

5-6-2004

The King of Love

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

THE KING OF LOVE

By

WILLIE HOBBS, III

A Dissertation submitted to the
English Department
in the partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Degree Awarded:
Fall Semester, 2004

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank God first and foremost for good health, good company and the sweet madness of hearing the muse... I'd like to thank my wife Dr. Tameka Bradley Hobbs and son Ashanti for support along this nerve-racking journey. I'd like to thank Ma and Dad and the rest of my family who have supported my unconventional dream..

Much appreciation to the FEF McKnight Fellowship for making my matriculation possible. Equally in that respect, much thanks goes to professor Darryl Dickson-Carr for helping the scholar in me better define the artist in me. Much love to Virgil Suarez, Elizabeth Stuckey-French, Sheila Ortiz-Taylor (I'm getting mushy writing all this), Janet Burroway, the unstoppable Robert Olen Butler, the grouchy Bob Shacochis... Writing rules!

Much thanks to Drs. Dana and Sharon Dennard for showing married folks can do this thing, Carolyn Hall and all my colleagues in the English Department. I love you. Follow your dream - and buy my books when they come out, too.

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ABSTRACT

"The King of Love" is a creative dissertation. It is a novel focusing on the struggles of the African-American community to bridge gulfs and divides within itself. The location and setting of the story are in the present day and revolve heavily around the historical black community of Tallahassee, Florida known as Frenchtown.

In the tradition of Randolph Fisher's "Walls of Jericho", the novel is primarily steeped in the genre of the detective mystery and offers elements of satire throughout its narrative. As with Walter Moseley's highly influential Easy Rawlins detective series, issues of class, race, culture and heritage are at the forefront of the story. This lead to the employment of the first person point of view, which best captured the humor, flavor and idiosyncrasies of the Frenchtown inhabitants as well as its supporting characters.

CHAPTER 1

THE RETURN

My attitude had lifted with the flat lands and brisk Indiana air. I was more talkative. I had reinvented myself, even started to wear glasses. Marble brown frames, lightweight and professional looking. Not prescription, but you get my drift. I wore them on campus and took them off when I was with either Carla or professor Krementz, drinking Killian's at the Iron Horse. Me, a lowly sophomore, drinking hard with big dog, tenured professors and handling it.

People there like Professor Krementz were interested in me in ways everybody back home took for granted. I noticed the possibilities: The acne scars could have been possible signs of economic hardship. The love of khakis a possible hint of gang culture. The cloudy eyes evidence of weed sessions untold. It was all up to me.

The memorization of rap lyrics was a sign of pedigree, so maybe I indulged a little. Being a real musician, I didn't care for most of it, it was just my job somehow, to stay up on it and explain... The other two black girls in the department couldn't stand me. They wouldn't have even noticed me back home. In Indiana, I had my own kind of thing. The last thing I wanted to do was drive over the Georgia/Florida line with most of my shit to come back home to Tallahassee to intern for the fall.

I was just beginning to master being too stoned to feel the telescope around my eye while viewing the Milky Way at the Kirkwood Observatory, of existing off of one of the Uptown's huge servings of cajun meatloaf for three

days. I began to crave the smell of Neutrogena T-Gel Shampoo in Carla's chestnut hair against the limestone buildings.

I especially hated the idea of giving up the raves. The teeth chattering ability to float until sun up. The X.

On August 19th, I had left Indiana's smoothly paved roads, cool air and returned to kudzu-covered trees that lean over roads and choke out the sunlight. Back to drawn out, shitty sweltering days where even two showers a day barely suffice. I was back home again for the fall semester, with chain smoking, fattening, stagnant people from fattening, stagnant families I had grown up trying to avoid my whole life. Back among flying roaches, sorry-ass Chinese takeout and three hour plus church services. I didn't even know how to talk to these people anymore. Everybody in Indiana reamed me for my accent and so, the "suthun" twang that I learned to subdue - I now felt it curling up the sides of my tongue again with every breath. Claustrophobia from all sides.

I had been exploring a new place with new people, to see how my own first impression - and not the influence of my family - affected how people thought of me. There's just no way to know what you can achieve on your own without trying. And things were moving along. I had all A's in American Lit, Foundations of Journalism and Mass Communication, Intro to Sociology... all the signs that I was mature enough to be on my own. So why in hell did Ma and Dad pull strings to get me to intern at the Capitol Outlook again, the local black newspaper that comes out only once a week? Because they didn't respect me or even see the big picture.

This is why I had set up the internship with the Tallahassee Democrat instead. I was working on writing a book Professor Krementz had given me an idea for after my original internship with the Atlanta Journal-Constitution was already screwed up thanks to Ma and Dad threatening my advisor. Carla was going to fly down to see me for God's sakes! If I was going to be home for the fall, it was going to be on my terms.

Professor Krementz had told me how to break out from the pack as a journalist. There's your exclusive, which usually takes years of experience to luck up on. And then there's a book. He totally supported my writing and was always telling me that I should start writing from what I knew. I'll be damned if that wasn't what I was trying to get away from in the first place.

Krementz was from Bloomington, which couldn't be whiter. Krementz, like many whites from there, never ventured into nearby Gary, Indiana - Blacktown, USA. I was constantly the only black person in my classes so I had to explain a lot about blacks. He said there was this thing called gentrification going on in many black communities that I should look into. I told him my parents said that's what was happening in Frenchtown and that they hated it. Gentrification's when people try to renew a run-down area with middle or upper class people. Their being there brings in the dollars that renovates abandoned buildings ad brings in new business. The casualty usually is the removal of poor people that were there at first.

Frenchtown's the part of Tallahassee that I came from. Krementz figured if there's something a young journalist had to explain constantly to various audiences that they

obviously know about intimately - then there's where their material and the chance to get noticed was. I just figured some really important black neighborhood like Harlem of southside Chicago would be more important. Krementz thought differently.

After that e-mail, he took to Instant Messages with me to get me on task:

"You've got a wellspring of material at your front door, Orlando. The capitol of the most visibly corrupt state as far as voting is concerned. . . Jobe Bush has to be corrupt. You can go straight to the source to find out what's going on with the gentrification of your neighborhood. "

Jeb Bush. It's Jeb.

"Jeb? What's with that? That's the Beverly Hillbillies all over again? How'd you people even vote somebody with a name like that in? This guy lobbed the ball to his asinine brother for the winning slam. The presidency! How can that not be rich?"

But as Professor Krementz kept bringing up things I know he had probably read about in Michael Moore's Stupid White Men book, it occurred to me just how far off he and others who had never visited the state and especially, the capitol, were:

"I mean you got your Disney World, everybody's in bikinis, everybody from the Caribbean flavoring the pot. Maybe that's what they want to make Frenchtown into. Either way, it has to spell the end of people you've always known living nearby. It may even mean the end of the life you've known. "

... Once Professor Krementz explained it like that, I figured, fine. I'll show the world how far off he and the rest of white Indiana was. I would show 'em that Tallahassee was truly a piece of Georgia that had to import Palm trees to even look like it was part of Florida.. So there it was, a full semester of no foreseeable sex, no real headway in networking. . .

This disappearance of black life, as he insinuated, did seem intriguing. Some of that black life I wanted gone anyway, like the constant beer bottles and fly attracting watermelon rhines along curbs and ditches as I came down Old Bainbridge. The barefoot kids out at all hours of the night from the Ebony Garden projects all the way up to Virginia Street. The black men, young and old, hanging out at bus stops and under street signs with either nothing to do or nothing but the wrong thing to do. The drugs and boarded up houses. The abandoned buildings. The mountain of picked-over evicted furniture or discarded appliances that miraculously landed at the curb of some vacant lot. The police that everyone hated for being there or not being there at all. The sight and confusion of it all, the smell of it all depressed me all over again. But as I drove, there were more half done homes where there were once vacant lots of soda cans, potato chip bags and dirty socks. Green Porto-Potties dotted the sides of some streets, the heat aggravated the smell of fresh cement and cut plywood. Buckets of plaster, insulation wrapping and discarded vinyl siding piled up at curbs. Things had picked up speed since the last time I had to come home.

I pulled into the driveway behind Ma's Blazer. The sight of that brick bungalow tickled and sickened me all at

once. The cheap sprinkler Dad is notorious for buying had jammed once again and had flooded the patch of grass around it. The sound of loudening crickets, yelling street kids blocks over and distant cars passing down the main roads settled around the sprinkler's ineptitude.

Ma's wicker patio set was turning brown and gray. I tried to recline my seat and just relax for a moment, but my baggage in the backseat stopped me cold. I took in the moist, early evening air. It would take a minute to get ready for all this. Fine by me, I reminded myself, as long as I made my mark.

CHAPTER 2

AT THE DEMOCRAT

My in-car meditation wasn't as successful as I had hoped. I appreciate any dream that lets me know, as quickly as possible, that it's merely a dream. Such was the case the very next night when I found myself standing ten feet high enough above the earth and sapped of any real energy under ominous, gathering clouds. My arms were spread parallel to my aching shoulders. The sound of weeping women grieving, black funeral style, crept up into my throbbing feet. I looked down. I was clad in my favorite Hanes boxers and leather chaps. It was the nail driven through my feet that caught my attention rather effectively. I checked my hands. Yep, I was being crucified - in Tallahassee! I looked down and realized I was at the Seminole Burial ground near the airport. Greg, the owner of Condomology, my favorite in-town porn store, was knocking on my beam. How dare he bother me about a DVD rental late fee at such an occasion?!

Women swarmed around him. The women were all familiar, but no Carla. These were all in-shape, *black* women with small features, each just as fine as the day they had rejected me in high school or college. They were all barefoot and decent in tight, black dresses and looked like extras for En Vogue's "Hold On" video.

None compared to the one coming into the crowd from the loblolly pines and red cedar. No, this one was new to me. Of bubbling café au lait in a black unitard and jeans. Womanchild. Her wrists were Asian-girl tiny, her body made

to endure the most cruel corset ever conceived. The eyes slanted as if she was smiling even when she wasn't. Underneath freckles of cinnamon sprinkled across the nose, I could tell even from way up there. Hair jet-black and pulled back. She could have had an outee belly button and would have still been beyond reproach

Dopey-looking people in flannel with apple pie stains around their mouths overwhelmed her. The idiots wore orange smocks and eventually made their way to comforting the hysterical women. I howled at the sight of the smocks; The Home Depot off of Capitol Circle drive had provided the lumber for the crosses! I had lost a job there just because I fell asleep in the break room once. The grieving women seemed to veer to my left. Even her.

"Hey fool."

I looked to my left. There stood a green-eyed, wiry black male. He too was being crucified. The women were clamoring at his wood. He wore a black bandana on his head. His P. Diddy-autographed Sean John jeans sagged so badly his pubic hair crept over his front button. In fact, the nail for his feet went through his bloodied cuffs.

Sweat bejeweled his tattooed, well defined body. "You eva seen Tupac CD cover for Makavelli? It's kinda like this." He snickered like the nails were a mere inconvenience. "I told you was gonna be a legend. I told you nigga, didna?"

He began to ask me what Indiana was like. I grew dizzy and unable to answer. A faint whimper came from the right. In that direction, I found another had met the same fate. Though woefully obese and black as a seal, he cut a dashing

figure in a lime green and orange plaid button down, braided leather belt and rather tight khaki slacks. The cuffs were rolled up to his gargantuan calves as to display the pierced and bloody beige socks. Some sort of lime green sweater was wrapped around his shoulders. It bunched up behind his head like a makeshift pillow. I didn't care, a wise accessory be damned. I screamed to the heavens; I hate lime green with a passion.

A blueberry smoothie was duck taped to the fat man's chest, allowing him to drop his chin to the left and seek nourishment. The whimper had come from his frustration in trying to get the straw back into his mouth. He eventually gave up. Only then did he notice no one grieving at his feet. It was after that that he bothered to look over and notice me. Sunscreen was on his nose.

I felt something on my head, some kind of hat. I arched my head back. A gold crown fell over my eyes and then fell to the grass beneath me. The one in the unitard stepped away from the herd and retrieved it. She clutched the crown to her ample breast, looked up at me. She brushed hair from her face and smiled. It sent violent tremors of sensuality through me that tested the hold of the nails. The nails won.

The fat one whimpered again.

"Stopped bitchin' up!" hollered the one in the bandana. "We running outta time, fat ass!"

A cell phone went off in some outer thigh compartment in my leather chaps. The fat one muttered the last thing I remember before I looked into the clouds for the last time. "When you go back to Indiana, will you tell him about us?"

On Monday, August 23rd of 2003, my fourth day back, I skipped my appointment with the Capitol Outlook Ma set up and went to the Tallahassee Democrat to keep my life on track. Chris Matthews came to greet me at the receptionist's desk. Matthews was the assistant Metro editor to Russell Roberts. Mr. Roberts was the guy I had been working with to set up the internship. Matthews gave me a look of phony enthusiasm so forced that it rated up there with the assholes I'd met at IU. This jerk was a twenty-something blond with obvious connections; He was in jeans and flip flops! No way in hell were you're supposed to be doing that!

"I was just dropping in today to pick up some things, remembered our lil' appointment. Close call there, I was almost out the door."

I mashed my lips together and nodded. His accent demanded a pickup truck with a gun rack as an accessory. I even had to initiate the handshake. What kind of professionalism was that? Disrespect.

Matthews took me to Mr. Roberts' office, who apparently wasn't in. It was spacious, smelled like Lemon Pledge and was full of pictures of people that shared the forty-something's ruddy complexion, facial or teeth structure in one way or the other. I sat in the office chair in front of the desk. Matthews sat in front of me on the desk's edge. He leafed through my portfolio with this over-exaggerated nod of his head here and there. This was probably the first administrative task he was ever given.

He wanted to be Mr. Roberts so bad; You could just tell.

"Uhhh, yeah, uhhh you know, you write quite well here, Orman."

"Orlando, it's Orlando. Mr. Roberts definitely thought so."

"Yeah, yeah... you're stuff's really good. I was looking at the articles you did for the Outlook especially. The one about the notable characters in Tallahassee. Very thorough, in depth. I wonder where you got this level of research done."

"My aunt works for the Florida Archives."

Matthews closed my portfolio and folded his arms. He curled my portfolio like it was a newspaper he was about to toss into somebody's yard and tapped the edge of it against his lips! He stared up at the ceiling. "Well, you probably won't have that much time to or even need to go that deeply into the history of things to cover today's story - in fact, I got more of a Truman Capote type feel from your work. Ever considered writing books?" Matthews looked down at me. "You've heard of Capote, right?"

"Yes," I said as I curled my toes inside my appropriately chosen loafers, "I have In Cold Blood at home. The thought has crossed my mind, writing creative non-fiction."

"Yeah, yeah that's what they call it. You are correct." He unfurled my portfolio. *Correct*, like he was some fucking professor. "This is good. Too many long, winding sentences though. Today's reader can't take that type of mental strain. Everything's now or never. Ever heard of Norman Mailer?"

I smiled, "you have no idea."

Matthews gave me a look as if he had cut his fingernail too close to his finger. "Simple yes would suffice."

After enduring Matthews' intellectual/literary pissing contest, I got issued a badge. The intern shit for pay run down was next. \$6.50 bullshit minimum wage plus three credits toward my major. 40 hours a week, Monday through Friday, 3 to 11pm. Stories were due in by 10pm. Matthews gave me a quick tour of the Archives, cafeteria, and circulations after that. The polished aroma of the mahogany and brass in the front lobby lingered in my nose with every step.

We were making our way back to the newsroom when Matthews introduced me to Harris Green, one of the mainstays in the Democrat for almost two decades. Harris' was such a fixture in the paper that his name would be more notable missing from the metro section than it would taking its usual place.

One of the things I loved about meeting writers was looking at their hands, hearing them pull air in through their noses. Catching them on an off day, where they look even less like the photo they poised for, was even better. It equaled the playing field to me, made them more flawed and mortal. Harris was definitely on an off day.

Unlike his staff photo, Harris' eyes looked as if they had never known a full night's rest since birth. With his being a white guy, the splotches of mild psoriasis that decorated his forearms were extra pink and brought to mind a baboon's ass. His belly covered his belt buckle and half

the length of the zipper to his puke green Docker slacks. The green and yellow checkered, short sleeve shirt wasn't a winner, and not even on the day he bought it. On the upside, his black hair hadn't thinned any more than before. Harris was in the middle of a call. The headset cradled his head like it belonged from the kid's toy section of some store. While continuing to talk on the phone, he swiveled toward me and shook my hand as if to say, 'yeah, I look a lil' different, whatever. Just hold a sec.'

Black coffee steamed from Harris' black FSU coffee mug. The smell of it made me feel like Dad would walk in the room at any moment and ask me why I wasn't at the Outlook. "Alright then," Matthews said as he patted me on the shoulder and started smoker's strut out the office toward the front of the building. I sat in the cubicle next to Harris while he finished the call, taking in the fluorescent lighting, and buzz of activity, the Byron Dobsons, Zilpha Underwoods, Mary Ann Lindleys all scurrying here and there. Getting things done. I lowered my head so that no one could see me smiling to myself.

I was on my bed in my old room later on that day, next to my alto, staring at the ceiling... The old room was an insult to me now. Too small and condescending for my imagination. The red Million Man March T-shirt thumb that was tacked to the back of my locked door was dusty and ancient looking. I could barely read the commemorative pin attached to the

shirt on account of the dust. They were both at the foot of the door, knocked off the door by Ma's fat fists.

The smell of Ma and Dad's cigarettes were still all over the sheets even though I asked her to wash them before I even left Indiana. Ashtray potpourri that violated me with every breath. My heart was racing. My lips were thinned out and pulled tight across my teeth. I had done great! Fuckin' fine. I had stood my damn ground with Ma. I should've just gotten in the car and straight up left, but I just didn't even want to see anybody's face. Bad decision.

My opened saxophone case and backpack were still next to the bed. The posters of the first Matrix movie and stolen banners of Rickards High (back when the mascot was the Redskins and not changed to Raiders because of all this whining about Native Americans' feelings), were still on the wall by the dresser mirror. The rest of the lime green walls (I hated that color! It made me hate green altogether!) looked so bare without my fingering chart for my alto, posters of Aaliyah, Cannonball Nat Adderley, of Oliver Stone and Norman Mailer shaking hands. I could not deal with all this silly ass green watching my every move, watching as she screamed into the door and threatened to get a screwdriver to undo and poke out the knob to get in and start up again. It made me replay pieces of what went down in the living room.

"Didn't I tell you to meet with Mr. Roosevelt at the Outlook? I thought you were supposed to be so responsible? What?! The Democrat?!"

I twisted to my right, toward the cordless I had

called Dad on only moments ago. He was finishing up cutting someone's hair at the shop and was on his way. The phone's base was on the dresser, next to the silver pair of Chinese exercise balls I couldn't find when I first left for IU. I had thought my older sister Juanita had stolen them before she went back off to Virginia to live a carefree life of dykeadelick with some roller-blading girl with a lisp she met while skipping rocks along the water out at Lake Ella. Next to the Chinese exercise balls was where the Spelling Bee state Champion trophy of 1996 usually sat. Now it was tight in my right hand, ready to drive a marble corner into an eye socket if necessary. Flashes of seeing Ma go down holding a side of her face keeps me focused. Fucking spelling bee bullshit... It didn't even seem like something I had done. More like something her and Dad did through me. "I've had it with you embarrassing your father and me. I work hard at that photo mat like he do the barber shop to see you through! You get around these white people in Indiana and lose your lil' mind, I see! We should've never let you go out that far for school. It's obvious you're not mature enough to keep your focus. They've got your head in the clouds with these phony 'options.' You think this is some kind of game?!"

The wires to the old play station system were still snaking out from under the bed to the back of the nightstand. A pile of John Grisham and Michael Connelly books would have kept them from sight like before, had I brought them back from IU. The nightstand itself looked naked without Norman Mailer's The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing or Advertisements for Myself atop it. Never

realized how much books took up in my life.

"You don't have an ounce of common sense, do you? What the hell do you mean the Democrat is more in line with what you want? Daily experience? Please! If all our talented writers stayed with the Outlook, it would be more of the damn place that you want. The Outlook is wide open for you to make your mark because it is understaffed and because of your talent. They can showcase your writing, I told you that! You could have a column for God's sakes. I'm calling Roosevelt and you're getting your ass up there and - what? Excuse me?!"

I figured that's where I would put the laptop, one of the few things I could bring myself to immediately unpack. I wanted to turn over and type as soon as I woke up in the morning to keep myself from thinking about all of this green. And how I pushed Ma into the dining room table. She was pushing on me first!

"You ungrateful bastard! Y'know what? Get outta my damn house!"

The TV (that I left back in dorm storage) would be connected and sitting next to the old bottles of Polo, Cool Water cologne and Aloe Vera Magic Shave powder on the dresser next to the nightstand... which I always asked her not to fuckin' do because my Sony portable stereo was always put in the center of the dresser where all this other shit was supposed to be... Only Ma would have arranged it so neatly around my plastic, black CD rack of scratched, outgrown albums of Pearl Jam, pre-afro Lenny Kravitz, CD singles of (conveniently burned to one to save space) Usher's "My Way", Mark Morrison's "Return Of The Mack" (you probably liked it

and never admitted it), Ghost Town DJ's "My Boo" (of which everybody at Rickards swore the lead singer as well as the local rapper Clay D, were their cousins), "Don't Let Go" by En Vogue... and of course the newly placed CD's are next to the Chinese exercise balls.

"No! Don't run in that room! Don't go hide and blow on that saxophone! Get outta my house! Get outta my home, Orlando!"

My old Goosebumps book collection was still on the lower row of my bookshelf to the left. The top was virtually empty of the Mailer classics like The Executioner's Song, The Armies of the Night: History As a Novel/the Novel As History, Tough Guys Don't Dance and others that were taken along with me to Indiana. I was presently keeping An American Dream in my backpack.

"Open this goddamn door, Orlando! I swear to - you're getting withdrawn from IU! I'll fix your ass!"

On the other side of my bed, even further to the left, was my container of hard disks in which only God knows still resided, underneath an old Iomega 100mg zip drive was a humidior (cigar box) I got for my birthday for my reeds. Next to that were three Rickards yearbooks.

"Orlando! Orlando! Don't let me get a screwdriver to this door! I will tear up my own house just to kick yo' punk ass!"

From the hanger rod hung the Rack Room brown company shirt I wore while working at the Rack Room shoe store in the Tallahassee Mall. Beside them were cheesy red, blue and

gold paisley Stafford ties I wore that Dad would pick out at the end of every month. Never did care for paisley. I looked like some biology illustration of flagellum or some unrealistic painting of sperm. And yes, I had told Dad that many times before. I wiped my eyes and came back to the present. The door rattled with what had to have been her knee ramming into it. I was so afraid for Ma if she found her way into the room. Things were different now. I'd really hurt her on pure reflex alone.

"I'm gonna get a screwdriver! I'm goin' right now!"

My faded, boot cut jeans from the GAP were still in the closet. Left them by accident when I had to come back last time for Easter. Next to those buttons down Auntie Gretchen loved to buy me... the fake maroon and black Anaheim Ducks hockey jersey her son cousin Ricky let me have. Further that way toward the corner was the busted Super-Soaker from senior skip day that still sat back in the corner of my closet behind my high school grad gown. Used in-line skates Juanita bought for me from Play It Again Sports were still in the box, laying next to the soaker. I wanted to write everything left in the room into words and disappear and be left alone. I had grown used to writing freely in my journals and not worrying about someone reading that I wish I was dead in it and throwing it out - as if I wouldn't notice.

The front door of the house had opened and closed. Dad had come home. I heard her fuckin' footsteps skipping off, she was getting ready to start crying and exaggerating to get him even more on her side than he already was. I sat up on the bed and clutched the trophy with both hands. It

took leaving Tallahassee and getting away from all these voices, it took that time away from Tallahassee with Carla, to discover I had a right to all of my emotions. I wiped my eyes with a sweaty forearm. I looked out the window. And waited.

Gwone n'run, silly chile. Run to a way that cain't be found. Ain't no man atall. She thank she know you, she don' even know herse'f. Don' know 'bout hangin' from Magnolias, or the trying to swallow through the bit in the January frost, she don' know nuthin'! Story too much for her. Damn near too much for you. Scribble your 'lectronic confusion, silly child. Swimmin' with the others fine, but you li'ble to drown. Freedom ain't s'posed to cost so much that you ain't got nuthin' in common with us once you get it. Hell...

Indeed, fate pushes you at every turn to come to us. Brush the Spanish moss from our graves and dreams. Fate pushes you back to tell the story. Everything moves the speed of light in your age, yet we wait for you and will not move an inch until you come. History is the story of the victor! Claim your victory among these hills and dreams. Make your peace with the blood and heat. Listen to our voices blowing through the trees in the wind. Move in the rhythm of life here not against it. The tears you are bound to cry no woman can dry.

Auntie Gretchen was the first family member I called when I got everything straight with everybody at the Democrat to

start. I used to spend hours after school at the Florida Archives, where she's the director of Public Services, just flipping through books. Watching her work. Watching her move. She inherited the almost Georgia clay-colored hair and lean, ballet dancer's frame from my late grandmother Selma Dougherty-Gaines, whereas my mother inherited hers from my late grandfather Willie Gaines; the more common fleshy-upper armed, thick and undefined physique of most black women. My maternal grandparents both died in a car accident in 1967. I've sat back many a time and watched Auntie Gretchen, wondering if she and my grandmother were really as identical as people claimed. Sometimes, most of the time, I resented the blood that ran in Auntie's veins. If I could have been someone else, I would have married her.

Auntie congratulated me on the internship. She's the most accomplished one between she and Ma obviously, so Ma hated her in a quiet, calculated way. I asked Auntie if I could stay over with her on Dover Street. She said she'd see. She called Ma and Dad apparently because I had to call her days later to see what the answer would be; She wouldn't have left me out there like that otherwise. Of course the answer was no, of course she didn't want to get into the middle of it. Of course she knows how Ma and Dad have slept in separate rooms for the last eleven years, how they stay together only because everybody in town "looks up to them" for all the bullshit appearances they kept up. They only wanted me around to take the stigma off of their daughter and look like they knew what they were doing.

Dad came in from the barber shop alright. He

supposedly talked sense into Ma, made her go off somewhere while he came into the room and balled up the collar of my shirt with a fist. He tried to lift me off the bed like I was still a thirty pound pre-schooler (he did that shit one time when I was in second grade or something and has been trying to do it ever since). It didn't work very well. When he yanked me, my glasses fell off. He accidentally stepped on them. He said I'd be spitting teeth the next time I lay my hands on that bitch. I couldn't see ever coming back again after all of that - too much power was wrapped around her and when she was dead wrong like this, there was nowhere to breathe.

At least things were looking up at the Democrat. Harris had me doing mostly half ass stuff like blurbs of traffic accidents, lottery jackpot updates, things mentioned in the metro section that aren't even worth a byline. I know he was testing me though. I was with it. For every paragraph of copy Harris requested, I had an extra page for him to extract the goods from. He'd just look at me, "you and all this prose, man." He even allowed me to go back and highlight the meat of the articles (the where, when, who, what, why, and how), where he then trusted my judgment and dropped the articles in as they were. Ma refused to read any of it and only gave an attempt at it when she heard Auntie Gretchen was reading them. My mother was such a bitch.

Things moved along well enough. I started running into old faces from Rickards High, most with the same lame dreams I feared they'd have. All of them noticed my accent. Most were saddled with kids and swearing up and down

driving the bus at Taltran (the local bus system), or teaching second graders or being the circulation clerk at the local library was the big time. Just like Ma and Dad. I was going to write my creative nonfiction about them all. I was certain I could have trashed them all to look even more simple than they really were. Not only would they never get to reading it, but if they did, they probably would see it as a compliment. I'd tell them my plans to write a book. None even asked what it would be about. Small places make small minds.

Just like the old days, I found myself falling into the same habits. Slowly going mad from all the Sunday morning-styled slow driving. Matter of fact, the red light in front of Bethel AME on Martin Luther King and Tennessee Street still took longer than watching a gopher turtle cross a main road, so why did I find myself at the same intersection when coming back from work? Who knows. I also found myself still close to cursing out Ms. Frankford, the liver-spotted, 78 year-old lady at Krispy Kreme who insisted on calling me Kevin. The daughter of the only black delivery man of ice for blacks in the forties consistently messed up ringing my bill at the register so badly that my donuts would be damn near hardening when I got them. In spite of it, I never seemed to go through the drive-through. Maybe I was expecting her to die and be out of the way of progress. She was always there though, quick as ever to tell me that she got up for work at 3:30 am. to be at work at 5:00. The typical rut was coming back. The malls were boring. It took two months thereabouts to get the distraction I needed.

I was hanging around the news room early one Saturday morning in October to work on my book (mostly from the Archives at the Democrat) when Matthews was in his own closet-sized office toward the building's side entrance. He quickly called me into it via Harris' extension.

I walked into the office to discover he was getting a call from the Sheriff. Matthews was snapping his fingers at me to sit down - as if I wasn't already tuned in. As if I wasn't already reading the word 'homicide' on the goddamn paper he was scribbling on.

That moment was something I had dreamed about in flashes for the last five years. Shots had been fired out at the Waffle House on Tennessee Street. Something about a young black male being hit. Deja vu, just like I had imagined it in my mind. Matthews' lips moved with the words the sheriff was saying... It all made sense. No one else was there. It was destiny. My hands, my feet, they all went numb. I knew it was mine for the taking. My Camry's suspension was almost ruined from flying over the shitty potholes to the crime scene.

I readjusted the brown frames of my new glasses so they sat just right above my nostrils. I parted the crowd. He was laid out by the K& D Grocery behind the Waffle House parking lot. Sprawled across the gray leather front seat and hanging outside of the driver's opened door of a G'd up Chevy Caprice, blue in color with tinted windows. It had 20'inch rims and Armor-All downed tires. His opened door was rattled with bullet holes. The driver's window was shattered. Tight, beige rubber bands were wrapped around raggedy-looking dreadlocks in a way the kids called

"wicks," which made the hair stand up like stalks of sugar cane in various directions. For that reason alone, he had to be about twenty-three or so. Slim. Oak-colored and muscular. His face was down in the pool of blood in the seat that ran over and collected down near the gas and brakes. There was no sign of his breathing in the chill of the October air. There were tire marks behind the car and if he was trying to pull off and get away from someone. He wore a sweat suit, white and gray. Shot somewhere in the back and apparently under the arm. I stepped back and sighed like a girl; my very first crime scene.

I remembered the veins in his huge hands, thick as lo mein noodles. Ashy, gnarly knuckles. There was an incredible platinum ring encrusted with 2.88 carats of baguette white diamonds on the ring finger of his left hand. All the blood in the world couldn't have killed that shine. It was so impossible to miss that I assumed this guy was either a drug dealer or some rapper I hadn't recognized right off. Believable, with the small shoulders, but yet tightly wound. His thick neck seemed too developed for his shoulders.

The police were becoming a bit harsh from trying to keep people from coming up onto the crime scene tape they used to mark off the area. I flashed my pass and inched closer. I walked around the back of the Caprice... Leon Tags? A rap star? Doubt it? It was then, somehow from the smell of his blood and the October morning air, that I learned even moreso to trust my instincts. I just knew, somehow, that he was from Frenchtown.

Along with France's stance in George W. Bush's

campaign of greed over Iraqi oil, Dad was always quick to say that if you must trust a white man, he might as well be French. His reasoning went back to the beginnings of Frenchtown, which was actually the site of the most extraordinary farming experiment in the antebellum period. The young idealist Marquis de Lafayette valiantly served as a general for colonial forces during the American Revolution. In the process, a sizable amount of his fortune went to support the American cause. Lafayette's largesse was so greatly appreciated by the Americans that, in 1794, when he was in dire straits, the United States Congress quickly offered him his back pay of \$24,424 as a major general. Later on, in July of 1824, Lafayette became the beneficiary of even more American gratitude when he was also granted a gift of roughly \$150,000 worth of township land (36 square miles) and \$200,000 in the then booming Florida territory.

It was there that Lafayette attempted his abolitionist vision of a society free of slavery, a vision that would hopefully replace the rapidly growing slave society around and in the capital. Per his instructions, 50 to 60 Norman peasants arrived from France. With the help of friends of Lafayette, this free white labor settled there and were set to grow olives, silk worms, mulberry trees and limes. The plan was that the success of this venture would rid the new territory of slavery.

Disease soon hit hard; The settlers were unaccustomed to the hellish, humid climate, leaving only 50 acres cleared over a span of three months. To add insult to injury, the settlers discovered their land deeds weren't

properly certified and were therefore worthless. Most of them returned back to France, some went by ship from St. Marks to New Orleans. The rest made the northwestern outskirts of Tallahassee their home. Though this area kept the name Frenchtown, it grew to a predominantly black section after slavery was eventually abolished, making my family and the murdered Michael "Ikey Mike" Warner residents of the last reminder of how decent the French can be.

I went down and took a peek at the homicide detective's list of facts until my insides went tight and warm at the sight of a familiar last name. Bennett. The investigator had picked up the dead man's bloody cell phone. Bennett's number was on the missed call listing. I don't know why I was surprised. It was none other than Lorenzo Bennett, of the notorious Bennett family in Frenchtown.

The Bennett family came from nearby Smokey Hollow, a horseshoe throwing, country-slick black community among the loblolly pines and Spanish Oak over by Lafayette Street, less than a mile or so from the Capitol. Like Frenchtown, Smokey Hollow was established for blacks in the late 1800's. Like what Frenchtown was being threatened with, Smokey Hollow had been was menaced by the state for its land in the late 70's early 80's. Urban renewal. The department of Transportation ate a chunk out of Smokey Hollow's old stomping grounds. The idea was that mostly riff raff came from or lived there. Not necessarily so, because Wally "Famous" Amos, the "Cookie Man" who made the world famous cookie; Lucille Brown, the County's first

black librarian and most of all, Jessie Adderley, mother of Julian and Cannonball Adderley, came from its rows of shotgun houses. All this was well known out here that the Bennetts of Frenchtown were from the "hustler royalty", if you will, of Smokey Hollow.

Smokey Hollow brought the razor-toting, Wild Irish Rose breathed, greasy-mouthed element to Frenchtown. Men, always sweaty, too loud, gold teeth and grinnin', wearin' broughams and pageboy caps came to Macomb street after nightfall to Ms. Yellowhair's theatre, the easy to glide floor in the Royal Palace, or by the ragged-hinged maple door leading to kitchen in the Green Lantern and hung out along the Hadley filling station on West Brevard... rarin' to cut the fool, throw a punch and find some overly-mannered, upstanding socialite somewhere around the classy, Twilight Inn to talk her away from watchful eyes.

Revulsion was legendary, so much so, the fine men of Frenchtown, including my great uncles Clifford and Lee Gaines from Ma's side saw fit to challenge the "Niggas from Smokey Hollow" to games of pool. Frenchtown was beaten time after time. The competition of choice then became baseball games, games which were played on the Smokey Hollow field off of Monroe Street by the underpass periodically up until the 1970's. What's the reason you might ask for the reserved means of settling scores? Liquor. Smokey Hollow's raw country contingent was tolerated, for it all floated in on the current of Walter "Shine" Bennett's moonshine. Bennett was owner of Shine Quarters, a pool hall/juke joint/moonshine provider for the Southside, Frenchtown and Smokey Hollow. Bennett's nickname came from the fact that

he was so black, he shined. When Prohibition was the order of the day, Bennett kept Frenchtown "wet", when Tallahassee could not decide whether to sell liquor in the newly proposed packaging stores or let the clubs handle it all, Bennett kept it coming. For all his nefarious dealings and associations, Bennett was a wise man of connections.

In the daytime, Bennett was a janitor at the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission Building off of Gaines Street. The green-eyed country hustler so thoroughly charmed the whites with liquor made from sugar cane and wild stories of niggers past that, at the very top of the building come mid-December, Bennett was Santa to the employees' children. It goes without saying his connections kept the law off his trail. His cousin, Ashford Charles, was the fourth black police officer hired by Leon County. Frenchtown appreciating Bennett's family as neighbors was another story entirely.

Even with all the money Bennett had amassed (and, thanks to never sharing much of his business acumen, his descendants eventually lost all his money and remaining property), his people retained their "rough" tendencies. There's the legend of how Terrence Bennett and a cousin of his killed the Candy Lady in 1995. Ida Tucker was the Candy Lady of Frenchtown. She lived off of Dade Street. The elderly lady sold Now N' Laters, Blow Pops, pickled eggs, hot sausages, Lays Potato Chips - the good ol' stuff. They say Bennett had to be about eleven that summer when he had set fire to the Candy Lady's front yard where the mailbox still stands. They say he wanted some candy for free, maybe a cut of her profits - you can never tell. Mrs. Tucker

screamed out of her window at the boys, swearing she'd call the police.

Bennett sidestepped the growing blaze, unbuckled his belt, dropped his pants and started stroking his chicken pocks-scarred, eleven year-old dick at the 72 year-old former secretary of the Future Farmers of America. The Candy Lady was found in the living room floor with the phone still in her hand. Heart attack. I had seen the black, stiff and smoking splotch of grass with my own eyes next to the parked ambulance in the driveway. Ma was riding home from Winn Dixie and made a habit of going down any corner in the neighborhood on the way with police cars or ambulances in order to have something to gossip about later that night.

There's a Frenchtown saying that if every Bennett were born on a Sunday morning, every law abiding black in Tallahassee would turn Seventh day Adventist in protest. The Bennetts were the only family known in Frenchtown where their mother Eva whooped Terrence and Lorenzo with a weeping willow switch before going into Griffin Chapel for Sunday morning services. Reason: it was understood that they were going to wind up starting something. Since the rule was that not a sound could come from any of them, the laughter they created became even more long lasting and contagious. It was either that or they'd get to elbowing each other in the ribs where a welt from the weeping willow surely was until a fight broke out, or striking matches and flicking them at each other, or irritating people in front of them by kicking the back of a pew with their feet, cursing, or sticking boogers and gum on pages

of the Bible and slamming the book shut. Sitting close to the front pew made no difference. But that's just the beginning.

It was a Bennett, "Ray-Ray" Bennett that was known to, while smoking Havana Sweets cigars, walk right into people's backyards and steal neighborhood dogs rumored to be purebred pit bull or Rottweiler pedigree (lassoing them with some lasso tool stolen from Leon County Animal Control) in broad daylight, the chain still dragging from their necks. The dogs were rumored to wind up being fought for money behind "Medicine Man" Grant Jackson's old farmland off Miccosukee Road, only to be put down and burned like country trash among the thickets if they lost or were too damaged to recover. Word was Ray-Ray was doing life for grand larceny in some Illinois prison named Jolliet.

There was Bessie Mae Bennett, a bow-legged hellion of a madam that caught one of her women off of her Macomb Street post. The woman was in the nearby Ruth Hawkin's saying grace over a long-delayed meal. Willie pistol-whipped her with a Derringer before the woman got to 'Amen' and then ate her two-piece with yellow rice to the horror of onlookers.

Before approaching the Warner's house, it made sense to see the Bennetts first, if anything to assess which of the Warners were best to approach about their murdered relative. I put my pen in my jacket and took my glasses off to massage the bridge of my nose. I walked slowly to the car and looked, for a moment, east, into the rising sun and toward the restaurants in the Tennessee Street area known

as the Tennessee Strip... God had given me a half-empty squeeze bottle of ketchup for a plate of fries. I was giving it the squeeze, but it looked like nothing but red water was going to come out; I had a murder to make something big for me and it was starting off with having to deal with the ignorant Bennetts, of all people!

The police frequented the Bennett home to settle squabbles fueled with liquor. Word was you're hard pressed to find a Bennett that wasn't in the system. I hoped Lorenzo being in the system would make it easy to find out what I needed. The Bennetts had moved from house to house in Frenchtown until managing to luck up on one of the new, characterless starter houses that were springing up from the Tallahassee Lender's Consortium. These were almost identical, respectable starter homes for people used to the tin-roofed saddlebag or shotgun houses raised up on brick or concrete blocks that still remained. Nevertheless, I parked on the curb, leaving the oil-stained empty driveway open.

After ringing the doorbell of the beige vinyl-sided house several times, I knocked on the door. I took my glasses off at what sounded like a small dog barking inside. I was about to walk in as a total surprise; I had attempted to call, yet, in true ghetto fashion, the Bennett phone was out of order. The sound of a heavy-set, mean-tongued older woman cursing at the dog became more pronounced. She was on her way to the door. I tried to imagine how Harris would handle this when the door opened.

Eva Bennett was just as I imagined. Her brown, blood-shot eyes came out at me like an eel from out of a coral

reef. She wore black house shoes, long denim shorts and an old Freaknik T-shirt. Her jheri-curl was dry and slowing turning gray from the roots. Her hair and coffee-no-creamed complexion contrasted the sparkling diamond earrings in her ears, which were set off in white gold studs. The purpled inside of her lips disappeared as she took a pull of a dangling Newport Menthol. She took it out of her mouth and tapped the ashes so that they fell by my toes.

"What you wohnt? You ain't no Jehovah Witness, is ya?"

I smiled and told her that I was actually a reporter for the Democrat. It went well enough until I explained my reason for wanting to interview her was to get her input on a murder.

"Which one?" she quipped.

A black, fish-eyed Chihuahua tried to bolt out at me from between her legs. Mrs. Eva pulled the door closer so he wouldn't come out. I told her for the Ikey Mike killing. She eyed me slow and steady through the remaining space.

"We ain't kin to Warners. You got the wrong house."

I explained that I was on my way to the Warners and, that if she didn't cooperate, the white editor I answer to would make something up about her son Lorenzo's connection to Warner.

Mrs. Eva huffed, "dey was friends. That's all." She opened the door wider, then hesitated, since the dog was wiggling through to get at me. Mrs. Eva shoved the dog back with the back of her heel. "Gone on, Malaco!" I raised my hand out. Mrs. Eva declined to shake it.

"Wait a minute, don't yo' daddy cut hair at Artistic up the road?"

"Yeah." I couldn't count how many times that helped me get along. Mrs. Eva sucked her teeth and opened the door to let me in, watching me closely through a plume of smoke from her cigarette.

The unmistakable smell of cooking pig innards made my tongue curl up on itself. The house was not lit well at all. I kept a straight face though, eyeing the many dimly lit pictures of Bennetts that peppered the white walls and peopled the rented black and brass entertainment center (the Remco tag was still visible on the side of the top shelf corner). The infamous Bennetts all glared back at me, some hardened men in clubs seated in bamboo chairs with loud short sets, some as women in couples placed within the background of a wine glass, in front of fancy cars, kneeling high school football poses with helmet at one's side or the unmistakable generic poses and backdrops of the JC Penney photographers. All of them seemed more easily believable in their poses with the aroma that clung to the air.

I started feeling around at my chest when Mrs. Eva began to mouth the words on my shirt and huffed under her breath.

"Ambucrobie an' Fitch? Shiiiiit. Thass white people clothes you got on." She turned and walked on to the kitchen. It didn't dawn on me that I had the wrong shirt on. It was a T-shirt, over-sized appropriately by hip-hop standards, but ruined by the Ambercrombie & Fitch name across the front of it. Carla and all of her presents. Everything had happened so fast that morning. I just didn't think of it. I followed Mrs. Eva passed the dinner table of

bills, ashtrays and Sister 2 Sister Magazines to the back of the house, into the kitchen. There she stood over a huge pot of what had to be both chitlins and collard greens bubbling in the same pot. She removed the top and stirred the contents. Her head swiveled side to side. "I really oughta send your ass off somewhere... All light-skinned. Cuban prob'ly."

I shook my head and tried to smile. Dad had enough problems with dark-skinned blacks not trusting that he knew how to cut 'nigga hair' and what not already. "No, not Cuban."

"Hispanic? Maybe some white in you 'cuz you awful happy."

