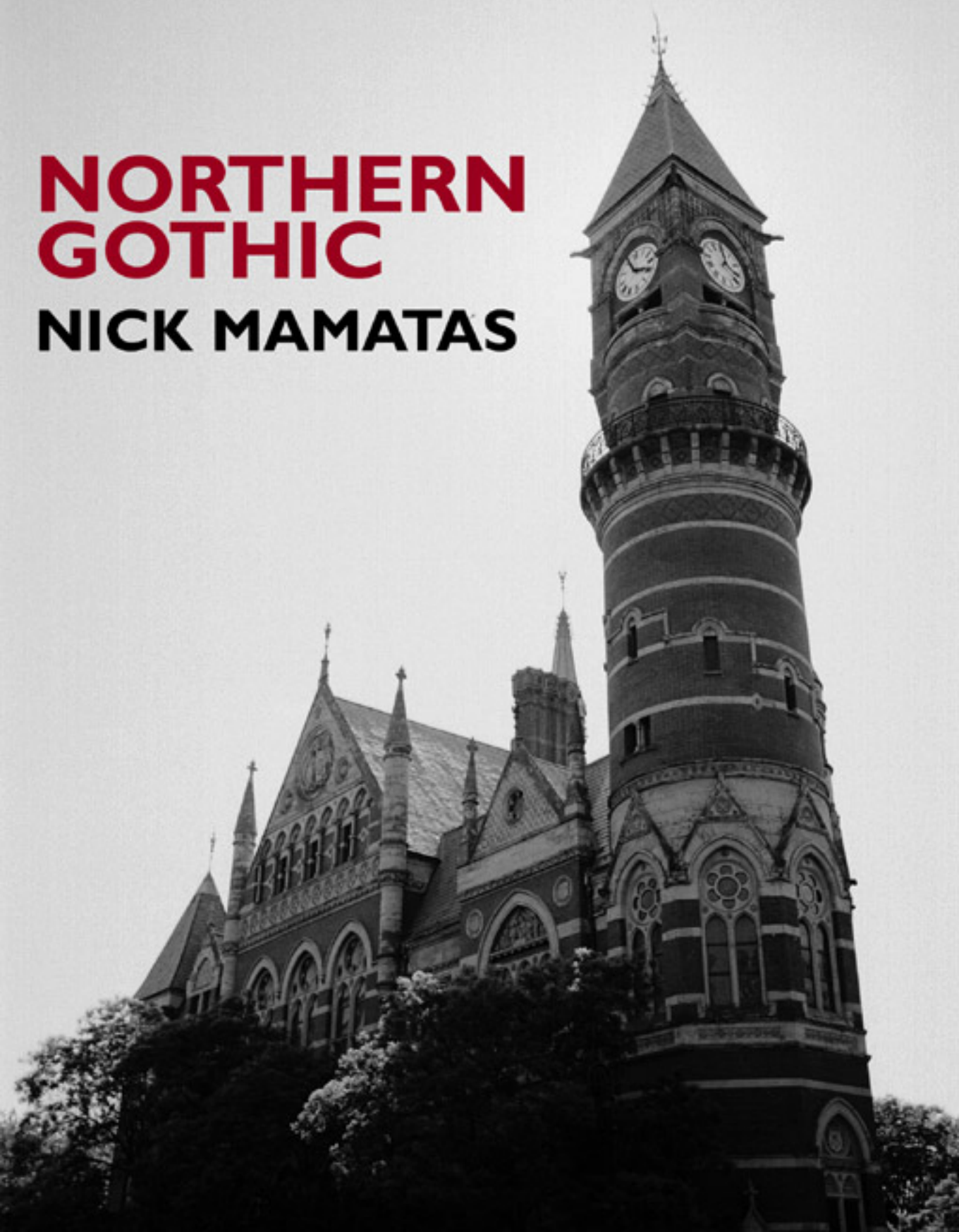


# **NORTHERN GOTHIC**

**NICK MAMATAS**



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A NOVELLA

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Thanks all



**FOR YOU, FOR YOU, FOR YOU.**





**ONE**



## July 11th, 1863

A nail in the throat. William Patten shuddered and died a little when he saw that cheap yellow paper fluttering on the post. It was his brother Neil who read off the lottery announcement, his voice hard like ground glass in William's ear. Over the wave of voices in Gaelic and Yiddish and English, over the clutter of horses' hooves and crooked wheels on cobblestones, over the buzz of the flies, even over the smell of shit and sweat on the crowded street, William heard him and died a little.

"Those able bodied men of means . . ." Neil started and William knew that was him. His arms were hard, like rock under skin. His shirt was too big for him three years ago when he came to New York. Forty thousand crates, hauled in from Chelsea and Hell's Gate. Nine hundred fifteen-hour days of pushing and pulling and teeth chipped from his gritted jaw later, he was a man.

"Who would otherwise be fit for conscription . . ." Free. White. Twenty-one. Not unfit. Otherwise fit, like pants that would fit if *they actually had a second leg*, William thought. Darned war bosses always throwing in words that didn't belong.

"If able to tender a fee of no less than three hundred dollars . . ."

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More than William made in his entire life. How many crates would that be? How many nights of closing his eyes to see nothing but slats of wood equals three hundred dollars? How many chilly mornings turning into steaming days and then damp nights out in the open would it take to get him three hundred dollars? William tried to do the math, but gave up—he forgot to add in food and drink and rent and the union fee and courting a girl and the whole rest of the money-costing world. Two days past never, that's when.

“ . . .or through payment of a sum with which a substitute may be hired for the duration of such hostilities, may be counted out of the lottery rolls for conscription into the Army Of The United States.”

William looked away from the meaningless letters and towards the thick tenpenny nail sunk deep into the tree. He swallowed and could taste it.

“You're eighteen now, brah,” Neil said. “Looks like you're gonna have to go up with the Blue.”

No more crowds of people, no more tall buildings, no more girls, no more work. Just an open, smoke-filled field, a gun, and a wall of men trying to kill him. William's knees gave way as he retched on Neil's boots. Neil didn't even bother to take a step backwards. Even the cobblestones were warm on William's palms. His face was cold, bloodless.

“Done yet?”

“No,” William choked out, and vomited again, over his hands. It was six o'clock in the morning. A long stream of sunlight poured over the curb. It was time for work.

An hour later, he couldn't even smell himself, just beer and sweat. The press was harder today, chests and elbows and rough sleeves all around. He was glad. The others held him up. William drank salty sweat off his

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lips and waited for the stevedore. He arrived seemingly from nowhere and stood in front of the group, eyes squinting through the haze of day. “What a bunch,” the stevedore said with a sigh. William thought the man looked like an oven—squat and nearly black from dirt and leathery skin. And his breath was hot—a billow of beer and some sour German food. A meaty hand pulled someone off the crowd, then another, then another.

“You, you and you.”

William found himself in the front. “Me?” Where is Neil?

The stevedore shook his head, “Billy. Yeah, you too.” He stepped forward and turned back to the crowd on the corner. Neil was in the back, whispering with another mick, one already half-drunk. No wonder there. The stevedore took William by the shoulder and pulled him towards the pier. “Now, not next Sunday!”

