now they formed a complex that housed everything from the international headquarters for the Quakers to a soup kitchen. It also contained office space available at a very low price for just about every cause under the sun, which included where Jonas and Adrienne worked. There was even an affordable day-care center for everyone who worked in the complex, as well as people in the city who wanted their kids looked after by quiet, patient, and surprisingly artistic Quaker caregivers.

As we walked, Adrienne stepped in front and shoved Jonas behind her, with the instant and unspoken authority of a secret service agent. He looked

worried but she looked determined and she moved quickly, pulling him along with only her energy, dragging him in her flowing wake. I hustled to keep up.

There was a small crowd outside, smokers and drummers and sign holders, gathering around into an informal rally by the steps. There was an ecstasy, a jubilation in the air, that seemed hard to place with the fact that we were gathering to mark a death. There was a rage as well, barely buried, but that was less shocking, especially considering the way that Keith had died. We walked through, the crowd parting in gentle waves as we went, all eyes on us, with whispers and secretive comments splashing around us, so much left floating behind us as we passed.

We stepped to the large glass doors, swiftly pulled open for us by the polite and confident Muslim men doing security and inhaled the last of the fresh air (such as it was) and headed inside.

CHAPTER FOUR

Once You Tell It, It's Yours

*"I'm awfully bitter these days,
Because my parents were slaves..."*

Nina Simone

This is an American story, as I have said, and of course it is a love story, as all good American stories aim to be. I will tell you of two young people and that bright day that they were searching for—their story, indeed, our story, is not a romantic story. But the romantic or the physical or the sensual elements are not all there is to love—after all, this story (mostly) takes place in the City Of Brotherly Love, and I'm pretty certain people weren't thinking of The Gayborhood when that name was laid on us. It is the story of the ways that love moves us, traps us, and eventually, potentially, redeems us.

That is, of course, part of what leads me to call this an American story—and you can be certain that this is an American story, as much as any I've ever heard, certainly as much as any I've ever told. In my mind, the story of this country has always been a tale made by people who are desperately searching to find themselves in the nation's reflection, who scream their throats bloody for even the slightest chance of being noticed, who burn their legends into the sky and dare the world to deny their importance, who don't know if anyone will ever

hear them but never question the significance of their lives. Not the mad ones, but the ones the world needs to believe are mad in order to avoid its own growing and growling madness. The America I dream of belongs to them and these are the stories I yearn for and for this reason the story I'm about to tell is the story I have been waiting to hear. Yes, you might say that it is not, truthfully speaking, my story to tell—but let's be honest—aren't those always the best stories to pass on? It was passed on to me, most of it; either from questioned friends or the whispers of passing pigeons, who see everything that happens inside my city. And so this, a story not really about me, remains my story to tell, and once you tell it, it is yours. Isn't that what history is—a series of stories that didn't happen to us but that we decide matter so much that we not only claim them, we define ourselves through them? All of these myths—global, national, local—become something new when enough of us agree to believe in them. Part gossip, part bullshit, part fantasy, each element indefinable and impossible to separate; it is the gaps in what we know that lead us on, those unseen spaces that we fill with what we hope, or fear, to be true. This is a story, you see—and that word means both truth and invention, each holding so tightly to the other, dancing through fields of meaning and belief like solemn and graceful enemies and the most awkward and anxious lovers.

It is not built on facts, of course; indeed, why should it be? I have no use for them—this is a book, not a newspaper. Or rather, I should say that I do not have a use for facts so much as a place for them, and you have my word that I will endeavor to keep these story wreckers in their place, as much as possible, and let things run on without them. The presence of facts is no marker of the presence of

the truth, and the truth can be found happily wandering alone without the slightest shame or worry. It is not fact, but I swear to you that it is all true, as true as we allow it to be. Some of it I was there for, some of it I was told, and the rest—well, let's just call it an educated guess and leave it at that.

And it is, if you remember, the story of my own, simple actions, three of them.

So—action number one: I convinced Jonas to take up his pen and become a writer, leaving his painting and acting dreams behind him. I was never able to get him to stay interested in storytelling, he always remained at heart a poet, but without me he'd have stuck to constantly cleaning paintbrushes or memorizing well-worn monologues. It was no pure motive that pushed me, I admit this; hell, I made little attempt to disguise it. We were thrown together our first semester of college, one of those accidental and random acts that sometimes make the world seem a little less accidental and random than I like to view it. He was a good roommate, but I knew I would prefer to come home to someone who could instantly jump into a discussion of the recurring themes both hidden and obvious in the work of James Baldwin rather than trying not to pass out after my roommate accidentally spilled an entire bottle of paint thinner all over the floor, or listening to a roomful of spindly pasty white-skinned black-clad Johnny Depp wannabees arguing over their motivation for their 3 lines in a 2 minute skit due to be performed as part of a festival taking place next month in the backroom of a half empty bar.

He was trying to decide just what path to take; we still believed at that point that any decisions we made would be irreversible, perfect, permanent. This

made choosing classes an act of monumental proportions. We'd of course started drinking and talking on Friday after our last classes and culminated our discussion on Sunday night, minutes before passing out and getting in at least the pretense of a good night's sleep.

"Think about it this way," I said, as he flopped onto the bed across the room, "you can always write about painting, or acting. You can't paint about writing."

"Fuck it. I'll become an MC."

"No. No, you will not."

"Why you bringing me down?"

I could feel myself falling down, through the bed, from our 3rd floor dorm room down to the lobby. I squeezed my eyes shut to let it pass. Then I opened them to catch Jonas Chesire Cat grinning at me.

"You," I said, "are not an MC."

"Stay away from me, if you're contagious/cuz I'm a winner/no not a loser/to be an MC/is what I choose."

"Is it?"

He stretched, moaning with effort.

"Why," he said, "did you let me drink this much?"

"Because you," I said, with a groan deep enough to answer his, "let me drink even more."

"Oh. That makes sense."

"So you gonna be an MC?" I asked.

"Of course not."

“No?”

“No. Art is a calling.”

“So?” I said.

He sighed, then threw an arm over his eyes, blocking the eager attentions of the early sun, though there was still a few hours before even the most duty-conscious sun made its way in through our windows.

“So,” he said, “despite the eloquent and insistent claims of Mr. Rob Base,” “one does not choose to become an MC.”

“That’s true about anything. To be. To become. In art, I mean. You don’t choose.”

“Yeah,” he said, “you just are. Or you are not. There is no choose.”

“Why,” I groaned, “must we always get deep when we drink?”

“I could answer that,” he said, “if you hadn’t let me drink so much.”

“Well,” I said, “you could always write about the other stuff. You can’t paint about writing.” For some reason this seemed like a strong argument to make.

“Yeah,” he said, voice muffled by the arm thrown across his face, “but I can always act about writing.”

“Of course,” I said, “but not well.”

“I know what all those words mean,” he said, “but that sentence doesn’t make any sense.”

“That’s fair,” I said. “Just trust the words.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re words.”

“Oh,” he said, and was soon asleep.

When we woke we both just acted like it was decided and soon enough it was. He was always going to be onstage, in some sense. But once he decided he was a writer, the only words he spoke were his own, and I guess the need to find things to say affected him in ways I never felt. I only wrote what I saw, and he, well, he had other ideas.

Action number two—I was the one who introduced Jonas and Adrienne. Did I know all along that we’d be best friends and run together forever and all of that? That’s how I remember it, that’s how I tell it, and Jonas and Adrienne have never argued it, so, yes, I must have. It was during spring break, and I had taken Jonas to Philly with me, for me a homecoming, for him a new world. I met up with Adrienne and caught up on all the things we hadn’t spoken about over the phone while I was away at school. She wasn’t one to tell all that much of her business, but I guess I knew her enough to be able to infer a lot of what wasn’t said, and since I got most of it correct she didn’t really seem to mind. She mentioned that she’d been playing a lot of basketball already and soon as she did I knew all that was left was to open my mouth. So I did.

I said, “You’re friend Jonas would love to get out there.”

“Hmmm,” she said.

“I mean my new friend, your best friend. No, wait—my best friend, your next friend.”

“Eshu,” she said, sounding annoyed, “can he ball?”

“Yeah, he can.”

“Well,” she said, “all right then. Your word’s good enough.”

Was it a slip of the tongue? Was I speaking truth before I consciously knew it? The words came out, and now they are true. Jonas was her next friend, and is her best friend. And I can explain it all with basketball.

Basketball: Jonas had a great handle and a lot of energy but was a somewhat suspect shooter. Adrienne liked to hover around the outside but never missed. It was a marriage made in basketball heaven. In addition, there was defense. We all have that odd friend who loves to do housework, who actually whistles while scrubbing or mopping and has a million little gadgets or new cleaning products or healthier ways of combating dust—no one ever understands them, but we're always happy to have them around. This was the way that both Jonas and Adrienne approached playing defense on a basketball court, deriving in some weird way more pleasure from forcing a bad pass than from making a contested layup or unguarded three. It never made any sense to me, but like the cleaning friend, I was always happy to have them around.

And action number three—no, we won't be getting to that. Not yet. No.

CHAPTER FIVE

Of Course, She Was An Expert At This, By Now

*“We people
who are darker than blue...”*

Curtis Mayfield

The Memorial was held in the large auditorium, with its pews and church rafters and stage setting. A professor once told me to always look at buildings as sculptures, as works of art for controlling and containing empty space; until I understood that, I don't think the physical act of going to church ever made any sense to me. With that in mind, it is always a strange sensation to enter this Quaker building and suddenly find yourself in a church; I have been there often enough that it should no longer throw me off, yet it continually does. I have always felt that this room and the giant Unitarian Church in Center City are two of the grandest and churchiest places in all of Philadelphia. If you consider how little evangelizing goes on in either space, as well as how much community organizing, well, it's definitely forced me to reconsider how I look at religion, at least in some of its current forms.

This building, for us, was a place for long and stressful meetings. Adrienne worked out of an office on the third floor, and Jonas got the funding for his job from another non-profit on the fifth floor. And everything anti-war came

to the building, eventually. But here, this room, the chapel, this was not a place we went to with any regularity. Adrienne took a bus ride to get to her grandmother's church every Sunday, and Jonas, to Catholic Maria's constant chagrin, only entered a church after exhausting every possible escape route.

And myself? Well, I popped in at various places from time to time, mostly to hear the stories they were telling. I have always delighted in the stories and myths that people tell each other, and themselves, to make it through the day. That is, in the end, the only real reason to tell a story: to make us strong enough to survive living the stories, and to make the non-story times bearable. Whatever it is that someone believes, I have always chosen just to revel in the fact that they do believe, and leave it at that. But the stories that get told as a means of seizing power, for stealing money, for turning profit at someone else's suffering—well, they've never really rung true to me, let's just say. Oh, yes, tales of trickery and deceit, sure, even tales to trick or deceive. But a trick is only worthwhile if you let everyone in on the joke; then it's up to them whether or not they laugh. But stories that kill, that rule—no.

An ability to read through all tales, to see all the sides and asides and unspokens can leave one with very little of what, for lack of a truer word, could be called faith, as well as a healthy dose of suspicion towards those who swear to live by it. Maybe that's why I have always been, shall I say, a little tickled by the Quaker style. There was something almost cute in their lack of fun. I don't mean they weren't fun, as people; it takes a lot of concentration and energy to fully drag the fun out of someone, and only a few religions are capable of it. But in their services, it's quiet, nobody preaches at you, you simply think the story yourself,

and, when you feel ready, you share yours, and everyone listens. From what I've seen, most seem to express themselves through action, not ritual or dogma, which is the best kind of preaching there is, regardless of your gospel. I don't know, maybe the lack of an overwhelming narrative leaves me with little room to pull out the lies and the mistruths. I don't believe them, or, I should say, I don't believe with them, but I find that I enjoy their belief more than I do anyone else's.

This room, however, wasn't very quiet, and this service was more like a contained riot than a peaceful observation of the divine. Everyone had filed in, finding seats in that mass unregulated way that people do when they want good seats but don't want to be jerks about it. Adrienne hovered near the stage, whispering to someone, anyone, everyone, then discretely gesturing to someone else, or examining another's clipboard and scratching voluminous notes on it. She appeared to have a youthful army of messengers who, with varying levels of skill, attempted to race in and out of the room or dive into the audience without being noticed.

There was always, for me, a pleasure in watching Adrienne run a room. In saying that, I don't mean watching her run a meeting, or facilitate a discussion, or moderate a panel, or whatever; usually, that was Jonas' task, not Adrienne's. She was always more producer than product, despite her evident skills on the mic. I have never met anyone so good at commanding attention who wanted it so little.

She looked tired.

But to be honest, she looked better than I'd expected. Of course, she was an expert at this, by now.

This was not the first father figure that Adrienne lost, nor was it the first

memorial that she'd been forced to organize. I think being by the stage, not on it, was what made this bearable, kept it approachable. Survivable. Because sitting in the audience, watching—that would have killed her. And being on the stage waiting to speak, that would have been a fate worse than death, I believe, because that would have enabled everyone to see her as she grieved, as she felt the world falling. As she felt her own world collapsing. Again.

Because to Adrienne, who had withstood all that the world had dared to throw at her and leapt up swinging, there was nothing more painful than letting the world know just how badly the falling had hurt.

CHAPTER SIX

A Different Kind Of Weight

“Here we go...

*Once upon a time not long ago,
when people wore pajamas and lived life slow...”*

Slick Rick

I met Adrienne when I was just in high school.

Some friends and I had made an elaborate plan to slip school and sneak into the city to—well, we weren’t really certain on what it was we were going to do, just that we absolutely had to do it. This being before the days of Mapquest or a cheap GPS, we valiantly copied the relevant information from a few school maps the day before and hopped on the train and headed out. There was no truant type of official, as far as we could spot. In those days things were a lot more relaxed. We quickly realized, however, that while our parents made navigating the city seem effortless, it was a lot more complicated than we had been led to believe. The whole North/South thing in addresses had us a little thrown, but we struggled on, certain that in any direction something awesome was just sitting around waiting for us to discover it.

The cooing birds that seemed to be everywhere around us we just shrugged off, the way we figured cool city types must do every day.

In the end it was our young, innocent, touristy faces that brought Adrienne to us. She was doing a project for school, examining various architectural styles in the different neighborhoods as a means of understanding the history of Philadelphia's growth and change. Yeah, this was the kind of stuff she did as a freshman in high school; it's not that she was ahead of her fellow students, it's that she was so far ahead of the teachers that they mostly let her do her own thing, as long as she calmly and carefully explained it to them later. She refused their many attempts to get her to advance and graduate early for as long as she could, but once her mother got ill at the end of her sophomore year she dove into it and within a year she'd graduated and was already a few credits into her college degree.

Adrienne and her mother had that specific closeness that only comes after it has been fought for and won through long, ugly battles; by the time I met them, her mother had been sober for 3 years, and they were slowly moving from a truce to a true peace. Her mother was quite a storyteller herself, and over the next few years we spent many a summer evening squashed together on the swing on the porch, sharing brainfreezingly cold and toothnumbingly sweet ice tea, hearing her slow and scarred voice talk about the Black Panthers, MOVE, riots, new cars, first kisses snatched between trees in Fairmount Park, water ice stands, and long closed soul food restaurants.

She held on just long enough to have a picture taken, her face stiff and formal, carved from an old and hard wood, all fat repeatedly scraped off until all that was left was a beautiful and frozen skull, wrapped in dark Black skin—yet her love and joy burst from the 2 dimensions of the photo, as her tiny and oh so

fragile hands grip tightly the framed diploma from Temple University, Adrienne's arms both firmly and gently wrapped around her faded and fading body.

There is something about taking a photo like that. You know, forever and ever, that you were there, that you saw this, indeed that you are responsible for it being able to be seen—yet to every viewer, and eventually even to those in the photo, your eyes have been replaced, favorably, by a machine's, and your presence is not even worthy of a vague recollection. Though it is their picture and a part of their story, it still functions as a signpost in mine. But more on that later.

The day we met Adrienne was wandering around doing her nerdy thing when she spotted four confused and clearly lost young Black men wandering happily around, with no comprehension of the realities of being four confused and lost young Black men in Philadelphia. She loved to tell this story for years afterwards, and in her telling we get more and more country each time, until by now even I see it as she tells it—when she stumbled on us we all wore mud covered overalls and straw hats with grass in our teeth and looked up at the buildings and muttered, “Golly!”

“Where the hell you boys goin’?”

My friends, who before this would be very quick to tout their unrelenting skills with women and the ease of their approach, turned and stared at her with more amazement than they'd been viewing the skyline. I assumed one of them would step forward and show off their well-practiced lines but it looked as if they were attempting an unannounced open-mouthed fly catching contest and were only half-way through.

“We, uh, we're just looking, you know, for action.” I was hoping that this

would sound like we weren't from around here but were still kinda cool, like we were the fun guys in our neighborhood and were looking to expand. I was trying even then to set the world by telling it the right story. In actuality, we were pretty much kids that fit right in the middle. Smart enough to be nerds, just cool enough to pass, quiet enough to be ignored. There are times when being ignored is a terrible thing. High school is not one of those times. Add to that the subtleties of negotiating integrated schools at a time when no one really had much experience with doing so—none of our parents and none of the teachers had gone to mixed schools, yet we were expected to charge right in without problems. We carried all of this with us; Adrienne, of course did not. Whatever laws or rules might be in place mattered little to her school; in her area of North Philly, there were few people around who weren't Black, and no one was going to be bused to her school. At this age Adrienne was already somewhat imposing, though not anywhere near what she grew into. Never tall, she seems short in my memories of that day, with thick arms expanding out apparently for miles from underneath her hooded sweatshirt. There was something thick, as well, about her skin, or at least it seemed that way to us. It wasn't any darker than our own, at least not physically. But she was City Black, and we were not, and that carries a different kind of weight within it.

She stared at me, not moving, and for way to long I just stood there, hoping that this moment would someday end but not really believing it. Then, she smiled, and shook her head.

“You don't wanna go that way.”

“Why not?”

“When you get a chance,” she said, “ask your dad about Fishtown. Trust me, you don’t want to be there, they’ll assume you’re looking for trouble.”

“Maybe we are,” said one of my friends, stepping forward and leaning into his best b-boy stance.

Adrienne ignored him.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a handful of tokens.

“Holy crap,” I said.

“My uncle works for SEPTA,” she said, counting off a few tokens and then handing me the rest. To this day, she has various family members who still work for SEPTA, and is always loaded down with ridiculous amounts of tokens and passes. “Take these,” she said, “and you’re gonna wanna take—”

She stopped. We kept our eyes on her, and she smiled again, softer this time, and took me by the arm.

“C’mon,” she said, and led us to the bus stop. She rode with us, and gave us quite a tour of the city, not exactly the dirty sexy trip we had thought we were entering into when we left in the morning but a more thorough trip than we’d had any reason to actually deserve.

When we stopped for lunch I paid for hers without thinking and she ate it without mentioning. When it was time to head out she took us to the train station and made sure we got on the right platform. As the train pulled up she scribbled something a piece of paper and stuck it into my hands.

“Next time you thinking of coming down here, call me the night before.”

“What about next week?” I said.

“Call me,” she said, already turning and heading back into the station.

On the ride home my friends went on and on about my perceived new studly powers and the fact that she was clearly into me, in a big way. I said nothing, as even at age 14 I could tell that Adrienne's interests lay in a different direction. I figured that any such mention would only lead to ever increasingly disturbed fantasies and impossible daydreams from their now obviously inexperienced minds.

When I called Adrienne the next week, I went alone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

She Thought She Was Gazing At Paradise

*“There are so many roots to the tree of anger
that sometimes the branches shatter
before they bear...”*

Audre Lorde

I must tell you a story.

It’s an ordinary enough story, in the end. A few days ago on my way to work I stopped to pick up some coffee in a 7-11 and that’s when I saw the ghost. No, that’s not right. It was not a ghost. It was—an echo. A momentary image from someone else’s memory. A thought dragged to life.

I saw Adrienne as a child.

She never talked about growing up. To know Adrienne was to accept her on her terms, in her time, to know her, not who she once was or who she might have been. What I know of her I know from being with her, from what little I could push her into telling, or from the very specific details passed along by others that spent time with her. Not much of it actually flows all the way back to childhood. Little Adrienne is long gone, never to make an introduction, and there has always been something in the finality of that shut door that moves my imagination to create if not a key then at least a keyhole, to view my friend before she was my friend—if there’s a story, I’ll find it.

I was waiting in line to pay for the coffee. There was coffee waiting for me at the office; even a low-level copy writer gets his share of perks, and I am both young and low-paid enough to appreciate the free coffee and extremely cheap cafeteria much more than the full health care coverage. But work coffee is a long morning-train ride away. Quick coffee from places like 7-11 is always hotter than you think it will be, hotter than you imagine it is actually possible to be and still remain liquid, and I know this, but I was still unable to stop myself from taking my tiny baby sips. When I of course scalded my tongue I shuddered with a grimace; below me there was a slight and sudden giggle.

I looked down into the grinning Black face of a girl, 2 years old, hair pulled back into tiny puffs along the sides of her head, big eyes that looked without shame or fear into mine. I had no choice but to return her grin, and she threw back her head and laughed, giving her whole body to it. She was so alive for a tiny mixture of pudge and growing muscles. Without warning she turned and moved away and just like that I was left forgotten and quiet with a burnt tongue. Her mother, large with another child on the way, got in line behind me, continuing a rapid conversation with another pregnant woman beside her and someone else, presumably pregnant as well, on her cellphone. The little girl wandered around, gleeful and inquisitive, noticing everything yet paying attention to nothing, her joy overflowing and filling the store, making me think of a 19th century painting of a child romping through a meadow. At a sharp call from her mother she gradually made her way back to the line. This was of course only until her eyes were drawn to the mother-lode of plastic toys dangling from a rack, just hanging there waiting for her; like Cosette she thought she was gazing

at paradise.

“Mommy toy.”

“I was hoping,” said her mother, “you’d forget.”

“Yeah,” said her friend, “that had a lot of chance of happening.”

They both chuckled.

“You want one?”

The little girl nodded fiercely and her mother smiled back at her. They had the same grin.

“Okay,” she said, “take one.”

The little girl tugged two packages down, one holding a dinosaur in mid-roar, the other containing jacks and a ball. She presented them to her mother in triumph.

“One,” her mother said, “just one.”

She stared at her mother, then looked, uncertain, at the two toys, then held them back up, voicing her thoughts clearly without words. Her mother sighed, looked through the money in her hand, then turned to her friend, who shrugged, and shook her head no.

“I’m sorry, honey. Your daddy only gave me enough for one.”

There are few things as dangerous to one’s wallet as the face of a heartbroken child. At this point the line had moved enough so that I finally made it to the register.

“Just the coffee?”

“No,” I said, “ring up those two toys.”

The mother turned in surprise. Before she could say anything I shrugged

and smiled. She stared at me, then broke out into a grin, and it was even more clear just where the little girl had gotten that smile from. She calmly and gently wrestled the toys from the child's ferocious grip, trying to explain that they needed to be rung up, and whispered gently to her as the girl whimpered and cried.

When the toys were returned to her, that whole store lit up.

I didn't see him enter, or even walk to the front of the line. It was the pregnant friend who first saw him, her smile fading as she quickly nudged the girl's mother. Her smile faded as well. He was slightly older than she was, and there was something angular about him, something that went beyond the perfect creases of his suit, and the sharp edges of his matching hat. His face was built of straight lines, without a quiver or a curve to be found. A loosened tie was the only gesture he made, weak as it was, towards any sort of movement.

"You done?"

"Almost," she said, pushing her stuff forward. I moved out of the way. The clerk, without a word, rang her up as swiftly as he could.

The little girl, oblivious, talked in her own language to the packages she held. It was a complicated conversation, where questions were asked, answered, and then the answers were responded to. Her tiny excited fingers squeezed the bags in rhythm to her talking song, and her head shook back and forth, keeping time; her thick strong legs and arms were slowly and clearly working through her baby fat with new adventures and actions each day. The man watched her, carefully studying the two packages she held.

The slap, when it came, seemed to land on all of us.

“What the fuck you doing?” he said. “You just get one.”

He pulled a package from her hands.

“Be lucky you’re getting that. You more and more spoiled each day.”

The little girl stared up at him for a long second, then it all burst out, blooming like the red mark slowly growing on her cheek, and I think we all realized we’d been holding our breath along with her.

“No, it’s okay,” said her mother.

The man looked at her now and the sound of her pulling in her breath spread throughout the store.

“Oh, it is?”

He seemed somehow even straighter, firmer, as if solidifying before our eyes into a postmodern sculpture of himself, motionless yet somehow still making its way towards her.

There’s nothing I can do, I thought. Then I thought, well, there’s very little that I can do. And once I thought that, I had to do it.

“Hey man,” I said, smiling, “my bad. Sorry about the mixup.”

He turned and looked at me.

There is an art to being just the right size. At 6 foot, 210 pounds, I’m big enough so that people don’t usually single me out for trouble, yet I’m not large enough that men feel they need to challenge me. And I smile a lot, which helps.

“I bought the toys. No offence.”

Usually the smile was enough. Not for him. He just stood there, glaring. That was when I knew I needed a story.

“She,” I started, “uh, reminds me of my niece...”

“So?” he said.

“So...”

I took a breath to think of my next sentence, and tried to make it seem like I was having a hard time talking about her.

“So,” I said, “she died a few months ago...”

The man stared.

“Hit and run,” I added. “My, uh, my sister’s only kid.”

We stood there, facing each other, for at least, oh, three hours, I guess. Maybe a little less. Then he spoke.

“My condolences.”

“Thanks.”

He nodded at me. Then, with a look of bored disgust, he tossed the package down at the little girl’s feet. She looked up at him, still bawling.

“Shut up,” and just like that she was silent, though the tears kept flowing, mouth held open in a now soundless scream.

“Be quick,” the man said, and walked out.

The women finished their purchase without speaking. The friend gave me a quick glance and a nod, which I returned. She picked up the packages on the ground. The mother lifted the child gently, and carried her out. The girl, stiff, unyielding, was herself now like a statue, frozen in her mother’s arms, head thrown back, tears draining down, mouth wide in a silent yell.

And that, that image, is the echo. That moment, that second, in my mind, contains Adrienne’s childhood. A constant, never ending, and unheard shriek of rage.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Ballad Of The Weeping Man

*“I had to tell him it was alright,
and that’s a lie,
and he knew it as he shook and died,
my God...”*

Tupac

Sometimes a friend asks you for help. Sometimes you ask a friend if they need help. And sometimes no questions are asked, as none are needed.

Spring of 1995, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, Tuesday, early morning—or at least the college student equivalent of early morning. I had just sat down to eat. I was never one to complain about the food in the dining halls, especially not breakfast; after all, it’s difficult to truly mess up pancakes and omelets, and as long as enough of the food was provided I had no problems. I was reaching for the salt when Jonas scrambled in, looking like he’d run the whole way from the dorm; as he spotted me and rushed over I could see that he was still wearing his pajamas, partially covered with his Knicks jacket, and finished off with an old pair of sneakers. Jonas was not a man to leave our room without the right outfit.

And so, without a word, I knew.

“A call from Philly?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, straining to catch his breath as he dropped into the chair beside me, “your friend’s mom.”

“Aw crap,” I said, and I started to stand, but Jonas put a hand on my shoulder.

“Finish.”

“What?”

“Look,” he said, “the train’s probably pulling out right now, you’ll never catch it. The next one’s not for an hour. I checked. Eat.”

I nodded my thanks, and sat. I stared at my food. The pancakes stared back. The smell of the eggs attacked my stomach and for a moment my head spun, and I was glad that I hadn’t actually taken a bite yet.

“Breathe deep.”

I did.

“Again.”

“Okay.”

“Better?”

I nodded.

“This is it, right?”

“Her mom didn’t say?”

“No,” he said, “just that you should come.”

I looked back at my food.

“Yeah,” I said, “I don’t think she’d tell me to come if he was still alive.”

“Well,” he said, and he nudged my coffee a little closer, “it’s gonna be crazy when you get there. They’re gonna need you to, like, I don’t know, to make sure

they eat and stuff. All kinds of stuff like that. So you should eat now.”

“You’re right,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Need anything?” he asked, and he pointed to my tray as he stood.

“What? Oh. Some more juice, I guess.”

“Grape?”

“Of course.”

“Back in a minute,” he said over his shoulder as he headed for the line.

When I laughed he glanced back with a grin.

“As long as I’m here,” he said with a shrug, “might as well eat.” Off he went to grab a tray, nodding to the people he knew, ignoring the smirks of those he didn’t.

I took another breath and dove into the food, eating as quickly as I could. I had been expecting the call, but I had figured that it would be at least a few more days in coming.

I guess it’s always possible convince ourselves that a call like that is still days away.

We all called her Mama.

There are not many parents who seek something like that from their children’s friends. Names have meanings, after all. “Call me Mama” is not something one just proclaims. Very few would even try it, and most that do only succeed in making everyone feel a little awkward, ensuring that their house will be the last one anyone chooses to hang out in. But for some it comes so naturally, so obviously, that it almost doesn’t need to be said: she was Mama, to one and all.

Mama was waiting for me as I got off the bus, enfolding me into a hug before my feet had a chance to solidly connect with the pavement. Then she handed me several hundred pounds of groceries contained in two screamingly stretched plastic bags; she gave me a second to gather them and shift my backpack into a slightly more comfortable position then headed home somewhere just short of the speed of light. She rummaged through her bulging purse for her keys; we had a few blocks to travel, and it was possible though not likely that she would find her keys before we arrived.

“You look good,” she said. “Midterms?”

“Not for a bit, starting next week I do nothing but study.”

“You better study,” she said, “we don’t need all that cramming you tried to pull off last semester.” She sighed. “You do look good, Eshu.”

“Thanks, Mama.” I wanted to return the compliment, to say how strong she looked, how she was going to beat this, but she knew how I felt and she knew the truth about herself. Lying wasn’t going to do good for any of us.

“We know you’re going to make us proud, son.”

I looked down at my feet. It was easier than trying to meet her eyes.

“Just remember,” she said, “to lift your head from the books from time to time. Okay? Words is only worth so much.”

“Mama,” I said, trying to sound as if my fingers weren’t planning to fall off any minute, “you don’t need to go to the store on your own like this. Wait for me next time. And don’t you have a shopping cart?”

She gave a short wave, brushing that aside, then took a quick glance at my fingers, as if reassuring them that they didn’t have far to travel and that falling off

wasn't really an option.

"Adree's got a girlfriend," she said. I almost dropped the bags.

"Adrienne?" I said. Mama waited for me to get myself together, then we started again.

"Yup."

"But she never dates anyone more than once. Like, never."

"Never?"

"Well, she hasn't done it before."

"I have to tell the same thing to Adree. You writers."

When Adrienne was born, her older brother was three, and completely incapable of pronouncing her name. The closest he got was Adree, and for the family it stuck. Very few people even knew she was called this, and I only got away with using it on the rarest of occasions.

"Us writers?" I said.

"Hmmp," she said. She whipped out her Newports, stuck one between her thin red lips, and lit it quickly.

"Mama," I started, but there was little heart in it and she waved it aside as well. We all had given up trying to get her to give up her cigarettes; fights you know you can't win are rarely worth entering.

"The problem," she began, pausing to launch a thin stream of smoke over her shoulder, "is that you and Adree like the *feel* of words, but you never think through the science of them."

"Speaking of Adrienne," I groaned, "why isn't she carrying these bags?"

"One more block, Eshu."

“Yeah, I know.”

“Adree’s in class. Should be home any minute.”

I almost dropped the bags again.

“Are you serious?” I said.

“We knew he was going, Eshu. No one—no one was gonna survive that.

We were blessed to have David as long as we did.”

“I know.”

“We said our goodbyes last night,” she said. “Before David went to sleep, he told them all if they let this affect their grades he was gonna go straight up Freddy Krueger on them and fuck up they dreams for the next five years.”

“Yeah,” I laughed, “that’d work. Movie scared the crap out of us.”

“He never woke.”

“Well,” I said, feeling I should say something, “that’s good, I guess.”

“Got my keys,” she said as we turned to her steps.

“Garden looks good,” I said.

“And it will, long as I’m still breathing,” she said, and of course at that moment she launched into a flurry of hacking, breaking coughs. Before she got to the door it pulled open and Adrienne’s little brother, ten years old, bolted out, shouted a hello at me, snatched the bags, and was gone.

“Adree’s grandmother’s in there, cooking. You can say hi in a minute. Let’s sit first,” she said, and we headed to the swing on the porch. I dropped my backpack at my feet and sat. She pulled herself up next to me.

“What’s her name?” I asked.

“Adree’s girl?” she said. “Sarah. She’s nice.”

“Mama,” I said, and at the sound of my voice we both chuckled, “I’m fairly certain you’ve never in your life used the word nice to describe someone.”

“There you go,” she replied, “throwing that ‘never’ word around again.”

She let out a long laugh, then sat back, feet dangling just above the wood floor, and I lifted mine to let the swing rock a little faster. She finished her smoke and reached back and stubbed it out in the hidden and scrubbed clean ashtray kept in the corner.

“She adores Adree. They have fun together. And she *is* nice. Cute, too, though maybe a little more...*punk*...than I would have liked.”

“But you like her?”

“Eshu,” she said, after considering for a moment, “did you know my mother loved my first husband? Adree’s father. Evil, evil man. But could talk his way out of anything. Into anything also. Once saw him pick a random conversation with couple of White cops, early 70’s, before Adree was born. Just started talking. Within a minute they had the cuffs out and clubs in their hands. Then they were all laughing and buddy-buddy. Then the cuffs. Finally they shooed him away and he left.”

I watched the memory slide across her face, anger awe and relief that slid into the slightest and quickest smile. The swings creaked in a dull, constant rhythm, and we listened to it.

“Of course,” she said, “turns out he was just distracting them from his friends lifting TV’s and stereos from the place across the street, like 3 stores down. Had to keep them from turning away from him.”

“And they didn’t?”

“No one ever did,” she said. She stared out into the street and I could see him then in her gaze, young and raging, laughing, never ever boring. She closed her eyes and sighed and he was gone. “Even with the drugs and cheating and fights and he was something. My mother loved him. He charmed her, you see.”

“And David?” I asked.

“She passed before I met David. Just as well. She never would have taken to him. Too quiet, I guess. I didn’t know, until it was almost too late, that I was a quiet sort of person.”

“Quiet? You?”

She ignored that for the moment.

“I loved my mother, Eshu,” she said. “But I never, ever should have listened to her about who I dated. Adree and I—hell, we got our own share of problems, and I bear most of that, but that’s one mistake we ain’t gonna make.”

We sat, listening to those ordinary sounds that a street makes when there’s not a lot going on. Birds. Playful kids, playful parents. Cars, close and far, then the random airplane overhead.

“I never realized how quiet your neighborhood could be, Mama.”

“Nothing wrong with quiet, Eshu. Quiet raises kids. Makes a family. And family means a good life.”

“Sure,” I said.

She took my hand.

“You remember that,” she said.

“I will.”

I could see the blood in Adrienne's eyes as she came towards the house. It shadowed her features, covered them like a ski mask, rising off of her like a Looney Toons image of Elmer Fudd storming after the wabbit. It was so perfect it was almost silly and if it hadn't been someone who normally kept her emotions chained behind the stonewall in her eyes I might have laughed. The swing rocked behind me as I lurched up and the wooden steps shouted as I bounced down them. My feet slapped the pavement as I went, stinging my toes. I tried to make as much noise as I could; this was not a time to startle Adrienne.

She almost passed me. I stood on the grass, just out of reach. Her glance flicked over me and kept on, then swiveled and snapped into focus. I looked back, silent. Then she nodded, and I nodded back, and she walked on. When she got to the steps, she paused, as if struggling to shift the heavy weight she now carried. I stepped up beside her and her hand seized my arm and we made it up the steps together and collapsed onto the swing. She shuddered, once, twice, then leapt up and pulled away, but I was right behind her and she turned and burrowed into my chest.

"It's just not fair, man," she said, when she was capable of words, "I mean shit ain't fair, right? Nothing ever is. But this?"

"I know," I said, "I know."

"He's gone. He's gone and the son of a bitch shot him..."

"They'll catch him, Adrienne. They got his picture from the security cameras, your stepdad was pretty fucking smart about where he kept them in the store."

I felt her hands pushing me back and I stumbled, reaching for the railing

to keep myself upright.

“Catch him? Fuck that. Fuck them.”

“Adrienne—”

“What they gonna do? And that’s *if* they get the right guy.”

“Put him in jail,” I said.

“Eshu, I know what jail does to people. Do you?”

“Well,” I said, “I—look. It’s jail. It’s punishment.”

“All my time, and I mean all my time, if I’m not with family I’m studying to be on the other side of that. Punishment. To stop all this lock-’em-up shit. And now...”

“And now,” I said as I slid in to her, “now you wanna kill the motherfucker.” Holding her gently I leaned against the railing, which was thick and solid and crafted from impossibly old wood David had tracked down somewhere. The two of us held each other, listening to those quiet sounds the street makes.

“Yeah,” she said softly, “yeah.”

“Adrienne,” I said, “only an idiot would expect you to forgive—something like this. You ain’t Jesus. Wait—you’re not, right?”

“Idiot.”

“Well, then I think you’re just a human, being a human.”

“Eshu,” she said, “if I ever see that stupid fucking junky...”

“Yeah,” I said, “yeah.”

“Y’all need to sit down,” said a voice behind us, “drink some coffee.”

Mama made her way through the door with a large tray, holding three cups with

steam slipping up from them and a plate with a trembling mound of tiny chocolates on it. She slid past us and with her foot dragged the small table over to the swing. The table had been a joint project of David and Adrienne, in one of his failed attempts to teach her some basic woodworking skills, and was kept on the porch more out of his obstinate belief that she'd ultimately grow into the work than any legitimate pride or recognition in the art of its making. Mama set the tray on the table and hopped up onto the swing.

"Mama—"

"Adrienne," said her mother, and her voice was somehow both as solid as the railing and yet softer than the pillows she was perched on. Adrienne slid out of my arms.

"Mama."

"Go on now," her mother said, and somewhat hesitatingly Adrienne and I sat at the top of the steps, at Mama's feet.

"This here story," said Mama, handing us our coffee, "is called The Ballad of the Weeping Man."

"It's got a name?" said Adrienne.

"Most stories do."

We all sat back, taking tiny sips from the boiling liquid held in our cups, and Mama unwrapped a chocolate and popped it in her mouth, then passed the tray down to us. I fiddled with one, which was somehow loud enough to echo down the block, or at least it seemed to do so to me. The chocolate I picked was dark with an almost painful bitterness that was quickly drowned in a rush of sweet. Adrienne picked one, nervously tossing it up then snatching it out of the

air.

“This story,” Mama said, her voice sliding out from behind a cloud of steam, “happened right before your brother was born. Just down the block. At least it started there.” She lit another cigarette and breathed in deep, then continued. “See, there was an angry young man who had no one around him. I don’t know if it was drugs, Vietnam, or what, but he had no one, and no one had him.”

Adrienne leaned against me, and I put an arm around her shoulder. Then, awkwardly and only just avoiding spilling any on her, I took as large of a gulp of the hot coffee as I dared.

“His name?” asked Adrienne.

“Don’t rightly know,” said her mother.

“Oh.”

“Don’t matter much, really. Never really talked to him. No one did, you see. Maybe that was the problem.”

“Hmmp,” said Adrienne.

“So this boy, he up and gets himself into some mess he ain’t got no right to get into. Don’t know if it was a girl or he owed a guy money or what not, just know he was walking home from the bus stop, right there, they didn’t have these lights then—at least they didn’t have no working lights. So on his way home, drunk or stoned or most likely both, some hardheads caught up to him, damn near stomped his nose into his chest they whooped him so hard. Beat on him for an hour, seemed like.”

“No one heard anything?” I asked.

“No one cared. Who knows what they heard? They didn’t care. So this boy, this young man, he gets to thinking. Thinking he’s gotta get back at them, at everyone. What’s he gonna do? Well, he knew where his neighbor kept his pistol, in fact knowing about the pistol was the only reason he hadn’t already snuck in and robbed his neighbor before, but he figured now’s as good a time as any. So he waited until he knew his neighbor would be out late and he climbed in, took anything that could be sold for more than a dollar, which he did, and kept hold of that gun. And went looking.

“The men that jumped him weren’t hard to find. He wasn’t the first guy they’d gotten, and they weren’t figured on him being the last, and they damn sure knew wasn’t no one calling the cops on them. They were down at the park playing ball when he caught up with them. No one saw him. Just gunshots, everywhere. Now that pistol held eight shots, and he used every one. Killed the first guy straight out, first shot. Fired off five more into the night before he finally caught the other fellow with the last two. Then he stood there, just staring.”

Mama stubbed out her smoke, and drank her coffee.

“Ahh,” she said, “just right.”

The swing creaked a little under her, and we could hear an ambulance in the distance.

“Now, those other five shots,” she continued, “they missed their target, but that don’t mean they didn’t hit nothing.”

“I don’t like where this story is heading,” said Adrienne.

“Couple went into a tree. One smashed up the window of a car parked blocks away. One they ain’t never find.”

“And the last?”

“Way they figure it, his aim was off, because of the recoil. Like this. See? Pointing up. Because that bullet flew damn near across the city then right through a eighth story window. Little boy standing by the sink, brushing his teeth. Grandma downstairs. Says she heard a tinkle, like a tiny broken bottle, then it all got silent.”

The ambulance grew louder and louder, and now we could see the lights. The cars on the street pulled off as best as they could.

“Wasn’t no trial. No one was gonna talk to the cops, even for some kid who had no one, and he just faded back into the city. Until one day that old grandma found him.”

The ambulance screamed its way through. The cars slowly got back onto the street and we watched the lights twinkle smaller until they finally disappeared in the sunlight. Adrienne closed her eyes, relaxing against me. The door opened and Adrienne’s older brother Daniel stepped out onto the porch. His mother patted the swing next to her and he joined her.