I wiped off the smile. And tried to feign her lackadaisical tone. "No, I'm just black."

"Naw, you got good hair like yo' daddy doe. You done cut it all, but I can tell. You get that from your daddy. He Puerto Rican?"

"No," I insisted. I sat at a chair seated by a morning table near the corner window. "My dad's just black."

"Light-skinned as he is. Hmm, maybe some Cherokee in you. You may not even know."

I inhaled deeply. I began to entertain having my daddy be whatever she'd like. I asked her how long did her son Lorenzo and "Ikey Mike" Warner know each other.

"'Bout three some years, maybe. Take yo' glasses off."

I took them off and smiled. I quickly pulled out my pad and pen. Mrs. Eva informed me that Warner was from St. Thomas, Virgin Islands and nicknamed by his late grandmother. Warner was a janitor for Franklin Janitorial

services and boxing sparring partner for the white manager at the Federal Express that he cleaned. Mrs. Eva went on. This was when Warner's taut frame and rough hands made sense: Mike and the white manager at the Federal Express sparred at the Lincoln Community Center nearby.

Ikey Mike was known to make odd, insightful comments, usually about sensitive things. He could get away with it on account of his fists. He was married to Stephanie Warner, a Leon County school bus driver and bingo card worker at the local Senior Center on Monroe Street.

I was scribbling it all down, not picking up anything that would warrant that diamond ring I saw on Ikey's finger. The information seemed to flow well enough, as long as Mrs. Eva kept tending to the pot on the stove and not the words on my shirt. The clang of the lid going back on the pot warned me that she'd be turning back around. I attempted to ask her about the diamond ring I saw on Warner's finger.

"What school you went to?" Mrs. Eva asked, cutting me off and avoiding the question. She leaned against her stove and folded her arms.

"Rickards."

"Probably in the IB college program. One of them lactose intolerant, sickly types like Juicy that didn't talk none with the rest of the school."

"Juicy?" I leaned towards her and asked. "Whose Juicy?"

"Graduated when?"

Mrs. Eva brushed the side of her face. She tried to do it nonchalantly, but I could tell she was checking her

earlobes. I couldn't imagine it; having earrings that amazing in so often I had to remind myself they were on. She began to shoot out questions even faster, before I could finish answering the last question.

"Graduated! When you graduated boy?!"

I sighed heavily and rubbed my nose. "Ma'am, I have to ask these ---"

Mrs. Eva waved my words off while she went to the refrigerator and pulled out a huge tray of deviled eggs. "Hah! You gettin' interviewed, too. I ain't havin' you in here doin' the work of dem crackas. 'Cuz that's how they do, send a nigga in first to soften it all up. Black social workers, black cop, black teacher..."

I realized, as she spoke, that my fingers were still at my nose. Mrs. Eva sensed that, too and slammed her refrigerator shut. "My cookin' ain't good enough for you?"

Vigorously, I protested.

"You a lost nigga's what you are. You think everything yo' people know's just to get you where you are so you can forget?" Mrs. Eva snapped her fingers and pointed for me to make my way to the door.

"Lost niggas, ain't got no roots with yo' people. Don't eat chitlins, turn yo' nose up at candied yams and okra, everythang pizza and the mall. Just lost niggas that think being outta touch is being ahead of the game. Fulla air-conditionin' and bullshit. My kids ever be like you, I'd send 'em to be with that Warner boy."

I panicked. "Ma'am, I'll print exactly what you'll say, whatever you like."

Mrs. Eva muttered under her breath and then called out. "Malaco? Malaco, what you doin'?"

That shitty looking Chihuahua came scampering into the kitchen up to her leg. Its tail wagged like it was being electrocuted. Mrs. Eva looked down at Malaco and asked it again what it was doing. The dog whined and stood on its hind legs until the woman broke a piece of chitlin off on a fork, blew it down to a bearable temperature and fed it to the dog. Although Malaco seemed used to its rubbery consistency, the dog struggled with it as if it were a slab of peanut butter. Mrs. Eva smiled. It was the only time I would ever see her do so. She hardened again and looked over her shoulder at me.

"My ass you gone write whateva I say. Yes, ma'am my ass." She began to stir the pot again. The smell, coupled with the cigarettes, was making my tongue shrink until a sharp pain shot right down the middle of it to the tip. "That's posed to sugar me up? Say what you feel. Say what you Wheatleys thank for real 'bout us."

I stood up. I don't know why, I just did. Malaco didn't like it. The dog had finished his chitlins and raced toward me, stopping close enough for the hairs on my leg to feel his chitlin breath (had I been wearing shorts) as he barked wildly.

"No, no it's not the Wheatleys anything... Please, really, I'm my own person. I have my own thoughts..."

Mrs. Eva stopped stirring the pot and looked me in the eyes. We both stood there for a moment. Perhaps I was more forceful with what I had said than I thought. Either way, I wasn't backing down from it. No way was I going to let my

family's bullshit complicate this. That's when I noticed that Malaco had stopped barking.

Malaco was now latched onto my leg with his front paws. I rolled my eyes to the ceiling when the light humping began. His shiny, red tamale pepper-looking dick was out of his foreskin. Mrs. Eva, seeing Malaco rape my leg, turned back to her pot and stirred in a much slower, content counterclockwise circles.

It was then that she let me know more about Lorenzo's relationship with his late brother, famed dead hood Terrence "T-Boy" Bennett. She was more than willing to inform me that, although he was a reputed dope dealer, Terrence bought kids in the neighborhood bikes. Her broad shoulders dropped when she relayed how Terrence was killed mysteriously in a field by the airport and left in the trunk of his own car. She was explicit in stating that officer Wayne Bertrand had to be involved in it since Bertrand had it bad for some ghetto girl in Joe Louis Apartments.

The girl knew Terrence and apparently was seeking his help to help free her of Bertrand. I nodded blandly. This was some extra crap that had nothing to do with what I was after. With that, it was explained carefully that Lorenzo, a struggling rapper, worked at a car detailing shop and was a man spurned by one Karma James, a FAMU graduate who had had his baby, DeAndre, and left him a year ago.

The story seemed to excite Malaco even more. He looked up at me, like a retarded bat with no wings. Laughing somehow with that open mouthed panting. I couldn't take it anymore. "Ma'am, your, your dog."

"What, you 'llegic to dog, too?"

"No, but---"

"He be finished in a minute, shit. You lucky the Rock at the vet."

"Rock as in ---"

"Rockwilder."

I didn't bother correcting Mrs. Eva's pronunciation. She snorted in satisfaction, as if she knew this and took one of the halved deviled eggs from the tray. She stuffed it in her mouth. "You ain't but 'bout twenty years old talking 'bout they gone write what you put down. Yo' people got you thankin' the world yo' damn pearl." She swallowed the deviled egg in one gulp. "You keep playin' with them crackers at the paper that - "

Mrs. Eva stopped and caught me shaking my leg just so. My shaking sent Malaco sliding across the kitchen floor. He slid to the right into the lower half of the dishwasher. He quickly recouped and barked even louder than before.

Mrs. Eva turned around and faced me. The steaming, dripping metal spoon she'd used for stirring was in her pointing hand. For a moment, I pondered what would be worse, letting a ghetto Chihuahua make my leg its bitch or being beaten by a chain-smoking, overweight woman with a hot metal spoon dripping of chitlin juice.

"You got yo' damn facts 'bout Lo' that they get outta them records anyway." "Lo' meaning Lorenzo, your son?"

"No, Jimmy damn Carter... hell yeah, Lorenzo! You know where Ikey Mike lived, so go ask his wife 'bout him. Why don't you just gone somewhere with that 'cuz I'm 'bout get real annoyed with you, boy!"

I cleared my throat and put on my glasses. I looked down to pull a card out of my pocket. I saw Malaco, growling and inching toward my leg again. I pulled the card out and handed it out to Mrs. Eva. "If you change your mind ma'am. Here's my card." Mrs. Eva kept the spoon pointed in my direction. She then motioned for me to drop my card in the spoon. I had no choice. I continued passed the entertainment center. Malaco stayed at my heels, barking in a shaken, agitated way. The backs of my legs were still tight from bracing for Malaco as I drove down Macomb Street in search of something for lunch.

I stopped at the light at Copeland and Tennessee Street. The strip was to my right. The buzz of flip flop-wearing, backpacking FSU students (mostly girls) scrambling for Greek, Italian or hamburgers made my heart sick with tremors. Too many low-cut jeans and thongs riding high up tanned backs. Girls. Nice, toned and clueless. Some with long brown hair only shades away from chestnut. Carla. Shit, I hadn't called her in over a week!

The girls just kept coming by. Anonymous enough under redneck-looking camouflage baseball caps but unique with each and every cup size and sway of the hips. I gripped the steering wheel, but the light wouldn't turn. I turned on the radio to NPR - another one of the things I'd picked up from Carla when I'd ride in her car from work at Kinko's. The Weekend Edition with Scott Simon was just coming on. Simon's voice made me pine for Tibetan food at Bloomington's Samira, of deep conversations at the steps of the Beck Chapel, of shopping hand in hand at the College Mall. That chipper attitude of hers, like life couldn't be

better.

We blacks used to trip off of white kids like that at Rickards, at how little of a joke one needed to make them laugh, or that goofy bounce in their step; *'dumb asses, what the hell s'posed to be so great?'* Secretly, we knew; they would grow up and inherit everything in sight, everything from an area that was based off of agrarian slave labor. That's what. The jealousy I had had for whites lessened when I got next to Carla. Her cheerful way became an experiment - then a welcomed vacation from negativity.

I thought about Mrs. Eva, how she grew uneasy because I was just too "happy." My excitement of having my first big story made me white to her. But I loved the way this "white" enthusiasm made me see the possibilities of things - it's what gave me the balls to go to the Democrat. I liked it and decided to keep it. I just would not forget where I was from then on, back home in Frenchtown.

An Isuzu Trooper blared its horn at me from behind. The light was green. To top it off, I was turning right anyway. I parked behind Gumby's Pizza and sat in the car. I closed my eyes. The sight of another female, at that moment, would have put me in a dangerous place. I reclined the seat and covered my eyes with my hands. I tried to imagine what someone named "Juicy" that hung around with the likes of Lo' and Ikey Mike would look like. Hell, he'd probably get his hair cut at Shear Designs, the barbershop I had just passed on Copeland. He'd probably have some extraordinary diamond jewelry on as well.

Dat white coot su'm else, ain't it? You don't know how they used to sell it right there on Monroe street near the Capitol? Back when we'd get pulled off our mules and be beat for being anywhere near the Capitol. They used to come from them Georgia backwoods, plenty white coot: young, dumb and bored... They took on legislators and police captains and had us for fun. Fucked me one for good measure, too. Put it on her su'm ugly. Sent me preserves, a daguerrotype pitchuh, even money on occasion like yourn, so whuchuh know 'bout dat? Money ain't that hard fuh 'em to git, so it mean what it do to them what do to you. Hah! Come now boy, you play with it, that's fine and well, but now yo' shit don't stink? I sees you in yo' automobile. Which ya paved black roads... You yo' own pussun, you doin' yo' own thang I reckon. That can happen, I reckon, catchin' feelin's and all... Yeah, call her on that lil' phone uh yourn. Ain't dere? What you wuk on'll wuk on you... I jus' knew that it couldn't be that serious. But dat white coot su'm else, ain't it? Like it wanna 'pologize for they daddies...

The suspects for Ikey Mike's killers were believed to be in a gold Hyundai that night. Three black males between the ages of nineteen and twenty-eight. Harris was on his shit (I don't know how he got this information before me) but still let me poke around on my own, though he'd check almost daily to see if I had enough info for him to step in and totally take it over. There had been a death in FSU's library the previous month that reeked of foul play and kept his attention. Some kid hanging from his own belt from

one of the stalls. Hey, whatever, long as I made my mark. He'd make that story and I'd make this one.

I knew working with Harris would be good for my need to compete. I went home and thumbed through John Grisham's The Firm. It was under the bed, behind a Shakespeare anthology. Grisham somehow gave me the idea that it would be best to get more of a feel for the sentiment of the killing on my side of town - and to get to know others who knew this boxing janitor. He wasn't boxing professionally. Matter if fact, he was a janitor for crying out loud, so where did the monster diamond ring come from?

It was one thing to piss off someone in the neighborhood whose relative was known to be in foul shit from time to time. It was quite another to piss off a family in the neighborhood with raw questions about a seemingly decent relative that had just been murdered.

I decided to go to one of the few places black men talk freely in: the barbershop. This was something my dad, Samuel Wheately, knew quite well. Being a country boy from a family that sold fertilizer and sod for a living from the nearby community of Chaires, he did not care much for reading. It would be virtually impossible to tell, because, though he talked little, he was a walking newspaper when he finally came home for dinner, thanks to his clientele. Reverends, cable installers, professors, hotel clerks, retarded people that greeted you at Wal-Mart or as door openers for the legislative sessions at the House and Senate Chambers all sat in his chair at Artistic Barber shop bemoaning elections, FAMU, state and church politics, spirituality, women, white folks and the economy. Thank

God for them. It took their wide range of perspectives to get him to appreciate that I wanted to do be a writer so he'd stop trying to force me to be a barber. Being the color of beach sand and having the hair that kept the curl and softness of a newborn helped my Dad's profession, to a certain extent; He was one of the best barbers in Tallahassee. My dad took the shop over after Mr. and Mrs. Gilliam passed away.

Women would approach me in grocery stores or the Mall when Ma wasn't in sight and ask how she and Dad were doing. I always took pride in that. I don't know if he fucked any of them. No one's ever caught him in anything, but I've learned from his shop that men live in perpetual guilt regardless of good deeds and that the more attractive or successful they were, the more suspect they became. Dad shined regardless. Even Carla was impressed with his picture. The tomboy frame of Lorraine Gaines that poised with cadaver-like rigidity next to him was another story.

Ma's teeth were always too big for her mouth. Her skin, the color of stale ginger snaps, was always in need of moisturizer. She knew she wasn't very memorable, which was why she was always quick to play up some martyr vibe of how she could have finished school at FAMU had it not been for marriage and kids when somebody wasn't doing what she wanted. This only made her more annoying. Now that I think of it, this probably was what broke things up between she and Dad.

Juanita used to swear Ma and Dad once played jokes on her and had a world of their own before I was born. After my fourth birthday or so, I remember only seeing him at

night or on Mondays, when he'd cut my hair in the kitchen before I took my bath. He decided one day to take me out of school to just be with him at the barbershop. Catching up on lost time. I remember watching him cut some kid's hair. I hated it. I remember jumping in the chair after the boy left and asking Dad was this shop where he lived. Since then, he made a point of having me come to the shop to clean my fade or whatever I was wearing at the time. I tried to buck the idea of going there when I was in high school, but I guess a free haircut's a free hair cut. Only three people have ever cut my hair before. I decided, when Tuesday came around though, to go Shear Designs off Copeland.

Shear Designs was a barbershop for the in-crowd. This was the shop Dad and the old heads grumbled about when the sons and nephews of their clients stopped coming in. Shear Designs being connected to a hair salon through a small game room with a pool table didn't hurt... I had heard those 35 and under with at least a little city flair to them tended to go there - mainly because the barbers were as well. The stubble on my scalp started back up just in time for me to get a clean shave.

I left my suspect T-shirts and khakis home and donned a crisp, new Frenchtown uniform of baggy jeans and an oversized clean white T-shirt. My sneakers were old New Balances - definitely not basketball "hoodish" enough. I was going to fix that with my next paycheck.

I called for an appointment - a definite "new school" sign. (Most barbershops keep you waiting until a chair opens. The barber appointment set up was the most efficient

set up I've ever seen myself.) The one place I got my hair cut in Bloomington did it like that, too. The problem was, with this appointment set up, every spare moment had to be for info. I stepped into the door an hour early and well rehearsed.

The smell of muted talc powder, Oil Sheen and Club Man tonic put me at ease. I couldn't help looking at these twenty-something barbers and thinking these were kids that had snatched their father's smocks and were amuck at their stations (as I used to do). Everything was legitimate enough, neck strips to keep skin from touching the cape, clean neck dusters to get hair off the neck, the disinfectant smell of blue Barb-acide for brushes and combs. All to the beat of BET music videos from the TV.

Churchgoing men working jobs with benefits went hand in hand with confused college boys, philosophical local drunks, all the way down to true playaz "from the Himalayas" type hustlers. A welcomed, wide enough demographic. Besides the age range, all seemed to share a love for critiquing hip hop videos, KING Magazine and watching ESPN. Enough camouflage for a former music nerd too wrapped up in band camps to dip and dab in discussions provided things didn't get too hardcore.

The hardcore, local hip hop crowd that would frequent shops like Shear Designs was quite different from your P Diddy, Jay Z, metropolitan type rap stars. The country could not be stamped out of these locals. Gold teeth and big cars had been the rage for far back as the fifties. Maybe even longer. It's just that the "thugged -out" rap crowd of the South had taken both to an annoyingly new

level. As pictures of Terrence Bennett in Mrs. Eva's house proved, gold "fronts" tended to cap the whole bottom or top row from canines to canines. And the cars... take the brother that was in the third chair with the crisp Michael Vick jersey underneath the apron, with the tattoo of some cursive name I was too afraid to ask him to pronounce on his neck below his ear... There was no way to not notice his restored, candy apple red '72 Cutlass parked right up to the door so he could hear the alarm and see it through the shop's tinted windows while he was getting his beard touched up...

Yes, *that* car, the one with the Dub Spinner Moab 22x9.5 inch RWD wheels. Tires probably came with it as a package deal over at R&R Trucks and Auto Accessories. They did a lot of the work on big shots' cars like Corey Fuller or Florida State ball players.

It didn't take much to make out through the tinted windows the Tasmanian Devil Air Freshener dangling from the rearview, or the re-upholstered white vinyl interior and bench seats, Aiwa CD/MP3 deck with detachable face (which, along with his two cell phones, is in one of the many pockets of his faded, baggy jeans) and monster 15' Bose speakers along the tinted back window that was probably bumpin' Miami thug rapper Trick Daddy or Atlanta's T.I.... No way could I tell him he 'ain't doin' it.' Be it Chevy Caprices, Malibus, Lincolns, there was just something about the authority of the old-school body, sprinkled with the youth's raw energy and unchecked need for attention. I watched everything, soaked up the vibe. I knew getting down to the truth of Ikey Mike's murder depended on it.

I put on my shades and studied Mr. Tattoo-on-the-neck. He was complaining to his barber as to why the cops followed him from place to place when he rode in his Cutlass. It took about half an hour to guess that he was bragging, in an ignorant kind of way; There were several mid-twenty to mid-thirty year-old women sitting along the window. They were the type that would claim to refuse to let their middle school to high school-aged young sons come in to get their hair cut without their supervision due to concern for the thuggish character of some of the clientele yet, one of these women, while wearing short-shorts, stroked a bare outer thigh as she re-crossed her legs. There was the one with the weave in the snug pink capris, who dangled a flip flop off her French manicured toes to better show a dolphin tattoo on her left ankle, both aiming the goods strategically. There was the other in the cream linen pants, with a little over two handfuls of ass, who conveniently bitched about how much her lower back hurts as she worked a slow, lazy roll of her hips across the floor to get another magazine from the rack by the TV. All aiming at the baller complaining of his woes with the police. The boys sensed their mothers' intentions and, with them, studied Mr. Tattoo-on-the-neck's watch, Air Force One sneakers and mannerisms.

The reason for Mr. Tattoo-on-the-neck's complaint was made evident when others joined in. One of the barbers was bemoaning the fact that his cousin had been arrested for selling some kind of XTC pills, or X, to nearby FSU fraternity boys.

X makes you want to hug people. It raises your empathy level and gives you the energy to dance and stay up all night. It dries you out though, so drinking water is a must. Carla introduced me to it. She's reaped many a benefit.

The boy arrested had been pedaling from Frenchtown across Tennessee Street into Florida State's campus only nights before. He was busted with over \$400 worth of pills with a king's crown on them.

I grabbed an Esquire magazine with Britney Spears in heels and a man's dress shirt on the cover. I flipped through the pages indiscriminately and listened. \$400 worth of shit; Tallahassee might turn out to be easier to deal with after all. Perhaps this was how Lorenzo, Ikey Mike and others in the neighborhood got the cash for the big jewelry. That'd be nice.

I could have used the info coming from this barbershop when I was doing work on penny ante arrests like this barber's relative. The lady with the capris stepped into the conversation. According to her, the crown on the pills were typical of how X manufacturers tried to get their product to stand out above the others. One with a wet cat on it was called wet pussy (of course she didn't say *that* in front of the kids) and was known for its high content of embalming fluid, or "wet." From the way she explained it, the highs associated with wet pussy were characterized by one's vision being twirled into a liquid vortex that looked like the center of oversized lollipops found in carnivals or something to that effect. Mr. Tattoo-on-the-neck added that there was another pill with the end of an electric

plug on it. It was called the "hook-up" and was reported to give energy equivalent to a line of coke. This is the one I knew of already. Pink capris raised an eyebrow at him, party people flirting. I could see the both of them somewhere twirling glow sticks and squeezing their nipples.

The crowned X was called King Love and was reported to have the most sublime sense of sensuality or connection with all of humanity - much like marijuana, but with less of the dopey effects. The fact that it was called King Love made me so defensive the magazine pages began to snap as I flipped them. Talking about King Love always excited me. Most black folks were too narrow-minded to ever understand it.

Kamal Youssef was known to all Tallahasseans as King Love. He was more than a delightful town oddity, he was my fucking friend. Dressed in a brass king's crown, sheer fuschia cape, dark T-shirt, jeans, work boots and a necklace with an oversized ankh, the balding white-haired Arab-American frequented the corner of Tennessee and Monroe. There was nobody like King Love. He was weird. He was fun, everything Tallahassee paid good money not to be. This chubby man of his late fifties carried signs stating "All You Need Is Love" and would tap citizens with a wooden wand with glued on stars. Throughout the nineties, King Love would proclaim that those who had received the tap had now "been loved" and insisted that they "spread some love today." You'd have to go as far out as the Panhandle in Panama City or Tampa to find this kind of a break from the conservative nine to fivers.

Everybody in Shear Designs could have told you that King Love lived to make people smile and think. That was all he'd do throughout the day. People appreciated him so much that he was basically fed and taken care of by the whole city. That's how starved this town was for some eclectic energy.

I remember seeing him for the first time when I was at Raa Middle School. I remember likening him to the little boy in pajamas that controlled all the horrible beasts in the children's book Where the Wild Things Are. I dreamed of joining this King's party. Forever.

Years later, as a high school freshman, I skipped school one day and played my alto out on Monroe and Tennessee with King Love. There we were, two miles or so from the Capitol and all of it's bullshit, jamming. He blew his bike horn at cars, waved and then pointed them toward me. A passerby even donated his fishing cap so he could donate money. King Love and I made \$221.67. Smokey Hollow's own Wally "Famous" Amos once said that people should "go where there is no path and lead your own trail." I gave all the money to King Love. I had offered something different to the world on my own terms that day, for the first time. That was enough for me.

Sadly enough, King Love's fuzzy white beard and impish smile disappeared when he was found in 1996 dead near a trash dumpster near the Democrat. Real Tallahasseans swear it was foul play by jealous homeless people who had grown sick of the man's celebrity and ability to enjoy the largesse of the people. Naming this fucking pill King Love

couldn't have been a coincidence; the maker of this XTC had to have been a native or in the area for quite some time.

I watched a Jiffy Lube mechanic slide into a chair. The draped silver cape over his shoulders reminded me even more of King Love now that his name had been mentioned. In fact, as I reflected, it was that day of playing out in the street with King Love that I made up my mind to be a writer and not a barber.

My appointment with Eddie Oliver had finally come. Oliver was a gap-toothed, dark-skinned brother with a boyish laugh and a freakishly strong handshake. I sat in his chair as he went on to state what anyone in Tallahassee knows; Frenchtown had been the spot to get recreational drugs since the mid-eighties. Ever since, seeing petrified-looking white men in company cars driving at a crawl down the streets was nothing new. A boy on a mountain bike would be pedaling alongside him and passing a small packet of God only knows to him. The only difference, this time, was the kid was related to the barber next to Oliver, who was quick to almost justify it with the fact that 3 out 10 kids are able to find work in the summer. Not even counting being a black male of course. Again, nothing in town had changed. All the more reason to get out and stay out. I rustled under the cape and quietly waited for a chance to turn the conversation toward the Warner killing.

That chance came easy enough. I simply asked if the barber's arrested relative knew anything about Ikey Mike. "Rick, don't even start lyin'. Yo' cousin don't know nothin' 'bout Ikey Mike an' nem," Oliver chimed in. I was in luck; Lorenzo, Ikey Mike and Juicy frequented the

barbershop. "Ikey, Lorenzo an' nem was into some other stuff. The way they shot Ikey may have given folk the impression that he was into some drug game, but no - just like it said in the paper, Ikey was showing off with that jewelry 'cause Lo put him up to it. Whoever did that to him was just jealous and wouldn't let it go." "I read that he had this huge diamond ring on his finger when they found him. How'd he get it like that?" I flinched at how crass that sounded. Luckily, no one took offense to it.

"He came in and showed it to us last week or so," quipped Tony, the tallest of the barbers. "Thang looked like a damn crystal ball sittin' on his hand. He ain't the type for that kind of nonsense."

"You had to admit, that thing was beautiful," Rick mused. "I don't know where that fool Lo get that ice from."

I laughed under my breath. I hadn't heard that type of talk in a while. Diamonds, ice, bling-bling. Especially bling-bling. I called myself getting away from that by going to school elsewhere, only to find, returning for my internship with the Outlook last summer, that it was entered in as a legitimate term in the latest dictionaries. Still, I seemed to blend in with everyone in Shear Designs. Perhaps the blackness I professed to at Indiana was indeed the real thing. Perhaps it is all just a thing of confidence, after all I had had a few girls, drank some of the things these had surely drank.... Yes, I thought, stroking my chin, I got it together.

Rick started digressing about some jeweler Lo knew in Panama City that made pieces for rap artists. I tried to pull them back to answering how Ikey or Lo could have made

the money to have gotten hold of something like that. That's when Tony stepped in.

"You from Tallahassee? You look familiar."

I explained I was from Frenchtown, right off Dade Street, but I had always gone to the Artistic Barber shop. Rick recognized my resemblance to Dad. I confirmed the connection. I assured them that I always wanted to come over to Shear Designs and see 'my own people.' Rick asked how old I was. When I told him, he hit me with a momentum-killing question: "You been of age to come over here on yo' own. Yo' people had you so on lock for this long that you couldn't come up the street to us?" I tried to laugh it off, but no one would laugh with me. I wanted to explain that I went to school out of town and shit, that I knocked my Ma down the other day for runnin' her mouth and, and I got a white girl that will give me money whenever I wanted and -- fuck it, I choked.

I left Shear Designs needing my alto. My feet were sticking to my socks from sweat. Oliver was apologizing profusely about Rick, which meant that I was obviously so hurt he couldn't help but feel sorry for me. Not good. Then again, if I was stoic and everyone left me hanging in silence after the question, I would have felt nobody in there liked me anyway. Thank God I didn't tell them I was with the Democrat. And to think I was about to ask them where I could score some King Love.

Perhaps the blackness I professed to in Indiana wasn't the real thing. But this *had* to be my crowd. I declined to play for IU's marching band because I wanted to have different experiences for once, but I didn't fit anywhere

else. I vowed to re-invent myself and go back to that damn barbershop as soon as I grew some more stubble.

I went scouring for my copy of Top Tones for the Saxophone (Full Octave Range - Third edition). Thank God Sigurd M. Rascher put this text together. A good ten to fifteen minutes of playing altissimo helped to get off steam. The high notes just sounded like a legitimate way to scream without your manhood being questioned. And scream I did. I blew and fought back at the barrage of car horns, screaming, barefoot brats at Wal-Mart, barking strays, bullshit radio commercials and stupid comments of ignorant ass people. I split my fuckin' La Vaz reed I was so into it. I quickly replaced it and chewed on the split one like it was sugar cane. The taste of the wood made my mouth water. I swallowed a few sweet and softened splinters. It helped the need to float and chew on something like the pacifiers they gave out at the raves at IU. The emptiness of the house seemed to still be reeling from absorbing the notes.

I went through my CD book to find something to play to that could calm me down. *Cubism*, by Ronnie Cuber won out. The fluidity of his solos were so impressive, it's almost like he was laughing at you. Keeping up with his baritone for a few cuts would clear my mind and get me ready for the next move of interviewing the Warner widow. Only then would the phone ring.

Actually it was a cell phone and it wasn't ringing, but vibrating in my pocket. Carla had bought me one before I left for the intern. I mailed her money for it at the end of every month. The only people that had the number were Auntie

Gretchen, Harris and her. I put down my alto and pulled out the phone. Carla Scarelli's number and info was on the readout.

"Hi," Carla said, not even waiting for me to speak.

I cleared my throat. "Hey wassup."

"You tell me." The edge of urgency in her voice slowly dissipated. "I mean, you can't call or whatever."

I fell back onto the bed and unbuttoned my pants. It was practically a ritual: she'd say something flip to get me going. I'd get tough with her and everything'd be cool. "Look girl, I've called." Her taunt was pretty weak, but I needed the release. "I leave messages to let you know everything's that's up. You knew about the Democrat before my own damn family did."

Carla started to stammer. It was making my dick hard. "Well, I mean, but you told me about the Democrat before you even left here. And you always call late at night. You know I have the phone turned off and I'm sleeping."

"I call you once in the day, too. Maybe even twice, but you were in class. You gonna start our conversation off like this?"

"I mean, just call me more often. Not during class." There was a fragrant weariness in the long gap of silence afterwards. It definitely took the fun out of our ritual. Honestly, it had been there since I had left to come back home. I was avoiding talking directly to her for having to deal with it. I knew I couldn't get mad at her like I was supposed to if I didn't get it out of her.

"I'm in a new time zone. When I call it makes sense for me to call. You musta forgot."

No rebuttal. Her breathing became an uneven tide of sighs, bubbling around me and collapsing everything I was used to. The phone made a light tapping sound, meaning she was tapping hers on the side of her cheek in contemplation. I sat up and set the phone between my neck and shoulder. I grabbed the alto and began practicing my fingering. The wave was coming in fast.

I started on about the murder case, about how cool Harris was and how I was almost attacked by a dog trying to get information about it. Yeah, I embellished some. A Chihuahua just doesn't inspire suspense. It did no good. The wave came in, and threatened to drag me in whole.

"I really do a lot for you, Orlando. Have you told your mother about me, about us?"

CHAPTER 3
CAN I BE DOWN?

Stephanie Warner stood six foot two and blinked persistently. What's more, she ran a chewed down fingernail over her walnut-colored top lip as if battling a potential mustache. It didn't take much to catch her for the interview. It did take a lot to keep her focused. We sat at the dinner table she shared with Ikey Mike, she was at the end, I at a corner closest to her. Usually playing her pocket-sized radio as she drove her busload of Pineview Middle School kids, Warner was in a daze on the job the day before. Driving in complete silence, she had suddenly forgotten her route and ran a red light. A cop happened to be at the intersection to catch it. No one was hurt, barely.

Stephanie was dressed in a gray Polo Association of Beverly Hills t-shirt, obviously no bra and a multi-colored African wrap skirt of some sort that fell over her ankles, no kind of flashy diamond jewelry in sight. She kept blinking as though both Ikey's death and my being there would somehow change.

"Mrs. Warner, you know why I'm here, right?"

The thirty-seven year old nodded. I had heard from Mrs. Eva that Stephanie tended to favor young men. In doing so, she resented young men calling her Mrs. Warner or Ms. Anything. Mrs. Eva claimed Stephanie liked Ikey for the most obvious reasons and that, because of the rawboned woman's appetite, Ikey couldn't seriously train to become a true contender. Then again, I was beginning to notice that Mrs. Eva tended to have a gripe against anyone that was not as dark, fat and ugly as she was. Stephanie's vacant,

brandy-colored eyes and neglected braids proved that she must have found quite a match with the ex-boxer.

Stephanie nodded again. "Ikey was my man, my husband. He's gone. I ain't got life insurance or nothing. Short fucker... What else you want?"

I fought the urge to massage my temples. I needed something to open her up, even if it meant her getting emotional. "Was he a thoughtful guy?"

Stephanie smiled. Her face immediately went numb afterwards. I tried a more broad approach.

"What kind of person was he? I heard he was a boxer. I always thought boxers were all mean and violent."

Stephanie started fumbling with the plastic on one of the five newspapers that had been collecting in the front yard. I had brought them in to her when I spotted them. She had been coming in and out of the house since the funeral and was just too into a fog to notice them or the leaf-covered, almost knee-high grass.

"You mean dumb," she muttered. "You wanna know if he was a dumb thug."

"No," I said, lying. "Not really."

Stephanie scratched at her scalp and laughed. She said she never saw Ikey that way. To her, he was a peculiar man who moved to Tallahassee from St. Thomas with \$86 and the radio Stephanie listened to while driving her bus route. Ikey constantly nodded even when nobody was talking to him or there was nothing to agree to, a man so on the go with work and training that he always ate with his plate in his hand, never touching the table. Stephanie even gave me the name of the Fed-Ex manager he trained with. Lee Jasper. As helpful as she was, Stephanie really did seem to have an issue about her husband being perceived as unintelligent.

"He wasn't dumb. He may not have been the type that's supposed to be in college, but he wasn't dumb. He got over here and made it off nothing. Print that."

Ikey Mike would call himself cooking her favorite of oxtails and rice even though he couldn't cook. His chicken was always bloody. The potatoes in his potato salad remained cube-like with a suspicious crunch. Ikey never cooked anything fully.

When Ikey had no car and needed her Neon, he would get it detailed at the shop Lo worked at. This was where he and Lo really became close. Ikey would put in Keith Sweat's *Make It Last Forever*, Stephanie's favorite CD, and cue it to her favorite song so that it would begin as soon as she started the car. I would find out later that that was an idea of Lo's, who sensed Ikey needing someone like Stephanie in his life.

"Ikey kept a lot of company with Lorenzo?" I didn't want throw her off her moment, but I had to direct her toward what I needed.

Stephanie bristled at the mention of Lorenzo "Lo-Lo" Bennett's name. "Yeah. I don't really care for him. Lo got a way of pulling people into stuff. I call it ignorance on fire, 'cause you cain't know everything, that's fine, but Lo be stupid and leading a bunch of people into darkness."

"What type of darkness?"

Stephanie smiled and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. "Well, he ain't all bad..." Suddenly, she sat up. Her eyes began to blink furiously, becoming clear with purpose. "Never mind. You know I ain't puttin' dirt on my man's name. You can forget that."

"I'm aware of Lorenzo's criminal record if that's what you mean."

"Ikey didn't think he was better than anybody, so he hung with Lo, too. He ain't as big a snob as Juicy."

And there it was! The Juicy character again. I leaned toward her and held her clammy hand in mine. "You, you don't like this Juicy?"

Stephanie grabbed my hand. "He a snob, but I guess I understand why now. I don't feel like talking about him."

Her hand grew warm. She would not let go. I tried to focus her on her husband so she wouldn't hold on to me like that. "Is there anything else you want to the world to know about Ikey?"

"I want the world to know that he needed them fists to protect his good heart. I want them to know that he ain't no statistic. My man breathed, lived and was on his way to a better life... "

Just when I thought that was that, Stephanie sighed and leaned toward me. Her eyes met mine and held them tighter than her hand ever could. She whispered as if someone else was in the house. "I believe Lo days are numbered. The whole thing happened with him running his big ass mouth with whoever shot Ikey. Lo does not know how to lay low. He think his baby mama givin' him problems... you just watch." I couldn't tell if that was a threat or a heavy premonition. Either way, I took her advice on trying to get to him before somebody else does.

I followed her out over the piles of Ikey's unwashed clothes in the living room toward the front door. She still had not let go of my hand. Cards of condolences were scattered over the coffee table and sofa. Stephanie made it to the doorknob and seemed to be melting into the door. The light quiver of her shoulders let me know. Her grip tightened, she had been doing well so far.

When she turned around I knew there'd be no getting around it. Her crying sucked me in. I tried my best to crane her down to me to lay her burning forehead onto my shoulder. She was just so tall. She placed the hand she held between her legs, legs that knew no end instead and groaned like I was massaging her back. I opened her skirt. Nothing underneath.

Stephanie scratched her scalp and took me over by the sofa. She slipped under me and tugged at me to get down on the floor with her. Her legs, spread eagled and so long, made her ankles practically out of my reach. That was when I noticed the sparkling diamond anklet on the left one. I kissed her thigh and brought her legs together, licking and kissing until the clasp of the anklet ran across my teeth. Stephanie opened up and pulled me down to her, as if to keep me from it. I fucked her slow on top of Ikey's work pants, jeans, the laboring, alkaline battery smell of his sweat all over us.

I went home and showered off the scent of the couple. The Keith Sweat CD Stephanie gave me played along as I sifted through my clothes in the closet. After we had finished and came outside, Stephanie went over to her unlocked car (with windows already down, a no-no in Frenchtown) and gave it to me. I couldn't see her functioning with it in her sight. Before she turned to go back into the house, she asked if I knew anything about the family of Cleveland "Juicy" Willows. Having worked at the Outlook, I assured her I had an idea of what I was getting into. I lied and promised to come back and see about her. With no answer, Stephanie turned and began to float back into the house.

Unlike the illegitimacy floating through the Bennett clan, the Willows were easier to trace. The Willow family name floated over Frenchtown in almost the exact opposite way the Bennett name had. They descended from Freedman John Kincaid, who learned his tailoring trade with armed forces during the Spanish American War. He came from "up Nawth, pro'bly Kentucky", but wound up in Tallahassee, following soldiers from the area. Kincaid opened Capitol Tailoring shop in 1924. Young Kincaid sported a dashing, mustache that covered over his top lip and curled at both ends. Such style aided him in becoming a preferred tailor, doing alterations for mayors and capitol dignitaries, much to the chagrin of many of the blacks working at State Normal College for Colored Students, a land grant institution that would become Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University.

It is rumored that while en route to the capital on horseback one afternoon, then Normal College president Thomas Desaille Tucker caught Kincaid whistling down the capital steps with hand in pocket and timepiece chained to vest in the other. Tucker asked rather bluntly, "keeping the white folks all dandied, is that all you can do for the race?" Kincaid kept periodical visits with Tucker and many a president at the university for fittings and alterations from then on.

Kincaid married Flossie Riley, distant cousin to John G. Riley, one of the most well-known business and civic leaders in Tallahassee (of which the Tallahassee museum the Riley House was founded). Their daughter Emma, apparently married drifter Joe Willows, though records of their marriage were impossible to locate. Willows was a blue-

black, hardened man of cracked country lips and a violent temper.

Willows had left his hometown of Tifton, Georgia after sharecropping troubles with a lynch mob. Willows took over the family business. Wanting as little to do with whites as possible, he moved it to Macomb Street and renamed it Frenchtown Dry Cleaning.

From the hardened hands of Joe, the Willows became known for being a pious and stubborn clan. Joe fought valiantly to keep Frenchtown "dry" during the Prohibition days. Though Joe earned a few enemies in this regard, it would be the next two generations of Willows that would truly make the family infamous.

Emma and Joe beget Rev. "Daddy" Titus Willows who married Ida Beamon of the prominent Beamon family. Ida died while giving birth to twins Wallace and Moses. The Beamon family, angered at the result of the pregnancy, began to sell their many properties and left Tallahassee.

The alterations aspect of the business was phased out in the mid-50's and because of it, young Moses Willows was able to specialize in the dry cleaning. Old men in Artistic Barbershop to this swore the Willows men could take out any stain made. Blood, dirt, sweat. They kept the zoot-suited men, brown sugars, people of distinction and classy women the good Rev. Willows made a point of counseling periodically starched up and Sunday morning sharp for many of the old photographs done by Joseph H. Avery photographs in his renowned Virginia Street studio.

While brother Wallace struggled to delve into real estate, young Moses could run Frenchtown cleaners almost solely on his own from open to close by 1958. Moses risked the wrath of his father when the coffee and cream-colored

Sadie Raintree went strolling passed the storefront window that same year. Leaving customers talking in mid-sentence, Moses followed Sadie into the Artistic Barbershop (where my own father and mother had met) to fetch her little brother Arthur. Moses married Sadie on "May Day" in 1960. She was a glowing bride, in spite of the hubbub that was beginning to stir about the Willows father and son. She, along with the Willows to come, paid a dear price for it.

Say the Willow name now after all these years and everybody black in Tallahassee with roots here will feel their skin still tightening up; The Willows were known as the Tom niggas that fought C.K. Steele and the local civil rights movement. The Democrat used to come and quote Moses and Titus and the conservative preachers to make Steele look crazy. They say Moses was probably the only twenty something year-old nigga against civil rights in town, that he was just too scared to go against what his pappy said.

The Willows were harassed by school officials, fired from jobs, forced to have to get meat and fish as far out as Quincy, left to sit by ourselves at church pews by themselves and were accosted in the streets (again, the agitators included the same great uncles of mine that constantly tried to get the upper hand on Shine from Smokey Hollow).

Titus and Moses Willows fought against integration in order to stay independent so blacks had something for themselves. They knew Frenchtown businesses, my Dad's included, would probably fall if Steele and them had their way. Thank God blacks don't trust whites to cut their hair. Frenchtown Dry Cleaning closed in 1974, due to integration.

The embattled family moved to a smaller house on Duval Street and had a yard sale of prized possessions that left

the children in tears. Civil rights students and other integration-minded blacks from as far as Havana rode by the busloads to buy the belongings of the Willow clan with fervor of a lynch mob collecting a victim's ear or genitals. This too the Democrat covered. And it did not end there.

The Willows children, Helen, David and Anthony, continued to catch hell at every turn. Dates for the prom had to be brought in from out of town. Birthday parties were as uneventful as the days before and afterwards. The hostility seemed to have driven Sadie to varicose veins, ovarian cancer and a waiting grave in 1997. Others in the family seemed to have visited sanity's edge as well.

David and Anthony became estranged from each other from fighting over things left in Sadie's will. Moses retreated into himself after Sadie's death. Months of total silence began, then a hunger strike, which he continued as he was admitted to Tallahassee Memorial Hospital. It was discovered that he would only speak to whites. His own family was now forced to bring in a white nurse or orderly as a go-between to have conversations with him.

The other surviving Willows had recovered somewhat financially by going into Moses' twin brother Wallace's line of work. They started buying foreclosures and renting out houses in the community. The sentiment inspired by the line of work did not help their image. Many complained they were profiting off of the crack epidemic that left their fellow neighbors, who already hated them, vulnerable to their ruthless business sense. Helen Willows seemed to have not wanted it any other way.

Helen Willows was born on May 12, 1962 and died on February 4, 2001. Once a FAMU education major, Willows

never graduated. Yardmen and handymen whom she slept with claimed the former Griffin school librarian watched syndicated "Cosby Show" reruns religiously and loved post-Supremes Diana Ross and "loud" Patti LaBelle records. Eighteen year-old Helen had had an affair with H.D. Parker, a mathematics professor at FAMU. The professor, already married and respected in the community, never claimed what was the result of the tryst: Cleveland "Juicy" Willows.

It could be for this reason that Helen never married and developed a reputation for being argumentative with men, especially educated ones. Tenants would have rather taken their own children's lunch money to make rent than have Willows, with the police in tow, at their door. She had become a scorned woman with failed attempts at moving up in society, a "dark-skinned" disgrace to an influential Tallahassee family. Evicted elderly, families and the like took the brunt of it.