The crates were too heavy that day. William put his head down and stared between his legs at the water lapping up to the pier. Behind him, the others grunted and unloaded the ship. He didn’t get paid. Spit in the water. That’ll show ‘em. Light played over black waves. William couldn’t even see his reflection.

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## A few days ago.

A column of blue uniformed cops and plastic shields slammed into the first-row protesters, knocking them backwards. The wall of shields pushed their way into the twisting valley of Gay Street. The chant of “Cops in blue/Get AIDS too” collapsed, along with the ACT-UP marshals Ahmadi Jenkins found himself writhing under. He tried to scramble to his feet but the mass of men hit him like a wave. He put his hands up over

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his face and let them roll over him, sweaty and thick, nearly drowning.

Chairman Gene The Maoist, a squat man with a huge paunch, a gray beard and a beret, stood at the sidelines and shouted, "See, you should have taken 6th Avenue! You have the numbers, this street is a pig pen!"

Ahmadi pulled himself up, wrapping his arms around a lamppost and shouted "Fuck you, Chairman Gene!" before getting slammed against a guard rail the police had set up along the sidewalk. Police in dark blue body armor and round riot helmets waded into the crowd and swung their billy clubs at the demonstrators like boys wandering through an overgrown garden, whacking at weeds. One grabbed a boy by the back of the neck and smacked him, face first, into the guard rail. He didn't grunt, he just cracked. Ahmadi turned and sucked in his breath, pulling into himself, arms slippery from sweat wrapped around the lamppost. Thuds, more pushing, more thick hot flesh and fabric on his back. Someone smack Gene, at least. Nobody did.

No hands came to pry him away and dump him on the asphalt. He blinked through stinging tears and looked out at the street. The sirens stopped howling, and the slow procedure of picking people up like bags of laundry and chucking them into the paddy wagons began. Bodies, some twitching, others tense and defiant, littered the ground. Like that scene from *Gone With The Wind*, Ahmadi thought. Then he thought, *Fag moment!*

Chairman Gene The Maoist was across the street, past the gathered police cars, talking into a pay phone. A cop approached Gene, for a second maybe, then drifted by, his feet seemingly not even touching the ground. Other police were there too, brushing past Ahmadi, tapping him lightly with their batons. The pain was too distant to be real.

Ahmadi glanced down at the streak of blood across his knuckles. It looked like he had been in a fight and kicked some ass, but it was that

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kid's blood, splattered onto his pants and across the bars of the gray guard rail. There was a lump somewhere, not on the back of his head, but floating a few feet away, it felt like. Strange and jumpy. A short-circuit shooting electricity to all the wrong nerves. And more blood, maybe not the kid's. Whose? When he closed his eyes, Ahmadi imagined his limbs glowing. He walked around the corner—all but invisible to the cops now because he was bleeding and wide-eyed and without a thousand friends sweatily screaming for justice—squeezed past the interlocked-bike-rack cordon and went back to the sane part of the world.

Ahmadi joined a few of the stragglers who had managed to dodge the hospital or Central Booking on the steps of the Center, an old red-slab school house. It was hot outside, but whirls of cool air from the open doors cooled the steps. Sammy was there, nursing a 40-ounce bottle of malt liquor and smiling wildly. Ahmadi looked him over. Sammy's skin was dark like cola and covered in a fine sheen of sweat. His hair had been tousled in the protest, but it wasn't mussed, and there wasn't a bruise on him. Sammy was like that; he could walk out of a NYPD beat-down looking better than Ahmadi did on the dance floor.

Sammy smiled and leaned his bottle against the huge purple bruise camping out on Ahmadi's temple. "Hey doll, looks like you got one. Those pigs were rough."

Ahmadi ducked back and put his hands up to his head, just to smooth out the tight curls of his bleached-blond crop with his palms, "Jealous?" Ahmadi winced as he accidentally brushed his fingers against the bump. "Why do I-i-i keep do-ing this?" he sang to himself. "It wasn't even a cop. It was somebody's ass landing on my face."

Sammy picked at his perfect, round elbow with one long fingernail. "Man, I think I got a little scrape. Those pigs are real bastards."



Ahmadi shook his head and laughed, “I signed up to meet boys, too.”

Sammy smiled. A glimpse of his huge white teeth were enough to make Ahmadi feel better. “Well, you met one. What are we doing tonight?”

Ahmadi slithered up to his feet and inhaled, showing off his own lithe body under his ever-present white T-shirt. “Well, I figure you can walk me home, help me to my couch...” he paused.

Sammy leaned in, his smile growing even wider. “Yeah?”

“Prop up my legs and give me a little rub-down...” Another pause.

Sammy put his drink down and sidled up to Ahmadi, cleverly sneaking into his personal space.

“And?”

“And then go back to your own house, Sammy! I got a headache.” They laughed and hugged. Some baseball-cap wearing Yuppie rolled over the cobblestone street in a late-model BMW, stuck his head out his window, and shouted “Fags!”

---

## Afternoon. July 11, 1863

William counted out his money, placing each bill carefully on his straw mattress, doing painful math for the fifth time. “Thirty-four dollars,” he said softly. “Thirty-four dollars.” The room was small, dark and smoky. The dirt wall William had his back to was tightly packed and stained black from the haze. William lived here with Neil, his sister-in-law Erin and Neil and Erin’s two infant children. Neil had gone for a drink and the wee ones were quiet for once.

“You ain’t buying yourself out, Will,” his sister Erin called out. She

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was in the far corner, thrashing a white sheet into submission by drowning it in a wooden washtub. “You can only pray that the Union doesn’t call you up.”

“Can’t you do something, sis? Don’t you and brah have any money in savings?” William asked. “I . . . I just don’t want to go.” His voice, usually brash and ringing like a gong, left his last sentence a plaintive whisper.

“Money saved!” Erin dropped the sheet into the water. She balled up her fists and slapped them on her hips. “Three hundred dollars? Neil and you together haven’t made three hundred dollars this whole year. I got two more mouths to feed now an’ you, and the rent on this—on this palace.” She rolled her eyes skyward and muttered.

Erin was five feet tall and pale, her ash-blond hair tightly bundled up into a bun. As short as she was, Erin was only a few inches shorter than the room she was in. The family lived in a cellar dug out under a brownstone a few blocks from the pier. Not so far away that the room didn’t smell of coal and salt and fish, but far enough away that the walls weren’t black with moisture. Not all the time, anyway.

William had carved out a small alcove into one wall for his straw mattress, on the far end of the room. Another bed by the hearth for two, and baskets for the children on the long table. A few cast-iron pans hung on hooks dug into the mortar of the fireplace. It was close to the waterfront and the public house though, and two of the walls were brick. The floor was wooden and freshly swept. “We only got two dirt walls now, Will. Next week we’ll pack it all up and move up to Park Avenue and Neil will buy beer by the wagon from the Germans.” Her voice rose an octave.