“He was at a bar we all used to go to,” she said, “course it ain’t nothing but a laundromat now, but it was hopping back then. Well, he was drinking and carrying on, you see, because he figured he was safe now. Wasn’t no one gonna jump him no more, and he’d just gotten away with killing two men and no one cared. Then suddenly he realize that no one’s near him, and it’s real real quiet. So he look behind him and there’s this old old lady, just staring at him. The whole place is silent, pool players just holding they sticks, no flirting, no bad jokes, nothing. Jukebox just—nothing.”

Adrienne pulled out her tobacco, rolling swiftly and without taking her eyes off her mother. When it was done she began to move to keep the smoke away from me but I shook my head and held onto her.

“And the boy knew her, soon as he saw her,” said Mama, “they all did. Seen her on the news, holding her grandson. And when he’d seen her, he’d wished, just for a minute, you know, for a minute he’d wished that maybe she’d been his grandmother. But now she’s standing there and everyone can see it.

“‘What you want, old lady?’ he says, so no one think he’s scared or something, though of course he ’bout to lose his mind. The old lady, she don’t say nothing, just stares at him. He’s starting to get more and more nervous and more and more freaked out, because she’s not even moving, hell he’s not even sure if the old bag is breathing, she’s just planted there for all he can tell. So he starts yelling, cussing, screaming, ‘What the hell you want old lady? *Fuck* you old lady.’”

“Stupid junky,” muttered Adrienne. There was a look, sharp as a breath, that went from Daniel to Mama, carrying whole conversations along with it, conversations that had been had before—and Adrienne hadn’t been a part of those either.

“So,” says her mother, recovering, “he’s yelling all this. No response. So he says, ‘*Fuck* your *fucking* grandson. You hear me? Old lady? *Fuck* him.’ And when he says that she just reaches out, grabs both of his arms at the elbow and holds him. He’s flipping out scrambling but she’s got a grip can’t be broken, like iron claws just sinking in, and he’s totally freaking out and so is everyone in the place but they’re all too *fucking* scared to move and suddenly she pulls him towards her and leans up and whispers something right in his ear.

“And just like that he stops struggling. Stops moving, pulling away. Just stops.”

“What did she say?” I ask.

Mama pulled out another cigarette and Daniel lit it quickly. She took her time with it, then turned to me.

“No one knows,” she said, “at least not, you know, with certainty.”

“But you have an idea?” I said. She shrugged.

“All I know,” she said, “is that everything got real quiet. Silent. Boy just stood there. Stopped. People were trying to get back into their groove, I mean it was a Saturday night, they were at a bar, they figured the old lady wasn’t coming back, no harm no foul. But nobody could really do anything. Because he didn’t. They weren’t even certain he was breathing. Just standing there. Finally they was getting ready to call 911 when somebody pointed, said, ‘Look.’ And there, hanging on his eyelashes like it had been waiting to be noticed was a single, round, perfect tear. It dropped and plowed its way down his cheek, slipping off to splash onto his shirt. Then, after several more minutes, another one, this time from the other eye. Then, again, quicker this time. And then more. Until they rushed down his face, like falling rain on a statue. And then it got worse.”

“Worse?” said Adrienne.

“Yes,” said Mama, “because then he moved.”

Daniel offered her the ashtray and she finished her cigarette and ground it out then he offered it to Adrienne and she ground out hers. He put the ashtray back in its hidden place and Mama smiled at him, and kissed him lightly on his forehead. He smiled. I could feel Adrienne wanting to rise up to them yet

holding herself back, keeping her body down and away from that family moment that built without her. And her mother turned and smiled at her, a different smile, a special I-know-you're-hiding-and-that's-okay smile.

“He didn’t move much,” she continued. “Just turning. Looking. Looked everyone, right through their eye, as if he was peering through their eyes to see everything they ever saw, as if he could in a glance take in all the horrors they’d done, the sorrows they’d felt, the crimes they’d suffered. And it just made him cry more. He walked, like that, past everyone, and out the door. People stood around, for a little bit, fidgeting. Then they all just gathered their stuff, making sure not to catch anyone else’s eye, and they just closed the bar for the night and went home.”

“Were they crying?” asked Adrienne.

“No. They weren’t even really sad. Not really. It was more like they hadn’t realized their lives had held so much. Had been so much. Until they viewed it again, and he cried over it. They...understood themselves, I guess, in a way they never had before.”

“And they had to be alone to handle that?”

“We usually do.”

“And what, he just faded into the night? Never seen again?” I asked.

“Been seen,” she said, “once or twice in the neighborhood. Though we hear stories.”

“Suppose to be,” said Daniel, “weeping man turned up in North Philly, when a couple dudes was about to throw down. Just walked up, out of nowhere, never said a word.”

“And,” I said as I untangled myself from Adrienne so I could stand and stretch, “no one could bear his gaze and they all went home, fight averted?”

“So the story says,” said Daniel.

“How come I never heard this story?” I said.

Mama winked at me.

“C’mon Adree,” she said, “your grandmother could use a hand.” She helped Adrienne to her feet, then held onto her and slid quite naturally into her arms. Adrienne hugged her back.

“Wait,” said Adrienne, drawing back, “what did the old lady say? I know you know.”

“Three simple words,” said her mother, pulling her in close again, “she said, ‘I forgive you.’”

At that Daniel gave me a look that didn’t need to carry much with it, and I nodded and we both headed for the door.

CHAPTER NINE

A Love Supreme

*“That’s what you get
for fuckin’ wit a ghetto bastard.”*

Naughty By Nature

It is clear that we are all byproducts of our families—not just intentional creations, but also runoff, waste, and accidental discoveries. Yes, we are all part of the greater family of man, and our ethnicities and cultural heritage and racial histories matter, and we draw meaning and strength from whatever particular nation-state or enclave we claim or are claimed by, and the streets we tread every day leave prints on our souls—yes, yes—all of this goes without being said. But it is within our family that we are taught how to hurt and how to act when we are hurt, how to scar and how to see another’s scars, how to care and how to be cared for. The ways we confront the world we either learn from our family or teach ourselves as a form of rebellion from all that we have been raised with.

I would like to tell you now of Adrienne’s family.

This is a story that I was not supposed to tell—but I cannot tell my story without it. In the Black community we often talk about the horrors of airing our dirty laundry, especially in front of the White folk. But even in our ugliest stories,

there are moments of brightness that could only be seen because of the dirt and grime surrounding them. It is only when we are pushed to stand with one another that we can see just how beautiful we become together.

Big Momma pushed the door open before my foot could solidly connect with the steps of the porch. As soon as the door cracked open I could hear the laughter and clatter of a house being prepared, and the swing and wonder of Mingus' *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady* welcomed me in. There was that perfect and specific smell that only comes about from the collected scents of Thanksgiving foods. If there was a true "American" cologne, it would smell like this: meaty yet green, nutty yet sweet, filling yet with the definite and far-off promise of pie.

"Hey, Eshu," she said, holding the door for me.

"How do you always know it's me," I said as I passed, "when I know for a fact you never look out the window?"

"It's a grandmother thing. I see you got dressed up."

"Hey," I said, "I look good. Black T-shirt, brand new-ish jeans, my dress sneakers. It's good, right?"

"Hmmm. Well. You got my macaroni?"

"Of course." I laid the large baking pan on top of an old magazine on the table, and leaned down to give her a hug and a kiss.

"This ain't Kraft or nothing, right? You know I don't play with that stuff."

"Big Momma," I said, "I know how to make macaroni and cheese."

"Bread crumbs."

“Made them myself. From fresh bread from Sarconi’s.”

She grinned.

“Good enough?” I said.

“Should be,” she said, then turned from me and shouted, “William, where you at?”

“Coming,” came a voice from upstairs.

If you’re not looking, only listening, teenage boys always sound like they’re desperately falling down the stairs; it’s like they have four or five extra legs that they only pull out to go from one floor to another. Adrienne’s “little” brother crashed down and skidded to a stop right in front of his grandmother. He had the same muscular and stocky build as the rest of his family, yet he came in a stretched out, elongated version, as he was already the only one in the family to hit six feet and at fourteen he didn’t appear to be stopping at a specific height any time soon. Like many kids who were suddenly tall, he stooped a little, and always seemed to be looking for a place to hide, with a slightly worried look on his face that acknowledged the fact that he wasn’t likely to find one. When he saw me he grinned, and I could have sworn he blushed.

“Monkey Man,” he said in a soft voice, a softness he betrayed with a punch to my arm.

“Little Dude,” I said, and smacked him back.

“Boy, what are you wearing?”

“What?” he said, and again he blushed. “You told me I had to put on a tie!”

“No, no,” she said, as her eyes watered a little and she covered her nose, “that smell.”

“It’s ‘Polo,’” he said, “Adrienne got it for me.”

“You kids,” she said. She grabbed the pan and headed to the kitchen, and added over her shoulder, “Take Eshu’s coat for him will you, William.”

“Careful, Big Momma,” I said, “that’s still hot.”

“Only if you got weak fingers,” she said.

“The trick,” I said as I took off my coat and handed it to William, “is to find a good cologne and only put a little on.”

“But I want people to smell it.”

“It’s a tease,” I said.

“How?”

“Well, if someone wants more...” I stopped, leaned closer to him, and sniffed. He squawked a little, fumbled with my coat, and fled back upstairs.

“What are you chuckling at?” said Adrienne as I walked into the kitchen, the door swinging shut behind me. She spoke without looking up from the bird in the oven as she basted it carefully.

“Your little brother.”

That got her attention.

“You teasing him again?”

“Adrienne,” I said as I gave her a hug, “little brothers are supposed to crush out on older siblings friends. That’s one of the good things about having an older sibling in the first place. The day my big brother became friends with a bunch of cheerleaders was one of the happiest days of my life.”

“This is different,” she said. She pushed me away.

I shrugged.

"Only if we let it be, Adree."

She stared at me.

"Idiot," she said, with a swift punch to my arm.

"You know," I said, "that shit does hurt."

She pulled me back in. In her arms I could feel that there was something inside her, just below the surface, as if her stress and anxiety had taken physical form and now could no longer fit beneath in her skin. I looked at her but she avoided my eyes and squeezed me a little tighter.

Behind us came the sound of a croaking door. Big Momma emerged from the basement, lugging 2 folded wooden chairs up the steps. Adrienne turned and took the chairs, giving her grandmother a quick glare, then handed them to me.

"Living room?" I said.

"Please."

"Gramma, I got this," said Adrienne, "please, just sit down. Relax. You promised."

"Girl it's only a couple of chairs. Besides," said Big Momma, her voice fading behind the swinging door, "you and your friend were having a moment, or did you think I didn't see?"

The dining room was decorated in a relaxed and unhurried manner, with deep orange and weighty red accents, with touches of brown and gold here and there. There was nothing too expensive on display, yet it all seemed to have been bought just for this day, and clearly was purchased by someone who had planned ahead, as opposed to the slowly filled out over time style most houses with children acquire for celebrations. I was used to holiday rooms filled with

fractured and never sturdy cardboard turkeys crafted from toilet paper rolls and construction paper, dioramas, tiny papier-mâché pilgrim statues painted in fading acrylics, and piles of store bought Thanksgiving-themed knickknacks. My house looked less like a gathering to commemorate an American holiday than a long-delayed elementary school art exhibition.

There was a long table for the food to be laid out, with new cloths and some dried flowers and a few tiny pumpkins along the edges. Against the wall was what appeared to be a large framed picture, wrapped in brown paper; the paper still bore the markings of whatever grocery store it had originally come from. For some reason, this made it seem to fit in better, like corn drying in its husk or leaves preparing to slip off and reveal the branches beneath.

I unfolded the chairs and brought them to the table. Once I added those, there were seven. I tried to think it through: Adrienne, Big Momma, myself, William, and their big brother Daniel. That left two more. Could it be that they wanted to leave places for Mama and David? This was the first Thanksgiving since Mama had passed. But while David's presence had been missed last year there'd never been any thought to setting up an empty chair to force people to think about him. Big Momma was pretty religious and Passover and Thanksgiving were definitely sibling holidays, but I'm fairly certain they weren't expecting Elijah to pop in and drag along a friend with him.

While I was trying to figure out a tactful way to ask the question Big Momma poked her head out of the kitchen.

"Company at the door, Eshu."

"Got it," I said, and hustled to the front of the house.

The woman stepping onto the porch froze as I opened the door. She was short and thin, with close cropped hair dyed bright blonde that gently framed her face. In one hand she held a delicate basket of flowers that matched the color scheme of the living room and in her other hand she carried a bowl of blood red cranberries. Her eyes were deep brown and opened panic-sized wide as she stood and stared at me; the thick black eyeliner and tapered eyeshadow only added to it. The sunlight seemed to aim itself straight for the tiny ring she wore in her nose and from there to slide across her brown skin to her basic and new-looking black T-shirt. She wore jeans and black sneakers to finish the outfit.

“Wow,” I said, “we’re like twins.”

“You know what the difference between us is?” she said.

“What?”

“I make this look good.”

“Good one,” I said. “Come on in. Here, let me help you with that.”

“How’d you know I was here? I didn’t even get up the stairs.”

“You met Big Momma?”

“Yeah.”

“But your first time visiting?”

She nodded.

“Well, she does that,” I said. “Somehow. It’s a grandmother thing, she says. Only Adrienne’s mother used to do it to.”

I started to lead her towards the dining room, stopped to help her with her coat, then realized she wasn’t wearing one.

“I didn’t know you live in North Philly.”

“Yeah,” she said, startled, “just while I’m finishing up at Temple. Between school and some non-profit work it makes sense, but I’ll probably move to West Philly when I graduate next year.”

I pointed to the table with the flowers and she found a spot for it.

“Studying?”

“Film. With a minor in sociology.”

“Ah,” I said, “a documentary filmmaker.”

“Eventually.”

“And community organizer. The nonprofit work, I mean. Yet you’re not having Thanksgiving with your family.”

“No.”

“What does that mean?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“Wait,” I said, “I got it. Your family owns a store, no, a restaurant, they’re all working today, you’ll join them tomorrow to have a celebration.”

“Not even close,” she said with a laugh.

“Wait,” I said, “I got it. They’re Mormon missionaries traveling in Honduras or someplace.”

“No,” she said, “but I like that story. I might use it from now on.”

“Cool,” I said, “I like it when people like my stories.”

“Eshu?” she said.

“That’s me. Sarah?”

“Yes.”

“Good to finally meet you.”

We shook hands.

“I don’t know,” she said. “You’re dangerous.”

“Rarely,” I said.

“Well, you’re the only one Adrienne warned me about.”

“Poets never trust storytellers,” I said with a shrug, “we’re more honest than they are. Come on. Kitchen’s this way.”

“Hey wait a minute,” she said, “why aren’t *you* with *your* family?”

“Define family,” I said.

As we stepped out of the dining room I glanced back. There was still that one chair left and I began to have a sinking feeling that I knew who was going to fill it, and how this evening was going to play out. If I was the only one she was warned about, then I would guess she had not been told everything.

Adrienne’s eyes bloomed when Sarah walked into the kitchen, and they awkwardly stood shuffling their feet near each other for a few never-ending seconds. Then Big Momma grabbed her scissors, took me by the arm, muttered something about her herb garden, and led me to the backdoor. There wasn’t much space, but she had covered most of it with a large raised bed that sprouted her cilantro, basil, thyme, rosemary, and other green and fragrant things I couldn’t recognize. It was a change from when Mama used to store toys and random appliances in the back, and it made the place seem a little more alive, I guess because it was.

“She seems sweet,” I said.

Big Momma chuckled.

“That girl,” she said, “is a lot of things, but sweet ain’t really one of them.”

“Well,” I said, “she seems good for Adrienne.”

“That,” said Big Momma, taking my arm and leading me back inside, “is the truth.”

When we got in, she peeled away from me and instead took Sarah’s arm. The two of them walked out without a glance and were already laughing before the door closed. Adrienne turned to me and I grinned.

“Don’t you start,” she said.

“Who, me?”

“I don’t say anything about your girl in writing school in Iowa or whatever.”

“Indiana.”

“There’s a difference?”

“Less nose rings, more short haircuts.”

She glared at me.

“Come on. I had to make one joke. Last one. I promise.”

“Better be.”

“Well,” I said. “Let’s do some cooking.”

Their kitchen was large and always seemed scrubbed down to the barest molecules, regardless of how many meals had been prepared or finished within its walls. Adrienne was a planner as a cook, and had a whole layout for the day of what had to be chopped when and which should be stirred first and what kind of salt added to each dish; assisting her was more like working in an assembly plant than whipping together some new and elaborate concoction. All of which allowed us to relax and take each task in order without rushing or stressing, and left plenty of time and energy for talking, and for more than a little teasing. People

came in to grab some coffee or bring out an appetizer as they were ready or just to talk for a minute or two before Adrienne and I herded them back out. The music was loud and we could hear everyone laughing and talking in the living room, and it began to feel like a holiday living up to its name.

Then we were in the hustle and bustle of getting it all done, timing working just about right and teamwork getting through the parts where it was off.

Adrienne grabbed a pot and headed out to put it on the table and to tell them that the food was ready. As she went through the door I noticed that it was somewhat quiet out there and figured they were just getting hungry. As I was pulling the bird from the oven Adrienne returned, her older brother Daniel tagging close behind. Neither of them spoke. I nodded to Daniel and he nodded back. I maneuvered the bird onto a tray and he helped me dress it up for display and eating.

“Careful,” I said as he started to take the platter, “that’s a nice shirt.”

“You ain’t lying,” he said with a laugh, and swiftly rolled his sleeves past his elbows. His arms next to the platter seemed to be like a spare set of extra large turkey legs. I was about to make a joke about dark meat when I caught the tiny almost hidden marks right in the crook of his arm. When I raised my eyes it was obvious that he knew what I was looking at.

“Wait,” I said, pulling the sleeves lower. “You don’t want to get a burn. You can always replace a shirt.”

“Yeah,” he said, heading back out, “thanks.”

I looked over to Adrienne. She was staring out the window, to the backyard.

“Adree?” I said.

“Can you finish up the gravy?” she said. “I think I need a little air.”

“No problem,” I said and she stepped out.

When I brought the gravy out I saw who had taken the last chair.

Adrienne’s father was shorter than her mother had been, and had the thick muscle of prison, a heavy build without any cosmetic element to it. He was grilling William about some aspect of his latest football game, and actually seemed to be giving his approval. William pointedly did not look in my direction and I went straight to the table.

“Hey, Sarah?” I said.

“Yes?” she said, as if she had been expecting my words.

“Can you give a hand in the kitchen?”

“Of course.”

Daniel stood up with her. His father quickly shot him a look.

“I think the ladies got this well in hand. Come here and help me explain about zone blocking again.”

Adrienne’s father never could understand how she and I could be close friends for so long and never have sex. The only conclusion he could come to was that I had to be the gayest person man he knew, which, to be honest, wasn’t really saying all that much. Fortunately he wasn’t around all that often, and anyway he paid little attention to Adrienne even when he was around. William and his football potential was about the only family thing that he really cared about anymore, and as a result Adrienne and I were able to avoid any painful yet hilariously awkward *Three’s Company* style shenanigans.

We went into the kitchen. It was empty. I nodded towards the backdoor and said, “That way,” and Sarah made a quick exit. There wasn’t much left to do and I got everything together, making sure not to rush while keeping everything both hot and unburned. It was easier than it sounds. Eventually time ran down and I made a sharp knock on the backdoor and began collecting as many things as I could; a long and hideously dull summer spent waiting tables has come in handy much more than anyone could have predicted.

They came back in and immediately Adrienne seized control, stirring and whirling, murmuring and pointing, and generally making a glorious noise. I could feel my love of food and regular appetite engaging in a desperate war with my nervous and panic-filled stomach. I had no idea who would win but I just hoped they would hurry up and get it over with; being a battleground is never fun.

We laid the food out on the table and Big Mama directed everyone to their seats and ensured that everyone had a glass of water and some other beverage of their choosing. Adrienne kept her eyes from Sarah, looking only at the food with an occasional glance at one of her brothers. Her older brother Daniel kept a watch on her—even when his eyes appeared to be looking at something else it was clear his mind was solely focused in on his baby sister and her friend. With a completely natural casualness Big Mama said, “Sarah, sit next to me, dear, you can help when I carve the turkey.” This had the unspoken benefit of having Sarah also sit next to Adrienne, a move that earned Big Mama a glare from her granddaughter and quickly silenced gasps from her other grandchildren.

“First,” she said, “we open up this.” She picked up the package placed on the table and carefully tore the paper off in long strips. Daniel came to her and

she handed him the paper as it came off, revealing a thick wooden frame, the contents of which she stared at with wide eyes. She stood, holding it, then turned to kiss Daniel on. She handed him the frame then wiped a tear from her cheek. Daniel held it up so we could all see.

The painting held Mama, as much as any painting could hold her, with Adrienne in her arms and an explosion of a grin on her face. The original photo, something that I had been so proud of when I had taken it, was dwarfed and forgotten in the shadow of this painting, a riot of screaming colors and solid heavy forms. The diploma, so prominent in the photo, was a spot in the background, a dash of light that added to the moment but was no longer, in itself, the moment. The two women were so different, yet it was still like gazing at two the separate faces of the same being, some ancient goddess that was eternally reborn in each birth that followed the first.

“You did that, son?” asked Adrienne’s father.

“Yes,” said Daniel.

“Hmmm,” said his father.

“I guess art school wasn’t a total waste,” said Daniel.

“Not total,” said his father, turning back to his plate, “now let’s eat.”

Daniel handed the painting back to his grandmother, who placed it back on the table. Once we were all seated, she turned to me.

“Eshu, you’re the word man. I know my granddaughter hates saying grace,” at this her granddaughter hid her face behind a glass of water, “and I want to hear something nice today. We can all use it. Will you do us the honor?”

Big Mama knew that Adrienne hated this kind of thing, and that I loved it.

I took a quick sip, wiped my mouth, leaned back, and began.

“When my little brother was little, around two or three, he would get a little confused at all of the holidays and celebrations being thrown at him. Halloween, Thanksgiving, birthdays, Christmas, New Year’s. They all blended in. He could never remember what day was coming up and what he was supposed to say and to whom. Finally, he decided he would just run up to anyone he knew, wrap his arms around their leg, look them in the eyes, and shout, ‘Happy You!’ this, he figured, covered everything.

“I still like to think that it does. ‘Happy You.’ I would like to wish everyone, ‘Happy You.’ Because I know that a happy you is the fastest and best way to a happy me.

“And when we wonder, after a year that held loss and pain, why we should be thankful, what do we have to be thankful for, my answer is not a difficult one. If nothing else, I am thankful for the ability to look around this table and see smiles. Happy faces. We can be thankful for making each other happy.”

Big Mama smiled at me, which may have been the best payment for my words I will ever receive. Then without words we all held hands and sat for a moment, remembering without words. I looked at the painting and I could see Mama’s grin, that grin! it was the same grin she wore whenever she saw her children all together. And there it was, still with us. She wasn’t one to sit around and wonder what if, or to wish she’d done things differently or that she could get more time. That wasn’t her style. The fact is, some people are missed even when they remain here. Mama made sure she’d only be missed once she was gone.

I looked around the table, feeling a sense of joy and true thankfulness that

I hadn't expected for this day. I looked towards William and even before I saw him I could feel the armor building around him, like an armadillo rolling into a ball before it is struck. I followed his eyes to his father, and then followed his father's eyes to Adrienne and Sarah. Unlike the rest of us they had not yet let go of each other's hands, and the look they shared was not the uninvolved glance of friends preparing to share a meal. The connection between them grew until we could all just about see it, until Adrienne's father sliced through it with a look of his own.

Adrienne let go of Sarah's hand, and averted her eyes.

"Daniel," said Big Mama, "the music stopped. Can you put something on?"

Daniel didn't move. He had shifted in his seat, so now he hovered, back to his fullback days, waiting for the signal to leap up and create a path to safety for those who came after him.

"Daniel."

He looked to his grandmother. She smiled at him, and went to the table to carve the turkey.

"Sarah, come give me a hand."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Girl, if you don't stop calling me that we gonna have a problem. See how I hold it here? Now you ain't one of them vegetarians are you?"

"No, ma'am—no, uh—"

"Big Mama will do fine. Pass those potatoes. Let's get this food going."

"Yes, Big Mama."

"Daniel, please. Some music," she said. "A little Coltrane. *A Love*

Supreme, maybe. That should be about right.”

Daniel got up and walked to the living room, looking back as often as he dared.

“Son,” said Big Mama, pausing in her work, “something on your mind?”

He had not taken his eyes off of Adrienne. She had not lifted her eyes from her plate.

“I didn’t raise you not to say what’s on your mind.”

“Just trying to figure,” he said, “how to keep my damn appetite, when...”

“When?”

“When I got to see this.”

“This?” asked William.

“William,” said his grandmother, “shush.”

“Your sister’s gonna bring this...person,” he said. The volume of his words fell but they expanded nonetheless, floating in the air above us all. The flaring of his nostrils and the blooming rage of his reddening eyes was no longer simply human but had reached into a mythological past, a paternal Minotaur trembling with fury before us.

“To your grandmother’s table. Where your mother used to sit.”

“Mama ate here,” said William, “ate right here next to Sarah.”

“William, go help your brother with the music.”

With a last look William got up from the table. Soon we could hear the rumble of the two brothers talking in hushed tones in the other room.

“Maybe I should go,” said Sarah.

“Girl you ain’t going nowhere to you pass those potatoes. We got a meal to

eat.”

Adrienne’s father leapt to his feet, his chair falling back with a thud on the carpet. His arms were like immense sledgehammers, held straight out at his sides, holding for the exact second to swing forward. He stood, shimmering, like a highway seen through a desert heat, and leaned over the table to speak, his voice even calmer and lower. The words slid from his mouth like an elegant and dignified gloved hand to slap Adrienne in the face.

“Girl,” he said, “you are gonna send that little bitch home and you and I are going to have a talk.”

There was silence as that hung in the air. William and Daniel stood by the doorway between the living and dining rooms, twitchy and jumpy, ready almost eager to step in, yet a lifetime of fear holding them back. We waited. Then Adrienne finally lifted her head, looked back at her father, and said, simply, “No.”

Big Mama smiled.

Adrienne’s father exploded.

All elegance or calmness was gone from his voice, just a short grouping of rageful sounds, his eyes doing the majority of the talking for him. That and the fact that he started to walk around the table, until he found himself stopped by a small and gentle hand on his arm.

“Boy,” said Big Mama, “you need to stop this.”

“Get out my way.”

“Or what?” she said.

He stared at her, his anger flickering.

“Boy,” said his mother, with a chuckle, “you remember the first time you

was in court? Judge looked at you like you was crazy.”

“What,” he said, “are you talking about?”

“He asked you,” she continued as if he hadn’t spoken, “if you were afraid of going to prison. And you said no. There was only one thing you were afraid of.”

“And?”

“And what was that, the one thing you were afraid of?”

“My father.”

“Your father, yes,” she said, and we were all suddenly aware that while her one hand rested softly on her son’s arm, the other still held the knife for carving the turkey. “And what,” she added, “was the one thing your father was afraid of?”

Her son made a noise closer to a squeal than any actual words.

“Can’t hear you, boy,” said Big Mama, “say it again. What was the one thing your father feared?”

“You,” he said, in a voice that was definitely not elegant or calm, but suddenly had no room left in it for rage. Big Mama glanced at Daniel, who picked up his father’s chair and then quietly took his own.

“Well, to be completely honest,” said Big Mama, guiding her son back around the table, “he was afraid of making me angry.”

“Mom,” he said, with an embarrassed, almost pleading tone, but she just smiled.

“Boy,” she said, “I love you, you my own flesh and blood. I watched you grow, I watched you fall, I watched you get back up. Sometimes I was the only person alive who rooted for you to get back up.”

“I know.”

“You do?” she said.

He nodded.

“Then know this,” she said, leaning in to touch his cheek. “I love you, but you ever disrespect my granddaughter again, I will fuck you up. You hear me?”

It was clear that she was heard but from the way he looked at her, for a moment, it seemed like this might just be an asskicking he was going to have to take.

“Hey, Dad,” said Daniel, taking his father’s plate, “let me get you some food.”

“Don’t bother,” his father said, brushing Big Mama’s hand away. “I ain’t staying around for this shit.” He made a move to stand and her hand, still gentle and patient, took his arm. He froze.

“You sit down,” she said, “and be here for your family.”

“Please, Dad,” said William.

“You been gone enough,” said Big Mama. At that he opened his mouth and her hand, slow and calm, touched his lips and silenced him before he could make a sound. He slumped into his chair.

She turned back to the turkey, and gestured for Sarah to help her as she resumed carving it. The food began to make its way around the table and we all helped ourselves, no sounds but the scraping of utensils on china and the passing of bowls, platters, and plates.

“William,” I said, “has your dad ever told you about the time he started for Penn State?”

“Don’t patronize me, boy,” said his father.

“Tell it again,” said William through a mouthful of food, “it’s a good story.”

It was a good story. And he told a good story, though he wasn’t quite the storyteller his mother was, or his ex-wife, but as he spoke it was clear how much it meant to him, to his vision of himself, and things like that can often improve a tale. His sons chimed in as he went, throwing in details and images, a few of them probably true, some others embellishments their father had built into his story, the rest things they had added in as children that now fit so well it was no longer possible to tell what the original story had been. No one really cared, though. As the tale built to its big, legend-making moments, he stopped, looking over at Sarah.

“You,” he said, and there was a deep and open sadness in his voice, “you don’t really know football, do you?”

A panicked glance at Adrienne, who smiled, then Sarah turned, and shook her head.

“Didn’t think so,” he said, then reached onto the table and began lining up the salt and pepper and a few glasses into a formation. Shouts of assistance and explanation rang out, questions were asked and re-asked and answered and re-answered, and the story spread out across the table like a Civil War reenactment, though with perhaps slightly less concern for historical accuracy. Soon the whole family was involved, and each play was brought to life with eager and exacting dedication. That story led to another, and that storyteller led to another, and the night was spent spilling ourselves out, onto the table, to be shared and passed around until the last bite of pie was swallowed and the last drip of coffee drank.

CHAPTER TEN

Is It Still Love When It's Refused?

"Is it my turn to tell the tale

Of how I got popped,

And how my lawyer failed to get me out on the spot?"

The Coup

There have been times when this story, which has become my story, has interfered with my life. Or, I should say, with those parts of my life that this story doesn't cover. Like everyone I know, September 11th had made early morning phone calls into a much more nerve racking experience than the rightfully should be. I spent a year training myself to let the phone ring, if it needed to, in order to avoid picking it up and screaming at whoever was on the other line. I felt like Evilline from *The Wiz*: *Don't nobody bring me no bad news/'Cuz I wake up already negative and I'm firing up my fuse*. Morning phone calls don't have to be bad news; it's just that we seem to only remember the ones that are. Since that morning when my brother had called, hearing that ring while still in bed has never been a good sign.

"Turn on the TV," he said.

"What channel?"

"Doesn't matter."

I couldn't imagine how anything good could follow that. Of course, I couldn't have imagined how viciously yet cartoonishly evil it would be. Jello Biafra has talked about how it should be no surprise that his generation couldn't take their eyes off of the TV; after all, they watched someone land on the moon, a President get shot, and then his shooter get shot. They didn't want to miss whatever came next. For us, it feels impossible to miss anything. We do try, though. I think my generation still holds out hope that if we miss seeing something then maybe we could claim that it didn't actually happen.

For me, the early morning phone call puts an end to that.

I will call her Monica, for purposes of this story. I have decided to hold onto her real name, for no other reason than I have to keep some things for myself and there is no harm done in not revealing it. She will not be returning once I leave her, indeed, I have yet to see her again myself, and hold out little hope for any sort of reunion. I had been trying to convince her for weeks that we should venture from the safe confines of the friend zone into the more dangerous yet potentially exciting realm of friends-with-benefits, with the growing possibility of more-than-friends that sometimes comes along with it. On weekends she worked a night shift as a security guard to help pay off student loans as she finished grad school. We had started together but she could only take one or two classes a semester and she was staying true to her four year plan.

She didn't like to cook and wasn't a big fan of breakfast and when she would come home hungry she inevitably found herself either gulping down some pancakes or reheating leftover Vietnamese takeout. So I told her I would make

her an actual dinner, salmon with a miso glaze over udon noodles, with a side of kale, all over a heaping dish of brown rice. I had even broken out the ice cream maker and whipped up some fresh mint chocolate chip, burying it in the back of the fridge to insure that no roommate stumbled upon it. When I saw her during the week and told her my plan, she laughed, and said she'd be just before sunrise Monday morning, and that she'd be bringing her toothbrush and nightgown.

Dinner was finished and I had just gotten out the ice cream when my phone buzzed. I silenced it without looking down at it. A chill flew across my spine, as if I had already scooped out a tremendous bowl of the ice cream and dropped it down my shirt. I could follow the sweat as it slid from along my neck and raced to my underwear. I held my breath and looked down. Adrienne's number. No, her grandmother's number.

The phone buzzed again to tell me that she'd left a message.

Old people call early, I told myself. They wake up early and they make early phone calls about later in the day things. William probably has a game, or Daniel has an exhibit, or she just wants me to come by for dinner. If that's true, I thought, and if the rest of this morning goes well, I could even bring Monica. Big Mama would like that.

We ate our dessert and it was as thick and creamy as we always dream that ice cream will be. I straightened up a little, leaving the dishes in the sink for later. Monica picked up the bag she had brought and headed for the bathroom, stopping only to drop a tiny giggle and an almost tinier kiss on my lips (our first!). My heart pounded on me, trying to break free from my chest so it could go off and follow her. I smiled, I laughed, I stretched, I sat down. I looked at my phone.

I sighed.

I checked the message.

Monica came out of the bathroom and walked with eager confident steps betrayed by the slight hunch of her shoulders and the little grin slowdancing its way across her lips. Her Afro was picked out and full, stretching up to grab the remnants of the night, or at least to touch the ceiling. Nightgowns are not like lingerie; they are not inherently sexy, and if one is left lying on the bed it may provoke feelings of nostalgia, of home, or sleep. But it always means bed, and on the right body in the right time they can become a promise sewed in cotton, hinting at all of the things they cover.

When Monica joined me in the kitchen she stopped, her mouth dropping open and her eyes rapidly shifting around the room.

“You’re leaving?” she said.

I bent down to tie the laces of my boots. The boots were brown and still felt new to my feet but I could see, looking at them this closely, that the leather was rippled and scratched and soon would get to that peeling stage and from there go straight to itty-bitty holes, on to groupings of little ones almost too small to see, then bigger, then the boots would be done. The laces were becoming worn threads themselves, it wasn’t clear if they could hold on through the remaining life of the boots. Did this mean I would have to go shopping? And would I have time this weekend?

“Eshu.”

I stood, and zipped up my jacket.

“Please,” I said, “stay here. Get some sleep. There’s plenty of food left. Ice

cream too.”

“Are you going?” Her voice was flat and steady. She sat down at the table.

“I have a situation.”

“What does that even mean?” she said. “A situation.”

“It’s hard to explain,” I said. I grabbed my backpack.

“Well fucking try.”

“It’s not my story to tell.”

“I thought,” she said, “all stories were yours to tell.”

“Please,” I repeated, “sleep. Stay as long as you like. You know my housemates, they’ll be cool.” I said all this as I had my hand on the door. I took a deep breath, opened it, and peeked over my shoulder. She had already gathered her things again and headed back to the bathroom. The slamming of the bathroom door trembled through the house, and I hoped it didn’t wake anyone. I closed the door behind me as quietly as I could.

By the time I got home that afternoon she was long gone and had already decided to never again return my phone calls.

Being by yourself on a trolley is a great time to revisit the actions that led you to that trolley. Was I wrong in not explaining myself, in sharing a story that, as I said, was not mine to tell? Quick decisions are either great or terrible; the one thing they have going for them is that they are rarely boring. Why is it my story now, when I couldn’t claim it then, even as I knew what holding it back would cost me? I am not who I was then, my story has grown and pulled the world around me into it—and there are reasons why I am telling this story that have little to do with my life. Lust is not enough make me pass on this tale; as

strong as a motivator as it is, it cannot compete with grief, or with guilt.

I held onto the strap, packed within a mass of work heading sleepers, coffee guzzlers and ipod listeners, rustling opened and unread newspaper holders, trudging along together to those same, repeated destinations. I was able to make my own schedule, when to go in and when to work at home, a level of control I held onto even though it kept me on the lower end of the corporate ladder, and had gleefully been able to make certain I was free for as long as I needed on this Monday. From the racketing trolley on to the steady reliable randomness of the Broad Street Line, heading up north to the neighborhood Adrienne grew up in.

Sarah was rocking gently on the porch swing. She looked up as I made my way up the steps and tried to smile. It wasn't much of one but I appreciated the attempt.

"Hey," I said.

"Adrienne's inside," she said.

"Okay."

I sat down next to her. The swing moved beneath us, steadied, then restarted its slow and regular motion. She smiled again, this time succeeding a little better.

"How much do you know?"

"Nothing really," I said. "Big Mama called, but she was pretty upset. I couldn't make out much on the message."

"It's Daniel," she said.

"I got that much," I said. "Where is he now?"

"He's in holding. William and their father are with the lawyer, at the

courthouse. Looks like he won't be arraigned until tomorrow."

Hearing that Adrienne's father was there made me feel both much better and more worried. Anything that actually got him involved had to be a big deal, but I guess we all knew that already. Adrienne's father had become quite an effective jailhouse lawyer while doing time, and if anyone could translate the dry discussions of a court-appointed attorney and actually advocate for Daniel, it was him.

The street was waking, slowly, begrudgingly, with staggering its release of pedestrians, slow driving cars, and soft singing birds. The sun hid itself as best it could behind every tree it could find, so even though there were no clouds it still felt like it wasn't as bright as it should be, moving shadows covering every corner and sidewalk. There is a solemnness that we view the world with, in moments like this, a feeling that could make even Hong Kong seem like a quiet and empty village. And this, even on a happy busy day, was most definitely not Hong Kong.

"What are the charges?" I asked.

"Drug possession. Assault with a deadly weapon. More to come."

"Fuck," I said.

"They'll probably plea bargain it down. Stabbing your dealer when he tries to stiff you and then take your money is a crime, but it's not one the DA's gonna want to spend a lot of time on."

The singing of the birds stopped, cut short, and the trees all seemed to be emptying of birds, and as soon they did all of the birds also lifted off of the telephone wires, joining in a sudden mass exodus of flapping wings and several different anxious cries. There was a shuffling in a nearby tree and I peered into it

as best I could. There was a dark shape I couldn't quite make out, perched on a branch and calmly keeping watch.

"Do you see that bird?" I asked.

Sarah wiped her eyes and stood up.

"You're leaving?" I said.

"Adrienne," she said, pulling on her backpack, "told me quite clearly that this is for family only."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Oh."

"You love her," I said. "You really do."

"Is it still love," she said, "if it's refused?"

I smiled softly at her then realized she was actually waiting for me to answer. I stood there awkwardly for a moment. Then the door opened behind us, and Big Mama walked out. She nodded at me and calmly engulfed Sarah in her arms. The younger woman collapsed into her chest, and Big Mama whispered softly to her. I looked at her eyes, so brown and open, and it was obvious that they had down their standard in a crisis cry-full-out-for-two-minutes-then-dry-up routine that had been necessary way more often than a woman like her deserved. Or really, than anyone deserved.

"Adrienne's inside," she said to me with a nod of her head. I nodded back and went in.

She was sitting at the dining room table. The table was covered in notebooks, all open to crumpled and ink-covered pages, as well as ripped half sheets and scribbled napkins and the backs of receipts and torn envelopes and

old newspapers. Her head was down and her hand squeezed a pen so harshly I could feel it screaming as it scraped its way across the paper before her, a page she quickly slipped and kept moving, flipping again, words filling page after page in an endless river of thought and life that drained through her.

I sat, and took off my backpack, placing it on the ground beside me. I took out my own notebook and a pen, opened the notebook, and began adding my own stream of thoughts to the flood crashing onto the table. My pages turned, not as rapidly or as frantically as hers, but with their own steady pace. After a while I stopped and looked up at her.

She paused, looking down at the notebook before her, then shuffled the pages to an order resembling the beginning, and slid it across the table to me. I took the notebook and picked up my pen. I read through it quickly, marking tiny edits or suggestions down as I went. By the time I finished there was a pile of pages beside me, and I handed her back the notebook and took up the next one. She looked through what I had done and added her own changes and edits, sliding that notebook back into the pile, and taking the next one as it was made ready.

We sat there, for hours, until our hands could no longer hold a pen, scratching away at the horrors building up within us. Then we stopped, still silent, and we sat, and waited for the rest of her family to make their way home.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Because This, You See, Was Jonas

“Yo, all I need is one mic...”

Nas

The Memorial grew around us, foundations laid with songs and sermons, all of the weight-bearing words shared and passed around. Adrienne hovered, with constant though subtle motion, but whenever I looked at Jonas he was still.

Sitting beside him Maria contained Jonas with just the touch of her hand. I watched and I could feel him bubbling over, my eyes rolled with him like staring through the lid at a pot of water on the stove—though he never moved, not even a twitch. She held him there, she kept him inside himself, and she did it with only one hand, soft, along his arm. There was a preparation in his waiting. I had seen him speak so many times, of course—but what could be like this? He had always used words in a way that I couldn’t. It’s hard to explain. To me words were just the raw materials, the bricks that I laid to create the road for a long journey. Jonas was more like a gardener who made you gloriously aware of every rock you stepped on, any inch of gravel you displaced, each blade of grass you bent or shifted as you went by.

At this point I was no longer listening. Just sitting. Watching. And then the room was silent. The MC stood there, holding the mic, fidgeting and awkward, each movement sending pops and scratches into the soundsystem that

bled into the crowd.