There wasn't a fallen leaf in the yard of 525 Dunn Street. A older model, garnet Volvo couple sat directly in the center of the circle driveway. I came in from under a dingy overcast mid-afternoon to the immaculate open porch. A one-eared, black and tan cat was curled in a ball under one of the plastic white chairs. It's coat was mired with car oil and dirt. Though it did not looked like it belonged to such a home, it stared me in face with no intention of moving until I stepped toward it with a stomp. It scampered off with a meow into the bushes. The front door opened just as the sky opened up to thunder and chilling rain. I opened the screen door. The front door immediately closed, leaving just enough space for two bulbous, distrusting dark brown eyes to inspect me. There was apparently few lights on in the house, a surely the Southern custom of turning off as

much electricity as possible for fear of the house being struck by lightning.

Cleveland Willows struck me as the type of person you find at crowded airports that place their bags all around them to keep anyone from sitting down. I alerted him as to who I was and of the obvious, that it was raining. The door opened a few inches wider. There, in the color of deep oak and standing at least six foot two at an overweight, belly-centered 290 pounds was proof the guarded, almost hateful Joe Willows glare had passed down through the ages. In this descendant though, the look was lessened with nervous lip biting and arm-scratching. It was then that I noticed the nappy, powder blue housecoat he had on strained with every breath he inhaled. The sleeves didn't even reach the middle of his forearm.

"You're the reporter. You're here about only Ikey Mike."

I agreed. I tried to ignore the house robe. I sensed it was his mother Helen's, who had died in 2001 of the same ovarian cancer as his grandmother only days apart from each other. Cleveland caught my eyes and quickly discarded the robe. A blue T-shirt and cut off jeans were underneath. "Come in," he said, in a voice so high I frowned in disbelief. Cleveland whisked me into a house lit only by the living room light and TV. Flashes of lightning helped me assess the layout of other rooms. The smell of dying flowers was unmistakable.

A Matlock marathon was on TV. Cleveland took my parka and hung it on a coat stand by the door. He then sat me on the sky blue twill fabric sofa in front of the TV. The table in front of the sofa had an opened, unfinished game of backgammon on it. I noticed a horrible rash of bumps on

the back of his neck, pinkish-red bumps so pronounced and discolored that hair could only grow them in patches. He sat at the other end at an angle slanted towards me. A stack of newspapers were between us. After opening a section, Cleveland seemed as if he had forgotten I was there.

"What're you readin'?" I asked.

Cleveland shook his massive head and grunted. The sound was so far removed from the person it came from. The high pitched voice was not a cracking voice, this was truly Cleveland. He snapped the deep horizontal crease from the paper. "This is ridiculous."

"What is it? Something I wrote?"

Cleveland looked at me as if I was the village idiot. "Uhhh, no. Historical Overlay. The city is proposing that everyone in Frenchtown now fork over \$40,000 in order to come to the city's standards to have it be considered historical."

I remembered Ma complaining about something like that earlier in the week.

I told him so. He grunted a high effeminate grunt again. "If she's trying to keep her property, I'd think so. The city's trying every which way to get this gentrification going. They're going to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Meaning they're going to get rid of black people in efforts to get rid of the niggers so the FSU students can get the land. "

The next question was totally off in delivery. "You don't work? I mean, I heard you don't work. Is that true?"

Cleveland eyes zeroed in on the paper. His words came at a slower pace, signaling he was beginning to really focus on whatever gentrification article he was reading.

"The people who say that are ignorant. I invest. I buy houses. Property. I work, but not in a conventional sense. I used to work in the city library. Now I just get hassled for the land. I don't particularly care for people."

I looked at the papers between us. The New York Times, The Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, The Capitol Outlook! On a massive bookshelf by the dining room table, the spines of PC Today and Wired magazines became recognizable. I felt both superior to him, yet out of his league in a way that could not compare to Harris at the Democrat. I closed my eyes and reminded myself of how the house was so stuffy and in need of fresh air. I reminded myself that Cleveland sounded like he had eaten his mother and that she was talking most likely out of his mouth as the grandmother did through the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood.

Cleveland put down the paper and sighed like a pubescent girl. "I remember you doing some work in the Outlook."

Now I felt like the girl. I shrugged my shoulders. "Well, yeah...but you have to move on to better things."

Cleveland peered over at me shyly. "Better, in what way?"

I went over my situation. I was careful. I left out everything about Carla. Unlike others, Cleveland gave off an intimidating intelligence that excited me, yet it was powered by this strangulating bond to Frenchtown and Tallahassee that sounded suspiciously like Ma. When I finished, he bit his lip in deep thought. I asked him about his ties to this town, why it was so important for him to stay here.

I learned that Cleveland, being a computer whiz, and into real estate, was quite the historian. He knew more about some of the Tallahassee families than I did! He ran down the names of several well-known newlyweds in town who were actually second cousins and pushing baby strollers, dumb to the fact. People just didn't talk like they used to.

"You can't be more than twenty-six. You're too young to know anything about that," I said. A moment of jealousy.

"I've spent most of my time around older people. I know plenty. I've been messed with by people 'round here 'bout it, too. Messed with from the people that do remember the history. All that property we had, good property, all them connections. Gone."

"I don't follow you."

Cleveland got up and showed me some of the old family albums. There was a worn blue and gold one. I'm telling you, Frenchtown was beautiful! There was a picture of Moses Willows in front of Frenchtown Cleaners. His hair was permed back like old Sugar Ray Robinson pictures! Baggy pants, too. He was leaning hard against a bright yellow and white Plymouth two door. Brand new. Cleveland said he called it a Belvedere. Babied it like it was part of the family.

There was a picture of Moses begrudgingly handing Little Richard a crème-colored cape the singer came in to pick up. Why a man would take a chance out in daylight with his head tied up like a woman in a washhouse I don't know.

There was one of Sadie Willows. Her hair was pressed and all slick with a pair of those heavy, secretary-looking glasses. Next to her stood Florida's own Ray Charles singer, just as blind as he could be, in front of the

Knights of Pythias Hall club. Had to be in the '60's or something. Oh! And there was Cleveland's great-uncle Wallace bear-hugging James Brown in front of Nims Grocery! That building was still standing, just like the Cleaners.

"Now if you meet somebody that's black and famous today, it's at the Civic Center or Mall. It's only here in black communities when they're trying to get a photo op."

I laughed out loud. It was true. Dad met the O'Jays at the airport, not his barbershop. Ma met Jesse Jackson and Spike Lee not when they were patronizing her store, but after they came from a podium at Florida State.

"So you think your people don't care anymore?"

"All I know is all of it's gone because, no offense, but well, black people think the white man's ice is colder."

I squirmed in my seat. "Why does it have to be black or white things?"

"Well, you know, take white women for instance. There are still consequences."

I scratched my forehead. It took a moment to even remember the focus, the reason for the interview. "Well, can you tell me about Lorenzo Bennett? From what I hear you, Ikey and Lo are close."

Cleveland quickly corrected me; He, Lo and Ikey were close. According to Cleveland, Lo's limited vision on life's possibilities ran a wedge into everything. "He wants to be a rapper, I'm serious. He's that type. Scared to give anybody credit for anything because he's afraid it'll make him look weak. Very juvenile in many respects. Lo's far too unrealistic about things - and too narrow-minded to get something going for himself. He's tried so hard to be as well known as his brother Terrence was. I could tell you

about his attempt to even be a drug dealer like Terrence. I could tell you how Lo almost burned himself up trying to cook some crack in some George Foreman knock-off grill. I could tell you that he was so pathetic the guy just told him to give him the stuff back, but that would be wrong of me. That rap career of his is a joke, too. Of course he's tried basketball and that failed. Lo has tried every ghetto fabulous shortcut to fame and has fallen flat on his face every time. He believes the limitations for black men. He counts on them and uses it as a reason to raise his hand to his own son." When I pulled out my pad and pen, Cleveland caught himself for a moment. It was the same sudden restraint I saw in Stephanie when she began to rail about Lo. "He's a good father, but I don't buy the spanking/hitting thing. I got enough abuse when I was growing up. That's what I'm trying to say."

I put the pad aside. "Physical abuse?"

"Abuse is abuse. Lo's always fearing that I may be gettin' more respect than him. This had be what got Ikey killed."

Now it was my turn to make my move. "So the diamonds and jewelry he and Ikey wore... I mean, I see you wear no jewelry, aside from that small gold stud earring. You think the jewelry was part of Lo's need for attention?"

Cleveland's chins went upwards to the ceiling. He closed his eyes and let his head sink back into his shoulders. The question definitely pissed him off. I didn't care. "You have any idea how some lame drug dealer and rapper made enough loot to get jewelry like --"

"No." Cleveland's nostril flared. He stared at me straight in the eye. "No I don't."

Gone then, scary ass. Where's your heart? We took it to folk in '56 and we'll take it to you! Let him cry about his Uncle Tom granddaddy if he wohanna. How 'bout Rev. Metz Rollins. That man stepped up when Wilhemina and Carrie did here what Rosa Parks did. He defended them girls and caught hell from crackas - people with the real power and nature to hurt you. How 'bout Dr. Anderson? Yeah, how 'bout how Dr. Russell Anderson gave all that money for us when we got arrested for protesting and scary ass Toms at the university were threatening to expel us! What did his people give? At least his people had whites on their side.

The Robinson Trueblood Pool his fat ass learned to swim in; He recognize it got there because of wade-ins we had at white only pools? He ever had rocks thrown and wet towels snapped at his head so good he had to go under water or drift out to middle of the pool to get from it all? Ever had the chairs from the side of the pool thrown in? How 'bout learning that the lifeguards refused to help if him was hit, bleeding and floating unconscious in the water. How 'bout the fact that they paid white children to pour bleach into the pool while all this was happening?

He ever had a German Shepherd to the white meat in his leg soon as he got out because he had to rescue the floating brother? Was he made an easy target 'cause he was half mad with burnin' blindness from the bleach and still needin' to drag his friend off? No? He don't know nuthin' 'bout that? Then fuck him! Whites have no morals. We have to keep 'em straight. We have to make them do right. Not because we are helpless without them, but because it's what we deserve. Reparations gone come one way or the other. How you gonna let this fool disrespect what you're

enjoying? This is our world, not just our neighborhood. Everywhere we dream of, we at already. Prob'ly think Africa a damn country. We ain't following whites, whites following people of color already living in every corner of the globe. Don't let him throw you off the big picture!

Cleveland looked at me as if he had just met me at the door. "I said I don't know anything about how they got money for any jewelry. Did you hear me?"

I nodded. The ideas for the book began to come right at that moment. It was as if people were feeding it into my blood. I leaned toward Cleveland and crossed my legs. "Cleveland, you strike me as a fascinating person. Would you mind being part of a book I'm doing on gentrification in Frenchtown?"

Cleveland grunted, folded his arms and tapped at his chin with a finger. While his eyes went up to the ceiling in exaggerated concentration, I grabbed my pad and pen. "Exactly what are we talking about here Wheately?"

"Call me Orlando. You know, just an understanding of how a man like you came to be. How your history has shaped you. How somebody like Lo was even able to cross paths with you."

Cleveland snorted. "There's this girl named Priscilla. She's presently living here with me as a tenant, but I'm going to send her on her way because it isn't working out. She's not here right now. That's one of the reasons I let you in to talk."

Cleveland explained that Priscilla worked at a laundry mat off Tharpe he and his mother used to use. Priscilla always hassled him about his mother using the laundry mat. She said they were doin' it so somebody else would have to

do our clothes like we did Frenchtown's. I assumed he had told her about the old family business. I imagined he probably told the goddamn mailman about the old family business. "Do you think she could appreciate what you were telling her about having a business of your own?" I asked, hoping he'd take a hint and get over it. "I mean to some blacks, it's just ol' facts."

"Priscilla was nice enough at first, then she... she started hasslin' me about not bein' black enough. First was my fade haircut. I had boxed my hair off, military-like. Soon as I'd sit the laundry on the counter, she would go on and on. 'Cut your hair low, Juicy. Get ridda that box mess. Look like a nigga been 'round white folks too long.' If I stayed too long, she'd get at my clothes. I even tried my best church blazer, the one with the arm patches Grandma bought. No luck at all. Never brought up them cashew-lookin' keloids dangling off the back of her ears. But still, like all these bastards 'round here, she's always got something to say: 'Don't you ever get new clothes? With that tight ass blazer-jacket. Y'dress like that shiny nigger lawyer on *Matlock*' Now customers laughin' under their breath. So I say, 'Well you know, Priscilla, that's a fine show', because it is.

"Priscilla disagreed and made a big deal of it: 'Fine? You twenty-somethin' and talk so old. . . Yeah, the show alright. But it was still a long time ago. Ain't the flyest girl in Tallahassee, but you a damn relic, a white man relic.'

"My chest got tight off that *relic* mess; I know she got that damn word from them *National Geographics* some FSU student musta left by the TV. Like she ever went to school. I gave her my usual commentary on the misguided priorities

of society. Us as a people. Black folks, I mean. She'd just nod some, thought about it because it's true, and went on hasslin' me like I never said a thing about it! I cut my hair even lower than usual and stayed off to myself. She still would interrupt me with my thoughts. 'Why you always writin'? You ain't no Tyler Perry?' I asked who that was. She said it was some playwright. 'You cain't be no writer, no E. Lynn Harris. Niggas don't write pretty. Plus you got them nasty bumps on the back of yo' head.'

"I tried to get Momma to go ahead and get a new washer, least have me get her clothes done somewhere else. No such luck. The owner knew Momma from way back and was giving her a deal on the clothes.

"I ran out of ways to avoid Priscilla's mouth, so then me and her really got off on the bad foot one afternoon. I even got to yelling and pointing directly in her face. That was a big thing for me. I don't see why it's gotta come to all that loudness and scuffling. It ain't worth it. I kept quiet. I left the laundry mat ready to stab somebody. I wondered if I shoulda called her manager or somethin'. She called me a fat faggot in front of customers and everything. I was just sitting there, praying that she wouldn't bring her ignorant ass outside. I don't know what I would have done to her."

I shook my head in amazement. It sounded just like the shit I went through with Ma. Cleveland laughed to himself. It seemed strange that even he looked fondly on tough times. He turned toward me and scooted closer. "That's how I met Lo-Lo. He was sittin' on the curb playin' a Gameboy video game. The silver chain he had was long. A wide cross frosted with cubic zirconias hung from it and sat over his flat belly."

I sat up. "Not diamonds? You sure it wasn't diamonds?"

"No, not diamonds. Beads of sweat were all on his forearms like somebody got him with a bottle of Fantastik. It made the tattoos and the silver Seiko watch seem to stand out."

I covered my face with my hand. "Never trust a man whose wears a watch that doesn't work."

"He wears a pretty pricey Movado now. His chain's upgraded too, but that's how he was when I met him. I even sucked my belly in when I saw his lil' waist. Lo-Lo looked up at me and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Next to his dark complexion, them eyes just seemed borrowed from another place or time, but familiar in a on-the-tip of your tongue kinda way. . ."

Cleveland got up and walked backwards into a corner room. I had no idea why he did this. I just sat there, wondering if he wanted me to follow him. The rustle of opening dresser drawers commenced. Minutes later, he came back to the sofa with a light green colored notebook. "Like I said, I went home. I sat in the bathroom and memorized some stuff Lo had me write down in my notebook. 'Say you feel exactly how you think she's feelin',' he said. But the thought of her was still makin' my neck itch."

Cleveland began to stammer and stutter. It took a confession of sorts to loosen his tongue. "I - I have a rash in the bad of my neck if you haven't noticed. Momma sent me to a barber when I was about four or five that didn't - he wasn't a very clean barber." Cleveland opened the notebook and showed me a passage.

Must I communicate under your veil of anger the greater good of who I am?

*To this degree must we fear our true selves?
Dream a world where the direct line is not a crime. Circular
movement is overrated.
In blackness, every kind word has a backdoor marked 'just
playin''.
You stupid hoodrat girl, my life is too messy and painful to
waste on riddles
Or feminine cowardice.
Your life only embraces the reflection of experience from a
side profile.
missing 180 degrees. 80 percent of your life is explaining
what you really mean to say
Your blackness keeps you blind from honesty's light.
Bein' hard makes life hard when the crowd is no more.
This is not romance, not
the soulfulness the world looks to blacks for:
this is bullshit*

I was impressed, genuinely impressed.

"This piece, it's kind of about her. I was still upset about how she behaved when Momma sent me to get the clothes later that night. I waited right at closing time. I figured Priscilla'd be in a hurry to go wherever hole in the wall she need to, wouldn't make a scene. 'Back for somethin'?' she said.

"I got tight-chested and just pointed behind the counter to my clothes. I leaned real easy on the register. I don't even remember her asking for the money or how much the clothes were for. I could feel her about to make some stupid ass comment to get back on where it ended earlier.

"The cross on Lo-Lo's chain flashed in my head. I looked at the Bobby Bowden picture on the wall for some

reason. I was determined once again to try it Lo-Lo's way and cater to her stupid ego, but the words - the whole act - stayed stuck in my throat like cold that just won't get coughed up. I just concentrated at looking her right between the eyes like he said. Let me tell you, I am not gay, alright?

I raised my hands up like I was being frisked. "Hey man, understood."

"I just became fond of Lo. I admired how accurate he was about the whole thing. I sucked my belly in again. The way the words came out, effect of his words. I mean, you haven't met him yet. He's crude, but so to the point sometimes. I said to Priscilla, 'Baby girl, you really look nice. I just get so excited about it that I just get frustrated tryin' to keep your attention that I don't know what to say or do sometimes.' It was like I was him."

My cell phone began to vibrate. I ignored it.
"Cleveland, the smooth pimp daddy."

Cleveland giggled and covered his teeth with his mouth. "It was so simple! Priscilla's jaw hung loose! She cleared her throat and leaned onto the register from her side of the counter, like some kid just kneed her behind her knee to see if she was hungry. For a minute, her stupid ass was quiet! That quiet was the best thing I ever made! She folded her arms over that Spear Britney cut off she wears too much, a kind of tight arm fold, so you couldn't see her underarm hair. She tried to roll her eyes, but they kinda went straight back up in her head. No quick lip, no nothin'. So I'm thinking I got her back then, I'm even! But her face started looking even more human. I got to thinkin' she'd wanna get hit like that again. I backed up some from the counter. She noticed, licking her pink, fat lips and getting

back even on her two feet. 'Whatever. I know I look good. Ms. Willows in the car?' she said, popping some fruity gum."

I could almost picture this Priscilla in my mind. Loud, overly fond of poppin' gum. Probably even smacked on her lips when she talked.

"'No,' I said to her, 'momma isn't in the car.' I looked down at the laundry. Neatly folded and ready. 'Why?'

"'If you shut up, I could show you,' Priscilla said. Her voice was softer, it curled at the end of 'show'. She put her fuzzy, mulatto hair in a ponytail. Not what I was expecting. Priscilla pushed me away from the counter, toward the bathrooms in the back behind the Galaga, Ms. Pac Man and busted up Mortal Kombat video games. She shoved me with one hand and used the other to take the wad of purple gum out and stick it on the shoving arm's wrist.

"I never saw a fight start off like this exactly. Then she tongue-kissed me so hard we butted heads! Yeah man! Once I figured what was what, I kissed her like I had always practiced. Soft, but with a good firm grip on her with the hinges of my mouth. Twirlin' my mouth across hers in the shape of an "o," then slashin' a line through the "o" like I'm noddin' no.

Cleveland snorted with feigned disgust. I was willing to bet he was no different than the so-called hustler at the barber shop complainin' about the cops following him from place to place.

"Priscilla's tongue went still in my mouth for a second, both our eyes opened, then closed. Now she tried to kiss me like I was kissin' her. So I cupped her chin in my hands and broke up the suction with small tongue kisses. She inhaled hard and put her arms around my shoulders when I went back to the "o" and line slash. We kept kissing 'til I

could feel her breasts and nipples mashed up against me. She pulled back, starin' at I was a wild man. 'I see you been eatin' them Funyuns, aintchuh?'

"I was getting pissed. 'So what! You got gum in yo' mouth anyway!' She kissed me some more, but still not as good as I did her. The grape taste of her gum was good and settled. This seemed better than fightin'. 'Lay down on the floor now,' she says half polite, half impatient.

"I laid on the floor behind the back row of dryers. She put her gum back in and started pulling at my corduroys until I got the idea. I got 'em down to my ankles. Legs were ashy though. Socks were tube socks. I just blocked the socks by keeping the pants at my ankles, but then I figured if I got 'em off all the way, she'd see how the insides of my thighs are blacker than the rest of me.

My mouth kind of hung open. It took a second for me to get it. Cleveland looked at me as if I was stupid anyway.

"From rubbing together, they get black from rubbing together. I really don't like that. The floor was cold and not awfully clean. Whole place smelled like sweat and fabric softener. This wasn't the way it was supposed to happen exactly. I didn't plan on all this going on.

"Priscilla was standing over me, popping her gum again. She undid the zipper to her Chic miniskirt. It stopped halfway, then went back up. 'Did I lock them doors? Before I could answer, she was off to check the door, mumbling about some crazy guy that might come in and write us a ticket or something for doing it in the place..."

I remembered the area. The Children and Families Department was over there. That didn't sound quite right. "Ah security guard writin' tickets? Those state department areas usually have police around there."

"I didn't know what she was talkin' about, all I knew was she had left me naked from the belly down, staring at the dusty, long-tubed ceiling lights the missing their cover. I spit in my hands and rubbed it into my legs. She returned, pulling out a red and white tin box about the size of her palm out a back pocket. She opened it, but got real annoyed, tinkering with the crinkly paper inside. I figured she must keep condoms in there and maybe lost the last one.

"Priscilla pointed a chipped, orange painted nail down at me. 'Shit! Next time we do this, you're gonna kiss it first.' Priscilla closed the box and showed it to me. It read *Altoids Curiously Strong Peppermints* on the cover.

"She shimmied out of the skirt, catching the 'what's the candy for?' look I s'pose I had. 'Well hell boy, how yo' mouth feel when you eatin' 'em?' My face froze. I swallowed my grapey spit. 'Well okay then,' she pointed to the furriest one I've ever seen, 'that's how it feels when them candies get down there, too.' She flung her skirt and the box behind her, her bushy eyebrows started knitting together again. I can't even remember when the panties came off. I believe they were lime colored. 'You gone put summa these in yo' mouth and handle yo' business next time; This a cat that don't lick itself. You play dumb too much, Juicy.'"

I couldn't help getting into this. My time with Carla was definitely educational when it came to sex. It's one of the things I loved about white girls, the lack of hang-ups. "Just a word of advice, Cleveland. Cinnamon is a natural germicide. So if somebody has you go down on them, cinnamon Altoids may be a more calculated risk."

Cleveland leaned back from me. "Really? Okay, well..." He giggled that lil' bitch giggle again. "Okay. Well, Priscilla Louise Scott sat this thick, hairy maw on me."

I felt weird. Every slang term for vagina I had heard in Bloomington came rushing to my throat. Chia pet, meat wallet, catcher's mitt. Nothing I could come up with came near hairy fucking maw! That wasn't black, wasn't white either. I didn't know where he got that from.

"Well, the whole world real small and intense. She was chewing that gum awful hard the whole time, 'specially after she got her balance good and got to mumbling and moving conveyor belt-like 'til my belly kinda flopped up and down.

"They say it has a smell to it and Priscilla's did, actually kinda like cinnamon and a gym sock in your room you can't seem to find. It made her seem even meaner, more animal-like. All the stories and all I heard about it. Now it was me! I guess I hyperventilated some with all that on my mind. She slowed down for a second and that made me get that sweet urinatin' feelin'. And then I knew it; I was ejaculatin' inside a person!

"It was hard to believe it was happenin' 'cause I couldn't see it doin' it; My hand could only grip her hips tight. I giggled that it seemed so secret-like, hiding it all in her, the gushy evidence I mean. She stopped, sorta sweaty across the nose. 'S'um funny?'

"It got real good, like talk-to-you-in-a-minute good. My butt squinched up hard. She started doin' it hard, splittin' up her words with the moves. My butt screeched along the floor like sneakers with the syllables: 'Wus - so - damn - funny - nigga, huh?'"

I slapped my thigh and bent over from laughter. They didn't tell stories this good in Dad's shop - even after closing time. Cleveland seemed to become even more animated.

"My smile and butt eventually went soft again. She got hold of herself, said she was on the pill. She wiped up some

with one of Momma's towels. She smiled at me and stuck her purple tongue out at me. 'You look like a fat, black baby with dickhairs,' she giggled when she said it. Maybe that meant she was joking, at least she called me a *black* baby. In retrospect, I still didn't like it.

"I told her I was about to do a Subway diet. Priscilla stood over me and came down slow like she was dancin'. I grabbed the inside of her thighs for some reason. Remembering the locker rooms stories, the pictures of Zora King and Rita Banks from Steve Elliot's book bag... They were, like the finest girls in Godby High ever. I just had to see Priscilla's up close. She was open, shining like a bit-in strawberry droolin' melted white cake icin'. The smell of cinnamon, socks and goop made me impatient. I wiped the Funyun crumbs from my mouth. We did it again. You'd think my blackness was beyond question. You would've thought I had finally won. After all, Priscilla's gum chewing and mumbling stayed with me. Her greedy warmth second, but so did her crabs."

My mouth fell open. "Woah, what?!"

"Yeah, Lo met and as a gift, he set me up with a skank that gave me fuckin' gave me crabs. Momma had passed by then. Before I could really get used to the peace and quiet, there was a knock and then a ring at the door one Sunday afternoon. Lo and I had our disagreement about how well his advice worked... well, he kinda went to the laundry mat and told her what happened."

"In your defense?"

"I don't know. Well, like I was saying, it was a Sunday afternoon. I opened the door. It was Priscilla. Every hair in my armpit felt like it turned into a porcupine quill. I kept the screen door closed. No way was

she and her lil' friends gonna get me again. 'What you want?' I said.

"Priscilla stood there raccoon-faced, like some sleepless days punched her in both eyes and left dark rings. I may have not said so before, but she's always in something tight. This day was no different. She was in a pink and cream tank top, no bra, cream shorts and scratching the inside of her ear. Her hair was fraying up from the ball she had it in. That ugly brown Nissan truck that was always somewhere near the laundry mat was in my driveway, full of milk crates of clothes and magazines she probably stole from there. She talked like she'd rehearsed: 'I read the paper, y'know? 'Bout Ms. Willows passin'. Awful bad... Maybe I can help out with things if you like.'

"I laughed so hard, I almost fell through the screen door from doubling over. I just knew Lo sent her up to do this. I don't know how, but I did - like he was tryin' to embarrass me."

"Your paranoia is just..."

"I just have bad nerves."

"Dude, you're not even forty years old. That's stuff old people say."

"Well, I just wasn't in the mood for all that. I said, 'A place to live? Hell naw! You, you ain't makin' my house no damn flea bag!' Priscilla had this dumb look on her face, like she was about to sneeze, but the sneeze wouldn't come. Then she shook her head like some loose connection would set itself right and the words would come. I don't think she ever had a full connection, honestly. For a moment though, it did, 'cause she stepped back like she was barefoot and close to steppin' in glass.

"'Okay, you know, that's cool,' she stuttered, almost whispered. The sudden change in her attitude made my heartbeat ripple up to the back of my tongue. It was beautiful! She whipped around toward the steps and started down. . . Hah! I hurt her pure and clear, for once. I licked my lips and tried to think of something even better to say.

"Priscilla messed up my train of thought when she stopped at the bottom of the steps."

I grinned to myself. "With them tight, cream shorts..."

"I guess. I was really cussing, remembering everything I never said. Maybe I was just all confused with Momma's death and all. Bored. Horny. I don't know."

I grabbed his thick hand to shake it. It was so soft that it almost offended me. "Horny, dude. You were horny."

"She got really panicky. Told me that it ain't easy havin' to wash strange people clothes for a livin'. Then she said I don't know about that because I live life with my momma handlin' everything. That last part she mumbled under her breath. I unlocked the screen door. I asked her to repeat what she said.

"Priscilla said I just sit with books or write things nobody's gonna read, mainly because I don't even let other people see them. Then she said I 'be just hidin' and eatin'.' I was getting pissed off. That's when she said it: 'Cleveland, I'm really sorry 'bout the trouble I caused.'

"It was the first sorry I clearly recall anyone saying to me. Maybe I was speechless 'cause it came so quickly. I don't know, I wanted to push her to say it again. Then it hit me too that she called me Cleveland. Took the time from someone to find out I really don't appreciate that Juicy bullshit. Priscilla turned around and took a step up to me.

She said when things happen, you gotta get over it. See, she was tryin' to work her way back to bein' nasty again, I could her tryin' to turn it up in her voice. It didn't work.

"I stepped one down to her and looked around. I didn't gave a damn about Ms. Rita next door sitting on her porch, spittin' snuff into her bushes or that pack of boys that were hangin' on Mr. Roe's fence across the street. She'd just called me a faggot - again!

I couldn't see that from what he was saying? "You're used to holdin' a lotta grudges..."

Cleveland folded his arms and fell into a full pout. "I'm sick of not sticking for what I believe because of manhood mind game people always play with me. Nobody's given me the chance to be more than my latest mistake, mistakes I don't even---"

"What mistakes?"

"Stupid shit like walking up to three urinals, seeing one guy pissing at one on one end and choosing the middle one that happens to be next to him instead of the one at the other end. For not liking to cook meat on grills - even though I'm overweight. For sitting in the grass with my knees to my chest and my arms wrapped around my knees. For pronouncing too many of my words clearly and not cussing enough. For not liking arguments and fussing. For checking to see if everyone visiting in my home is comfortable. For taking baths to clear my head... People like Priscilla would be the quickest people to pull that shit with me.

"This wasn't goin' to end with me sittin' there with a million things I wanted to say but didn't while some low class that wears party dresses to church gets to unload their whole childhood on me. Not this time. Fuck no! Her

eyes got big like I was about to jump on top of her. Her hands were comin' up over her head.

"I was like, 'you're embarrassing to your race. You're a statistic. I couldn't create a stereotype better than you! You should apologize every time you pass a mirror, just in case somebody's in the room with you. Life ain't taught you no classy way to be 'round a man? I'm supposed to like bein' called out my name by you in front of people?! I'd rather masturbate, 'cause if you did - She tilted her head. 'If I did what?'

"Now I was backtracking. 'What? Move in, shit!' She perked up. 'Move in? Well, first I need to sit down. I don't feel so good.' I pushed her in the chest when she got where I stood."

I tried not to look up into his eyes. The idea of those soft hands trying to get tough with anyone reminded me of bags of potato chips which had 70 percent air sealed in the bag and only 30 percent of chips at the bottom. It was depressing how much his relationship with women reminded me of the one I had with my mother.

Cleveland sensed my disbelief about his taking a stand and became incensed. "I'm serious! She was walking into me! What the hell is a man supposed to do if a woman is trying to walk through him? She had to step back. Bein' female don't give you the right be rude. It's my house. It's my fuckin' property!

"Priscilla saw I was serious. She placed a hand on her chest. Her shirt - I just. . . just wanted to slap her civilized! I don't beat up women, but it'll cross your mind with one like that. She was lickin' her fat, ruby lips. Her voice was without that funky, rude ass edge. Like she lost her wind. 'Fine, Cleveland. Look, I said I was sorry.'"

I started to thumb through his journal as he continued.

"The tremble in her voice at that last sorry. . . Beautiful. So different from the car horn blaring I usually get. I couldn't trust it. In fact, it scared me. I quickly slipped in the house. 'I got to think about it. Get a new job first. Subway hirin'.' Ms. Rita next door was laughing as I watched through the window. Priscilla pulled off in her raggedy Nissan truck. Look, gimme the book; I'll save you the trouble and find the damn poem you'd want:

*Her tremble floated,
went back and forth with the crickets that night.
Every passing car sounded like an over-packed pickup
As I lay in my bed,
relieved yet sleepless.
I trade a scared boy's sleep for a madman's rest.
Tired of having to try to change the subject
Or back down.
Who can I pass it onto if everybody stays forgiven?
No, I will only rest here. On this stolen land.
Nowhere near Spanish moss and this miserable heat
slowly splintering bones and cooking nerves
into crow's nests of mean-spirited misinformation
No way will I sleep without my full share of blood*

"Well well. . ." I said. "Your first taste uh power."

An old fashioned, bell ringing alarm clock went off in one of the bedrooms. I looked at my watch on instinct: 2:34 p.m. I had spent over an hour with him, the longest interview yet, if having sex with the interviewee didn't count.

Cleveland quickly got up and peered over at the words on my pad. "How'd I do?"

I nodded and gave him the thumbs up.

"We'll get into how she wound up livin' her next time because I just know you want to know."

I drove away, certain that writing the book would be painless. Maybe even fun, thanks to this weirdo Cleveland and his peculiar family. This guy was born into a situation where he was hated by the blacks his family initially fought for out of love. Unique enough. He and most of his family sat like immovable Buddhas in the heart of this black community, either for fear of venturing beyond its limits or because they were convinced the glory they once enjoyed would return and redeem them. My parents were guilty of both charges. Cleveland and I had many similarities, but also a marked difference of opinions.

Like most businesses in Frenchtown, Cleveland "Juicy" Willows was starved for recognition. Cleveland had nothing else, which was probably the reason why he minded the affairs of so many of the other Frenchtown families. God were he and Ma totally alike! Social outcasts like effeminate men and forgettable women that held that tightly to past distinctions had nothing else to draw from. I grabbed my pen and pad. Ah! That's it! I'll interview Ma on this! That'll get that bitch on my side!

I got home and turned on the laptop. Images of Cleveland playing hard to get kept jumping into my mind: "A book? Well, I don't know." The way he peered at me out of the corner of his eye when he said it was so lame. "I suppose if this for the good of the community..." Please! I wasn't even going for that bullshit. I knew I had him!

CHAPTER 4

GETTING MY HANDS BLOODY

It was the next day, Wednesday of October 22nd, that I went to the Tallahassee Police Department. I had hoped to set up a meeting to chat with some officers that patrolled Frenchtown. I was even open to do a ride along, but I remembered the faces of Mrs. Eva and the Tony barber at Shear Designs. Riding shotgun with a cop for four hours in broad daylight, if it got out, would have ruined my chances with potential street contacts.

Officer after officer seemed to pass me along. 'Oh, who you really need to see is...' I made everyone I dealt with aware that I was with the Democrat. How much trouble could it be to find a cop that patrolled Frenchtown or knew the Bennetts? The name of an officer Wayne Bertrand started coming up. Ah! Mrs. Eva came back into my mind again; this was the cop she said was messing with some hoodrat girl. Yeah, the one that asked Terrence to help her get away from him. As expected, I never got a chance to meet Bertrand. I would later find out that Bertrand had been suspended and was given enough of a stare down as to not ask why. I scribbled on my pad to find out why later on at the Democrat. I didn't know if I was getting the complete run-around or not until I was introduced to Investigator Roy Buddy.

Buddy was a 53 year-old bear of a man that hailed from Arlington, Texas. The accent was unmistakable when words like 'wall' and 'nachos' dribbled out the side of his mouth, a mouth that could only have the excuse of using snuff to justify teeth being that brown near the gum line.

The ex-marine caught sight of my badge. He slapped me on my shoulder and gave a squeeze. It knocked a cough out of me.

"Hell, you mighty young, aintchuh? Where's uh-hh? Where's err-uh-hh?" Buddy snapped his fat, gnarly fingers to recollect Harris' name. I put him out of his misery. "Ol' Harris got him in apprentice then... Gotta get your hands bloody after while I s'pose."

Buddy was an investigator for a murder that took place on FSU's library, the same one Harris had been so diligent on lately. I made a note to read up more about it. As he talked I remembered Harris calling someone Buddy when I was in the newsroom working with him. I could see why.

Buddy turned out to be the go to guy for info on a lot of things. I found out through Buddy that my very own Lo Bennett was a suspect in that FSU library case! Buddy sat me down at his desk and confirmed all of this. I laughed out loud, remembering that when I told Mrs. Eva I wanted to interview her about a murder, she replied "which one?" The scent of Stephanie ran through my mind; she was right, I needed to find this Lo in a hurry.

On the evening of September 23, 2003, Lorenzo "Lo-Lo" Bennett was supposedly sighted having a shoving match with a large black male in front of the lobby of FSU's Strozier library. That same male was apparently Chauncey Millers, a 19 year-old FAMU student. No one could figure out why. Millers was found later that evening in the third floor bathroom apparently dead of strangulation, he was hanging from some bar of a stall by his own belt. Investigator Buddy stated that it was ruled a suicide initially, but was now being investigated as a homicide.

Buddy claimed the new theory was that Millers was "injected with some chemical thing or another to be knocked

out." From there, even I knew somebody hanging him would be easy and mistaken as a suicide. I told him I was looking at Lorenzo in connection with the Ikey Mike murder.

Buddy smiled. "Let's take a look-see at your boy's rap sheet."

To be so young, Lo had a shitload of charges. Two aggravated attempt to elude a police officer, possession of cannabis, carrying a concealed firearm, possession of paraphernalia, aggravated assault, resisting or obstructing officer without violence, civil contempt in court, even depriving an officer of their firearm! Tats of matching black panthers on his upper arms, one of his son over his heart and a huge dollar sign on his back. I sat back in my seat... Wow, I had to deal with this asshole?

Buddy gave me his address, 1576 West Georgia Street. I was sure it was probably one of those saddlebag-looking houses where the porch was screened. You couldn't clearly make out for the life of you what was going on unless you came close enough to the porch to catch a chest full of buckshot. I asked if Lo had a phone number. Buddy pounded his desk with laughter. "A sack of shit like that with a working number? Hell, you are green, aren't you?"

I watched 1576 West Georgia Street from way down the street, near Martin Luther King Boulevard. Lorenzo "Lo-Lo" Bennett was more popular than I imagined. People would stop by the house like he had taken ill. It took several days and three notes in his mailbox to catch up to him. A green Chevy Caprice on its way to being fixed up sat in the driveway the whole time. Its tag had been removed.

I learned on Thursday that the pit bull I kept hearing when I walked into the almost grassless yard was finally

chained to a tree out back, so I became more adventurous with approaching the screen door of the porch. Actually, I had taken Dad's shitty 22 with me. Bennett dogs were famous for not being hospitable. I went into the porch. It was crowded with 10, 25 and 45 pound plates from the dingy Olympic weight bench at the far left end. The bench was in front of a green and yellow couch. Mind you, this was not a sofa, this was a couch! One of the legs it was supposed to stand on was missing and had been replaced by a Yellow pages phone book. The whole couch smelled like mildew. Foamed padding was coming out of different tears. I could not bring myself to lift up the cushion, but I did feel between them and found wrapping papers and a burned, nameless CD still in its case. I smiled and thought; 'the authentic nigga life' until the chill of the wind caught me through my sweater and parka. It made me callous and critical of what I found on the other side of the couch.

Emptied bottles of Grey Goose, Cuervo, Hennessy and 40 ounce Bull and Magnum Malt Liquor were neatly arranged. Too neatly arranged. The labels were not peeling or faded and the caps had been twisted back on so no rain had collected in them. Somehow I knew that Lo didn't drink all this shit. It was as much of a put-on as the white frat boys that came to class moaning and threatening to hurl from some legendary party no one ever heard of before. Lo was desperate to advertise to one and all how his crib was some ghetto frat house. A burned pearl-colored Cape Canaveral ashtray sat between the couch and the door. I sat on the dirty couch and imagined how small my world would have to be to stay content with such an existence. I sat there over an hour until my nose started running. I took the CD

and left more confident, thanks to impatience and left a message for him to reach me. He never did.

I returned the next day. The exact thing happened again. I just sat there and talked to Carla for a while until she had to go to class. Then the rustle of falling autumn leaves slowly drove me mad. This time as I left the porch, I realized my parked car in the driveway was probably a tip off. He probably had rode by, saw the car and kept going. Before I could start off, a black Ford Taurus pulled up behind my car. A white man with black hair and in need of a shave got out. The hair between his olive-colored knuckles and phalanges made my shoulders tighten. If this was going to be a fight, I would have had to fast and hard. He was my height but made like an offensive lineman.

The man wore cheap shades. He checked the perimeter around us so many times I thought Lo's pit bull had gotten loose. He signaled me closer to him as he approached and like most white folks, he was red from the bleak October air, yet wore no coat over his garnet polo shirt and khakis. I stopped far away enough from to keep him from getting those hairy mitts on me. I took my hands out of my jacket pockets.

The driver had a toothpick in his mouth. He pulled it out. "What's your name, sport?"

I scratched my head. "Orlando. Is something---"

He walked passed me and put his toothpick back in. "Full name please."

I turned to him and opened my coat. The man turned to me and put his hands up. "Hold your horses now."

"No," I said. "I wanted to show you my badge." A look of raw chaos melted his martial demeanor. The toothpick in his mouth fell into the leaves.

I took the badge off and showed it to him. "Uh, Orlando Wheatley."

The man regained his composure. He continued to walk - around the back of my car- taking note of my license plate. "You friends with this Lorenzo or what?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "No, just interviewing him. Just doin' my job."

"For what?"

"His friend Ikey Mike's murder."

The man looked up at me as he came back around through the two cars. "And nothing else, but that. That's what you're telling, Wheatley, correct?" He didn't wait for a response. "It wouldn't be in his best interest to get him into anything else. Or yours either." He walked up and tapped a finger into my chest. "Tell your friend I'll be in touch."

On Friday, I parked the car on Carolina street, some two blocks away. I sat on the couch. A Black Expedition came up to the curb soon afterwards, one that I remembered seeing go by the day before. Lo got out, crunched along Winged Elm leaves as he jogged up into the porch and had a fit when he discovered me on the couch waiting for him.

Lo couldn't have been more than one-sixty. Even with a heavy denim jean jacket and matching, oversized pants, the taut way his skin was pulled over his cheekbones and jaw line proved Willows was correct; Looking at his features made you want to go into a room where he couldn't see you and do sets of push ups.

Lo quickly picked up a five pound barbell that sat at his untied Air Force Ones and pointed it at me. Cobwebs hung from it. He lifted the barbell over his head, ready to bring it down. "Nigga, who you wit'?!"

I immediately raised my hands. "Woah! Woah! I'm with the Democrat and I wanted to know your views were about Ikey Mike. That's it."

"Bertrand sent you, didn't he? I'll bash you in yo' fuckin' th'oat with this thang! Or maybe po-po botherin' me 'bout fightin' wit' Juicy in fronna dat liberry! You betta just git the fuck on!"

I remembered the CD I had taken from the funky couch cushions. It was garbled up demo of some rapper yelling about snitches. Traitor motherfucker this and that. I took a gamble. "I heard some of your raps from Willows. It ain't bad. I figured with you being a rapper and all, this could help your publicity..."

Lo's emerald green eyes sparkled. The platinum lock on his chain swung a few links over as he pulled the barbell even further back for a better swing. The diamonds encrusted into the shape of a king's crown made my throat dry. Then the leaf-link iced out bracelet, that new Movado watch and ring... The disco-fat diamonds in each ear. It all screamed of another black man with a ravenous ego to nurse. The rap fan response I had given him was a perfect move.

"Juicy played my shit to you, huh? What shit uh mine you heard?"

I thought quickly.

Wish I could lay a barrage into yo' entourage

Habitatin' for Humanity in my hood as camouflage

Take a picture helpin' a kid for the evenin' news

*But you diss him in the mall, got him feelin' used
Fuck ass pussy playas I'm hollin' straight to you
out for yourself ain't even real with yo' crew
One gunshot blast and you all beggin' to flip
Nigga Judas is the cruelest epidemic to hit*

*Here ya gun, here you razor, here ya drugs, here ya rope
Yo' soul can't cash the check yo' mind wrote
Here ya gun, here you razor, here ya drugs, here ya rope
Yo' soul can't cash the check yo' mind wrote*

*So the future is Juicy, there I said it bitch, sue me
I'm okay when you play, but for bidness you shoe me
Countin' the days 'til you leave, like then you got it made
The plague's put into yo' people, yo' people ain't the
plague*

*Wanna live with a sweater wrapped around your shoulders
'cause there'll be no human bein' when it's said and done
to hold ya*

"The one about snitches and sweaters wrapped around their shoulders. About the soul not bein' able to cash checks minds right. Nigger Judas, that's the one. Shit was kinda funny."