William just stared at his sister-in-law. He knew better than to say anything now. His head throbbed when her voice started getting shrill. He had felt Erin’s skillet slam against his temple once before, and didn’t want it to happen again.

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Erin spread out her arms and shouted, “You little crumb, I want you out of me sight, you hear!” She jammed a small hand into her apron pocket and threw a handful of pennies at William. They bounced crazily off the walls and table, William dove for them, counting them as quickly as he could. “Go on, get yourself drunk with your brah. Sleep all day tomorrow, maybe you’ll wake up in Gettysburg with a rifle in your hands!” Erin grabbed the pan and beat her brother up the cellar steps, calling “Out out!” after him. The pan nicked him, hard, right at the base of his skull. The world exploded in his face.

Stars. Blood in the mouth. Up or maybe down, but he was moving. He snorted out a faceful of blood and smelled it, thick horse sweat and shit. The horse blew by as William rocked backwards onto the curb. Shite. Almost dead. Almost no lottery, no march, no boots, no lonely meadow down south. Dead on the street, blood and guts dripping off shod hooves. Double shite. William wandered, sun on his shoulders, south. To the Five Points. The city bubbled and waved from the heat.

It was a long walk. William had two pennies; he could have gotten a ride. But somewhere uptown, somewhere in the back of his head, a fat man in a suit with buttons bursting and a watch worth three Williams was going to spin a wheel and make him die. Not the time to be two cents short of three hundred. At Five Points, he might be able to do something. He could wrestle a bear for five, maybe. Or at least spend the week in the ward with a few bites out of him.

*Sorry, Mister Lincoln, I can't be a part of yer lovely war. I got et by a bear.*

Maybe some rich bastard would be there looking for some fun, and get drunk, and faint, and would have just enough money in his roll, and William would find him before any of the footpads did, and take it, and nobody would ask him how we was able to afford to escape conscription. He worked hard. Everyone saw him, everyone knew the Pattens hauled

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more than anyone on the dock. It could work. Maybe. Maybe he'd just get drunk himself instead, though. How long had he been walking? William turned the corner, climbed down and disappeared into the noise and orange light of a basement well.

The public house was subdued because of the table full of bluecoats squeezed in by the back end. William took off his cap and hid his pinched face from them as he trotted towards the line of men seated at the bar. William joined them and blended in, one more mick with baggy pants, pasty skin and freckles.

"Brother," he said as he squeezed in next to Neil.

"Sis chased you out?"

William nodded and dumped all his pennies onto the oak counter. The bartender was a thick German with hands the size of William's head. "Vell, vat vill it be?" he asked William. "You buying for everyone?" Neil smiled and slid all but two of the coins away and into his own pocket. "He'll take a pint," said Neil

"What am I gonna do, brother?" William asked shyly, his eyes anchored on the quartet of Union soldiers at the door. They were playing cards, and with every ante looked about the room. A bushy-haired captain lifted his cap to get a good look at William. He smiled and William spun around on his chair and stared into his beer.

"You're gonna fight."

"Mother of Christ, I can't do that. What's the Union to me? I don't care for coons, anyway. Don't care for them breaking strikes on the dock, don't care for them picking cotton down south."

Neil grinned. "I didn't say you were gonna fight for the Union. But you're gonna fight. We all are." He smiled at William and exchanged winks with the others along the bar. As one, they lifted their pints to their lips.

The last red rays of the sun sneaked into Ahmadi's apartment through the narrow window while he snuggled into his futon. A Ziplock bag full of ice and a crocheted blanket from his grandma joined him for the headache. The blanket was damp from sweat, and the air in the room was hot and dead. He reached out, arm stretching across the narrow room, and tapped the button on his answering machine.

"Hey yo, this is Sammy. Just wanted to see if you got home safe..." Ahmadi frowned. Chelsea. The Village. Freedom flags—the homo rainbow Sammy called them. Queers in leather pants. It was safe with his arm around some guy, comfortable sipping coffee and people-watching, inspiring to even jump in on the occasional ACT-UP demo. Why did that 'phobe in the BMW have to piss in my Cheeri-Os today? Yet one muttered 'fag' from a rawboned accountant from Westchester was still enough to twist in Ahmadi's stomach like a knife.

Then he spotted The Thing. The Thing was, unfortunately for everyone involved in its terrible existence and dusty place under the card table that held the tv and VCR, a butt plug.

It hadn't taken long for Ahmadi to make friends. His floor was still littered with boxes in full bloom with rolled-up newspaper and styrofoam peanuts when they came. A guy in the corner handing out flyers. A smile and a wave at the diner. On line at the dry cleaners (*Fag moment!*). Waiting on the pastel couch in the bright holding pen at the temp agency and good-naturedly arguing over who got to read *In Style* next.

So they visited that Friday, Sammy and Steven and Damon and Peter and Charters (not his real name). Truth or dare? Truth. Who thinks Ahmadi is hot? Hands went up like a third-grade bathroom request. And

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there were presents. Movie passes. Some bud (Ahmadi flushed that afterwards). A scarf (*In summer?* Ahmadi thought. “It’s an all-weather scarf,” Steven explained). A flogger. A butt plug.

Ahmadi didn’t know what to do with it. Say thank you? He tried. “Thank you, very much. Thanks.” He had been more convincing with the scarf. They all stared at him, Sammy sitting on a box with a monkey grin, Charters leaning in the doorwell practicing his boredom, Steven halfway in the fridge, eating rice with his hands. A few grains clung to his cheeks.

So Ahmadi tore off the plastic to admire it more closely.

“Were you planning on using that now?” Sammy asked. Chuckled. Steven quickly stood up and slammed the fridge shut with his hip. The party ended soon after. Ahmadi rolled the little white thing into a corner, too embarrassed to actually think of a place one might keep a butt plug.

More messages. His mama. “Be careful out there, don’t go gettin’ yourself killed. Keep your money in your socks and your wallet in your front pocket. Don’t wear hoods, they can sneak up on you that way. There are men out there just waitin’ for someone like you. I don’t want to have to come up and identify your body in an alley,” she said. Ahmadi chuckled to himself. He already learned that Manhattan didn’t even have alleys. All those *Spider-Man* comics were lying. Mama went on about subways, (“Never!”) and muggers, (“Just give them what they want”) and crossing the street, (“Look both ways, twice. That’s four ways, ‘Madi”). Then she wrapped up with, “Well, so long.”

Other messages. A callback to dance in an off-Broadway show. Or was it? The tinny little queer in the machine actually said, “We would like to call you back in again,” and that was just plain old confusing. They’d like to so they are, so they will, but they can’t? “What the hell?” Ahmadi said to the stuffy air. The machine beeped, cutting that message off mid-sentence before the phone number for the callback. “Shit.”

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Another beep. "I don't care for coons," in a drunken brogue.

Ahmadi's stomach clenched up, his tongue turning into a clump of wood in his mouth.

"Don't care for them breaking strikes on the dock, don't care for them picking cotton down south." Click. Beep.