Keith's daughter stood, and with a quick pitying glance at Jonas she walked over and took the mic. The silence held—or was held—or did the holding. She looked out at us, fingering the cord as she lifted the mic to her lips.

“When anyone asked my father,” she started, too softly, and at a signal from Adrienne she began again, louder, “when anyone asked my father, he always called me his first child. His blood child, yes, but never his only child.”

She looked into the crowd, reaching out and making contact with every eye that dared to seek hers, capturing each glance that focused in on her. She straightened, and began to relax.

“People usually thought that he meant the whole world was his family, or that his generation looked at the ones that followed them as their children, a shared joy, and burden.”

She smiled.

“He didn't mind them thinking that. It was wrong, but he didn't mind.”

Maria's hand grew, slowly and certainly, fingers spreading to support Jonas' head and wrap around his back, lifting him slowly and carefully up, so proudly.

“No, what he meant was, in his mind I have a sister,” and with this she shared a wink with Adrienne, “and a baby brother.”

She searched the room, then stopped, and her smile grew.

“And this little brother,” she added, “was trained well.”

In the crowd, Jonas' sister smiled back at Keith's daughter. I had never seen his big sister smile before; I realized that without seeing it you'd never know

they were related, but once you saw it, you couldn't help knowing. She was the only one of Jonas' blood relatives at the Memorial. She was the only one he asked to come.

"Jonas," said Keith's daughter, "my brother."

And all those eyes, the ones she had reached out to, turned at once to him, rising in Maria's hand, above us all, and everyone in the crowd who had entered this building with anger at Jonas, with blame for Jonas, with shame or grief or doubt about what he did or who he was, they all could feel it now sliding down their cheeks as they sat and stared at him.

"I know my father," she said, "and I know, without any doubt in my heart, that he would want my little brother to come up here, to do, as he would call it, 'that Poet thing.'"

And with that, Jonas was no longer in Maria's hand, above us; he was simply back in his pew. Just sitting. He didn't move. We watched him. But he didn't move.

I don't know where it started. I would probably take the credit for it if I could, hell I would even just like to know who to give the credit to—I only know that it began somewhere towards the back and like everyone else I was looking to the front where Jonas sat. But in the back someone stood. And faintly at first, with an almost embarrassed feel, they clapped. Then someone else stood. And then I was standing. And we were clapping. And someone shouted. Hollered. And we joined in. The whole room swayed.

Jonas stood. He waded through that growing wave of sound and forced his way to Keith's daughter, and fell on her and they held each other up and in

that roar of noise and life they shook, and we all reached out to touch them, our hands burning, our voices going but we kept on—yelling, clapping, shouting.

And then, in the center of it, I wondered, for only a second, if this had been planned, prepared. I don't know if it matters—this moment was needed, and it happened.

Because this, you see, was Jonas. That was him, more than anything, more than any other act or words he said. Jonas was the one who would do anything to make the crowd rise. And as much as I sometimes feel I should, I never could be mad at him for it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Roots

“Word, but who the fuck has heard?

It’s time to take a trip to the suburbs,

let ’em see a nigga invasion...”

Ice Cube

I have wondered many times just who Jonas would have been if he had grown up in more natural territory for him. I don’t mean safer or healthier, because that’s not really an option, or possible—the world is what it is. What I mean by more natural is simply that: Jonas, in his natural habitat. Raise an antelope in a zoo and it might be safer, as in the fact that there are significantly less predators—or at least the kind that would actually kill and eat the antelope. But you could never convince me that the antelope isn’t aware that something is wrong, that it doesn’t belong there, that it is being stared at, and that, in a manner it is not quite capable of understanding, it is being mocked—with every glance, with every pair of eyes that lights upon it, it is being mocked. It eats the easy food but it sees the outlines of its cage. From its actual lived experience it should be fine. If it was born in captivity, it knows no other world than the one given to it. But if you look deep enough into its eyes you can see the shadow of

unseen lands, the echoes of never heard cries and the touch of unknown winds—this was Jonas in his suburban home. Jonas Of The City, or, God forbid, Jonas Of The Country, would have built himself around who he was, around what he saw of himself reflected in the world he lived in.

But our Jonas was a creature of the suburbs.

He grew up in opposition. He grew up against. There's no better way to say it than that: he grew up against. Like Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*; ask him what he was rebelling against and his only response, indeed the only rational response would have been, "What've you got?" This was before politics, before becoming anti-war, before rallies and poetry and four hour long meetings in sterile, packed rooms. Getting exposed to left-wing theories and ideas didn't make him suddenly begin to act out, didn't cause him to reject everything; no, he was well on his way to doing that on his own. The "movement" only gave him something to join once he had already decided to leave all that he knew behind.

Often, once we become accustomed to our surroundings, we only see them when an outsider shows them to us with new eyes. In the land of his childhood, Jonas saw everything with the eyes of an outsider, even his own home. New Jersey is an intricate place. The name brings up images of bland concrete and continual highways, the voices of Joe Pesci and Jon Bon Jovi, the flavors of highway diners and wild blueberries, the sound of two young men who started out as unheralded rebels and wound up being hailed as The Boss and The Chairman of the Board. There is pollution and there is corruption, there are gardens and there are green spaces, there's the Pine Barrens and the Jersey Devil. And there is, of course, the hair. You have everything at your fingertips, minutes

or miles away, hop in the car and hit the Turnpike or the Parkway and the whole country spreads herself out to you, or at least all of the country that you are taught to think matters, Philly D.C. New York The Poconos Florida The Shore, what else do you need?

There is a story that Jonas loved to tell, that explains his feelings for where he grew up. He had, of course, a hundred other stories like it. This was not the first, or the last, or the worst, but it was the one that, if you heard it, you basically heard all of the others as well. The first thing you must understand is that Jonas, like myself, was a child raised in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement. His parents, like mine, gloried in an America more open and inviting than any other, at least since the arrival of the Puritans. To his parents, leaving behind the empty stomachs and endless roaches and emphatic poverty meant a move back to Eden. Into this glorious land they fled, and in its glow they saw forever, they saw the future, they were able to let down their past. This past, however, was still sitting on top of Jonas' present, and because they could not let themselves see it they could never truly see him.

The other parents, the other students—I do not know what they saw in this world we shared. I know how they acted. Like they belonged there. Like this was heaven, a heaven well earned and long deserved. They acted, in short, like everything was perfect, and would remain that way for all time. They acted as if they never noticed the teen pregnancies, the bullies in the hallways, the children who feared to go home, the coke and the beer and the do-anything-to-escape attitude that bloomed right under their roofs.

Parents and teachers loved to tell us to go to them, to trust those in

authority, to bring any and every issue to the teachers; in their minds, there was no stigma to snitching and no doubt that those older and more experienced would quickly be able to put all wrongs right, if only we were wise enough to bring our problems to them. Whatever someone does to you, they repeated over and over, don't let it get to you, be better than them, don't get too angry and by all means don't ever try to handle it by yourself. You'll only make things worse. Bring it to your teachers. To do this, of course, requires that you assume the teachers are not part of the problem. In a mostly White suburban school with teachers who were also mostly White and had themselves gone to schools that were all White, a partly White but mostly Black student could afford no such assumptions.

This story starts, as many high school stories do, with a substitute teacher. Yes, yes, we can all agree that substitute's have a hard job. Despite what kids are told to do, their respect is rarely given cheaply, and never freely, and walking into the battleground that is high school is no small task; it's like throwing on the blue helmet and heading out into the nearest war zone. Anyone who willingly chooses to undertake this somewhat insane job should be commended, without question. This doesn't mean, however, that folks in the blue helmets always bring peace, or that they even try to; the most intense job can become only a job, if you allow it to.

So: a math substitute. An older man—let's be honest, a very much older man, silver-haired, wrinkled, Florida tanned White skin, dressed in a sharp suit. He was vibrant, active, and perfectly ready to lecture on anything and everything that came to his mind. Math, unfortunately, was not something that appeared to slide into his thoughts. The main thrust of his discussion that day focused on the

ways that this generation was not likely to amount to much, as they wanted to hide out and do the dope and listen to screechy music and didn't have the dedication to stand and fight; this generation, he said, was losing the war. It took the students a few minutes to figure out just what war he was talking about, as the only war anyone had ever asked these children of the 80's to join in on was The War On Drugs. The teacher's whole attitude seemed unreal to them, like a stereotype escaped from the silliest and most forgettable sitcom high school classroom, dropping irrelevant and impossible one-liners to the canned applause of a hidden studio audience. It all reeked of Grumpy Old Man Syndrome, yet he smiled at them with what appeared to be genuine affection, and he sprinkled his sermon with soft chuckles and little jokes between sighs and slow shakes of the head.

Some of the students attempted to explain perhaps he had been thinking of their parents, as they themselves had been busy being born as the last troops flew back across the ocean; Carter had already forgiven the generation who had "lost" the war before this generation was able to hold a conversation on any war that didn't include Darth Vader and the Millennium Falcon. But all of the information they provided seemed to flow past him, or maybe through him; it certainly seemed to have no real affect. He remained good-natured during his lecture, and most of the students seemed to like him. They all enjoyed any opportunity to avoid math, even more so when that opportunity was presented during math class. Jonas sat up front. This was the only class where he wasn't perched in the back, spending his time scribbling cartoons and rhymes and flirting. To this day he remains quite proud of saying that the most important

things he packed into his backpack each morning was his bottle of Polo cologne and “a little black book to put my poems in.” Most of his time was spent ignoring what was actually going on in the classroom, yet when asked he would have admitted to actually enjoying his schoolwork, which is the reason why his teachers would universally describe him as a model student. Except in math. From the moment that letters were added into the equations he hated math and did everything he could to avoid it—in college, one of his happiest days was when he realized he was probably going to pass the ast math class he was ever going to take. Math was the class that gave him legitimate trouble, and his parents insisted that he plant himself right in front of the teacher, and they inspected his notes at the end of the week to ensure that he was paying attention. Even Jonas had to admit that it helped; he still despised math, but the difference between hating a class that you are getting a B in and hating one that you are failing is indescribable.

Jonas caught the tail edges of a whispered giggled joke being told behind him. Not much, just the trailing echoes of a punch line. But he didn’t need much. This isn’t surprising. We never need much. When any of us are being laughed at, we know. Don’t we? It doesn’t matter if the joke is about our socks or our skin, what we chose for lunch or how we chose to live our lives, it’s as if the sounds coming from others mouths are visible, as if they shone straight forward like the beam of a flashlight, pointing right into our face. In college, Jonas and I stayed up late one night and he told me this story; he made it clear that he is no longer certain just what jokes were told, or just what it was he heard. Replay it ten times in his mind and he would hear ten different variations on the theme, each sliding

in as if they had always been there, waiting to be heard. What they were saying when he first caught their laughter doesn't matter, for this story. It was the tone—the feel of it—that did. Memory, it seems, is a jazz musician.

“—you hide it under the soap!” said the first voice in the version Jonas told me, and it brought out extreme and slightly suppressed laughter from the second voice. Jonas turned, staring at the two red-faced White kids sitting behind him, looking like they too had crawled straight out a TGIF sitcom high school, perfect clothes hanging just right on plastic bodies. The first voice, the teller of the joke, belonged to a kid Jonas didn't know well; they shared classes but not words, and his eyes darted over Jonas' face, as if expecting to become nervous but enjoying his joke too much to do anything but laugh. He had on his soccer jersey, signaling not just that he was on the team and had a game after school, but that he thought it was important enough to wear his jersey all day, in case there was anyone who didn't know what he would be doing once the last bell rang. He was wiry and bouncy, not someone Jonas had paid any attention to. The second voice, however, belonged to someone Jonas knew, a kid that he even had been friends with at one point. His name was Craig; they had never technically stopped being friends and Jonas had usually thought of him as someone he could count on if needed. Once, when a trio of bullies looking for trouble had set their sights on Jonas, Craig had walked up without a word and stood behind him, and his quiet presence and size had calmed the situation down. When the others had backed down and left, Jonas nodded thanks, and Craig nodded and walked off.

And now Craig was laughing.

There was something in the laughter, something both hidden and asking

to be heard that pulled at Jonas, that spoke to him. So he looked backwards, over his shoulder, eyes directed out into space as if thinking hard about a problem, hearing them without obviously listening, seeing them without looking directly at them. They knew, of course—that was part of it. But he looked and listened in a way that allowed them all the space to act as if he wasn't minding them, and so they continued, as if alone in the room. The act could not be changed, by any of them.

The soccer player spoke.

“What’s the most confusing day in Harlem?”

There it was. Beyond denial. Like a TV, its antenna suddenly twisted into just the right configuration, picking up the signal and letting it all play out on the screen. The situation comedy—the outtakes, the jokes behind the scene, the real world that the TV covers and destroys. There is a pattern to these things. Line A always leads directly to Line B.

“That’s messed up,” said Jonas.

No more looking without looking. Jonas stared into the his eyes, but the soccer player looked away, his eager giggle pitched a little higher than it had been. Those eyes gave him away. They bounced around, touching on everything, taking in everyone, except Jonas—which of course means he was paying attention to nothing else. Jonas stared at him but it was Craig who spoke.

“It’s a joke.”

“Some things aren’t funny.”

At this point, the soccer player looked up, at Jonas. His smile wavered, faded, almost died, his eyes fell. It almost ended there. Craig giggled. Such a

simple action. And the soccer player was grinning, chuckling, his eyes back up and away from Jonas.

“What is it?” said Craig.

“The most confusing day in Harlem?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t do this,” said Jonas.

“You want to know?” said the soccer player.

“Yes,” said Craig.

“Come on,” said Jonas.

“The most confusing day in Harlem?”

“What is it?” said Craig.

“Father’s Day.”

Craig and the soccer player laughed, harder, holding their sides, not bothering to hide it anymore. The teacher looked at them and laughed too.

“What are you two up to?” he said.

“You don’t hear them?” said Jonas.

“Hear what?” said the substitute.

“You haven’t been listening.”

“No. Did they say anything worth listening to?”

Another kid in class spoke before Jonas could:

“Everything we do is worth listening to.”

“Oh no, I know better than that,” said the substitute, smiling at the student, “my grandkids have the MTV.”

Jonas turned. Put his hand on the soccer player’s desk. Leaned in. The

soccer player flinched, then forced himself to sit as straight as he could.

“You’re not funny,” said Jonas.

“They’re just jokes,” said Craig. The soccer player said nothing. Jonas turned to Craig.

“He tells another like that,” said Jonas, “and I’m going to punch him in the face.”

“It’s a free country,” said the soccer player.

“They’re just jokes,” repeated Craig.

“Whatever,” said Jonas, facing the front, “one more, and I’m going to punch him in the face.”

This was the problem, you see. There was no room left to move. Saying that last line and turning his back left the soccer player with no choice—or I should say, left him with two equally bad choices. To allow yourself to be quieted, to be silenced, even when you are wrong, is an act of weakness, of fear and shame. The scent of it would flow out from the confines of the class to spread throughout the hallways, slipping under doors and reaching the noses of all of those students who would soon be storming through those hallways, looking for something to entertain them, for a way to make the day seem less dull—and for someplace to lay their anger. Do this, or call the bluff. When we look back on our childhoods, we all know the choices we realize we should have made. And we all know the choices we did make.

“What’s the difference between a Black guy and a bicycle?”

Jonas felt his pencil snap in his hand. There was no air in him. He could not take in a breath and there was no air in him. Everything was silent. For all

he knew the entire class was staring at him. He said nothing.

“I don’t know,” said Craig.

And he giggled.

“A bicycle won’t sing when you put chains on it.”

There was still no air. The world hummed, the walls were reaching out to press against his face, his skin was on fire—didn’t anyone notice his skin was on fire? He was burning up the fire on his skin was eating up all the air and he couldn’t breath and the walls were so hot they had set him on fire and no one seemed to notice. He heard the laughs behind him rising like smoke and the darkness pressed in on him and he squeezed his fists together and without warning the air broke free and pressed itself into his lungs and his body inflated to twice its size and he stood flipping over the desk/chair he was sitting in and with a roar he set free the air that gathered within him in one perfect exact punch that caught the soccer player flush on the chin. He turned and Craig was jumping to him and Jonas shoved him in mid-air, sending him sprawling back over his desk in a blizzard of papers and startled shouts. Jonas turned back but the soccer player was lying on the floor, tears already building, the whole class was leaping to their feet with one solid wail of sound and action, interrupted only by the sound of the bell. Jonas grabbed his books and his bag and flew out, burying himself in the wave of students crashing through the door and out into the raging river that tore past the door, slipping through the crowd until the he could no longer hear the sound of the excitement he had left behind.

It was two hours before he was called to the principal’s office.

“You again,” said the principal.

“Me,” said Jonas, “again.”

“Well, what do you have to say for yourself?”

Jonas looked at the soccer player, sitting in a chair next to him. He held an ice pack up against his already swollen cheek.

“I say,” said Jonas, “that I should have hit him twice.”

The principal frowned. His eyes narrowed and he shook his head with disgust.

“This type of behavior is unacceptable.”

“His or mine?” asked Jonas.

The principal’s frown became a glare. He looked at the soccer player.

“What did the nurse say?”

The soccer player shrugged.

“You going to be able to play today?”

The soccer player nodded.

“Get out of here.”

The soccer player left.

“That’s it?” said Jonas.

“We have to deal with your anger issues,” said the principal, with a stern face.

“This is bullshit,” said Jonas, his face just as harsh.

“Your sister,” said the principal, “was the very definition of a model student.”

Jonas said nothing.

“She still talks with some of her teachers. Did you know that?”

“Yes.”

“And now you. Makes me sick. How you even look her in the eyes I’ll never know.”

“She was only a model student,” said Jonas, “because everyone was afraid to mess with her.”

“Oh, really? And you think now they’ll be afraid of you? You think this is a good thing?”

“Well,” said Jonas, “it seems to work for you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Okay.”

“Okay what?”

“You’re excused.”

“You have a smart mouth,” said the principal, “you think that you’re—”

“You know what,” said Jonas, cutting him off, “why don’t we just get to the whole ‘you’re suspended’ part. I’ve got homework to do.”

The rest of the meeting, unfortunately, did not go any better.

Fortunately, however, it did not last much longer. How could it—there was not much left to say. I have had too many of those same conversations. This school is not racist. But what about this situation? What situation? What he said, what she yelled, what they did. This school is not racist, so therefore those actions were not racism. So therefore it was your fault. Jonas knew this logic, flawless and intricate, before he entered the room; part of him always thought he should have written the script ahead of time, handing each of person their lines

as walked in. Sometimes the only way to survive a no-win situation is to approach it with nothing to lose.

Jonas took his time getting home. His parents wouldn't expect him before dinner, and he used every minute that he could. He walked in, prepared to tell his side of the story, and to explain his punishment. His sister Lynne, however, had beaten him to it. Somehow, she had known everything, all of the details, even the jokes, and had come straight home from law school an hour away, and Jonas entered into a room of already angry people, preparing a complaint against the way he had been treated.

When he got a moment, he pulled his sister aside, and gave her a firm hug.

"Thank you," he said, wishing he could think of something more to say.

"Jonas," she said, looking up at him, "if you ever do something that stupid again I will spank your ass myself."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Oh Elegant Woman!

*"My dear, my dear, my dear,
you do not know me
but I know you very well..."*

The Pharcyde

This is, to repeat, a love story. Or, more accurately, it is a grouping of love stories. Before the story of Jonas gets any further, let us take some time to reflect on the lover and the love he left at home. Maria wasn't tall, not really, only about five six, not short by any means but nowhere near as tall as she seemed. It was her stance, most likely, erect without being too firm or tight; she held herself as if she had spent half her childhood in some old-fashioned charm school, walking through the hallways with a book on her head to perfect her balance and poise. Soft, with curves all over. She had eyelashes like an Egyptian painting and a smile like the spreading dawn and a voice that rolled like whispering thunder. I was, like just about everyone else, madly in love with her, a fact that you have no doubt already picked up. I make no apologies for this, or at least, for loving who she turned out to be once I was able to know her, if only from a distance.

I was making lunch when I first talked with her. We had a policy in the house of all of us taking turns each week to make a huge pot of soup or stew or

something similar so that we had a quick meal to scarf down without much effort. It was my week, and I had made a gigantic vegetable soup the day before; for lunch that day I heated some, threw a few slices of bread in the toaster, and tossed together a salad from what greens and things we had left in the fridge.

“Hey Jonas,” I said loudly to his door, “there’s eats.”

A muffled response came from his room, and the sound of movement signaled that he was on his way. We all knew each other’s schedule; the other two guys wouldn’t be home for at least another half an hour, and Jonas was always ready to eat when the food was. I was grabbing silverware to put out when his door opened behind me.

“Hey you lazy motherfucker,” I said, “pour us some juice.”

“Sure,” said a voice quite clearly not belonging to Jonas. “Where do you keep the glasses?”

I wheeled around; she was already peering into the fridge, poking her way through the bottles inside. We might be lacking in food but we never, ever lacked in sweet things to drink. She paused, considering.

“How about the ginger ale?” she said.

“Sure,” I said.

“The juice in here probably doesn’t go with soup.”

“Glasses,” I said, “are in the cabinet right above you.”

I stared at her. When she turned towards the table with the ginger ale I quickly went back to the stove, stirring unnecessarily, feeling a blush swiftly working itself across my cheeks. She poured drinks for us, and I fiddled with the knobs on the stove, trying to seem like I was doing something important.

“Can I?” she said.

Without meaning to I turned to look at her. She smiled.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “is there enough? I don’t mean to impose.”

There was something about her accent that made letters seem to stand out randomly, as if the word leaving her mouth were blossoming into 3-D shapes facing the world at odd and unexpected angles. When I realized that no more words were coming from her I smiled, and pulled down an extra bowl.

“Lunch,” I said, “is a meal that is always better with more people.”

She grinned.

“Thanks for the food, Grape-Ape.”

This was from Jonas as he came from his room, pulling his shirt over his head as he entered. I was about to make a snappy comeback when I caught the look between the two of them. It told me everything I needed to know in milliseconds. Jonas put his hand on her arm, and Maria’s grin disappeared and somehow her face was happier for losing it. As they sat, Jonas turned and looked at me, his face calm and motionless.

“Eshu, this is Maria. Maria, my housemate Eshu.”

“We’ve met,” I said. “Twice actually.”

“We did?”

“Yeah,” I said, “twice, actually. But I probably wouldn’t have remembered me either, so don’t worry.”

“I’m pretty sure I would have remembered your name. Eshu?”

I was used to this.

“The Monkey-God,” said Jonas.

“Not exactly.”

“Close enough.”

“He was a legendary figure in a lot of African culture, a god, the trickster, like Loki or Coyote. Also the storyteller, the one who passed on the myths and things. Not real reliable, though,” I added.

“It’s a good writer’s name,” Jonas said.

“Grape-Ape?” she asked.

“Forget it,” I said, “and maybe someday Jonas will too.”

“How did you end up with that name?” asked Maria.

“My parents had a brief flirtation with their African roots.”

“How brief?” she asked.

“Well, figure it this way,” I said. “My brother James is one year older and my other brother Eric is a year and a half younger than me.”

“Oh,” she said, softly, “that’s pretty brief.”

She asked me a few more questions while we ate, told me that she had come to the U.S. from Nicaragua when she was nine, and complimented me on the soup, which we all had two or three bowls of.

And that was the second longest conversation we ever had; the longest was also held around that table after Jonas was arrested, and Maria’s tears did most of the speaking for her.

Jonas had barely seen Maria the first time they met, and had in fact almost missed her, something that still drew smiles from both of them years later. He had been in a grouchy mood all day, and if I hadn’t talked him into leaving the

house that night, well, even I don't know what that would have done to this story. It had been at a benefit show for a local shelter for survivors of domestic abuse, held a few blocks from our house. Adrienne had recruited him to play the role of a supportive face she could quickly pick out in the audience. The benefit had been conceived as an evening of women activist/artists, and Adrienne's name was featured large and hard to miss on the flyers plastered around the neighborhood.

The evening before the show, Adrienne stopped by our house to go over the poems she had planned on reading. She was calm, eager, relaxed, and Jonas and I could only envy the dispassionate yet determined way that she examined her work, and herself. We were fully aware of Adrienne's legendary nerves of steel, of course; Jonas had been beside her as she stared blankly into the faces of cops on the street or 6 foot 5 inch defenders on the basketball court, never blinking when either tried to get a hand in her face. She never hesitated to jump up at an open mic or poetry reading, and had in fact been the one to pull Jonas onto a stage after her, the first time he had read in public. But this was a new face of Adrienne, her Featured Performer Face, and for some reason we found this new aspect of her even more intimidating. We sat with her in preparation, pouring over old notebooks and wrinkled and folded pages, words drowning each other like competing tsunamis. She studied the poems, as we both studied the way she studied.

"See," she said finally, "it's not just about the words. I got them."

"Even a new poem I'm not allowed to see," he said. She ignored that.

"You gotta move past the words," she said. "The poems, they're like building blocks."

“Fucking poets,” I said, which she also ignored.

“Blocks,” she repeated. “Maybe some are bigger or prettier or heavier, but they all gotta fit. Together. You know?”

“Not really.”

She stared down at the litter of papers that lay scattered across the floor, nearly burying both of them, death by literature.

“How’s it different than a poetry collection?” he asked.

She smiled at him.

“You’re the one with the book published,” she said, “you tell me.”

He groaned.

“A chapbook, Adrienne,” he said.

“How many printed?”

“A few.”

“A few thousand,” she said.

“And many fewer sold. But seriously,” he said, “I always have a hard time planning a reading. How do you do it?”

“Think of it,” she said, “like an album.”

“Not a CD?” I asked.

“No,” she said, firmly, “an album, something meant to be listened to all together. Not tracks or singles or downloads. An album.”

“Which one?” I said.

“Any one. A great one.”

“Well,” said Jonas, “there’s really only one. The one. THE perfect album.”

Adrienne nodded. I groaned. We had already had this discussion, and all

of us were clear about where Jonas stood on this issue. Public Enemy, It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back. In his mind, all culture and music had been working together to build to the crescendo that was hip-hop, the ultimate form of expression; hip-hop itself hit its peak in the late 80's/early 90's, and everything else was either preliminary exercises meant to prepare us for greatness or else rapidly fading attempts to recapture the purity contained in Yo! MTV Raps.

“Good,” Adrienne said, “that’ll work. Now, they don’t start out with the strongest track, right?”

“No.”

“But they don’t bury it either.”

“No,” he said, “they don’t.”

“They plan it out, each song, what follows what.”

“Okay,” I said. “Where does it go from there?”

“An album is an ocean,” she said, “and the flow is everything.”

“Poets,” I said.

“Do you ever say anything that isn’t poetic?” said Jonas.

“Shut up.”

“Shutting up.”

He watched her silently for a moment. Then:

“Is that it?”

“Well,” said Adrienne, “the important thing is to figure out how I want to leave them.”

“Now you’re talking,” I said. “The ending determines the beginning.”

“How you want to leave them?” Jonas said, somewhat confused.

She was focused in, her eyes and her mind and all that she was centered in on getting it to feel right, tearing each piece down and rebuilding them word by word like a snake shedding its skin and quickly growing a thicker one with a more unique and intricate design.

“How you want to leave them?” he repeated.

“Look,” she said, “it’s easy.”

“It is?”

“Yes,” she said, looking up calmly.

“Oh,” he said, “well, that’s helpful.”

“The way I see it,” she said, “is like this: when everyone leaves tomorrow night, what’s the emotion I want them feeling as they head out? What will they think, tucking themselves in, going back over the hugeness of their day? How are they different at the end of the night than they were the night before?”

“Oh,” he said, “that is a good question.”

“Yeah,” she said, “it is. Everything I read is built to lead up to that.”

That was, of course, the type of thing that poets can get away with saying. Storytellers, we respect words but we don’t worship them the way poets do. We splash them across the pages, layers upon layers, each hinting at what is to come—when we’re lucky. Poets—they drop a few words onto a piece of paper, they fight with them for days, feel faint or scream like demons, write some more words, erase others, make peace, rejoice, then argue with other poets over the placement of a comma or the timing of a line break. I watched both Jonas and Adrienne struggle with a single word on one line of poems 3 or 4 pages long, debating this and that, crossing off lines to better fit that one, single word. I

would tell them to knock it off, to scrawl something and be done with it—and then they would suddenly find the right word, pulling it down from the air itself, and the whole poem would come alive, in their hands.

I hated when they did that.

But on this night, the night before *The Night Of The Maria*, Jonas was still an apprentice, and Adrienne an eager professor. She turned back to the papers. I looked at the pieces she showed me, offering up a few comments here or there. Jonas sat and watched her carefully, a smile, thick and unstoppable, blossoming on his face, becoming alive and firm, filling the room. He sat back without saying anything else and just found himself enjoying the sight of another artist creating herself in front of him.

That next night, during the show, we watched Adrienne's words fall into the crowd, all of us straining to pull them inside, to take her energy home with them. After she read, holding the crowd breathless in her hands, she left us feeling like we too could grip the world in our own hands. Once she was offstage, he relaxed, as if shivering from a climax, and fought off the sudden urge for a cigarette. Without smiling or moving Jonas sat politely, waiting for the rest of the performers to speak their piece. But the host stepped onto the stage and announced an intermission, and as smoking is what intermission was designed for he simply took his package of Drum from his pocket and we both headed for the exit.

He rolled a cigarette without looking down, slipping through the crowd, well-practiced fingers working rapidly and steady. Lifted the package up and licked edge of the cigarette and rolled it. Kept it in his mouth. Rolled a second

for me. Wrapped up his tobacco. Slipped it back into his pocket. We squeezed through the stragglers waiting by the door and stepped into the cool night air, a light breeze greeting him like a welcoming peck on the cheek. The door led out into a parking lot, surrounded by buildings creeping up on all sides. It was dark, with lights from the randomly placed streetlamps selectively brightening some corners while seeming to darken others.

“Yo, Adrienne,” he said forcefully, and the clusters of smokers and chattering friends all looked at him, as if he had farted loudly in the middle of the performance. That subtle inching away, when a group of strangers decides without speaking that someone needs to be avoided. I was used to this by now.

He grinned. “Yo, Adrienne,” he repeated, “that shit was tight!”

And just like that, the ocean of people split open, repelled as if by magnets, and he strode through, heading for the far corner where he knew she would be. I nodded to some people I knew and followed, stopping here or there to say a few words to people as I passed.

She glanced at us, briefly, and while nodding and giving attention to the breathless young women speaking in a long stream before her she flicked her lighter towards him. He stretched out and caught it just before it hit the ground. The angle of the lights lit Adrienne vibrantly, yet cast shadows on the women around her. The light flickered, off and on, off and on, strobelike, as if waiting for someone to climb up on a ladder a flick it with a finger, which always seems to work in movies.

I didn’t have to see the young women to be certain that they would all be blonde, that they would all be smiling so hard it would be painful to see, that they

would all be laughing and babbling through long unshed tears. Jonas walked up, and lit his cigarette; he never had a lighter, and Adrienne was always quick to hand one to him. Light. Smoke. That simultaneous pull in and release. Wait.

There was often a group of these young, eager women surrounding Adrienne; something bright and violent and intense within her dragged these fluttering moths to her side. They wanted to learn that it's okay to be around fire and they knew Adrienne wasn't going to burn them. There was something beyond Jonas and myself in their connections. The young women sought to understand Adrienne, and even more, to be understood by her, and they endlessly followed her every movement. Adrienne drew some comfort from them, as well; some she even thought of as friends. Jonas however rarely bothered to get to know them; there appeared to be little use in it. At one point he might have tried to sleep with one or two of them, succeeding sometimes, failing others. Nothing really came from that, beyond the physical act, and he had matured enough to know that wanting to fuck someone you dislike is not exactly a healthy mode of operation. In the interest of full disclosure, this is knowledge that I have, through trial and error, found to be true.

There was something about Adrienne's specific anger and her individual Blackness, something in her searching and her rage that forced these young women to seek her out, some unspoken thing that they needed, that they clutched to like salvation the way a shipwrecked sailor clings to a plank. It wasn't the fact that Jonas was mixed race, and that I had not grown up the city kid that she'd been, though those were both factors. In the end it had to do in their shared way of seeing as women that made Adrienne both human and beyond human—she

was Black in a way that, to them, we could never be.

Adrienne smiled and gathered the women in front of her into a gigantic group hug. They grinned and giggled and hugged her back, all of their words falling onto her like a thunderstorm, until finally she pulled herself from them and without another word turned to him. “Hey,” she said, gripping his hand and pulling him to her, in a motion both less intense yet more meaningful than a hug, and looked into his eyes.

“Man, it’s good to see you.”

“Yeah,” he said, and the rest of the world faded, “I know.”

They both paused, silent, and looked at each other. The lights flashed on, vibrant and direct, then faded, then popped back.

“That first one,” he said, “the untitled one? That’s the one you held off showing me, right?”

Her only answer was a grin, and he nodded, softly.

“That one’s intense,” said Jonas. “I was feeling it. ‘I miss the days when/Columbus was my hero...’ Yeah. Just—yeah. I’m glad you didn’t read it to me last night.”

“Yeah?”

“Hell yeah,” he said, softly. “You got that one down.”

“I knew you felt it,” she said. She smiled at me as I joined them.

“You got it,” I said, getting my hug. “You owned this crowd. You probably still do.”

“I was watching you two as I read it. Everybody else, you know...”

“Yeah,” he said, “I know.”

She was glancing throughout the bustling horde of folks, wandering and shifting like an ocean, her eyes piercing the dark like the beam of a lighthouse seeking out a lost boat. Jonas looked around for a moment. Then a thought came to him and he understood. He grinned.

“So Sarah is here, isn’t she?” he asked.

Adrienne blushed, an action he knew more from the tension of her neck and her looking away from him than anything he could see in the night. The light hid, sharing the moment with her, then gradually built back up.

“Yeah,” said Adrienne, “and her friend too.”

“What friend?” I asked.

“You’ll see,” said Adrienne. “She’s sweet. You’ll like her.” Then she stopped, considering, and looked at Jonas and added, “yeah, you’ll like her.”

“Me?” he said.

“You.”

“And me?”

“Hey,” she said with a laugh, “you always say your love life’s doing well enough and doesn’t need help from me.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I do say that.”

“Well,” Jonas said, “did Sarah tell you she was coming?”

“I saw her, right before the curtain went up.”

“Oh,” he said, and then we both laughed, “that’s why we saw you peeking out. And,” he said, “that’s why you read your ‘Elegant Woman’ piece! You player.” Adrienne giggled, and shoved him roughly, and he laughed harder.

“Oh, Elegant Woman,” I said, “I touch your lips to mine/I dance within

your soul/I reach for your being with all that I am!”

“Shut up,” she said.

“I always loved that piece,” he said, softly. “And the way you read it.”

“I know.”

“So I hope it worked.”

“Me too.”

“Usually does, right?” I said.

“Yeah,” she said, “but every time is different.”

It was unusual for Adrienne to get too worked up over any one woman. One time Adrienne and I had gone with some friends to a club downtown. Not our usual way to spend an evening—but of course that had been the thrill. One of the guys had challenged everyone to a numbers contest: whoever could get the most phone numbers from women they just met would get free drinks the next time they went out, paid for by the person last on the list. To the friend’s surprise, but not mine, Adrienne had easily come in first, with a variety and quality of numbers that the rest of them could only applaud. I had placed last, but I didn’t really mind, as Adrienne and I were the only ones who hadn’t gone home alone that night. As I said, I usually did well enough without help.

“Wait,” she said, peering off to the side, “shut up. Here she comes.”

Jonas giggled, under his breath. In our minds we were already sifting through different jokes to tease Adrienne with.

“Hey, Sarah,” I said.

“Monkey-Man,” she said. I turned and glared at Jonas.

“Hey don’t look at me, I didn’t say anything,” he said. His smirk spoke a

different truth. I gave him a shove and he protested his innocence.

“Hey girl,” said Sarah, sliding into Adrienne’s arms. Jonas and I wrestled off to the side, partly for fun but mostly to give them some space; even in this “woman-centric” space, they were getting enough looks, they didn’t need our eyes on them adding to it.

“Get off me,” said Jonas.

“Make me.”

“I can’t he said,” he said, already laughing, “monkeys got strong hands.”

“I’m gonna kill you!” I said, and he ran, slipping through the crowd, eventually winding up behind Adrienne.

“Keep your hands off me you damn dirty ape!”

“Boys, boys,” said Sarah, “the noise is enough, please don’t add quoting Charlton Heston to your crimes.”

“Don’t matter who said it,” replied Jonas, “Geek Law supplants all.”

The light flashed twice in agreement.

“True enough,” said Adrienne.

Sarah sighed.

“Try not to embarrass me,” she said, waving to her friend.

“No promises,” I said.

And Maria walked up, in the dark, just a shadow in the night.

And Jonas looked to her. And something inside him rose up. Fell.

Crashed then died. Only to pull itself up, reborn.

The lights held, faintly, just there.

She gave a quick hug to Sarah, and a peck on the cheek. Then:

“Adrienne,” said Maria, her voice as soft as a warm bath. Like a towel fresh out of the dryer. Like ice cream right before it starts to melt. Jonas realized he was holding his breath. He let it out as quietly as he could. I could see him try not to look in her direction, and it was obvious that her actions were mirroring his. She was “not looking at him,” either. He glanced at her quickly, taking in nothing but a silhouette, an elegant woman clothed in darkness. She had said only one word. She had never emerged from the night. But still Jonas was stuck in place, and I could tell that he could not figure out what he could possibly do to make things change.

“Adrienne,” she said, again, “you are beautiful. You held my heart,” she said, clutching her hands to her chest, and his hands balled up, furious, jealous, of what he wasn’t sure. Adrienne stepped to her, and they hugged, slowly, tightly, and he stood, watching and yet not watching, all at once.

“I’m glad you got to see me,” said Adrienne, “I know you got to leave after intermission. They moved me up, at the last minute.”

“I wasn’t sure I’d catch you. And that would have been terrible.”

They hugged, for a moment, for a decade, then slowly, aching, they pulled apart.

“That’s enough,” said Sarah.

“Well then you hug me,” said Adrienne, and she did.

“In Nicaragua,” Maria said, “we build statues to our poets.”

“Shit,” said Adrienne, “I’m lucky if I get a sandwich.”

“Oh, Adrienne,” she said, and the words hung there, in the air, between them all, until Adrienne shrugged as if pushing the words away. Maria turned to

me, and smiled. It was on me for the briefest of moments, then it slid, so calmly, to Jonas.

“You haven’t met my friend Jonas, have you Maria?” Adrienne said. Maria shook her head, and once again it appeared that Jonas had lost his ability to breathe. Adrienne took his arm, firmly, possessively, and introduced him. He smiled. Looked down at his feet. And felt her glance touching the side of his face.

“Like Eshu here Jonas is my brother. My brother,” Adrienne added, “from another mother.”

“Really?” said Maria.

“No,” said Adrienne with a chuckle, “not really.”

“Hello,” said Maria to him, her voice nothing but a whisper. She looked down. Back up at him. Then down. She was still lost, in the shadow. Jonas looked to the side and saw that he was caught in the light, that she could see him and had seen his every move, while she was still only a mystery before him. He stumbled, and realized suddenly that we were waiting for him to say something.

“Uh, hey,” he said quickly, “Adrienne’s great.”

I could see that Jonas hated himself more fiercely at that moment than he ever had in all his life.

“Yes,” said Maria, and her voice made us feel as if she had heard the hours and hours of unspoken words caught in his nervous babble, “yes. She’s great.”

“Jonas is a poet, too,” said Adrienne.

“You are?” Maria asked.

He could see a slight reflection and knew it to be from her grin, shining out to him, overjoyed, and he stepped back, confused. How on earth could the fact

that he was a poet make someone interested in him? It usually created the exact opposite response. Most times, he just said he was a writer, which, as I know, is hard enough; it was very rare that anyone went beyond saying, “Oh, really?” and asking him about what he wrote. He had never known anyone to be excited at what he did, certainly not to celebrate it as she seemed to, and he didn’t have the slightest idea of how to respond.

Without warning, the host of the event, having walked outside while they were talking, announced that the show was about to resume. Maria sighed.

“I better go,” she said, and looked at him.

“Oh,” he said, “that sucks.”

Jonas appeared to be wondering if he could actually physically kick himself, and I’m certain that at that moment he was very willing to try. But Maria merely giggled, tenderly, and reached out and held his arm, her fingers burning his skin with only one, slight touch. She hugged Adrienne, quickly, gave me a smile, and turned to go. He stared after her as she went.

And as she walked she turned, looking back, the lights kissing her goodbye, her face coming alive under the glare, revealed to him for the briefest of seconds. Her hair flowing down around her face looked to him the way a river does in the night, black, with shiny quick reflections from the lights above. Later that night he told me that just looking at her skin he felt as if he could feel it against himself; it was the same soft wood brown as his own, he had never seen himself on another the way he saw his skin wrapped around her. Her eyes were wide and alive and their eyes collided, almost audibly, and he was finally able to pull in a quick breath. She smiled. Waved, just a little.

And then she was gone.

“You know,” said Sarah, “I really should have seen that coming.”

Jonas turned to her, worried, but she only grinned, and gave a shrug. He started to say something. She shook her head. His cigarette had gone out, and sat limp and exhausted in the corner of his mouth. He shrugged as well and she laughed back, and he hugged her, tightly.

“We cool?” he said.

“Jonas,” she said, “we are better than cool.”

“Just be careful,” said Adrienne, “she’s young.”

“Young’s good,” I said, quickly receiving an Adrienne-punch on my arm for my efforts.

“That’ll learn ya,” said Sarah.

Adrienne turned to Jonas, and punched him on the arm, hard and quick yet somehow tenderly, like an older brother would, and grinned up at him.

“What’s that for?” he said.