Lo grunted. I showed him my Democrat badge. He turned and waved at the Expedition at the curb with the barbell. It cautiously pulled off. "You dat nigga been posted up here the last few days. You lucky, playboy." As he spoke, the gleam of gold from the front teeth on his bottom row saw daylight. Lo spat off to the other side of the porch

and lowered the barbell. "I was finna cave yo' shit in, keepin' a nigga from his own househol' ain't right."

I told Lo about the black Taurus and its driver. Lo sighed heavily, then gave me a grand tour of the frigid house. Though it was embellished with a flat screen TV and monstrous stereo, it smelled of his jasmine incense and the elderly flesh of tenants past. The floorboards squeaked under the thin brown carpet. A brass framed picture of Tupac Shakur was on the wall, as expected. There was another of Al Pacino's *Scarface* on the opposite wall over by the flat screen and a busty, well-hipped black woman posing as an African princess next to the front door.

Pictures of his green-eyed son DeAndre were on every dresser. Old father's day cards Lo had bought himself were pasted to the refrigerator next to paperwork showing when DeAndre was due for his immunization shots. The child's room was immaculate. Hair from his first haircut was in a Zip-Loc bag at the top of the closet. Baby teeth that had fallen out were collected in a blue Tupperware container named as such with masking tape. Shrek and Wrestling action figures as well as every athletic ball imaginable were in Toys R Us shopping bags lined up along the wall. Beyond that, the house was a mess. Mountains of worn clothes all over everything designed to sit on. Playstation games were all over the floor. Heineken cans were in the sink. A sixteen track Foster mixing board was on the dining room table next to a box of Cap n' Crunch cereal. My favorite.

Lo went to his thermostat and cackled as he noticed my seeing the box. "That Cap n' Crunch live as fuck, aintuh?" With these types of people, I could never ascertain if they were being rhetorical or meant for you to truly answer. Of course, I chose wrong here.

"I said that Cap' n Crunch live as ---"

"Yeah, yeah. Yes it is."

Lo moved some of his clothes off the black leather sofa. He had me sit down on it. "Thirsty?"

I cleared my throat, though there was nothing to clear. "Water would be straight."

Lo sat down. "Well swallow ya spit, nigga... shit." He stared at me for a moment. I was shrugging my shoulders. He burst out laughing. "Mama right; you is a scary nigga."

Lo brought me a bottle of spring water. He then took off his shoes and rested his feet on the XXL Magazines on the coffee table. The house began to warm up. "Off the record, Ikey was like that. He was ah-ight. God bless the dead, but he stayed on the fence wit' shit too much. Sad to say, them the first people that get hurt first. I hate it that that happened to my man. Scary ass people and those that cain't make up they mind." Lo looked over at me. "Life will come and decide yo' shit for you."

Ikey Mike was as kind-hearted as the candy he was nicknamed after. A nice and simple kinda guy. Another cat used to the idea of a hopeless future. Lo swore that livin' in Frenchtown'll do it to you. "Ikey never had to fight much, 'cause when he did, he took folk out. A kid's ass he beat at the basketball courts even went and told a boxin' coach 'bout him. That's how nice Ikey was wit' his knuck game."

I could see Lo looking to recruit somebody like Ikey to add muscle to his entourage. After all, what rapper didn't have an entourage? I began to wonder if Ikey was recruited in any of the strong-arm intimidation I had heard Lo was famous for when well-meaning white liberal social welfare students from FSU walked Frenchtown's streets to

clean up ever-recurring trash or help build a home with Habitat Humanity. I asked him about it. He disregarded it. "We need to clean up our own shit. If a nigga like it dirty, then a nigga like it dirty. People got different ideas of was clean anyway."

"Speaking of cleaning, Ikey was a janitor himself, right?"

"Ikey was cleanin' Federal Express offices for Franklin Janitorial services. One time this new manager started doin' shit like drop burnin' cigarettes on the floor and say 'Ikey you missed somethin'. Ikey been dreamed of knockin' him cold, but the asshole was a manager and white. I told him he had to make his own rules, 'cause Joe square rules stop short at lookin' out for niggas. I told him to warn the cracka out loud in front of folk. That way, the shit public that you tired of him. So then, next time, run a fist in his chest and through his spine if he step up again." I nodded, thinking all along, 'look where runnin' with a violent character like this got him.'

"Ikey came to the house one night Chris and me was making a song a few days after that. His lips was so swole they shined and he was steady wipin' his hands on his pants. 'It happened,' he said, snigglin' like a girl. 'I caught him flush, too.' We all stayed up 'til three in the morning tryin' to figure out what Ikey needed to say to his boss to get him to understand.

"Why couldn't Ikey just file a complaint?" I don't know why I couldn't keep myself from asking stupid questions.

"Right, like they gone take a black man word over a white one. Unemployment a bitch for people like Ikey, too. Ikey went to Employment Service looking for another job

just to test the waters the next morning. He said he couldn't get in 'cause they were closed due to staff shortages. That's some bullshit; the people working unemployment fuckin' unemployed!

"Ikey finally went to see his boss. Come to find out, the boss said that cracka ay Fed Ex requested Ikey come by early that day. I rode with him there. The manager came out with them funky Oakley shades Bobby Bowden wear to hide his eye. The fucker actually gave Ikey a proposition, become his sparring partner for a few rounds early in the morning twice a week or so, for a lil' extra change and he wouldn't press charges.

"After that, for months, I'd just stare at Ikey. At his hands. I was happy for him and disgusted at the same time." Lo shook his head in wonder and scratched at his crotch. "Can you imagine that? To get to beat a white man for money. . . on a regular basis?"

On the night of Friday, October 10th, he and Ikey were keeping time at the Moon, a local nightspot fixture in the heart of where Smokey Hollow used to be. Lo was reportedly buying up the bar, passing out demos of his CD and paying girls to make out with each other on the upper floor while the more introverted Ikey Mike was enjoying the festivities. None of this Lo had a problem admitting to. "Shit, issa free country."

The attention they were receiving apparently pissed some Southside boys off. The Southside was the 'other' remaining black hood area in Tallahassee. Since there didn't seem to be much else to do, quite naturally rivalries began and had claimed several lives over the years. Midnight came and went. The wrong girls ventured off into the wrong circle. Words were exchanged.

"This the part you won't hear 'bout; them niggas threw a fuckin' drink at me, but security comes and throws me and Ike out!" Lo's voice began to rise. "I'm tellin' you, haters don't take no days off!"

Ike apparently struggled to keep Lo from goin' back in, which didn't amount to much, because the Moon closed soon afterwards, sending the Southside boys out into the parking lot where Lo and Ike stood. It had become customary for TPD (Tallahassee Police Department) to manage the traffic in parking lots of such places, since niggas will be niggas. Such was the case that night. This made everyone involved pass what was believed to be idle threats at each other for the ladies in attendance and quickly disperse afterwards. Lo got in the Caprice that he had out front and went over a girl's house until sun up. It was reported that Ikey went to the 24 hour Waffle House for his beloved grits, no butter and black coffee. Someone he recognized entered. A female. They talked for hours. He left soon afterwards. He was found hours later behind the restaurant shot to death.

Lo grabbed a demo CD and put it in the massive stereo system at both sides of the flat screen. "This some new shit I'm comin' out wit'," he stated proudly. I nodded and sunk back into the couch. I could barely stand what I heard from him the first time. Now it was time to pay the piper for getting him to open up to me.

The first cut had major animosity toward Karma, the mother of his child, possibly women in general. His horrible attempt at Jamaican patois set muscle spasms off in my shoulders:

Clubbed by dem Culture

*This next shit dem a quick shout-out to me baby mama
Who got she FAMU degree and t'ink she gone find better than
me.*

*Gone sho' ya'll I can be felt wit' dem wicked dancehall
beats.*

Go 'head, start dat track, nigga...

*Karma Karma Karma Karma Karma Chameleon,
you fuckin' hooooe, You come and go. Damn straight.
Love would be easy if yo' colors was like my dream
Red, black, greeeeen, 'steada just green for creeeeam*

*Everyday's already survival,
You can't keep a man if all he is is yo' rival
All yo' girlfriend dykin' just so yo' ass know
Put down de dildo, you need a Biiiiiible!*

*Boooyakah!
You ain't no strong black woman
You a scary ass, lil' girl with a big mouth and a degree
and issues.
Grow yo' bumbaclot ass up, biyyyyatch!*

*And of course, there had to be the unoriginal thirst for
materialism...*

*Havin' thangs
Feel me on this: There's a diff'rence from doing wrong and
bein' wrong. We'll know in the end, my nigga... It's just
hard to know a diff'rence when you broke and folk countin'
on you.*

Ridin' on fumes, which yo' jewelry and yo' pit bull on hock
You can't get no gas now you walkin', say the car in the
shop

Phone cut off so you cain't plot or tell a nigga about it
'merican Express leavin' mail for you to leave home without
it

You clean your house to find change for lunch money for
school

It's time to jack Peter and fuck it, hit up Paul ass, too

Spinnin' D's, heavy Chevy's, smokin' trees, chicken wangs
Who are they to hold me down from ever havin' some thangs?
Model bitches respectin' wishes and be ready to hang
Don't let no haters hol' you down from ever havin' some
thangs

Since I was a teen I'd be lookin' out my from door to
dream,

'Cause the good shit 'cross the street and my screen door
ain't got a screen

sick of totin' this cell with no service, bet this shit may
sound strange

I dream of a call when it get turned on that make all this
shit change

Ketchup from Mikkie D's to make tomato soup

That double fo' spaghetti sauce while ballers ridin' in
coupes

Yeah!

Ol' and jealous motherfuckas don't want young niggas to
have shit, that's why they don't tell us shit. They don't

respect our grind. They jealous, they want all the shine for themselves. Fuck 'em. Ride for yours.

"Uh-huh! What you know 'bout dat right dere, nigga?!" Lo punched me in my shoulder. I would have rather tripped off some bad X than hear any more of his demo. The thought actually aggravated the spasms. "So you say Juicy played some uh my shit for you?"

I nodded affirmative. "Yeah, Willows told me all about you."

Lo's left eyebrow went up. "Cainta been good what he said, so why you akkin' all glad to see me?"

"I believe in making my own conclusions."

Now it was Lo's turn to be animated. He began to talk more with his hands. They pointed to emphasize the middle of his sentences. "Juicy wish I did get it for fightin' wit' him in front of that liberry, but that's all it was. I was there readin' up on the music business. I ain't have shit to do with lynchin' niggas wit' belts in bathrooms. And let me tell you, I ohn give a *damn* 'bout that fat bitch ownin' this place. Rent ain't nu'n but money. Money come and go; Cain't *nobody* own my soul, dawg!

"There's a reason why Juicy got so many enemies. His family ain't got shit to do with it, even though they can't stand him either. He don't respect the wisdom people like me got. See I know shit is hard and you need people with some character by your side, not a bitch that fold when the heat is on. If niggas see Juicy weak and dis, it's 'cause they know it's better to have a puss-ass nigga for a enemy than as a friend that may turn traitor on you. I mistook his knowledge of computers and shit as a strength, at least to help me with my thing. Robert right; I shoulda cut him

loose after that, but he just kept hangin' around like I was his daddy. I'm the real blackness he's jealous of. He can know everything, but I know everybody. I got a good feel for the weird ways of people. Folk ask him for favors, they ask me for my comp'ny. That means I'm the street, the people. Human bein's. Family, wrong or right. That nigga gone die brilliant and lonely tryin' to play golf wit' people that can't stand him 'cause he got standards for his people nobody ain't trying to reach. Juicy got all big-headed on this Hope Robinson thing."

I felt sick. Another factor to deal with. "Okay, who's she?"

"Naw, playa. Let him tell ya. I'll just say she a missing girl that was s'posed to be incognito in the liberry at the same time. Anyway, he showed me her picture and said he was gonna find her. This fool was still scared to go up to Joe Louis Apartments where she stay and he gone find her? I told him I'll prob'ly find her first 'cause he ain't in touch with his people. It was a test that he took to heart, so I asked around about her some, just to prove that how I do my shit. That stiff-ass robot nigga callin' hotel clerks and secretaries. Hidin' behind machines. I got niggas far off as Quincy puttin' the word on any girl that even wish she Hope.

He found out how I was handlin' mine and really got his panties in wad. Now you gonna put another story about her in the paper, right?"

I grinned. It did cross my mind.

"Don't put that picture of Hope in jeans and that black shirt in."

That sounded awful familiar. "Jeans and a black shirt?"

"Don't show that picture again. You bring out the other side in men when you tell 'em a distraction like Hope may be out there within reach. Priscilla done told you what it's done to Juicy.

"Dover, Dunn, Dent, Dade and Dewey Street was just coolin' off from all them creepy lookin' strangers in station wagons and F150's that cruised up and down the blocks. I mean yeah, they be comin' for dope, but still... The construction workers building new houses over there gone start lookin' for her again on they lunch breaks. You'll start it all up again. All that traffic gone bring them basin hoes back out strong for relief. They turn tricks parked in Philadelphia Baptist parkin' lot if you let 'em. Or back behind sheetrock doggie style in them half finished houses. Even in the Porto Potties.

"I ain't tryin' to be with no Hope like Juicy is. Oh yeah, I'd fuck her, don't get it twisted. Ain't a man I know wouldn't. See this girl got y'all, Juicy and all kinds of fools lookin' for her. And if she in town like you say, that mean she gotta be slick as hell 'cause you cain't miss a girl made like that. As fine as she already is, this much attention cain't do nothin' but make a monster out of her. She'll be ruint when all this over. Best revenge I'll have is to see that Juicy gets her and the aggravation that'll come with her. I wish Priscilla could see that."

Lo grabbed his remote and turned on his television. It was already set at BET. He turned down the volume. "We call him Juicy on account of how fat he is. Sissy ass nigga. His own house smell like a flower shop going outta bidness." Lo pointed at himself through the platinum lock on his chest. "Me myself personally, I tried to be intelligent 'bout it, but he couldn't respect that. Look like nobody could."

"How so?"

"What you mean how so? We off in Frenchtown, man. It's you, yo' kin and your boys against whoever. He messed up shit between me and so many people. It was like I had to start from scratch. People started feedin' on the fact that I was givin' this nigga such a long leash to disrespect me."

I took a sip of water and selectively scribbled down what I could. "People watched that, saw that I wasn't gettin' my get-back head up. Folk owing me money started gettin' slick at the mouf . Testin' me 'bout this and that, but that's just the way niggas is. But I had my son stayin' wit' me. I was tryin' to stay cool. Karma was prayin' for me to get in some shit so she could take DeAndre back. Juicy knew all that. Sissy ass nigga hit the scene thanks to me.

"Juicy had a run-in with this Priscilla girl that stay with him. She used to work at the laundry mat off Tharpe Street. That's where I met him. Gave him some clues on how to deal with the girl 'cause the dumbass couldn't see she was tryin' to get next to him. Anyway, she kinda left him with a gift he didn't care for too tough after things fine'ly went down."

"Crabs."

"So he told you, huh? Well, he came 'round me 'bout the time my baby momma Karma moved out with my lil' boy DeAndre."

"DeAndre's your son."

"Yeah, Karma one of them saddity-ass bitches, wanna be at least. She was goin' to FAM fo' computer science."

"Of which Juicy seems to be good at," I interrupted, remembering all the computer magazines on his bookshelf.

"Karma from Jacksonville. She wasn't gettin' no help from her people. Blew all kinds of money tryin' to be in that AKA sorority and never even made it in. We met at the Lincoln Center. We was dealing with eachother fo' like, two income taxes when she got pregnant. I was cool with the shit, too. Moved into a new spot. I went to the Lamaze thang, did the sonogram to hear the baby. 'Cause that's my boy. DeAndre. My lil' man. Straight up, what I don't like 'bout Juicy's what I don't like 'bout Karma."

"But both of 'em you saw fit to have a close relationship with Lo," I stated, hoping he could see a connection.

"Both uh 'em wanna be all high class and holier than thou. College niggas, like a degree gone make you better than me. Neither can shit for checkin' to see what some Ebony magazine say about it. Karma was with me fo' like several damn years, takin' classes between braidin' heads. I helped pay for dem classes! But she call herself outgrowing me when she got 'round to graduatin'. Talkin' 'bout I ain't got no ambition. How many niggas you know tryin' to be wit' dey kids like that? How much more ambition you need?"

A black man wantin' to be a father, I thought. Wow, that's got Nobel peace prize all over it.

"Karma start braidin' hair wherever the person stay 'steada of at the 'partment. The cell that I pay for for her can't ever seem to stay on... I knew what was up. Thank I'm waitin' for somebody clownin' me in the streets?

"Hell naw, so I was like 'bitch, you playin' me.' So then she pickin' arguments all in my face tryin' to change the subject. Fucked around and said she'd leave. I pushed her ass out my face. She fell and get to floppin' all over

the rug like she got sickle cell or some shit, just addin' shit onto it for her benefit."

I stopped him again. "I didn't see any domestic abuse incident in your file."

"'Cause she knew she was wrong and didn't call! Too much shit men got to take these days. So that was the getaway she needed. I come home from work and all her shit was arranged just a lil' too neat in the closet. Jewelry all gone off the dresser."

"Jewelry like yours?" The fear of approaching the subject was slowly deteriorating. "I mean, she was crazy to leave if you were hooking her up with diamonds like yours or ---"

"Riiiiiight," Lo interjected. His eyes thinned out. "I got her legit shit that was paid for. Perfume bottles gone from the window sill in the bathroom. All her Jill Scott and India Arie just happen to be in the car I be takin' to Jiffy Lube for servicin' so that bitch can go to class in? No clothes of hers in the dirty clothes?"

"Put two and two together, me bein' the man that I am, and took DeAndre out daycare to stay at Mama's. When I say 'mama' like that, I mean my daddy, too. Karma got her shit and left. We was doin' that partial custody thang for a minute. I believe Juicy done started sayin' junk to Karma through e-mail or somethin', 'cause lately she be tellin' Children and Families that I be abusin' DeAndre. Since shit got bad between Juicy and me, shit got worse with her."

"See, DeAndre would cuss, snatch things from your hand or shove plates of food off at grown folks like some spoil ass white kid - no offense. I'd pop his ass on occasion when he needed it. With my hand or a belt or somethin'. No broken bones and bruises and all that crazy shit, just

somethin' so he know I mean what I say. She know that, but all the sudden I'm abusin' him? She lied like that all the sudden, so Children and Families thinkin' he needed to be with her. So Children and Families almost kicked Mama do' in. You know that house you interviewed my Mama in?"

I nodded. "Right."

"You know, when you started askin' her all about her jewelry and shit. You lucky my daddy wasn't home off all that. I gotta daddy. I ain't lackin' like Juicy is."

It felt like a trickle of ice water went down my spine. I didn't look up at him. I knew I would lose it if I did. "It's just, man, I'd like to have a lil' chain or something myself, nothing as serious as yours. So what happened when Children and Families came to her house?"

"They made DeAndre take off his shirt like some slave inspection at an auction! Karma mama in Jacksonville won't tell me shit. I was tellin' Juicy 'bout my problems when I met him. Matter fact, that's how I found out where she was, what she was doin'. On Juicy computer. He looked the shit up for me. Juicy taught me that internet dot com mess.

"I taught him street smarts - and 'bout his thang with Priscilla. I was really into my own thoughts when Juicy came out the laundry mat, but still, big as he is, you don't let nobody just walk up on you like that. He was ready for church 'cept for missin' a tie. That kinda threw me for a second, 'cause it was 'bout ninety-eight in the shade. You be thinkin' what somebody dressed like this doin' at a laundry mat gettin' harassed? I nodded for him to take a load off and sit next to me. He did. He pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs."

"So your boy was a mess, huh?"

"A heavy breathin' slob. Oh man, he was like, gnashin' his teeth and rockin' back and forth. Hurt like a bitch. Lip out, all quiet. I don't know why I didn't bus' out laughin'. 'Never been in a fight before, have you?' I said. He just wasn't in his natural element.

I asked him his name. 'Cleveland Willows,' he say. I heard Priscilla screamin' 'Juicy' out the door, but hey, I figure the nigga told me his full name for a reason. 'Cleveland,' I said to myself under my breath. 'Cleveland' loosened the grip on his legs. He explained what went down with Priscilla. Boy was so clueless I was finna ax if he was from outta town, man."

"But he lives only a block or so away from y'all, Lo."

"It was different when my brother was around. That was the last time you got love from the jump. Now, them wild-eyed bums, basins and shit got people on edge."

This was a new term for me. While kids like Lo hung out in the street, I was with Dad at the shop or at band practice. Or working some piss ant job. Always something else. "Basins?"

"Crackheads. Basins are baseheads, they smoke rocks; they be basin'! Like Basin Street. Heron users are jukes. They juke the needles in their skin. I mean, that's what we call 'em. Basins and all them got people spooked.

"People speak only when it ain't night time or rainin' hard or when they ain't doin' dirt. Back then, even drunks had home trainin'. Juicy was always in the house anyway or driving off. I didn't recognize him 'til I saw that ugly car he and his mama ride in parked by the pay phone. I explained that Priscilla, in her ign'ant way, mus' like him. He took out a face rag sof' as a Crown Royal bag and dabbed the sweat off his forehead, says he a 'Willow' and ain't

some 'backwoods girl that drink water outta garden hoses' gonna get him 'arrested for foolishness'. He said some silly shit like that."

I couldn't see a problem in that. I didn't understand why a man could only be a man if he was looking for a fight.

"You from Frenchtown, but you may not know; You take the risk and go for yours. If you do it well, word get out and you won't have to have situations half as much. Ain't no Martin Loofa Kangin' it. You set a bitch straight or you get tried.

"So I just sat there, looking at Juicy, tryin' to figure him out. I pulled out some uh my sunflowers seeds. I was just noddin' and spittin' into some oil slick off the curb. Smilin' and listenin'. Meanwhile, he just salivatin' 'bout them seeds. I found out later he don't even like 'em. He just like to eat any shit in sight when he stressed. That's why he so fat. For a while at least, he took my mind off goin' to that apartment complex up the way and havin' a chit chat with Nyesha for actin' like she don't know where Karma at. Nyesha is Karma girlfriend from Jacksonville. That's why I was there, waitin' for Nyesha car to pull in."

"Okay, the aggravated assault charge. Nyesha's the one you assaulted. With the belt."

"Yeah. Anyway, I get into the rest of this Cleveland situation and figured out his deal: 'I hear you. Do me a solid though, Cleveland. Just try one time dealin' wit' her this way. Just for experiment's sake. . .'"

"Next day, fat ass called me over to his house 'round 10 o'clock in the damn morning... he saw me out his winda'. Met me at the steps before I even got on the porch good. Pecan Lady happened to be in his front yard at the time looking for pecans, singing that opera mess."

I couldn't help but laugh. Pecan Lady. Her real name was Miss Ludie Mitchell. She had been livin' over by Philadelphia Baptist church for as long as I could remember. Her mind wasn't quite right. She had the hairiest chin I'd ever seen on a woman and would walk through the neighborhood with house slippers, a shower cap and rollers singing some Italian opera shit nobody recognized.

Mitchell's obsession was pecans. If there was a pecan tree in Frenchtown, she knew where it was. The sixty-plus year old would go in people's yards unannounced to collect pecans even in the middle of June. It was just her way, so most folk let her be. But not Cleveland Willows, according to Lo.

"Juicy ran her out into the street so quick, she dropped her empty plastic bag. Then Juicy turned to me wit' his zipper undone , talkin' 'bout how my 'ghetto' advice worked a lil' 'too well.' That he had did it with her and now got crabs. He was lookin' wild too, sweatin' and scratchin' at his eyebrows and lookin' at his finger nails when he done like some fool on dust imaginin' shit.

"Bein' the man that I am, I was like, 'Ghetto? I didn't know advice gotta have a damn name to it.' I don't remember sayin' he had to fuck shit noway. People like that so used to blaming somebody else so they - ugh! He just like Karma! He was up there tryin' to cuss and jump bad. And it wusn't eeeeven workin'. He pointed over my shoulder to the street where Pecan Lady was examin'in' something by the curb. Talkin' 'bout I need to leave just like that!"

"You felt sorry for him?"

"Hell naw. This was just the kinda break from his day to day he needed to have in order to get a real life going. Everything in life ain't planned. He kept poutin'. I was

pissed off but - y'know wit' my probation and all that - I started laughin'.

"I had peeped his game by then. Cain't get no mileage in the 'hood slappin' a puss-ass nigga like him. Plus, wouldn't be nobody but Pecan Lady to see. He musta realized he was outta his place, 'cause he turned back to the house. So Mr. Bourgie got burned with crabs. Serve him right, since he think he so damn phisticated."

To here Lo tell it, everything outside of Willows' meter of good taste was an issue that threatened his property value. Every argument that could be heard from the street deserved a visit from TPD. In short, all black life that was not sanitized, dull-as-ditch-water and backgammon friendly was in violation.

"I got cool like Frazier on TV: 'Crabs? Well Cleveland, it seems you in a bit of a pickle, my good man. Was it any good?' He slammed the screen do' and turned around swingin' his head like he got long, permed out hair. Faggot ass.

'Pickle?! People like you don't talk like - quit mockin' me! This serious! Damn whether she good or not!'

I walked up on the porch. I laughed so hard I was leanin' on the screen do'. He let out this ho-ass whine and collapsed in the couch near the do'. I opened the door after he got himself together. He was still on the couch, back stiff as an ironin' board, clawin' up dick hairs.

"'The hair - I'm scratchin' it out, ' he say. 'The raw skin left is bleedin'.' Much as I wanted to cave in his whiny chest, I sat next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. Like a true friend: 'Well 'bout time you let the world know who it's fuckin' wit', Cleveland.' No way in hell did I know where he'd take it."

I looked deep into Lo's eyes. "What do you mean?"

Lo smiled, showing me that lower row of gold teeth.
"Man, Cleveland a thief."

CHAPTER 5

BOUNCIN'

Come now, boy. Do you not see what they've done to my Frenchtown? Our own flesh and blood? I believed in what Moses Willows and them was sayin'. I just - I couldn't go against my man. I owned a gas station right off Brevard, we sold Nehi's for 10 cents and a gallon of gas for 23. Fords Fairlanes and Customs used to park at the side by the bathrooms and water hose. They'd come to wipe off the eggs and piss whites would put on them when they had parked and went in for their jobs. They'd pull them cars off and them frenched headlights and taillights would be shining all over again. That was bad enough back then... I would be at the register fanning myself with a Life Magazine and singing along to Fats Domino on the radio. Smiling, trying to be happy just knowing that they were washing their own car and not some white man's. Things changed. The Fords stopped coming. We closed down.

I owned all the land further down the road from her... up yonder between Brevard and Woodard where FSU took it for dormitories. My land was to show my life wudn't in vain. I used the deeds to keep my nephew from going in and outta jail. Never knew they'd take it. I kept a money belt under my girdle. I couldn't trust no banks after the Depression did, not even the Lewis Bank. I saved my money. I was there for my family.

I had to do for him. Them crackas woulda killed him. There was nothing else I could do. All the car stealin', fist fighting', liquor runnin' wit' dem Bennetts from

Smokey Holla... he messed it up good, but he'd always bring me flowers and 'pologize. He taught me the mashed potato, the pony, the swim. His mother wasn't payin' him no mind... I was raised not to turn my back on my people. It coulda been me out there needin' understandin'. It coulda been you.

After hearing from Cleveland and Lo, I went to the Democrat to check out what I was dealing with past newspaper clippings:

DATE: October 14, 2003, Tuesday - Tallahassee Democrat

SECTION: State and Regional

LENGTH: 474 words

HEADLINE: Search begins for killer of FAMU college student

Frederick and Irene Millers are considering putting something special on their son's grave in hopes of keeping the unsolved case in the attention of the public. On September 20, 2003, the body of Chauncey Millers, a 19 year-old FAMU Business Administration Major, was found in the third floor bathroom of Florida State University's Strozier Library. Millers, apparently dying of strangulation, was hanging dead from an overhead bar of a stall by a belt around his neck. The belt was apparently Millers' own. Suicide was ruled as the cause initially, but now is being investigated as a homicide.

A new investigation ruled that Millers was "injected with cyanide to be rendered unconscious, then hung in noose of belt to induce death and injuries relating to suicide." The Millers suspected foul play all along, but insist the killing is a case of being in the right place at the wrong

time. "Chauncey was not the type of person to take risks or get himself into trouble with people," Mr. Millers insisted. "We had to convince him that going to school out of state (to FAMU) was in his best interest. How much more safer can a student be studying in the library?"

"There's no suicide note of any kind and he had somebody's skin under his fingernails. I know the police will find the bastard that did this. All Chauncey dreamed of was having a chance to make something of himself in life," said Mrs. Millers tearfully. The troubled youth was adopted by the Millers at age 5.

Soon afterwards, the soft-spoken child excelled in academics and earned a spot in the local International Baccalaureate program. Millers eventually won a full scholarship for college and served as a youth leader for a local church. This fuels the belief that Millers was the victim of a mistaken, yet premeditated attack. Leon County Sheriff Cletus Fisher said he has turned the case over to the homicide Division and will work alongside the investigators assigned to it.

Since August, state police investigators and deputy sheriff's had organized the available evidence and created a chronology of events, Fisher said. "We even have notes written on napkins," he added.

Beyond the stealth methods of the killer, the most alarming aspect of the case is the disappearance of Hope Robinson, a local young woman involved in another case. Robinson kept company with Millers up until that night, even following

him into the library. Although the library was hampered with being under construction, security video revealed possible suspects.

Of course, Harris wasn't too pleased with my stepping into his territory. This put even more of a bounce into my step. I already had enough info on the King Love XTC being sold in the area. I was willing to drop that, but the crown on Lo's platinum lock kept me thinking. I needed connections to all of this. The pieces weren't fitting.

A more pleasant visit back at Shear Designs gave me another tip. Tony, one of the barbers, was also one of the tenants at one of the Willows properties. I caught him smoking out front on the curb, pissed that Willows had raised the rent. "That bitch tryin' to get rich off us," he muttered.

I wanted to tell him about the historical overlay, about how the city was putting the squeeze on Frenchtown citizens to hopefully fail to come up with thousands upon thousands to get historical status and keep their land.

The proliferation of white students walking down Copeland Street over the past years didn't seem to matter to Tony. All of them, walking right by Dr. Na'im Akbar's office on Copeland, not even knowing that this man's work in psychology was renowned in showing just how crazy white folks were. The crowd that frequented the Tennessee strip seemed to have spread to clean, efficient apartment buildings where there were once only lots of weeds and spare trash. FSU-stickered Jettas, Camries and Jeep Wranglers lined down the curbs on Copeland passed Shear Designs, Akbar's office, along Strong & Jones Funeral Home and the "fake lake" where the homeless people lay in the

sun, drink beer and have it out with each other, along the off brown apartments set back from the road where hookers, single mothers and city workers with no car sit in their parking lot smoking weed and crane their heads at white folk walking to the new duplex next to them connecting Copeland to Brevard. Yes, little pockets of apartments had sprung up in the heart of darkness and it worried the hell outta a lot folk. But not Tony. I didn't want to interrupt him though.

"That nigga Juicy get to get in the game and get out without a scratch? He get to leave folk high and dry and broker than broke?"

I told Tony that Lo had said the same thing in passing. I asked what game. Tony sucked his teeth and said there was a girl on the salon side of Shear Designs I needed to see. I asked if it was Ikey's girl, Stephanie Warner. Tony, being only two years older than I, smiled a knowing smile. "Naw, bruh. She put it on ya' good though, don't she?"

Priscilla Throatwood was between 145-155 pounds of high-yellow, bow-legged trouble. The freshly contained eyebrows and swirling, shoulder length hairdo of the menstruation-colored bird's nest Cleveland described did nothing to offset her raw presentation. I caught her as she strutted out the door, her voice screeching goodbyes to the staff. Priscilla was clad in a tangerine knock-off Baby Phat sweat suit. She was also working the hell out of a piece of gum, as I expected. "I knew Juicy had somebody on the way over there the other day, funny as he was actin'." Priscilla looked me over from the floor to my forehead and back. "New Balance sneakers. Dem white people sneakers."

I had \$11 to my name when I offered her some food at the Wendy's across the street. She only ordered a Frosty, thank God. It hurt my head to imagine Juicy's girlish voice and hers in the same space together. Priscilla talked like she kept a walkman on and took on a timbre as inviting as eating tin foil when a disagreeable subject presented itself. The good thing was I had found that most women, especially pissed off ones, tell their men's business in a heartbeat. Though I was certain she'd give me some headway into the jewelry mystery, the more Priscilla talked, the more I wanted to break up with Carla.

"Hmm, 'bout time you gat to me. I'm 'bout to move out. Juicy got issues. I know you got his version about our relationship or whatever. That I'm jussa tenant, right?"

I nodded yes. I waged that this would anger her more and really get her going. I was right.

"Juicy and me finna break up on account of Hope Robinson, for starters. Hope that girl that's been missin'."

My mouth twisted up. What the fuck did this have to do with diamonds or the possibility of Lo's crown being involved with King Love X?

"You know 'bout Hope. She the girl Lo's brother s'posed to have been killed tryin' to help."

I took a slurp of my Frosty. Yeah, this was the girl that was involved with officer Wayne Bertrand. Dots started to connect; Bertrand was the cop that regularly patrolled Frenchtown. I played dumb. "This Hope Robinson, Cleveland was involved with her, too?"

"He ain't Cleveland to me, he Juicy. And he wish he had something goin' on with her. Fake white ass! Oh, I know plenty 'bout Juicy and his damn solitary love affair. While

I been livin' there, Juicy's had plenty 'bout Hope Robinson in that house! Sho'll do. Too much. Some of it look official, like it came from some office. Ain't you gone write what I'm saying down?"

I pulled out my pad and pen.

"It's stuff talkin' 'bout like where that vagrant had got in trouble at last. In dark brown folders, different signatures of people this and that place, scared me some to tell the truth. I couldn't say nu'n to him 'bout it 'cause then he'd know I was lookin' in his stuff."

"Why were you lookin'?"

"Why was I lookin'? I mean, y'know, me and him..." Priscilla rolled her eyes and took in a mouthful of Frosty. "Juicy so - it's a long story."

I waved my pad at her. "I got time."

"We had unprotected sex together! On my job! My bacterial colony all put at risk like that and he think he can treat me any kinda way? Shit, I don't love just for my exercise." With this girl, you didn't know whether to laugh or cringe from embarrassment.

"Juicy - uhhh Cleveland, tol' me about some security guard or other out there was coming in and bothering you. Something about writing you a ticket. I checked and there was no security outfit out there. Had to be a police officer to write tickets or ---"

Priscilla's hazel eyes got wide, too wide to believe. "Naw, naw... that was just... I was just playin' with him. I just, I dunno, I wanted to see if he would be tryin' to protect me and stuff. The papers Juicy had were about where Hope family stayed off Basin Street and when they moved to Joe Louis Apartments. Typed up and stuff. Juicy had two nice, glossy black and white pictures of Hope like she some

singer on TV. He call himself bein' smart I s'pose and got 'em copied at Kinko's. Even put the one where she thank she cute in that black unitard and jeans on his computer screen. The one where her hairs wavy because it's in a ponytail that probably ain't gonna grow. You know, the one where she ain't got that zit on her chin. And when I say she on his computer screen, I don't mean he scotch taped to the glass, I mean she under the glass *inside* the computer!"

"I believe they call it background."

"I'm telling you his background now! He kept wantin' to show me computer stuff and all kind of nice things 'til the Hope mess started. Nice things is the least he could do for me."

"I mean, all this ain't goin' to in no book is it, the stuff I'm finna say?"

Before I could answer, she cut me off. "You know what, fuck it, 'cause I was under duress; he made a fake FSU student ID card one time for me to look at 'cause I wanna go to college and better myself. It was wrong, but it was a nice thing to do. He made him one, too. We got backpacks, some clothes from the Gap and we'd sneak into places on campus and hear professors lecture and stuff. We'd go in buildings and do it in empty classrooms like real students.

My image of Cleveland "Juicy" Willows began to turn in on itself: Was he an anal, law-abiding nerd or some black cyber punk? Was he truly able to get into places like school computer labs, check out books at the library? If Priscilla was right, Willows could get into places only students were allowed to go. He had the intellect to blend in and the money to get a legit card. It didn't add up.

"Juicy keep disrespectin' me with them real pictures of Hope under his mattress. The ones he copied probably

still under his pillow. . . Much as I done for him. He dead wrong. He owe me. Young as that girl is. Nasty ass pedophile."

"You're telling me he's worse than Michael Jackson, Lo tells me he's a thief... Speaking of which Priscilla, Diamonds... I notice Lo and Stephanie Warner and them bling-bling hard, people who're drivin' buses and collectin' unemployment. A lotta broke people got some serious diamond jewelry. We don't have stores that flashy in town. Any idea how they got it?"

Priscilla stopped sucking on her straw. Some Frosty went down the wrong hole. Her eyes began to water. She excused herself and went to the bathroom. It took to long for her to return, over eight minutes. If I wasn't by the bathroom doors, I would have sworn she had left. When she returned, the cell phone she had attached to the swivel lock on her waist had disappeared. It had to be in the fake Louie Vuitton pocket book that hung from her wrist; Priscilla had called someone on the phone when she was in the bathroom.

"All that diamonds shit you talkin', I don't know all about that. I know things kinda changed for everybody though. Juicy and them stopped bringing in new DVD players and laptops. Everyone of them got old Caprice cars or old Regals they tricked out. Juicy got a grey one, but his wasn't as fancy. He said he didn't like the type of dudes that would approach him to ask about it. He was just getting' some flava, and then got rid of it. He studied the Godfather movies, bought some nice, pinstriped suits and got into the Frenchtown Improvement group. You know he got me a tennis bracelet that was just awesome, too."

"Were diamonds in it?" I had to ask.

"Yeah, so what? It was so pretty I didn't have anything to wear with it, no real place to show it off at. I would wake up in the middle of the night and turn on the light to look at it. He'd reach over me and turn off the light. I had to sell it to a Pawn Shop for the money ahmma need to move out.

"Lo had this new chain that had a platinum lock with a diamond crusted king's crown on it, made you just stare at his chest. Then a leaf-link iced out bracelet, that new watch and ring... Fat diamonds in each ear. He was buying the bar at the Moon and paying girls to make out with each other on the upper floor and shit. Lo's place got vinyl siding. Busted dressers got replaced. New shower curtains, new TV. Sneakers for every day of the week. Stereo. Most of all, DeAndre was the sportiest child around. People would come up to speak to Lo just to see what he had the boy in. Chris paid off the rest his probation stuff from all those checks and started to never repeat clothes too. His spare room turned into a serious recording studio, lights and echo and machines. Even the microphone with the screen covered with panty hose on it. Ever been to his house?"

I nodded no.

"Ikey stayed pretty much the same, except for his fixed up black Regal. Robert was finally able to buy that shiatsu back massage chair from the Brookstone store in the mall. He used to keep going in there talkin' about he was testing it out and the white folks got mad and started callin' security when he showed up. He put it in the middle of his living room, which made it look stolen on account of how raggedy the rest of his house was. Nobody had the time to come over for any of the meals Juicy would cook. . . We was meetin' up at Olive Garden now. Nobody would say what

was up, but they all would leave town together and come back slappin' eachother five. It wasn't hard to tell something was happening.

"They were flying out of town some too, 'cause I remember Lo' asking all these 'what if a plane do this and that' questions out on the porch for days before they left the first time. Credit cards were coming by the bunches in the mail. Juicy was bringing newspapers from different states in, too. I knew he was doing something on that computer but I'm telling you, I ain't have no new place to go. He was nicer, like he was looking forward to seeing me again when he'd come back. Doing it on a bed fulla hundred dollar bills stickin' to you is pretty cool, too."

"So all was well in love land then, huh?"

"Chris was talkin' to him. That's the freak of the group, Chris. Juicy'd come back wit' that funky gleam in his eye and -"

"So Juicy was the inexperienced one out of the group, in everything. No serious social circle..."

"All I'm tryin' to say is sneaking in the house and fuckin' with a ski mask on. . . That thang was kinda straight, I ain't gone lie. I mean, it was the danger thing of it, I s'pose. Hmm, it got to the point that I had to go as' some girls I worked wit' how to make it more even, 'cause he had gotten used to my same ol' routine. I stuck a thumb in his uptight ass right when he couldn't refuse. That nigga was poppin' and lockin' like Reagan was still president."

I had to admit, that comment made me take her more seriously. "Aren't we a talented girl."

"I just had to send a message, y'know?"

"Wow, rape enactments by a passive aggressive hiding behind a mask and thumbs in anuses from his high society girlfriend. What ruined paradise?"

"So I can incriminate myself? I want some immunity."

"This is for a book, not a ---" I stopped myself. I regrouped. "I won't print this."

"Well, I remember them talking under they breath and sitting at the dinner table with a layout of some building one time. I knew what he was about was important, so I stayed out the way. He liked when I'd leave the room so he could talk to people. He just seemed so important, not worrying about his stupid bumps and all that. He was a man with something to do with himself, making thangs happen. So I gave him space like he was the man and he was handling his. He talked to me like I was somebody. He started bringin' Altoids that I like without me askin' -"

"Priscilla please, he owes you, remember? Now what happened?"

"Alright, Juicy kept a lot of tools in two or three knapsacks in his closet. Y'know, crow bars, power drills. . . flashlights. It struck me as funny 'cause Juicy don't look nowhere near knowing a flathead from a Phillips. When they would leave out of town though, them tools would be gone with 'em. His Dickies uniform would be gone, too. Ikey Mike got him a Dickies uniform catalogue from his job. Lo came in and cussed Juicy out about ordering it to come to his house. That was some funny stuff.

"Things were good 'til I was home early from work while they were at the dinner table again. I had brought them some Heinekens from Jax Liquors, just because I was sorta proud of them I guess. They got at 'em and I was in my room on the bed playin' with DeAndre. Juicy was reading

something off his laptop to Lo. I mean, Juicy cut Robert off to read something. Juicy has a bad habit of doing that, just then I realized that he got more like that with that beer. I had never seen him drink before, but Robert was saying some mess about Juicy talking like he ran the show just 'cause he do computers. Juicy said he was trying to show them all something they needed to read about 'that grab and run shit', he said Lo pulling that type of hit was foolish. 'Faces will be on monitors,' he said. Lo disagreed.

"Then Juicy was like, 'if it ain't that big of a deal, Lo you read what I was tryin' to show you and everybody yourself.' It got real quiet. Even lil' DeAndre was quiet. That beer got Juicy to talkin' big. . . Then I heard Lo talk under his breath, reading, stuttering something about some Outward company hiring people to find hackers. Everybody was kind of helping Lo with the words.

"Juicy was like, 'see, you cain't even read, Robert cain't either. That's why you forever handing me instructions to hotels and articles from VIBE magazine... you need me to read it for you!' Juicy started complainin' that Robert and Lo get attitudes with him the most because he is the most well read and articulate. Robert started mumblin' that he'd snatch a book and beat Juicy to sleep with it. But that's just envy talkin'," Priscilla huffed. She leaned in closer. "I know the green-eyed devil when I see it."

Priscilla said that Juicy said their issues with white people physically integrating Frenchtown got them twisted up into thinking that them being pressured to read and speak correct English was the same kind of integration of their minds. She said Lo said some crazy shit about if one

loves their people, they take the ways of their people wherever they go. They don't drop who they are to be with others. Juicy rebutted, saying if that were enough to make it in the world, they all wouldn't be there begging him to set up another lick.

"Lo got huffy, talkin' 'bout 'you love niggas, Juicy?' Juicy said niggas only amuse or irritate him. Then he turned to Lo and was like 'look at you; your woman hates you, you can only show love to your son by buying shit he doesn't even need. All hail the King of Love.'"