Ahmadi kicked off his blanket and snatched the answering machine up off the floor. He played the message again; it was distant and over the din of a crowd. "I don't care for coons. Don't care for them breaking strikes on the dock, don't care for them picking cotton down south." Click. Beep.

Ahmadi croaked out, "What the fuck," but his throat was dry and his voice a whisper. He dropped the answering machine and it rang dully against the floor. He erased the message, and decided to pretend that it sounded like Sammy playing a joke on him.

"It is too hot today," Ahmadi said as he walked up to the fridge, opened the door and stared inside to cool down. "This flowah is wiltin'," he told the mustard. After a minute he shut the refrigerator door and unscrewed the cap on his bottle of emergency Bacardi. The floor creaked under his heels. He spun around and shouted "No!" to the empty room. His voice rang against the exposed brick.

Ahmadi felt a ton of cement drying in his stomach and dropped the bottle. Fear in the spine, and it felt like a rope being dragged across his skin. His sweat was cold and clammy now, and even his anus squeezed open and shut. What was outside, something scratching at the door? The phone waited pensively on the floor, waiting to explode with a ring.

"Get a grip, superstar," he said to himself, "Get a grip." Even the walls seemed expectant, like they were just waiting to crumble and let the whole dark world inside. The floor under the crouch creaked as Ahmadi curled back under his blanket. That guy on the machine didn't sound like

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Sammy, so Ahmadi decided to pretend that he had never heard the message at all. Creak. Creak.





**TWO**



## July 12, 1863

William woke up with the sun in his eyes. He jumped to his feet and started mumbling apologies. "I didn't drink that much sis, I don't know what happened, I'm never late, I'm a-sorry..." he babbled in a thicker brogue than usual before slamming head first into Neil's marble slab of a chest.

"Easy boy," the older man said. "We're striking today. No work for us, we're fighting the draft. Put on a shirt, we're going down to Ward II."

William had been to the Lower East Side once, looking for work on the eastern waterfront, and almost passed out trying to work his way through streets full of thick black overcoats, smoked fish and jabbering beards. His ward was usually much better, with wide dirt roads with enough room for two lanes of buggies, but not today. The Chelsea streets were packed shoulder-to-shoulder.

William stuck to Neil's back as the big man cut through the crowds of workers to the edge of the piers. Someone jammed a picket in his hand. William couldn't read it, but he hoisted it in the air and mouthed, "No to the draft, no to Republicanism!" along with the others. He caught a glimpse of Union soldiers unloading a wagon and let the sign drop to his side.

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“Let me tell you boys, we got to depend on each other!” the union boss called out. O’Brien was a hefty man in a threadbare vest. He creaked atop a nailed-together pyramid of soapboxes. William met the man once and got a slap on the back and a faceful of rotten teeth and bad breath. He felt like throwing a rock.

“The Republicans won’t do naught for you! The fat cats on the East Side, why they’re the very ones who send the coons down to do our jobs. The Negroes take fifty cents a day to do a job that everyone knows a decent man needs a buck on the barrel to do!” Two hundred decent men cheered and waved their pickets, demanding their dollar. They only made eighty cents a day, minus four cents for union dues. “But they won’t be sending more of our boys down to Gettysburg when the docks are shut down!” Another cheer. “They won’t be bringing in the darkies when we form our strike teams and patrol the streets!” More cheers and calls for “Captain, captain, captain!” They wanted their strike captains now. “And they won’t have Lincoln sending our boys off to die for them when the Democrats take the White House!” The crowd’s fire sputtered a bit.

William backed away from the group and walked onto the dock, his picket dragging behind him.

Then he felt an itch of sweat crawling between his back and his coarse shirt. His muscles tightened and his face flushed. The Union soldiers stood, watching him.

“Hey mick! Hey mick!” one of them called out. “Give you penny to help us load up.” The soldier waved his hand at the supplies the other bluecoats were hoisting onto a wagon. Behind them, ships rocked slowly in the harbor, wondering if anyone would come to unload them.

William spit and slapped his sign against the wooden pier. “I ain’t no strikebreaker and I ain’t no line crosser! Take off your jacket and we’ll throw down.” Too hot for his clothes, he could feel the blood in his face

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and in his mouth already. He pulled his suspenders from his shoulders stepped up to the taller man.

The soldier just took one heavy step forward and said in a voice like gravel, “Oh no. Just get back behind your picket line, mick. I’ll keep my penny and you’ll keep your teeth.” The soldier’s chest and arms strained against his heavy blue coat. His fists looked like boulders. “But you can use a penny, can’t you?” He chuckled. “How about a dime?”

William flushed still more, his head swimming in the heat of the July day. He nodded though.

“That’s what I thought,” said the soldier. He smiled a bit. “You don’t look like you can buy yourself off the draft rolls. You’ll be getting paid soon enough though, on the front. It ain’t too bad, ’less you get shot. You piss where you like, they got cards and whores. Two pairs of boots, too, though they’ll pinch like the devil.” He looked down at the square leather boots on his feet. “I already lost a toe walking in mine. You get a square a day, a biscuit so hard it’ll chip your teeth. Plenty of chaw though, and you get to see a doctor.” The soldier broke out into a smile and spit tobacco. “Show him!”

From behind the wagon, another soldier hoisted himself up onto the buckboard with his left hand. He waved his right arm, a bloodied stump loosely wrapped in black—once white—bandages, at William. “Morning, O’Whoever,” the second man said with a laugh. “I just got myself the teeniest scratch fighting for the Union. Plumb dumb sawbones took off me whole arm though. You should’ve seen it lad, they stack our arms and legs like cordwood. They smell like pork when they burn. You’ll get yours, soon enough.”

William backed away. “I got a meeting.”

“You got a meeting with your mammy,” the first soldier said, his hands still balled into fists. “Get her to give you a blanket, mick. Haven’t

you heard, there's a draft going round?" William took off in a run, then his throat caught. Something hard; it crushed and pulled him off his feet. He couldn't hear the laughing through the blood swimming in his ears.

---

## The next morning

Fifty push-ups every morning. Ahmadi's arms began to burn at forty, but he did fifty push-ups every morning. At the first push-up, Ahmadi's shoulders felt heavy, like cinder blocks on his back, but he worked through it. Five push-ups were just enough to get his blood flowing. Ten push-ups, and he barely noticed the warps and grains of dust on the tile floor under his palms. Five push-ups were just enough to get his blood flowing. Twenty push-ups, and it just warmed his face. It was only thirty push-ups before the glint of sunlight dancing across his face became an obstacle rather than an annoyance. The apartment looked larger when he kept his eyes trained on the floor anyway.

Fifty push-ups. Today, the phone rang at the height of thirty-six. For a moment, the tension in Ahmadi's arms gave way.

"Hey yo, this is Sammy," said a tinny, ghostly Sammy. "You know, it's rude to screen your calls. What if I was at a pay phone with a knife in my heart and didn't have a quarter to tell you that I loved you before going to Hell?"

Thirty-nine. Ahmadi uncoiled and sprung towards the answering machine, limbs twisting to avoid smacking into the wall or the bed.

"What, you love me?"