“Consider it,” she said, “preemptive,” and she grabbed his arm and wrapped hers around it. She took mine in her other.

Jonas could breathe again. He flicked the dead cigarette out, into the night.

“C’mon,” she said, dragging us all after her, “let’s catch the rest of this show.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

5 Minutes In Heaven

“When was the last time you danced?”

Well come rock with me baby.

Dance with me darling.

Step with me sweetheart.

The world is watching...”

Gnarls Barkley

Jonas and Maria had their first “real date” at his favorite restaurant, but that term is itself a convenient fiction. A few days before the official date they had met up, and in truth they had been inseparable from that first pre-date evening on. It was Adrienne, of course, who had put them together. It was under the pretense of a gathering of friends to have dinner and watch a movie; Adrienne has always been an excellent cook, and took a grandmotherly pleasure in seeing people she cared about eating food she had prepared. All three of them, in fact, were quite good cooks, and were usually quite happy to take turns providing food any time we got together. As someone who enjoys eating significantly more than I do cooking, this has worked out very well for me, I must say, though I have wound up doing more than my fair share of dishes over the years. Jonas tended to focus on the Italian foods his mother had taught him and Maria used the

kitchen to bring everyone back to Nicaragua with her. Adrienne went straight Black and Southern on us, with fried chicken that a bird could be proud to die for, biscuits and gravy that could stop a battle, and peach cobbler that could start a new one. She could “step on them greens,” as my grandmother used to say; everything melted in your mouth when you were lucky enough to get some.

She invited Jonas and Maria to come and watch her monthly Philly movie. Each month she would set up her projector and screen some work that had been filmed in Philadelphia, or that pretended to have been; sometimes the connection was fairly tenuous, but generally we were able to point out some landmark or another flitting by in the background. It was always a fun time: good food, nice crowd, and after the film more folks would show, chairs would be stacked, and we would dance for the rest of the night. Jonas and I had been attending for years. Adrienne invited both of them, but made a point of not mentioning the other. I have no doubt, however, that they both knew the other would be there. Jonas did not need an invitation to come over to Adrienne's; she hosted people over for a film, as I said, every month, so having her specifically ask him to come over made it obvious to him that he had better clear his schedule and show up ready to impress. Maria and Adrienne were still somewhat newly minted friends at that point; they didn't know each other well enough for Maria to know when an invitation should stand out as something different. Maria wanted to ask if Jonas would be there, she felt the question on her tongue, but it felt so childish, so high school, that she couldn't let it slip out. She could see, however, that Adrienne had read the question as it peeked out from her lips, and the simple fact that she only smiled patiently and waited for Maria to get up the courage to actually ask was all

the answer that Maria needed.

Jonas and I were there when Maria arrived, setting the table as the food was brought out. He was wearing a black short-sleeve shirt with a collar, and new-looking jeans. Watching them I could see her eyes as she noticed his immaculate black sneakers, and the fact that his head and his face both appeared to have been recently shaved. There was something touching about the way he failed at his attempt to be casual, putting all of his energy into the very complex job of making sure that everyone had a fork and a spoon.

Baxter welcomed her in with an elaborate handshake and a quick bro-hug, something that left Maria a little confused but not unhappy. Baxter also had, in those days, a standing invitation to Adrienne's; he was the only White person to ever officially receive such an invitation. Keith, of course, needed no invitation, standing or not, in order to come to Adrienne's, or indeed to our house either; his evenings were more often spent reading grandchildren to sleep than watching bad movies on the wall.

There were a few other folks there, but Jonas and Maria paid them so little attention that later neither of them could ever remember just who had been there. Her building was old, in the way that money can be old, and her block was coated in the shade of well-kept broad reaching trees. The apartment wasn't very big, yet sitting as it did in the middle of one of the more desirable locations in the city it felt enormous. The kitchen was elegant and well-laid out, and smoothly blended into the dining room, which blended into the living room, which blended into the street, with only a solid and well-locked door in the way. The bedroom was in the back, as big as the others rooms combined, and they all had cavernous

ceilings that stretched beyond the sky, the open space of an entire extra apartment hovering just above our heads.

“This place is amazing,” said Maria, “I think I love it.”

“Well,” said Adrienne, “I know I do.”

Sarah smiled at her. They never sat next to each other, at things like this. Near, usually, but not too close. They didn’t touch often, hold hands, play with each other’s hair, any of the standard PDA that is expected of young people in love. It was in the playfulness of the eyes, the weight of a finger brushing a sleeve, the fact that you could pile a thousand people into that room doing a thousand different things and yet I would still bet my life that, without looking or asking or any observable action, they both knew exactly where the other was and what they were doing. When I hear people talk of ESP or extra-sensory-perception, telepathy and mind-reading, I assume they are either playing me for a fool or trying to steal my wallet. But there are relationships built and maintained by senses that we have yet to calculate, that refresh themselves on sources we have yet to define; for lack of a better word, we usually call this love. I don’t know if it fits, I just don’t know what else to call it. I always felt honored to watch it; I knew, without having to ask her, that it scared Adrienne.

“Maria’s looking for a place,” said Sarah.

“Not just yet,” said Maria, blushing. “I promised my mother I’d stay home for another year. Just thinking neighborhoods for now.”

“You don’t want this one,” said Baxter, “Adrienne only got this one because the lady who owns the building rents it cheap for her good work.”

“The landlady’s son is in prison,” I said to Maria, seeing her quizzical look.

“Embezzlement, I believe. So she loves her some Adrienne.”

“Who doesn’t?” said Daniel as he wandered out from the bedroom where he’d been taking a quick nap. “Is that food almost ready?”

“Maria,” said Adrienne, “do you remember my friend Jonas? He was at that poetry reading the other day.”

“Yes,” she said, and smiled. She was wearing an airy summer dress, a light red thing with a pattern of flowers. Her hair was up, above her head, with those few obligatory wisps floating down to dance alongside her cheeks. She had the lightest perfume that she would wear when she felt the need for extra beauty; it always seemed to me to be the scent that blossoms on a strawberry vine would carry.

“Hey,” he said, and I could see that she was struck by the way he seemed to stare at her in quick snippets, like someone savoring their favorite candy by only allowing themselves a quick taste every so often. She caught his eyes and he felt her face flush and he smiled, and in that instant it was as if he was back in the parking lot during the intermission, seeing her for the first time, the world nothing but shadows around them and the only thing that provided any light was her eyes, smiling softly back at him.

What is it about eyes? Why do they matter so much—not how, but why? When did we decide that the eyes would be the pathways to our inner selves, not, say, a pouting mouth or eager hand? And the truth is we say eyes when we mean so much more, lashes and eyebrows and those little corners where wrinkles begin, the shadows that line up alongside the nose and slide down the cheek—there is so much to what we see when we look someone “in the eyes.” If we have a soul and

if it is stored in the heart, then the eyes must be where we allow it to exit, where it leaves our bodies to re-enter the world. We have built an internal corridor between the edges of our eyelids straight to the very furthest depths of our hearts, an emotional highway that connects what we see to what we feel, and lets what we feel be seen. I say this to you now because in the seconds it took for Maria to see the feelings of Jonas and for those feelings to travel own into her heart (a total of, let's say, 3 seconds, just to be safe), in that time she was brought to the edge. I do not say that she fell in love at first (technically second) sight, because that would be ridiculous. I do say that she teetered at the edge of that Cliff of Love, and she knew it. She felt the beginnings of panic and she convinced herself that no one else saw it, which is what we always do when we are on that edge. And she was, like we always are, completely wrong.

"You're just in time," said Adrienne, interrupting the start of an epic stare that could have gone on for hours, "dinner is just being served."

"Oh, okay," she said. She didn't know if she could eat. She felt filled, overflowing, locked up. That path from the eyes to the heart took up too much room to allow much in the way of eating. Adrienne shook her head, kindly, and sat Maria down in a seat near her and far from Jonas. Somehow the dinner passed, and Maria managed to put away more food than she thought she could. She and Adrienne shared cooking tips and secrets, the conversation around the table was lively, and she was able to relax. Mostly. After dinner she and Adrienne set up in the kitchen, cleaning dishes and storing the remnants of the meal into her fridge. Jonas brought in dishes and straightened up around them.

"J," said Adrienne, "can you bring out the coffee for me? And the cake, I

think it's behind the soda over there?"

"Sure," he said, and with a smile he was gone.

After a silence filled only with the watery sounds of scrubbing and rinsing, Maria spoke. She felt like she had to, as if the quiet would have built up, submerged for brief moments soap, then leaping up to drag them both down the drain. She had to speak. She had to acknowledge what she thought was still somewhat of a secret.

"He's very sweet."

"Who?" said Adrienne, giving up no ground.

"Your friend."

"I got a lot of friends."

"Adrienne!"

"Ok, ok," she said, smiling up from the sink, "Jonas is very sweet. Today."

"What's that mean?"

"Maria," said Adrienne, "don't worry, today he's definitely on his best behavior, but his normal behavior's pretty good, too."

They watched the movie in the living room, piling onto the large comfy chairs and wonderfully aged couch. The wall they faced was emptied of photos, drawings, and paintings, each placed carefully to the side and prepped to return as soon as the projector stopped running.

"You need to have an art showing, Daniel," said one of her friends.

"These are yours?" asked Maria. She stared at one, an image of a flower on a hill, overlooking a far off and desolate looking city. The style bore a heavy influence from Japanese scrolls and bore the distinctive lines of a master's brush,

but the city was clearly modern, and the ground around the flower bore relics and refuse of contemporary society. There was an element of longing that seeped out from the picture, a feeling that was more stunning for the beauty of the flower than it should have been: we don't like to think that beautiful things can be lonely, just like the rest of us, and the artist seemed to set out to make us confront that thought. It looked like an elegant painting; only on extremely close inspection could you tell that it was actually created just by a selection of slightly different ball-point pens, thousands of immaculate and precise little lines blending into long, swift strokes.

Daniel had gotten better as an artist. There was a cleanness to his art, especially to the work that was made specifically for Adrienne. They were so close then. I don't know if two days went by when they didn't share a meal, and often a plate. By this point she'd known, of course, of his habits; he had spent time in rehab, here and there, always by his choice, as he had avoided any sort of legal entanglements until the big one. She had believed, maybe she had needed to believe, that he was on a path towards getting clean, and staying clean. That had been what had hurt her the most—that he was not clean, not even truly seeking cleanliness, a state of acceptance that led inevitably to tragedies like the death of their stepfather. Once he was arrested, Adrienne had visited him, just once. Neither of them would repeat what had been said, on that day. He wrote to her faithfully, letters that I know she read, yet she never replied. Her poetry, either short and brutal, long and passionate, elaborate and intricate, touched on just about everything in her life. There were two subjects missing. Only those who knew her well could notice that the poems never spoke of Daniel, or of Sarah.

“Speaking of brothers,” said Jonas, “how come your little brother William isn’t here?”

Adrienne lit up at the question, her face exploding into a grin.

“He’s got a date,” she said, giggling.

“He does?” said Jonas.

“Is it definitely a date?” asked Baxter. “Sometimes, you know, we think it’s one way when the other person...”

“Oh yeah,” said Adrienne, “it’s a date. They had one of those heavy talks, with more sighs and deep looks than actual words spoken. Or whispered, really. But they cleared it all up.”

“Good for him,” said Jonas.

“Aww,” said Sarah, “I remember those intense first time dates. A closet can make anything feel passionate.”

“They say closet,” I said, noticing Maria’s confusion, “because no one else knows they’re gay.”

“Oh.” The group looked to her, waiting to see what her response would be. “Do you like him?” she said to Adrienne.

“What’s not to like? He’s the starting quarterback, has a 3.5 grade point average, he loves opera, and he’s been my brother’s best friend for years. For awhile he literally was the boy next door.”

“The kind of boy,” said Maria, with a glance at Jonas, “that you do bring home to mother.”

“Well,” said Adrienne with a chuckle, “maybe my grandmother.”

“And then over to big sister.”

“Oh, he’ll bring that boy here,” said Adrienne, her voice rising, “if he knows what’s good for him.” With that, they all laughed, and quickly found seats. Maria sat on the end of the couch, without thinking, and was quite honestly startled when she found Jonas seated beside her. I don’t think there’s the slightest chance that was an accident, but I don’t think it was something she consciously did—now Jonas, that would be a very different story. The movie that week was *Trading Places*, and they all got a kick out of watching Eddie Murphy and Dan Akroid tramp throughout the city. The movie, a funny piece of nostalgia to everyone else, was a revelation to Maria; she had been too new to America in the 80’s to be paying attention enough to know that there was a time when Eddie Murphy was still raw and funny.

Jonas, of course, could do a pretty good Eddie laugh.

They leaned back on the couch, sitting with that hyper-awareness of people who want nothing more than to touch but who aren’t sure how to start. So, once more, Adrienne was there. She passed out bowls of popcorn, making sure that Jonas and Maria had to share one because there weren’t enough dishes, a lie that everyone chose not to question. Then, she pulled out a few blankets to “make things cozy,” and again made certain that things were shared by the right people. This was at the halfway point of the movie, but I don’t think Maria saw another thing that came across the screen; I’m sure she looked at it, but I doubt she saw any of it. Under the blanket they played out an age old ritual, hands first getting close to each other, then bumping slightly, then lying against each other, fingers touching, then grabbing each other, until finally, without all of the worry that acting quickly can bring, they found themselves holding hands.

And, after the movie, as everyone pushed the couch against the wall and moved the chairs into the corners, as new guests started to arrive, they rolled up the rug from the floor and carried it away and suddenly found themselves, alone, in the back hallway. They placed the rug on top of the pile of boxes, as Adrienne had asked them to and then stopped, once more trying to look into each other's eyes in the dark. They were supposed to grab a crate of records for the dancing that was about to start, but they had other concerns for the moment.

"So," said Jonas, his voice little more than a mumble, "I, uh, I..."

"Yes?" she said, after waiting.

"Okay," said Jonas, with a sudden and determined resolve, "so, I don't like not knowing what's going on."

"You don't?"

"No."

"So what's going on?"

"I don't know," he said, "and it's kind of messing with me."

She could see him, leaning against the wall, hands just barely slipped into his pockets, shoulders hunched. There was something in his attitude that held her heart. She wasn't certain, maybe it was the way this strong man seemed to stumble when she was there, the way he seemed to be gathering his breath as if he was preparing for the possibility that he might run in fear if she got too close. She could see an edge in him, anyone could, a layer of rage and ambition that he made no effort to hide. But it was what he did try to hide, that attitude that was only the thinnest cover over his fear and desire, that pushed her back to the cliff.

She stepped closer to him, placing her hands along his cheek, and leaned

in and kissed him, long and deep. She pulled back a little, then, seeing that he was frozen in place, she smiled, and kissed him again. She waved goodbye to the cliff, as she without warning or any hesitation fell in love—because, as we all know, the idea of love at first sight might be ridiculous but the fact of love at first kiss is scientifically proven. Their lips parted, but she kept her hands on his face, and he grinned and stood there looking into her eyes.

This was of course the moment that Sarah walked in on them.

“My bad,” said Sarah, turning from them and walking back, saying over her shoulder, “but Adrienne’s gonna need them records in, like, 5 minutes.”

They made good use of every second of those 5 minutes.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

For The Man At The Counter

“Back in the day

When I was young I’m not a kid anymore

But some days I sit & wish I was a kid again...”

Ahmad

Jonas once told me the story of how, when he was eight, he had what he later would call his first “writer’s moment,” and it had, not surprisingly, started sitting in the back of the family car. His mother and two sisters had dragged him along with them, as they got their hair done, strolled through the mall searching for the perfect pair of shoes, or the ultimate skirt, and any other combination of things that made little sense to him. Shopping, as far as he was concerned, happened in candy stores, comic book stores, and Toys R Us; everything else was just a new form of torture.

His sisters paid little attention to his opinions on the matter. If it were up to them, he would have been left at home with a tape of the Transformers or any other loud and flashy cartoon imported from some Japanese toy company. His mother, however, was fairly certain—with good reason, it must be said—that sooner or later the show would end and he would be left home alone and bored, and there were few things more dangerous to a house than a bored and alone

eight year old boy. He would be all right, somehow—she knew that—but the house, despite being significantly larger, would be lucky to survive. So despite his complaints and his sisters' well-expressed desires, he was carried along with them.

Jonas had tried to stay by his mother's side, and had put in a truly heroic effort to behave; at least, in his version of the story he did. His mother paid little attention to him, simply pushing him to the side when he was too far underfoot. His sisters, viewing him as little more than an embarrassment, tried to pretend that he was not with them, or else used him solely as a means of carrying whatever items they were preparing to try on next.

"Oh, aren't you sweet?" said the saleswoman. She leaned down, hovering over him; he felt buried beneath a stack of blouses, dresses, and other items he couldn't recognize, and didn't respond. She smiled, a gleaming mass of teeth and bleached blonde hair, her perfume filling the world around him. He looked away, hoping if he didn't look at her she would lose interest.

"What's your name?"

"He won't talk to you," said his sister Lynne, glancing over from where she had been checking out her latest pair of shoes in the mirror. She smiled, apologetically, and shrugged, then returned to her shoes. She was, as their mother loved to say, fifteen going on thirty, and was alternately his biggest protector or his worst enemy. The saleswoman continued smiling, and standing over him, and he began praying for an earthquake or any other form of distraction that would let him, once more, be alone.

"Will you say hello to the nice lady?" said his mother, coming up from the

back of the store where she had been helping his other sister try on her first bra. She marched up to him, with her most artificial smile, and he knew that it was only a slight covering for her anger. “You don’t want to be rude,” she said, and her smile grew larger, and fiercer. When she was angry, her lips seemed to disappear, her mouth one tight thin line slicing across her face. Her skin, which remained a very light pink even in the depths of summer, seemed to become even paler, giving her the appearance of a Michelangelo statute, her features seeming to be just as frozen. When she was in this mood and smiled, it fooled only those who didn’t look too closely. As far as his mother was concerned, there was little worse in life than her children being bad-mannered, and she was convinced that if she didn’t keep a firm eye on him he would wander around the mall, engaging in unspeakable and unimaginable acts of rudeness that would be remembered for decades.

He glanced up at his mother then turned to the saleswoman, and said, quickly, “My name is Jonas.” He looked at his mother, for approval, and she sighed, and took the pile of clothes from him. She put him into a chair, with another sigh, and turned to the saleswoman.

“Sorry,” she said, “he gets cranky when we’re out too long. Shopping’s not really his thing.”

“He’s a cutie,” said the saleswoman with a laugh, “especially when he’s cranky.”

“Yeah, well,” said his mother, “cute will only get him so far.”

The saleswoman, caught by something in her tone, glanced at him, then back at his mother, as if putting them together for the first time. His mother

looked back, her long thick brown hair framing her strong northern Scandanavian features and smooth white skin; her eyes, when focused as they were now, were firm, and unnaturally, almost violently blue, shining even in the dark, and her smile grew even fiercer. Jonas glanced down, for a moment, at himself, at his own soft brown skin; in the chrome of the clothes rack, he could see his own eyes, so much gentler than his mother's, with long and thick lashes and bushy, strong eyebrows. The saleswoman smiled, again, and he could see all of the unspoken words and questions that flew across her mind, displaying themselves in her split moment of hesitation and awkwardness, as she nodded and went off to assist another costumer.

These were questions he knew very well; he had them himself. Even when answered, those questions lingered. Lynne had told him once that they had the best of their father's Black skin and their mother's White skin, and smiled and swore that no one else looked like him. Near tears, he had told her he knew that—and that was the problem. With a smile she had just put her arm around his shoulder, gently, and said that one day he would learn to appreciate being different. Until then she asked him to take her word for it. He trusted her, he always did; there was something about his older sister that just demanded belief, and when he was older he was grateful that she had never told him he could leap off of the roof and fly or any other prank that he was fairly certain he would have tried, had she told him he could.

His thoughts were stuck on the look on that saleswoman's face. That confusion. That needing to know. It was the only thing he had to do, as they went from store to store, from section to section. Finally, in another boutique

that to him had been exactly the same as the three before it and not much different than the six before them, he had given up and without a word crawled under a rack of dresses and decided that he was not going to leave until he was promised ice cream. He had no idea how this demand would be reached, and his mother had never given any sign of giving in to demands; in fact, when he thought about it, he could see that there were many ways that this demand would backfire. But once the idea had come and he had acted on it, he saw no way to pull out from under the dresses without backing down, and felt, somehow, that if he backed down this day he would always be expected to back down. This was not something he could explain or even understand; he just knew that once he made his decisions he had no choice but to suffer through them. Jonas waited, expecting the chaos to begin instantly, and was startled to find that life seemed to continue on without him. Seemed, in fact, to be possibly happier, and definitely more efficient. He crossed his arms, tight. Curled into a ball.

Waited.

Only to be awakened, later, by his sister's calm hand on his arm. He started, shaken, and looked around, panicked. She quieted him, and took him into her arms and lifted him from beneath the racks. He was already too big for her to carry for long stretches, and was old enough that the threat of being carried by anyone usually sent him into hysterics; yet that day, for a moment, he relaxed, in her arms, for as long as he could.

She explained where he had been, and mostly deflected their mother's anger. There were times, all through his life, when Lynne and he would stand before each other like two vicious, competing storms, destroying all in their path,

voices like thunder, striking deep into each other's hearts with lightning like precision, neither backing down until it seemed that all around them was buried in their wrath. Or else they went through their days without a glance, spending hours in the same room without ever acknowledging that the other existed. Yet, there were also times, though few in number, when Lynne would, without him asking, reach out, and carry him even when he was finally too big for her to do it physically.

Later, they stopped at a diner off of the highway on the way home. His mother had chosen that one in particular because they made their own ice cream, fresh, in the back, and without ever getting his demands heard he found himself, legs swinging wildly under the table, swiftly diving into a giant hot fudge sundae. His mother and sisters, all on various diets or meal plans or other weight loss measures, nibbled at salads and light soups; they never glanced at the ice cream menu, a fact that Jonas simply found impossible to comprehend. This stop, even he knew, was solely for him.

As Jonas ate he saw, up front, at the counter, a Black man, in his forties, sitting, and eating his lunch. The man never talked to anyone, or looked back to Jonas. There was something in his posture that forced Jonas to watch; the way his shoulders hung in the air, or the way he ate, slowly, as if he knew this was the best moment of his day, something, he couldn't tell what. He was dressed in overalls, dull and dark blue, and his clothes, as well as his hair and his entire bearing were clean, as if all of it, including him, was brand new. He never turned. Jonas never saw his face; if he had, Jonas was certain that he would have read the man's story, right there, without question.

On the way home, he stared out the window, sitting quietly throughout the entire ride. As they got closer, Lynne looked at him, turning from the passenger seat to smile.

“Hey,” she said, “what’s on your mind?”

“Who was that guy?” he said.

“What guy?” said his mother.

“That guy, the one sitting at the counter.”

None of them had noticed the man. He tried to tell what he had seen but he couldn’t, he found himself babbling and shut his mouth with a snap, and looked back out the window. Saw his own face, reflected in the glass, and somehow could see the same expression of surprise and curiosity that he had seen on the saleswoman’s earlier. That need for explanation, that hope for a history, was overpowering. The trees were silent, as they passed, telling no secrets and he suddenly became aware that if he wanted to know the story he would need to find it himself, to create it on his own. He grinned at his sister, and she laughed, surprised, and smiled back.

Later that night she sat, perched up on the edge of his bed, as he read her “The Poem For The Man At The Counter.” She listened carefully, and as she tucked him she told him in that it was the best story she had ever heard.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I Think That We Know What They Need

*“Everyone is crying out for peace, yes,
Nobody’s crying out for justice.*

*I don’t want no peace.
I need equal rights, and justice.”*

Peter Tosh

Being American, which, as I have said, we are, means that when viewing your fellows you are pushed into a constant battle between pride and horror, joy and revulsion, glory and deep, deep despair. These may be the times that try men’s souls, but they’re also the times that raise our hearts. In January of 2003 I met up with Sarah and Jonas at the I.N.S. Department in Center City. The building was in downtown Philadelphia, but tucked between highways and was a place that if you didn’t need to go there, you likely didn’t even know it existed; I didn’t, before this day. This, you see, was one of those headlong post-911 days, when terrorists peeped out from underneath every rock and over every wall, hiding in every letter and near every monument, and when each citizen was a deputized and fully authorized member of just-born Homeland Security. Two years before we’d all have laughed at the thought of such a non-American name and concept as Homeland Security; it sounded like something Mel Brooks would’ve put into a pointed and hilarious skit about ridiculous Nazis in an

upcoming movie, not a thing we would be expected to actually endorse, and listen to.

And we never figured that we'd be dealing with NSEERS, which sounds like an acronym for an organization ran by James Bond's upcoming nemesis, not the latest "weapon" in the War On Terror. National Security Exit-Entry Registration System. Non-citizens from select countries (funny coincidence how they were all from Africa and Asia, and even funnier that twenty-four out of twenty-five countries were Muslim) were required to visit their local immigration center and register with the state. That, as well, was a word new in meaning, at least to most of us. The word 'state' had meant California, New York, Texas, Illinois, a section of this country. Saying 'the state' just referred to the one you whose borders you were currently within, nothing more. And now we had a homeland to secure and a state to be prepared to register with.

Sarah had been working with a group that advocated for immigrants, and went to the center to help prepare folks as they went in, and to make certain they came back out. Baxter was there as well, he was a friend of Adrienne and Jonas who had gone to law school but was taking some time off before jumping into the family business. Sarah asked Jonas to help the legal observers and lawyers who were trying to help everything run smoothly and without too much stress; Jonas asked me to come to keep him company and to prevent him from flipping out on the police. He was fully aware that he wasn't really a great choice for quietly observing the cops or feds and calmly talking with them; Sarah was very insistent, though, and Jonas never liked saying no to people he liked.

We stood around outside the building. There was little for us to do. There

were a few actual lawyers and Baxter and a couple of other legal observers and they all appeared to have everything well in hand. Sarah and some others met each person as they came to register and spoke with them briefly so they knew what to expect. They helped get each person's information and a contact person in case they didn't make it back out of the building. Things went smoothly, at least as smoothly as something like that can go. I had my notebook out and wrote down everything I saw. I had an idea for a short story about someone having to register, and as it wasn't an experience that I knew much about I took the day as a chance to do some research; to be honest, that was the only reason I'd even come. Happily I wrote away, thinking of the story I would craft from these little observations and scenes, the people, their world. I thought of a few questions to ask Baxter, on how to deal with a few legal technicalities. And then I looked up from my pages, and I suddenly realized something.

Jonas was bored.

Ordinarily this wasn't that big a deal. I mean, we all get bored. Bored bored bored. Nothing to it. It is of course the eternal and internal problem, the ultimate bummer, the drag that hovers behind the ending of every unsustainable and enjoyable act. It is the final question, it is the basis of dread, it is the 'what else is there?' that lurks within all of us. So, we are all used to it by now. We know it. We deal. But you have to understand, this was Jonas, bored, in front of a federal building. I learned early on that placing a bored Jonas near a building filled with various types of law enforcement officials and keeping him there was like poking a particularly grumpy and underfed bear in an under-staffed zoo. None of us ever forgot the rally in D.C. when Jonas got bored listening to the

rambling speakers and wandered off, to be found later by Keith smoking a joint and freestyling with some newfound friends. The panic we felt was not in the new friends, or in the smoking; it was the fact that they had plopped down on a curb without glancing behind them, which would have enabled them to realize that they were sitting in front of the national headquarters for the F.B.I. When this was pointed out to them, they had insisted on finishing their smoke, and then strolled, with a deliberate stride that no properly cautious red-eyed hoodie-and-jeans-wearing Black men should have, back to the rally. What I mean is that Jonas was not necessarily going to cause trouble, just that he was going to do something, and it was often impossible to predict just what it was.

I was about to tell him that we should leave when he pointed at someone heading towards us. Talking passionately into his cellphone was a young man I recognized as from one of the newer Maoist parties, walking with a fairly hyper college student that I'm pretty sure I could hear squealing from down the street. They were about a block away, and already I could feel them in my stomach.

"That cannot be good," I said.

"No," said Jonas, and he waved to Sarah and began moving to cut them off before they got too close to the men going into the building.

The young woman was talking before she got across the street. There weren't many cars and there wasn't much noise but we still couldn't make out what she was saying.

"What's going on?" asked Sarah as she joined us.

"Not sure yet," said Jonas.

"This can't be good."

“Funny,” said Jonas, “Eshu said the same thing.”

“I don’t think this is going to be funny,” I said.

They made it across the street, the young man ignored us as he listened on his phone and added an emphatic “Yes!” or two to his conversation. As the young woman talked her long streaming blonde ponytail danced in time with her words. I couldn’t stop looking at it; I began to suspect that it didn’t move to her words, but that her words fell out as a response to the movements of her hair. It whipped back and forth and her voice rose, flailing up at us, hitting excited pitches that were well beyond anything our regular human ears could take in.

As soon as they made it over to us Jonas and Sarah stepped forward, blocking their path. The young man instantly shifted to move past but Jonas kept with him, they shuffled, dancing on the sidewalk in increasingly more frustrated steps.

“What?” said the young man with a hand on his phone. He kept it to his ear and listened to the voice that appeared to be chanting at him.

“We need to check in,” said Sarah.

“I don’t have time for this,” he said, turning back to his phone. He made a move to get around Jonas but I was standing next to him and he found himself boxed in. “Hold on,” he said and held the phone to his chest.

“You don’t have a radio on? Like NPR or 1050?” said the young woman. “They just interviewed me on 1050? My parents always listen to that so I know it goes everywhere, it’s crazy, it’s bigger than we expected?”

Everything she said was somehow a question.

We all looked at each other. I shrugged.

“None of us have any idea what you’re talking about,” said Sarah.

Her mouth literally dropped open.

“The rally?”

“Rally?” Jonas said.

The young man shook his head. “They don’t even know about the rally,” he said into the phone. His voice made certain to get across just how disgusted he was with us, as the person on the phone couldn’t see his expression.

“You didn’t get a flyer?” the young woman asked.

“We’ve been a little busy,” said Sarah.

“Doing what?” the young man asked. I could feel Jonas bristle at the young man’s voice and could see some of the cops keeping an eye on us.

“You guys all right?” asked Baxter from near the door.

“Not sure yet,” I said.

“Okay,” he said, “when you know let me know.” He turned back.

“Okay. Okay,” said the young woman. “Well, it’s okay. We’re coming.” She grinned at her news.

“Who,” asked Sarah, “is we?”

“We’re bringing them,” she squealed, “it was my idea!”

This was not a question.

“Pretty clear path,” said the young man into the phone. “What? No, looks like they’re mostly inside. We should be able to set up easily. Not much room but we can make it work.”

We glanced around at the building. On all sides the sidewalk stretched at least twenty feet from the street, and there was ample grass and even a space with

a few benches and a large bus stop.

“Who’s coming?” said Sarah.

“The rally?” replied the young woman.

“No,” said the young man, “the march. We’re being joined by another event that’s going on right now, about the Patriot Act.”

“They’re coming too?” she said. She beamed at us and the ponytail leaped up in ecstasy, a tail wagging its dog. “I don’t believe it, this is amazing. Everything just, it’s just working perfectly!”

“Oh, you can’t be serious,” said Sarah.

“I know, right?” said the young woman.

“No,” said Sarah.

“No?” said the young man.

“No,” said Jonas, “no as in no, you can’t bring a march here.”

“We respond to the will of the people,” he said, “the people’s revolution is coming and you can’t stop—”

“Oh please. Nobody’s trying to stop your revolution.”

“The people will not be slowed, you can stand with the state all you want and be brushed aside—”

“Talk to her,” said Sarah, and then she turned and walked over to Baxter and the others. I watched her as she talked to them, and could see their anxieties rising, even as she did her best to keep them calm. Sarah and others began pulling men aside as they came to register, trying to explain the situation, while the lawyers and observers talked to the police. Uniformed cops came out of the building, calling on walkie-talkies and gesturing wildly to each other.

Already a few blocks away we could see the horde, waving, banging, stomping, heading towards us was a cresting tidal wave, and we were just as powerless to stop it as the shore.

“This isn’t going to help,” said Jonas, “this is the worst thing you could do.”

“What are you talking about?” said the young woman. Her ponytail hung straight down, limp.

“You can’t silence the revolution!” said the young man, stepping out into the street to wave the march on, as if they couldn’t see the building without his guiding hands. The young woman hovered between him and us, her hair twitching left, then right, up, then back down.

“This is,” repeated Jonas, “the worst thing you can do. Look. The police are already locking down the building. See? There are people stuck in there. The whole point of protesting this is that they shouldn’t have to go in there, and if they do *then get them out out as quickly as possible.*”

“We’re drawing attention to the issue,” she said, firmly. Her hair, however, was back to lying against her neck. “Look,” she said, and now her hair was more perky than ever, “the news vans followed the march! The cameras are here.”

Baxter and the lawyers did their best to intercept the cameras. We saw a car pull up and a dark-skinned man in his best suit start to get out, then quickly duck back inside and the car raced off. The stink of satisfaction rose off of the young woman; she’d been looking to the press, and had missed the car. We watched it fade away.

The young man came back, ahead of the march, with an enthusiastic high-five for the young woman. They beamed at each other and grinned at us.

“I wish,” said Jonas, “that it was boring again.”

“What?” said the two smilers.

The swarm of the crowd broke over us, drums and chants and whistles lifting us bobbing on a bouncing ocean indifferent to the chaos left behind in its literal wake. The young man pumped his fist, cell phone forgotten, and after quickly checking in with some compatriots he began riding the wave of the march, less steering it than swinging along with it. The young woman cheered and screamed with friends as they passed by, someone handed her a sign which she lofted high above her. Before she walked away she turned a kind and sympathetic smile to us.

“You see?” she said. “We’re going to stop this.”

“You know,” I said, “I don’t think the Klan could have done more damage than you did today.”

“The Klan?” she said.

“How do you ever expect anyone to trust us,” Jonas said, “if we never listen to what they want, and we don’t help them get what they need?”

“I think,” she said with a patient smile, “that we know what they need.”

“Oh, you do?” said Jonas.

“The Klan,” she repeated softly. She shook her head, the ponytail waving its disappointment to us. “We’re the ones fighting this, and you want to waste time playing the race card.” She bounced away, her ponytail wagging indignantly behind her. We watched it leap into the crowd, jumping up and sticking out every now and then, its joy and belief in itself safe once more.

“The race card,” said Jonas. “Can’t believe we’re still hearing that.”

“Yeah,” I said, “because that card always works.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Hey,” I said, “it wins in spades.”

“Yeah,” said Jonas, “but this shit is war.”

For some reason, we laughed for a long time at that. While we laughed, Baxter gave a quick call to Keith, telling him what was going on. And Keith hopped into his car and played his *actually-able-to-win* race/gender/experience card and quickly gathered everyone around him. Unlike the fury that Jonas, Sarah, or Baxter would have expressed, he gave off a feeling of joy, of being overwhelmed with the power of the moment.

“Let’s keep it going!” he yelled, grabbing a sign and heading into the street.

“To City Hall! Make them hear us, make them fear us!”

And he led the motley hordes in more of a rolling circus than a march, winking at us as he passed. We stayed behind, helping in the damage control that followed. It was a long night.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Nature Of Stories

*“To think
Is much against
The will.
Better-
And easier-
To kill.”*

Langston Hughes

This is not a war story. That’s something I’m going to have to deal with, and it might as well be now, before this story goes any further. This is not a war story, though it is a story that is touched by war, as all American stories now must be, as all American stories have been. But this is not a war story, or a history, or a lecture, or even a calm, rational discussion: it is just a story, a tale, with a beginning, middle, and end.

We are not going to spend a lot of time talking about the wars in Iraq or in Afghanistan or anywhere else. I’m not here to go through that. Some people are going to be relieved by this statement, some are going to get angry, some will make judgments and build whole worlds of opinions from this. I’m trying to tell

you a story here. Stories are inherently political, as are all storytellers; the best politicians are the ones that make us believe in a tale of our better selves, fantasies built on what we want to be and on what we like to believe we are, or who we were. Even more, the simple act of saying *this* happened and it happened *in this way* is the foundation of politics and the basis of most agreement and arguments the world over. This is what happened/no it's not/I'm right/no I'm right—it all works its way down to the story in the end. The only thing that starts more fights is the word “*mine*.” But I'll leave the analysis for those who get into that kind of thing. Poets like Jonas and Adrienne can give you the meaning behind things, I'll just try to stick to the things themselves.

Because the truth is I'm just telling a story. I'm only trying to tell you one specific story and this story spends its time in the United States, in the state of Pennsylvania and most of it in the city of Philadelphia. And so this story is not set on some far off battlefield that the average American couldn't find on a map—at least, I hope it isn't! In addition, while there are those who return from those distant battlefields carrying heavy weapons and even heavier wounds, this is not their story. I mean those soldiers weigh on every moment of this story, they are an invisible mass which everything is centered on even though the way this story must be told it seems the opposite—there is no Galileo coming along to point out that the earthen bound characters of this tale revolve around the burning sun of the war and its warriors. Sometimes the best we can manage to do is to point out the fabled elephant in the room and move on; this is not right or just or fair, it is expedient and makes things easier and this story has enough to worry about.

And of course this is another example of the politics of storytelling; in the

act of telling you what I won't be telling you my words exposed biases I didn't even know I carried. I look up at what I just wrote and can't help but wonder why did I focus attention on the American soldiers, those returning and those not? Why was that where I center the mass of the untold story? Even in pointing out things are left out, things get left out. That is the nature of stories.

And this is a story. Just not a story about The War. Or even about war. I could tell you that this is a story about "the war against the war," but come on, the whole point of being against a war is that wars are not like anything else. We throw that word around whenever possible, but it remains an ugly, ugly thing. There is nothing here that is truly war. I mean, a soldier in a full on war, in a battle, the best they can hope for in a day is that they don't have to kill someone. That's a good day, when you don't kill and you don't get killed. In the life of our city there's little that could possibly equal an actual, full-on war. There are seconds hours days that may hang with any dramatic moments elsewhere on the earth, but even in a city where guns ring out each day like Philly, it's possible to live your life without seeing it, if you're lucky. It is true, of course, that there are recovering places in Philly that, if you caught on them camera and then compared your snapshots with photos of Baghdad streets healing from bombings, suicide and otherwise, well, you might be hard pressed to know which is which. Debris studied on Flickr seems to all blend in, sooner or later. But those are photos. Leftovers. Afterimages of aggression tend to resemble each other, regardless of the intensity of the original violence. Philly may not be in a state of war but it has seen its fair share of battles.

We are not going to be talking about those battles either.

I bring this up to be clear that while my focus is limited we were constantly aware that there were things bigger than us going on, miles away; no matter how self-serving they might have seemed at times, there was always a purpose lodged behind our actions, there was always an acknowledgement that we lived on a side-stage, doing our best to draw the attention of an anxious crowd. We knew where we fit in. In a far off Somewhere that sometimes found a way to dwarf our ridiculously large Here, we knew there lived 16 year olds who snuck out of their houses to bomb the city—and when they did they didn't bring spray paint cans, and they didn't see themselves as the children of Ramo or Banksy. In our lives there was no draft, we were not about to be sent into war ourselves, we were confident and furiously optimistic about our futures, at least on the individual level. Jonas, Adrienne, and I all had college educations and were in the process of crafting fearsome resumes—we had no need to pick up a gun to pay our bills, either to defend a drug deal or an oil well. We knew that we were not going to be dying in any war.

But we were always aware that others were.

Sometimes, it seemed like that thought, the reality of it, slipped in between any other thoughts that snuck across our minds or out of our lips, like a jingle or holiday song that you pick up somewhere and just can't shake. It's hot out today. Someone is dying. I want a cheesesteak. Someone is dying. You guys wanna shoot some hoops? Someone is dying. What are we doing tonight? Someone is dying.

Were we overdramatic? Caught up in ourselves, in our responses to the world? Did we think we had a right, even a responsibility, to change the world?

Were we arrogant, young, spoiled, naïve, ignorant, inexperienced, were we searching for a fight, for a cause? Yes, of course we were. We were all that and more. Did it matter? No.

Because we were right. And someone is always dying. And we refused to forget that.

This is not a war story. But that doesn't mean we didn't fight. And that doesn't mean there won't be blood.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Home Is Like A Virus

*“it is a hard thing
to admit that
sometimes after midnight
I am tired
of it all.”*

Sonia Sanchez

I will pick up Adrienne’s tale—the story that leads us to the Memorial—I will pick it up at that moment in the day right before the alarm changes everything. Adrienne was in bed, without sleeping, staring at the ceiling as if examining a classic film to learn what all the fuss was about. But the ceiling held no messages, and she was reduced to waiting for the day to begin. She had become, to her utter shock and disgust, a morning person. This was not just because as she’d gotten older she had more things to do in the mornings, though that was a part of it. No, it boiled down to the fact that she could no longer fool herself that her bed was a safe place to be. An empty bed can be a blessing or a curse; the difference is never in the bed itself, of course, but in the soul of the person crawling into it.

If you’ve been in a bed, the same bed, for long enough, it becomes crowded,

no matter how unoccupied it looks to anyone else peeking in. A bed, if it is your bed, and has been your bed, it holds all of the bodies that ever slept there, the jokes they told, the sweat love lust, the heat and dirt of a lived in bed—I don't mean this in a physical sense, of course; Adrienne was decently fastidious and never had a literally dirty sheet or crummy bed in her life. What I mean, of course, is is that we can still see those bodies,

On this morning, this specific morning, the one where we pick up her tale she waited for the alarm to go off before lifting out of bed, like a balloon straining to slip out of a child's hands. She made the bed carefully, smoothing the sheets and pulling it all tight—she kept her bed and room flawless. When you looked at the bed, you wouldn't be able to tell that one side hadn't been slept in; this was why it was the first thing she did upon rising. These days, the Days After Sarah, she spent nights here and there in different beds, with different bodies entwined with hers, but none of them ever made it here, to her bed. If any woman had a problem with it, Adrienne was quick to let them know not to worry about it as they wouldn't be sharing any beds for the foreseeable future. A breeze blew in from the window, looking to sneak into the now completely empty bed, and she turned and snapped the window shut.