Priscilla and I laughed at that one, truthful as it may have been.

"Ikey even spoke up. He was like, 'Juicy, you kinda come off with an attitude when you showin' people stuff. At the same time Lo, you ain't talkin' outta love or pride right now. You talkin' outta fear."

I could totally relate. I had done community service with AmeriCorps in the area during high school. We tutored at-risk elementary kids in an all-black school to help raise their reading level for the upcoming FCAT tests that determine whether they'd be promoted to the next grade or not.

These kids were beyond the typical mischievous nature of childhood. Day in and day out, they showed up dirty, underfed, over-medicated with television and hiding any real kind of originality under ghetto posturing. Especially the boys. It was a year of unreturned parental slips, disconnected phone numbers and bullshit excuses like "over-sleeping" as to why conferences were missed. Yet, parents would come in halter tops or saggin' Dickies with gold teeth ablaze off the strength of any story the child made up about being done wrong.

The days of getting' your ass kicked if you didn't get your lesson died off. Now young niggas sported being dumb like it was a brand name of clothing. It was a fear, a fear seeing that shit ain't cute and funny all the goddamn time. And here one of their idols were bitching about the path they chose?

"Juicy was settin' 'em straight. He was like, 'y'all sit here suckin' yo' teeth at how I'm not pressed to do another job. Crime's a mere experiment to me. I don't see it as my only way of evening the playing field. I show y'all how to do resumes, I help you with your taxes, I write fake recommendation letters to you, I give you exercises to increase your vocabulary, and you just hold your dicks and mumble ignorant shit to hide the fact that you're insecure with your performing this type of intelligence. Priscilla, Chris and Ikey, on his good days the only ones who really seem up on it.'

"I knew when he said that shit was gone change. Lo love to be the leader, but it was like, how Ikey put it, like 'Kobe and Shaq on the same team.'"

I scribbled 'Lakers', on my pad. The perfect metaphor. They were my favorite team. "Who was Phil Jackson?" Priscilla shrugged her shoulders. "We wanna be seen, not on no sideline."

Priscilla decided on getting a salad. I can't even remember how she swallowed her forkfuls between what she was saying. "Lo got flustered about folk helpin' him an' cussed out everybody. He snatched DeAndre outta my hands and left. Things only got worse after that. Juicy started complainin' over the phone to Chris about his having to pay for everything when they all went out to eat, that they thought that since they paid Juicy rent then he could use

some of that money. They always felt Juicy was cheap, but Juicy live below his means for a reason. He started makin' them pay for their food. They claimed he was actin' like a bitch. He claimed the business with the rent was business with the rent and that he wasn't footin' the bill no more like he was take no bunch of niggas out on a date; he felt he needed to wean them to stand on their own and stop freeloading.

"Lo and nem stopped coming by just to chill. People started talkin' real short and to the point with each other. I started hanging out of the house mo' often. I was hopin' all that would blow over. By then, I had got me a Sprint phone. That's when Juicy was starting to act a total ass again with me. He was keepin' six packs in the fridge and tinkering and switchin' out his computers. Those things were all over the house! Lo had my number and he would talk down about Juicy. Juicy got those stupid pictures of Hope around that time, so I really was down wit' he was sayin'. Next thing I know, they were sitting out on the porch and had the blow up where Robert was comin' in the kitchen tryin' to talk to me."

"What happened then?"

Priscilla shook her head no. There it was, another brick wall. I got her cell number and thanked her for her time.

Auntie Gretchen took me out for lunch the next day at Wilson's Barbeque and Soul Food on Bronough Street. It was new and closer then Shingle's Chicken House by FAMU. We had a two piece and fries. It was hard not to compare it to Shingle's. There was just something about watching Auntie

bite into a piece of food while she was reminiscing about something. Her eyes would flutter. Sweat would bead up on her forehead. Even when it was about an unpleasant event, she would speak reverently as if ghosts were walking the streets.

At the moment, she reminisced on how Ms. Pee Wee, FAMU's oldest and most loveable "mascot" of sorts, would dance with her brown-spotted tongue out in front of Shingles. The jukebox would play some James Brown and that was all she wrote! I had heard many times of how this elderly woman worked in the FAMU cafeteria in ankle-long skirts, hair net and bobby socks by day only to turn her wig backwards on purpose, get drunk and go to the school's football games and party her ass off.

Such individuality was appreciated back then. Instead of being ran away for fear of white corporate sponsors watching, Ms. Pee Wee was allowed to lead the Marching 100 onto the field and down the streets during Homecoming Parade. The long part of her wig would be in her eyes and she just didn't give a damn. And her people let her be. That was love. Auntie said uppity folks visiting who were taken aback by her just understood, in time, that Ms. Pee Wee was family and, if they didn't like it, tough. Auntie had heard Ms. Pee Wee had recently passed. The little lady had been put in a rest and withered away.

As always, I'd get jealous listening and say something like 'I swore to her I was born twenty years or so too late.' Worked like a charm. It, just as it would always do, brought her back to me and the present. She'd snapped back and smiled. My whole body ached with sunshine. My amazing Auntie.

"Why didn't you ever get married?" I wasn't sure how that came out of me, but it did. As fine as my auntie was, at thirty-four, even I expected something to have happened by now.

She stirred her root beer. "You're too much. Pickin's are slim. So much inactive masculinity around, now you got these men on the down low... Where'd this come from?"

"Huh?"

Auntie wiped her forehead. "The question."

"I don't know. I just --"

Auntie gasped and grabbed my hand. "You're in love?"

I still couldn't respond. This had to be what being retarded felt like.

Auntie's eyes lit up. "That's wonderful, Orlando!" Auntie smiled. I could see the beginnings of crow's feet the corners of her eyes. She sipped her drink. "And rare. I think love can be a beautiful thing, if you put it in perspective. We're not talking babies or any-- "

"No! No. I don't even know if it's love. She lets me be, let's me be who I think I want to be at least. I know that."

"It's easy to now. It's when you're out of school and bills have to be paid that things get crazy."

Right then I realized that it was easy for my aunt to support my being a writer. I wasn't her child or the father of her children. She didn't have to bide her time waiting for some book deal to come in. She could pat me on the back and drive off when shit got intense. But then Auntie always encouraged me. That has to account for something. It did for me.

"I've tended to be a bit selfish, but why not? Unlike for men, women are supposed to be totally remade when all

that gets going. Name change. New social. This is probably why I've sympathized with you so. I hadn't invested in any relationship that deeply. Love to me includes discovering and liking flashes of myself in the other, not just being overwhelmed with conforming with their idea of who I ought to be."

The waiter came by the table and asked only Auntie if everything was okay. I took it as a compliment. "I don't know, Orlando. To each his own. I'm going to try it one day. A guy I've been seeing has some serious potential. I don't know."

I sat my chin in my hands and sighed. "On the other hand, I think I wanna know what love is. I've never been in love. I've been in gratitude. I been in planning. Every story of it I know of has some big sacrifice to it."

Auntie nodded her head and wiped her mouth with a paper towel. "Love is that kid you've been interviewing. The Willows boy. He sacrificed his college years and everything to take care of his mother. That's when you discover who you are. And I remembered Helen Willows. She was nasty when she was in good health."

"The other one, Lo, he's a thug but done stuff like ride with his friends when they had to confront their white bosses about being done wrong. And I mean he ain't the kinda nigga that just sit in a car while it run waiting to call the law if it gets nasty. I've gotten several reports of his loanin' people money for rent or taking a carload of street kids to Chuck E. Cheese. And the kids mother's weren't even fine."

Auntie threw her head back with laughter. I could see the fillings in her top row of back teeth. "I swear, you a fool, boy..."

The waiter came and handed her the check. "So Cleveland and Lorenzo love their people. They sacrifice. Black folks have always leaned heavily on what they had - which was sacrifice."

Where I was going with all this began to feel inevitable. It sprouted up with warmth through my tailbone to the top of my head. My dating a white girl, knowing it would break Auntie's heart. "I don't know what I'd sacrifice for my people. I don't even know what that means."

"You haven't been taught that. The closest thing to it for your generation is buying an artist's album instead of downloading it from Napster. But now there's Iraq. . ."

"Auntie, for real now...that a war's reason being's lame as Vietnam. You see how much respect those vets from Vietnam get. Half of those guys in the homeless shelter by the house are from that war. I just feel like I'm not significant yet, that the love I'll have for anyone won't be respected because there's no stories of - all these black folks before me have these Biblical stores of sacrifice and I don't. Even in the songs." I clenched my teeth to keep from saying anything else.

"I have a feeling you'll create one. It was our generation's fault though. You're fortunate; most people don't tell their kids anything. Most kids in town don't know they probably had a relative who was cheated out of their land like a lot of people in Frenchtown are about to be. These don't know about relatives whose ears were nailed to the post out near the capitol for something as trivial as arguing the price of blueberries with a white merchant or not jumping off the sidewalk when a white woman walked their way. I really think the option of choice has ruined

our ability to function. Now we just consume everything, other people's thoughts, drugs."

I stuffed the rest of my chicken breast into my mouth. None of its taste registered across my tongue. The inevitable subsided. I dreaded the next call from Carla.

I spent the next few days trying to nail a time to interview Cleveland, who seemed quite evasive. In the meantime, I did some research at the Democrat on officer Wayne Bertrand:

DATE: September 21, 2003 Thursday - Tallahassee Democrat

SECTION: State and Regional

LENGTH: 355 words

HEADLINE: Stolen police files turn up in Fast Food trash bin

The trail of evidence from a March 11th burglary at the local police Internal Affairs office leads to a Taco Bell trash bin in off of North Monroe Street. Two bags full of confidential police documents and other items were found in a container behind the Taco Bell located on North Monroe Street by a man looking for discarded materials to build a play pen for his new puppy.

Jason Riverdale, 42, said he and his son Jim were rummaging through the trash behind the store at about 7 p.m. on September 18th when he came across some of the police department's most closely guarded secrets. Riverdale claims he found surveillance photos, mug shots, video tapes with names and addresses, police personnel folders and files, a

city police officer's Rolodex and files marked "confidential - city police Internal Affairs section."

The employee of nearby Andy's Guitar shop said he called 911 after discovering the items. Three county officers responded, taking Riverdale and his son in for questioning. "They got real hush-hush about the whole thing when they contacted the guy whose Rolodex it was," Riverdale said. "I don't think they got everything that's missing yet."

Tallahassee police would not comment about Riverdale's discovery, and refuse to release information on how the break-in was discovered. Although no arrests are pending as of yet, authorities confirmed that the crime will be investigated as an internal matter.

One of the disappearing files not yet recovered involved Officer Wayne Gerard Bertrand, arrested in February for lewd and lascivious conduct with then minor Hope Robinson and planting drugs on and falsely charging suspects.

Bertrand's prosecution is part of a broader effort by police to weed out corrupt officers. Bertrand is scheduled for arraignment later this month. Though the burglary casts doubts on the department's ability at self-policing, Officer Larry Simmons put a positive spin on the recent events. "I'm sure we'll get this straightened out," Simmons said. "These are just setbacks that come and go."

After talking with more folk shooting ball at the Fourth Avenue courts, attending a few churches with my

suspiciously bland khakis and running into old faces at Publix, I got the "streets" word on Bertrand.

Officer Bertrand, better known in Frenchtown as the "greasy from Looweezy" because of his lust for light-skinned, Creole-looking girls. Word was that the ex-college ball player's slight scar across his Adam's apple came from screwin' with some black man's daughter. Yeah, I thought, that had to be the man that gave me the third degree in front of Lo's house!

Bertrand's wife's family was into real estate heavily. The Baton Rouge native was indeed under suspension, but according to many, could still be found driving through Frenchtown in an unmarked black Ford Taurus. While driving through town looking for his car, I came across a rather lanky male individual coming out of the Goodbread community over into the auto detail shop off Old Bainbridge. He flagged me down. Since he was sharp with pleated, charcoal wool slacks and a cranberry sweater, I figured him not to be a homeless bum, but a man on his way to handling some business. I pulled into the detail shop. He approached the door.

His questions did not wait for answers. "Wassup man? You feelin' today? Ah-right? Yeah, true-true..." He claimed everyone knew him as "Scoop", but articulated that he never liked the name in the first place. I asked what was the rest of his name then. "Oh, my government name? Oh, true-true Chris Thomas. Yep." I asked if he knew someone named Cleveland Willows. Chris smiled. "Shit yeah, man."

Chris' gold-capless smile bended his perfect pencil mustache. Being a barber's son, I couldn't resist noticing the exact hairline and well-shaped lil' afro. The edges were tapered down and not wild-looking. He asked for a ride to

the Tallahassee Mall, not even bothering to ask if I was going that way. I complied. Chris straightened his already smooth sweater and got in. After all, this was the other friend of Cleveland's.

Most of the Goodbread houses were raggedy, with walkways covered with weeds and beer bottles. Perhaps he was on his way to a job interview. Maybe he cut through there from Macomb - but in brand new Steve Madden shoes? Why? I caught a whiff of the scent that lingered over his cologne. Husky, Stephanie-like, but a little less tart.

I turned on 96.1 FM and smiled. Well I'll be damned. A light-skinned brother making the rounds. "I see you been gettin' some ass in the hood."

Chris put a hand over his mouth and grinned sheepishly. "Oh snap! She all over me like dat?" Chris sniffed his fingers and that same hand and laughed. "Damn!" We pounded elbows in place of slapping five. "I'm tellin' man, I'm gone bring back the eighties by my damn self."

I showed him my badge. I told him what I was doing. With his unchristined hand, Chris called Cleveland on his cell to confirm. Cleveland did, and promised to get back in touch with me.

I would find out later that "Chris "Scoop" Thomas was a half-ass musician with prior weed possession charges. He had done a small bid for writing bad checks. Skinny as he was, you'd think he did rock cocaine. As Lo claimed, he played keyboard and helped Lo's rap dreams by making tracks for him. A bit spacey, Chris tended to brag of getting fucked up with the local funk legend George Clinton and his P-Funk Allstars. His driver's license was suspended. I later found out that he used to work at Butler & Taylor Jewelry in the Governor's Square Mall.

"I first met *Cleveland* - officially - at a house party Lo had two and a half years ago abouts. In September."

"Lo was on house arrest then. Yeah, I'm pretty of it."

"Well, I guess he was crazy enough to do it on house arrest. Every year Lo has one, same time in September, on his dead brother Terrence's birthday. I'm sure you heard of his brother, much as y'all wrote about him."

"What do you mean?"

A call came through on Chris' phone, he read the caller ID and ignored the call. "People would see blue and red lights at night coming through the windows and the first thing they'd say is 'damn, what Eva and Virgil child did now?' Cleveland ain't that type of element. That cat's a real thinker, too much of one maybe."

"In fact, I sat back and peeped Cleveland tryin' to blend in, clutchin' a Zima drink and studyin' everybody playin' spades and what not like he was the one on house arrest."

Chris put his hand out of the window and left it coast against the breeze. "Cleveland's my boy, but that cat is spe-cial."

"Special meaning..."

"Too bookish. Jeans was too tight, shirt was too clean cut. It was a button down with stripes, the type you wear to a job interview. Them penny loafers didn't help either. Casio watch on. Just bookish. Lo once told him that Cleveland can't click with people 'cause he too deep into facts, raw information."

"What's Lo into then?"

"Truths, that's how he explained his raps, 'cause I do tracks for Lo rap songs. Lo wants to blow up as a rapper

and claims his raps are about truths, stuff that don't need specifics to be real. But his shit get pretty redundant. It's pretty mind-blowing when them two get in arguments over things.

"Lo introduced me to Cleveland and next thing you know, Cleveland sweatin' me to teach him how to play spades. We sat down at the table between games and you could just feel the attitude from all directions. Guys were pullin' Lo off to the side; I could see them lookin' over Lo shoulder, motionin' toward Cleveland like 'who is this fool up in here?' Cleveland would catch the tail end of it and snicker, 'Heard that? *up in here*. . . Hear them prepositional phrases? Sounds so slavery-ish.' I knew that was that Zima in the mix."

I shook my head. *Slavery-ish*. "So Juicy does think he's above people in Frenchtown, that he's better than most blacks."

"Smarter than most, maybe, but pretty amusing on how he acts on it 'cause dude got to congratulating me on not talkin' as backwards as everybody else - so you see the potentialities of where I'm coming from wit' this, right? I advised him to chill and wrap his mind around the cards. I played with him a second, let him get a book on me. He gripped my wrist with them dishwashin' soft hands and was like, 'Yeah! This is cool. Tell me more stuff like that.' On the real, that slavery-ish mess kinda blew my high, so I slid the drink a touch out of his reach and continued showin' him what takes what to make a book.

"I never did get into cards much, but Juicy and the drinkin'... guess that nickname stands for more than his weight. I take it he didn't drink regularly until then?"

"Nah, he didn't, but I mean, I 'member him sayin' he had some Remy cognac stuff before when he went and quit his gig at the city library. Some stuff like that."

"So he was pissin' you off at this party full of the criminal element there... Why'd you keep playin' with him?"

"He was still Lo's friend, for whatever reason."

I turned onto Tharpe Street for the scenic route. "So then what happened?"

"Everything seemed to be straight until the rest of the players settled down for a game. I introduced Cleveland, to keep him from talkin'. Everything stayed the course 'til he got a second Zima from the kitchen to drink. I didn't notice the drink. What I did feel was the vibe get thick and intense all of the sudden, like somebody had bet some heavy bills on the game or something. I was wonderin' what was up when some of the girls kept passing the table, rollin' their eyes at Cleveland all the sudden. I'm thinkin' 'is there a booger in this cat nose?' I was afraid he'd pick up on it and do something that would vex somebody I couldn't reason with at the table. The dynamics of this thing gets complicated.

"Now the guys were really lookin' hard at him, the bottle in particular. I broke it down: they weren't likin' what he was drinkin'. Zima's don't do nothin' but give me headaches personally. Me and Cleveland got the next book and Robert got annoyed by the books we won. So what does Cleveland do? Holla some crazy mess like: 'Alright! Yeah! Whose your daddy?!' I told you, Cleveland spe-cial.

"The way it came out was so - unnatural. You don't say no 'alright, yeah' 'round no black folks. Plus 'who's your daddy' better be 'who yo' daddy.' Everybody looked up from they cards. Robert started chewin' his toothpick hard,

'shit, fat boy you need yo' ass beat behind that Zima mess.' I could feel Cleveland curling up inside like, straight trippin'. This made everybody laugh at the table, in a way that meant the heat would get turned up with a quickness. Cleveland blinked at his cards like they were changing colors. He tried to laugh too, but Robert eyeballed him hard, talkin' 'bout 'Shet yo' puss-ass up, nigga. Tiger Woods talkin' fucka.' 'Cause that's how Robert is, pretty country. Robert Crawford, a throwback from wayback."

I turned onto Monroe Street. "Damn, uhh old-fashioned."

"Right, right. Lo had walked by just as the situation started. He punched Robert in the arm: 'Gone somewhere wit' dat fuck shit, Rob. Dat nigga got skills.' Robert rolled his eyes and reached under the table to get his cell. You could practically feel Cleveland suck in all the air floatin' over the table. The cards in his fat hands were tremblin' and almost bent from the stress. Now people are droppin' their heads down their laps and laughin' under their breath. Robert didn't catch it. He was still too busy checkin' his cell and poutin' about his hand: 'What a nigga who got it like that doin' wit' a Zima in his hand?'

"Lo stayed on him. 'Just play yo' hand, nigga,' Lo said. Cleveland stared into my eyes like I was donating some organ that would keep him alive. I waved Robert off with my free hand to get the boy to relax: Cleveland started breathing again."

Thank God I hit a red light. I could see Cleveland just drying up in front of this group of niggas like a fat poodle stuck in the middle of one of those velvet ghetto

portraits of tough dogs shooting pool or playing cards at a table. "This is terribly enjoyable. Then what?"

"Females started walkin' by startin' up more non-satisfaction about the Zima drama, since no more were in the 'fridge and everybody was too uhh occupied to go to the store. Let me qualify that we're talking a few of the best looking ones were complaining. Cleveland went to the bathroom with the bottle as the drama continued. He slid back without it and a fresh Genuine Draft was waiting for him at the table while they were dealing for the next game. Can't say who put it there. Nobody told him beforehand that, the way Robert eventually put it: 'Zimas and nem coolers in there shit for the hoes to drank.'"

"*Dem hoes, this is rich.*"

"Cleveland caught me alone again and was still laughin' 'bout that one, *the hoes!* It amazed him that females were walking right by Robert when he said it. I sat Cleveland down to the side after the last game, got him another Genuine Draft and asked him who his peoples were. Then I asked Lo what's really up with him kickin' it 'round all of us like this. Lo looked at Cleveland from across the room like Cleveland was some kid at an after school program waitin' for a mom that wasn't comin': 'That nigga got the brain, Chris. I got the heart.'"

Chris knew that I was looking at the Millers murder as the killer mistaking Millers for Cleveland and killing him by mistake. Chris got out and said he would 'put it on everything' he 'loved' that Lo was not part of the killing at the library. As Chris gave me his cell number, Willows hit me on my cell. I could tell he had been waiting for a moment when Priscilla was not around.

To my surprise, Cleveland was more forthcoming than I expected when I asked him about Lo's claim of his being a thief of some sort. I had to indulge him in a game of backgammon in the meantime. The more he focused on the pieces instead of my eyes, the more he divulged.

"Lo did come over the day after my incident with Priscilla at the laundry mat. It didn't go like he told you though. I told him what happened and he went ghetto. I pushed me back into the house. I fell back over the arm of this sofa. He grabbed me by the collar and was screaming like an idiot of whether I was a man or a bitch... I mean, you'd think that someone wipin' your spit from off their face would be an indicator that the situation needs to be diffused. I had had enough of his gettin' loud, tryin' to turn everything around on me."

"But you just met him."

"Okay, well I was just sick of his type of people attacking me. I told him to back the fuck off and that he better respect me and leave before I called the police." He shook the two dice in his cup vigorously and pursed his lips. He looked up at me with the burning eyes of Joe Willows. "You want to hear me or not?"

"Hey, my mistake. Sorry."

"I tried to stand up. He tucked his cross in his shirt and shoved me down onto the sofa. He stormed out: 'Don't bring yo' puss-ass 'round where I stay no damn mo'!' So I sat there, brain on fire. My throat felt like it was about to close up. Twenty-three years old, infested for trying to keep the peace with a trailer trash laundry girl. So where do I go? Albertson's, later on that evening. I was just dying of having to go to this grocery store and buy this

whore medication. Me, Cleveland Willows! Knowing how everybody'd just love to get wind of this!"

"Everybody who? The people your granddad pissed off?"

"Yeah. I always laughed at the dumb asses from high school that hassled me. They just stayed around the neighborhood after graduation, mostly. Faces all drawn up and angry, in tight uniforms that don't fit right for jobs they used to come into stores and restaurants and antagonize other people for having. All 'cause of babies they didn't want. All 'cause of sex.

"I didn't know the lady at the counter right off. She was pasty white and looking at me like I was one of the homeless folk askin' for change by Popeye's Chicken. To make it worse, the skin down there felt like it was bein' turned inside out. I didn't even get to the counter yet and she was just totally embarrassing me!

"'What you need?' the lady snorted when I finally got up there. I always got Momma's prescriptions from Albertson's. I looked back there for Mr. Moore or Mrs. Hill, people who usually deal with me, 'cause this lady obviously missed the tape on customer service skills. This new lady was just looking at me crazy, like she could see Priscilla and me doin' it. You think I was gonna explain it to her? Me, Cleveland, mister never-go-to-the-clubs. Never got no speeding tickets or had substance abuse like Uncle David. A virgin. Me, a virgin! One slip up and I'm like everyone else?! That was it for me. I got right out of line and went to aisle seven for insecticides."

I struggled to focus on my pieces. It was easier after reasoning that crabs are, after all, insects.

"Nobody else was there. Found me a bottle of Garden Fresh scent Off spray and stuffed it underneath my shirt. Just like that.

"I left the store with this stupid grin that made my mouth dry. My world, the possibilities in it, grew from the size of a pinhead to a fat watermelon by the time I got into the car. It was the longest, best walk I ever took. I sprayed that stuff twice a day in the hairs 'til my nuts burned for a week or so. Momma died that week after I got rid of 'em. That's when the expanding really got started, the stealing, I mean."

Priscilla came through the front door. She rolled her eyes at the sight of us and unlocked the bedroom door by the kitchen. She went into the room and slammed it shut. Cleveland raised his finger to his lips, telling me to keep quiet. I could hear the unzipping of her zipper, the denim of her jeans peeling off her legs. The snap of the elastic band of panties.

"She's going off to work," Cleveland mumbled.

"And you still ain't rent from me either!" she screamed through the door. "Now say something else!"

"No need to act childish," Cleveland declared.

Priscilla came out with a red and blue Rent-to-Own uniform. After locking the door to the bedroom, she stomped out the door.

Cleveland continued once her car engine started up. "I found out about different people who took things, too. In a matter of weeks, I could notice them by the way they moved. They try so hard not to be noticed that you notice them. The way they happen to glance casual-like upwards for those tinted glass bowls or at the corners of the ceilings for

cameras. How they look over their shoulder at you when you're close enough to tap 'em on the collar."

"You're being dramatic," I said. No way could a weirdo like this have a wilder life than I could! "Anybody would do that, Cleveland. It's an issue of personal space."

"No, it's a different look. How they act like foreigners reading the information on boxes. I knew the frustration on their faces when they stomped out the door that they didn't get what they wanted. A wild-looking white girl, probably from that SAIL school in Frenchtown, caught me stickin' some reading glasses in my backpack at Barnes & Nobles. She had black lipstick on. I remember that. When she smiled it looked like she had been playin' around with Oreos. I said 'which ones you like?' She looked so lost. She said she didn't care, long as they were 2.25. I took her some, too. That lipstick seemed to crack and brighten right up. She stuck a bookmark in one of her work boots. I stood in line with her, held her cold, sweaty white hand while she bought some book by some writer named Kerouac. Her name was Chelsea.

"I gave things I took that I didn't even want to old people who were here when Frenchtown was Frenchtown. Come to find out these were mostly people who cut their Lipitor or HCTZ in half because of Medicare and small pensions. Next thing you know, they're asking for fresh blood glucose monitors and wrist supporters. It hurts to wonder what they would do otherwise. I'm talking about former school teachers, deacons and what not. It ain't right that good people like that have to live their elderly lives begging for medication and in fear of assholes their children were too sorry to raise. When I told you my family needs me, I'm talking about them, too."

"What about the people Lo talks about helping?"

"Bums. Embarrassments to the race that keep trouble goin'."

"Even Ms. Pecan Lady?"

Cleveland looked up at me with a slow, phony smile. I could tell he would've called the law in on King Love if he would have come down Dunn Street.

Cleveland cleared his throat. "While you were at IU, Pecan Lady was trespassing on some property a few blocks down. The people there had some kind of hound that got a piece of her calf muscle. And folk jumped on them for the dog protecting their property! What's the point of having your own home and fenced in land if anybody can walk through and loiter like it's some shitty Arab convenient store? She's also started wondering around in the night and peeking into people's windows."

"But she don't hurt nobody?"

"She could have gotten hurt. Twice over. Owners out here have to protect their property from these fake gangsta kids. Insecure punks that keep music blasting all through the night. Guess you didn't hear about those teenagers that broke into old man Christy's home. They beat him with an aluminum bat and left him for dead in his kitchen! A 72 year old man! Mostly the people that need to go are young and ungrateful anyway. They can't keep a job on account of bad attitudes. Selling drugs on the corners and in the Oakland cemetery is all they know because they think it's a short cut. And they keep quarrels going. Look around; They got the whole neighborhood lookin' like a coon show.

"The people I help, these same ones were now on their porches with a Ziploc of hot cracklin, a plate of butter beans and rice or preserves waiting on me to do what

the black stores that got ran off woulda done for them on credit."

"They can get ATM cards."

"These are people that don't trust things like that."

I moved three of my ivory pieces. "So integration got rid of their support system."

"Yeah. The men would offer me bourbon or buck, that's liquor you make from sugar cane skimmings. I don't drink nuthin' that hard, but I have a collection of bottles and flasks at home."

I was coming close to getting all my men on the other side. I was catching up to Cleveland. "The same type of liquor Bennett's family used to peddle?"

Cleveland rolled his two chocolate dice hit double sixes. "Appreciation is appreciation."

Cleveland went on to say how he had helped housewives with busted lips, sick of waiting in lines for help fins the courage to drop some new Jaclyn Smith panties or chewing gum or double A batteries in their open purses and just walk out. Small shit like that's possible; You can explain that you didn't notice it falling in your purse, long as your wallet's in your hand. Cleveland swore that 'the fog around their ears seemed to just snap. They'd slip to their cars as giddy as I was with that pest spray.' He even claimed that two sat in their car ignoring their dirty children just to wait 'til he came out to leave.

"What for?"

"To wave me bye. I read from a ball player that once you've had a certain injury, you know how to spot someone else with the same thing. I guess it's like that. I started meeting some people. A part-time weightlifter that wanted to be a cop but TPD said his polygraph wasn't right. A

telemarketer sick of her job but scared to quit because this town doesn't have any jobs. An ice cream truck driver who was sued outta sellin' in his neighborhood because of some noise pollution suit.

"Never did anything with addicts, though. Way too weird and clumsy. We'd create a disturbance in KMart to get stuff. The overnight stock boys knew us and even cheered for us, would tell us what to look out for. We went to the one in Quincy and Havana. Been in every WalMart. Even got a DVD player right off a loading bey."

"But you were gettin' crap you didn't even want."

"You get sick of watching all the beautiful, stupid people skippin' around hand in hand pickin' up whatever they want from life. And you just sit there, too broke or too out of the loop to get any. You just start refusing to let it go. Plus, people depended on me. It was important.

'Specially the elderly. They began to remember me as me, not from what my family had done. I felt useful. We even had DeAndre involved in one at KMart where he'd knock over some cereal display box or request some toy that didn't exist in order to get some manager. I'd skip work sometimes just to try to get things. I felt capable, bringing back what needed bringing."

"Like a man."

"I was appreciated. It was hard to keep what I was doing to myself. People just seemed to see a change. I laughed more, a lot more. Lo noticed quicker than anyone else. I was finding my way around in a different world."

I rolled again. He had me blocked. "By shoplifting?"

Cleveland rolled double twos, a perfect roll that won the game for him. "You don't understand. Of course you don't. That's where Hope Robinson comes in, because I know

Priscilla told you about her. I got to thinking when I saw Hope in the paper that, perhaps, I could steal her heart. The strangest things can do wonders for your confidence."

I drove away totally confused. Cleveland advised me to talk with his friend named Chris. Before I did this, I stopped by the Oakland cemetery for a look-see. Cleveland's alleged biological father, H.D. Parker, was laid to rest somewhere near a weeping willow. Helen, Cleveland's mother, was rumored to be buried only yards away. No suspicious people were around.

I began to check the markers by the nearest trees. Mrs. Reid, my sister's old Latin teacher at Godby High, came from around a tree trunk and scared the hell out of me. Age and the old hadn't slowed down her chirpy demeanor and quick movements. She recognized me on sight, as so many seemed to do lately.

"Afternoon Orlando, what is such distinguished alumni doin' out here in these parts?"

I wiped my running nose and braced for the wind. "No, no... that was my sister that went to Godby. I went to Rickards. You probably remember me from writing in the Outlook."

Mrs. Reid agreed. "Yes, that's it." She was the first white person I had heard of besides Professor Krementz that read black newspapers.

"Here on the way back to work." I showed her my badge.

"Lunch break at the Oakland Cemetery? Well, who am I to talk, right? I was just payin' my respects to Cliff. It's been almost four years now." The wind hit her head on and brought the blood up in her cheeks. "Hasn't gotten any easier."

I just remembered that Cleveland went to Godby. I turned up the collar on my field jacket and asked if she remembered him.

"Cleveland Willows? No, I don't know where he is in here..."

"No, he's alive."

"Oh! He's alive! I'm sorry. A student at Godby. Well, can't recall that name..."

"How 'bout Juicy? People call him Juicy."

Mrs. Reid snapped her wrinkled, chalky fingers. "Juicy? Oh, that's it! Juicy, they called him Juicy! He's a big one with those gross-looking bumps on his neck. A black kid. The preppy dresser. Oxfords and loafers with everything. Graduated a few years back. Yes. That was a character. How come?"

I explained that I was doing a profile on him for the paper.

The wind had its way with her graying, short black hair. "Oh yeah, I really remember his mother. Marva Peck sits on our board and was friends with her. Something concerning him went down, something relatively minor and his mother came in the front office smelling like everything Mary Kay ever made and raised hell, threatening to home school him. Right, like anybody would care. There's too many kids in classrooms in Tallahassee per teacher as it is.

"Wait, I know what it was... She was there about some wild paper he wrote on race. Said we were persecuting him. He do anything?"

I chuckled. "No ma'am. The profile's more for achievements in the community."

"I mean, Juicy's big enough to do something, but I just don't see him having that in him. People can change I'm sure, but... Kids can be cruel no doubt, but he just seemed to be missing some sort of survival instinct. Let's keep walking, this wind is ridiculous!"

I walked her to her parked Continental.

"Juicy'd be one of the earliest kids there in the morning. I'd see him alone out in the circle where the students would get dropped off. He'd be on that bench under the birdhouse with the end of a pen between his teeth and this green journal listening to the cars pass or the train from across town. You could set your clock to him. He'd sit there scribbling and scratching out things looking like he was in perpetual agony. If you asked him what he was doing, he'd always say 'waiting for the computer lab to open.'

"Juicy'd eat his lunch out behind the cougar statue with honor roll and other techie kids. He wasn't honor roll himself, daydreamed too much. His clothes and his lunches were the stuff of legends. It looked like he was bringing food for an in-class party every day! He never drove off campus for lunch I'm sure because of his mother saying not to. Big family-sized bags of Funyuns. A whole carton of Lemonade. Chip A-hoy cookies that kept his tongue brown for most of the day. She definitely over medicated him with food.

Mrs. Reid unlocked her door. I opened it, hoping she keep talk. She rolled down her window. I lucked out. "The 'Soledad O'Brien' something or others, that was a lil' group he was in. The SOB's. That's what they called themselves. There was a picture of them in the yearbook. Computer types, lovesick, tai chi artsy-fartsy types. He said, and he was something with words, something in the

yearbook like, the "artists" are people who create a real life instead of coloring by numbers and staying in the lines.

"That quote really stuck with me though. He probably got it from some book. He'd always be the last one to leave classrooms, helping janitors pick up trash. Always picking up things around him..."

A black teenaged boy with a windbreaker zipped up over his nose came into the cemetery from the southern direction. He rode a silver and red mountain bike. Another soon followed him on black and gold bike. This one wore a Washington Redskins Starter jacket. A black ski mask was pulled over his head. They rode by us as if we were not even there.

Mrs. Reid's voice grew low and hardened. "They could use somebody like that to help here with all these Frenchtown dropouts that just hang around against the trees on their bikes and leaving trash everywhere." She opened her hand and showed me a red jewelry bag. "Some of these tiny jewelry bags were by Cliff's marker and you know what *that's* for." My heart raced. I picked it up and examined it.

"What disrespect," Mrs. Reid grouched. "You should come through here more often and do a story on that!" The bike riders stopped at a marker and looked back at the both of us. The one in the ski mask motioned for us to get lost. Since I was with Mrs. Reid, I was screwed. That was that. Mrs. Reid left. I went off to find Marva Peck's number in the Yellow Pages.

Marva Peck did not know enough about my family to have me come to her home. Instead, she agreed on meeting me at the cemetery as well (my suggestion). Only in broad

daylight though. The stories of drug deals among the graves kept good folk from evening jogging through after sunset. I arrived and Mrs. Peck was already there. She was the only one there. I was pissed.

Mrs. Peck was an average-sized woman in her late forties. She did not appreciate the cold. Like most native blacks, forty degrees or below was inhuman. It was thirty-eight after the wind chill on that afternoon. Mrs. Peck wore a black jacket and shawl. I never saw her chin because she kept it tucked in the fabric of the shawl.

"Willows? I know that family well." Mrs. Peck pointed to the North section of the cemetery. Helen Willows is buried out here if memory serves. Her mother, too. Yeah, me and Helen used to play hopscotch together in the driveway and go to Irene Edmonds Theatre camp in the summers as kids. This is when we all lived on Georgia Street. Mrs. Willows would make us butter sandwiches with sugar." Mrs. Peck giggled. We began to walk in the direction of Helen's grave. "Yeah, we had some times..."

Mrs. Peck claimed she and Helen worked together in the Frenchtown Neighborhood Improvement Association. She swore she was Cleveland's "play" Auntie, and could be only that because of making a stink about not being named his Godmother. "See, I was the one helping her find baby clothes and get to her doctor appointments when Mr. Willows threw her out. I was the one finding older ladies in town that didn't hate her family enough to refuse watchin' Cleveland while she worked and tried to finish school. Bottom line, I didn't have as much social class as she wanted for him."

Mrs. Peck kicked at dying grass and went into how Cleveland spent so much time with Helen, that she wasn't

sure if he ever had a proper girlfriend. "Sure Helen always claimed this and that, but you know a mother will talk up her child even if he Ted Bundy. She made him dance with her sometimes at silent auctions and roasts of different people and it was just so sad. Him in the same spot, just staring up at the ceiling, while she's just a twirling. She'd be out there doin' it like she Ginger Rogers and he'd just sway like a big dog strainin' on a chain, his fat thighs would never even part. You'd try to cut in but she just - he didn't have a minute to breathe. Children these days need mo' structure, need to know how to conduct theyselves but, a boy sixteen or seventeen has got no business always living like a kept poodle at grown folks functions like that."

We reached Helen's grave. I bent down to touch the marker. I immediately stepped back. I always had the idea that I was stepping on someone's face when I walked straight up to markers.

"The boy didn't even get any rest from her at her wake. I remember him standing over her at Strong and Jones Funeral Home. They do mostly everybody around here. He looked down at her real hard and amazed, like couldn't believe she wouldn't sit up and straighten his tie. It wasn't mourning, just suspicious, I guess. He rubbed her arm and then, quick as can be, put his hand over his mouth and squealed liked like a lil' pig. He got to leanin' on the casket and they had to set him down in a chair. A few people fanned him and helped him to his asthma pump while he kept pointing to Helen. People were already privy to the boy's effeminate ways, but this just seemed really intense. My husband Luther and I went over to Helen and noticed the arm Juicy touched was full of goose bumps! The little hairs

on her forearm were standing straight up! So we didn't go to her funeral. When he came to the funeral, they say that's when he put that earring in his ear, something I know Helen would have held off the devil for. I've driven passed the here and seen him. Leanin' on tombstones, looking like a beehive busted open in his head."

There would be a poem of Cleveland's I'd come to read later on, before things became terribly unhinged, that would remind of my stroll with Mrs. Peck:

Poem : The Love of a Black Woman
After the prognosis of ovarian cancer
and a life of sending men off to their cars
and out the driveway before I officially woke up for
breakfast,
it's the inhuman pursuit of sex that makes men bad, momma
decides.
Men. Niggas. Loud. Sloppy. Unnecessarily mean. Prehistoric
knuckled.
Hairy faced like wolves. Harsh. Prone to testing the
warranties
of everything made well and of high quality.
Men. Embarrassingly simple, with clucking Adam's apples
shaped like eggs swallowed whole,
begging to be crushed by a boot's heel.
Men, hiding from all things needing patience -
like roaches from light, she tells a woman she barely knows
while standing in the buffet line, bloated and nodding for
me
to put what she's too weak to on her plate. Too weak
from the medication. Men. Niggas. All the same, she says.
With loaded stares at me when I'm defenseless and unable

to refrain from resembling the one she hates most.

The wind hit Mrs. Peck one good time and she was off to her car. She promised to talk more on the phone, perhaps. I thanked her and walked to the Camry like I was stood up for the prom. I could play alto in the meantime. If only I had somebody like Chris to cop for me.

In thinking of Chris, I remembered that he did give me the name of Robert Crawford, the guy who spooked Cleveland. It seemed strange that everyone I was interviewing seemed especially concerned of what the other was thinking. Lo wanted to know what Cleveland said. Cleveland wanted to know what Lo said. Chris wanted to know what both of them said. I called Priscilla, who verified that all of them ran the streets together at one time: Chris, Lo, Robert, Ikey and somehow, Cleveland. There had been a fall out that she couldn't clearly explain with Chris and Cleveland on one side and Robert and Lo on the other. Ikey tended to float between the two camps. Since Ikey's death, all sides became respectfully distant of each other. Perhaps they were looking to reconcile. I knew though that personalities that diverse don't just hang out and call it a day. No, these dudes had to be rolling together for a mission, a reason, to get something done. That something was connected somehow to those diamonds.

I sat in the parking lot of the Time Saver convenient store on Fourth Avenue and Old Bainbridge. A woman with house shoes and ashy ankles asked me if I wanted a good time. I nodded no thanks. A black Ford Taurus suddenly

rolled west down Fourth Avenue to a red light. Wayne Bertrand. I casually pulled the Camry out and tailed him as he went down Old Bainbridge. The car turned onto Dunn Street, Cleveland's street, and slowed down to a crawl. The homeless men sitting on the corner immediately got up from the porches of the abandoned houses. They brushed the dirt off their asses and started walking down the road. This meant that this was a cop that even they recognized. The car then rolled in front of Cleveland's house and stopped at the curb. I copied the tag.

Before I could figure out what to do next, the Taurus sped off down the narrow road. Bertrand has parked in front of my car when I was at Lo's and recognized it now.

Bertrand picked up speed and was headed toward a group of teenagers at the other end of the street. In typical Frenchtown fashion, they walked in middle of the street even as they saw the car headed their way. They took their time moving to the side, as if daring it to strike them. I gripped the steering and gritted my teeth as he came upon them. It looked like had grazed at least two of them in passing.

I always wondered what made Frenchtown people risked their lives doing that. It wasn't just bold teenagers or drunk old men. Everyone walked in the middle of the streets and took their time crossing streets. Even stray dogs. I would learn later from my mother that, besides the neighborhood having no sidewalks, Frenchtown folk used to being ran out of the downtown area saw fit to take their time crossing their own streets almost to the point of seeming oblivious to cars. It was a way of forcing whomever was in the car to recognize them. It was a way of owning the streets. I didn't bother chasing the Taurus. I

knew it was Bertrand. I wasn't ready to risk running over human beings to get at him either.

CHAPTER 6

THE GEMINI EFFECT

My book was slowly taking shape. The way I saw it, two forces with different power bases and philosophies were going to be represented within the black Frenchtown community. There would be the Willows sector, which was made up of the elderly that maintained and enjoyed Frenchtown in its heyday. These would be the ones that were stiff as a starched collar and seemed to require hours of therapy and liquor to unwind. Whatever the case, the habit was handled.

The Willows sector remembered when getting an education was the blackest thing to do and appreciated it when their kids were kept in line by like-minded neighbors. Men were prominent in these households. Such families came from pioneer black families and had maintained businesses such as Dr. Millard C. Williams' dentistry, pharmacies like the Economy Drug Store, the Laura Bell Memorial Hospital and Campbell Clinic, upscale social clubs like the Twilight Inn. A pioneer family was a family that had been in Tallahassee since Emancipation or the 1900's.

The other side was the Lo Bennett sector. These were the largely illiterate, politically inactive good timers who enjoyed a joint and a fight amongst themselves almost as much a plate of neck bones. These were the type whose women laughed too loud and were so adventurous white men, along with the supposedly upper crust black men of the same neighborhood, would creep into the streets at night to peel off one's itchy stockings and wear out their press and curls.