"Oh, is this Ahmadi?" Sammy said, swallowing a laugh. "I must have dialed the wrong number. I was trying to call Fucking Idiot Giuliani. We

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have a wop-spic thing going on. Very greasy.” *Greezzy*, he said; the word practically slid.

“How about having breakfast with me instead? You know, someone without ass cancer?”

“Ah, I don’t like grits, Ahmadi,” Sammy said, still giggling.

“Geez, Sam, what are you on today?” Sammy was being funny or maybe cruel, Ahmadi didn’t know. His mouth tasted of buttered sand, a memory.

“Oh, just high on life, as usual. Skipping down the cobblestones, feelin’ groovy. I’m not up for breakfast, though,” Sammy said.

“Well?”

“Well. Well, well, well. Hmm.”

Ahmadi didn’t know what to say. Never did.

“Midtown.”

“What’s there to do in midtown?” Ahmadi asked.

“Touristy stuff, hillbilly. You’ll love it. I’ll get you one of those Statue of Liberty tiaras. Green foam is in this year. My hairdresser told me.”

Ahmadi laughed. “Hey, I’ve been living here for a whole month.”

“Have you been to the Empire State Building yet?”

“Nope, can’t say that I have.”

“Me neither. Meet you in the lobby in an hour.”

Sammy hung up without saying goodbye. The line was dead for a second, but Ahmadi clicked the receiver till he got a beeping dial tone. Voice mail. Checking it, he heard a sputtering choke, the dull roar of a muttering gang.

“Smoked?” a voice asked, almost questioning, but angry.

Then nothing.

Ahmadi didn’t so much yelp in pain as whistle, like a boiler not quite



ready to explode. The Empire State Building loomed above him, the white hot sun seemingly spinning atop the building's antenna.

"Man, you're not supposed to look up," said Sammy's voice in his ear. "People will think you're a tourist, knock you down, and next thing you know, the pigeons are swooping down on you, and eating you like bacon."

"I . . . can't . . . seem . . . to," said Ahmadi through nearly locked jaws, his tongue between his teeth, "move . . . my neck. Crick."

"Crick, crick, hmm." Sammy reached up, grabbed Ahmadi's head in both hands, and yanked.

A brace of tourists ran off like frightened birds.

"Brooklyn, all my life, 'til I left school," Sammy said, over his shoulder to Ahmadi. They were on a short line, stuffed with pale, knobby-legged tourists, all silent as the dead except for the rustling or brochures and stuffed shopping bags. A kid sucked his thumb and looked up at the ceiling of the Empire State Building lobby, his dead eyes following the arc of the miniature reliefs of the building up the sides up the walls. Ahmadi was a head taller than everyone else. *Sure are a lot of bald women, nowadays*, he thought. Then he glanced backwards and saw the man behind him actively flinch. The subtle flinch. The "Eeek, A Nigger Is Looking At Me" flinch. The "Show No Fear, They Can Smell Fear" flinch. Ahmadi felt sick, morning oatmeal spiking back up his throat like a nail. He turned back to Sammy and tried to think of the conversation.

"I thought you said you'd never been here."

The line inched forward. "I haven't. Why would I come to the Empire State Building? Why would I even ever come to midtown? Jesus. There's nothing here."

"Well gee, thanks for inviting me then. I feel so privileged." Ahmadi looked around. "Slow day?" he asked. The line moved again, and the boys

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turned the corner to see . . . another line.

“Never mind.”

They waited for a while, falling into the silence of the procession nearly against their will. Sammy scratched something under his shorts. Ahmadi practiced his Zen impatience technique, counting in his head till he lost count. He did it often, while waiting on line at cattle calls for the privilege of dressing like a daisy or a butler or a singin’, dancin’ street tough, or when waiting for the F Train. It kept people from staring, from sneering, from checking him out, or at least kept him from noticing. But not today. The kid was staring, eyes lolling like he had just been strangled or very late-term aborted. Ahmadi ground his teeth, they squeaked like a fork against a plate.

“Geez, what?” Sammy asked. Ahmadi just frowned.

“I hate lines. I hate waiting for something to happen. I didn’t come to this town to wait on a line just to be picked to see the sun.” His voice was tinted, almost tainted, like a knife full of gray paint dragged across a landscape’s blue sky. Sammy blinked. He thought of something to say.

“Chill out, geez. Think of something else. Every tourist attraction has lines. Letterman, Twin Towers, Rockefeller, Central Park. . . well, not the park.”

“How do you know?” Ahmadi asked. “I thought those places were only for, you know, tourists?”

“Like you?” He smiled.

“No,” Ahmadi said, still annoyed. “Like them.” He nodded towards the thumbsucker who stared back blandly.

“Well, I’ve only been to one tourist attraction in my whole life,” Sammy said.

“Statue Of Liberty?” Ahmadi whispered.

“Almost,” Sammy said. “Kindergarten had a trip. But you had to take

a boat to get there, and then there are all these steps, the teacher said, so I stayed home.”

“You have to take a boat to the Statue Of Liberty?”

Sammy turned around, his face twisted. “You don’t *have* to,” he said, his arms slicing through imaginary waves, “but it *is* on a fucking island. Heh heh.”

Mama’s hands clamped over the kid’s ears. He shook them free and went back to sucking his thumb like a piston.

“Oh.” Another corner, an escalator, then another line, short and packed, between two more velvet ropes. “How many lines are there?”

“Well, eventually we get to use the elevator,” Sammy said. The walls were plain and deadly office building white now.

The crowd pushed in. Ahmadi winced when a pocketbook swung into a bruise on his thigh. “This is taking forever.” They waited like statues.

“Yeah, if we were working today, we’d be late by now. Working men, coming through.” At the other end of the line, elevator doors slid open and an ancient man—ancient was the only word for a man whose chin-flesh hung down lower than his Adam’s apple—lifted an arm and croaked “This way, up to the Observatory.” He wore a red vest and a little boy tie. A walkie-talkie hung off one of his belt loops; it was nearly the size of his hip. Twenty people far ahead on the line squeezed like toothpaste out of the queue and through the elevator doors. The old man stood back, leaving Ahmadi, Sammy and the brace of chirping tourists behind them to wait.

“What, no!” Ahmadi’s lungs called out. It was the lungs, pushing air out, up his bronchial tubes, over his tongue and through his teeth. Ahmadi’s brain was just dully surprised; something else was riding it now. “He’s only one man,” Ahmadi said, loudly, his hands on Sammy’s shoulders and shaking him. His hands. His mouth. Not much else. Ahmadi was

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one foot away, really, looking at his own body, arms akimbo, mouth wide, eyes bulging, sweat pungent like compost.

*Hmm*, he thought. Then he saw himself screaming.

“There’s plenty of room in the elevator, let’s rush him. All of us, we can do it! We don’t have to stand here like dead men. Solidarity! Unite! He’s only one old man, he doesn’t have a gun! Push him aside! Take the elevator! Let’s all take the elevator!”

The people ahead of Ahmadi didn’t even turn around, except for a few of the men, who glanced back and then turned away, looking straight ahead, to wait. Heat and embarrassment poured off their skins like hot wax.