So, she stretched. Her nightshirt, a gift from Jonas (though clearly purchased by his girlfriend Maria), was quickly placed on a hook, and she pulled on loose sweat pants, a sports bra, and an old T-shirt; this early in the morning it was still cool enough for her to choose sweats to shorts, and though most people up and about at this hour were too busy to pay her much attention, she still preferred the slight protection from creeps that sweats provided. Threw on a hat.

Added socks, then sneakers. She stretched some more, jogged in place for a minute, then grabbed her keys, and headed out for her morning run.

There's a beauty in running that can be so singular, and constant. Pick them up, put them down. Go. Forward. On, don't stop. Adrienne was the type of hidden athlete that caught everyone else by surprise. Basketball, baseball, rugby, tennis, if you named it she played it, and if she hadn't mastered a sport she could at least be competitive. She had a strong build, often hidden under empty and loose fitting clothes, with bulky muscles that misled the eyes into seeing her as chubby, possibly even borderline fat. I had seen many an opponent on a basketball or tennis court betting their own inevitable victory on their belief in her largeness. This belief never lasted for more than a few minutes and it was always a joy to watch it slowly slide off of their face in a rush of sweat.

But running...running was like nothing else. You run against yourself, you run to yourself. And it was there, in running, as the sweat began and her face focused in on the strain of moving moving moving that she allowed herself to feel it, to know it. There was something that made its way to the front of her eyes while she was running that she was able to keep buried when she was still. Maybe it was the rush of so many sensations suddenly coursing through her body that let her acknowledge the other feelings, the ones that hid; sometimes feeling intentional pain lets other pain slip out, accounted for and disregarded, immaterial.

She lost her heart within her body.

To feel the burn, beginning in the legs and climbing to the lungs. To hold the wind against her face, like a soft kiss that grows more and more passionate as

you pull into it. To make her legs pump even as they screamed at her, to tell herself just one more, one more, just one more minute, just one more block, just one more step—to say this and to know that she was lying but still decide to believe it, to pound against the pavement, over and over, until her breath drew itself heaving and thrusting into the air, tears sliding down her face, and she had to stop, to slow down.

And just like that, to shut it off, to pull her body into itself, to close off the heart that sang out in frustration. She was not a machine, for machines are not aware of what they are doing and she was fully conscious of the flood that was held, permanent and implacable, behind her steady and unmoving face. She shook her head, stretched, and headed back home.

Home is like a virus—not in the biological sense, but informational. It is something that takes over us until we are a new being, something that builds over time—not just in the little knick-knacks we pick up, or in the memories that layer over each piece of furniture like so much temporal and emotional dust. Or maybe I'm wrong—maybe it is biological, like the way arteries in the body build up plaque and refuse as the years go, slowly, unnoticeable, until suddenly your heart screams at you and you realize time has left its trail in your bloodstream.

Home is all of the feelings that you've had within it, all of the feelings you've had avoiding it, dreaming of it, escaping to it, all of the times you wished you were there, all of the nights you felt the world fall off of your shoulders simply by putting your key in the lock—home is the emotional plaque that clings to you, thickening your arteries, a process which will either make you stronger or

leave you with a broken heart.

Adrienne's heart was threatening to become hard.

She took a deep breath, stopping on the stairs to center herself. She went back into her house, gathered her things together, and went straight to the shower.

She spent less than ten minutes in the bathroom getting ready, but she exited with the look of one who had been preparing for hours. Hair braided tightly the night before by her grandmother, every strand in place, skin gleaming with just the right amount of shea butter, jeans hanging the exact correct amount off of her ass, showing pristine boxer shorts, thick brown boots showing off their laces but never sliding from her feet. Black t-shirt, matching hoodie, just a touch of frilly perfume—she had a weakness for smelling good.

A quick stop in the kitchen. We all have our dishes that we have mastered, those things we make that we are forever doomed to keep making, as any time there's a gathering someone is bound to say, "hey can you make that dish you made for the benefit last week? That was amazing!" Adrienne had mastered the egg. Omelets, quiches, poached, egg-drop soup, you name it, she made it, and well. She whipped together a frittata from ingredients she had chopped and prepped the night before and stood stirring it on the stove while the oven heated. She added the cheese then stuck it in the oven. While it cooked she quickly went through her email. As the sun was not yet fully awake it did not surprise her that there was not too much to deal with and by the time the eggs were done she was done as well.

She pulled some food from the fridge, rice pudding with black-eyed peas

from Jonas, leftover from when he stayed until the light rose and they bounced poems off each other a few. The only place that Jonas fully embraced his mixed race heritage was on his dinner plate, and he had mastered both Italian cuisine and soul food, and found new and intriguing ways of combining them; his collard green pesto was a revelation, and his watermelon-peach-ricotta cheese pastries were heavenly. The pudding was a sweet desert when heated, but functioned as a nice breakfast porridge if still cold, and Adrienne ate it quickly, with a dusting of chili powder on top.

Adrienne gave the eggs some time to cool, and while it did she prepped a box to drop off for her grandmother and her little brother. There was a part of her that was convinced, regardless of any actual evidence, that they went hungry when she wasn't around. So for this morning she had put together a food package to leave them with. A few dinners, a cake, some sandwiches, what was left of the pudding, and now the frittata. Enough, if necessary, for a few days. A start, at least. If everything went according to plan she'd be back cooking before they were done. If not, well, there was always the Chinese place around the corner.

When the box was ready she placed it by the door then turned back to her bedroom and walked to the bed. She knelt, her head pressed against the sheets, and clasped her hands together. Do I know what she prayed? Do I even know that she prayed? I do know that she said she prayed every day, each morning before she left the house. I couldn't imagine that she would be capable of not praying anyway, even if she hadn't stated that she did. She carried herself that way, it was something in the way she accepted what was in front of her, her

manner of always being affected but never deterred, as if she knew that she had some hidden gear lodged within her, where she could turn it all up at a moment's notice. She had the patience of someone who knew there was more to what was going on than she knew. Let me make clear: I have heard many of her stories, ones that I will not pass along here. Her love life was the one section of her life she had no problem revealing to her friends. I know she was no saint.

But that doesn't mean she wasn't holy.

I do not know what her prayers were. I could guess, I mean there were certain subject areas that I would be fairly certain she touched on, pretty much every prayer. Things asked for, promises made. I can see her, in that room, lips making the slightest of movements. But when I close my eyes to listen all I hear is the sound of her mother, the rusty creak of the swing on her porch, her weathered voice humming and singing along to her crackly Billy Holiday records:

Mama may have

Poppa may have

But God Bless the child

That's got his own

That's got his own...

Well. If her mother chooses to hover around to cover this moment, out of a whole life laid out before us, there's little I could do about it. Let her have this, if it means that much to her. And anyway, it feels worse, for some reason, to peek over Adrienne's shoulder here than it did when she stepped into the shower. Let us just agree that she prayed for her grandmother, for her brothers, and that she prayed for all of us on that day, for our safety and our return—that she prayed

things would go well, that she prayed for strength, that she prayed.

And then, when she finished, she grabbed her bag and the box and headed out.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Such Simple Actions

“If you were lounging around

it's time to get up.

Pardon my expression,

but I'ma tear shit up...”

Big Daddy Kane

Jonas sat there on the edge of his bed. He rubbed his face vigorously and felt the blood begin to move—so he did it again. And sat there, staring at nothing. I never could understand just why he did that; it never seemed to clear his head any quicker, or to enable him to place exactly what it was he was getting up for. He swore to any who would listen that he never used to do that before Maria—as his former roommate I am the only one able to attest to the truth or falseness of that claim, but no matter—I repeat it only because I know that he believed it to be a solid indisputable fact, and in the end it is belief that actually matters. So let us agree that this had been her morning ritual, not his, to sit on the bed in that halfway space between up active moving and lying in bed considering moving.

But tell me—Isn't that what a relationship is? The process of taking on each other's rituals, of looking down one day to find yourself agreeing to things and actions that you would have thought beyond you? Of seeing yourself

following patterns and habits that you can no longer question, even ones you have never understood? This thought came to Jonas, and he made a mental note to discuss it with Maria later. It was the type of thing she liked for him to say. She would laugh at his words in the daylight, shoving him away with a shout of “You think too much!” and a shake of her head. Then, in bed, she would wrap herself around his neck until his face consumed her eyes and she would repeat it softly, less than a whisper, the edges of the words rounded so slightly by her accent.

Edges. There he was, still on the edge of the bed. Let us look at him, this young hero: he should be up standing moving going. Gone. Not sitting, waiting. Okay: so who is he? Shaved head and obligatory goatee, light brown skin, thin, almost skinny, with tight tense muscles. But most importantly: steady and patient green eyes. There was something constant in his eyes, a feeling you got, something not quite hidden but that was only seen by those who knew him well and paid attention; a sense of containment, a fiercely guarded control and a bitterly fought for control at that. His eyes, as beautiful and calm as they looked, were simply put the angriest eyes I’ve ever seen, before or since.

So one last time, there he was, on the edge of the bed. Rubbing those eyes. He didn’t bother to look over at the clock. There was time. Nothing new for the clock to tell him—nothing to do but to do it. He stood. His glasses stared out from the desk in front of him; yes, those green eyes did everything but see clearly. Jonas lifted his glasses, wiped them softly on the sheets of his bed and slipped them onto his face, marveling as usual at how quickly the world can change from such simple actions. Sitting alongside his cell phone was a small scrap of paper,

wrinkled and torn. He studied it for a moment; lifting a thin Sharpie marker from the desk he copied the two numbers from the paper onto his left arm. Blue-black ink on light brown skin: lawyer on top, safe house on bottom as always. He dropped the marker back onto the desk then tore the paper into tiny pieces and tossed them into the trash next to the desk. He stretched.

His computer, awoken by all of the activity around it, threw the world into hyper bright and awkward light, as if the outside was sneaking into the room, silent and wireless. The weather looped constantly over the screen, as if the mind of the computer had kept itself active and informed while its body had slept as he did. Though refreshed, the website still repeated the same facts it had before he had gone to bed: another grey day to come, all around.

One moment. Then gotta get going. He straightened, tall and ready, and looked up at the poster taped to the wall above the desk. *Scarface*. Staring down at him, delivering an unspoken blessing from above, the eyes of Tony Montana, a film Cuban (by way of Sicily), himself a monument to the random and invented history of race and culture. In the confused and mixed heritage of film and the filmed, of actor and character, Jonas could only see himself, his own life. The World Is Yours, the poster whispered, as it did every day, and he smiled, as he did every day, and agreed: the world is mine.

Turned to the bed. Looked down at her. Hair slipped out from under the covers, hiding her face. Her hips, steady and solid, waited like hills under the blanket of snow, and he knew every inch of her that spread out from those hips. Jonas was always stunned, in those rare moments when she was still and not moving, at just how beautiful she was, and at how close he was to her. He was

absolutely certain that she could easily make a living as a model or an actress, a fact that he mentioned often but that she shrugged off like a too heavy coat on a slightly chill day. For her part she was certain that he said these things for his own sake, not for her, to make himself feel and sound more important and special—after all, only a stud like him could hold onto her. He was never fully able to convince himself that she was wrong. Still, he could get caught up in looking at her, moments becoming seconds becoming minutes. Becoming late.

She still slept, thankfully. He didn't like to wake her. They were both night people, she taking classes all afternoon and working as a waitress at night, him spending his afternoons holding reading and writing workshops for inmates and folks newly released from prison, then his early evenings at meetings, then writing until it got late. After that they were up all hours, together, inseparable. Sleeping to wake up to make love around ten, then long glorious breakfasts, the only meal they always shared. On those painful early mornings when he rose without her, even if it was just getting up to shop for groceries, she would always tell him the night before to wake her before he left. Every time, she asked. Every time, he agreed. Promised. And every time, every single he meant it. But every time, like today, he stared down at her, peaceful, relaxed, unconcerned, and he could never bring himself to wake her, to change that serene face to one of worry and sadness. She hated when he left. He touched her cheek.

On the floor next to the bed was a stack of clothes and other things he had prepared the night before. Jonas knelt over them, going carefully through the pile, checking to see that everything was there. Everything was. This was not a shock, as he had put them there only hours before; still the ritual must be obeyed.

He took a tiny packet out from the pile and stood and stepped out the door. The kitchen was right outside his room. He reached above the sink and grabbed a glass, emptied the packet into it, and filled it with water. The powder sizzled over when the water hit it. EmergenC. Powdered vitamin C drink. His mother's ritual, held onto only for those days when he felt it necessary. Why bother to stir? It never seemed to help, anyway. He lifted the glass to his lips, and found himself even now expecting it to taste better than it always did. It looked and smelled like a fizzy, bright red Gatorade or fruit punch, a promise of childhood sweetness, yet it hit the tongue like medicine. And every time he took the first sip, there was always that shock and disappointment when he actually began to taste it. He forced it down, quickly, then re-filled it with water and gulped that down too, then rinsed the glass and put it on the rack to dry. Stood there for a second staring off to nothing. When he suddenly caught a glance of himself in the glass of the window next to the sink, he realized that at this point in the ritual he was still without clothing. It was pitch-black out, and it wasn't likely that any of us, his housemates, would be stumbling into the kitchen for a late-late-night snack or early-early morning breakfast. He needn't have worried—we were still out cold. Still—plenty of time to tempt fate later. Back into his room, the door closing softly behind him. He pulled a towel out of a dresser drawer, wrapped it around himself and ran out to take a quick shower.

Back to the pile. First, and most importantly, his shirt. His lucky shirt. Maria often teased him, holding it in her hand like a rotting and musty dishrag, saying it was time to put it down, put it to sleep, that it had earned its rest. She knew how precious it was to him, the meaning that it held. It was in her smile as

she kept the shirt away from her, as if grossed out even by touching it with the tips of her fingers. Even more, she knew that it was separate from her, part of him that existed before her and that would live on alongside of her, pulling and pushing him, dragging him towards silent and unspoken things. Looming and frightening things. Things she had chosen not to join. Holding the shirt playfully, joyfully, was as close to telling him it was okay as she ever got.

He picked the shirt up—gingerly. It was, he could admit, a mess. Patched, stained, eternally wrinkled, it had lived quite a life in a few short years. The shirt was, however, clean; he had washed it carefully by hand the day before. Now he pulled it on, feeling it stretch and cling to him instantly. He looked down at the image sitting on his chest, barely visible and only decipherable to someone who knew what it had once been. Traced the remnants of the lettering with a finger: “Prisoners Rights March” sketched out in small, rapid type. The shirt had been a gift from the organizing committee for MCing a rally outside of City Hall. The shirt became immortal exactly one year later, while he wore it as he linked arms and sat in the middle of the street with 7 other friends, shouting and screaming the whole time. His first arrest. They had thrown him to the ground, to pull him apart from the others, his friend Adrienne’s right arm firmly locked around his left. The police had dragged them both, pulling them like a tug of war, or some thick salt-water taffy from the Jersey Shore. When that didn’t work they simply stepped on the back of his neck, calmly watching as his face went from its normal soft brown to a vivid and darkening red. Only then did he stop shouting. But he hadn’t let go. It was Adrienne, finally, unwilling to risk his neck any further, who had let go. They had expected things to get rougher, more dangerous, and the

eyes and voices of the police let them know the cops had been expecting that too. But their lawyers were quick and the news reporters active; enough cameras and noise and even the Philly police will back off. Sometimes. And that time they did.

For some reason he never could fully explain, he had always put his good fortune on the shirt. He didn't really know why or how exactly it had happened, but it did. So the next time he went out, expecting to get arrested, this time protesting the death penalty, the shirt was worn, comfortable and reassuring. And once again he returned home, mostly unharmed. Wore it again, for another cause. Same result. Then again. And the same. The shirt now began to have a legend beyond him, and when his friend Baxter was heading off to court after he had been arrested at a similar protest, he begged to wear the shirt for luck. The shirt returned home safe that night, along with his friend, and now it was as good as Holy. It was never worn simply as a shirt, only as a sacred charm, and he never said no to anyone who sought it out. He touched the shirt again and wondered, as he always did, just how many stories were trapped in its stains and holes that he would never hear, that would go untold. The things that shirt knew! It made him happy to think of, and he was glad that he would never know them.

He pulled on underwear, then jeans, picked up the week before at a thrift shop on 45th Street. Opened his backpack, and rifled through it. Driver's License, current, easily discarded if the need arose. Extra shirt and pants, if a change was necessary. First Aid kit, contents checked, re-checked, and three-checked the night before. \$20 bill, pinned to the inside. \$2.00 in change in a small bag also pinned to the inside. Phone card with at least 10 minutes remaining. Bottle of water. Loose package of tobacco with extra rolling papers. There was a lighter

somewhere by the desk but he couldn't remember just what he had done with it. Notebook. Brand new Bic pen, and a Sharpie for good measure. A dollar store mechanical pencil, in case the pens died out. Salty package of sunflower seeds, small bag of Oreos, 2 candy bars (he had a weakness for 3 Musketeers). Snapped his fingers, then stood and went back into the kitchen. From the fridge he grabbed a paper bag that held a plastic container of rice and beans, a little baggie filled with sliced mango, and 3 plastic forks. Maria's idea, insisted upon vigorously and he knew better than to refuse. She made the food the night before, a fragile smile on her face the whole time. She did not know exactly what was happening and she did not want to ask, but whatever went down she was absolutely certain that food would be needed. He took the small bag back into his room, and fit it gently into his backpack.

Quickly he rubbed on some deodorant and doused himself lightly from the small bottle of rosewater Maria had given him last Christmas. It had been, in her mind, a minor stocking-stuffer, but he wore it every day, without fail, and she had come to identify the smell with him, with his daily movements through her life. His friends mocked him, his attachment to "bourgeois values" revealing itself in arbitrary moments, but he never minded. Like Adrienne, he liked to smell good. Jonas was the only guy, Baxter would tease, who could be chained to a bulldozer for hours yet smell faintly of flowers. He smiled, thinking about it. He still loved the smell.

Then socks, and his boots. Steel toed, well worn, rough and perfect. Laced them quickly, without looking, and sighed. He was almost ready. Tied the boots tightly and stood. Snatched his black hoodie from off the chair by his desk, and

pulled it on. His hat, off the hook on the wall. He took the 76ers hat, newer and cleaner than any of the others. Grabbed his backpack and threw it onto his shoulders and started for the door.

He glanced at his cell phone, sitting on the desk expectantly. Oh, the modern rebel's conundrum! How to weigh the threat of straining ears listening and anxious busybodies tracking his movements as it collided full on with the reality of being out of contact for the day? He darted back, snatched the phone, then turned to the door.

Behind him Maria shifted slightly in the bed. He froze. She always knew. When he left for a jog after he woke, or when he stepped out of the room for a shower, she never moved. Only when he was leaving for the day. Or longer. In the 3 years she had slept there, in his bed, in their bed, she never moved when he was coming back to the room. She knew.

He walked back. Bent down, hovering over her for a moment, and felt something inside him, some macho edge that he usually held tightly onto, felt it slip from his grasp and fall away. He pulled his glasses off, and knelt even closer. She inched towards him, her eyes tightly shut, her mouth slightly open. He smiled. He kissed her, and her lips kissed him back. She murmured in her sleep, shifted, turned away, and he stood, not wanting to wake her. The world was foggy for a moment. He wiped his eyes, fiercely, and replaced his glasses. Such simple actions. No more time left, he thought. He didn't look at the clock, but he knew.

Jonas glanced down at her, sleeping deeply now, and he smiled. He would see her soon. Hopefully within a few hours. He turned, and this time without

looking back he quickly walked out of the room.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Looking Out Into The Bowl

“They reeled ya in like your skin had fins

Now you’re poundin’ sand for another man’s sins

To each his own to each his own they say

But I’m a blow a bone and you can march ‘til the cows come home...”

The Goats

Lock the door. Down the steps. Past the row houses still asleep, though a few were starting to fidget. With enough exposure you could see which ones had children and which ones didn’t, who rented and who owned, who planned to be there for the rest of their days and who barely noticed they were there now. One blue, one exposed brick, one yellow, healthy plants here, plastic flowers there. The skin of a house could say so much more about a person than their own skin did, yet was so little noticed. In the suburbs it had been the lawn that people judged. That never seemed to make any sense to Jonas. He had always been a city kid. The fact that his parents had been ridiculous enough to move from Philadelphia to the blandness of small town northern New Jersey months before he was born changed nothing—how could it? It was who he was, from the very first moment he was, and likely from before then. Growing up he was constantly glancing over his shoulder at that behemoth, that beast, hovering so tantalizing,

so close, shadowing his every day and thought—New York City, that living entity beyond knowing, beyond knowledge, he had felt so alone without it, yet New York simply went on its way without him. It was an insult he never responded to, as New York wouldn't have bothered to notice his complaint anyway. Each morning, he and his friends plotted how they would escape from the Nowhere around them. They knew: you cannot become Someone living in Nowhere. He left home for college, Rutgers University, State College of New Jersey, spread throughout his first city, New Brunswick, a place that at times almost felt like Somewhere, but in the end came off more like a city-shaped waiting room, where the sounds and flavors of a big city slipped teasingly in through an open window.

And then, after graduating, class of '99, with no real plan of action he finally found himself living Somewhere. In his first Somewhere. Philadelphia, of course, is not New York; a significant portion of its personality was based on being not-New York. Stuck between NYC and D.C. there was something he found charming in Philly's inferiority complex. The city fought for his love as soon as he arrived, but it had taken two years to seize it fully. There was a part of him that had forever been captured by Philadelphia in those rushed and unknowable days after the Towers had fallen; there was rage and fear and horror and loss and confusion but there was also an unmistakable sadness as well. It was the earnestness buried in the heart of the city's panic, waiting for that inevitable second attack, the one undoubtedly headed here, as if the entire population was frantically trying to convince itself that New York and D.C. might be struck first but clearly a rational terrorist would undoubtedly be heading for the Liberty Bell or Independence Hall, most likely as we speak. Any attempt to steer a discussion

towards the economic and military aspects of the terrorists' actions were brushed aside, calmly and fervently. Because people had to believe that they were as important, as valued, even as hated, as their rival cities. It was a fascinating, ridiculous, and utterly human reaction. And Philly—Philly has always been a very human city. Philly was a city made for humans, for flesh and bone people spread across neighborhoods and blocks that they had built with their own hands, piece by piece, together. It was dirty and awkward and corrupt and lonesome and held out open arms, touching each of her children's hearts in a way that a giant like New York never could. You could know Philly, not just map-knowledge, but a knowledge of her streets, her alleys, her one-ways and her potholes, her cheap eats and her free parking. Philly was stone, concrete, brick, mortar, without a hint of plastic. The concept of some ludicrous Seinfeld/Friends style sitcom being made here always brought giggles from all of us. Philly was not a city that took well to an outsider's interpretation.

But as I said, I like to think that the idea of home is like a virus, taking over our bodies and systematically converting them to something else; maybe we wish for it so hard that we are left with no choice but to force ourselves to become a part of our surroundings, simply to ensure our survival. Maybe our human nature to pick up accents is part of our larger ability to blend in. Or perhaps we simply have more in common with our lizard ancestors, particularly the chameleon, than my high school science teacher dared to tell us. Anyway, what I am trying to tell you is that at some point in his time in Philly the soul of this young man, Jonas, had not just grown, as all souls do, but had changed. It had gradually transformed itself into a brand new creation, hardly recognizable, a

weird concoction of polluted air, tension, children's giggles and teen-aged dances, sirens, music (so much music!), the clankings of the trolleys in their tracks, the smell of fresh cut grass in flowering parks, the scent of street-side barbecues, the flavors of foods sold from trucks.

Around Jonas, as he walked, the city slept. The moon appeared to have retired well before the morning could rise up to chase it off, and the stars were never really visible in his neighborhood. But the streetlights were there, covering every corner, and along with the scattered neon signs leering out from store windows they kept his path somewhat well lit. It didn't really matter; he was reasonably certain he could navigate his way blindfolded, though he figured that wasn't the wisest way to go.

Turn right at the church. Left at the dry cleaner. There was a slim alley between the bodega and the gas station but the guard dog's leash wasn't all that tight, a lesson learned from hard experience. Better to just take it as a straight line, down Baltimore Ave. Across the street, he could see the light on in his favorite café; the owner and her husband would be in the back, baking the best muffins in town. The grate was still down. If they had been getting together just little later they would have been able to meet in that café. Newspapers blew in the wind and butted angrily up against the wall, as if they too were waiting impatiently for their breakfast.

Two months ago he had been walking home from work when a patrol car had rolled down this block, slowly, its spotlight swinging casually back and forth like the bored eyes of a tiger with a full belly. They dropped the light on him and flared the siren once, just once, enough to make him jump, and he could hear

their laughter as they pulled away. It was the first time he had thought to be afraid in his neighborhood. Every day the papers seemed to scream at him to change, to fear, to hide from himself and from those like him, but he knew that his city couldn't hurt him. He had no reason to be this confident, of course; he knew how many murders there were, almost daily, the list billowing out behind the city like the flowing string of a spider. He had been to the funerals, held the crying mothers, had sung the mourning songs and church hymns enough that he could hear them in his sleep; he knew where he lived.

But he still believed his city couldn't hurt him.

Jonas hadn't wanted to move to this neighborhood. I had grown up in Philadelphia, on the outskirts, and in my heart I was like Jonas, a child of the suburbs, a latchkey kid. But unlike him I had been happy there. Germantown, however, was not your ordinary suburb; it is not actually a suburb at all. It was another neighborhood of Philly, and had always been one of the more integrated areas of the city. I had lived as part of the city, yet still apart, and now I wanted that to change. Jonas and I met at college, shared a dorm room and then a house off-campus. When I headed home, he came with me.

"What about this house?" I said, pointing at an ad in the Inquirer. "I know a couple of guys, good guys, who'll go in with us on that."

He glanced at the ad.

"Nah," he said, "we can do better."

"You haven't even seen it."

"And I still know we can do better."

“Those houses are huge. And cheap.”

“No,” he said. He scanned down the page, tracing his finger over the words, black ink darkening the tips. I just stared at him. He kept looking, and I kept staring. He turned pages and kept his eyes moving but I knew I would win; in a battle of wills he usually won, but I knew the city and I knew him, and it was already over.

“Well?”

“Well what?” he said.

“We can’t be afraid of our own people anymore,” I said.

“Who’s afraid?”

“We both are, and you know it.”

He didn’t speak.

“They are our people.”

He was still quiet. There were things there, on his face, words that seemed to be both straining for release and fighting to stay hidden, but I knew those words, as they had lived in my own mouth long enough.

“They don’t know you,” I said, “but you’re not going to get anywhere until they do.”

“Center City just seems easier,” he said, “more central, and all.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I understand the name. Tell me something. Why are you coming to my city, Jonas?”

“Your city?”

“Yeah, my city. If you live here long enough, you’ll own it too. But right now that seems like a pretty big if.”

We both knew, without going through it all, exactly why he was going to Philadelphia. You cannot become an organizer without someone to organize. It wasn't going to be enough to protest someone; he was going to need to protest for someone else. Do you need to live with someone to organize them? Do you need to be a part of something to support it? I'd never thought so, in fact I'd never really given it much thought at all, but I knew that Jonas did think that, even if he didn't want to face that belief. He was scared to live there, amongst people who should, by all rights, be his people—but would they think he was their people? In that conversation he had no chance to win the argument, because he could never allow himself to make it; to him the only thing worse than being afraid of something was the fear that others would find out.

So, Jonas and I made our home in West Philly; we still do, or more accurately, we both still intend to. Again, to be more accurate, we made our home in Southwest Philadelphia, but since that doesn't nearly the ring to it, as well as the fact that in the minds of most Philadelphians the phrase "Southwest Philly" brings up images of smelly black-clad white kids with dreadlocks and preppy college students, we have always gone with "West Philly." Names are a funny thing, even more so when it comes to neighborhoods. The city itself has continually tried to push the tag "University City," as a means of selling the area better to those college students and their parents, as well as the businesses looking to sell to them. Any time I ever heard anyone actually use that name in conversation, everyone nearby stared at them as if cornered by a lunatic—and that included the college students the name was meant to attract.

It had a better name, back in the day. Black Bottom. Now that's a name. I

mean, just think about the possibilities:

“Where you’s all headed?”

“Black Bottom.”

Or even better:

“Where’d you just come from?”

“Just came from Black Bottom.”

You honestly can’t do better than that. Really. Of course, the name was not really as titillating as it sounds and referred more to that fact that its residents were Black and at the bottom of the ladder, economically and socially, and was likely originally conceived as an insult, but hey, us Black folks are pretty good at taking insulting names and turning them into sources of pride—at least, some of us like to think that we are. As the colleges grew they found that they had developed two rather large and pressing predicaments: one, they needed more space, and two, there were a lot of “non-college material” folks living nearby. Being smart educated types, they quickly came upon a solution for these two difficult problems by referencing one unembellished axiom: when in doubt, make the niggers move. So, areas were declared blighted, eminent domain was established, buildings were demolished, thousands were displaced, and from our Black Bottom sprouted their University City. This is not a history most students would be required to learn; when asked about Black Bottom, the average student’s response would either be a giggle or an urgently expressed desire to see said bottom, as quickly as possible.

West Philadelphia, born and raised, on the playground is where I spent most of my days...

He was ahead of schedule. His feet slowed, not quite dragging but treading sluggishly, as if someone had replaced the steel toes of his boots with solid lead tips. As he went down Baltimore Ave, Jonas glanced down the other streets, hidden by their own trees and leaves, the streetlights stepping out in unexpected spots from behind branches and between cars. This block was close enough to the college campuses that there were few abandoned vehicles, or if any were abandoned the city quickly gathered them up and hid them away. The neighborhood was only in the beginning stages of gentrification, and had the mixed blessings that process can bring with it—but there was still time. Most of the businesses were still small, Mom-and-Pop operations, bustling families streaming in and out of the door, children working cash registers and wielding brooms like lightsabers, immigrant families that held tightly to their slice of America despite the increasingly larger and larger sums they were offered to sell. At that point in time the university advised its students to live no further west than 45th street; here, just east of 49th, there were the early warning signs of the invasion to come, but the chain stores were far off, and local businesses ruled the streets. The rent was still reasonable, the stores and restaurants catered to just about any diet, the children came from everywhere from Laos to Eritrea, people smiled at each other in the streets, and the few white faces were mostly young artists and activists, or else older hippies with families—and they had moved into the neighborhood in the '70's and feared the onrush of students as much as anyone else.

Above him Jonas could hear the birds, enjoying this moment that they still

held to themselves. All about him were the random sounds marking the end of the night and the birth of the new day. It's strange, the way that lack of noise magnifies sound; far-off voices shouted things he could never quite make out, distant sirens blared and kept moving until they began to feel close then abruptly faded, and he could hear the sharp echoing footsteps of people he would never see. There was a chill in the air. It felt like it wasn't going to be cold anymore, that soon winter would fade out and Spring, sitting on the horizon, waiting until it felt appreciated, would soon choose its own time to make an entrance like a bored and sullen teenager.

He decided, without really thinking about it, to go through the park. It was out of his way. But it sat there, unused and waiting and he simply followed his feet until he was making his way through it. In the dark it was a mass of hanging green and dimly lit empty spaces; somehow, what light was dribbling down from the sky seemed to pool up on the grass of the park. A street sliced through the center of the park, dividing it into two separate, very different sections. He stepped slowly through the side close to Baltimore Ave, thick with trees, with curving walks that meandered in and out, designed for leisurely strolls and chance meetings. Weaved through it, away from the destination, just walking, taking every last second of remaining time. Behind him the sidewalk grew wide; it was there that twice a week the farmer's market gathered together the hippies, the yuppies, and the Amish, each in their traditional dress, like a neighborhood United Nations focused on food. Each offered up their own visions in green, yellow and red, vibrant growing things displayed like a peacock's feathers.

The other side of the park was itself split into two sections. The first housed the swings, the monkey bars, all of the standard kid friendly necessities—and, most importantly, the basketball courts. Jonas and Adrienne did a lot of damage on that court; from their very first meeting they seemed to speak in a tongue no one else could, it was more a telepathy of the closely related, like long-lost twins whose wonder-twin powers activated in the form of backdoor cuts and off-the-ball screens. Maria, of course, was always encouraged to watch; seeing her on the sidelines led Jonas to reign in his natural impulses to do everything, to try everything, and to instead concentrate on doing things well. Jonas returned the favor as much as he could, though she did not see it as a favor the way he did. Knowing there were extra sets of eyes on her did not send her, like Jonas, into a calmer, better rhythm. Fortunately for her, the doctors and professors at medical school tended to frown on outside observation, and she was able, mostly, to do her things without his supervision.

But she loved to watch Jonas slide between defenders on the court, the ball merely another part of his hand, throwing his body around like a rough and violent ballet dancer. He took it all so seriously; with her, he was laughing, flirting, so silly, so alive. Out there he never smiled, never blinked. It was his celebration that always got her heart, surprising her anew each time. The thing is, he always seemed to almost ignore when he made a basket, shrugging it off without thought—and as I said, he didn't shoot well. But he played the kind of game that ensured that he would always get picked; his celebration came when he pulled off an intricate no-look pass, or when he gestured with his eyes for a teammate to cut and then dropped off an easy pass for a lay-up—that was when

he threw back his head and roared, fist clenched, sweat flinging from his head in a wide spray. It was while she was watching Jonas play ball that Maria realized she was in love with him.

But Jonas did not head for the basketball courts that morning. Right next to the courts and kid area there was The Bowl, and Jonas went straight for it. This was a large empty space of dirt, dying grass and dandelions, about the size of a football field—it dipped down in the center, all sides gently sloping into the bowl that gave it its name. On weekend afternoons, it became a riot of colorful jerseys with unpronounceable names on the back of freewheeling bodies of every race and nationality, pickup soccer games that flowed in a triumphant disorder that Jonas could never figure out. Ethiopian, Eritrean, Jamaican, Polish, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Guatemalan—and that was just a start; basically anyone who could make it to America appeared to have at least one representative on the field at any given time. How the teams were chosen when no one appeared to speak the same language was beyond his comprehension; even more, the fact that anyone could decipher exactly who was on their team felt like a minor miracle to him. But there seemed to be a good-natured vibe on that field that was missing on the basketball court, and while everyone was continually shouting and no one seemed to be understood, it never moved past the yelling stage, despite the intense combination of confusion and competition.

He slipped through the trees, and crept down the slope of The Bowl. Footprints littered the ground, traces of heavy feet and the lingering afterimages of sneaker treads that still remained stuck in the thick, brown mud. Down the slope. Right to the center. Then stop. He bent down, keeping above the dirt,

hands on his knees, studying the ground, not with the observant eyes of an ecologist but with the patient steady view of an historian. Careful. Because this was still Holy Ground. These prints were battle scars—all that was left behind.

Here in The Bowl, two weeks earlier, he had helped organize an anti-war rally. There had been a larger, citywide rally going on downtown simultaneously. Originally, the rally in The Bowl was only supposed to be a meeting place before everyone headed on to the main rally in Center City; it was intended to be only a “feeder” quickly submerged by the larger event. But as they had begun organizing it had quickly become clear to Jonas and the others that everyone knew what to expect from that larger rally, and it wasn’t anything they found worth spending a day off doing. This is the price paid for one large “movement,” namely that there begins to be very little moving going on. In its rapid accelerated growth these public outbursts were already settling into an established routine, with indistinguishable speakers and an impenetrable order. The idea of community and solidarity died quickly underneath the reality of being lectures delivered by another bunch of unknown White folks, lectures interrupted only by the continual chants of “This is what democracy looks like!” that flowed through the joyous White faces. So: we fed nothing. We gathered, not to move, but to be moved.

As the organizing for the rally went on, Jonas had found himself serving, really for the first time in his life, as an elder statesman; the fact that a few of the organizers were old enough to be his grandparents hadn’t stopped anyone from treating him like some sort of famous expert. His work in the prisons and with the former inmates gave him clout, yet it was more his attitude, a certain

calmness that gave him a more dignified air than he was aware of. Knowing him, the calmness was a combination of barely suppressed rage and well-concealed fear that forced him to seem calm.

Calmness is not a young man's tool. Seeing this the teenagers who made up the majority of the group had all called him "Old Head" the instant that he walked into their afterschool meetings, granting him the boisterous respect for older folks that their parents had forced onto them. He laughed with them. They teased him. The young girls tried flirting with him. All of this was done with the understanding that he was of a different generation, one who could be among them but never of them. There was no one between them, no Missing Link explaining his evolution and showcasing their potential future. As far as they were concerned, he might as well have been 50. There was no one bridging the vast gap in their ages and worlds—from their 15 or 17 to his 26 there existed nothing but a yawning hole filled with prison cells, funeral homes, and for the rare, rare few, college. Because they couldn't see themselves blooming into 26 year-old experts, because there were no visible steps from one to the other, no $1 + 1 = 2$, there could be no Before and no After, and they couldn't imagine him as he once was, stranded like them, lost, hormonal, angry, confused.

There was something he was searching for, some intangible yet noticeably missing thing, feeling, understanding, something he sought out in the recognition of those older folks or in the admiration of those youth. They were like some form of living mirror, a way for Jonas to see himself that his own eyes could never pull off without assistance; it was as if his own self-approval could only come through acknowledgement of their approval. Maybe I'm putting my own

thoughts into this; maybe I would prefer to see some less altruistic purpose in Jonas' actions, so I can feel less guilty about sitting on the sidelines. But he had to get something out of it, besides the hope that a far off war and the about-to-be-war would be marginally impacted by their attempts at confronting the government. I don't think I'll ever fully understand what it was he got.

Jonas helped arrange a benefit dance, signing the rental agreement for the space, showing them how to sweet-talk the local newspaper into doing a full-page spread at an extremely discounted rate, teaching them the best ways to phrase a press release or design a flyer, as he himself had been taught. He used his connections to convince a few bands that playing for free would help them build an audience who would inevitably follow them to paying gigs, and he spent the two days before the event cooking with Maria to ensure that there was a ton of cheap food. The young folks were excited to have him there, to show off their dances and music and all of the things that younger people hide from older, guarding their most precious secrets from ridicule, mockery, and even worse, those pitiful attempts to join in. And so he stood, off to the side with Maria, somewhat thrown by the vast complexities of their ritualized dances and unspoken agreements, the utter lack of shame for actions that would have gotten him slapped when he was their age, the motion of young bodies bending in ways that he had forgotten young bodies were capable of, the unknowing passion of those who still believe that they are forever. The music was beyond him. He was quick to assert that the long timeline of human artistry had been arranged simply to ensure the development of hip-hop, and it had perfected itself in the late 80's/early 90's; as far as he was concerned, anything else was not really worth

listening to, with the obvious exceptions being granted to Miles Davis, Billie Holiday, and Prince.

As he watched them dance he smiled, trying not to look shocked, and held Maria close to him, her beauty helping earn him a few points but still leaving him outside, both an accepted spectator and an awkward legend to be watched, admired, then ignored. Maria had left him standing there, after awhile, having given herself no limits as far as music was concerned, and deciding not to let his limits interrupt her god time. Watching her dance was, to him, as good as feeling the rhythm himself. Eventually, however, they dragged him onto the dance floor, and while Maria had gotten cheers he had been able to get a few grins, a few jokes, and no major insults, which was about the best that he been prepared to hope for. This was Maria's territory; the idea of taking charge at meetings and standing in front of strangers to speak was Maria's worst nightmare, but getting Jonas to loosen up and have fun in ways he never could on his own was easier than breathing.

Of course, when he spoke at the churches and community centers, when he dropped in on the bars and the storefront restaurants, when he brought flyers and notices to the bodegas and corner stores, it was as if he had become a totally different being on his way in the door—here he was “Young Brother.” Here he was “that nice boy from down the street,” or “that girl Adrienne's friend,” and sometimes just “Little Maria's sweetheart,” an unending variety of new names and callsigns that all served only to signal one thing—that he was a precocious child, a prodigy of sorts, not a minister but close enough, and they expected to feed on his energy. As the war—indeed, the wars—continues, we forget that not

everyone was for it, in the beginning. Black folks, for the most part, could get behind sending troops into Afghanistan, because we can understand revenge as a necessary ingredient in life; as James Brown put it, “you got to get ready/for the big payback...” But heading to Iraq never got over with us, we never saw it as anything worth dying for. The audiences Jonas spoke to were open and ready to hear. This sometimes surprised the suburban anti-war folks who thought of themselves as the “leaders” of the movement, the ease with which the message could get through. What they could never quite wrap their heads around was the fact that it wasn’t their message, and they were never the ones who could deliver it. In our neighborhood, Jonas could, if he was careful not to take too much credit for it.

This was the tight-rope that he walked before and during that rally—sometimes being a leader, always being a voice, yet constantly playing both teacher and student, giving away credit for every idea, hearing out every thought no matter how ridiculous, remaining patient and calm in the middle of each argument. I have always been amazed at how much effort and work is required in order to act as a peacemaker for a peace movement—the irony was not lost on him, either. But the rally had come off, somehow they had done it, The Bowl packed with people who had never been to a political rally before, the air heavy with music and the excited voices of the youth and the thick sad voices of their elders, as the aroma of incense and soul food laid out a rich welcome like a flowing red carpet. There is something special about that combination of scents, as if the earth let loose both her flesh and her breath, her body born of black-eyed peas and collard greens, the sweet touch of her breath flowing out like thick

smoke of frankincense.

Jonas stayed offstage, coordinating the speakers, feeding information to the MC's through a headset, roaming through the people and handling little problems that crept up like weeds, catching hold of them before they were able to blossom into drama and danger. As the rally was nearing its climax, he allowed himself to relax, to stand with Maria and simply take it in.