This was also the group that still hung their drawers on clothes lines and told the best jokes. The dirtiest of their laundry were the children of their mostly illegitimate unions, neglected and bored in clothes either too big or too small, and whatever the case, taking it out on everything in sight. School was seen as the white man's game by this side, hence the enormous drop out rate.

Although there were decent lower scale clubs, I felt the need to put such club owners in with the Bennett side; Although I respected anyone bucking the middle class pressure to be in a career for the satisfaction of others, I was sick and tired of everything that black people tried to prosper in as of late be of some chitlins/minstrel entertainment angle. So then, even if that meant damning the Red Bird Café, Café Deluxe along with the infamous Savoy and Club Faces of old, I was with it. Another basketball player, rapper, whatever. It all was becoming boring. In short, the Willows sector was the blacks. The Lo Bennett sector was the niggas. It would have been great to tie the two together by one rival's attempt to murder the other, but Lo was nowhere near being a clear enough suspect for the attack that wound up killing Chauncey Millers.

Both sectors had their misgivings about whites. Both recognized the shitty service most black businesses provided and, more often than not, now went to white establishments by habit or just to take a break from the bullshit. Both wanted something to hang their pride on. Frenchtown had been that. Now it was only a source of pride mostly to the ignorant that felt the authenticity of a black neighborhood depended on how raggedy, pathetic and dangerous it was for all involved.

I ran my synopsis down to Carla that night. Her speech seemed a tad loud and somewhat slurred for a weekday night:

"You do recognize that you kind of like, have tendencies on both sides. I'm mean you as in you personally."

"Yeah," I said as I practiced my fingering in the dark. "It's never been an easy truce."

"I, I don't know Orlando. It really makes sense that you're a Gemini. I kind of like it."

I hit my laptop. The screen saver disappeared. The poem Cleveland let me copy from his journal shined through the darkness. I read it to Carla:

*Too big under the ribs, my elbows fan out,
brushing against their hairy forearms when I ride
up front with my uncles. They scoot their arm and
squirm,
almost flinching in their seat like girls near a fat-
bellied spider,
all in the name of breaking contact.
I clear my throat, tryin' to study them through the
busted
side mirror closest to me, but they feel my awkward
heat
And one, pulls to the side of South Adams Street
en route to Auto Zone for pads
for his brakes to ask if my hatred of confrontation
and constant writing in computer journals is 'cause
I like boys or something
His AC is dead and my stunted, sweaty insistence
that it ain't so
is answered by boy cousins keeping a polite distance*

from me at reunions.
I am the fat one, right there in the corner, alone
with a plastic plate full of hot-sauced greens and
yellow rice,
with three novels at his side to stuff every silent
moment
I cannot bear
I am an artist who has no success to justify his funny
ways...
I am a logic, a love without a home

"Isn't that something?" I said afterwards.

"Daaaaamn," Carla crowed. "Yeah, very complex for a big guy that looks as mean as you say. Maybe he uses the X to write like that."

"No, he's overly sensitive already."

"Well, he doesn't have the mix of complexities you do. With all this metrosexual stuff with men going on, people'll like totally get into a book like this."

The phone became warm against my face from use. It always did that when I talked over four minutes. "I think Professor Krementz would."

The sheets on her bed rustled. I could almost smell her almond body cream through the phone. "So maybe all your people are that complex. I mean, I can handle it." Carla began to moan. "Man, I went to a rave out by Collage Mall. They gave out Vicks Vapor Rub nasal inhalers. Orlando, I'm telling you, total orgasm I was missin' youuuu."

"I might land some here. I don't know, there's a lot of talk."

"Sweet. So, have you told your ol' parents about us."

"I'm working it in. But that complex thing, African-Americans split down the middle, it's real. Yeah, both sides are unhappy and confused. You been drinkin'?"

Carla laughed that bleating goat laugh of hers. "Ummm, well, no."

"X?"

"Yeah."

I was so jealous I tried to hang up and misdialed.

"I like the whole of you dawg, with my whole everything, I love the black guy and the nigga..."

"I got it. Don't repeat it."

She hung up the phone moaning. I lay there, stroking myself and thinking, 'that's it, That's what I'll call it; the Gemini Effect.

When I checked my e-mail, I discovered that Cleveland Willows had a message for me. I had not given him such information and felt the need to close the curtains in the room. Like Mrs. Eva told me, Frenchtown was checking me out as I was checking it out.

He was aware of the lowest grades I received at IU thus far, which were all math and science classes. He could tell how much Krementz meant to me from the straight A's I made in his required courses of Reporting, Writing & Editing I, Reporting, Writing & Editing II and The Media as Social Institutions classes. How the fuck did he know all this? Willows had attached a copy of my transcript to the message, which showed my social security number. This really pissed me off.

I left four messages on Carla's phone and played my alto that Saturday morning for two hours straight. The

house rang. Since I had the old phone in my room, I couldn't tell who was calling. It was Cleveland. He said he was drinking the night before while he was on his PC. I cussed him the fuck out.

I threw in his social retardation and that maybe this book thing ain't in the cards for him. I told him he didn't own shit off Dade Street so manipulating me wasn't gonna cut it. He was speechless. I could hear the breeze and passing cars on his side of the phone. Then there was a woman screaming at him to give her a week; He apparently was making rounds on some evictions. Perhaps he needed some reassurance that he was not a total asshole to his people by hanging out with me. He asked me if I swam and would I like to go. I hung up the phone. He called back and explained that he was just worried about how he'd be portrayed in the book, that he hadn't signed any sort of paperwork (which was a valid concern, I was just too green to know the full process). He offered to come by and straighten everything out.

Luckily no one was home but me at the time. Cleveland walked in with an exaggerated, discriminating air and ran a finger along his upper chin. I had never seen anyone examine a room so closely. A CD of the Cannonball Adderley Quintet's *Mercy, Mercy, Mercy* was presented to me. I remembered that we had talked about music.

Cleveland was most impressed with the framed pictures in the house, thanks to Ma's managing Capitol Photos and the adjacent Frame of Mind frame studios. Pictures of Dad and the only decent sized bass he ever caught, the classic black and white of my late grandparents Willie and Selma Gaines, or Juanita as a Godby cheerleader (before she come home drunk and said she always wanted to be Bowzer of some

syndicated Shananah TV show Dad watched on cable) were highlighted with Antique conservative matboard and set in an either the sleek Kensington or decorative Nouveau style of mahogany frames courtesy of Larson Juhl. Ma's side gig as a wedding photographer began to pay off by the time I was in middle school. It made our history seem so much more important. Cleveland went so far as to run his silky fingers along the contour of the frames. He asked for Ma's business card. I lied and said I was fresh out.

We sat the dinner table and talked about the book. I shared my working title. He was concerned. "Why give the ghetto contingent that much of your book for a platform," he whined. "They have all of popular radio on their side as it is."

Cleveland went even further into his life of crime. Simple shit like opening lotion in grocery stores, using it and putting it back. Taking a bat to H.D. Parker's marker. Misplaced aggression. I asked how his grandfather Moses was doing. Cleveland became more withdrawn.

"I think I tried to do something like Granddad's hunger thing with food - in the other direction... After that thing with Priscilla, I finally checked out August Wilson plays. And eating a lot."

"Why?"

"I just heard the plays were bad. Momma swore he was the worst thing to happen to black literature. I quit my position at the city library around that time, too."

"Jobs are hard to come by out here. Why'd you do that?"

"Don't know why, but I just did. Momma got me that job anyway. Got tired of all the quiet, started getting different jobs. You can't make any real money there. I got

jobs that made me be in front of people, to kind of try confronting them. I wanted to know what the rest of life everyone was so scared of me seeing was like."

"Everybody like who?"

"Momma and Uncle Ant."

It was the first time he spoke of Helen's older brother. I remembered the poem of his I had read to Carla. "You didn't get along with him well I presume."

"You get tired of being the elephant in the room. You get tired of running out solitary ways to occupy yourself in order to ignore being ignored. I used to write essays once, like you. That eleventh grade paper on segregation was the greatest one I ever did." Cleveland stuck his heavily breasted chest out. "Momma gave Granddaddy a copy of it."

"And what did he say?"

"Well, she said she gave it to him. I read his responses in the old Democrats about C.K. Steele. That's the kinda writin' Granddaddy likes. I even got detention for not "staying on the subject and causing a disruption." See, I sent a copy to the school paper and they printed some of it. They sure hated that! Even heard some of 'em saying I was a good example of why paddling should be reinstated. That's when I started hearing it - from grown ups: 'Oh, and you know who his daddy is?'"

I looked away sheepishly. Though we but heads, I don't know how I'd turn out without Dad. "Sorry about that, man."

Cleveland began to smile. "Whatever. I'm not lookin' for handouts from H.D. Parker. I'll be a real man. One without all the glitches.

"Abandoning your kid's a helluva glitch."

"I was researched H.D. Parker good and close when he

was alive anyway. His family's from Delaware, which explains him being a Howard graduate. Had arthritis bad. Enlarged prostate. A bit of an alcky, matter of fact his hands would shake from it. He'd ride 'round town in that ugly blue Lincoln he never traded in. Cigar smoke sitting around his frizzly gray hair like dry ice turned wrong side up. He drank Remy Martin Cognac at Pioneer banquets Granddaddy wasn't allowed to anymore. VSOP to X.O. kinds. "

"How'd you know that? Can't get that on a computer."

"Momma'd tell me. She'd slip in as somebody's guest. He had this big, deep voice like he was indestructible. He lived on the other side from FAMU the whole time. Right across the tracks." Cleveland laughed. "Fuck him."

The uninhibited Cleveland at Lo's party started to make more sense to me. This kid had alcoholism in his family. Cleveland opened open his journal and read aloud:

From arms, table and car lengths, away. Worlds away. I learned.

He'd catch my eyes and adjust the knot on his tie - quickly looking away

from this teenaged reflection...

Math professor. Always professional.

Studied math

probabilities,

Because I knew The Answer, The Look I'd get if I asked.

Feeling the doughy obesity of my own face, I just stared at his picture,

The high booty he and I share

Studying probabilities

To keep him from hiding from me in plain eyesight. Needed some kinda formula to explain

why I was plugged into such a sick equation.

Cleveland smirked. "Oh yeah, yes... that's a poem about H.D. Parker. And Momma."

"So if I were to interview these Parkers..."

"I shook his hand once during one of FAM's homecoming parades, hard as I could. H.D. Parker's, I mean. I was about eight. Had it in my mind to tell him I was in the third grade. Don't ask me why... Snuck away from Aunt Monique and Momma to do it."

"Aunt Monique?"

"Is married to Ant. I walked right up to him like I was 'bout to hand him a million dollars. He had a FAMU shirt on and was eatin' a fish sandwich like he did every parade. Whole shirt smelled like mustard and hot sauce when I tapped him on the arm. 'Uhh, hi. Hello today.'"

"That's it?"

"He acted like he barely heard me . . . He stepped back from the men passing on the horses, and on my shoe. Barely looked down at me. I just froze. Froze as the weight of this man bear went back onto my little toes. Asses and pocket books were in every direction. I got from the crowd, pulled my shirt out and ran to Momma. It was getting hard to breath. I pissed in my pants. I found her. She looked at me like she knew what I did, what I tried to do. She hadn't moved from her spot. She went right on watching the parade."

"She didn't grab you?"

"She could've smacked me. I wouldn't have felt any of it. That's the problem with being careful, y'know. Not trying to bother people. You become everybody's whipping boy. Being polite, having class among niggas attracts violence."

"So you lose a lot of politeness when you drink then."

"When Granddaddy wasn't around and Grandma was supposed to watch us I used to play in Granddaddy's Bourbon. Had to try that bourbon, since Granddaddy never bought Remy. Thought maybe if I drunk some my voice wouldn't be so - high like it is."

"More like Parker's."

"Musta been about eleven or so then. I asked Granddaddy once to buy some Remy - to see if maybe he'd like it, I think I said. Granddaddy made his eyes real small and just looked at me, like I was Parker. Granddaddy left me standing right there at his chair to go and tell Momma. She comes out the kitchen from helpin' grandma, up to her elbows in suds. The look both of them gave me. . ."

"Do you think they were ever proud of you?"

Cleveland folded his arms tightly and looked at me from the corner of his eye.

"That would have made me feel enormously small in the scheme of things."

"Granddaddy has a lot of grief to deal with. I mean, I didn't know it all then. I was eleven years old. Always said a man can go only far as a woman let him... Good ol' H.D. Parker. In and out without a scratch. Still know his license plate. His son, Junior got it on his new Cherokee. He had it, I mean; I got it under my bed now. Maybe I was just mad in general. I tried different jobs, but I quit them just as quick as I got 'em. Take the Subway one, for instance. I was makin' sandwiches in Subway on Tennessee Street and - I might as well tell you this part before Lo tries to use it to make me look worse than I am. I'll tell it, so I can explain it right: One night Ricky Byers, ink

black as ever with his chipped front tooth since the fifth grade, came in.

'Awww haw! Big ass Juicy! Dog, I know you lovin' it in here!'"

Cleveland lips began to tighten. "See? Fat jokes. Nobody was even with him and still this dentally challenged bastard always got su'm smart to say to me! 'What're you havin' today, dog?' I said. The manager was in the back on the phone arguing with one of his roommates. I wasn't in the mood anyway. I cannot stand that *dog* shit black folks call each other. Some things shouldn't be sacrificed in the name of cool.

"Ricky didn't even look at me anymore when he was talking. I was a non-person all over again. He just stroked his nappy ass goatee and was totally into the menu behind me. His fat tongue ran across his teeth. The tip of my own tongue started to tickle with the idea of being the one to chip the other front tooth or knock it out clean, or maybe not so clean, with meat hanging out the gums where it used to be.

"Eventually he settled on a six-inch turkey on wheat. It would've been fine if this dumb ass would've just not said anything else, but he started up about how Momma used to aggravate him and the rest of us at Riley Middle School when she was a librarian there. 'Yep, yo' Ma was fuckin' trippin' up in there, like dat place was da Pentagon an' shit.' He kept mouthin' off about how glad he was she got that City Commissioner job, where she can talk all white for real up there... Leave niggas be.' No idea at all that she'd passed." Cleveland's fist pounded the dining room table. "It was in the paper!"

I tried to calm him down. "You're pretty good with impersonations."

Cleveland was oblivious to me. "Shoulda known; black people hate to read. I just smiled and started tapping the mayo spatula clean like a roach was on the counter. I didn't tell him she died either. If I was fuckin' respected he would've known to just leave me alone. He kept talkin'. 'Naw, don't put no mayo on it, just spicy mustard.'

"I tried concentratin' on curling the turkey meat just right over the condiments, but his words kept reachin' over and tappin' me on my forehead: ''Member when she had you sayin' 'Ma'am' and 'Sir' to everybody? All that gay military shit . . . Know you hated goin' in and waitin' for her to finish up after school, readin' them books while she was finishin' up. Couldna been me, dog.'

"Ricky kept goin' on about Momma: 'And you always was drivin' her around like she was Miss Daisy. Slow as hell down the road.' I finished his turkey sandwich and bit the inside of my lip 'til I tasted blood. I couldn't even ask if he wanted jalapenos or not. This son of a bitch took a picture of me in the shower at P.E. and passed it around school. He skipped over all that. . . and had the gaul to feel he was cool enough to come up to me to talk like that. The manager whizzed passed me toward the front door. He was knocking his hat off from rubbin' his forehead. This meant he'd be out at the side of the building taking a smoke.

"The stars pulled at my skin through the roof soon as the door closed. I prayed Ricky wanted cheese. He did. I told him the provolone was old, had been out there for a minute. Ricky shrugged his shoulders like, 'go get some mo' then.' As I took his sandwich around the back out of his sight, he said something about me hookin' him up with a

cookie, that his son likes peanut butter cookies with his sandwich.

"My ribcage, the part that covers the lungs, felt like crackin' when I realized who the sandwich would be for. A boy somewhere. Waiting in Spongebob peejays, probably the kind that covered his feet like socks. Didn't have shit to do with anything, but I lifted up my apron, unzipped my pants, opened that dumb nigga's sandwich up and laid a spurt of piss on the olives. He'll be just like Ricky soon enough, so now you hate me, right?

"'C'mon dog,' he whines. 'Ain't got all day.' Rick's voice made me do it again.

I slapped some cheese on. Handed it to him with numb legs. He looked at me all stupid- like. 'You smilin' hard.' I sure am, I said. He told me to keep the change. This weird flu feeling came over me, made me irritable. Dizzy. I kept my strength up by pulling his pink ATM receipt out the trash. I just, I wanted the piece of me people like him always seem to take. I emptied the plastic cup for spare change from the counter every night from then on. The Jerry's Kids display got it, too.

"Soon I took to hiding six inch, turkey sandwiches - no mayo, spicy mustard - and peanut butter cookies in my bag. I don't even fuckin' like peanut butter cookies. I'd break pieces off and feed to wondering cats and dogs until it was gone. This one-eared cat used to greet me at my doorstep in the morning from the stuff I'd bring home. I named him Cosby."

I remembered seeing the black and tan cat the first time I came to Cleveland's house. Since I saw no cat dish on the porch. I told Cleveland I figured it was a stray and

didn't figure him to be the type to keep a pet, let alone one as haggard as that.

"That cat isn't a human. I felt rotten for doing that kid like that, so when the cat came along. . . the cat doesn't have that much of a choice in anything. There's no asshole of a father to even look out for him. Cosby keeps rats from the house and birds from shitting on the porch furniture. Cosby doesn't need babying, which I like. He knows his place and serves a valuable purpose. As for Subway, I did what I did until the manager caught me. I quit before he could say shit."

A fruitful discussion was brewing. I set out some orange juice and John Coltrane, to which Cleveland was appreciative. All was well, until Carla called.

Carla and argued over my still not having told Ma about her. She could not understand that my family thought I was going out like that already and, in some fashion, I hated to be predictable. She could only see it as a diss of her personally.

I had gotten so deep into the argument that, for a moment, I forgot Cleveland was there. When I hung up the phone. Cleveland's eyes were like some dirty Panamanian orphan's that can eat for a year off of three dollar's worth of corn meal.

"What's it like?" asked Cleveland, as he bit the pink inside of his dark bottom lip with anticipation. "How's it with a white girl?"

It felt good to finally tell someone this, to hear the way it sounded out of my mouth. I needed the practice for whenever Ma and Dad found out. "Her name's Carla Scarelli. She likes wearing safari hats, raves, X and doesn't have much of an ass."

"X?"

"Ecstasy."

"Oh yeah, the white kid pills. I hear everything's different when you take that stuff."

"Actually you became more loving. I've seen grown men bury the hatchet with each other, feuding sorority sisters make up and make out off of it. You just look at the world and think, 'why not give a shit?' All the bullshit I've heard about how wonderful and full of love black people as a whole were in the past to each other, I'll tell you, a score of X is the closest thing I can get to imagining it, because we're just too selfish and hateful. Look how hard your family has had it."

Cleveland's eyebrows raised up. His mouth opened. "I just keep waiting for it to change and I'm tired. When I think of that girl Hope being out there somewhere..."

Cleveland pulled out a black and white glossy of her, the kind Priscilla claimed ha had all along. She was the girl I had dreamed about in my crucifixion! "Hope Robinson lived in Joe Louis Homes until the state took her from her mother, who was addicted to crack. This was apparently where she and this pervert cop named Bertrand crossed paths. Robinson got bounced back and forth in the system. Foster cares and lockdowns. A bit of a wild child, the paper said. Her case workers wouldn't allow her to get an apartment of her own through the subsidized Independent Living program, so she took to the streets. There you can imagine, a girl like that is quick to find a man."

"She had to have found one." I knew it was cruel to say it, but there was no way a girl like that could not have a man doing whatever.

Cleveland sighed. "Yeah, a college guy."

My back went bolt upright. Cleveland constantly went to the library and could hack like nobody's business. I could feel connections taking place. "Uhh, was his name Millers?"

Cleveland chewed on the inside of his lip. "Maybe."

Robinson had been on the lam since the Millers murder. "Cleveland, dude were you there when he was murdered in the library? This is unreal!"

Cleveland exhaled and massaged his temples. "What I did was stupid. You have a real relationship. At least you have that." He smiled and began. "I did find her social at a maid service, okay? I called and asked for her specifically. I said she was highly recommended, y'know. The operator, a woman, snorted on the phone. I felt bad. She knew. Then I felt vicious because this woman snorting in contempt could have meant other men had done the same thing. I pre-cleaned the whole house and studied her file before she came. I had gone and gotten some diamond earrings to give Hope; I didn't know her ring size. I just guessed.

"My grandmother would sit me in the kitchen with her while she cooked. I'd taste pound cakes and sweet potato pies before they were baked, I'd taste them all while I sat and snapped peas in her big pot. Snapping peas. It was the one 'country' thing that my grandmother refused to give up. I was the only other person she'd let do it. Momma wasn't even allowed to. Hope came in some beige cargo shorts with some short, Mexican co-worker with a clipboard tight to her chest. The Mexican despised me on sight but remained professional. Actually, the Mexican virtually disappeared soon as Hope, who spoke. 'Hello, we're Plantation maid service.' Hope's so tall."

"'Cleaning service,' the Mexican corrected. 'Oh, dag... okay, we're Plantation Maid Cleaning Service.' Hope's eyes stayed at my knees. She constantly tried to smooth her wavy black hair back behind her ears. I felt something in me snapping like snap peas with every stroke she gave her hair. She looked up for a split second with that long oval face and it was just - I don't know what to say. Her being sixteen meant nothing from then on. It was like her fingertips went to the bottom of the pot and were stroking the texture of my nerve endings.

"I followed her around, even helping by holding her bucket or finding a cleaning brush. I didn't mean to. The Mexican would ask me questions because she was in charge, to get me to go off somewhere, but I just mumbled off whatever to her. As soon as Hope was in the bathroom, trying to find something, anything I had missed cleaning, I pulled out the earrings. She was on her knees by the toilet with those yellow gloves. She wore ribbed white socks and these cute lil' hiking boot type shoes I've seen at Payless. She looked up and I handed them to her, like some marriage proposal in reverse. Her eyes got wide and she recoiled. Then she leaned against the toilet and pounded the floor with a yellow fist. She started laughing. 'What's that for?; You ain't got straight cash?'"

I got up and paced in circles in the living room. I couldn't even look Cleveland in the face. "She was prostituting herself during jobs?"

"I guess. I sat on the edge of the bathtub and we talked. She said men would threaten to turn her in so the sex would be free sometimes. She knew everybody was looking for her. She had a younger sister that was with state that she was trying to get custody of. Like I said, their mother

was addicted to crack over in Joe Louis apartments. The place got raided. Hope was staying close for her sister, but she was trying to get away from Lo's brother being killed and Bertrand."

"She said Bertrand was responsible?"

"Yeah, I told her I just wanted to help. She said if that was true, then I'd let her get an honest day's work and never say anything about seeing her. . . The Mexican had went for cigarettes or something. Hope said when men had sex, Hope would give her half of the money for it to keep her quiet and happy. The men would pay the additional housecleaning fee on top of that."

"A home delivery prostitution ring."

"The people that mostly use cleaning services read newspapers. They'd know her from the paper. They'd snap their fingers and scratch their heads while she'd be cleaning in a hurry to leave, but they'd get it eventually. Sometime's she'd lie and say all that was cleared up, sometimes the wife of the house would feel threatened and start asking more questions.

"After Lo's brother Terrence was found dead, she had left Joe Louis Apartments. She was pregnant with Bertrand's baby."

I grabbed a pillow from the sofa and balled it up in my hands. "I don't wanna hear this man! This is insane..." I paced the floor wildly and, eventually looked back over at Cleveland. I threw my head back and steadied myself. I motioned him to go on with a hand.

"Chauncey Millers found her nodding off on the bench in an Old Navy dressing room in the mall. Chauncey bought her some flannel pj's, got her an abortion, antibiotics, Gatorade, moved her in his place. She said he was okay to

her, let her recuperate laid out on the bed watching BET videos. From what she said I could tell Chauncey was ready to take whatever trouble she came with. It made me even more determined! I needed more fuel though. 'He forces you to have sex?' I had to ask. She thought about it: 'What other way can - ' then she took the gloves off for the earrings. 'I am a good person, okay?'

"Hope likes that singing group called B2K. I didn't have any, but I played some BoysII Men for her instead. She said it was nice enough. After braising chicken and stewing mixed vegetables for her and the Mexican, I caught her kneeling to set the adjustments on the vacuum. I looked at the Mexican, she smiled. The food had put her in a good mood.

"I took Hope's old gold hoops out and put the new earrings in for her. I talked her into letting me, she held one of my wrists with her nails poised to pierce the place most people slit while I did it. She peered over and looked over toward my face. I could feel her breath brushing against the underside of my forearm. Her cheek had an acne bump, but the rest of her face was so cool and soft. 'My God, you're so fuckin' beautiful.' I just kept whispering it. One went in. Her grip began to sweat. Then the other. She stared over at the Mexican, then, for the one time ever, she stared me dead in the eyes. The grip loosened. I gave her an e-mail account, showed her how to get online. She said she wouldn't call and if she did, it would be from some pay phone. I kissed her before she left. Just as she walked out, Priscilla was pulling up."

The hate she had for Cleveland. The rage. It was all crystal clear. Lo may have scrapped with him in front of the library, but for a woman to live in the same house with

the man she loves and know he not only worships someone else, but is willing to kill to be with her...

"I began to watch Millers. He wasn't that hard to find. . ."

My back was turned to Cleveland. I could hear the pages of his journal being whipped back on fourth. I had never heard a killer's poetry before.

*No one knows what I have found
Before me, buried under circumstance
You
Who introduces me to myself
And out of my unsociable vices and follies
A-muse- meant to me
I pray that God kept you wily enough to forsake others
And left your heart restless and clean for my inscription
Those lips, the eyes, Hope
A velvet-lined shackle that warms my sluggish blood
A friend is sent at last
My imagination has met its match*

"I sat there writing that and memorizing it in an abandoned lot across the street from Plateau Villas for three hours the first night I came to it, wondering if I was ever gonna knock on that door. I wanted to recite it to her, to let her know. When I got the nerve I crack my car door and just as I do, a black Mercedes pulls into the empty driveway. FAMU tag. I went numb when he got out. Chauncey Millers was a fat guy!"

I turned to Cleveland and laughed. It felt uncomfortable to turn my back to him all of the sudden. I

raised my hands as if to say, 'I don't know what to tell you.'

"Right, I know! How can I talk, but you'd just expect... I had dreamed of some pin-up, light-skinned boy. The car seemed to sigh when he got out of it. He knew how big he was because he was in a goddamned pinstriped blue suit. He looked out of breath just walkin' to the door, I was just filled with boldness. I mean, I'll be damned if some bastard gets the only girl for me looking just like me! What does he have then, you think, nothin' over me but a full hairline all over and family that got him that car that my own mother couldn't even afford. The whole thing was just totally different for me from then on, but I did not kill anybody, Orlando!

"I put the poem in the mailbox and left. I continued watch his movements though, the way he wore out the outside of the heels on his shoes. I imagined the smell of his leather briefcase. Parking at Bragg Memorial Stadium for classes 9-2 Mondays and Wednesdays, walking to the SBI Building. 1-3 on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Like Hope isn't good enough to use his car! He didn't even work for it! I'm struggling and he's got it made! She'd always left before he left in the morning.

"I watched him, how he lived. Breakfast at O'Lean's, McDonald's and never Burger King. Lunch at Ruby Tuesdays on Fridays and Saturdays. With her. With not a care in the world! Bastard can't even cook. Just disgusting. Always studied at Strozier Library, discussed shit that I have no one to talk to about. You just can't imagine.

"Chauncey had developed a schedule of bein' on the third floor every Saturday at eight. I couldn't miss it. I

had dressed up in black slacks and a black dress shirt just in case Hope would be there. She was.

"Unless you ever see someone that looks so much like you it angers you, you won't get what I'm about to say. I never understood how women would get upset over someone wearing something that they have on, but when I caught him by the copying machines. . . At the very least, you think you think you're original, original enough. Then when he turned out toward the window and I saw the clean hairline, even greased! I just thought God figured I was a defect and maybe . . . I don't even remember walking up to him. But the texture on the back of his head, so neatly trimmed, like he could get up any morning he pleased set my knuckles to cracking into fists. His shirt was lime green, a rayon and silk blend. I could tell from the collar. His black slacks were pleated and cuffed. Mine weren't. He had some black outerwear jacket hanging off a finger over his shoulder, like he was some model."

"Wait, you guys had on the same clothes practically?"

"Pretty much. I looked over his shoulder into the window overlooking Landis Green. The darkness of the night made our reflection clear. He was almost as dark as I. Triple chin. We looked like brothers. I imagined Momma looking through it, seeing us. Hope. Granddaddy, too. Everyone. Wanting him and his wardrobe instead of me.

"What?" I didn't realize he had turned around. "You want this copier?"

"No," it came out quick. I smelled some kind of chocolate on his breath. I imagined him standing in front of vending machines and being weak. Gorging it in his mouth as fat as he was. It made him human. Made of spit, piss and

breakable bone. Right then all second-guessing evaporated. 'I don't want yo' stuck up copier, why?'

"Millers just looked at me as if he could see no resemblance. Then he shook his head like my uncles and cousins when I said something too abstract or emotional. He was standing in my own body it seemed, looking at me like I needed to explain why I even bothered to exist. Living my life!

"I backed up, waiting for whatever the next crazy idea was. Three or so other people were in the copy room. They all had stopped and were looking at me. I backed out of the room toward the elevators. I was walking on the balls of my feet. I ran into the hallway alongside the copy room, probably to replay what I just did. I was sweating a lot but, I was alright. I caught Millers walking out of the copy room. He saw me and stopped and made a motion like he was waiting for me to say something. Nothing came out. He padded his jacket, as if money he forgot was in it and then pinned it tightly to his ribs by the crook of his arm. He kept walking.

"He started walking out to the back of the third floor. I followed. He was looking over his shoulder at me, shaking his head. He got to the passageway where there's usually a couple of computer terminals and stopped again. I was behind him about ten feet away. This time the annoyed look on his face was turning into something of awe. Of panic. It made me stronger. 'What?' he tried to ask quietly, 'what do you want?'

"I kept saying something stupid like 'it's free country.' He walked on, but halfway turned toward me the whole time. I got a hunter's high, followin'... watchin' his expensive leather shoes pick up the pace. The power of

terrifying a grown man, and sex, is amazing. He went right passed his study group, calmly enough to not get their attention. He dropped the papers he copied on the table and went toward the stairs. I lightly jogged to catch up. I looked at my watch as I passed the group, so I looked like someone late for something.

"I caught Millers turning to the second level platform. I pushed him and he pushed back. The jacket dropped when I punched him in the chest. I held my hand out there and pushed him into the wall. He sorta did it on his own because he tripped over the jacket. My elbow just slid under his chin. 'Hope's my girl. That's my girl you with.'

"He still didn't get loud. To afraid to maybe. He asked who I was. He asked me I was another cop. If I was with Bertrand. I said, it don't fuckin' matter. I told him he better leave her alone. He brought his knee up into my hip. I backed up. He was massaging his throat and reaching for his jacket. I warned him again to let her go. I left him there, to find her. I went from the fifth and skipped the third. I kinda was embarrassed of seeing Millers again after a while. Besides, he did have some guys in the study group. I returned to the first floor. I walked home through parking lots and open lots. That's all the relationship I ever got."

I was now at the table, trying to go over Cleveland's features once again. I checked for any twitching eye or nervous that spelled homicidal. Cleveland Willows, a killer? I ran my hand over my face. It just wouldn't stick.

"I didn't kill that guy though," he said. "The police have already questioned me and Lo..."

There was no evidence of Priscilla being there, but she couldn't have had the strength to string a man up

anyway. But then the construction going on at the back of the library could have allowed someone in, but who?

I excused myself to the bathroom. I sat on the toilet and nothing came out. I wanted to call Auntie Gretchen, somebody. I needed to know if I was just in shock or outright scared.

I washed my face with cold water and returned, determined to get some sense of control. I sat down, I was certain was sitting down. I just couldn't feel my ass is all.

"So, tell me more about Carla."

My mouth began in slow motion. "She uh-hh, has skinny legs. No kinda shape compared to a black girl stripper physique. But, white girls are nicer, sooo much more nicer. You'd think that they were playing a joke on you they're so nice."

I leaned forward and put my hand on Cleveland's. "And it's true; They will do just about anything for you."

Cleveland pursed his lips and closed his eyes as if imagining 'anything.' "Really? I've given out jewelry, everything and ---"

"Yeah, the thing is, black women make a power struggle out of everything."

Cleveland nodded gravely and made his left hand into a quacking duck's bill.

"All that back talk and aggravation---"

"Like niggas in the streets. The ones that are actually supposed to be your friends, too? How in the hell are you supposed to hang out with me and spend all the time fussin' and - ugh!"

"They don't trust us and have no real faith in us, so they make a production out of them ever going along with

you on anything. But she's like 'okay, whatever'... She doesn't assume being submissive's supposed to make me some bullshit demon in some Lifetime made for TV movie." The wistfulness was returning back to my voice. The smell of Indiana cornfields, the hard rrrr's of the mid-western accent, students in IU sweaters stumbling shit-faced out of Kilroy's and the English Pub along the Kirkwood strip.

"How did it happen Orlando, you hookin' up with her?"

I told him how it all began in late April last year, of how I was trying to move out of my dorm, because I just felt I was ready. I kinda ran a phone bill up with TBC, the phone company out there and it was screwing up everything. She was in two of my classes and saw I was just not raising my hand and everything for class discussions or something like I usually do. 'What's wrong?' she asked. And, after Killian's beers at the Iron Horse, she's tugging me to an ATM by the hand to loan me the money. I woke up in her dorm room the next morning and got her full name only by reading some American Express Blue for students mail out she left on her dresser.

"You love her?"

"If this ain't love, it'll have to do. I'm in awe of her. To be able love, to give that freely. A black woman has minute flashes of that sweetness and then she catches herself and you're back to bullshit and fear. They swear once the relationship is solid, marriage is there and all that, they'll loosen up. I see this with my Dad and Ma. They've been married forever and he goes through the same thing. Then they tell you that's what you met in them in the beginning, so that's what kind of person you've got, period. Life's too short."

"But some of them actually like drama... that's what's so --- none of this even makes sense."

"If this one likes drama then I'm just going to have to blow it, 'cause I'm happy man. She'd give me her last dollar and mean it - and wouldn't throw it back in my face either... I'm not robbing her blind 'cause the gratitude I feel for her. My own black ass family doesn't even trust me to choose my own internship. They wanted me still on campus last year. I had to sneak out from under them to do it.

"Carla has given me over \$600 just to help get my apartment, utilities and phone set up. Doesn't even live with me, just believed in me. My parents have that kinda money easy, the thing of it is they don't believe in me, that's the thing. The gratitude I have for her. It owns a huge part of me."

"Own? You feel like you're an indentured servant?"

"Bad choice of words. A slave ain't ever fucked a white girl as hard as I do her."

Cleveland's hands clasped together. He leaned his elbows on the table and whispered. "Everywhere?"

"Yep, in the ass, too but not as hard of course. It extends her orgasms. Everything isn't a political statement in bed with them." I could see how he admired the way I spoke. My confidence. Confidence, that's what she gave me.

Cleveland winced as if I were torturing him. "Please don't say anymore." His eyebrows were knitting together from concentrating on what it would be like for him. He had wasted prime college years caring for his mother. Now she was gone and he was scrambling to make sense of it all. He leaned back into the chair and bit his lip hard. "You can write whatever you want about me, just wait 'til the

statutes of limitations are up maybe. 'Cause, I mean, I could tell you some more things..."

"This town has turned you into a nut case, man. You really need to get out of Tallahassee to see some things for yourself. I know what's really out there now. No way in hell is some selfish family shit going to suck me back into this no-paying, nosey-ass town."

Cleveland laughed from the pit of his belly. "Oh, I been outta town. I can do things on computers, remember? I could tell you some things..."

I folded my arms. My sense of superiority had me feeling invincible. "Besides stalking folks, you can tell me some more things? Really?"

"My life has been just like you said, sucked out from me. You see all these dumb people go to the military, get the big job or go off to some school somewhere out of town and its not fair." Cleveland's eyes rolled up into his head. "They have no real idea what they want to do. How in the hell do they --- I'm not scared to leave!"

I had to bait him. He was making it too easy. "Oh yes you are."

"No I'm not, I've done a lot of crazy stuff. You can't hang out with Lo for a decent amount of time and not get into some crazy stuff."

"Lo's into some foulness, but it's small time, whatever he does. One of those people happy with being a big fish in a little pond." I kept talking fast, hoping Cleveland would forget what I just said so it wouldn't ever be repeated. A fool with priors waving a barbell at your head can have an amazing affect on the mind. "What you do, Cleveland, break into a car? Sell some weed?"

"More like jewelry?"

I knew he was talking about the diamonds. He already said he had given the girl earrings. Finally, someone would come correct about these diamonds. I kept playing hard to get. "Snatching jewelry? Please, that's so pedestrian."

"Orlando, do your research on the ring on Warner's finger." Juicy pounded a fist on the table. "And *then* get back to me."

CHAPTER 7
WHEN EVERYTHING'S EVERYTHING

I had the strangest dream of being pinned down naked with yellow ribbons along the altar in IU's Beck Chapel. The chapel was packed with news media. Cool, rushing water was running through the aisles and drenching me. Carla and Auntie Gretchen were pacing at the podium with mikes as if they were some gangsta girl group. King Love was presiding with his bike horn and wand at a front pew. Cameras snapped everywhere.

Professor Krementz burst through the chapel on a magnificent Clydesdale that had a gold chain with a spinning tire rim hanging from it. Water splashed like dramatic geysers with every clump of the steed's hooves. When he reached me, I cringed, fearing he'd trample my naked body. No such luck.

Carla raised some golden goblet. The next thing I knew, the horse started nodding its head up like horses do. The voice of Mister Ed seemed to emanate from it. He kept saying 'wassup nigga' to me every time he lifted his head. Suddenly everyone splashed through the water and fell atop of my body. Lube was passed and folk began feeding diamonds in every orifice of my being. I woke up squeezing my dickhead to kill the sensation of a doctor sticking a Q-Tip up my urethra. Never eat Chinese in Tallahassee. I went into work early that Monday with diamonds still on my mind. I went straight to the Archives, where Ms. Betty greeted me. Just as Cleveland stated, there was a trail, starting April 5th of 2002. This had to have been a while after he and Lo had met. Enough time for them to get know each other and feed off their individual strengths:

SECTION: State and Regional

LENGTH: 129 words

HEADLINE: Local jeweler loses \$240,00 in theft

DATELINE: Columbia, S.C.

BODY:

Cumberland Jewelers was the latest victim of a rash of jewelry thefts plaguing the southeast. The thieves broke in during the night and disarmed the alarm system by way of the electricity, cut the phone lines and drilled through a safe holding over \$240,000 in jewels. "Thank God everything in there's insured," said owner Paul Lugabria. "Security will definitely be stepped up in a hurry." Berget-studded tennis bracelets and wedding bands, and diamonds were among the valuables stolen. "The surgical way they did it's impressive," says Chief Lloyd Carr. "You'd think an employee was in on it, but everybody here checks out." Cumberland Jewelers was just celebrating 17 years at the location last Tuesday.

"Chief Carr assures me that they'll get to the bottom of this," said Lugabria, who has no plans of leaving the area.

Then there was another hit in that same area:

SECTION: State and Regional

LENGTH: 212 words

HEADLINE: Myrtle Beach jewelry store loses \$26,000 in merchandise

DATELINE: Myrtle Beach, S.C.

BODY:

A group of thieves stole \$26,000 worth of diamond rings from a jewelry store by distracting the store staff. The owners of Jewels of Myrtle Beach, Ltd., Tina and Donovan Whitman, said two black men distracted them Wednesday afternoon while one or more accomplices went behind a counter, opened a jewelry case filled with several consignment pieces, items that fronted to them by other jewelers as well as a marquise-cut diamond.

One of the thieves found a key behind the counter to open the case, and grabbed the merchandise, Whitman said. It took over three weeks for the Whitmans to notice that jewelry was missing. After scanning a printout of inventory, they realized what had been taken. "We were talking about going so far as armed guards, but Myrtle Beach is so quiet even with tourism. You couldn't have paid me to believe we weren't secure enough." Organized jewel theft rings are believed to be operating throughout the United States, particularly in the southeast regions where security isn't as intensified as in more metropolitan areas. But Myrtle Beach Police Chief Wes Fressner said it was unclear if the robbery is part of an organized theft ring. He said he plans to consult with FBI authorities on similar robberies reported in the region.

Harris had somehow found out what I was looking up. He contacted Investigator Buddy and claimed I needed his help. It was bullshit. Harris was bitching up. Word had got out in the newsroom that I was sniffing around the Millers case. Harris was using Buddy to watch me to see what I would dig up. I wasn't getting much on either murder per

se, but whatever it was I was getting was interesting me. I tried to avoid the call, but Buddy fucking came to my house! He brought an expandable deep brown file and kept it in his hand as he and scratched at his belly with the other. I could hear his loud breathing out of his nose, that annoying hiss big white people tend to make, coming over my head.

I looked out the window and saw his squad car in the yard behind my Camry. Little boys on bikes began to slow down as they passed the house. This would get back to Lo and everyone. I'd be fucked. I felt like a belt was coming over my neck and stringing me up. I burst out into a sweat. I spread everything out on the dinner table.

Buddy looked at the two hits in South Carolina. "We're already on it. Yep, that's during the same time as the snatch and grab in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina." Buddy knew about the one in Montana as well:

SECTION: State and Regional

LENGTH: 167 words

HEADLINE: Theft leaves jeweler with over \$220,00 in losses

DATELINE: Helena, MT.

BODY:

Steinfeld Jewelers and Sons is without over \$220,000 in diamonds, some of which they had just received within the past few weeks. The thief or thieves broke into the store during the night, disabling the alarm system, electricity, the phone lines and drilling through a safe holding the jewelry.

Chief Samuel Lozario is convinced that this is not the work of amateurs. "The method of entry used is in line with the rise in jewelry thefts in the southeast. They went after a specific group of jewelry, like the others. It has spread to the Midwest."

"I had heard about the ones in South Carolina and Florida," co-owner Elliot Steinfeld stated. "Naturally, I was hoping it all would be contained in that area." Steinfeld said that all the stolen merchandise was insured. Chief Lozario insures that it is only a matter of time. "Burglars who rob specific pieces are working for a specific clientele. The word is really getting out about this. It's only a matter of time."

Buddy opened his file, backed up and checked a few papers. "Now Orlando, this one here happened in Montana." He put several papers on the table. "Notice the matching M.O. Look at what our computers can do... Credit Agency reports that a stolen VISA/Mastercharge Discovery was used online in Florida State's Library to book four tickets from Tallahassee Municipal Airport to Helena Regional Airport (Montana). On April 25, 2002. Another stolen VISA/Mastercharge from Tallahassee was used for a Toyota Camry and Ford Mustang from airport's Hertz Rental. Records show both rented for 3 days (less than 2 hours) and odometer clocks 28-35 miles each. Established radius corresponds with jewelry heist occurring the time period."

Buddy sat on the living room sofa. It grunted under his weight. "Outworks Security Services, that's the one that services those stores that were hit."

"All of them?" I asked with crack in my voice.

"Yep. So you say your friend hangs out in the Strozier

library?"

I gave Buddy a bullshit lead. Said it was a homeless guy from the Shelter off of Macomb and Tennessee. I said he was an ex-techie support guy with a dotcom company, that he got let go and dumped by his lady and went down the drain from a drug problem. Luckily, there was such a person. He was not an ex-techie though, but a crackhead carnie that traveled in and out of town with the southeastern carnivals. I remember having read about him in a Tallahassee Democrat Online article when school was in. It was summer and there was no way the guy'd be in town. I knew the wild goose chase would buy me some time.