“No!” Ahmadi said. The old man looked right through him. The elevator doors closed.

“What the hell has gotten into you?” Sammy hissed. “Jesus!”

Ahmadi’s eyes rolled back in his head as a wayward burst of sterile air conditioner breeze chilled his sweat. A shiver in July.

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William had vomited again, but didn’t even know it until he smelled it. His back and neck were screwed tight, so tight he couldn’t blink without a sharp, pouring pain sluicing through his spine. He was on his knees, again, again. The soldiers’ laughter was distant somehow, like he was looking at a picture postcard of them, their mouths open, laughter assumed instead of heard, color pictured rather than seen. His fingers were sticky, his legs wet with spittle and little smeared globs of bread. It happened all the time. Too much lifting. At night sometimes he thought he could hear the bones in his neck splinter. He shifted his body at the waist to look behind him. The soldiers had gone back to ignoring him.

Beyond them, not quite still, a troop of masts swayed lightly.

The planks of the pier carried the vibration of footsteps, so William turned again, painfully, legs scrabbling for some hold. He looked up at Neil, and only then noticed Michael, his other brother. The bad boy. Small dark curls clung to his head like moss. He smiled, his teeth great and yellow, and said oh-so-slowly, "Will. Yum. How. Are. Ya." Michael was all simmer, no stew. Erin had thrown him out of the house a year before, for sodomizing some girl on the table. "Eh, she wanted," he kept saying with his sharky smile, and she did, but Michael never understood that Erin was just upset that the table was soiled. He'd been down by Five Points ever since, throwing haymakers, rolling bones and wanking with the boys. He didn't even have to work on the docks anymore, people just gave him money for being Michael, so he said. And he said a lot.

Michael said, "Willie, you worked for Sigler, yeah?"

He nodded, wincing. "Uhrb."

Neil reached down and grabbed William by the arm. Huge fingers, William's bicep small again when they wrapped around them. Up in one clean swing; William could only cough.

"The meetin' let out, we got a job for you," Michael continued. "We're doing it, a strike. All the men, some Germans even. We're not working for a rich man's war." Only Neil's firm grip held William on his feet.

"We're going to Sigler. You know some of the boys there. C'mon then. March!" A sharp push and William was on his way, swaying like he was balanced on a pair of pins.

"We're the swing gang, right? Well, while the rest of the boys make sure the stores and factories shut up and the pub hands over the beer, we're going to Carmine and Gay to hang us a few darkies!" Michael laughed and pushed William off towards the streets.

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“Where’re you going? Hangin’? What for?” William asked, excitement and fear jockeying for position in his voice.

“No,” Michael said with a shake of his head. “Not yet. First we get a little nip—”

“—then two or three more,” someone else called out.

“Then we get ourselves some rope and some darkies. After dark, of course.” He nudged William and laughed. William’s face was stone.

Neil leaned down and whispered, “And brother, if we’re not hanging together on this, you’ll hang separately. Michael is a bit mad, but there’s no room for fairweather types here.”

“Maybe five more nips!” Michael called out.

The E. H. Sigler molding mill was another world. The sky was always gray and water black in puddles around the complex of buildings. Only a few blocks north from the piers of Chelsea, the air was too heavy to breeze, always too hot to comfort. William’s mouth tasted of soot and sawdust, and he remembered nine years ago. Eleven years old, and new to America, he got a job at Sigler’s because middle brother Michael’s hands were too big for the machines. He worked every day for three years, seven cents a day (minus three for being late, minus two for talking out of turn, minus one for not sneezing into a handkerchief. A handkerchief cost nine. Plain ol’ snot rags didn’t count). Even when his brothers spent their days waiting for a stevedore to throw ‘em a bone, William had the job. Till he grew up. Some darkie—Milo—was William’s age and was also going to be let go. Milo pulled off his little finger in a vice and got to stay on the job another year.

William had a finger for ol’ Sigler now.

With every step up the avenue, William’s muscles loosened up. A line of men marched behind him, grabbing stuff. An apple off a cart there, the

skullcap from a Jew here. A broom, a cobblestone for a window. Bottles and a pair of pants from the other side of those windows. A cheese wheel. Striking was hungry work. Newspapers hit the street and rolled with the wind. A wagon wheel spun crazily, its wobblings random like a lottery, while the papermonger scrambled after his change. William's eyes were locked forward. It was the other guys who were messing around.

Better this march uptown than a walk into a wall of musketballs and black smoke.

The shop stewards, black smocks clean of sawdust for once, were waiting by the west side entrance. A sudden wind picked up, the first ever for these characters, and they smiled when it made William's cowlick dance.

"Afternoon Patten."

"H'lo, boys." He walked into the mill. It was already quiet, except for the murmur of three hundred men, and children. Dozens of children. They murmured like jingle bells, or like quietly singing women, William thought.

A sour taste in the throat. Spit on the floor. Sawdust darkens against the tile floor. William was used to spitting on dirt. "Hey!"

"Hey, hey Sigler!" William called out, his voice loud and echoed. Old Man Sigler stuck his head out the door to his office, right over the millstones. He was high up, by the scaffold, where he could see nearly everyone. His mouth opened to say something, but William couldn't hear it.

Sigler was deaf, practically, thanks to long years of millstones and saws and screaming kids howling about the blood and men crying for a penny. It hadn't occurred to him to look out onto the shop floor till he heard the whisper of his name. Nobody was working.

"G'wan bock!" he called out to the workers. Three hundred white faces looked back up at him. A few of the darkies were in a corner, far

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away, watching the others. “G’wan bock!” Sigler yelled again, maybe not as loud as he thought he did, maybe not as clearly. A boy, about nine, rocked on his heels, looking at the floor, and held the rim of his cap with one hand to keep it on his head.

“Sigler!” William called out. Whatever had been poured through his spine before had cooled into iron. “Close your mill, send the boys home. It’s hot today, and we want company!”

The crowd behind William hooted and roared. They kicked up sawdust like foam on waves.

“We’ll take you down if you don’t. You’re only one man! Your finks and goons won’t help ya . . . not for two hundred and ninety-nine dollars.” Laughter. And coughing. Someone lit a newspaper on fire and held it like a torch.

“I’ll fiyah ever one o yeh!” Sigler called out. “I got me smerked irish frim don saath. The niggerzll werk fer harf.”

“Sigler,” William said. “You are a G D S of a B. Of an MF B!” The blacks started moving out the east entrance, far from William, slipping out under Sigler’s scaffold, hugging the wall till they got to the door.

“You want to call a nigger a smoked Irishman, Sigler? We’ll smoke you!” William turned to the boys behind him, and smiled at the torches. Neil had one. A hot splash of bile hit his tongue—there were a lot of people behind him. G D. *Mary in heaven*, he thought, *we could burn this place. We could. They’d never stop us all.*

Sigler stared out at the shift for a long moment. “Mindee. See yinz Mindee. G’wan hoom.” He shut the door to the office.