And the group had shocked him, in the end, by pulling him up to address the crowd, announcing him as the surprise keynote speaker. He covered it well, and only those of us who knew him could tell how touched he was. With a calm, elder statesman look he stepped onto the stage, joining the smiling faces that beamed out over the park. When he looked out into The Bowl, to the 200 or so neighbors shouting and rocking, swaying like the park grass in a breeze, he had felt, for the first time in his life the possibility of victory.

It wasn't something that he had felt on February 15th of that year, as part of millions protesting across the world, on every continent. He had spent that day standing on the back of a flatbed truck, Mcing the largest anti-war rally the city had ever seen, shouting as the truck slowly circled City Hall, 10,000 screaming people following its every move, answering his every yell, a call and response that echoed without restraint throughout the otherwise emptied streets of his city. He hadn't felt it in all those meetings or silent vigils or street actions; he hadn't felt it laying in bed, Maria's head on his shoulder, his eyes on the New York Times opened on his chest, or scrolling across the websites flowing down his computer screen like some unending ticker-tape of bad news that could only be replaced by worse news. It only came to him here, in his neighborhood, with people much

older and much younger looking to him, and doing what had seemed impossible only a few weeks before. He closed his eyes for an instant, caught his breath, and let it out.

“Cities in Iraq,” he began, “are being bombed in rubble. But I look around my city, our home,” (and here he paused, taking that quick moment to look at random people in the crowd, waiting for them to nod and begin to speak with him) “and I don’t see no bombs—but I sure do see a lot of rubble.” Again, that pause, the call and response catching up to him, the moment becoming a living, speaking thing. I was always amazed at the instant shift in his tone, his words, even his body language. It was like slipping on a favorite jacket, one that felt snug and perfectly set off your eyes—in a way, he was only himself when he was onstage.

“Ain’t no nukes in Philly—ain’t none in Iraq either—but both cities got people worryin bout comin home late at night. The war supposed to be over there but I still see a lot of bodies in the morgue ‘round here—with bullets all over them,” he said, voice rising to float out above them, echoing into the streets surrounding them.

“They only get on the news if they’re shocking enough, or young enough, or had enough of what the media decides was real potential. They don’t get they own rallies, only funerals, but we miss them, we love them, every one.”

Another pause, and on cue, they roared, each person pulled into the group, arms thrust upwards and faces reflecting that soaring feeling of movement, of joining, of accepting that someone was speaking for them, that Jonas was no longer merely an individual standing before them but transformed into another

appendage of the crowd itself, his voice was an echo of their own, and they stared at him and they opened their mouths and they heard his voice pouring through.

“They too busy in Harrisburg,” he said, “to listen to us. Right? Think that we ain’t nothing but trouble, this city, our city. All we good for is sending them inmates or infantry, throw a uniform on us and send us to hell to make them feel safe. But we ain’t your soldiers and we know who the damn criminals are. We’re livin, we’re breathin, and we ain’t fightin no one for you!”

This pushed the crowd to levels of noise I don’t think any of us expected, or believed ourselves capable of. State politics are always tricky but always reliable. In the capital in Harrisburg and in the open farm-filled expanses of the state Philadelphia was a great money-sucking heathen, a dangerous land of killers, corporations, and tax cheats. And here, in Philly, the capital was a far off, ignorant and corrupt body that counted on us for tax money and census bodies but delivered little in return.

“They want us to believe,” he said, “that us killin or dyin will make the world better. A better place. For who?”

“They make money off this war!” someone shouted, and he nodded, and let the crowd speak to itself for a moment. Then:

“This war,” he said, “is gonna shut down our cities. Gonna build new bases in Basra—ain’t gonna fund new schools in Philly. Build bombs to tear down streets in Baghdad, but we can’t drive down Washington Ave without tearing up a tire in some pothole that been there for the past five years.

“I know we angry. We got a right to be angry. 911 happened. It happened. And people died. We got a right to be angry. But let’s be smart angry.”

It is a strange thing to be moved by someone you are close to, who has borrowed money or forgotten to clean the toilet, or helped you clean up when you've gotten drunk all over yourself. When you know, without question or doubt, just how human they are. Usually when he or Adrienne were speaking I spent most of my time checking the crowd, looking to see what reaction they were getting, trying to come up with ideas to pass on later. But he had something that day, that moment, and even I forgot who he was, and just listened.

The words came from him, without plan or consideration, just speaking. He never thought about the different languages he spoke, all the different ways the English transformed into something else, something specific to his needs. An English for work, an English for the basketball court, an English for walking into church and one for the students and one for being on the mic.

As he spoke, he could spot the photographers, their cameras popping up out of the crowd like the heads of long-necked birds, the newscaster with her TV camera focused firmly on his every motion, and I know that in his mind he could already see what the photos of him would look like, what poses would get him onto the front page, how it would play for those seeking him out from the back of the crowd. Who knows, maybe the AP would pick it up. A thought: his father, sipping his morning coffee, leafing through his Star Ledger in the morning, to see this, his son, in front of the screaming horde, his name on their lips. Or: Maria out there in the mass of eyes, beaming up at him with love and ownership. Or even: the President being handed a briefing in some cavern beneath the White House, skimming through the pages, his glance catching on the image of Jonas with his mouth open in fury and eyes blazing in frozen indignation, until

President Bush would angrily mutter, “one of y’all better do omething’ ‘bout this high-yella bastard!”

Was this the kind of thing that Martin Luther King thought as he spoke? Or Gandhi? Were they as distracted by ego as I knew Jonas to be? I doubt it. And I could never prove it, one way or another. Jonas was not MLK, or Gandhi, or Malcolm—but they were not him either. I say this not to try to lift him to their level, or even (sacrilege!) above them. What I mean is that the child is both more, and less, than those that led to his birth, and he will chart a path they could never have imagined; this does not mean his path is right, or just, or even smart. But it is his own.

I tell you of his ego just to make clear that he was no saint, no selfless soldier giving his all for the cause with no thought of himself. No. That would not be him. But does it matter? No—what mattered was that he felt it, that he was held by it, by the full on possibility of it, the thought of seizing the world for even a moment, his moment, and he took that feeling and squeezed it, until he felt all of that pour out of him, letting the mic translate it all into words that others could hear, and it all just hung there in front of them and moved them, like the moon hovering over the ocean and dragging the tides in with calm certainty. He read no poetry or pre-written ideas and spoke without plan, he just pushed off and let the words lead him and the crowd held tightly to him and he held tight to the words and in the end, he brought them home.

“Out in Harrisburg, they wanna keep doing business as usual. And as usual, they think we got no business tellin’ them what to do. We been to D.C. and we will be back. We will be back. But we also stayin here, goin’ door to door,

block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood. City by city. State by state. We buildin', not bombing." He paused, measuring the crowd's response. When it felt soft, he repeated it, louder this time. "We buildin'. We're loud and we gonna get louder, a whole lot louder.

"But do they listen?"

This time, he got the boom he expected. His face was stone, like a black and white photo in an old history book, but inside, inside he was grinning the largest grin of his life.

I asked him once if he really thought that getting some little bill passed or a statement by the Governor would do much of anything. He said that people needed something to focus on, to fix their angry gaze on. Start with something small, something insignificant, like a camera in a full-on closeup, then pull back, gradually, show the details and particulars once you've gotten their attention. And he was good at getting attention.

"Well," he said, "it's time we told them once and for all, and make them hear us." Voice growing, lifting, as if he could hear the soundtrack a director would layer beneath it, and the sound of it dragged the crowd along for the ride. "It's time we told them, once and for all, that if they ain't gonna listen to us, ain't nobody gonna hear them. They bring our neighbors home, they shut down this war, they stop killin' in our name, or we shut their city down!

"We shut their whole fuckin' government down!"

And with that, he was done.

As he walked off the stage, the roar of the crowd draping over his shoulder

like the most elegant of hugs, the first person to greet him on the stairs was Adrienne, her thick arms pulling him into a firm and real embrace. Baxter was right behind her, hugging them both.

“You know,” she said, “we gonna have to do some crazy shit now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“C’mon,” she said, “seems like you just set our bar pretty high.”

He considered that.

“Yeah, guess you’re right.”

“Yeah,” said Baxter, “now we gonna have to live up to all that speechifying.”

Adrienne grinned up at Jonas with a relaxed acceptance, and he could only shrug, and nod. He glanced over her shoulder at the people advancing to meet him.

“Do me one favor,” he said, quickly.

“Don’t worry,” she said, releasing him, “I ain’t telling Maria shit.”

“He no,” said Baxter, “we ain’t getting’ in the middle of that.”

Jonas laughed with them.

Now the park lay quiet, as if resting from the work it had put in the last few weeks. The Bowl sat empty and motionless, as if it had already forgotten he had ever been there. The birds did their thing, fluttering from tree to tree, chasing each other amid the leaves, but nothing else seemed to move. A trolley somewhere in the dark stormed past, banging along on its tracks. Jonas stood, and pulled out his tobacco. No more time left to waste; the moment had come. He walked up the side of The Bowl and out to the street.

The 11 o’clock news had shown him, just a flash of a body onstage without

a name, in its swift 15-second recap of the rally. He hadn't made the front page, in fact there had been no picture to go along with the story wedged between the notes from the latest City Council meeting and a report-back from a visit a State Senator had made to a local community center. The downtown rally of 3,000 had earned an average of 30 seconds of airtime on each of the local news stations, an exchange rate of about a second per 100 people; the rally in The Bowl should therefore have netted a grand total of 2 seconds of airtime, for fairness. His only recourse was to tell himself that he didn't care; I think he almost believed it.

Jonas moved quickly out of the park, without looking back. Rolled a cigarette. Realized instantly that he had never found his lighter. No matter. Adrienne would have a light—she always did. He looked ahead to the coffeehouse about a block away, and he could see a faint red glow holding steady, and Jonas knew that she was already waiting for him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

To Get In The Right Mood

*“Since I can’t go
where I need
to go...then I must...go
where the signs point”*

Nikki Giovanni

It was still dark out. The sun hid behind a solid grey wall of cloud, as if lazy and uninterested in the world beneath it. They leaned in, over their bagels. The steam from the coffee rose and tickled her cheeks, and she watched Jonas as it clung to his glasses. She watched him as he paused, momentarily blind, to wait for the world to clear. When it did, he leaned even closer in and sipped from his cup, enough so he could lift it without spilling. Like her, he had forgotten to get a lid.

Adrienne made a mental note to grab one and some napkins when she left, though there was always the possibility that she would be too anxious to bring the coffee with her. Jumbled nerves and caffeine are questionable allies at best, and she knew better than to stretch their relationship any further than she needed to. For now, she needed to drink, but once they left—but there was no reason to think about that, not yet. Better to make coffee plans and to keep nibbling at this

bagel. Garlic, toasted, with butter. Breakfast of Champions. Wrapped her fingers tightly around the cup. Glanced over at Jonas. He was staring intently into the coffee; Adrienne didn't know what it was he was seeking but he seemed determined to find it, within the calm black liquid.

She almost smiled. Not quite, but almost, a touch. Back to the coffee. They both gripped their cups as if some unknown and evil enemy was sneaking up behind them to rip the coffee from their hands and run off, giggling fiendishly.

Jonas looked up, studying her. She could always tell when he was looking, or anyone else for that matter; she never had any trouble knowing where the eyes were coming from, and she always knew the eyes were coming.

There was a game we used to do, when we were younger. I would let Adrienne into a room, give her a moment to look around, then send her out for a few minutes. While she was gone I'd go through the room, as carefully as possible, and find one thing, just one, one small insignificant thing, like a pencil or the placement of a book or how much water was in a glass sitting next to 3 others on a table, and change it. Then I'd let her in. She was only allowed to look forward, or into her lap, or something else close centered and constant; otherwise it'd be too easy for her. More often than not, she figured it out quickly, even when I cheated and switched 2 or 3 things.

So, Jonas studied her, and she knew it, without looking, and he was fully aware she knew, because he knew her. When she still didn't acknowledge him Jonas nudged Adrienne, gently, with his foot. He was always needling her, pushing, probing. And she was always frowning, snarling, pushing back. Jonas, in his heart, was always a little brother, and Adrienne was everyone's big sister.

She tried to ignore him this time, and he responded but nudging her again, more firmly. She growled, quietly, and didn't look up. She hadn't gotten deep enough into her coffee to be playful yet, but Jonas was aware, as I always was, that she remained, under her glare and strong hunched shoulders, essentially good-spirited and cheerful.

"I should have woken Maria," he said, more a mumble aimed at his coffee than a sentence.

"What?"

"I should have woken Maria."

"Why would you do that?" she said.

"Because she asked me to," he said.

Adrienne considered that, silently. That was something Maria would ask, and something Jonas would never do. Despite her big sister nature she made a point to never interfere in her friends' relationships, unless they asked. I have a feeling that both Maria and Jonas requested help or advice more than either of them would have admitted to. This comment from Jonas was not a complaint, or idle conversation, or even an "oops, I forgot."

Sipping from her cup, Adrienne nodded, with a serious look on her face.

"Yeah," she said, "you should have woken her up."

He didn't answer. Turned his face from her.

"Jonas," she said, "you owed her at least that."

He sighed, loudly. Did not look at her. Put his head down. Rested his chin on his hands. Eyes searched around for something to distract himself with. They were the same age, Jonas and Adrienne, yet sometimes, sometimes, no, they

weren't.

The coffee house was startling busy, bubbling with small conversations and morning people. She wasn't sure what time it opened, but there always seemed to be someone in it. I've never seen it without at least two skinny, black clad hipsters with awkward haircuts and bored attitudes sipping coffee, perched in seats by the window. Maybe they never close. Maybe it's like an all-night coffee club or something, you need to know the special knock to get in after 11, to show that you are with the "in-crowd." That's why you never see hipsters at Dunkin' Donuts anymore, they're all here being ironic and post-everything while everyone else sleeps. Do hipsters sleep anymore? Or is being caught up in the body so '90's?

Adrienne stood, stretched, reaching for the ceiling, and got caught up in the flow of blood rushing to the far corners of her form, tingling fingers and a slowly awakening back. She ran her palm over her head, freshly shaved, and down her neck, to the muscles gathering there. There was little she could do. Just going to have to deal with being tense today; there was no getting around it.

"You think this is gonna work?" Jonas asked.

She didn't answer. Jonas watched her, but her eyes only looked at the floor.

"Adrienne?"

"Jonas," she said, "we do what we do. It works, or it doesn't. We survive, or we don't. Why? You having second thoughts?"

"Of course," he said, and he was laughing.

"Hmph," she said.

He blew on his coffee and smiled at her. She could see the edges of his smile hovering there as he leaned down and nibbled from his bagel.

“We’re gonna have to keep doing this shit,” he said, and she wasn’t quite certain what to call it, what she caught on the tone of his voice, not fear, not exactly. But it wasn’t quite not-fear, either. Her eyes slipped up, to meet his.

“Yeah,” she said, “more. Bigger. Much, much bigger.”

“More dangerous.”

“Yes. More. Just...more. More everything.”

“How many? More of us, I mean.”

“Well,” she said, “how long you think this war is gonna last?”

Now it was his turn to stare at the floor. She could almost see the bagel turn to wood in his mouth. Took a sip of coffee to help it go down then lifted his eyes to hers.

“I thought we just did what we did.”

“Didn’t ask you about us.”

“Adrienne,” he said, “war never ends. Maybe it takes a break here or there, but it never ends.”

“Man,” she said, turning back to her coffee, “it’s too early for you to get all deep and shit.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You supposed to say ‘A couple of months, Adrienne, tops.’”

“A couple of months, Adrienne, tops.”

“That’s more like it.”

“I have to hit the john,” he said, heading off with a smile.

At the table next to her, a well-dressed couple in their forties quietly sipped cappuccinos and spoke to each other in subdued, almost inaudible tones. They glanced towards her, catching little views of her like rapid shutter snapshots, a flicker of eyes, a flutter. Here. Then gone. And again.

She shifted in her seat, putting her back to them. It wouldn't stop their looking, and it's not like she could stop herself from knowing they were looking. But at least she wouldn't have to see it.

A coffeehouse is a fairly obvious thing. A place, where they have coffee. Other drinks. Some snacks, baked goods, maybe a few sandwiches. Music playing. A little art on the walls. You sit. Bring a book, or a computer, a newspaper, something. You bring a friend, or just hope to make one. And in the end, all of it, the food and coffee and ice cold drinks and double chocolate cookies and mint teas, the books brought in, the music playing so softly or way too loudly, it all adds up into a new thing we, for lack of any more specific word, call atmosphere. And all of us, upon crossing through the door of a new coffeehouse, can take in a deep breath and sense in milliseconds whether or not this unfamiliar atmosphere is capable of sustaining life as we know it.

This was not a business designed with Adrienne in mind.

"Everything alright?" Jonas asked, as he sat back down.

"I hate this place," she said quietly.

"What?" he said, mostly to distract her from his eyes darting around for a threat. She let him look without comment. When his attention came back to her she tilted her head just a touch towards the couple at the next table. As expected he turned towards them, and she caught the man shifting guiltily and sliding his

eyes down to his cup. There was an inexplicable fury in her, a rage that fed on eyes, stares, glances, moments of observation. She held onto it, placing it onto a stack of slights and angers that she kept like a running tally in her mind, a scorecard that she doubted would ever be made equal but that she needed to be remembered, just in case.

“I hate this fucking place,” she repeated, more firmly this time, and sat back in her chair. Her thick arms flexed, just a touch, and her newly healed and freshly exposed tattoo of two women entwined together rolled across her Black skin, like an elegant and forbidden dance that for some unknown reason was being performed out in the open.

“Keep it down,” said Jonas, his voice booming across the coffeehouse, “We still have plans to make.”

For a moment she thought he’d lost his mind.

“LaKeesha,” he said, and she realized he was using his stage voice, turning a whisper into a deep, echoing call, “LaKeesha, yo, we gotta finish planning this robbery, girl. You sure they ain’t gonna be home and shit? Cuz I ain’t goin’ back to the join’, nah’mean?”

The man spilled his coffee onto his lap. Next to him the woman never noticed, as she was too busy trying to stare and yet not-stare, achieving neither, leaving her stuck in a sort of robotic loop, away back away back.

“Adrienne,” Jonas said, and she could hear the giggle hidden in his normal whisper, “you ever given any thought to decaf?”

She knew she had lost but still she turned her glare towards him.

“Don’t you start,” she said. Her voice, deeper and more melodic than ours,

always found a way to make every sentence seem important and ancient. I can see her sitting there, stubborn, with her arms crossed and spread out, a pose at once both hostile and defiant yet endearingly childish at the same time. And Jonas, with no reaction but a smile, and to that she could only frown harder.

“I mean it,” she said, “I fucking hate this place. Don’t know why we come here.”

“Well, for one thing, it’s the only one open.”

“Idiot,” she said.

“You hate this place,” he said. It was not a question.

“Yes.”

“And I hate it too?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“You don’t like being here.”

“Make your point,” she said.

“You don’t like it. I don’t like it. We even hate it. Makes both of us wanna, I don’t know, smash things. Right?”

“Exactly.”

“Well,” he said, with confidence, “that’s why we came here this morning.”

“What?”

“To get in the right mood.”

She looked at him, and a slight smile danced lightly on her lips. She fought it off, in fact she was quite certain that only a few people would have even noticed it, but Jonas, of course, grinned, victorious.

“You so stupid,” she said, shaking her head, and relaxing, just a little.

“Yeah,” he said, “but I’m still right.”

They sipped from their coffee, feeling slightly comforted, and waited for everyone else to arrive.

Keith was the first to join them. His bushy white hair was unbrushed and wild, and he flicked his fingers through it, absently. His grin when he saw them was a huge and living thing, taking control of his face and spreading over to theirs. When they hugged, he smelled to them like a beautiful combination of baby powder and sawdust, of grandchildren and working with his hands. He was much taller than either of them, and still large, despite his age, and his body felt firm and steady.

“Well,” Keith said, his voice thick and proud, “how are you rookies feeling today?” His eyes studied them, in a way that made them sit back, straighter, like soldiers being inspected by a legendary general. Which, to be honest, was kind of true. Jonas pulled a chair over, and gestured for Keith to sit.

“We ain’t rookies,” said Adrienne.

“No,” Keith said, “no, you’re not.”

“We’re legends,” said Jonas. “Keith, you think this is gonna work?”

Keith didn’t respond to that. No. Instead: took both of them by the hand and sat there, without speaking, looking from one to the other. And just like that, the moment that they had both been holding off hit them, in its entirety and wonder, and they grabbed his hands roughly, almost painfully, and he held them, close, with only his fingers.

Adrienne reached out and took Jonas’ other hand in hers. She stared down at their fingers, in a pile on the table, like a bundle of strings jammed into a

drawer and pulled out when needed. Keith's fingers, thick, almost brutal, proud grandfather hands, rough, a farmer's child despite many years in the city, the color a firm white-pink. Jonas', long and tapered, untouched, laying out like the first steps of a journey, that soft wood brown in tone, his jumbled heritage blended elegantly on his flesh if not in his soul. And her own, coal black, nails bitten, dishwasher poet hands, an intricate tale of sorrows and survivals spread out in stubby, grabbing fingers, their history and destiny still unwritten and waiting. She held their hands, firmly, and felt her life being carried in that fierce, combined grip.

"You think this is gonna work?" Jonas repeated.

"That really depends on what your definition of 'work' is."

"Did you just get all Bill Clinton on us, Keith?" said Adrienne.

"Hey," said a voice, "is this some private love-in or can anyone join?"

They turned and Baxter stood before them, grinning ferociously, and Keith reached up and pulled him to them, and they all held onto him, some sort of ritual laying of hands, each of them squeezing him until finally he laughed, giving up any attempt to keep his macho dignity in place.

They let him go. On his face one quick, fleeting smile passed. Then: serious. He waited for them to quiet down.

"The truck's in the parking lot," Baxter said, with a quick look at his watch. "It's time to go."

They glanced at each other, tiny momentary connections, then rose as one. Ready. Heading for the door. Adrienne paused, only for a second, to take one last sip from her cup, then tossed it into the trash, and walked out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

What Grew Within Him

*"I get a craving like a fiend for nicotine
But I don't need a cigarette—know what I mean?"*

Rakim

Baxter shifted down, and revved the engine, for no noticeable reason other than the fact that he obviously loved the sound. Jonas smiled and leaned his head to the open window so the wind could run across his face and drag tears from his eyes. The truck rumbled and rolled, every pebble or crack on the road sending ripples up into the cabin where they sat, bouncing and bumping, riding the street the way Baxter rode his surfboard in the summer. Baxter grinned, and there was such a effortless happiness in his face that all Jonas could do was grin back. Baxter pointed at a plastic bag at their feet. Jonas opened it. It held several CD's; they were mostly the yelling and screaming bands that Baxter favored, but with a few unexpected choices hidden among them. He took out an Ella Fitzgerald and slipped it into the truck's CD player.

"Ah," said Baxter, "good choice."

"Seemed like good morning music."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," said Jonas. "Hard to be grouchy when she's letting loose."

“Don’t worry ‘bout me,” sang Baxter, “I’ll get along...”

This was sung with a surprisingly good bass, and his voice complimented the song perfectly. He snuck a glance over at Jonas, a tiny smile poking around his face. Jonas smiled back at him.

As Baxter drove he quickly ran a hand over his thick blonde hair, hair that was in clean and thin well-kept dreadlocks, swept back from his head; his hand touching that hair was mostly unnecessary as the locks stayed gently in place and refused to move even in the strongest wind. Then, never taking his eyes from the road, knees on the wheel, he pulled out his tobacco and rolled a cigarette for himself, and one for Jonas; as he had himself taught Jonas how to roll, he still looked at Jonas as someone in training, and insisted on doing the rolling whenever Jonas was in a car with him. He rolled them with one hand, hidden in the pouch on his lap, and as always it was tighter yet smoother than anything Jonas could put together with his utmost concentration.

Jonas never worried when sitting in any vehicle driven by Baxter, regardless of any hair maintenance, Zen cigarette construction, or other distractions. No one ever worried when Baxter was behind the wheel. The man possessed the ability to form an almost instantaneous and permanent bond with any car, truck or motorcycle he came in contact with; I’m pretty certain that Baxter didn’t so much drive or steer as he seemed to come to some sort of mutual decision on a destination with the vehicle and then just sat back and trusted in the relationship to get them there. He gripped the wheel loosely, with his fingertips, almost like a postmodern reincarnation of James Dean, with thick, tanned arms, sticking out from a clean white T-shirt, his customary leather jacket

hanging over his seat. His body was coated in scars, and his soft features were hidden by piercings in his eyebrow, lip, and nose, yet it was hard to see him and not instantly know him for the gentle soul that he was.

His parents were furious that he was “wasting” his time working as a mechanic. Baxter was someone who had been the valedictorian of everything he tried; in kindergarten it was clear that he’d ace every class he entered, without ever being bothered to study hard, and that he would collect a long list of extracurriculars so impressive that staring at them for longer than a few seconds would leave you dizzy and somewhat ashamed of the life you’d led. College and law school in record time with near-record grades, sailed past the bar, space prepared for him in the family’s firm, timeline to the partnership lined up, and...nothing. The world will wait he told them. No, it won’t they told him, and no money’s coming. Oh well he said, and got a tiny apartment in a bad neighborhood, took the first job he could find, and found himself, to their eternal horror and disgust, to be completely and unexpectedly happy.

They told him they would wait, but not that long.

It was good to be moving; you can’t really be waiting, once you’ve started moving. Outside, the city fell away from them, like a dog running after the car and slowly slipping behind. The last sounds of the city were already fading, and heading into the past. The sun remained in hiding and the sky was stranded in that middle ground between light and dark, stretching out those final moments from last night to this morning as far as it could.

Sitting in the passenger seat as the mix of trees and blacktop flowed past always made Jonas feel like a kid. Long trips, especially, brought him back to his

childhood, and to those long cramped days, stuck in the backseat as they had all piled into the car to visit far off uncles, or on month long vacations each summer. As he sat with Baxter in the truck, the view wasn't any different than what he had seen every day as a boy in New Jersey. At times he felt as if his past was caught on the sole of his shoe, or snagged on a button on his sleeve, and as much as he liked to think he had shrugged it off he wound up carrying it along everywhere he went. Jonas didn't like to think too deeply on what had flowed past in making him who he was; he preferred to simply act, as himself, and to leave his words, his poems, behind him as explanation. He never liked to talk about what had brought him to Philly, what had led him into our circle; the few stories he told we all held onto, tightly, like breadcrumbs littered gently behind him, a path that he chose never to follow but that fascinated the rest of us.

For no real reason he could define he was certain that someday there would be people—not just friends—who would seek out an explanation, for him, for his life, for his choices. This was why every scribbled poem, every scratched out note, every printed page of every draft (whether he intended to finish it or not) was named, numbered, and filed in a cabinet in his room. He didn't know if it mattered, to himself, to the world, to anyone—but he wasn't going to take any chances.

There was something welcoming in Baxter's quiet presence, something that reminded Jonas of his father. Neither of them spoke much, but they were both those rare people who truly love to listen, and in their silence they were much deeper thinkers than most folks gave them credit for. Baxter had joined

their crew, quite literally, by accident. Keith and Adrienne had been on their way to speak at a police brutality protest about a half hour out of Philly when their car had stalled and they had been forced to pull over. They were trying to call AAA but found that, as luck would have it, they had pulled to an area of the highway where they were unable to get a signal. As Adrienne was preparing to walk off in search of a signal Baxter, on his way home from the garage where he worked, spotted them on the side of the road. Without really thinking about it Baxter pulled off to help. He grabbed tools from his trunk and quickly and gleefully fixed their car, moving with obvious expertise and not bothering to explain his actions, as it was clear neither of them would have been able to follow him anyway. As he set to work, he asked where they were heading, and Keith told him. He kept listening so Keith kept talking and in the end when their car was mobile Adrienne asked if he would like to follow and go with them. They weren't all that surprised when he agreed, and later Adrienne, reading a poem from the small stage, caught his eye and they held each other's gaze, for a moment, and without any other words being spoken that was it, he was in: first a friend, then a comrade, and now, family. That had been two years ago, and Jonas could no longer the number of times he had sat in the passenger seat as Baxter and whatever vehicle they were in steered them safely to and from a meeting, a rally, or a protest.

"Adrienne's driving," said Jonas.

"How can you tell?"

"They start to pull away, then slow down. See? You know she always want to speed. That's Keith reminding her that we're behind them."

"I should have gotten a bagel," said Baxter.

“Here,” said Jonas, pulling out the mango. He set the bag down between them, and they reached in cheerfully to grab slices and chew them slowly and quietly.

“I can keep up,” said Baxter, swallowing.

“No doubt,” said Jonas.

“Their car can’t go that fast,” said Baxter, flicking an ash out his window, “I’ve driven it.”

“True,” said Jonas, grabbing a slice, “but a boring blue-ish sedan speeding along wouldn’t even get noticed, while a Ryder truck might.”

“Also true,” said Baxter.

“We set up our time well,” said Jonas, “we got no reason to take chances we don’t need to.”

Baxter nodded. He hummed along with the music that filled the cab, scatting beside Ella in an eerie, almost echoing fashion. From under his seat he produced an ugly and battered thermos, wearing a thick coat of stickers and scratches from long and frequent use. It was ancient, made from solid plastic when plastic was still a new and exciting material, and the lime green color was more a reflection of its times than any kind of aesthetic statement. It had belonged to Keith, and had been on the sidelines of more intense confrontations and major moments than the rest of them could dream of, and Keith had now passed it on to them; it was a sign of safety and responsibility. Whoever had the task of filling the thermos and bringing it along was also the one who was tasked with organizing bail money, speaking with the press, and keeping in contact with lawyers after an action; the glamorous, yelling roles of being in front of the

cameras or challenging police lines would always find volunteers but Keith made certain they were all aware that without someone holding the thermos and all that it meant, no one could act freely. Baxter handed the thermos to Jonas, who took off the cap, screwed off the lid, and poured a cup into the cap. Drank it, quickly, his body throbbing with the heat of it. Refilled it. Handed the cap to Baxter.

“Wow,” said Jonas, “you make strong coffee.”

Baxter glanced at him. “Sorry,” he said, “I’ve always been a tea person.”

“Someday,” Jonas said, “you’ll realize that I was giving you a compliment.”

Baxter laughed, and sipped his coffee.

They spent most of the ride in a comfortable, friendly silence, both of them with images of the upcoming day streaming through their minds, like bootlegs of a movie not yet released. Jonas watched the sun slowly begin to peek up over the tops of the trees lining the highway, as if clinging to the edges of its own bed, Ella Fitzgerald providing a glorious and elegant soundtrack to the films playing in their imagination, and the one gradually unfurling itself within the sky. What did Jonas feel, sitting there, as he went to become himself, to be the person he had seen himself as but that no one else knew yet? What grew within him, what energy rose alongside the sun, what reached up from his stomach to stretch increasingly long and cold fingers throughout his body? I imagine him as a Jonas-shaped bottle, intricately made, ancient and permanent, yet so fragile, slowly filling as a mixture of fear and excitement cautiously poured into him. And yet—he pushed it down. Separated it from himself. I can see him, the appearance of leaning back, relaxed in his seat. I can feel his mind as it tried to

think of clever ways of looking at his feelings, ways that could enable him to deny that he was scared, that his own fingers were gripping the edge of his seat so tightly he thought they might never let go. It wasn't important if he could convince himself or not, just as long as he could keep it all outside of himself, away from his thoughts and his now. If he could hold it off forever, this moment might never end, the fear could never claim him, or even be seen, especially not by his own eyes.

The air ran up against the windows, like a greeting. Jonas saw that the signs were now saying Harrisburg was only five miles off. There it is. There was nothing left to it. In a minute or so they would pull off, and everything would begin. The sun came with them, poking out shy and uncertain between the still thickening clouds. It peeked out over the signs that marked the road. Jonas couldn't quite make out the letters on those signs, but he didn't need to. There was his future being spelled out on ten-foot long highway signs for the world to read. It was almost time.

The cell phone rang, on Jonas' lap. He picked it up. Flipped it open. Answered.

"Pull over," said Keith, "we appear to have a problem."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

They're Still Talking About It

*"Bored as hell
and I wanna get ill..."*

Eazy E

They were pulled off, to the side of the highway. Cars sat beside them, inching along, and they rested on the railing along the shoulder, and talked. Adrienne was on the phone and didn't speak, only listened. She was talking with close friend of Keith's who lived in the area. Keith and Baxter had driven up to visit this friend a few times, getting a grip on the shape and flow of the city, asking casually thorough questions while volunteering no answers. This friend had no idea what the group was planning, though she might have been able to make a fairly good guess or two. She had agreed to give a report on what the city looked like when they got close on the day of the protest, and she was quite content to help without having to know exactly what it was that she was helping. Jonas was eating from the beans and rice Maria had packed for him, passing the container around from time to time, all of them nervously eating, mostly just because the food tasted good and gave them something to do besides waiting.

"Doesn't look good," said Keith.

"No?" said Baxter.

“No.”

“Well,” said Jonas, “it does look like the cops are doing our work for us. Traffic’s backed up like crazy.”

“Funny,” said Baxter, “cops never do things for us.”

“This is crazy,” said Adrienne, handing the phone to Keith.

“How long is it like this?” said Jonas.

“Dunno,” said Baxter, “but you saw: soon as we turned off everything stopped.”

“City’s shut down,” said Adrienne, “nothing in, nothing out.” Looking at the frozen sea of cars that lay out on all sides, she sighed. “Lotta people,” she said.

“True,” said Baxter, “true.” He glanced at the back of the truck. He took his tobacco out and quickly rolled three cigarettes, passing one out to Jonas and to Adrienne. He lit them, then snapped his lighter shut and slid it back into its holster along his belt; he thought for a moment, then pulled his lighter back out and handed it to Jonas.

“Don’t lose it,” he said.

“How’d you know I needed one?”

“You always need one,” said Adrienne.

“Better turnout,” said Baxter, through a mouth leaking smoke, “then anyone predicted.”

“Our gang make it in?” asked Jonas.

“Called a few minutes ago, checking in,” said Adrienne. “Right on schedule.”

“Philly’s in the house,” said Jonas, with a grin. He was surprised to find

just how pleased and proud the thought of the buses from Philly made him; one of them was made up entirely of the folks he had organized the rally with.

“Maybe we shoulda been with them,” Adrienne said.

“No,” said Jonas. “Let it go. Let them go.”

“No,” said Baxter, agreeing. “We got good people there. They’ll handle it. We got other duties.”

“Yeah,” said Jonas. “Or we did, anyway. We coulda done some damage with this.” He slapped the back of the truck, the sound thick and muffled, and he looked at the other two. They didn’t speak, only looked into his eyes and nodded calmly.

Sitting in the truck were three barrels. It had taken hours of sweaty and tough work to prepare the barrels; Adrienne and Jonas had labored with Baxter, late at night, after everyone else had left the garage where he worked. He had a key, and locked up at night, then reopened for them to come in. Baxter kept the barrels under a tarp in the corner, and no one bothered to look under it; they knew it was something Baxter was doing, so they left it at that, and just assumed that if for some reason they suddenly needed to know, he’d tell them. The barrels were regular size, like trash cans, rusty metal, and very old. They had cut two holes in each, and slid a thick plastic tube through the hole. Placed a long strip of rebar, straight down and piercing the tube; then poured in concrete. When it dried, they were done.

Once in place, the barrels would be extremely difficult to move. The plan was for Adrienne and Jonas to reach inside the tubes and lock themselves, with handcuffs, to the rebar. Locked in, they could not be moved or removed until

they unlocked themselves, or special equipment was brought in to carefully cut through the barrels without killing them. They had picked out a spot on the highway that would have blocked off the entrance ramp, and kept everyone out. This was, as they say, a direct action, a specific political act where the value comes more from the political and media fallout than the actual at-the-moment impact.

From what I understand, and I am no expert, the strategy of direct action is based on two assumptions about human nature, assumptions I always questioned—but activists throughout time seemed to hang onto them like gospel. The first assumption is that police officers, politicians, corporations, and the like would rather not hurt someone, especially someone who deliberately places themselves under their control. It works like this: if you tried to prevent me from building a giant wall around my lawn and got confrontational about it, I might not hesitate to kick you in the face; indeed, if I did, I would probably feel like a hero. But, if you willingly lay down in front of my foot to protect that lawn, I would feel like an ass if I pulled back my foot and let it go.

The second assumption is that the media, and the public in general, would raise hell if they saw me kick you while you were intentionally down. We don't generally mind our authority figures acting like jerks—we just don't want to see it so brutally in our face.

I argued with Jonas about this; I thought it was pretty naïve, and surprisingly old fashioned, appealing to the better nature of some people with basically ugly natures. We were just talking in general, not about this specific plan they had—I might have been a friend but that plan was on a need to know

basis and at that point I had no need to know.

“You have no faith in these people,” I said to him, “but you believe that they won’t kill you. They rule the world, but they don’t want anyone to see them fuck you up.”

“It’s not quite that simple,” he said, laughing. He had a great laugh—not too big, or one of those laughs that took over the room. He didn’t laugh all that much, but when he did people noticed—just a plain, happy laugh, one where you could tell he meant it.

“It’s like Monty Python,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Like in *Life of Brian*, when they send in the crack suicide squad. Brian gets excited, thinking they’re going to rescue him. Then the suicide squad comes up, pulls out their swords—and promptly kill themselves. As they die, they say, ‘That’ll show them!’ And with that, the crack suicide squad is gone.”

“Well,” Jonas said, with a chuckle, “their name really should have given it away. But that’s not exactly right.”

“It’s not?”

“No. Most people, most Americans, we don’t really know what it takes to make the world, you know? We really don’t want to know. Because then we’d have to think about the cost. The true cost, not just the dollars in our pocket. We don’t think about it. Meat just shows up at the store. Gas shows up at the station. Money in the bank. Check’s in the mail. When we show them the cost, things change.”

“So,” I said, “that’s it? Show them the cost and everything changes.”

“Did I say everything?”

“No,” I said.

“Well,” he said, grinning, “good, because that’s not it. Usually, the best we can hope for is that there’s some change in that one specific issue you’re trying to address.”

“And? So what?”

“What do you mean?” he said.

“I mean, come on?” I said. “What does it prove? How much good does a little change do? Is it worth it?”

Jonas considered that for a moment. Then he calmly pulled out a wrinkled photocopy of a page from the New York Times; he carried it in his wallet, everyday, tucked behind a picture of Maria. He handed it to me, and I opened it up. It was that famous picture of the young man standing in the path of Chinese tanks from Tiananmen Square; he had, like so many college students of our generation, had the requisite poster of the photo on his dorm wall. Somehow, the smaller picture seemed to carry a heavier weight, to show more in its tightly enclosed space.

“You still carry this around with you?” I asked him.

“Every day.”

“That’s a little weird. Don’t you think?”

“Probably,” he said, with a shrug.

“So you carry this. But what good is it?” I said. “What good did that action do? The government is still there. What did it prove?”

“We’re still talking about it now. People will talk about it for as long as

people talk.” This statement was made as if it alone won the argument for him.

“People are talking about it.”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“And,” he said, “people like me get inspired when we see it. We don’t feel alone. We believe. We act.”

“And it’s worth it?”

“Of course.”

“Even if he died?”

“That’s pretty grim, man.”

“Grim world.”

Jonas said nothing.

“Hey,” I said, “no one knows what happened to that dude, right? Not to be crude or whatever, but no one knows, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, is it still worth it if they killed him?”

He didn’t say anything right away. At the time I thought he was taking his a moment to think it over, but looking back I don’t think that was it. I’m certain he knew what he wanted to say; I think he just needed to allow himself to say it.

“We’re still talking about it,” he said softly, “so, yeah, it’s worth it.”

This is the world that he lived in, the reality that he walked through, the arena of dreamers and doers, believers and cynics; I can only guess at just what it was that sent him out on those way too early mornings to raise hell against the forces of hell, as he saw them. He was no selfless fanatic, I don’t mean that; he

was driven, no doubt about it, but he never seemed to judge anyone else for not joining him, and he was fully aware that the desire to be seen doing these actions was a part of his motivation. But he was mostly a good-natured and relaxed guy, which stood out, for someone with strong politics like his. Our image of someone willing to act so intensely for what they believe doesn't include a sense of humor and the ability to question themselves; I'm fairly certain that Dick Cheney and Osama Bin Laden don't giggle at their own actions very often, and they both are likely to get pretty grumpy if you question their way of life. But that wasn't Jonas' way.

So, here they were, miles from home, a perfect plan lying in ruins at their feet, and a rally to attend. Well. If they couldn't risk their lives by shutting down access to the city, they could at least seek out comfort in the company of others who felt like they did. That had been my plan from the beginning, in fact I would have been excited to see them join me in the crowd—but as I think has already been established, they saw things differently than I did.

As far as I know, there are no official rulebooks for situations like this, and they had no Plan B prepared. As they were discussing what to do, they watched the procession steadily streaming into the city, a joyous and celebratory long line gathering to protest and proclaim their humanity. Who was it? Hippies, college students, moms with strollers, guys with beards and guitars, Black folks looking like they just exited church, eager hip hop heads finally with a real reason to scowl, White kids with dreadlocks and earnest expressions (men and women), the pierced, the scrawny and scruffy, the organized and uniformed angry anarchists in black, teenagers, grandmothers, faces buried beneath signs, voices

in one long chant scream shout shriek plea, all heading into the city, a loud and raucous collection of the great unwashed rolling inwards, cars left who knows where, with eager and persistent communists socialists and just about every other ist trailing in their wake and hawking newspapers and other publications of every possible denomination and ideology. These were the forces of The Revolution, these were the people who believed they could change the world, heading gleefully and hopefully to their destiny. I cannot imagine Jonas' face at this moment; nothing embarrassed him quite like realizing just who it was he aligned himself with when he claimed membership in the anti-war movement.