I went by Cleveland's and told him what happened. After all, he told me to look it all up. Cleveland seemed not to be bothered by it. "Don't worry. They don't have anything on us, or me for that matter. They've questioned me about Millers and that was that."

"We're talking about the fuckin' diamonds now!"

Cleveland stuck his flabby chest out. "Just trust me from here on about what I say I have done in life." He tilted his head like some gloating coach. "You feel me?"

I smiled. Now Cleveland was talking cooler than I? I didn't have time for this shit.

Cleveland patted me on the back. "You could've washed your hands of the whole thing and not have warned me though. You didn't though. You are a king among men."

Robert Crawford was the last member of the immediate players of the Gemini Effect. I caught him over at Lo's a few days later on the afternoon of November 23rd. They were

smoking two dime bags of weed in the living room and watching ESPN. A huge, wooden bowl of miniature Twix, Snickers, Hershey's kisses and other candies left over from Halloween sat at the ready for the night.

I indulged in the weed and the candy. I had been through a rough couple of days with men from both sides of the Gemini Effect, as well as some outside of it, all determined to get the upper hand with me. We all sat on the same couch, Robert and I sat at both ends and Lo in the middle.

Robert was a clumsy shade tree car mechanic on disability. He used to play football at FAMU, but suffered career-ending knee injury running through the banner and into a smoke machine at the beginning of a game. Thank God he laughed when he explained this, because I was howling! A career-ending injury during pre-game shit. Robert's hands kept a blackish hue from being under car hoods. I could see him being as ornery as Chris described him the day they were all playing cards at Lo's party. His beady eyes hid under a low brow so secretively, he looked like an angry blind man. His scowl somewhat lessened as he smoked weed to take the pain out of worn discs in his spine from a car accident. Both he and Lo sat deep into the sofa. Puff, puff give. Robert began to nod in and out of sleep on the couch, humming to himself. Lo started up about Cleveland in the meantime.

"Priscilla say you writin' books and shit."

I agreed.

"I thought you were just a reporter."

I took another hit. "I'm a writer, first and last. Whatever fits in that category, I'll get a piece of."

Lo snorted. "Yeah, well Juicy steal credit cards. You know that, right? Taking people receipts from trash cans and doin' some shit on his computer. Bet he ain't told you 'bout when he was workin' at Wendy's. I got him that job after he got fired from Subway for stealin' food and rubbin' his dick all in people cold cuts. . . The manager a girl my big brother used to mess with way back. I set Juicy on the straight and narrow and what he do? Man, Juicy the liked to gained thirty more pounds just from Wendy's . . . makin' triple cheeses nobody ordered and slippin' in the back freezer wit' em. Nigga'd be in there suckin' down Frosty shakes 'til he come out clutchin' the sides of his face from brain freeze. Told me he wasn't even hungry most of the time. Got caught, quit on the spot and walked to my house with the runs. Now why do that when that raggedy car of his was in need of a head gasket job? Them shits cost.. . but he quittin' shit like he got it like that. I guess he do, since he everybody landlord."

The nicotine-seasoned growl in Lo's voice wasn't there. He sounded more like a guy recounting the hijinx of an old friend moreso than a disgusted former friend of someone. "Man, I guess he just wanted to see what life like for real niggas. No what? I know that's what it was."

Robert wasn't as kind. "I still don't like his ass. Juicy ain't got no heart. He ain'ta man. A man don't cringe under tables because two people disagree 'bout su'm. A man don't call AAA to fix no flat, 'specially when the lug nuts ain't stripped and a man damn sho'll don't drink no damn Zima drink. He liable to try anything, but 'cause he know white folks and got smarts he can just step off and leave us."

I did a double take. "Leave? What do you mean?"

"Somehow he got it in his fool head to move outta Frenchtown."

A pang of guilt sharpened my senses. I took another toke. "No, Juicy - Cleveland's *committed* to Frenchtown. You know he'd rather you cal him Cle---"

"I don't give a shit, man!"

Robert began to rock back ad forth. "Juicy committed to the fairy tale black town he tryin' to create in his fool ass head, the one where everybody kissin' his ass and tellin' him how wonderful he is. Damn drugs and all that, it's people like him that know all them business tricks, people like him leavin' that make Frenchtown messed up. See, you got it together. You goin' to school and comin' back and liftin' shit up. He just want Frenchtown fixed so his property'll stay up and in his name. Blackness don't mean shit to him. Ain' t love in it. He just wanna be the king of shit."

Lo revealed that Cleveland was 'used to his mammy makin' all his decisions.' Lo said Cleveland told everybody he passed that night what happened, about the Frosties he was stealing, like he had just won the lottery. Homeless people hanging by the lake still thought he was crazy. Wendy's owed him a last check, but he still hadn't returned the uniform.

I laughed until spurts of piss warmed my boxers. It woke up Robert, who was drooling on the arm of Lo's sofa. I pulled out his record. "Robert Crawford, let's see here...native of Midway, Florida. . . Thirty-one years old, oldest guy in the crew. Prior public indecency charge."

"Fuh pissin' on a flower bed, man. I was pissin' on the side of St. John's Episcopal Church, off Monroe and Call Street, the white church, downtown."

"In broad daylight?"

"On some flowers! I was walkin' home from the courthouse and - none of them fancy businesses would let me in. Not even the church so-called godly people! Talkin' 'bout they don't have public restrooms. Dat in dat report, too?"

Lo elbowed me. "He gotta bad back, man. Gone and ask him whatever. He probably need to lay the hell down. And don't be askin' dumb shit about no jewelry."

I asked him where to get XTC from. The King Love type.

Robert sat straight up. "How you reckon I know that?"

Lo elbowed Robert. "Nigga, quit trippin'. It's cool. 'Cause see, there was this asshole that was botherin' us. But it's cool now." Lo turned to me. "So you inna dat kinda shit?"

I was lost. "Yeah... but what's cool? What do you mean?"

Robert grabbed a handful of candy. "You ain't heard? Bertrand dead as hell."

Wayne Gerard Bertrand had been found dead the night before in the La Quinta hotel. Apparent drug overdose, possibly foul play. I hadn't read the newspaper. Lo was more than happy to inform me. "That fool Bertrand kinda caught me with some shit. I was kinda getting' blackmailed he said he'd have it so I'd never be able to have my boy back."

"He caught you for what?"

Robert and Lo looked at each other. Lo shook his head. "Come on, man. You that slow?"

"Man we was hitting up outta town jewelry stores," Robert confessed. "Juicy'd find, how he say it, 'vendors in fairly low-crime areas.' They be in buildings that ain't got no cellular backup callin' system. I don't know what

all that mean; he the egg-head that could tell you. I cut them telephone wires, them the electricity. You just take the meter from the meter box. The battery wires to the alarms' DC systems get cut, too, then you in.

"All them stores be in them slow, touristy spots with a kinda elderly population. Them stores all gat low-end, cheap central alarm systems. I forget the company. Juicy be doin' him some computer hacking. We get in and hit 'em for specific shit, not just snatchin' shit. Strictly diamonds. Ice. We took it out to a fence in Panama City. He recut and customize for big time rap stars."

"You ever felt bad about it?"

Robert slapped his thigh. "Shoot! Bertrand was part of the problem! I even talkin' 'bout him fornicating wit' these lil' hot ass girls neitha. Bertrand set up one of his boys so good they done made the cemetery the pickup spot of everything in town. Peter Arden is his name. He be frontin' as a sexton digging graves. That bitch pushin' big drugs - includin' yo' X."

My mouth began to water again. I kept reminding myself that Arden had to be busted.

"Ain't nothin' sacred. You might as well set up shop in one of these churches that's on every corner but ain't doing nuthin' but having a million collections a service. We just had an eight year-old from over here bring a dime bag of marijuana to his elementary school and sprinkle it on folk lasagna at lunch, talking about it's 'oregano' he want his friends to try. It may be funny to you because you might expect that type of thing from yo' people, but this where I agree with Juicy, sof' as he may be; Somethin' like that proof somethin' done gone wrong in Frenchtown."

Lo cut in and handed me more candy. "Now I know you

that I know that my family know bout some crime. I got great uncles that ran numbers and pot liquor back in the day in Frenchtown, grown men who understood what it meant. That cracka Arden is pushing this crap on kids on bicycles, kids with lil' brothers that are snatching their stuff and going to grade school tryin' to be like them. Most of Arden's sellers'll get busted and be back out because they're minors. Everybody's afraid to say anything to them because the kids are so into thuggin' that they'll throw bricks in your windows and ride off or shoot you like they did that ol' man that complained about them over in Ebony Gardens last year. If that ain't enough, the parents so far gone they back up their kids on it." Lo lifted up his bowl of candy. "Yeah, I rob and shit, but I give a lot to kids to keep them from that shit, just like my brother did."

"The money we gettin'," Robert interjected, "we planned to help get Lo outta gettin' played by that cracka. We wanted a lil' something for ourselves, too." Robert squirmed in his seat. "A few of the finer things. A damn operation my back maybe."

All this was easy to see. It sure as hell wasn't fair that the city just let it happen. Cleveland, my parents and countless other had petitioned, made calls to return Frenchtown to the place it used to be. I had seen the pictures. Every yard was clean and cut.

Now, just on Juicy's street en route to Lo's. I'd have to pass Midway Sam's place. He was famous for spitting snuff on children walking by while he shot squirrels out his trees with his Daisy for lunch meat. Standing out there barefoot in his boxers - every time. The cats wouldn't even cross over into that yard. The bum kept a dishwasher, or

some kind of appliance out on the curb every day of the week. Can't be that much shit in that house. He's gettin' paid prob'ly to let people dump other folk's evicted shit on his curb. Damn if rats and everything else is collecting in them and making the block an eyesore. That's some individuality that needed to go.

There was that migrant worker Enrique always walking up and down the street with blackened fingernails and rotting teeth. He don't live near here, but he's around lookin' to score so much that dogs don't even bark at him anymore. The one with the shakin' hands and that drawn-in face. Always desperate for a couple of dollars, yet, unlike any self-respecting addict, refused to cut people's grass to get it. People'd call to get him off the block enough, at least to get him some help. The cops never could. Enrique was not a unique personality, he was a man with a sickness. Everybody was too comfortable as it was. The city, the people. Somebody had to be getting paid to look the other way. If Enrique was doing it in Southwood, I bet the city would have handled it.

Try to get away from it over by Lo's, maybe to the park off Copeland with the fake lake that smells so bad in the spring and summer college kids who park by there for classes walk by covering their noses. The smell matched the sights; Nothing but incoherent homeless people drinking, bottles left everywhere. Or playing checkers by themselves on the benches and cussing themselves out for losing. Or laid out in the grass like it's a free concert - even in the rain. Their dirty-ass kids strapped down next to 'em in strollers and blinking off into space. Decent folk jogging the lake for they health broke out in a full sprint to keep from being bothered for pocket change. A fucking wasteland

of potential.

All this money was being sent to give Iraq Pepsi machines and shopping malls in exchange for oil, but nobody could get some progress in the streets? How could non-Americans get that kind of backing when we were right there staring America in the mouth?

It would have made sense to call the cops on this Peter Arden guy at the cemetery.

It would have made sense to have that as a resounding ending to the complicated story of the struggle of the black identity and how that struggle is affected in the face of the forced integration of gentrification. It all would have been ideal, had I not seen the FOR SALE sign in Cleveland's front yard. His modest Volvo was not in the yard. My chest heaved.

I pulled to the side of the road. I dialed up Carla. Payback was in effect. I couldn't even tell her what had happened. She started in immediately on me.

"What's up with you telling your parents about us? I feel totally used here."

I looked over at Cleveland's home. I imagined it run down, boarded up, with crackhead motherfuckers in the backyard lighting up by the toolshed. Or worse, I imagined it immaculate with two-faced whites as residents. "Why are you rushing all of this Carla? I told this isn't - this is Minneapolis or Bloomington. There aren't waves of frizzly-haired, mixed babies running around in packs here in Target and Wal-Mart like it is out there. Things that aren't common take time."

"You always complain about how slow it is. I just figured you'd want to help change, like everybody needs to catch up to your thinking. You have show them. You need to got out of the middle of the street and pick a lane --"

I reclined my seat. "You can't change some people. Shit, some people I don't even want to get in my shit.

"It's easy to make me the villain, the problem. The awful white temptress. It's so easy isn't it? God forbid you might have something to do with all this. The choice of me, the want of a relationship with me. You wanna talk integration? You approached totally me, Orlando, remember?

"Like, God forbid you own up to that. I mean, like really own up to it. Now I'm the evil white girl that can't dance that sucked you in. I'm the one that came out of nowhere and destroyed your black peace, right?

"You weren't doing that well in the first place, Orlando. If I had ignored your whining and left you alone, you would have still been squabbling with your 'soul sistas' who were with you in the hall. The ones that wouldn't give you the time of day because you weren't a ball player, rapper or some corporate dickhead like that. And by the way, you're not as hip and cool as you think you are. You're not Will Smith by a long shot."

I shook my head in horror. Will Smith? This bitch was way off.

"It's not that I wanted some macho black guy, you just happened to be black. I just wanted a guy whose fucking grateful, gratitude has no color! I'm too privileged to speak in your circles, too much of an antagonist to take your plight to heart? You try helping someone whose too lazy to help themselves, yet too proud to appreciate assistance! You came to me for acceptance, you came to me

for a chance! I even pushed you away with all I had and you wanted my company even more. Now you've gotten it and want to complain. You are a child in search of someone to blame for your hang-ups Orlando! You're such a silly, typical little thing.

Carla began to cry. I did too. "I deserve more from you, to make you more tolerant to the world. I see how you play with and smell my hair when we're in bed. I thought it was love. I see how you stare in awe when I talk to cable managers on the phone, you think the world opens up for me because I'm white. The problems that I do have in the world get no compassion from you. You think you'll blow it if we break up because I'm white and it can help you find a mechanic for your car, a bank account when yours is empty, friends in high places. A way out. Unless you're rollin' on X, you're just too wrapped up in just that part.

"I have a black girlfriend and she's saying that you're using me. Some of what she says is just way off, but still, I understand now why black girls are so harsh and thoughtless with you. My heart just isn't inclined to such ugliness. That attitude thing is so middle school. I love like a woman, not a trash-talking, scared little girl. That is why you are really going to blow it if we break up."

Carla hung up the phone. I lay in the seat and listened to the wind manhandle brown leaves from branches. I called Chris. He was at the Vinyl Fever record store and asked what I was doing. I told him I wasn't stupid; He wanted a ride instead of the bus.

I didn't even know where he wanted to go. "I comin'" I said.

I could hear him smiling at the other end. "On the real, you alright."

Chris couldn't believe I was asking for X. He shook his head. "And that King Love shit, too? You wanna fuck with the meaning of life, huh?"

I just stared at him. I couldn't talk.

Chris' expression flattened. "Heard about Cleveland movin', huh? He told me he told you about the other shit, too... Yeah, we started off hittin' a couple of spots where Lo's friends were working after a while. Lo set all that up."

Chris looked over at me. He figured the crime shit would snap me out of it.

"Lo did a church for audio equipment when I told him I wanted to be a producer. We did some songs for commercials and left \$600 of the profit in the church mailbox. Then we did restaurants mostly, where breakin' dishes and swipin' a few bills out of the register didn't satisfy enough. Then, Lo got to knowing some bullshit owners. You know, leave a door open and what not. But he was always hoping for somethin' like that with a jewelry store. It never happened though, not like that.

"We eventually did a few high end cribs in Southwood. You know, stuff insurance would pay back. Mostly still just shit to see if we could do it. When we did, we kinda didn't know what to do with what we took. Our fence wasn't 'bout to take no collection of World War II guns or some Fresco oil painting of some white family that ain't famous from a carload of sweaty brothers, neither was Folmar Gun & Pawn. Cleveland kind of figured out what to do with it by sellin' on Ebay.

"Money came and Lo did not like everybody waitin' for Cleveland to hand out the cash. It was bad enough he was his landlord, so Lo really started settin' up things with

the fence. In the meantime, we all were in our living rooms sword-fighting the air with new golf clubs... still on Rent-a-center couches, a brand new TV, drinkin' Kool-Aid out of peanut butter and jelly jars with other mismatch shit.

Chris got quiet. I needed the noise to keep from whipping the car into incoming traffic. "For instance?"

"Oh, shit like an antique vase from the Japanese dynasty on a table propped up with cinder blocks or ostrich cowboy boots in the closet that weren't even our size..."

I pulled into the new plaza on Ocala and Tennessee. I parked. "What the hell happened, Chris?! Lo was Ikey's best man when Ikey married Stephanie! Cleveland helped you guys with your taxes and Lo get DeAndre back! Robert was a fix it man for any of y'all that needed anything done! Priscilla babysat DeAndre for Lo! You all had a self-contained unit! I mean, you all even showed up for Ikey's funeral on speakin' terms! Weddings and funerals the only time niggas can be about business and get along now or what?!"

Chris shook his head. "We ain't have no choice. We didn't have nobody else to rely on."

"And it's come to this?! How'd things get so fuckin' bad between Lo and Cleveland?!"

"Cleveland gets lushed out and starts runnin' off at the mouth. Lo swears that's what he lacks as a man, but when Cleveland gives it to him, Lo ain't pleased with it. Cleveland clowned him for not bein' able to read one night when we were plannin' some shit and things went wild from then on."

I rubbed my eyes. "Priscilla told me about when Robert approached her in the house or something."

"Shit, that's a perfect example: Priscilla can be a lil' flaw - especially when that missin' Hope girl came up. One time, just like she said, we were all on Cleveland's porch and he was real out of it. We was having conversations and he was completely missin' 'his cue to put complaints in 'em, the way he usually does. Matter fact, that was when he started talkin' about Hope. Before I go on, you gotta remember that him and Robert got off on the wrong foot from the beginning."

"I know this."

"Anyway, he had been talkin' to Priscilla 'bout how the girl's missing and was probably somewhere in the neighborhood. She apparently said somethin' to the effect that he was actin' like a bitch about the whole thing. That the police are s'posed to be on it. He went on 'bout they ain't got it right yet. She said he was sounding like an old woman with too much time on his hands.

"Cleveland was rockin' back and forth on that couch with his face resting in his hands: 'Don't see how when I say something ain't right, it's always bitchin' and when she do it, it's supposed to be the gospel.' I told him it was because he was talkin' 'bout another girl, a fine ass hell one at that. Cleveland said some mess about the Hope girl bein' out there in the streets with no kind of support system and that Priscilla was just a tenant in his house anyway. Lo told Cleveland it's the way he say shit, in addition to what he be talkin' 'bout, that set Priscilla off."

"Lo and Priscilla are awfully tight."

"Yeah, too tight for Cleveland. Cleveland wasn't hearin' it. I always figured him and Priscilla was gone hook up more than that laundry mat thing. Why I had to open

my mouth and say it... Cleveland started up in a way that let me know he had a lil' somethin' to drink earlier. He got to talkin' loud about how Priscilla doesn't know what a real man is. That he's sick every move he makes being judged black or white. Then he got to pacin' again, tryin' on a new walk."

"So he was getting more assertive in the group."

"You got to recognize Juicy ain't raised that high voice or nothin' like this before. Somethin' had changed in him. Overnight. Way too fast to go over smooth. Lo was massagin' his temples or somethin' when he asked why Cleveland gotta say the word "support" though. 'Yeah,' I said. Don't ask me why I chimed in.

"Why did you?" I asked. "You're supposed to be his friend. You're supposed to keep his spirits up."

"Shit, prob'ly 'cause they had all did a job and I was invited in on it. It was Robert, Lo and Juicy, that's it."

"Two people that hate the other with a passion. Do you know where the job was?"

"Naw, but it was Mid-August prob'ly. Like I couldn't use extra change. . . I had found out about it through Priscilla earlier that day. I figured Cleveland woulda let me in on it. So I kinda laughed when Lo was goin' off. Lo said that 'support' word verbage cats that eat yogurt use.

"Robert got into it. 'You like yogurt, Juicy?' He hadn't said much, but you knew he was goin' for somethin' now. 'You eat yogurt? Don't lie.' Cleveland ignored him. 'Y'all need to focus more on what the hell I mean instead of how supposedly gay you think my words are.'

"I wanted to tell Robert to chill, right then, but he didn't do anything major yet, and being that quick on quietin' arguments make you look weak. So I just closed my

eyes when he stood up. I knew he was going to come at Juicy with some mess. 'A real nigga eat ice cream. I'm finna check yo' icebox right now.'

"Cleveland tried to play tough, talkin' 'bout 'Stay outta my house, boy.' I had to open my eyes wit' that one! Everybody was kinda shocked! Robert got to talkin' dumb: 'What? Nigga I'll piss on yo' livin' room flo'!'"

"I can see him sayin' that."

"Cleveland was like, 'Fuck you, Robert. I ain't playin'.' I'm tellin' you, if you ever heard it come out of Juicy mouth like it did then, you'd just scratch yo' head. Anyhow, Robert walked on in the house. Cleveland sat down hard on the couch and remained in his chair. His arms folded again. I guess that lil' moment sapped the testosterone out him, 'cause we were all lookin' at him like, 'well shit nigga, now what?'

"A muffled slap of some sort came from the back of the house. Priscilla's voice started laughin' then protestin', not a real one at all. You could hear clutterin' footsteps comin' to the door getting' louder 'til Robert was eventually shoved back out onto the porch, his hands up to cover the back of his head. He tripped over the weather strip when he came out the do'. Dishwashing suds was on his back. Cleveland actually laughed under his breath.

"Robert regained his balance, grinnin' standin' over Cleveland and scratchin' his nuts. Cleveland looked away from him, off to the side of the house. Robert moved to block his view, talkin' wild: 'Spanked that ass, right where it hang out the back uh them shorts. Dat fat was just suckin' all on a nigga fingertips like cool Jello. Got her fryin' me a bologna samich next, right after she do hern.'

"Then the fool go pull out a Popsicle from his pocket.

Cleveland looked over to the other side of the house and mumbled under his breath. Everybody except Cleveland was staring at Robert in disgust. Robert lookin' back at us, like he ain't gotta clue: 'What? She ain't his no way. That's what he say.' Didn't nobody say nothin' - to help out either one of 'em. I mean it was so quiet, I heard the train cross town. Robert swung his hands like he was about to hop off the porch, then changed his mind and went down the stairs. 'Fuck this gay nigga. Better off dead anyhow like we thought. I'm dippin'. He walked out the yard and didn't look back. He told Lo to get up and walk him a piece of the way down the road. Lo did it."

Chris needed to be dropped off in Joe Louis apartments. I didn't ask why. We got on Alabama Street and turned into Joe Louis. Chris began to hum what was probably a song he was making up, then he began to recite something:

*Nappy dreds, menacing gold teeth sit under colorful winter
stocking caps*

with festive tassles and balls at the ends

*babysitting brown paper bag-littered corners in need of
company*

'We buy pecans' and 'God Bless America' signs in

Mom & Pop Bar-BQ and shoe repairs,

and hole-in-the-wall clubs off Alabama Street

*Hard-faced, full-hipped girls with hair brushed up wild
like the lingering meat of an eaten mango, double rubber
bands*

on their fingers to ready as ponytails bands, stop

at the sign of any unfamiliar car of shining armor

*Front doors of homes sway open for air and the need to know
Anything happening in the street - immediately*

Especially the bad
To them it is how it should be,
slum sublime. Slum sublime.

I didn't have to ask whose it was, but I did anyway.
"That's Cleveland's stuff, right?"

Chris gave the so-so sign with his hand. "Him and Lo.
They worked on that one together."

I gave Chris \$50 and told him to call me when
everything was everything. He shook my hand and walked off
towards one of the HUD houses. I kept driving. I didn't
want to go home. I didn't want to go to Indiana. I didn't
know where to be and how to be when I got there. I had
checked the Leroy Collins Library several days prior for
background on Cleveland's working there. The man I needed
to see the last time wasn't in. I found myself driving by
it. I doubled back.

I felt a hunch that Hope Robinson had to still be in
town somewhere for Cleveland to still be so caught up on
her. There was a free internet room in the library where
the homeless, washing themselves in the bathrooms, could
check their e-mail after. Perhaps this was a missing link.
I hit pay dirt. The man I needed to see was in.

Cecyl Bechet was the bifocaled Leroy Collins library
manager. The white man was in his sixties and apparently
worked too long in the field because he seemed unable to
not talk in a whisper. Age had sunken the front of his
scrawny neck into looking like a close up of hairless
scrotum. Looking at him when he'd swallow put a ticklish
sensation that brought my knees together in defense. His
breath gave the impression his mother never told him to
brush his tongue with the toothbrush as well as his teeth.

All that was mean to say but, fuck it, he was jacked up, I was tired. That's the way it was.

We were over by the computers everyone used to go online. He was checking the log and grimacing. That had to be good for me. I was correct, the girl was dumb enough to sign in with her own name. "As you can see, this Hope Robinson comes at irregular hours. I'm glad you alerted me to the bogus address and number she used to register with us." He leaned in closer to me. I held my breath. "Would you like to get a copy of her signature?" I nodded no and backed up.

"So you think this woman's a ladyfriend of Cleveland's? That's interesting. He was so regimented, I wondered of anything could break through his routine. I haven't seen him in over a year now."

Bechet began to describe how Cleveland was on the job. "The rash, or whatever it is on Cleveland's neck, is understandable. Still, I never bought that Cleveland was shy per se. He just seemed stifled, afraid to trust people, white or black, being nice to him. He worked circulation, primarily opting to return books moreso than interact with patrons. He was notorious for whipping through reshelving until he got to the African American section. It got to a point that, as long as the desk wasn't overwhelmed, that we just let him breeze through reshelving the other books. We knew he'd wind up in the African-American section. He'd wear his walkman and sit against a bookshelf with the back of his neck carefully hidden behind a row of books, reading to intently his mouth would silently recite the words. Whatever books he was drawn to from other areas, he took there to read.

We walked upstairs. Bechet waved to some vegetarian-looking hippy types carrying potential checkouts in a cloth sack. "Cleveland would read a book like it had some missing part of him he had to find. It was almost funny to me when you told me about the murder you're accusing him of; he was so immersed in whatever he read, he could easily be walked up on. He usually hung around hours passed his shift, always seemed to hate to go home. You'd have to tap him on the shoulder to pull off his earphones so he'd know that there was a call for him over the intercom. He'd just sigh and leave, knowing his mother was on the other end looking for him.

"As I said before, he didn't seem anti-white or partial to anyone. Just very guarded. He was a stickler for acquisitions to get more updated computer applications. Oh, he was intense about jazz selections, too. Strickly classics, very unusual for somebody in their early twenties. He'd stick his chest out when we asked for his opinion on the best albums of whichever artist. Immediately afterwards, he'd realize his sudden pride and become twice as introverted from embarrassment. A 'thank you, Cleveland' or compliment would do it every time.

We got to the African American section. Bechet exhaled heavily. "We did have to forbid him from rechecking books on Malcolm X, the Confessions of Nat Turner, Richard Wright; no patrons could ever get them because he'd turn them in and walk back out with them. There's supposed to be a feature in our system that keeps people from doing that, but Cleveland was a whiz at helping patrons with research and knew more about the system than Administration & Operations, one of the reasons his idiosyncrasies were tolerated. We soon got a programming specialist on board and

suddenly, Cleveland's asocial tendencies, pouting for pay raises and constant trails of Lil' Debbies and Skittles packs, weren't worth tolerating.

Bechet took me to the circulation desk and began typing at a computer. "Criticism usually made him seem calmer, like it was the only honest thing he could expect anyone to say to him. Around the time of his quitting, the criticism was too much with his mother passing, of which he never shared with us. For that reason, no one could really make the connection to the accelerating food bingeing and sudden temper. In fact, the blow up that he had with the Support Services manager came as a complete surprise. It was obvious he was slurring his words. He was leaning over the desk as if he wanted to kiss the woman, pointing at her with every word, like Ms. Willows. I'm sure it was drinking."

Bechet squinted at the monitor. "He slammed down some book on the desk to return called "Things Fall Apart" and was babbling about already returning a book we had him recorded as not having returned, "The Psychology of the Criminal Mind." Yes, it's still outstanding. That one, "The Bell Curve" and "Modus Operandi." It says so here.

Bechet also gave me a copy of a poem Cleveland submitted to the library when it sponsored a poetry contest. The subject, as luck would have it, was Tallahassee itself:

*Tallahassee. Sleepy capitol of pot-holed roads and
restless hearts*

*Pulling tongues to writhe like shedding cottonmouths
in search of a reputation to rub against,
we cool in the heat with much ado about nothing.*

*Politics. Football. Flash floods and Jesus.
College town. A white one and a black one, one in
between.
Practicin' in Border's or Barnes & Nobles by the
capital,
sippin' lattes and reading more than they'll ever
remember,
lives set along a road canopied with native customer
service
and cheap credit hours
legitimate, clean reasons for haunting these humid
hills
not speakin' to me though, rude ass up Nawth ways,
I do not know where I am to go or be in it all,
just that I will write about it, should the world
discard me on sight,
like this stubborn, clannish town and its visitors
In return, I have something impossible to prove before
I cross the Leon county line
With you,
For keeps*

Investigator Buddy had called and reamed me about the bullshit lead. I apologized profusely and just said that I was at the Moon and heard someone bragging about diamonds and that I wanted to be in the mix of a big crime case so much that I exaggerated on what I heard. Buddy reluctantly accepted my excuse and briefed me on the Bertrand death.

Buddy confirmed that there had been a woman in the room. Forensics was inconclusive on what part that female may have played in what happened. Then Buddy went into

Bertrand's drug problems. Cocaine, heroin, X. Lying to his family and himself.

It made me break out in a sweat. I was in TPD headquarters with the head private investigator with X in my back pocket! And why, because I was so paranoid, I was afraid someone would steal it from the car. What's worse, I saw something in one of the crime scene photos that squeezed the air out me. I thanked him for the update, wiped my face and left.

They may not have the land, but they got the deed to yo' spirits! Every las' one of yo' souls in peril. Ah, y'all don't hear me today! I'm tellin' ya yo' soul runnin' on empty: "Ye shall keep my statutes. Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind: thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed: neither shall a garment mingled of linen and woollen come upon thee." Leviticus 19.

How dare you poison the land with the acid of your selfishness? You run from The Word with words of the streets, the classroom, the bright lights. The true Word is built in the grass underneath your feet!

Concrete it down if you want to with intellect, arrogance and self-serving dogma. . . the earth will shift, the weight of man and his invention will prove too great. A crack will split that concrete and the rose of love will crack through. Amen.

Will you be ready? Are you ready? In doing battle with the snake, have you become a child of the serpent? What you work on works on you: "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor

effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God."
Corinthians 1, chapter 6.

None of you are deserving of the land and its goodness! Too educated in this and that to give the Lord His praise if you want to. The imagination of your evil heart undoes your claims to the land at every turn!

The synthetic version of King Love remained under my pillow for two days before I felt weak. I went to sleep with and woke up to headaches, as if someone were screaming at me in my sleep. Thanksgiving was decent. Ma and Dad were cool, but sensed something going awry in me. We all went to Lake Ella and fed ducks like we used to every Sunday evening when I was in middle school.

I looked toward Monroe Street, by the parking area Marva Peck claimed a pregnant, seventeen year-old Helen Willows would sit in her ugly Plymouth Fury stirring rat poison in a cup of Dairy Queen vanilla soft serve while contemplating whether or not to kill herself. She had befriended, to the disgust of daddy Moses, the white family who had taken over the Willows two-story vernacular house on Georgia street. He had heard they offered to sponsor an abortion for her. She declined their generosity; *why kill just the child. It was my doing. If I go too, it'll be even.*

But no, she'd decide against suicide solely because it would most likely give daddy Moses a sense of satisfaction and, after all, black people didn't do cowardly things like

that. No, she wouldn't kill herself and prove what happens when young black minds mingled with the madness of whites too closely.

Instead she'd fall asleep wearin' some pink and dirty Hang Ten satin jacket she called herself hidin' her belly from the townsfolk with. All to get away from Mr. and Mrs. Willows. They were about to send her to family upstate until she had the child.

An out of wedlock baby changed her quick! She carried the guilt of that hard and heavy. Mr. Willows had had plans for his only girl. Both and Mrs. Willows had been saving since her eighth birthday for the material for the dress she'd wear when they just knew she'd be Ms. May Day. And that didn't happen until she was eleven! Yes, goodness did the Willows have grand plans.

That's when Helen's hands started staying ashy. She couldn't keep lotion on them for washing her hands constantly. I remembered seeing her at some civic event Ma made me go to. That was about the only skin you ever saw on Ms. Willows besides her neck, ankles and face - if you could get through all that foundation. And all them suit coats she wore and what not would just made you wanna fall out looking at her in the summer time. Cleveland overdressed like that. I figured it was just a thing of a family that spent so much time caring for clothes. I wondered, what would become of me? What grand mistake would I make?

Lovers holding hands were giving me the nervous shakes. I bent down on wobbly knees to pet a duck, any fucking duck, just be alright with the world and know that it wasn't true; I didn't need X to be real with myself and others. No ducks were with it.

I went home and grabbed a Zephyrhills water bottle. I went into my room and locked the door. I sat on the bed with one of the pills in my hand. I closed my eyes and asked God what to do. The cell phone rang. After nightmares of the crime scene photos and eight attempts at calling her, Priscilla had finally responded.

The splintered, paint-chipped door to apartment B3 opened quickly. It was part of one of the shittiest apartment buildings I had ever seen. Priscilla eyes were glassy and ringed with sleeplessness. Strands of hair shot wild out of her yellow scrunchie. Her black Charlie Parker T-shirt, surely Cleveland's, hung from her neck like a Flashdance shirt made to hang off the shoulder. The brown pajama bottoms she wore fell over her feet and threatened to trip her.

Priscilla's curtains were closed. The setting sun glowed through the thick green and brown curtains and made the room smell even more like musty armpits. She sat me at the foot of the bed and paced by the closed curtain. Her nose was red from crying.

"You cain't write nunna what ahmma say, hear? 'Member I gat diplomatic immunity. You said so yo'self."

"Okay."

Priscilla started wringing her hands. "Some shit went down. They gone be lookin' for me! They done found who killed Bertrand?"

"That was ruled a suicide or something like that."

Priscilla pointed a trembling finger at my forehead. "You better find the fuck out! For real!" She muttered something about Juicy and things now being even. "You see what done happened wit' Hope! I can't live like that!"

"Can't live like---" My sense of gravity began to sink. Again, the pieces were flying together. I was almost giddy from the shock. "Priscilla, I believe you're a good-hearted person. Somebody that means well. Because of that I feel that someone as giving as you can care for someone so that you're liable to do the impossible for them. I believe that you're holding back on some of the details of all this. I believe if you told me everything that I can help you. I believe that I can help everybody else out there in this crazy world understand you as well. I asked you before about Bertrand. You were quick to get away from that and looking at the circumstances, your reasons made sense, but there was just somethin' there with the way you said it..."

Priscilla fell back onto the back onto the bed. I looked back at her. Balls of Tussy deodorant were under her arms. She covered her eyes with her hands. "Juicy bought diamonds earrings for that bitch. I know he got 'em for her!"

I assumed it was a sore spot with Priscilla having keloids on her ears and pawning the bracelet he had given her. "Priscilla..."

"I saw her come out the house with 'em! Don't no maid wear shit like that for work!"

"Cleveland tends to play it safe, sometimes. Maybe he just stole them."

"That's even worse! Anybody can buy shit, to go and steal it, that's so deep." She began to weep. I wished I

had brought some King Love with me for her.

"I, I know 'bout Bertrand. He used to sit at the bus stop where I used to get off to work at the laundry mat, before I got my truck. He got my shifts down pat. I'd get off the bus and he'd pull up in fronna me while I'm tryin' to cross the street askin' if I needed a ride? I'm like, 'damn, I just got off the bus... what I need a ride for?' But you know, bein' a man of the law and all that... Plus I heard he be settin' people up. There was a girl that worked at Whataburger that did her clothes there and said he liked to piss on girls and stuff. She was light-skinned and pretty, too. I didn't ask how she knew all that. So he'd catch to me and I'd be like, 'no thanks, Bertrand.' He was like, 'call me Wayne. I want you to call me Wayne.

"Bertrand would come into the laundry mat like it was his house and give me that oily ass 'it's only a matter of time' look. Then he'd go to the Whataburger girl if she was there or just leave. He had eyebrows that make you wanna pull out your brush and just be his mamma, even had hair between 'em. With that dusty brown hair that looked like it never shined a day in his life. He did wear the best cologne I have ever smelled in my life though. Like half a burning log in a fireplace and half bubble bath. Bertrand was the main reason I made sure the front door was locked at the laundry mat when Juicy and me had sex. Bertrand would come in when the lot was empty with that spoiled brat look. He would've came right in... I didn't want Juicy hurt."

Priscilla dried her face and sat up.

"Lo wound up tellin' me that Bertrand was eventually aggravatin' them all anyway. He had caught Lo and searched his car. Diamonds was in the trunk... Juicy always told him to get the stuff to the fence soon as they got back from

jobs, but Lo like to show off some damn much. Bertrand wanted in but Lo was bullshittin', puttin' him off... Bertrand took to ridin' up to the house talkin' 'bout one of them 'fit the description' of some bullshit. He was even doin' it when he was under investigation. That's when he'd come through in regular clothes and that black car.

"When I heard it was Bertrand that was messin' with everything, I almost - well, yeah, I felt bad. Lo had set it up for me and Juicy to get together, came in after Juicy left and told me how Juicy really felt - that I should give him a chance when he came back to get his clothes. Even let me know about when his battle axe mamma passed and how I could slip in and start living with him. When things got rough Lo would swear Juicy needed me, not even somebody like me, but me."

I scooted over to her and held her hand in mine. "As you know, Bertrand overdosed on heroin in the LaQuinta hotel across town."

Priscilla snatched her hand away. "Please don't fuckin' start that. I don't play with the dead!"

"Bertrand's mouth was open wide with traces of Ivory soap around his lips and chin, someone else's blood and an Altoid in his saliva, as well as and a female's juices. That was almost missed, see because it was along the teeth and all."

"You can't make me talk 'bout that nasty shit. I ain't doin' it."

"I saw the photos. The bed was all tussled up and his pants were undone. Yeah, ol' Bertrand was a freak. Loved yella girls and dope. But you see, lookin' at the evidence in the room there shows someone else was in there. Those prints probably match with yours. Ever been arrested?"

Priscilla grimaced and fell back into the bed. "No!"

"Cool, if you've never been arrested; your prints would be in the data bank. I totally understand that Bertrand wasn't the type to back off easily when it came to young women like yourself. Hell, look what kinda mess Hope's in. The fact that Bertrand and you knew each other... that Bertrand was in trouble and was harassing Lo and suddenly the Internal Affairs office was busted into..." I caught up to the words I was saying. That giddy feeling was coming again.

Priscilla turned to me. "What? You ain't know Bertrand was in the pocket of that Peter Arden, whose running a front at the cemetery to sell drugs... who Cleveland---"

"Hey, it's okay... We want to help."

"You wanna know why I like Cleveland's fat ass, don't you? Juicy seemed so safe. Unhurtful."

"Security."

"I learned a lot from him. I learn a lot. He'd come in the laundry mat with the paper folded under his arm, with the crumbs of something on his chin. Like a big baby in a grown man's clothes. He'd speak and read me my horoscope. He'd tell me how I could take classes at TCC and filled the Cosmo questionnaire's out with me in the magazines. I pushed him to, but he still did it. He listened, you could even when we disagreed. I loved it that he could be pushed. Most just wanna push into you.

"I said somethin' to him 'bout him not really bein' black and manly. I was just trying to show him why he had a hard time with people. He just stayed off by the vending machines pouting after that. Wouldn't even look me in the eye. I didn't handle it well, but I damn sure wasn't goin' to beg..." She scratched her braless breast. "This is

bullshit! I was with Juicy to have better in my life, not be with a record!"

"There may be a chance. Go on."

"After they started doing jobs together, Lo told me Officer Bertrand wanted Lo to kill Juicy because Juicy started askin' questions as to why money the fence paid was comin' up short. Lo had started to pay Bertrand and didn't tell nobody but Robert. Bertrand started pressurin' them to do more jobs, keep the money comin'. He even stepped to Juicy and got pissed that Juicy wouldn't sell his properties to him. Juicy started petitioning for more patrolling of the area. Juicy knew people at the City Council by way of his mother working there. He has this alarm clock that goes off in the middle of the day, where he goes and calls commissioners and everyone about Bertrand's intimidation and the drugs. I never seen a black man be like that before."

I stared off into the ceiling. Spider webs were in most of the corners. "You ever tell him this?"

Priscilla just laughed. "He already hated me by then... Bertrand was taking off of drug busts and basically runnin' the show in Frenchtown. Everybody knew that. Dealers who paid him got calls minutes before there would be raids or anything like that. I think he may have had somethin' to do with Lo's brother's death. Arden sells all kinds of stuff."

"Arden gives it to them boys who ride up and down the blocks to sell it. Arden sells it to the big city kids that go to FSU, frats and sororities, people that like to dance at them raves all night, people that want to be closer to each other. X do that, too. Lo was considerin' taking care of Juicy because Bertrand said that he could

have it that DeAndre would never be with him. Lo and Juicy had already fallen out, so it was just like that. Lo told me about Bertrand havin' them hit that police office. He told me why that night I called and asked if him if he'd let Robert and Juicy fight. He hung up and came to the porch and told me that he was supposed to get his files and kill Juicy there to plant it all on Juicy."

"Which is why Chris wasn't in on it. And Ikey?"

"Ikey was too iffy with things. Lo couldn't take the chance of bein' on the wrong end of Ikey with this kinda thing."

"Lo didn't have the heart to kill him, but Bertrand was still on him. Lo then set it up for them to come to the house and try to provoke some fight that would get it done."

"The whole thing with Robert comin' into the house and harassing you."

"Yeah. I felt the gun in Robert's pants when he brushed up against me."

That's when I knew Priscilla had contacted Bertrand. Bertrand was always around, ridin' by the house like the day I caught him. . . He'd knock on the door sometimes when Juicy's car wasn't in. Priscilla would hide in the back room. You just walked by Philadelphia Baptist and he'd be in the squad car. Same old spot.

She wanted to see if she could talk him out of it all. He was in a black car, staring into space at three in the afternoon, needing a shave.

"I had quit the laundry mat by then. My hair cut was different, but he remembered me. He didn't seem all there, his eyes kept trailing off over my shoulder. He had me meet him there."

"At La Quinta."

"Yeah. I went. He was there in the same clothes, facing me when I came in, sittin' on the bed with his shoes off. It looked like he'd been livin' there. Suitcases were up against the walls. A full rack of clothes in the closet, his uniform pressed and the only thing clean there. Newspapers, warm beer and a radio was on the dresser. He was still looking out of it, staring off into the clothes curtain. I told him what I had to say. I told him if he'd leave Juicy alone, he'd never have any more trouble. He said he'd think it over while he made love to me, but he said it like his whole face was numb. He took off his shirt. I was right about the hair on his back. I went over to the dresser and stood in front of it and just waited. His cologne had faded. He was close enough for me to tell he hadn't taken a shower in a while. He didn't smell like the mall anymore. He unbuckled his pants and pulled down his boxers like he was sleep walking.

"He came up behind me and held me, tight. He was feeling on my chest 'til my nipples get hard. He was smelling my hair, my skin. He worked his way to kissing my lips with lil' birdy pecks from my ear to my mouth. I popped open my bag and was about to give him an Altoid, 'cause that's what I like. You figure, he white; white boys love goin' down. I mean, that's all I was plannin' on him doin'. He set my Altoids to the side and tried to tongue me, I bent down, hiked up my skirt and pulled the cotton part to the side. I rested my hands on my knees, because too much shit was on the dresser. I stayed like that so he wouldn't kiss me again."