The streets around Sigler’s mill filled with a parade of sweaty men. William was beginning to feel better: the back of his neck didn’t hurt anymore, his back wasn’t coiled like a spring. He could flip over a fishmonger’s cart and stare at the wheels, and not think of the draft, not have his



teeth chatter with every clicking, whirling revolution. William tried to melt into the crowd and surge downtown with the others, but something caught his eye.



“And all of a minute later, Little Miss Impatient, we’re here,” said Sammy, his arms wide as he walked out onto the observation deck. The crowd, thin, nonetheless gave Ahmadi a wider than usual berth. “So, want to rally the troops and start throwing the tourists over the fence, too?”

Ahmadi muttered something. His head was done, so Sammy couldn’t even guess from reading Ahmadi’s lips. He filled in the empty moment himself. “Here’s something I’ve been practicing for a while, if my career as the world’s first Puerto Rican fag President doesn’t take off. Hey buddy, spare a quarter?” He elbowed Ahmadi and got both a quarter and a quarter of a smile out of him. Ahmadi forked one over and Sammy danced to one of the mounted binoculars, slipped the change in and instantly announced, “Hey, I can see my house from here!”

“Oh, where are you from?” asked an older woman at the next viewer. She offered a toothy, yellow smile. “Show me where.”

“A great little neighborhood called Riker’s Island. Very exclusive, donchanoo?” Sammy smiled at the back of the woman’s head as she spun around.

Ahmadi shuffled up behind Sammy, head still lowered. A bead of sweat rolled off his nose and stained the floor. “Meh.”

“Meh?”

Ahmadi mumbled something else, something less comprehensible than *meh*.

“So, Meh, come look. I’ll give you a tour of Manhattan.” He spun the

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binoculars, “Lower East Side, where the spics live.” Ahmadi peeked in and *mrpphed*.

“See, first there were the kikes. Well, actually first there were Indians. Then little Dutch boys landed and the Indians became drunken injuns. Then the limeys moved in, then the micks, then the kikes and then the wops,” Sammy said, “The wops moved over there”—he shifted the viewer a bit to the right, towards what he guessed might show Ahmadi Little Italy, “but now that’s all chinks and gooks. Anyway, the kikes—” he shifted the viewer back to the left and palmed the back of Ahmadi’s head to move it along too—“used to live there, but then the first spics started showing up, so they all moved away.

“Anyway, that is when a little *chulito* named Sammy grew up and heard that Chelsea was full of fags.” Sammy spun the viewer again, and Ahmadi had to laugh from the tickle of fingers wrapped around the curve of his skull.

“So, I had to commute up to the West Side. And it was true, in the old days anyway. You could go down to the piers and there weren’t any cops, there weren’t any shops of bullshit. Just trucks and cars and guys. They were everywhere. Guys eating cock after cock. Guys naked and fucking in cars. Old fat men holding their dicks and looking around, their shirts open and big-ass tighty whiteys wedged up their cracks. Twelve year-olds with cum on their face like Twinkie crème, know what I’m saying. It was a whole sea of fags, all jerking and sucking and fucking. Quick, quick, like an assembly line, first one cock or ass, then the other, and another, and another. If someone even said ‘hey, how’s it going’ you were like ‘wow, I’d go home with this guy, I don’t care what he looks like.’ Nobody even talked to each other, it was just fucking or watching and jerking off. Now people just fucking drink at the piers. I tell you, white people moving into the neighborhood ruins everything.”

“Do you think you could stop saying . . .” Ahmadi stopped, his quiet voice just fading away. He couldn’t decide whether his embarrassment comprised a fag moment or a breeder moment, and that embarrassed him even more.

“Stop saying . . .”

“You know?”

“Cock? Do you mean cock? Where? Where?” Sammy dived back towards the binoculars, shouldered Ahmadi out of the way, and started rotating it back and forth wildly, looking for cock along the skyline.

The old woman, no longer smiling, leaned over to Ahmadi. “I guess he can’t stop saying cock after all,” she offered, her voice nasty as a crow.

“Hey buddy, spare a quarter?” Ahmadi had one, but just slid into position by the binoculars rather than give it to Sammy. “How about some cock then?” Sammy asked.

Ahmadi changed the subject, the face of the binoculars hiding his smile. “Hey, I can see my house from here.”

“That’s the spirit!” Sammy let go. “There, feel better? Heh.”

“I dunno,” Ahmadi said, still hunched over the viewer, “I just didn’t feel like waiting on line. Things have been fucked up lately.” Quiet, for a second. “Say, where do the Negroes live?”

“Ah, we’d need another quarter to look uptown, and you’d have to look over the head of the honkies,” Sammy said.

“Yeah, honkies.” Pigeon noises. Wind. Footsteps here and there. “White people got off easy when God was handing out slurs. Honky sounds almost friendly.”

“And cracker! Cracker sounds tasty.”

With a heavy clink the binoculars’ shutters snapped shut. “Now what?” Ahmadi asked, blandly. “How about lunch?”

And Sammy screamed “Lunch!” and lunged for the nearest pigeon.

Milo held up his hand. Four long fingers and a stub of a thumb.

“Billy,” he said, softly. William couldn’t hear him over the noise of the strike, but he could see his name on Milo’s lips easily enough. And he could see that Milo’s thumb still wasn’t.

“Billy.”

William shouldered his way through the people on the street, ducking, then jutting forward, then taking three steps back, then pushing towards Milo again. A thick hand clamped on his shoulder, “Billy boy!” It was Michael. “Where ya goin’?”

William shook his head. Nowhere. Nowhere. “We ain’t but started Will, there’s more to do. Nobody’s working in downtown today.” Michael glanced over at Milo and the few other blacks who stood near the gates of Sigler’s. “Fuck those niggers, Will, they’re just strikebreakers. And when they’re not strikebreakers, they’re slaves. Let’s go.”

They went. They went east and saw a column of good men, led by Fitzsimmons, walking from the Franklin Forge. The Fitzsimmons group didn’t even need torches, they were all big men, marching tall and occasionally singing and swinging one another around, arms linked together like chains.

William smiled; he felt like he had freed them all, too. Sigler was a spark, and now the strike was spreading, and that meant that William was the king. The King Of New York, only half as rich and twice as mean. Maybe the whole city would secede and make their own little country, an island thin as an upturned finger to the Union, the Rebels, England, the whole world. Williamania.

They went to the liquor store, William and Neil and Michael.

## Nick Mamatas

Michael cut eye slits in black rags and sneaked up behind William, wrapped the cloth about his head and pushed a whistle into his mouth. “Arch!” And then they marched to Merry’s liquor shop. Michael kicked the door open and waved a big hello.

“Boys,” said Merry, already defeated. His head was huge, William thought, like some giant, worried egg. A peasant having to pay taxes. King William Hood of New York, taking from the rich to give to the poor—himself. He was thirsty anyway.