Something had to be done. What was to be done couldn't be done, but Something had to be done. Something with a capital S. So, it was settled: Baxter would take the truck to Keith's friend's house to park. Keith got on the phone and pulled a few strings and called in a favor or two and was able to get Adrienne a chance to speak in the rally. Keith headed straight for the stage, for that behind the scenes give and take that remains invisible but forms up so much of what is actually seen at any event this size. Adrienne took her time walking, strolling in carefully, gathering her thoughts, planning what to say, keeping an eye on the gathering crowd, trying to determine what could reach them, or, failing that, anger them.

And Jonas?

He kept her company.

Was it too much of a step down? Is that what caused it all? To go from main event big fish in the pond—the surprise focus of attention—to nothing, a hanger-on, a groupie to his best friend, is this what pushed him to act, to do

something, to do something, anything? Was it the echoes of the “I think we know what they need,” the aftershocks of seeing power seized from his hands and turned against those who we were all supposed to be supporting? When I talked to him later or watched him in those unending string of interviews and especially when he was on the witness stand, he allowed very little time for introspection and any kind of inner focus; he always seemed able to shift the discussion onto the war, onto the protest and the acts of dissension. I had to respect it, in the end. It was like trying to beat a chess master, with the same results; you wait your turn to try out your best moves, you put all of your planning and energy into the perfect attack, and then, at the moment you think you have him, you find yourself with no choice but to smile in appreciation as he smirks and with one quick move leaves you staring at your own impending defeat. I think this boiled down simply to the fact that he didn’t want to know what was going on inside him, as thoughts bubbled up and rolled out—he’d rather think that there was some unseen hand guiding him on, pointing him onto his future path with a proud and expectant air.

So: on they went. Staying free of the chants and shouted slogans, politely pushing aside offered signs, and not so politely shoving aside the propaganda for sale, they made their way into the city, to the main street where the Capital building stood, patiently waiting. The crowd, growing, spreading, seemed to suck into itself, like someone excitedly drawing a deep breath before a scream. Yet the feeling was more of a celebration than a rebellion, with stern marshals with red armbands guiding everyone along a preset and perfectly orchestrated path. The fact that the city had seemed to step back and closed things off on their own, before the protestors even arrived, created some of the more entrepreneurial

restaurants had spruced up their outdoor sections, or, rather, had spruced down their outdoor sections, emphasizing their local color and down-home charm to draw in the money of the visiting horde, if not their actual presence. Along the path cops in uniform and in suits chatted with the people as they went, enjoying the parade as it passed them. A group of women in their 20's, dressed as cheerleaders but with garish makeup and with a variety and splendor of form that no high-school cheerleading crew would allow, sprinted through the crowd, stopping occasionally to perform an elaborate cheer to encourage their fellow rally attendees; at the end of each performance, the police and protestors cheered and laughed together.

What was Jonas thinking? What was I thinking? I remember arriving on a bus with other people from Philly, being relieved that there was so little tension, that despite my worries there was no Bull Conner-like sheriff standing firm before us, arms crossed and baton ready, waiting for just the right second to give the order to charge; the city seemed willing to let the show go on, and to sit back and enjoy it while it lasted. Indeed, it seemed like they viewed it as a solid business opportunity more than any sort of destructive force needing to be opposed. And the vast majority of us, so happy to be a majority, to be, if not appreciated than at least accepted, we simply took it all in, as a moment that lined up in our minds alongside those great black and white moments that we had grown up watching.

But this isn't what he saw.

I ran into them at a corner, along the edges of the crowd. I had stepped out to pick up some coffee, feeling happy to find a local place that had no relation

to Starbucks or anything else I had ever heard of before. As I walked back to the friends I had come with, I saw Adrienne and Jonas, calmly watching folks prepare some street theater, getting their props together and shouting out for people to gather around. I say calmly, but that isn't quite right. They were contained, really, not active, holding themselves still, but there was not truly anything calm about them, especially then. I felt scared of them, for a second, which surprised me; there was a violence sitting on them, like a hawk perched on their shoulders, observing the world around them and preparing for the chance to attack. I took a sip of coffee, and moved to them.

"Hey," I said, loudly, and they turned.

"Grape-Ape," said Adrienne, pulling me in for a hug.

"Monkey-Man," said Jonas, with a nod of the head. He seemed caught by something in the street theater being set up in front of them. I don't know if he knew already how things were going to go—he gave no real indication, but in my memory I see him studying the street, laying it all out ahead of time.

"Look," I said to Adrienne, "it's that girl from the video store."

"What girl?" said Jonas.

"Nobody," said Adrienne.

"Well," I said, "maybe she's nobody now, but not if she has her way. She's gonna be somebody. Or be somebody for a certain somebody, right Adrienne?" She ignored this, but Jonas seemed to think about it.

"Yeah," he said, after considering for a moment, "that's right."

Adrienne paid no attention to either of us.

The young woman in question was cheerfully holding one corner of a large

American flag, displaying it behind the fairly loud and indecipherable performance beginning in front of us. Her head was shaved and the various and scattered piercings sprinkled across her body caught the light and seemed to wink at us. The young woman with the ponytail held the other side; the hair twitched one haughty, superior wave in our general direction, but the woman ignored us.

The pierced woman however caught sight of us and waved as best she could without dropping the flag. Adrienne nodded, almost politely; Jonas, for some reason, seemed to be staring at her. Or at least I thought at her.

“Well?” I said.

“Esu,” said Adrienne, her voice heavy and dragging over every sound, “I’m done with White girls. I told you that.”

“Even cute anarchist ones?”

“Hmph,” said Adrienne, a tiny grin tip-toeing across her lips, “maybe if someone taught them to shower.”

I laughed, and turned to Jonas, who was usually quick with a comment on the sanitary conventions of certain sections of the radical left. But he was looking down, not really noticing anything, and for a second I thought he was about to be sick.

“Where’s Sarah?” I asked.

“No, *who’s* Sarah?”

“Oh,” I said, “it’s like that.”

“It is indeed,” said Adrienne, “like that.”

I looked to Jonas for support but he was still staring, a thin sheen of sweat building on his face.

“You alright?” I asked him. He seemed startled by the question, as if only now realizing that the world around him actually could see him, and talk with him, even when he didn’t start the conversation.

“Fine,” he said, “fine.” He considered something for a moment. Then: “You think it’s gonna rain?”

“Probably,” I said, “but I think we got some time.”

“Jonas,” said Adrienne, “you got that thermos?”

“No, Baxter does. It’s probably still in the truck.”

“Crap,” said Adrienne, turning to me, “where’d you get that coffee?”

“Found this nice little place,” I said, wheeling around to lead her, “c’mon I’ll show you. You want anything Jonas?”

“No,” he said, “I think I’m alright here.”

So, off we went in search of coffee, and there Jonas stayed, in search of himself or perhaps something greater.

“Looking pretty calm today,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Adrienne, “cops pretty much shut it all down.”

“That’s good, right?” I asked. “Job well done?”

She didn’t answer. The sound of drums started up ahead and seemed to erupt from all around us as we came up on a drum circle that had taken over a street corner. We walked through it, a minefield of odors (marijuana, sweat, incense, and clove cigarettes), sounds, and dreadlocked shambling dancers; it was as if that particular corner of the world had decided to assault every sense that it could conceivably reach. One of the dancers grabbed a drum and walked up to Adrienne.

“Sister,” he said, “play with us.” It was not a request.

“You already done disrespected that drum enough,” she said, without slowing down, “you best get out my way before I put it out of it’s misery and bury it someplace you’ll find very painful.” He scurried out of her way, eyes wide in shock.

“You sure you need coffee?” I said, taking her arm and pulling her into the coffee shop.

“Esu,” she said, “people dying by the thousands and these fools think it’s all a party.”

“You gotta fight, for your right, to party.”

“You ever quote the Beastie Boys at me again and we gonna have a problem,” she said, and I laughed. I pulled out my wallet and paid for her coffee; she nodded thanks, and drank it quickly, trying to rev herself back up. We avoided the drummers as we headed back, sticking to the sidewalk as much as we could.

A voice called to us and we turned. Baxter weaved through the scrum as best as he could, waving towards us. We waved back and waited.

“Van okay?” asked Adrienne.

“Yeah, we got it parked nearby,” said Baxter. “Shame, though.”

“Van?” I said.

“Don’t ask,” said Adrienne, and I didn’t, at least, not then.

Back we went, towards the front where the raised platform awaited. We went quickly, Adrienne bouncing ideas around for what she could say when she got on stage, Baxter and I mostly just nodded and listened. The wind seemed to

pick up as we went, blowing coolly against our faces. It was more than a new breeze pushing through the city streets; it felt more like an animal slowly gathering its breath. Gently but forcefully making our way through the still growing crowd, we maneuvered back to where the little street theatre appeared to be gaining significantly more attention. It hadn't really seemed like something worth watching, in fact it had given off every impression of something to be avoided, so the sudden change in the opinions of those around us was more than a little surprising.

Until we broke through the crowd, to the front, and saw that the theatre had ended. Instead, surrounded by the chanting and shrieking crowd that boiled and blossomed around him, stood Jonas, calmly, with a fierce and determined stance. In his left hand he held tightly to the flag from the theatre performers; the young woman store stood off to the side, screaming, cheering him on, bouncing up and down as if she had front row tickets to the opening show of the first hardcore band to make it to MTV. Her ponytail was back and danced with the flag, which billowed and whipped the air behind Jonas. The wind had also taken the flag by hand, shaking it at us to announce its rage to the world. The flag pulled and snapped loudly, as if trying to take to the air, as if it knew that it could fly, if only he let go. But his hand gripped it firmly, ferociously, his arm stretched high above his relaxed and steady body. That left hand holding the flag never flinched.

But my eyes were drawn down to his right hand, pressed casually against his thigh, jiggling slightly, which, in a nervous and clumsy grip, held Baxter's lighter.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

We Don't Deserve This

*“What would we do to become famous and dandy,
just like Amos ‘n Andy?”*

Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprosy

Crowds, in many ways, are families—and like families the happy ones are all alike, but unhappy ones are all unhappy in their own way. Pack enough humans together and they each start to resemble cells, individual entities that exist only to construct something larger, grander, a new life that both thought for all of them and also drew its thoughts from each of them. In this crowd, there was a sense of controlled and frightened impatience; my first thought in trying to describe it is that it similar is the feeling of waiting for a bubble to burst when you are uncertain of exactly what is inside. Or maybe it was, in a small way, as if the entire crowd had a grip on a Band-Aid on one of their collective legs and was taking a deep breath before ripping it off. It is difficult, writing this now after so much has happened, to trust to my memory of that crowd. How much is what I saw, how much of what I think I know do I actually know, and how much is only what it now seems like it should have been?

I remember stopping in place, as if stumbling into an unseen wall. Adrienne and I were too firmly in shock to actually react to what we saw. Instead,

we hovered on the edges of the opening in the crowd, circling Jonas like a pair of hesitant and uncertain electrons staring blindly at a suddenly altered nucleus. He glanced at Adrienne, and she sighed, hesitated for only the briefest of seconds, and then she was next to him. Her eyes scanned the street, passing over it in rapid, exacting glances; she seemed to be not just focusing on the people immediately surrounding them, but at the same time looking right through them; her gaze stretched out to what lay beyond.

Without a word and with the barest flick of his foot Jonas kicked over a trash bin next to him and Adrienne quickly stood it upside down. He leaped on top of it, the whole time holding the flag, lifting it higher and higher. The rumble of the crowd increased, slowly, surging inwards, threatening to overflow like a tidal wave, and Adrienne was suddenly and calmly everywhere at once, coolly pushing people back, holding them away from him. No one seemed to notice her, they merely stepped back as if some invisible and mythical force of nature was blocking their path. She circled Jonas, her back to him, keeping a shrunken but steady ring of empty space around him.

Baxter stood next to me, cheering and pumping the crowd up. He cupped his hands by his mouth and whistled, a white-noise shriek that burst through the air and dragged the screams of the crowd up along with it.

I watched them. I listened. My feet tightly gripped the street underneath me, as if seeking the earth hidden below it for some form of comfort or connection. I found myself wanting to move, but unable to. No, that's not quite right—okay, that's a lie too. It's not that it's not right, it's that I'm not being honest. I found myself wanting to want to move. I felt like I should want to move,

to act. But I didn't. I watched.

What does one do, at moments like this? These are moments for heroes, for legends, for the people that our style of history is designed to record. Moments when something is happening—yeah, something is always happening, but there are times when Something happens. When a dull Nowhere, through force of action, without warning becomes Somewhere. These are the times we remember, the times that we tell and we re-tell, the ones we embellish, we revisit, over and over, the good and the bad, because they alone mark the difference between Then and Now; this is, in the end, a history. And like all history there is before This Moment and there is after That Moment. The future is formed in miniscule, immeasurable moments. That split second, the decision that has to be made before we are even aware that the question has arisen—this is why humans are not machines. We see so much, so much, in instants, and without any chance of explaining why we decide, we move, we act. This is what makes the world.

And there, in this particular moment, was Jonas, his course set, his path chosen, laid out in the time it had taken us to get a cup of coffee. And Adrienne, without questioning, there beside him, her course set when she caught sight of her friend. I would like to tell you that I pushed my way forward, that I stood beside Adrienne. That I stood before Jonas. That I stood with them both. Or else—tell you that I shook my head and left, disgusted and angry. That I refused to watch what I saw coming. That I called for the police, that I turned the crowd against him, or even that I shouted “NO!” and grabbed the flag from his hand. That I did something, whether right or wrong, that I did something. But that is why I am writing this now, because I did what writers do when not writing: I

watched others do things and prepared to talk about it later.

Jonas was silent for what seemed like hours. Standing on the trash bin, hovering over the crowd, the flag fluttered in his hand like butterfly wings, and looking at him for the first time I saw just how beautiful a flag could be. Flags are symbols—they are things given their power because of other things, because of ideals or ideas or histories that they represent. They are ancient shorthand for dreams and beliefs. I have never thought of the physical form that a flag takes as having any meaning; this stems from the fact that, more often than not, when we see the American flag it is not actually as a flag. It is as a drawing in an ad, as part of the setting for a speech or conference or convention, as a t-shirt, or a patch on a jacket. As a bikini, or a baseball cap, places where the only meaning it contains is in the assumptions we make about the person wearing it. We see symbols of the symbol so often we forget what we are looking at. Okay, maybe not all of us, maybe some of us hold the flag as a living, breathing aspect of life, but for most Americans, it is background, at best. But here it was, in his hands, dancing for us all, and it seemed to welcome what it saw coming, as if it was willing to sacrifice itself for us one last time.

The touch of the breeze as it danced against a cheek. The sound of the flag as it snapped in the wind. The weight of the sun as it stared down at all of us. The feel of the muscles in my arms as my hands clenched into the tightest fists. The droning sound of anticipation. And the whisper of the moment as it slowly pulled away.

The sight of Jonas, standing so firm, so tall, so solid, if the statue of liberty could breathe and rage they would have been twins! Here was America, upright

and alive, here was all that we were, all that hoped to be, grabbing the moment in firm, unflinching hands! The wind blew the flag up and around his head, hovering for the briefest of seconds like a halo pulled from a history textbook. His eyes caught mine, and I was stunned to find no fear within his, only that implacable, ferocious calmness.

I looked around for the police who had seemed to be all over the place only minutes before. There were none around, which seemed hard to believe, as sudden loud gatherings in the middle of a crowd was the type of thing that they at least liked to check out. I kept swiveling my head, around and around, waiting for their arrival. I told myself I was just helping Adrienne, keeping an eye out for any potential danger, as even she couldn't see everything. But I wasn't looking for danger. I wanted them to come, to end the Moment, to prevent this. Was it because I didn't want my friend to get into trouble? Or because I worried that I would get in trouble for being his friend? Or did I want him to get in trouble, with a hope that I could fill the space he left behind? Or was it as small as not wanting any harm to come to this flag, this flag that, without warning, I had finally been able to see?

Hustling to the front and pushing aside any who might block their view came the press, the photographers, a surging stream that squirmed and shoved until they were inches from Jonas—I have seen hogs in their pen, converging from all corners as their slop is laid out before them—they were about as orderly and selfless as a group of hogs whose food is a few hours late. I saw that they kept a steady distance from Adrienne, and as she prowled near them the slightest hint of a look caused them to slide backwards. They responded like this without

even actually looking at her; her glance seemed to extend her arm's reach by several feet, and managed to keep the press mostly in line.

The clicking of cameras kept time like a drum beat and Jonas stood straighter and laid down his words over their rhythm and sound. He spoke in rapid spurts, softly, no long-winded poems or epic style speeches. For whatever reason there was no video taken, not even from a cell-phone. Because of this, in times to come all sorts of statements were put into his mouth, some by those who hated him and others by those who sought to support him; it became easier to define him if you could control what he said. But he said little. Such simple actions.

"We don't deserve this," he said, "this flag."

He paused, waiting; I could see him holding back, letting the words find him. He looked into the people before him, and once again our eyes touched. I had nothing to offer him. I only watched. And his eyes moved on.

"We have destroyed this," Jonas said, his voice rising. A photographer stepped to him, intent and unconcerned about anyone else's view. He was tall and had a thick mustache and a red face and was dressed all in tan, with pockets bulging in every direction; if I had closed my eyes and thought up a photojournalist, I probably would have pulled this man into my mind. He moved up until the camera was almost touching Jonas, flush to his face, until Adrienne seemed to come out of nowhere. Without a word she shot a stiff-arm into the man's chest and he flew back until he swayed against the crowd like a stunned boxer using the ropes to keep himself standing.

"This flag is meant to stand for things that our actions show we no longer

believe in. This flag is dead,” said Jonas, “because we have murdered it.” He turned to the flag, and his voice became soft, floating just over the murmur surrounding him.

“And those who have killed it still claim only to love it, they remain blissfully unaware of what they have done.”

As he spoke Jonas lifted his right hand to hover just beneath his left. The left held tight to the flag. And the right flipped open Baxter’s lighter.

“It is time that they learned.”

It was so quiet, as the lighter was struck and came alive. Jonas told me later that he had emptied some of the fluid from the lighter onto the corner of the flag, to help it catch quickly, and his biggest fear had been that he’s used too much and the lighter would be unable to put up a flame. But it did. The crowd turned silent, on hold, hovering; even the sound of the cameras seemed to fade away. As the flames began to build we all let out our breath, held so long and so completely, a roar that seemed to shake the ground of the city itself. I looked around and found myself secretly happy to see a few in the crowd turn away, heads shaking and disgusted looks on their faces. One mother, holding a toddler in her firm and trembling arms, glared as if she was seconds from charging Jonas herself; her child, a gleeful and screaming 2 year old, waved a sign that read “Don’t Kill For Me” in his own chubby, excited hands. Off to one side I saw a group of organizers made up of young black-clad marshals and older White men, all conversing in hushed tones with each other and shouting into walkie-talkies that squawked back indecipherable responses.

But the flame grew, treading all over that piece of cloth, until Jonas

dropped it, letting it shake and move in the wind, like a cat determined to land on its feet. As it hit the ground the flames seemed to grow, reaching back for the heavens, as if the increase in distance made it realize what it had to lose. That roar of the crowd swiftly became a cheer, and even the anxious organizers paused, drawn like the rest of us into the fire. The smell was like no other, like clothes left in a dryer too long, yet still something all its own. We all watched it burn.

What was it he saw? What was it that burned to life, before his eyes? It was so bright—even in the light of day, it was so bright. And he stood there, staring into it. There, in that dance of heat and life, energy and entropy, what was revealed to him? Look into fire long enough and the shifting movement of it becomes something else, something new; it shows you a different aspect of yourself, of your own soul. Fire serves man like dreams, eating up what is unnecessary and exposing what is hidden. And Jonas had such dreams, such goals. But there was something in him that was reborn, remade, as those flames began to die out. In legends, the phoenix sets its own fire, settling down into it willingly, readily, even happily. Then it emerges anew. I watched him, knowing that it is so rare to see someone remade in public, in front of us all—I don't think it could have happened without all of us there, observing each moment. He had sought out being public so long that it took an audience for him to let that go. In that moment, in that crowd, he found his way to letting it go.

I stared at him, searching those eyes that I had come to know so well. There was so much growing inside them, yet they were slowly becoming more and more empty, becoming things of potential, things that seek, rather than the overflowing eyes that he had carried for so long. To put it simply, he was burning

the anger out of them. No, you know what—I'm saying it wrong. Not the anger. He kept that. It was the rage. That self-centered, blind, unfocused, that Jonas-consumed rage, that single-minded selfish fury at the million daily assaults on his sense of self, on his pride and honor, that is what was burnt, in that fire. The anger remained, but channeled, transformed, like the charcoal that becomes better to cook with once it has flamed itself out. He was giving himself, his fury, like a sacrificial lamb, and in the ashes all that would be left behind was the determined anger hidden beneath his ambition. And this anger, he was startled to realize, only appeared to him as anger because he had never been able to see it so clearly before. It took the pure fire of his fury for him to see that this anger was in reality only a reaction to his love. Love of his people, love of his life, his world, of Maria and Adrienne and Jake and Baxter and his family and everyone and anyone he knew, from the youth he worked so hard to organize to the Tank Man in the photo he carried. A love beyond and above him, a love that stretched out so far it blended into everything that he saw, blended so well that for so long he hadn't been able to recognize it as his own. It was that love that pushed him to rise on mornings like this one, leaving his lover in their shared bed, and it was this love that sent him to meeting after meeting, to event after event, to argument after argument. There was only so much glory, after all, in the life he had chosen; clearly, there had to be something else that moved him, and in the end what can I tell you? I would argue that nothing moves us like love. In the glow of the flag and its flames Jonas was suddenly a man discovering that he was in love.

It was stunning to watch and like the rest of the crowd I could not look away.

And that, of course, was the moment the police arrived.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Dying Embers

*“But when them come to arrest a Black man,
them need 30 cops or more—
well now, hey...”*

Boogie Down Productions

It was a shock when they showed up. For all of us. It shouldn't have been, really; we had seen them everywhere. And fire, of any sort and for any reason, tends to bring them, and quickly. That is what police do, their purpose—at least, in theory. But we had become so accustomed to their absence, to the crowd's control of the street and its edges, that we had forgotten that police rarely cede any territory, and never for very long. One moment we were alone, the next they were everywhere. Most were in riot gear, covered in black from head to toe, shielded from the world like knights in armor, and they burst into the center of the crowd and quickly formed a wall around Jonas and the flag.

“Grab him,” came a voice from the crowd. It belonged to an officer in a gray suit that looked expensive and tailor made, and he spoke with an inflexible voice that gave off the impression that his words were never questioned. The wall of police surrounding Jonas broke down, as they each turned with eager fury to face him. From behind him one punched at the back of his head, knocking him

off of the trashcan and sending him sprawling on the pavement, his glasses clattering on the ground beside him. Jonas rolled, getting onto his feet instantly, and slipped past the cops closest to him and moved towards the safety of the crowd. Another officer, a round and heavy breathing cop whose face beneath his mask was so red I feared he was about to have a heart attack, dove towards Jonas, like an out of shape offensive lineman pulling to make a block. He ran, gathering speed like an avalanche; he focused so intently on Jonas that he ran straight into Adrienne, who was standing with her back turned to the cop and her head slightly bowed. It looked like an accident, the officer just stumbling into an innocent bystander, but I had seen Adrienne set enough picks on the basketball court to know different. The cop bounced off of her and fell, hard, sliding on the street, to the laughter of the crowd.

Before Jonas could get away, he was caught by the arm. The cop who held him shook him hard, and the officer in the suit came over, shouting orders that were lost in the noise. The other cops helped their fallen comrade up, neglecting the crowd, which inched closer and closer, collapsing in on the center. The policeman who had fallen, once he was helped up, ran over to Jonas and shoved him, knocking him down and bringing the officer on his arm down with him; the other cops, seeing the red-faced cop about to lose control, grabbed hold of him and pulled him back.

“Get him out of here!” yelled the suit, pointing at the red-faced cop. The suit turned to Jonas. Walked past the dying embers of the flag. The crowd followed him, storming in his wake, and surged onto the flag, a few putting it out with their feet; one older activist, an aging hippy dressed in the standard issue

uniform of sandals, light cotton shirt, jeans, and peace symbol necklace gathered up the pieces of the flag, with a solemn and almost religious stillness.

I watched, my body frozen, as I was buoyed by the motion of the people, floating without thinking until I found myself standing within feet of where Jonas was being taken to the ground, cops huddled all around him. He was not resisting, his face and eyes remaining so calm, so steady and certain. I stared at him and for the third time his eyes sought out mine. His eyes asked nothing of me, they held nothing, they simply looked back at me; the police were on top of him, the crowd was throbbing, the moment was slipping, and in the midst of all of that the only thought in my mind was wondering what Jonas was thinking as he looked at me. I couldn't take his eyes, I was used to the shield of his glasses, without them they were too cold and constant; he didn't flinch as the cops brought his left arm back, sharply, behind his back, and pushed his face down, roughly, against the ground. An officer stood above him then dropped a knee down, quickly, into him, as if they were battling inside a wrestling ring; Jonas let out a tiny, barely heard sound as the knee connected with the small of his back. Another sound, almost unheard, barely recognizable as a hard leather boot meeting a soft, giving belly. There were more boots gathering, salivating, and there was only the one belly.

An officer prepared those ugly plastic cuffs to strap around his wrists.

For the third time I had to look away.

And that is when I stopped watching, and spoke.

Just one word. Well, I had to say it twice. But still, one simple action.

And with that, this became my story.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

This Way, Young Bull

“...the youth are getting restless..”

Bad Brains

“Stop.”

The words seemed to vanish into the crowd, like pennies dropped into a fountain. I stared around me, at the millions of simple actions taking place within inches of each other. Everything caught in on itself, fading into slow motion, hyper-focused, each sound ringing clear and perfect, as if played on the latest high definition television with the most expensive surround sound system ever built. Two inches from me was the face of The Young Woman, face frozen in impotent rage, ponytail failing in desperate futility. I moved a few inches, just enough to get into her sight.

She turned to me, her face a mask of anger, and hate. With her were two or three young anarchists, dressed all in black, with bandannas over their mouths and noses, wearing sunglasses and with baseball caps pulled down over their eyes. They all glanced at me, then pushed forward, leaking through the edge of the crowd. Two cops moved quickly, shoving them backwards, both groups breathing a living fire. I felt like a leaf on a pond, gliding along the top of the water and slipping past everyone. I saw a group of Black youths, some them kids

from Philly who had come on the bus with me, and who had organized with Jonas.

I closed my eyes, took a solid lungful of air, and threw back my head.

“STOP!”

My voice filled me. And that word. It is not a pretty word. It is not a pretty word but it is the most powerful word in the English language, and sometimes it is the ugliest, and sometimes the sweetest. It is a word that seeks to be because it will not let you prevent it or the speaker from being. And now that word was all that I was, contained all that I had been, that I dreamed of being. The word became a roar became a chant became a siren became became became. Bulging, bursting—and then finally it all came forth, every infuriated word I had ever wanted to speak but had been made to hold in, every *‘Hell no!’* or *‘That’s enough!’* or *‘Cut it out!’* or *‘Please, please, don’t!’*—they all came up from their hiding places, from that internal storage that we all carry that stashes away every bruise or bump our minds are allowed to forget and they all vomited out into the street, the crowd, the overwhelming world. It kept going, without stopping. The air throbbed, moved, danced against me. My throat was harsh and burning and the word continued, pounding into the daylight which bore down onto me and ripped my eyelids open, forcing me to see that word blanketing everyone, an invisible blizzard so huge, so heavy, that everything froze beneath it.

There was no sound.

My voice faded. Not even a hum remained. Around me I could see everything. And nothing. Feet hovered mid-step. Lips curled into unreleased shouts. Hands plummeting in matching patterns paused and waited patiently to connect with drums, with thighs, with each other. A young man, off balance,

stared at the ground with wide and apprehensive eyes, caught in that split second when gravity has not decided just what to do with him. A balloon teetering in a child's pudgy grip. Coffee danced on a rim, the lid already falling but straining to reach back and hold on, the cup crushed by the manic fingers of a falling body, just another body, so many bodies.

I walked to where the anarchists huddled together.

I went to each one, a whisper from my lips to their stone ears. Was there a flutter, a motion, behind their eyes? As if something grew wider, some sight not contained in their pupils or caught beneath their lashes?

And the young Black men and women who knew the police and knew Jonas too? Did they shiver as I spoke? What dreams were called up, nightmares and fantasies that lived just behind those eyes? What memories hid there, with no hope of being changed, fixed, saved? Is this what was touched, shaken, brought to life?

And what did I say? What do you say to a captive audience, especially one who you are fairly certain will not remember the time they spent with you—in fact, would deny it if it is ever brought to them? What do you say, when you have all the time in the world? When you have the world? What would you say?

For me, it was obvious. I touched each ear, I breathed on each lobe as if existed in front of me, I touched each neck and brushed hair aside and I spoke the same to each one. And being who I am, what else could I say?

“There will come a time,” I said, “when you will have to tell the story of what you did, in this moment. Of who you are, and who you claim to be. Of how this happened in front of you, and of what you did. That story you tell will outlive

you.”

I looked around me again, at all of the arrested motion, this halted world, and knew that I had done the right thing, the only thing. I had done it, for now and forever, and when it was all over I knew that at least I would be leaving with a story to be proud of. I closed my eyes once more, and the deep breath this time took in the purest and cleanest air my lungs had ever known, and I hugged my arms to my chest.

I let it out in a whisper: “Make it right.”

The shattered silence, the suddenness of life, the feel of so much movement, so much being done, endings and beginnings, the abruptness of it all was anew assault on my ears and I clapped my hands to them in horror and pain. I squeezed tight until the thunder began to dissipate, and I could actually hear once again. And when I could hear I started at the sound my own words.

“Make it right,” said The Young Woman, her ponytail straight as a razorblade.

“Make it right,” echoed The Anarchists beside her.

“Make it right,” said The Young Black Women and Men who knew Jonas.

It spread through the crowd, weaving in and out of each mouth, touching a pair lips only to move on to the next. This led to thrusting fists in the air, words taking on a chanting rhythm that spread throughout the crowd and infecting people in all directions and gaining new voices until it seemed that everyone was saying it. The cops drew into a circle, pulling in tighter. From somewhere off to the side a group of officers in riot gear forced their way in, forging a way through the forest of people yelling and screaming at them. As they came in a young man

was knocked to his knees; the officers kept on, not noticing, and friends of his rushed to his side, gently helping him to his feet. They were so intent on getting him out of the way of the onrush of police that they paid little attention to the fact that they themselves were now directly in the path of this new wave of cops. The whole group was run over in seconds.

Someone went to shove officer off of a person who had fallen to the ground. The cop was too big to be moved and turned and reached but got caught up in his own feet and stumbled, landing next to the person on the ground. They stared at each other, a mutual embarrassment that didn't end when they helped each other up; they just moved on with an unspoken agreement to forget everything.

Someone else shouted in a cop's face. The cop's face shouted back and they fled.

Someone stood without moving. They were moved, by who I couldn't say.

An officer pulled out his pepper spray.

The Young Woman went down, clutching eyes eyes, her ponytail screaming.

Someone else ran.

Someone threw an empty bottle, clanging it off an officer's helmet.

An officer swung his baton. His target avoided the blow, made a face, slipped away again, yelled, and was gone. The officer searched, hungry for something to beat.

Someone bled on the pavement.

In the center of it all, everyone converged on Jonas.

The cops had him up, standing, hands cuffed behind his back; a thin trickle of blood traced a line from just above his right eye down to his chin. Three different hands tried to drag him forward, but they didn't seem to agree on exactly where to go, so he flopped, a rag doll snapping first one direction and then the next. As they pulled him into the crowd the Black kids came quickly, moving to his side. The cops in riot gear fought their way through the crowd to confront them; so intent and focused on facing this new threat they didn't see the anarchists coming in from the other side. I got as close as I could. I didn't want to miss anything.

Two of the anarchists in black charged right at the cops. They dove towards Jonas, banging directly into the cops holding him. Everyone fell, landing on each other, bodies getting caught up in various ways. As they all tried to rise two more burst through, a hit and run action, knocking aside cops then disappearing back into the crowd. Jonas rolled to his feet.

"Get that motherfucker!" yelled The Red-Faced Cop. An officer reached for Jonas, wrapping an arm around his neck. Jonas tucked his head in, shrugging off the man's hold. The cop swung his fist as Jonas moved and connected with his throat. Jonas whirled around and the cop stepped to him and Jonas moved to the side and something caught the officer's foot and he tripped, going down to one knee, his hand clutching at Jonas' shirt; the shirt ripped, leaving the officer with gripping only torn and fading cloth.

"Run!" I yelled.

Jonas tripped, started to fall face first. He pulled away from the cop and stumbled back into the crowd. Hands caught him from all sides. Bodies wrapped

around him. The cops surged towards him. The Black kids were everywhere; it didn't matter which way the cops turned, they were there. The officers swung their batons. The kids fell back, but only as far as they had to.

I lost sight of Jonas.

So did the cops.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

This Way, Young Bull

*“This was no La-Di-Da-Di.
Cause the boys had to pin the shit
on somebody
and me and my crew,
we were known to get ill...”*

Ice-T

“This way, young bull,” the man said. He was in his sixties, gray haired and relaxed, as if stepping out for a lunchtime stroll.

The man slid an arm around Jonas. “Lean on me,” he said. Someone cut the plastic cuffs off of his wrists. A White woman in her ‘80’s threw a jacket on his shoulders; another pulled a hat onto his head. Together they led him through the people—it was, Jonas said later, as if a herd of grandparents had been gathered together to protect him. A bottle of water was placed in his hands and he drank thirstily. He didn’t know where they were taking him.

“Behind,” he said. They couldn’t hear him. He tried again. His voice was weak and hurt to use. “Behind,” he repeated, putting as much into it as he could. “My people are there. Behind.”

The old man nodded. He didn’t say a word. He took Jonas by the hand

and moved swiftly, diving into the chaos that lived all around them, and somehow guided them. Around the back of City Hall, through the courtyard and down the back stairs. To the street, as everyone raced to the front they slipped through the back, unnoticed, a few old folks being led to safety by good-hearted young people, no trouble to anyone, get home safe now you hear?

And there, standing at the bottom of the stairs, was Adrienne.

She nodded to the old man, who nodded back.

“Get him out of here.”

“On it,” she said, “our car’s out back.”

The old man was in motion instantly. He led them through side streets and back alleys, poking his head out to watch for cops. They were rushing throughout the city, chasing anyone that looked remotely like Jonas. But the old man knew the city, and within minutes they were rushing to the car. Baxter sat inside it, engine running, waiting.

Jonas grabbed the old man into a hug.

“Get out of here,” the man said, affectionately. Jonas climbed into the back seat. The sound of the car door slamming shut held for a moment, as if pausing in the air to ensure that no one outside the vehicle heard it. They all glanced at each other.

“Where’s Keith?” Jonas asked.

“He’s staying there,” said Baxter, “trying to get a handle on things. He’s got a friend that’s gonna help him bring the van back to Philly.”

“If anyone can calm it down out there,” said Adrienne, “it’s Keith.”

Jonas leaned back in his seat. His throat still screamed and his chest was

clawing at him and his belly felt flattened and broke, but he was out. He was alive. He was free.

“Baxter,” said Adrienne, “if you got any White skin privilege you ain’t used up yet now would be a damn good time.”

“Sure,” said Baxter, calmly pulling away from the curb, “we always keep some extra stored in the glove compartment.”

“I thought so.”

“Keep that jacket on,” said Baxter, looking at Jonas in the rear view mirror.

“I will,” said Jonas. He reached under it to touch what remained of his lucky shirt. One more story added. One last gift of luck. From nowhere he suddenly remembered the event where he had been given the shirt, just another brief protest lined up alongside so many like it. One simple action: be the MC of an event, ran by people he hardly new. In exchange, receive a suit of armor, disguised as a T-shirt.

“Don’t duck, Jonas,” said Baxter, “that will only make you look suspicious. Stay calm.”

“That way’s quicker,” said Adrienne, pointing.

“Yes,” said Baxter calmly, “but too many people are going that way.”

“True.”

“We want this way—not too many to slow us down, not too few to stand out.”

“You seem like you’ve done this before.”

“Do I?”

“That’s good to know,” said Jonas, his voice shaking.

“Yes,” replied Baxter, his voice calm and steady. “Adrienne,” he added, “I have even better news: the thermos is at your feet.”

“You,” said Adrienne, “may actually be an angel.” She reached down and pulled it up, then unscrewed its cap and poured a cup of coffee. Somehow, it was still steaming. She gulped it down, then poured another, and turned and handed it to Jonas.

He stared into it then took a quick sip, feeling the heat flow throughout his entire body. He took another, then sighed.

“I lost my glasses,” he said. Adrienne turned, staring at him. And, to his surprise, she smiled.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice soft and caring.

“Well,” said Baxter, “we’ll have to get you new ones.”

“I know a guy,” said Adrienne, “he’ll take care of you.”

Jonas looked back into the coffee. His face reddened, and he could feel the tears building inside his eyes. He let them come, filling up his view until they leaked out, pushing off his lashes to pour down his cheeks, dripping onto the jacket he wore. He drank more of the coffee, then wiped his eyes, gently. When he looked back up, Adrienne’s eyes were waiting.

“We gotta get back to Philly,” he said, “we gotta lot of organizing to do.”

“Yeah,” she said, “we do.”

He smiled at her, a short, flashing thing.

“But first you need to make a phone call,” she said, and then she turned away to face the front.

“Yeah,” he said, “I do.”

The phone buzzed, in his hand. Once. Then once more.

Maria picked up on the second ring.

“Jonas?” she said. At the sound of her voice everything rose up inside him, and he had to move the phone from his mouth as he heaved, once, twice. His body shook. Nothing came out—only bile, which he spit into the cup in his hand. Adrienne looked back at him, and he waved her away.

“Jonas?”

Maria’s voice was anxious now, and he heard it clearly even though the phone was not on his ear. He smiled.

“Hey sweetie,” he said, his voice rough and painful.

“Jonas,” said Maria, and he had never heard such relief and joy in the sound of his name.

“Hey,” he said. He cleared his throat, then repeated it, softly: “Hey.”

“Oh, Jonas,” said Maria, “are you alright?”

He thought about her question. It wasn’t an easy one to answer.

“Jonas?” she said, after a moment of silence.

“Yeah, sweetie,” he said, “I’m alright. I’m alright. And I’m on my way home.”

Home. City of more than brotherly loves. Land of the flag and the nation, birthplace for both. We hold these truths to be self-evident. That a right doesn’t come alive until it’s used. And the loves that go unseen are sometimes the strongest.

Jonas smiled. He would have to tell Maria that when he got home. It was the kind of thing she liked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

He Was There

*“Tell me,
who’ll pay reparations
on my soul?”*

Gil Scott-Heron

Jonas was gone.

And I thought, as I watched it all, that it was quite possible I would never speak again. Maybe I was done, now. Nothing left. Or else I would only open my mouth on the deepest of occasions, a post-modern oracle searching for a mountain to recluse on. Let them come to me, and I shall lay my knowledge only on the worthy. Drink this rarest nectar. Are you worthy? These words were too powerful to entrust to just anyone; there had to be a price to pay, and the information sought must be something that only one such as I could deliver.

These were my thoughts. I knew, as I thought them, that I would never forget them. And I was right, though, of course, not for the reasons I believed. Not even for reasons I feared.

I coasted amidst chaos, bobbing on the tide, looking for nothing and able to take it all in. Once again, the dying embers. The moment, as all moments eventually must, was passing, though still somewhat wild; the crowd was

beginning to split up, fractions and factions, pieces slipping away. The police slowly re-took the ground, and it was ceded to them, with little trouble. At this point it had become a day that both sides could lay claim to, could use to pump up their troops, to milk their funders, to make noise and declare a victory—or, if needed, a close loss that suggested that if you helped more, they'd for sure win the next one. Does it surprise you that this is often a better sales pitch than a tight victory?

There was a sound, a cry, tugging at my mind, pulling at the edges of my awareness. I raised my head, tilted to the side to drag it in, to snare the location and snatch the story. I could tell that there was a story, I could taste it in the air, like the scent of a chef-in-training preparing for her final exam. It slipped away from me, I reached for it, found it, lost it, seized it and ran, stumbling and too focused, quick and yet way too slow, and it never grew louder, it stayed the same, keening sound.

Medics and organizers huddled together, gathering the wounded and the tired to them, pulling them out and leading them away. I couldn't get through them, took the extra minute to circle around. The sound, no louder, but now clear. It was there, and as I rounded the mass of people I pulled out my notebook and pen and prepared to capture the moment.

The young woman lay on the pavement, her ponytail wrapping itself around her neck, hugging her as tightly as it could. She lay on her back, her eyes covered by a wet towel. She held it close against her and it was her whimper that I could hear. No. It was something in her whimper, some pain to come that spoke to me, and I leaned against a parked car and watched. I waited.

She cried out, and the medic leaning down over her, a plump young man with pierced eyebrows and steady hands, lifted the towel to wipe her eyes. He did this with one hand and I realized that his other hand was holding a bandage to the side of her head, a bandage that was slowly reddening.

The sound shifted, changed tone. I turned. The red-faced cop, who seemed to be the only person who hadn't calmed down, led a group of officers down the street, pushing everyone to the side, opening the street to the cars and bustle that the normal business day required. They reached the medics and organizers who slid as a group to the sidewalk; this wasn't enough, and the two gangs spoke in quiet tones about what to do next. No one seemed to care enough to do anything, though, on either side. The conversation was followed a standard well-known format by this point, and though it annoyed everyone they went through it, mostly to give the organizers and medics enough time to get everything together to leave.