"All this for Juicy?"

"For all - for everything. Juicy had all this talk

about how blacks owned Frenchtown. He took us all to see his grandfather, though he wouldn't speak to any of us. He took us to see all these old blacks who told the same thing. That we could have for ourselves and do for ourselves again. I'm from Wakulla. Don't know my daddy and - you know the drill. I'm sick of running. I found a home with these niggas and I was ready to defend it.

Priscilla scratched again. "Bertrand couldn't get it up though. He was gettin' pissed, clapping me into him. He caught me rollin' my eyes when he looked in the mirror. I turned around and held him close. My face was in his hairy chest. I stayed there to keep him from tonguing me. I moved over to the Altoid box, got one. He took it and put it in his mouth.

"Bertrand stopped pulling and squirming and eventually cried quietly in my hair 'til it felt like I was holdin' him up. I noticed his ring. I was like, 'Bertrand, why you livin' in here? You undercover or somethin'?' I wasn't into readin' the paper and hadn't heard the whole thing yet. He didn't answer at first, then told me to call him Wayne."

"Buddy said his wife kicked him out. Him being investigated and Lo not killin' Cleveland in the office break-in didn't help either." I got behind Priscilla and began massaging her shoulders. A muffled howl escaped from her mouth at the minimal amount of pressure I applied. Her shoulders felt like bone and cartilage were eating away at the muscle. I kept going.

"Yeah. He just kept sniffing and holding me. I could feel his face changing an expression through my hair. He chewed the Altoid up like he had sore gums. His dick almost got hard right when the hottest tear I ever felt dropped

into my scalp. I couldn't do it. I just wanted to tease him into leaving them alone."

"The essence of teasing is to prolong attention something, not to walk away."

Priscilla mumbled to herself and patted one of my hands. Her head fell back into me. Suddenly, our eyes met. Hers blazing up at me, mine down at her. I could feel the humid, pockets of desperation making the moment electric. She did, too. She straightened her hair and patted my hand thank you. I cleared my throat and backed away.

"Umm, like I was saying, Bertrand had me sit on the bed and hear the train run through town. I sat way at the edge of the bed and brushed my hair. He was against the headboard. 'You ever do X?' he says. I then understood his spacey look, why he says make love instead of fuck. I told him, no.

"Bertrand got real blunt. 'Do this with me. We do each other and everything else will be the way you want.' I turned around and looked at him with his acne scars, wedding band and how long his ears really were. He asked if I ever did a threesome. I got up and get myself together.

"'I cain't do this,' I said. 'Please don't hurt them boys.' I left quick before he could do shit! I swear that's it, so how that make me in the wrong?"

I looked in the cloudy dresser mirror, at her, over my shoulder. "It's about evidence, Priscilla. The crime scene photos. You left, but the Altoid's tin box didn't."

CHAPTER 8
JUST TO BE WITH YOU

That night, I went to my room and locked the door. I called Stephanie. She didn't answer her phone. I played her CD of Keith Sweat and took a pill of King Love. The music embraced me. I wound up with nothing but my socks on, slow dragging with my house robe. From there it was a fit of pinching my nipples and crying in the dark. Rolling on King Love felt like an orgasmic sneeze spewing out of every pore of my body in slow motion.

I turned on the light and tried writing poetry on the laptop. I called Carla and begged her to forgive me. I drank all the Kool-Aid in the fridge. I refilled glass with water out of the bathroom when the Kool-Aid was gone. More slow dragging, for hours... Then the room began to spin and my heart started to feel like it was expanding, ripping itself apart. Hot spasms shot through it, like the tears were instantly reacting to the blood and tissue surrounding it. It's wrong for anyone to take X and be alone. I slept in and ate Thanksgiving leftovers, Harris called and told me I was fucking up. Neither woman had returned my call.

I went to the Oakland Cemetery again the following day. This time, I had come with Mr. Linden Hill, a recently retired sexton of the cemetery who frequented Dad's barbershop. I needed to see H.D. Parker's grave. I needed to see Helen Willows' grave again. I needed to see them through Hill's glaucoma-ravaged eyes. I needed to do so with him to protect me from myself, from temptation.

The always smiling Mr. Hill met me in front of his home at two o'clock on the dot. His famous black derby hat was tilted over low onto his forehead. He groped for the door handle, settled himself in the car. He gripped his mahogany cane with both hands and began as we pulled out into traffic.

"Cleveland visited Helen a lot right after the funeral, like most people tend to do. I'd talk to him about diff'rent things. Cleveland's big on the hist'ry, so me and him have better talks than I do with the rest of your generation. I worked the cemetery over forty years. Buried relatives of the Rileys, the Nims, the Proctors, some of the pioneer black fam'lies in Tallahassee. I know my bidness."

Mr. Hill claimed Helen Willows could give him a run for his money on folk history as well. People used to check with her on somebody they were sweet on to make sure they weren't related. I guess Cleveland had taken it from there.

"Cleveland's got a misguided idea of what Frenchtown was. He has it in his mind that it was a completely black wonderland or something, when the main jewelry store in town was run by whites. Hell, Mr. Ashmore has been and still is off Brevard Street, remembers me to this day. It was the place for black folks to live and do business, yeah. It was ours. Cleveland just got the tail end of what his momma and all was tryin' to do back then and, hell, the boy just aim to please. You know plenty people out here like that that won't go out of a twenty mile radius unless it's a funeral, wedding or family reunion. Cleveland's had it like that. That, for a young boy, even him, can be f'ustratin'. Take that for all your life and then the main person that kept you close to home dyin'? I tell you what,

ain't no boy worth a damn gone not be outta sorts when that happens."

We reached the cemetery. There was no sign of any boys on bikes, no satanic-looking white man with NASCAR stickers on his jeep peddling dope. I helped Mr. Hill out of the car.

"Cleveland held up well at the funeral, seein' that everybody thought he'd be the jumpin' on the casket type. Don't get me wrong now, Helen was a bitter pill. Never really got over her boy bein' outta wedlock and all. I guess she fed that into him so he didn't either. She was all over him about his posture, pronunciation of words, calling him a 'fat ass.' Boy wasn't smart just because he had it in him, he was book smart because he had no other way to hide from her."

We walked slowly toward the North. "Cleveland came walking down the middle of Brevard street like a plum fool toward here months after she passed. Cars were just flying passed him, folk callin' him this and that... He came on up into the cemetery. This had to be one weekday in April. Yep, 'cause I remember needin' mo' an'ihistemines. Hay fever. I asked him where his car was so he could get me some mo' an'ihistemines. He scratched his head and said, 'home I guess.' Mouth all white like he done had too many oranges. Shirt crumpled and out his pants, unlike the tidy way Helen raised him. I asked him where them headphones he keep 'round his head at, why he wudn't at the library matter fact. He just shrugged his shoulders. Boy was lookin' worse than that time he was just eight or so, wonderin' lost during FAM's Homecoming parade in Frenchtown. I was on the other side of the street and couldn't get his 'tention. Tell you the truth, Cleveland

was more lost walkin' 'round here that April day than as a boy all those years ago.

Mr. Hill suggested Cleveland come and help him with landscaping. It was as a favor to his Granddad. Mr. Hill said that Frenchtown turned into mess of useless churches, boarded up houses and liquor. Just like Moses predicted.

"I tried to get Cleveland to pick up some shears or something, but he'd just hang around the lots, runnin' his finger over headstones he passed. Even tryin' to read the eroded ones that ain't have nothin' to do with his family. It pissed off my assistant somethin' fierce. His name's Peter Arden."

Mr. Hill looked in every direction. "He ain't here today, prob'ly doin' paperwork back at the office... I was prunin' some bushes one afternoon and overheard Cleveland by the Parker marker." Mr. Hill turned left. "Come this way."

Mr. Hill adjusted his black derby, coughed and spat out phlegm into a napkin. "Cleveland was talkin' under his breath 'bout how the fancy Parker got the marker fixed quickly. Not long before, somebody came in the night with what must have been a bat and cut the plum fool on it. A big hunk of the thing was missin'.

"Half of me wanted Cleveland to have busted up the man's marker . This boy needed a father and watched the man to be it day in and day out go about his business like the boy wasn't even alive. Cleveland just needed a father. I couldn't rightly be one outta thin air, but we talked about keepin' his head up and all that before some fool have him in here looking up into the roots of trees. Frenchtown ain't as family-minded as it used to be. There's the Parker grave."

It was in granite with a rose tint. The plaque was mounted in a granite base. Emblems of roses where in every corner. FAMU's President Perry didn't even have a marker as impressive. The engraving was awfully nice: Harrison Delano Parker (December 31, 1950 - May 11, 2001). Next to his was where Wilhemina Parker was set lay. Her name and birth date of March 7, 1952 were already engraved.

"Cleveland sat in the grass with his legs up in a ball in front of Parkers' headstone and stared at it like a look could split it in half. Kinda funny that they're only two rows down from Helen. Juicy'd sit on this double marker and eat lunch for break."

I caught up with Cleveland later on that night. He gave me a tour of the house. The computers, the impressive collection of books, it was all a blur to me. I had too much on my mind for that. I asked him where would he move to if he sold the house. He said he didn't know yet. I asked him why. He said because it was just time.

I didn't see it that way. "But you've won! Bertrand is dead! Why didn't tell me about Bertrand?"

Juicy walked in front of the sofa lined up against the front window. We stared out into porch. I noticed his cat Cosby was missing. Cleveland read my mind. "I think Lo and them did something to that cat."

Cleveland sighed his girly sigh. "Bertrand would just sit taking it all in his Crown Victoria. You could hear the AC going in that car while it sat in Philadelphia Baptist's parking lot. . . feelin' on himself while flippin' through Black Tail magazines he got for free from the Arabs at the convenient store. Only a fool'd shake his hand while he was

on duty. I'd go to that convenient store just to see the lay of the land on foot. I'd pass them all. I'd speak, but none of 'em really spoke to me. Me, the stranger. The Willows boy, the one with no record or habit. The one that's been here longer than the rest of them. I don't fit in 'cause I ain't just goin' along with all this and I'm still not used to usin' or abusin' anybody."

I grabbed him by his shoulder. "You're supposed to be different! Everybody's better off with you here! Look at all the things you taught Lo and them!"

Cleveland rolled his eyes. "I did take them out to different things in the daytime. We did the Southwood and restaurant jobs at night. This was when we were really a team."

"Right, Lo was Mr. Charisma, you the brain, Chris the charmer, Ikey the muscle and Robert the guy with the know how with the tools."

Cleveland's voice grew whimsical. "I belonged to something, y'know? I took them to a play at FAMU. It took the idea of 'fucking some college hoes' to get their courage up to go. The play was "Zooman and the Sign." Perfect for them, you'd think. Lo and Robert are yelling back at the actors like all that's supposed to be cute. We get asked by people next to us to please cool it. Lo's looking at me like he was going to lose it. I'm calming him down. Chris was trying to get some girl behind's him's number and Ikey was asleep for most of it. Just drama."

"And Robert?"

"Who gives a shit?! I hate his ass. I then realized it though; this is how immature people in high school were. This was my chance, at twenty-three, to live what I missed in high school. Lo and them were really annoying the hell

out of everyone, all those professor types and college people."

"People that reminded you of your father. People that left Frenchtown. Let it go to shit."

We sat down. Cleveland nodded his head. "Yeah, I thought about it. After a while, I just gave up on the play. I decided to laugh along with everything that Lo and them were doing. It didn't stop there. We went to the bookstore and stole candy. Robert took a T-shirt. The next weekend we went a frat party and got in a fight with some Q-dog fraternity brothers. Dangerous things!"

"That kind of fun never happened to you before?"

"Well, if you recall I said that when I met Lo at the laundry mat, he seemed familiar to me in a way. You see, Momma had this rule where I was to never go anywhere with anyone because I would get molested. My grandparents couldn't even pick me up without Momma's consent. She'd set me up with tricks, like have some kid in my first or second grade class say I could go home with him and she'd watch behind cars. She'd come up and snatch me if I got close to the door. Kids would really get freaked out by her and not want to be my friend at all. But that was her answer for everything. 'What do you want to sit out on the steps for?' 'What you wanna see outside? Somebody's gonna mess around and molest you...'

"I was ten years old once on a Saturday. The sky was heaped with spotted, cauliflowered clouds. I had just gotten up from my nap and saw the mailman go by. Momma's bathroom door was closed and locked. She was in there with her cigarettes, letting the smell of shit and tobacco roll out the window, no doubt. I looked out the living room window to the mailbox.

"I swear I was being pushed out the door to the mailbox. Momma always got the mail, but I had been studying the mail after seeing a small envelope for Momma in handwriting I didn't recognize. They were small business sized envelopes with no return address and thin. The handwriting was so awfully twisted and choppy I'd wonder how it made it to destination, but I was fascinated enough by it to try and copy it. I knew right away it wasn't his uncle's or Granddaddy's. Whomever's it was, I was certain, that it was a man, one too busy to care what others thought of him..."

"H.D. Parker' s handwriting. Your father."

"Nothing special came: Credit card company. *Reader's Digest*. *Essence Magazine*. I flipped through the cool glossy pages of the magazine at Dianne Carrol, Debbie Allen then Suzanne Taylor, who Momma read religiously. I remember running a finger over her gap-toothed smile, wondering if what boys said about girls like that was true.

"A group of boys came down the block. They were probably between fourteen and sixteen. Loud in high top sneakers and full of themselves. Some slap-boxed, others were finishing MCDLT's and dropping the wrappers in the middle of the street. I couldn't imagine saying anything about it. They talked the hardest sounding craziness ever, food almost flyin' from their mouths:

*My nigga yo' mammy got hair like a barb wire fence.
Bitch you cain't even spell barb wire.
Ah nigga, B-O-B...*

"They were so free and vulgar, like Lo and all them. These guys passed right by me and didn't notice me. Just

talking wild! I never saw anything so unchaperoned and horrible. I felt such pity and loyalty to it that I laughed out loud from being shocked by the feeling. One of them heard me and turned around. He was the one in cut off jeans and striped tube socks, the one winnin' the slap-boxing. 'Nigga, what you lookin' at?' 'Huh?' I couldn't think of anything else.

"He waved me off and pushed one of them in the back for no particular reason. I don't know why I adopted him, this one in particular, but to my nine year-old eyes, he was the missing words to all my unfinished sentences. Lean, angry muscles that were so far from my doughy, dumpy body. And a mustache. I figured they were going to the EZ Mart up the street.

"I found myself trailing them, acting like I was reading through the magazine and just happening to be going to the store myself. I watched his shoulders in that tight, Izod polo shirt. It was like he had the body to perform the rage that I ever felt. 'You play football?' I asked.

"They all turned around. 'What you say?' the loser of slap boxing asked, as if I had reminded him he lost. 'Um, the one in the red shirt - you play football?' I knew it was wrong when it came out. Another soft, unboyish thing to say, or ask.

"He turned around and asked why. The sleeves on that shirt gave all they could for those arms. Then he asked me if I was gay. The others already waved me off. I could feel my clothes beginning to tighten around my chest. I stood in the middle of the street. 'No, I, I just thought I saw you before.' The boy asked how in hell could I see him with a helmet on.

"They all busted out laughing at me. He looked at me like I was a species of something he had never seen, a Discovery Channel oddity. Believe it nor not, I was more upset with disturbing or disappointing him than anything."

It was clear enough; Lo and them reminded Cleveland of this bunch, or even Chauncey Millers, always of a group he could never get in with.

"A blue Chevy truck with fishing poles in it drove on by the football player. He let it pass and continued walking with them. I started breathing again and started slowly walking down the street after them, after him. This hopeless charity was making a mess of me; these were boys Momma had always warned me about. Perhaps I wanted to know if they knew that they were the cause of everything that was damaged and criminal in the world.

"Still, I couldn't accept him leaving and thinking of me like that, no like that. They crossed over and open lot into the back of Dent Street. They stopped by an oak tree. One of them came up to it, spat on the trunk and pissed as if he was trying to knock the piss off the bark. I couldn't walk all the way up to them, so I stayed about ten feet away. I just stood there. MCDLT turned back at me. 'What da fuck you want, gay boy?' I just shrugged my shoulders.

"'What you want?!' Now red shirt was talkin'. His agitation fanned some sort of coals in me. I cleared my throat. 'Fine then. Where y'all goin'?'"

To fuck yo' momma,' bark pisser snarled."

"Bet Robert reminds you of him."

"It was kind of funny. I laughed a little. Maybe that was alright, I thought. We reached Dent. Cars were all along the curbs. It made the street narrow and walking so close to the windows made me feel reckless. I ran the end

of the magazine along the bodies of the cars. I imagined how if people sat in the car, they would jump as I approached. And then Ms. Jones ruined it, calling me like I was a child runnin' across her yard.

"Ms. Jones' voice shrills like Priscilla's. I turned right, to the mobile home with concrete under it, the house with all the windmill mobiles and year long Christmas trees in the yard. The ex-Taltran bus driver stared at me over her multi-colored reading glasses. She had on her usual yellow and green flowered house dress." Cleveland laughed and slapped his thigh. "It looked like a bed sheet with holes cut in it for the head and arms. I said 'ma'am' to her real quietly so the boys wouldn't hear.

"Ms. Jones went to town on me. 'You know good and well yo' mamma don't play you messin' out here with them! They ain't from 'round here. You know you wrong.'

"Red shirt and his crew burst out laughing. They picked up the pace, just to put some distance between me and, between them and I. I started jogging the other way, back home. The long way. My ears were sizzling with rage. One mother within two blocks was enough. I was about to turn the corner when that same blue truck came flying through. I remember the fishing poles swishing with white and red balls on them, the O shape of his mouth. It somehow told me, by itself, that I was going to be hit. The brakes sent the truck skidding and it didn't stop until after it knocked me down near a ditch. The driver got out and got down on a knee to check me. He was a big black man and smelled like beer. I lay there and looked into the sky. It was hard to breathe on my right side, where he hit me. I could feel bruises getting ready to stick to my clothes. I mouthed the word, sorry. I wasn't hit that hard, but it

felt like God just stuck a finger in my brain and just pressed snooze."

"The truck knocked you out cold."

Cleveland smiled and nodded. "I came to again. The magazine and the rest of the mail was scattered at my legs. The paramedics were there and blood was under my head on the street. It wasn't bad, but my right hand hurt. I told them, so. The paramedic was about to put me on the stretcher. A red-head man with freckles of rust all over his forearms. I grabbed him by his wrist. You wake up and get strength for the damndest things.

"'I can't go with you,' I whispered. 'I'll get in trouble. I'll get a whoopin'.' The driver and the paramedic argued for me to come off it until Ms. Jones finally came. 'Lawdy Jesus, dis Helen child from Dunn Street!' She assured me she'd go tell Momma. A crowd of kids had already formed, I could tell from their high top sneakers. The boys were there. Red shirt was there, he kneeled down to me. 'Hey man, you gone be alright.'

"I looked up at him. Tried to hold on to him in my sight, but my spinning head kept him sliding up into the sun. 'What's your name?' I asked.

His eyes began to water. "'Terrence. My name Terrence Bennett. I stay on Dent Street.'"

"Lo's brother."

"Yeah. When he gave me his last name, I knew I must really have looked bad. Nobody ever brings up last names unless something serious happens or someone's tryin' to see who your people are. I would stay fond of Terrence until his death, where the Bennett family and Lo threw the biggest, longest party after his funeral I had ever seen (he requested this many times before he died that they do

so). Mean, muscle cars and gangster rides lined down that very same street onto ours. Jheri-curved, gold tooth men in department-store button downs with a loosened black ties leaned against the hoods with plates of food or hugged up against always shorter, mostly black-dressed women.

"B.B. King records, Maze and Planet Rock re-makes pumped the smell of fish grease through the air. No shooting or anything. Momma was even respectful. She was solemn even, having yelled constantly at Terrence for walking in the middle of the street when she was trying to drive through. The memory of her run-ins with him seemed to keep her from calling the police.

"Being with Lo and them was like bringing it all back. Everyplace we'd go to started to necessitate us leavin' with me flooring Robert's Buick out of whatever parking lot. You don't understand how it was for me. I ran my first lights and drove over eighty with them."

"Oh no," I said, trying to resist scratching my nuts. "I have an idea."

"I felt safe enough to do different things with them. I got introduced to things I had only read about or seen in movies, music videos, places I always rode by and imagined what must be inside... smoky pool halls, old, weathered three quarter leather coats that smell like cigarettes, driving alone at night in the hard rain, rum and coke in dirty shot glasses, weed, fried bologna sandwiches and Magnum 40 ounces, tired Waffle House waitresses with ex-boyfriend's names and knife wounds for tattoos, gold teeth... Simple things, Marvin Sease records, Tom Brown park on Sundays, black men with no cars and tall tales, men who no one knows by their 'government names', cookouts with people you don't

know, mix CD's, funny-named, card-playin', baby-faced girls who can -"

"Like Priscilla?"

Cleveland's face turned to stone. "It's one thing when men treat you like that. But she... I've given her... she's hurt me. Too much."

December snuck up on me like bills at the end of the month. Work at the Democrat went along well enough. I still spent my free time doing drafts of the book. I contacted Cleveland to show him what I had. He said he was busy and would get with me later.

Cleveland had changed his mind about selling his house, but remained steadfast in moving elsewhere. Word on the street was FSU students came in to check out his home daily. Or maybe they were just young white couples looking for prime real estate. Who could tell anymore?

I caught up with Lo. He was in his front yard cleaning ash from the side of his Caprice. He pointed to a spot of ash in the middle of his grass. I automatically thought of his brother killing the Candy Lady.

"Man, I got my grill out back, right? Next thing you know, I get up and my grill flipped the fuck over in my front yard! Coals and ash all upside my car." Lo snarled at me and turned the water on for the water hose by the porch. "Thassum female shit. All over some damn cat of his. That's Juicy style, but I'm tryin' to be cool about it."

Lo asked if Priscilla was okay. I said she was. No one had contacted her about Bertrand. She had called and to tell me she was moving in with Stephanie. Lo asked if she and Cleveland talked. I had no clue. I asked if he knew

what happened to Cosby. Lo smiled. I knew I'd never get straight answer.

Lo began to water the patch of ash in the grass. "If that nigga leave, he takin' a lotta shit wit' him. Y'know, knowledge of how to do diff'rent thangs... You in college, maybe you can transfer home, show us shit."

I sat on the steps of his porch, almost blushing. I was flattered. "Naw, I'm just a writer."

Lo threw the water hose against the faucet. "Man, you just like them saddity niggas at that university. All these professionals. Bunch uh bullshit. All you niggas do is be professional observers and critics."

My bashfulness evaporated. I leaned forward and motioned Lo to come closer. "I can help Robert learn to read while I'm here. I ain't gonna take all the okey-doke bullshit he gave Cleveland about it though, understand?"

Now it was Lo grinning. He wiped his mouth and thought on it for a second. "I mean, Robert got his pride and all..."

I shook my head. I wasn't havin' it.

"Okay, okay nigga, damn."

I walked through the onslaught of Christmas consumerism in the malls and thought of Carla. It was our twisted dream that she'd fly in sometime during the holiday season and see my folks. I sat in my car with a box of Godiva chocolates and a sweatshirt of Winnie the Pooh (her favorite). I was about to pull out when the phone rang. I knew she was probably in the College Mall wondering if she should even bother buying anything for me.

"So what's up?" she asked.

Waves of shoppers passed by. Holding hands and faking like it was cold enough to really snuggle into each other.

"I don't know if I can be what you want me to be, Carla."

Carla stammered for a moment. "What do I want you to be?"

"I mean, I'm grateful but, I don't know..."
The weight of her breathing changed. I could sense her sensing it in me. "You been with another girl! I can tell!"

"Yeah." I felt ten pounds lighter.

"You just switch according to wherever you are! That's not original, that's not unique! What's your core identity?"

I took the sweatshirt out of the bag and smelled it.

"I know."

"So you're going to stick with the familiar then, right?"

Car engines hummed behind me. I reclined my seat and covered my chest with the sweater. "I need time to figure out where I fit in all this."

Carla's voice cracked. "You were trying to get out of not having to fit in at all, remember?!"

I closed my eyes. "It's the Gemini effect. I'll always love you."

"You totally suck ass. I want you to know that. Don't call me anymore!"

There he was. I was riding by, but couldn't resist. I drove in from the west, speeding passed markers and dead leaves covering the dead. He had a crackhead I recognized raking leaves for him. He was by his jeep with the boys on mountain bikes I had seen there before.

Peter Arden was a dickhead, with an over-accessorized jeep and aviator glasses. He dressed like some asshole wishing he could be on a safari hunt somewhere. His saving grace was that his face shared the linear features of Tim Simpkins, the late jogging enthusiast who used to jog through Tallahassee in superhero outfits.

You couldn't miss Arden, especially in Frenchtown: a lil' wiry type, 165 pounds or so like Lo, blond crewcut, major sideburns, leather neck from the sun, constantly smokes, work boots, fat country belt buckle with jeans. Kept leather gloves on all the time.

One of the boys took a pocketful of work from Arden and started pedaling off. I rolled down my window and screamed 'hey.' The boys recognized me and started cursing me out. Arden jumped in and threatened to gut me like a fish or some frontiersman nonsense like that. I drove off. There's only so much the human mind can take.

It made sense that Arden could get away with it. Mr. Hill's vision was making the world around him an unfriendly water painting of obscurity. Word was Arden only used green jewelry bags to blend in with the grass. Now red, yellow and blue ones could be found. I called the police to report him, but nothing happened. Perhaps the wrong officer got the call. Perhaps Arden and his money had gotten to him first.

Ikey Mike's murderers were discovered on December 14th, no thanks to me. The killers were bragging about the killing at the very same club it the whole incident began from. It was two ignorant, fake dope boys from the Southside. They

had been drinking and were unable to control themselves when all eyes were on Ikey and Lo.

Everyone met up and had dinner at Stephanie's and Priscilla's to celebrate the next weekend. Chris came in jeans, T-shirt and a pea coat with either his new girlfriend or the woman who decided to hang around after he had macked her into giving him a ride there. Robert came in a heavy Carhart work uniform, lit enough to give everyone a contact high. Cleveland even showed dressed in a turtleneck sweater and slacks. A bubbling Butterball turkey, complete with pineapples and maraschino cherries was his contribution.

After spending a lot of the time on the phone with his son, Lo sat at the table in khakis, a flannel coat and skull cap. He said grace, but was unable to eat from apologizing to Stephanie for what had happened to Ikey. Stephanie accepted.

Priscilla came in from work as gifts were exchanged. Robert played DJ and put on Bobby Blue Bland, then made us all sing "Silent Night" by the Temptations. "Give Love on Christmas Day" by Johnny Gill came next, then "Merry Christmas Baby" by Otis Rhedding. He was coming along well enough with my helping him read and continued to do so as long as I didn't tell Cleveland about it or 'act like I'm all that' about it.

Stephanie offered everyone Chivas Regal. Cleveland and Lo caught each other's glances and politely declined. I brought Stephanie's Keith Sweat CD. We played "Make it Last Forever", sang it like it would bring back Ikey. In a way, it did. Stephanie asked if she could hold it again for the night.

I caught Cleveland to himself sipping egg nog and writing something out by the window. He motioned me over. "What's up?" I asked.

"I don't where I'm going to send this," he said. "But it felt good to write."

Hope,

I weighed every decision carefully. Until now. Not because I'm particularly intelligent, but because I wanted to prove my worth by the things I refused, by the things that I'd say yes to, but you never came around. Not really. You were to be the reason I refrained. Funny that I had to dive into everything I shut out just to even get close to you.

I held off breathing, all this time, for a chance to smell perfume behind your ear. For that airline stewardess smile. Why couldn't you be everything I meant to say but couldn't? This is the last time I'm writing this letter. . . You'll only get cussed out or labeled untrustworthy in small towns and the big ones have girls like you, but they're white and meaner. Men will work blue veins into your thighs and go home to somethin' dependable, chubby. Safe. Just the same, life, the suffering of it, made sense when I imagined you burrowed under me while we lay in a hammock, toying with the buttons on my shirt as the sun went down. The idea of it was clear because someone was doin' it with me all the while. Priscilla.

I could have been on my way to owning some car lot, being some councilman, writing editorials in the Democrat. I could have been somebody respected, in spite of my name, with you in that black unitard by my side. I rejected an awfully horny, backwoods girl that don't keep her armpits

shaved, a girl that risked her life for me. I figured I had to deserve you and all things out of reach. Look how long I've waited. The unworthy would have given up long ago. I believe in love, revenge and all the funky details of both. But I don't have the energy anymore to fight with what's in front of me.

Tallahassee takes it from a man. The fog. The Spanish moss. They insulate and irritate the dreamer. Folk don't get together to live a life together, they cohabit to have somebody to rot and grow rank and sour in this humid air with. Separate bedrooms and all that. I risked making my whole world in the span of eight blocks. I'm at my best when I'm inspired, but the poems about you have begun to sound the same and I believe I've got to be mad at you now to move on.

All kinds of magic comes through my mind about it. The magic tells me somebody's gotta love me. Somebody's gotta fuss with me, set up the chairs and chicken at my after funeral party. Somebody's gotta have a story 'bout me to tell that's worth layin' a body to rest to. And that story won't fit any stereotype. It'll be layered and full of branches. Much more than some article in the paper 'bout a girl that should've probably left town long ago. I can't wait on makin' memories with you to live. You're a big girl now, Hope. I have to breathe right now, right this minute.

Take care,
Cleveland

I looked at Cleveland, then the rest of them. It was the first time I had seen them all together. I couldn't have asked for it to turn out any other way.

I turned in my badge at the Democrat a week early. Harris was there, in his typical frazzled state. He took me out to eat wherever I wanted. I took him to Wilson's.

Harris seemed to enjoy the place. He swayed to the blues music. The barbecue sauce was all around his mouth, making him look like a circus clown. He wiped his mouth and patted me on my shoulder, "hot damn! How'd you find this place?"

I leaned closer to his ear to talk over the music. "It's my home, Harris. I'm supposed to know what's goin' down in it." Harris ordered Miller beer for the both of us and began explaining things I needed to work on to be a better journalist. I just nodded. I hadn't told him I decided to change my major to African-American History. I hadn't told Professor Krementz yet either. Since Ikey's murder was solved, I gave Harris carefully edited notes on what I had gathered on the Millers murder. After cutting, re-editing with the concern of certain politics in mind, it came out in the paper soon enough and became the talk of the town.

DATE: December 21, 2003, Tuesday - Tallahassee Democrat
SECTION: State and Regional
LENGTH: 757 words
HEADLINE: Late officer declared killer in Millers Murder

The late Officer Wayne Bertrand has been named the killer of FAMU student Chauncey Millers. The players directly and indirectly involved in the September 20th murder continues to astound. Bertrand had been suspended for lewd and lascivious conduct with then 15 year-old Hope Robinson, a teen living in Joe Louis Apartments.

It was believed that Millers was killed by mistake, after TPD officials discovered Robinson had taken up with Millers. Bertrand had been stalking the couple. Bertrand had followed them to the library and snuck into the back entrance where security cameras were not present because of ongoing construction. Bertrand, a heroin user, had a needle in his possession when he came across what had to have been Red Devil drain cleaner, a cleaner that has the amount of cyanide needed to have produced the affect it had on Miller's body.

"Chauncey Millers was strung up, but the fingerprints on the belt were inconclusive," stated Investigator Roy Buddy. "Millers had to have been wearing latex gloves."

Bertrand apparently caught a kneeling Millers in the bathroom tying his shoe. Arden stabbed him with a needle of Red Devil, a cyanide-loaded drain cleaner. The drain cleaner was possibly found at the back of the library, where renovation was taking place. Millers fell unconscious

quickly, where Bertrand then hung the SBI business major with Millers' own belt. "We had to catch him from the residue of blood he left from the injection of the dirty needle into Miller's neck," stated Buddy.

TPD thought it was a suicide at first because there was the usual upside down "V" bruise on the side of the neck where the belt was fastened to Miller's neck corresponding with the belt's pressure.

Buddy now knows what took place. "Since he had that, we figured it was a closed case, because with a murder, it's a straight line bruise around the neck from the pressure because somebody would be from behind pulling the belt straight across the windpipe. But we got us a new guy in autopsy. He noticed how cherry red the blood and tissue was. Cyanide does that to a body."

A month later, Michael "Ikey Mike" Warner, was murdered October 11, 2003 at a local McDonald's. He was a friend of Priscilla Throatwood, who had a connection with Bertrand and Hope Robinson. Throatwood, a friend of Hope Robinson, decided to meet with Bertrand to smooth things over. The night they met happened to be November 23rd, the night Bertrand was found dead in a LaQuinta hotel room from overdosing on ecstasy.

Before law enforcement could arrest her for being a possible accessory, Hope Robinson had turned herself into the authorities with a confession. Throatwood, by coincidence, had turned herself in only an hour earlier and was being held in another room. It was discovered that Throatwood had

left the hotel room before Bertrand was reported to have taken the pills. "Bertrand's system was practically liquefied," said coroner Rolf Halmgren. "Such a process requires at least three hours. Bertrand had to have died near midnight." Throatwood had left the apartment between 8:35 and 9:00. It sounds easy enough, but there were signs of struggle and possible asphyxiation.

Hope Robinson claimed to have come to the room not long after 9:00, looking to break her relationship Bertrand. Bertrand, having marital problems, had been living in the room and sought to have sex with Robinson. Robinson claimed to have consented until the ecstasy Bertrand took made him abusive and violent. Robinson claimed to have choked Bertrand until the pills began to trigger a heart attack. Robinson attempted to clean the area and then left. "Either way," declared Investigator Buddy, "Millers' killer has been found. We got our man."

I received a call from Cleveland to meet him at 1034 Georgia Street. I arrived at the curb to a handsome, two story end gable house of ivory. The one and 1/2 story shed roof wing was russet-colored. It, along with the massive interior brick chimney gave the house a 19th century feel to it.

Cleveland came to the front of the house by way of the left side. He ran his fingers along the clapboard siding. I called to him. He smiled and waved a "SOLD" covered "FOR SALE" sign in the other hand. He had bought, had recovered the Willows Home.

The house had been built by sons of newly-freed masons. It had passed through the hands of prominent black families until the Willows bought it and were forced to sell it from the hardships of integration. The white family that owned it had added a sundeck and redid the roof.

Cleveland stood in the front yard and tossed a camera to me. "Take a picture of this." I kneeled down and took several. Later on he'd show me his reasoning for wearing the black slacks, white shirt with rolled up sleeves and black tie he had on at the time; It was the same type of outfit Rev. "Daddy" Titus Willows wore when he posed in celebration of buying the house in 1949! Cleveland posed in the front yard with the blazer hanging off of his shoulder by a finger as his great-granddaddy had done.

I toured the house with him. I looked out into the fading sun and Frenchtown from its 6/6 windows, embraced the acoustics of the spacious rooms, felt the solid foundation from the 8 x 12 inch bricks in the basement walls. I couldn't believe it; He had bought back the Willows home!

We sat inside on the hardwood floor. "Believe it or not, I'm going to miss the foolishness of Lo's and them." He nodded his head and tucked his chunky legs up to his chest. "Excitement had its place. Well, I never really got to do anything but drive - except when we hit Internal Affairs."

I laid on the floor. "How in hell did y'all get away with that?"

Cleveland sighed. "That had to September 11th of this year. We had stop doing jewelry stores in April because Lo was getting reckless. They talked me into doing this one, said they looked everything over themselves. I didn't even

know what it was we were hitting. Lo just said it was an office. It was about 3 am. I was sitting in the driver's seat with a beer from the six pack thinking this was for some pissed off employee wanting some revenge on his boss. I bet myself the smell of stale coffee and Pledge was floating around in pockets over desks. Restrooms were probably down the back hall. I'd never really been in the Lincoln Center before but I had an idea of the layout. I rubbed the back of my neck and checked the parking lot again. I dicked around with the rearview, glad - and kind of pissed - that I still was just the driver.

"Lo tapped me on the arm from outside the van with his undersized latex gloved hands. I guess I jumped a lil', because his filthy green eyes got so wide it looked like the skin around his eyes had been clipped off. He gripped my arm. I really hate when he did that.

"He punched me in the arm and said I was daydreaming. 'Why could I walk up on you like that then? You in here drinkin' the Geniune Draft? I told you that shit for later!'

"Hey, a lil' beer here and there had become a lil' ritual with me before going on a job. I didn't see why it had to be different all of the sudden. Robert came out the building massaging his lower back. His shoulders leaned against one of the building's walls. He looked up into the night like it was slowly snapping his spine in two, one fiber at a time. I thought that was cool.

"Lo raised his palms to Robert like he does when he swears he's got it all figured out. Then Lo turned to me again, clasping his hands together to try and get the air bubbles from the spaces between his fingers. I hate the smell of latex. 'Look Cleveland, the shit we need heavy.

Rob back botherin' him. Come help tote it out.' Is this for your book?"

I closed my eyes and smiled. I loved hearing Cleveland's stories. "Naw man, I just like hearin' you talk about your crazy life."

"Well, I was right about that stale coffee smell. The trash cans were already emptied. Along with the day before's paper, a sticky, cream stirring plastic stick was stuck to the white lining in the trash can in the break room. A brown fold out was pulled out from the table at the center of the break room. It faced an old vending machine. I walked up to the machine's window and was immediately hot that the thing was half full of that Tom's junk food that nobody in all of Leon County likes. I ran my gloved hands across the dingy white selection keys. Priscilla can't stand them things."

"Yeah, you told me that before."

"Oh. Well, Lo had done it again. Snuck up and yanked me by the collar. His grip quickly disappeared; he realized he had grabbed me on the neck, a place Momma wouldn't even have bothered me at: 'Wake the fuck up, hear?'

"The fact that Lo had on the gloves didn't seem to matter. I grabbed his wrist and shoved his arm away. I had never did anything physical against him before, but he was just outrageous that night. He was so used to runnin' the show. He had never been this rough with me. There's this funny sound latex gloved-hands make when gripping skin and pulling the hair off wrists. Lo shoved me back and for a second. Then he pulled out a fuckin' gun on me! That was something.

"My skin started tightening in different places, imagining what the bullet would be like, feel like. Son of

a bitch tried to kill me! Can you believe that? After all I did for him. You try to look out for people and they try to kill you, really kill you!

"There was a look in them algae-green eyes of his, like he was tryin' to turn some key in his head to a lock that wouldn't budge. There was sweat across his upper lip and he was talkin' real low to himself.

"I was like, 'Lo, what is up with you?' You hear all this shit about disagreements, not takin' them personal. That it's you that's gettin' too emotional. And this fool pulls a gun on me. I raised my hands and put a smile on my face. He came closer. Smiling, too. The nose of the gun was to my temple.

"'Thought we could agree to disagree on things, Lo,' I said. My breathing went to the top of my lungs and lifted my weight back on my heels. He coulda knocked me over with a sneeze. 'C'mon now Lo,' I said, 'that ain't your style. The longer we wait here, the worse it is.' He slowly brought the gun down and into his pocket.

"We took three computers from designated desks. They were to be sledge-hammered to bits. We also took files in the office. All the lights on Monroe Street were agreeably green. I was in the back of the van with a ticklin' sensation goin' up and down my spine. I was finally in the back of the van, with the men, looking at the back of Robert's head as he drove!

"I actually went in and did the work instead of just waiting to haul it off in the van! I wished a mirror was with me, so I could just look at myself: Cleveland Willows, outlaw. With every turn, I slid over the personnel folders, photos and video tapes of the opened garbage bags. My hands softened my collision into the walls.

"Average building, east side of Frenchtown. One level. Had to be 'bout quarter to three when we pulled up. Parking lot was empty and glossy from the morning dew. A crisp 52 degrees or thereabouts. Easy enough, right? Well, then I saw files marked "confidential -- city police Internal Affairs" and my legs started to itch from the tightness in my work pants. Vice.

"I lifted one of the marked files toward Lo. I called his name. Lo was sittin' behind me on the hard drives and lookin' out the back window. He turned and looked, and looked right back out the window!

"`This ain't good, Lo. I thought you said we were hitting some surveillance company's place?' No answer. 'This here is federal time stuff! I ain't never been caught and I'm not lookin' to get caught!'

"Lo didn't even look back at me. He just raised his free hand up and wiggled his fingers, all sweaty and bubbled up, under the latex. 'We gloved up. We was careful. We straight.' I scrambled around for another beer. Things felt like they would spin in a second or so.

"That's when I saw her opened file and the hum of the van engine disappeared. No, it wasn't the whole file that did it, but her picture. Yeah, a street light passed over it. The glossiness made me look closer. And there Hope was, in a black unitard. Simple and restless. Let's get up and walk around. My ass hurts."

We went out on the sundeck and listened to the cars and crickets.

"We dumped half of the stuff behind the Taco Bell on North Monroe. The rest went behind some white people's dry cleaners by the hospital. I put her information under Robert's seat when nobody was looking, then put my work

jacket over that. Took it all home with me... So Lo and Robert were really getting ready to kill me?"

I leaned against the railing of the sundeck. We both looked at each other and laughed.

The day before Christmas, we all went to see Moses Willows. He was eating again. Families had come and left gifts in place of their presence. Over-worked nurses moved about in mild indifference. The smell of sickness and the heat of stubborn will lead us to his room.

Mr. Willows sat up, a dried-up raisin of a man, at the sight of us. His hair had turned completely white. The red ring around the iris of his eyes Cleveland had told me about had faded to a garnet hue. Time and strife had picked patches out of his eyebrows.

Cleveland did the talking, introducing his fiancée Priscilla, Lo, Stephanie, Robert, Chris, Auntie Gretchen and myself. DeAndre shot out from between the legs of Lo's oversized jeans and sat in a chair to watch the TV over Mr. Willow's bed. Karma had relented and let the boy stay with Lo for the rest of the holidays. DeAndre introduced himself and immediately asked if he could change the channel from TNT to Cartoon Network. Mr. Willows' lips quivered, but he did not answer.

We settled ourselves. I came bedside and explained to Mr. Willows about my book. I read him some of the first chapter, of General Lafayette's crazy dream, of the Battle of Natural Bridge, of the reading of the abolition of slavery at the Knott House, read of families traveling the dirt roads in droves, of roving constables to keep them of

the downtown streets, of the great fire that destroyed eight blocks of storefronts and prime real estate there and how it was rumored the niggers did it in retaliation.

I read of hangings at Gallows Hill, of big-legged women and hardened black men tired of running, of midwives and healing men, of May Day, potato salad, 'collih greens', church service all through the week, hurricanes, of FAMU, of pride. I read about the need to keep certain things unsaid to remain alive, and the need to speak out on certain things to do just the same. I read about of the dream of Frenchtown.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

William Ashanti Hobbs, III was born in Fort Lauderdale, Florida but later moved to Atlanta, Georgia. He discovered the use of reading and writing as a means to escape unsavory conditions in his home life. Hobbs continued to write on and off and was finally inspired to self-publish Pseudonymous, a compilation of his poetry and short stories.

After witnessing the success of Pseudonymous, Hobbs decided to continue his experiment with writing. He took a year off from college to conduct research for what would become his first novel. In 1993, The Chosen People: Africa's Lost Tales of Meroe was published by the Meroen Press, a company founded, owned, and operated by William Ashanti Hobbs, III. With the publication of his second novel, Unconditionally, Hobbs continues with the vision of the Meroen Press.

In April of 1996, William Hobbs graduated from Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University. By 1998, Hobbs had married and won a McKnight Fellowship, enabling him to pursue a graduate work in Creative Writing at Florida State University. After receiving a master's degree in 2000, Hobbs continued and has graduated with a doctorate in Creative Writing as of the summer of 2004. A new novel, tentatively titled is in the works and due out in the near future. He currently lives in Tallahassee, Florida with his wife, Tameka, and son, William IV.