The sound rose, in my ears. No one else heard it, I could tell. But it was more than just hearing it. It was there, with us. Physical. But they didn't feel it. Neither did I, to be honest, though I didn't know that then. I thought I did. It was the sound Death makes, as he sneaks over your shoulder, when you aren't looking. When you are too proud to pay attention.

The red faced cop, alone, stood before the young woman, and her medic.

"Come on," he growled, "let's go."

She groaned. I glanced around. Everyone was so focused on the ending of this day, on finishing it all up, that they missed what was still going on.

The red-faced cop reached down, took her arm. The medic, bent over her

head, turned to the cop, eyes wide and horrified.

“She can’t move,” he said, “I’m pretty certain she has a concussion.”

“You a doctor?”

“No.”

“EMT?”

“No,” he said, “still training, I’m just a medic but—”

The cop took her with both hands, one under each arm.

“You can’t just drag her!” said the medic.

“Excuse me, officer,” said Keith, and he was there. And I knew, at once, that this was what had called to me. The rage, the fury swirled around him like dense yet bright smoke, and somehow he remained clean, untouched. He was angry, you could see it in the steadiness of his speech, in the tightness of his jaw. The sound was in my head, my veins throbbed along to it. I was paralyzed, I was the sound and nothing more.

I stared at Keith. He was there, and everything would be all right.

The red-faced cop ignored him. The young woman’s groan became a scream. Every head turned. The other officers wasted a second, uncertain of where duty lie. The crowd, dissipated and diluted into its member parts, was called back as one.

“Stop!” yelled Keith, falling to his knees and laying his body over the young woman. The red-faced cop dropped her and her head bounced on the pavement. His baton waggled in Keith’s face, a snake distracting its prey. Keith cradled her head, holding the bandage against the blood.

“Stop it!”

This from the medic, who stood before the red-faced cop. The cop shoved him aside, raising the baton high. The young woman groaned again, rolled, unseeing, to the back of the cop's leg. He swiveled, the baton snarled, the other officers were moving through quicksand, they seized the medic and pulled him back.

I dropped my pen. My mouth opened. The sound blocked my voice, clogged my throat. My notebook fell. I stumbled into the street.

The baton rose, reached the sky.

"Stop!" said Keith, again. He kept the young woman as straight as he could, her head beneath his chest, his own head turning, up, to the falling sky. My mouth was open. These moments come, when something happens, when we have the chance, the choice, to become someone. To act. Or to stare. And write about it later.

The baton shouted, waved the slightest wave towards me, and then it laughed and dove straight down.

There was a crack, a new sound, that ripped through us all. A crack, tiny at first, then quickly thick and red, spread across Keith's head. He flopped over the young woman. The officers were there, gently lifting him off, shouting into shoulder mounted walkie-talkies. The red-faced cop was pulled aside, was surrounded. Was gone. The two bodies, lying beside each other, so pale against the dark street, blood tasting the pavement.

And then, I could hear it. So faint, at first. Building. Nearing. A siren, wailing in tune to the sound in my head. The lights flashing.

It brushed past me, knocking me aside, screeching to a stop. The street

shuddered, reached up for me. I pushed it down with my hands, felt it dig into my knees. My lunch rose, battering up my clogged throat. The vomit burned its way up and out of my mouth, I watched it drop and I saw not the volatile mix of orange yellow brown but a steady flow of words, the words that had been stuck, held in, it reeked of bile and sickness and the scent of upcoming death and all I saw were the things I knew I could say, could be, and they all fell away from me, spilling out to stain the ground before me.

Someone took my arm. The ground fell away.

“He’s from Philly.”

A hand, gentle, against my mouth.

“Is he on your bus?”

A shuffling, and a hand took mine.

“Yeah.”

“We’ll get him home.”

The sound faded as we walked. I wanted it to stay, to remember it. But it’s gone now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Empty, To Be Empty

“All art is a kind of confession, more or less oblique.

All artists, if they are to survive, are forced,

at last, to tell the whole story,

to vomit the anguish up.”

James Baldwin

This is, as I have told you, my story. It is not about me, has never been about me. But I made it happen, with three different actions.

And that’s a lie. You may have known that from the beginning. Maybe I did. It doesn’t really matter. Because stories are more than just those actions you take pride in, or the ones that you dread to tell. They are the things you saw and the reasons you saw them. They are the parts you forgot and the things you tell yourself you forgot, and the things you know longer know if you did forget, or if you faked it.

They are the things that must be told.

I stared at my cell phone, that whole ride back to Philly.

If I hadn’t left my notebook and pen this would have been a perfect time to listen to those around me, to take down the legends they were already beginning to build. Things too good to be true, things too horrible to be doubted.

Adrienne's number. Jonas' number. Big Mama.

I had to call someone. Tell them what had happened to Keith.

I had to tell them what I had done.

I sat and stared at my phone.

And then I slid it back into my pocket.

I looked out the window, and waited to get home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

All The Flames He Had Stared Into So Deeply

“Herald Loomis, you shining!

“You shining like new money!”

August Wilson

“This was supposed to be a non-violent protest!” the woman shouted.

Jonas and Adrienne sat in the back. The meeting already run for an hour and did not seem like it was due to end anytime soon. Unlike the average “gone on for way too long” meeting, this one was not being held up over disagreements on the exact shade of blue for the paper of a poster or the right font for the newest flyer; it wasn’t even over whether the one spot left for a speaker should go to someone talking about Palestine or public funding for health care. No, everyone who entered the room on the second floor of the Quaker Center knew there was one topic and one topic only: what went wrong? The meeting was a week after the rally, early evening on a Saturday. There were only a few windows to the room, covered in thick institutional drapes; no one wanted to be reminded of the pale blue sky slowing darkening around them, as they were not likely to see it for some time. The room usually had a number of long tables scattered throughout, but they’d all been removed in order to make more space for the overflowing numbers of people who’d arrived, each with their own definitive thoughts

prepared. The chairs had been shoved against the wall, but most folks were seated on the floor, though their constantly thrust into the air hands threatened to pull them up to their feet at a moment's notice.

Jonas had invited me to the meeting, and I had heard him trudging out the front door. I had told him that I'd had some copywriting work that I'd put aside all week and desperately needed to catch up on, and he'd taken me at my word and headed out alone. Truth was, I couldn't take it. This was a meeting to discuss what had gone wrong, and I was the only one who knew. And I wasn't about to tell a roomful of people what I'd done. So I sat, and waited for him to get home.

This is what I missed.

"This is why I said we needed to do trainings," said a man, who then stood up in the center of the room. He was tall, with a round balding head and a wide belly that made him look like he'd just escaped from a bowling alley. The thick glasses he wore were the only things that set off his disguise, as the white shirt with red stripes and the dark blue pants definitely were not helping.

"Sit down," said a voice from the back.

"No, he's right," answered another.

"We're letting these people out," the Bowling Pin Man continued, "and they represent us. We need to make certain that they are prepared be out there."

"Who makes that decision?" said the first voice.

"Please," said a short red haired woman who stood near the front, "please, everyone, we'll all get a turn to speak but we'll never get anywhere if we shout over each other." She waved her hands like a conductor and the murmuring and

shouting around the room faded out. A glare at the man standing in the center of the room.

“Philip,” she said, calmly, “you need to wait your turn.”

The Bowling Pin Man sat, begrudgingly.

“Thank you,” said the Red-Haired Lady. She looked around until she spotted the woman who had been speaking. “Please, continue.”

The woman nodded. Her hair was cut short around her face and she wore a perfectly fitted pants suit that appeared to be made purely out of beige, and when she stood she was unexpectedly tall. Her earrings bounced the light around the room, and her overly flowery perfume was not an unwelcome scent, considering the number of activists packed into such a small space. Tears clung fiercely to her trembling eyes, straining to grip onto long and well-cared for lashes.

“My son,” she said, and her voice tremble more than her eyes, “is three. He shouldn’t have to see violence.” A wave of agreement rippled across the room.

“If your son is three,” said Baxter from somewhere near the front, “what was he doing at this rally?”

“Are you saying,” The Mother replying, with a voice so filled with horror and indignation it almost didn’t make it out of her mouth, “that my son isn’t welcome?”

There were gasps throughout the room.

“This was supposed to be a day of action,” Baxter said, standing up. “Why the hell would you bring him?”

“Language,” said someone up front, and Baxter grinned and flipped them the bird.

“How long,” whispered Adrienne, “do we have to stay for this crap?”

“Until it’s done,” was the whispered reply.

“Jonas,” whispered Adrienne, “I don’t know how much more I can take.”

“Go on, then. I’ll be fine.”

Adrienne looked at him, sighed, and tried to make herself more comfortable on the floor.

“Everyone, everyone,” said The Red-Haired Woman against the rising tide rumbling around her, “we’re on a schedule here.” The floor was still, or at least somewhat close to it.

“Why was your son there if you didn’t want him to see cops acting crazy?” said Baxter.

“You’re blaming this on the police?” said The Mother. Everything she heard in this meeting brought her to new levels of shock and disbelief, a blooming new world of chaos and disrespect that only she was equipped to prune and guide back into a more natural and healing state.

“Who else?” said Baxter. “They elevated a relaxed and fairly boring day of speeches into a fucking riot.”

Bowling Pin Man popped back up.

“Baxter,” said The Red-Haired Woman, “please.”

“Okay, okay,” he said, sitting down. He winked at The Red-Haired Woman and she did her best to hide a smile.

“We changed from a day of action,” said a flustered Bowling Pin Man, “into a peaceful day of solidarity as a good faith gesture after receiving concessions.”

“What concessions?” said The Young Maoist, this time in an angry red Mao T-shirt that declared the People’s Revolution Has Begun! in perfect Times New Roman lettering.

“Sit,” said The Red-Haired Woman, and Bowling Pin Man sat. She turned to The Young Maoist. “You’ll get a chance to speak. Wait your turn.”

“You’re telling me?” he said. “What about all of them?”

“Wait,” she said, and he did.

“This question,” said The Mother, “is how do we prevent our events from being taken over by this type of element?”

“Element?” whispered Adrienne.

“Hush,” whispered Jonas.

“Oh come on,” said Baxter.

“Hold on,” said The Red-Haired Woman.

“She’s just going to bring up her whole dress code thing, do we really have to go through all that again?”

“I think,” said The Mother, running well-manicured fingers across her pants suit, “that it wouldn’t hurt.”

Shouts and standing, hands raised and ignored, and The Red-Haired Woman waded through it all until she could finally get the room to something that resembled quiet. She turned to Baxter and gestured for him to sit.

“I vote for cowboy hats,” he said. “Or sailor suits.”

“That’s what you always say,” said The Red-Haired Woman, repeating her gesture.”

“I look good in a sailor suit,” said Baxter as he sat.

“We need to fix our image,” said The Mother. “It’s hurting our message.”

“There’s only one message,” shouted The Young Maoist, “and that’s for the people’s revolution.” He was unconsciously aping the fervent pose that Mao had struck on his T-shirt. At least I hope it was unconsciously.

“Everyone, please wait your turn,” said The Red-Haired Woman.

“You always say that to me,” he said.

“That’s because you’re next on the list.”

“Come on, people,” he said, “let’s be disciplined, let this woman speak.”

“People don’t want to see the violence,” said a voice from the back, and other voices murmured agreement or disagreement, then allowed themselves to fade out.

“People don’t want,” said The Mother, “to see all the black clothes, the baggy jeans, yelling and cursing. No one listens to us if that’s how we portray ourselves. We’re not going to win anyone over with hip hop and rapping. People don’t want that.”

“Which people?” said a voice that floated over from the side. It was The Young Woman, her ponytail gone, her hair lazily cut and holding tight to her still scratched cheeks.

Everyone turned to face her. She stood, with effort and help from those around her.

“Which people?” she repeated. “And how do you know? Which people have you talked with? Talked with, not yelled at, or gave instructions. Talking includes listening.”

“Here you go again,” said The Mother, and Bowling Pin Man stood next to

her. They shared a resigned smile, and he whispered something that made her chuckle.

“I’ve learned,” said The Young Woman, and it was clear that speaking was still quite draining for her, “from my own mistakes, and I can see you making them all over again.”

“You’re very young,” said Bowling Pin Man, and The Mother nodded.

“And you’re adorably plump,” said Baxter, stretching out on the floor, “and I’m dangerously good-looking. So what?”

“You’re out of line!” said The Mother.

“If she’s right, she ‘s right.”

“You’re out of line!” The Mother repeated, and this time several others joined her.

“Time!” said The Red-Haired Woman. “All right, let’s break. We start up in five minutes exactly.”

Jonas and Adrienne watched as some folks filed out, and others stood together in groups, debating various points that had come up or should have come up or were due inevitably to come up. It was a lot less fun to watch than it sounds, and it doesn’t sound all that enjoyable to begin with.

“This,” said Adrienne, head in hands, “sucks.”

Jonas agreed.

“Is this punishment?” said Adrienne.

“Why?” asked Jonas. “Do you need to be punished?”

“Don’t get smart. And I didn’t mean for me.”

“I know you didn’t.”

They sat, watching.

“Well,” said Jonas, with about a minute to spare before everyone was due back, “maybe I’ve taken enough of this.”

“*You* have?” said Adrienne.

“Okay,” he said, and he smiled, “we have.”

“True,” said Adrienne, and they gathered their stuff together.

At that point The Mother burst into the room.

“They’re arresting Jessica!” she said, dumping the words into the room and immediately running back out.

“Who the hell is that?” said Jonas.

“Girl with the ponytail,” said Adrienne.

“Didn’t she cut it off?” said Jonas.

“Who cares?” said Adrienne as they raced out the door.

The meeting was being held on the second floor and they ignored the line forming by the elevator and pounded down the back staircase. They ran to the front door. As they approached it Baxter was running to it from the outside. When he spotted them he waved frantically.

“Oh fuck,” said Adrienne, but it was too late. Jonas pushed open the doors and emerged on the into the courtyard. In the mix of dying sunlight and growing streetlight the officers were thick and indistinct, shadow-blue with bright shining eyes peering out from under brimmed caps.

“There he is!” a voice shouted, and Jonas turned to see the lead officer from the rally, in another new-looking suit, standing by the steps and pointing. The cops followed his finger and headed for Jonas. Two of them gingerly led The

Young Woman away, but there were more of them filing into the courtyard at every second, flashing lights and gloating sirens filling the air.

“Shame! Shame!” everyone shouted, the hostility of the meeting transforming itself into a unity of fury, which is, of course, the best way to unite an unconnected group of people.

They were on Jonas quickly, and he shut the door behind him to keep Adrienne inside, but the cops dragged him aside, wrenched the door open, and yanked her out as well.

An over-eager young cop pulled her arm, and she stumbled down the stairs, falling at the bottom. As she tried to stand he shoved her back down and jerked her arm up behind her back. She screamed, and he laughed.

“Save it for the judge,” he said.

“We don’t need her,” said the cop in the suit, “just him.”

“She’s resisting,” the he said.

There are pictures, personal accounts, cell-phone video, some of it shaky and unwatchable. The mixture of ending sunlight and birthing streetlight played havoc with most of the visuals; there’s nothing that could have been admissible as evidence in a court of law, and little that made its way through the court of public opinion.

There’s one picture, though, that stands out.

Much of the attention of the cameras and the witnesses was brought to Jessica’s wounded and dignified slow walk to the patrol car, or to the fierce defiance of Adrienne’s arrest—she didn’t resist, technically, but she didn’t assist, either, and the increasingly frustrated and embarrassed cop dragged her until

others joined him and they were able to carry her, loose and unmoving, as she stared into their eyes the whole way. There were the other activists, yelling and watching every move, noting down anything that might be of importance, blocking the cops as they walked, some even lying down beneath front wheels to prevent the cars from moving. And there was Baxter, making one smart remark too many until he too was snatched up, cuffs snapped on, roughly tossed into the back of a car.

Through it all, not much attention was paid to Jonas. He was too quiet, too reflective, and the cops shied away from him.

There was one picture, snapped from an iphone, an amateur photojournalist experimenting with black and white, capturing a moment, most likely by accident. In the picture Jonas walks, arms behind him, but his back is straight, and it is clear that his pace is steady, unhurried. The two cops tasked with leading him to the street stand off, stepping back from him, as if from a too well-fed bonfire. One shields his eyes, the other has his head tucked into his shoulder, covering up.

Jonas off-frame, moving from the foreground towards the back of the image. He is walking away from the camera, but turning, slightly, and in the midst of the commotion his face the only thing captured by the shot. The light is bad in the picture, his face is the only source of light, and shadows coat everything in a layer of dark, allowing only an arm here or part of a face there to poke through.

In one of those accidents of timing, Jonas is looking into the lens as they shot is taken. He didn't know the woman who took the picture and it is doubtful

he was looking for or at her; it is a peculiarity of photography, an unintended moment of clarity.

His eyes are open. His posture erect, he strides forward, with a confidence and surety that is stunning in someone with hands cuffed behind their back. There is the slightest of smiles gracing his lips, and his face is lit from inside, reflecting its glow onto the cops around him. All the flames he had stared into so deeply, so intently, shine back on him, dancing along his chin. His is the face of a man without shame.

It is one picture, one moment, nothing more.

And then it is gone.

CHAPTER THIRTY

We Got The Rest

*“Don’t worry baby,
God’s gonna see us through.
I know there’s confusion.*

Peace after Revolution...”

Erykah Badu

“Thanks for meeting with us, guys,” said Adrienne. She had quickly been able to plead a misdemeanor of disturbing the peace, and was released the next day. Jonas, however, faced more serious charges, which included incitement to riot, resisting arrest, assaulting an officer, and (my own personal favorite) illegal use of fire. As the “crimes” had been committed in Harrisburg and he faced potential Federal charges, he’d been moved to a prison upstate. A secondary effect of this, which I am sure never went through the minds of those who organize such things, was that Jonas, like so many others, was a two-hour commute away from his loved ones and friends.

We were gathered around the kitchen table, Maria sitting beside Adrienne. My housemates took the other chairs, making for a more cluttered space than we were used to. I ground up beans for some coffee.

“Hey,” said my housemate Jim, “we have a lot to discuss with you.” He looked at me but I avoided his eyes. I could see him staring at me, waiting, but I just cleaned out the French press, keeping my eyes trained to the sink. There was a folder on the table and Jim flipped it open.

“You do?” said Adrienne. Maria said nothing.

“Yeah,” said Jim, “we have a plan.”

“A plan?”

“A couple of them, actually,” he said, grinning.

“Well,” said Adrienne, “this sounds interesting.”

I poured the beans into the French press and waited for the water to boil. Out of the corner of my eyes I saw Jim look to our other housemates, who shrugged and allowed him to continue as spokesman for the day.

“You have to finish school,” he said, forcefully. Maria blinked. The teapot whistled, and I poured the water.

“We need doctors,” said another housemate.

“And you’re gonna be a great one,” said the last.

“We can all agree on that,” said Adrienne, carefully.

“Eshu?” said Jim.

“Coffee’ll be ready in a minute,” I said. He stared at me, then shrugged once more, and turned to Maria.

“Quit your job,” he said, “but stay in school.”

“This,” said Adrienne, “is your plan?”

“She’s gotta be dealing with J, right?”

“J meaning Jonas?” said Adrienne, and Jim nodded. “There’s a lot to do.”

“You can cut back in school, right?” said Jim. “Stay in, but cut back some?”

Maria nodded.

“Do that. Stay in school. Help J. We got the rest.”

“The rest?” said Adrienne.

“We cover the bills,” said Jim, “we got the rest.”

I passed around coffee mugs.

“You take care of J,” said the second housemate.

“And yourself,” said the last.

“And yourself,” agreed Jim.

“Can you guys afford to do that?” said Adrienne.

“Are you kidding?” said the last housemate. “This place was cheap when we just had jobs. Now we’ve all got careers.”

“Weren’t you moving out?” said Adrienne. “Getting married?”

I brought out the milk, and grabbed spoons. The sugar was on the table.

“Well,” said the last housemate, with a giddy smile, “guess I’ll have to put that on hold for a bit.”

“My parents,” said Jim, “are so damn happy I’m going back to grad school they’ll pay whatever I ask them.”

The coffee was ready. I poured for everyone. We sat, quietly, and drank.

“Wow,” said Adrienne. Maria said nothing. She looked to each of us in turn, and her eyes slowly filled. None of us could meet her gaze for long.

I didn’t look at her. I didn’t have to. I could hear each tear, scraping down her cheek. I could feel the thunder as they landed on her shirt, on her knees, on the table. Her man was gone and I hadn’t stopped it. Hadn’t stopped him.

“And lawyers!” shouted the last housemate, a little too eager. The other housemate nudged him and he bowed his head.

“Well,” said Adrienne, “if we can get Baxter—”

“That’s not an option,” said Jim.

Adrienne glared at him.

“Look,” said Jim, “I know he was your friend and all but have you seen him on TV?”

She nodded.

“Then you know he’s—”

“Yes,” she said.

“Eshu’s parents donate to all kinds of stuff,” he said.

“Mine too,” said the last housemate, receiving another elbow in the process. He bowed his head again.

“They went to some thing at the art museum last week and met some big shot attorneys at this liberal law firm,” said Jim. “They gave us their contact info and the guys there said they’d take the case.”

“Pro-bono?” said Adrienne.

“Mostly pro-bono,” said Jim.

“The rest cheap,” said the last housemate.

“Not cheap cheap,” said the other housemate, “law cheap, which isn’t really all that cheap.”

“Here,” said Jim, taking some pages from the folder.

“We’re gonna do some fundraising,” said the last housemate.

“We already got some designs from an artist,” said Jim.

“Eshu knows him,” said the other housemate.

Adrienne looked at the pages, then glared at me. For the first time that day, I met her eyes, and she was the one who looked away.

Maria stood, and walked to each of us, and gave us deep, long hugs, longer than comfortable, but shorter than we wanted. I was last.

“Thank you,” she said to me, and I nodded.

“You been up to a lot,” said Adrienne.

“Not enough,” I said.

“What’s enough?” she said.

“Eshu,” said Maria.

“Yes?”

“I know it’s a lot to ask,” she said, “but if you could visit Jonas, it would mean so much.”

I had known this was coming. I finished my coffee, gulping it down. I wiped my mouth. Turned to her.

“Okay,” I said, “no big deal.”

She smiled. One last tear rolled, and I could hear it crashing as it fell.

I opened my mouth, but as I expected, nothing came out. I closed it, nodded to Adrienne, and headed back to my room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Not Even The Wind Was Alive

“Now they got me in a cell...”

Public Enemy

“Eshu—you’re the best.”

This was the first thing Jonas said, as he slid into the hard plastic bench. He stretched out towards me and we bumped fists. I glanced around but no one seemed to be taking the ‘No Touching’ signs all that literally. I had never been in one of the large visiting rooms in a prison before, and had figured that all of my movie-born assumptions of it would be shown to be hilariously misplaced; instead I had found the cartoonish images in my head to essentially be clips from a documentary. Getting in was slightly less of a hassle than I had been told to expect. Either that or after a few post-911 airplane trips nothing seemed all that out of the ordinary anymore.

There weren’t many people in the room at this time. A couple, here or there, heads bowed silently. A mother and a son. What had to be twins, told apart by the difference in clothing. It felt as hushed as a library, though one where the librarians were significantly burly than usual, lurked on the edges, and appeared to be very well-armed.

“Sorry I haven’t come sooner,” I said. He waved that off.

“You’re here now.”

“No big deal,” I said, “it’s not that far a drive.”

I laid out what I had been able to get from the vending machines, chips, candy bars, a packet of fruit and nuts. A couple Cokes. And one very big and crumbly chocolate chip cookie.

“Though I don’t know,” I said, “why they couldn’t have left you in Philly until the trial. Whenever that is.”

I slid a soda to him.

“Sorry I didn’t come earlier,” I repeated.

“No,” he said, popping open a Coke, “that’s not what I mean.” He took a gulp, paused, then another, bigger one. Put it back onto the table and tore into a Butterfinger. His bruises were starting to fade, and his limp on the way in had been barely noticeable.

“Here,” I said, tossing him some napkins.

“I mean Maria,” he said.

“Oh,” I said, “that.”

“Yeah,” he said, “that.”

I stared at the cookie. It was already falling apart inside its plastic wrap. How old was it? This was not the best choice I could have made. It did have chocolate chips, though. That had to count for something.

“You guys didn’t have to.”

“What did we do?” I said. “Nothing.”

He saw me eyeing the cookie and nudged it towards me. He had already moved on to a Three Musketeers. The cookie wrapped was taped somewhere and

my fingers fidgeted with it, scampering over it until I found the right edge. Then it opened too quickly, and pieces of cookie shotgunned across the table. He laughed, coughed on his candy, swallowed, and laughed again.

“We didn’t want her to worry.”

“Please,” he said, still laughing, “you’re never gonna stop her from worrying.”

“Well,” I said, “maybe she’ll have a little less.”

“Maybe.”

“You do realize,” I said, “that you’re in jail?”

He waved that off.

“For now,” he said.

“Really?”

He nodded.

“Guys in here figure,” he said, “they locked me up to get me to plea bargain out, quickly. Probably expected me to sign the first piece of paper they put in front of me. When I didn’t, they panicked, thinking I had some grand lawsuit being prepared. They’ve been bringing me a better deal each day.”

“So why are you still here?” I asked.

“They haven’t brought me the right deal, I guess.”

I looked around, at all the men in the room, and thought for a moment of all of the deals they’d been forced to make. Guys in orange uniforms, guys in blue-black uniforms with weapons to match, guys in their best clothes, like me.

“Can you guys afford it?” said Jonas.

“What?”

“What you offered to Maria,” he said.

“What’s to afford?” I said.

I scooped up as much of the cookie I could, puzzling it back into as coherent a shape as I could. It was not an improvement.

“And the legal team,” I added, “that’s pretty much on Adrienne.”

“With y’all’s money.”

“You got to have money,” I said, “in order to start fundraising. It’s *raising* the funds. As in building them up.”

“Not creating them.”

“Exactly. Because we still don’t know,” I said, “just how long you’re gonna be here.”

“They’re letting me out for The Memorial.”

“You’ll be out for the Memorial?” I asked.

“No,” he said, softly, “they’re letting me out for it.”

“Oh,” I said.

He was silent for a moment. Then:

“And Baxter?”

“We haven’t,” I said, “been able to reach him.”

He thought about that, then shrugged.

“Saw him on the news,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“The short hair looked good.”

“Think so?” I said.

“Better,” said Jonas, “than I would have expected.”

The dreads had been the first thing to go. His parents gotten to the station before the police car driving him, and had landed with the force of a thousand writs and court orders. His fingerprints were barely dry on the intake form as he exited the building; by the end of the night he had moved back home, cut his hair, and been fitted for suits that had cost more than a few months rent for his old apartment.

“We had good times,” said Jonas.

“You did,” I said. “You did indeed.”

I shoved as much of the cookie as I could into the wrapper and slid it carefully off of the table. I carried it to the nearest trash and dumped it. When I returned Jonas sighed, pushing his candy away.

“You got news.”

“I do.”

“And yet,” he said, “you’re not telling it.”

“No.”

He leaned forward, but looked to the windows. They were large and institutional, covered with wire mesh, and the day outside was blue, though at this time in the morning the sun couldn’t be seen from the angle they faced. Every once in a while a random bird flitted past and everyone’s eyes locked onto it, following from window to window, until it flew off into the sky.

“Just tell me.”

“It’s Keith,” I said. “They called me. As I was coming up. Told me to tell you.”

There were no birds flying, not now. We waited. It seemed like the sort of

thing that should happen, a last symbolic flight, a spiritual goodbye. Not even a cloud. We sat, watching. He made no noise, and the tears themselves, of course, were silent.

I waited. There was more to say, and I wanted so much, more than anything, to say it.

“And Jessica?”

“Mostly recovered,” I said, “and plans on growing back the ponytail.”

A flicker of a smile.

“How’re you?” I asked.

“How am I?” he said. “I guess I’m as good as I can be, you know? Lotta guys here I know.”

“From teaching poetry?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Kinda sad to see some of them, thought they’d be out by now. But they show me the ropes, keep me all right.”

“You’re not alone?”

“Eshu,” he said, “everyone’s alone in here.”

We sat, nibbling at snacks and sipping our drinks.

“And you?” he said.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you,” he said. “How are you holding up?”

“Fine,” I said, “just, you know, worried about you.”

“Well,” he said, and the smile passed over his lips again, “I got something to take your mind off of me for a while.”

“What?”

Jonas looked out the window. There was nothing, no movement or life. He kept looking, but not even the wind was alive outside.

“Look,” he said, turning back to me, “I probably spoke a little too optimistically before. It’s gonna take some work to push them to do right. We both know that my best shot of getting out of here is Adrienne. If anyone can get me out, it’s her.”

“That,” I said, “is pretty obvious.”

“She takes care of her family.”

“And you’re family,” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “But...”

“But?” I said.

He was silent. I thought about it for a moment.

“But,” I said, “family’s not enough.”

“Not for her, though she’d never admit it, not even to herself.”

“So what can I do?” I said.

“So what can you do?” he replied.

“Ah,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said.

We sat there, smiling for a moment. I forced myself to meet his eyes; I was surprised at how easy it was, to smile and yet to hide. Then, I took a deep breath, sat up straight, and kept my eyes firmly locked on his.

“Jonas?”

“Yeah?”

“There’s, uh, there’s more. Something I have to tell you.”

He waited.

A bird flew past the window, and we stopped to watch it. I couldn't tell what type of bird it was, and for some reason this made me sad, watching it. It moved slowly, deliberately, as if milking every last eye on it for as long as it could. Then Jonas turned back to me.

I pushed myself to meet his gaze, and raised my shoulders as best I could.

"I saw Keith," I said. "I saw him die."

"Eshu, man," he said, reaching over to grab my hand, "oh, man, I'm so sorry."

I squeezed his hand, bursting with a silent and total hope that somehow it would all pour through my fingers into his palm, that holding his hand would in some way let it all come from me, tell it all without me having to open my mouth and see his eyes as the story filled the air around us.

There was a sudden feeling of silence in the room. Around us everyone seemed to be leaning in, soft speaking against cheeks and into ears, snuggling into whispers, even the guards huddled into conspiratorial jokes and chuckles. From the corners of my vision I could see them grouped together, twos, fours, a few, hoarding their information in the tightest flock they could.

The quiet continued. There were smiles now, big grins, handshakes, fist bumps, waves goodbye, flashes of motion, of connection, but no sound.

The bird returned, hovered, floated. Its feathers shone down on us, a rainbow sheen that twinkled in the air. I could see now that it was a pigeon, and it wasn't alone. Its flock whipped around behind it, zigzagging through the sky, waiting for a signal. The bird glared in at us, its wings flapping quick enough to

make a hummingbird jealous. Then it swooped in and its beak pecked against the glass. Dashed back, then flew closer again. Tap tap. Just a touch. Then harder. Again. And quicker. Other birds joined in. I stared, awed, as each strike landed sharper than the last. I thought for a moment that I was losing my mind when it zoomed straight back then promptly turned and raced directly at the glass.

“Eshu?”

I stood, and immediately felt the instant weight of that roomful of eyes tearing into me. I pointed, and every eye swung to the window.

“Look!” I shouted, and the room gasped as they suddenly saw it.

The window exploded in.

The splintering glass rained on us, chunks clattering at our feet, tiny glassdrops tinkering down on our heads. We all raised our hands as fleshy umbrellas and broke for the exits, the birds shrieking and cawing as they circled our heads. The guards shoved the inmates out one door and guided us to the other. My last sight of Jonas was of him being dragged out as he stared up at the beaked orchestra wailing in the rapidly emptying room.

The guards in their amazement stopped by the exit. I pushed away from them and stepped back into the room. The lead bird flew for me, then seemed to catch itself in midair, and dropped, feather-light, and sat calmly on a table. It opened its mouth and screamed at me, or tried to, but it was silent, an empty howl of rage. Its beak snapped shut, and it stared at me, frustrated. The bird shook its head, with a fluttering of wings and the sound of scratching claws against the formica.

“Sir, we have to leave,” said a guard, his fingers tugging at my elbow.

The bird glared at me and opened its mouth once more. The other birds cooed and chirped in sympathy, but it made no sound. Open beak and another soundless shriek, and the guard and I both flinched and jumped back.

“Now, sir,” said the guard, with a more anxious tone than I think he intended.

“It’s just a bird,” I said.

I stepped closer and the bird fluttered to me, alighting on a table in front of me. It shook its head up and down and opened its beak and roared in silence. I looked down at it, and I could see something poking out, caught in its maw. I carefully grabbed the pigeon with one hand and held the other up, preparing.

“What the hell are you doing?” said one of the guards.

“This just...this shit didn’t happen in Lompoc,” said the other.

The pigeon shifted in my hands, but allowed me to hold it. The other birds chattered, gossiping to one another as they stared. I closed my eyes, and dove down. My fingers grubbed around in the wet and fleshy mouth, its beak wide and steady. I got a grip on something and pulled, tugged, yanked, heaved, and there was an audible pop like a drain unclogging.

It was a feather, soggy and bent; it was long and grey. It was followed by others, brown, red, spraying out of the bird in a fountain, I covered myself as best as I could. Finally, it ended, and I stood, covered in bird slime and fluff of feathers.

The pigeon cooed, softly, sympathetically, and I nodded.

“All right,” I said, “I get it.”

I looked to the guards.

“Please tell me,” said one desperately, “that you ain’t hurt. Bleeding or nothing.”

I did a quick recon.

“No,” I said, “I think I’m okay.”

The two guards shared a look.

“If it’s okay with you,” the guard said, “we’d just as soon get you cleaned and out of here.”

“The incident report,” said the other, “is gonna be long enough without having to add...” He looked around the room, and I nodded.

“Okay,” I said, “let’s get out of here.”

I looked down at the bird.

“That okay with you?” I said.

And this time it screamed, an ear-shattering high-pitched roar, flapping its wings and bouncing up and down on the table. This time I didn’t resist when the guards pulled me back to the door.

The bird was still there as I was led out, and I heard its call as I went down the hallway. I listened to it for as long as I could.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The Song Of The Bloody Woman

"I got a story to tell..."

Notorious B.I.G.

The swings groaned beneath me. Big Mama had asked William to get some WD-40 but it sounded like he hadn't gotten around to it yet. Or else the swings merely drank it down and kept on with their scratchy chorus whenever anyone sat on them. I closed my eyes and leaned back, letting the rocking take me. It was a quiet afternoon, somewhat lazy; the street seemed less to be falling back asleep than to never have awoken.

There was a creak of a foot on the wooden steps, the bottom one. Eyes still closed, I smiled.

"Hey, Adree."

"Big Mama didn't tell me you were gonna be here," she said happily. She bounded up the stairs and hopped up next to me. I leaned my head onto her shoulder. She smelled faintly of colored markers and Elmer's Glue.

"Making more signs?"

"Yeah," she said, "didn't have time to shower."

We both laughed. In the tree in front of the house there was the trilling giggle of a robin, sharing in the joke. I could feel Adrienne shift to say something

more and then suddenly stiffen, her fingers clenching my pants leg in a fierce grip.

“Hello, Sarah,” I said, and then I opened my eyes.

“Hi,” she said from the bottom of the stairs.

“I am going,” said Adrienne under her breath, “to fucking kill you.”

“Well, if you’re gonna,” I said, “you better make it quick. You’ve got five minutes.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Because,” I said, standing up and stretching as I spoke, “in five minutes you’re gonna get a phone call. A collect call. And you’re going to answer it.”

Silence. Then her eyes grew huge and she jumped to her feet.

“Sit down,” I said, pointing to the swing, “I got a story to tell.”

I waited. To be honest, this was the only part of the plan I wasn’t sure of. I had never before told Adrienne what to do, and was under no illusions that she would just sit because I said so. We locked eyes and I kept mine steady, unaffected. No anger, no fear, no emotion. Just an expectation.

After what felt like a decade, she sat.

“This story,” I started, walking over to the other side of the porch, “is called The Song Of The Bloody Woman. It is a sequel, I guess. Adrienne, you’ve heard the first part; Sarah, you’re just gonna have to try to keep up.”

I pointed at the swing beside Adrienne. Sarah shook her head no. I stood, finger outstretched, until finally, fighting it each step, she walked up onto the porch and eased onto the swing. Adrienne never looked her way.

I leaned onto the bannister, taking in the street before me. The robin flew from its tree to one closer to where I stood, giving me a quick song of

encouragement. I took a deep breath.

“There was a young woman. Some say in her twenties, some say thirties, others say as young as ten, which doesn’t really make sense for all that happened to her but it’s not really all that important for stories to make sense. We’ll say young, and leave it at that.”

I glanced over at the swing. Two statues sat eyes closed and listened, on an unmoving swing.

“There may have been a war. That’s what some say. Battles. ‘She carried water for one side,’ say some, bringing bandages and supplies to the front line. You’d be amazed at the things we make little ones do, in our wars. Some say she was unlucky, or that her family was cursed for a long-forgotten blasphemy. One version simply says that everyone was suffering, and that she had it no different from anyone else around her. Who knows? Again, it doesn’t really matter, for the sake of this story. We’ll just say she had it rough and go from there.

“You see, this young woman had a talent. Or a problem. Or both. She had the ability to be there, when things happened to those she loved. She held their hands as they shook in their beds, coughing up blood and waiting for the end. She was there when they came back wounded from battle, looking for a home to die in. She caught them, as they fell, heart-finished and unable to go on.”

A quick peek. Adrienne stared at the her shoes, hovering over the floor. Sarah inched closer.

“After awhile,” I continued, “she began to notice something. Her clothes. They were all covered in blood. She threw them out and bought new ones, and within one minute of putting them on, without even moving, they were soaked

red, pain marked, and she left footprints with every step and ruined anything she sat on.

“She left home, wandering. Whenever anyone stumbled upon her trail, they called everyone they knew, to find out who had died, and how. She was spotted, every so often, but mostly it was a bloody handprint here, a smudge from an elbow there. Remnants of her passing.”

The leaves shifted. Behind the robin I felt for a moment that I could see another bird, bigger, wings outstretched wide, a long neck reaching up and elegantly, claiming the world for its own. In the chorus of the sleepy day I could make out the far off chirping of a pigeon, telling me to go on. I did.

“Finally, one day, people saw her. Standing motionless, in the middle of the street. Cars pulled up, honking at first, then quiet. A few people got out and started to walk over to her, yelling at her to move, but as they got closer they seemed to think better of it, and went back to sit and call their family. And wait.

“She stood there, staring.

“There was a signal, not a sound, not even a movement or anything. Just...something unspoken, yet shared. And they all turned towards where she was looking.

“A young man was making his way towards her. Slowly, as if each step hurt. His tears streaked the windshields of the cars he passed, and those unlucky enough to have a window down caught a sudden surprising shower on a clear sky day. He walked to her, and she stared at him.

“Then, gently, oh so gently, he reached down, and took her in his arms.

“She didn’t move, just stood there. She said nothing. Did nothing.

“But he cried. Oh how he cried. Rivers raged from him and torrents fell upon her, she looked up into his eyes and through the downpour she caught his gaze and they stood there, beneath it all, and he hugged her tighter and tighter, pulling her in.

“And then, slowly, with stiff out of practice arms, she reached up, and hugged him back. They latched onto one another and everyone else, standing knee deep in water, could only stare, and hope.

“The sun rose. Or set. Who knows. Probably both. Time passed, as time does.

“They ended their hug, but still held tight, hands wielded together, fingers melting into each other. They walked off, no one can agree on which direction, just that they left together.

“And his face was smooth and dry. And her clothes were bright shining white.”

I stopped. They stared at me.

“What happened to them?” said Sarah.

“Who knows?” I said. “Happily ever after? Why not?”

I looked to the door. Big Mama held it open slightly, the cordless phone in her hand.

“What happened next,” I said, “isn’t what matters.”

“What does?” said Adrienne.

“They faced it together.”

I walked over and kissed Adrienne on the forehead.

“That’s the only way we survive this shit,” I said, “and sometimes surviving

it is the best we can do.”

Big Mama cleared her throat. We turned to her, and as we did the phone buzzed in her hand. She stepped onto the porch.

“Adree,” she said, “it’s for you.”

Adrienne took the phone, stared at it, then lifted it to her ear.

“Hello,” she said. “Yes, I’ll accept.”

There was a pause. Sarah took her hand. Adrienne squeezed it tight.

Then:

“Hey, brother.”

I turned to Big Mama and said, “How about some lunch?”

“That sounds like a fine idea,” she said, and she took my arm and we went into the house.

EPILOGUE

*“Is this
the end?*

*Are you
my friend?”*

New Edition

They brought in a gospel chorus to bring an end to things. I didn't know the song, but it rocked, and even the anarchists got to their feet and swayed, mostly in time to the beat. The family was up front, no more tears, just arms around each other and big shining grins. The leader of the chorus pulled Keith's daughter over and she added her voice to theirs, and it washed over us, and for the first time in my life I felt like I could understand the concept of baptism. Jessica stood with her, not singing but with a big grin, and leaned against her. I stood too and though I didn't know the words I found myself singing along.

Jonas was at the front with Maria alongside him. And Adrienne was there with Sarah. The song poured over them and they moved with it.

This has been my story.

It was not about me, but I am the only one who can tell it. I think this may have been because the only thing that I could do was tell it.

As I have said, I have not sought forgiveness, but understanding, and that

is something which is harder to gain, and therefore is worth so much more.

In telling this I have discovered that there is more to my life than storytelling, just as there has been more to this story than my life. I didn't always know this; in fact, it may not have always been true. But it is true now and I do know it and that is much more than I knew, when this all began. The thing we hate to admit about stories is that, in all honesty, they never end. We simply stop writing when we're done with them, and when we find that they're done with us.

There's more, of course; things that happened, to me, to everyone. All these tiny things that happened, piling onto each other, building themselves gradually into yet another raging river. And as I've told you, this is that kind of story.

But, for now at least, it is done with me, and I with it.

End.

Philadelphia

4/7/2012

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