“We’ll be performin’ ya a song now,” Michael said. William blew into his whistle, and Neil clapped his hands. Michael belted out a tune, half-nonsense, half *I love my little Merry he’s a very fine man, canna hear him complainin’ over my huge din, rattle the cupboards and band on a pan la la la biddie bo bah, how about a drink.*

When Merry didn’t move, Michael added, “We’ll burn this GD store to the ground. Heh.” Neil held his hands apart, as if he had just lost his clap. William could have sworn he heard Neil’s eyes move in their sockets, to look at Michael. William didn’t know what to do either, accept to open his arms and take what Merry offered. Wines and gins, big armloads of clanking bottles. Michael had sacks in his pants and pulled them out now and helped himself. Neil too. Other men slipped in and started passing out bottles like a bucket brigade. William turned and saw a huge wagon, pulled by a team of six. On the side were letters he didn’t know by sight, but only by prior experience. The firemen were here. The Black Joke Engine Company had joined the fight. In the distance, the city began to burn.

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“So, you got a prank call?” Sammy asked, his mouth crammed with pizza.

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He chewed messily. Ahmadi was reminded of the mouse he'd found on a glue pad the day after he moved in. It was chewing its own leg off and squealing; Ahmadi had spent half an hour listening to steam pipes, double-checking his TV and then rapping on the walls before he found the little bugger in the corner, bloody and shaking—but it had been a neater eater than Sammy.

"No, not a prank. I mean, it was a racist threat or something. He called me a coon, it was very racial. Maybe I have a stalker. How else would he know I'm black?"

Sammy shrugged, "Your name is Ahmadi Jenkins. You probably put your name next to the buzzer in the lobby too, right?"

Ahmadi nodded and said, "Yes, of course. Is that bad?"

"You like crazy people calling you on the phone?"

"But how did they get—" Ahmadi stopped, realizing how easy it is to get a number, given a name. "Hmm. But why me?" Ahmadi walked into the street and slammed into Sammy's outstretched arm. Rush of wind and gravel and steel and exhaust.

"Uhm. . ." For a long moment, Ahmadi just breathed, dramatically, half fear-half affection. Sammy was touching him.

"Watch it, 'Madi," Sammy said. "If the cars don't get you, the pigeons will. Trip at the wrong time and they'll descend like piranha!" He laughed to himself, a little *heh heh heh*. Sammy did that a lot. Ahmadi liked how Sammy said piranha. A rolling r, a sharp an, and an *haitch! Very conquistador*.

"I'm worried, Sammy. I don't know if I'm cut out for this town," Ahmadi said. He hopped over a stream of dirty water and onto the curb. Sammy splashed through it and tossed a chewed and twisted pizza crust over his shoulder.

"Don't worry, beautiful, I gotta plan to toughen you up." He slapped Ahmadi hard on the back. Palm. Slap. Right on the bruise.

In the distance, a flight of pigeons descended on the pizza crust and tore it to individual molecules. “Toughen me up?” Ahmadi’s voice trailed and the pair slipped around the corner and headed towards the apartment.

Ahmadi’s ass was on fire. His wrists dripped sweat under the rough nylon rope. A draft, then the hard smack of the paddle made his thighs quake, sent a punch of pain up his spine.

“Twenty-six, Sir. Thank you.” Sammy reached around and tugged lightly on Ahmadi’s cock. The rubber bands were still tight around his balls, but he could barely feel them anymore. His ass cheeks felt huge though, like Sammy had glued a burning ottoman to his back. He had to laugh at the image of his own grandmother’s footrest sticking out of his butt. Sammy squeezed his scrotum till Ahmadi choked down a chuckle.

“What’s so funny, bitchcakes?” Sammy asked, as conversationally as one could with to a man bent over a bed, with legs and wrists bound together. *Heh heh!*

*Well, bitchcakes was pretty funny*, Sir was favored in the early running, but a most compliant “Nothing, Sir,” that Ahmadi finally elected as the answer wasn’t a very good answer either. A finger, greased with preternaturally cold Tiger Balm pushed into Ahmad’s asshole. He hoped the butt plug was still hidden under a dust bunny. Sammy wasn’t the type to be perfectly conscientious about washing toys. Did butt plugs melt in an autoclave? Hell, did they fit in an autoclave? Ahmadi almost laughed again; he shook like a raindrop off a window.

“Nothing was funny. Well, I find this pretty funny,” Sammy said, his voice hard. Ahmadi wondered what sort of expression Sammy wore right now. He guessed a smile. Maybe not though. Maybe a street thug sneer. Maybe a Hollywood street thug sneer. Maybe what some journalist might call a Hollywood street thug sneer, even if unable to place any particular film with a street thug in it. Ahmadi’s cock tugged all by itself. From with-

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in. Cosmic, almost. Then another blow from the paddle slammed into Ahmadi's flesh. It bubbled with blood and that inside fire. Ahmadi could taste dick in his empty mouth. He decided to make some noises, to please Sammy. "Uhn. Uhn. Mmm." *Guys like mmm*, he thought.

"Maybe you'll like the whip better than the paddle. I think that'll be pretty funny, wouldn't you . . . boy?" Sammy stammered a bit, the sexual politics of calling a black man 'boy' while holding a whip over him made the word unwieldy, like it was, oh, a squirrel that had to be spit out of his mouth.

Ahmadi heard the whistle of wind and then his CDs clatter to the floor. "Ah, motherfuck, shit," Sammy muttered. Ahmadi had to laugh, and felt a CD jewel box sloppily smack against his thigh. "That's enough out of you, slaveboy!"

"My apologies, Sir. Thank you, Sir."

For a long time, it seemed, Ahmadi waited. There was a bit of noise in the corner. The sweat on Ahmadi's belly cooled. He wondered, would he be a house nigger or a field nigger, if he was a slave. Could he pull off the knickers and silk stockings? The work outside, perspiration hot and boiling, not cool like now. Could he fuck people in the slave shacks? Shitting in a hole. What did slaves eat?

It would be a world without Diet Coke.

Ahmadi was sure he'd die in a week. If it wasn't the Coke, it would be when they finally locked him in the room with some fat woman slave. She'd open her legs and show off a fat, hairy twat. It would be like fucking a canned ham. He wouldn't be able to get it up. What would overseers do in that situation? Cut off his balls. Kill him. Jerk him off and smear the cum in the woman's pussy with a rag. Just get somebody else and send him back out to pick cotton.

*Why the fuck am I even thinking about this?*



Then the whip started falling again. Ahmadi choked out a single “Thank you” but then bit deep into his tongue. Leather wrote a novel on his back, he could feel the sweat, not blood, burning, boiling off his skin. Smell it like melting copper in the air. Wild, the whip wrapped around his neck, then slid off, taking skin with it. It bounced off the back of his skull, slapped his ass, ripped open his thighs. What was the word? What was the motherfucking word! He heard someone crying, “Stop, stop! Fuck no, stop!” It was his own voice, but a room away, or in a shoebox or something. The word!

“Sweet potato . . .” Ahmadi coughed out finally. He dribbled blood from his chin. “Sweet potato.” The safeword. Sweet fucking potato. It stopped raining whip, but Ahmadi just wanted to shut off his brain and die. The ropes cut deep into his wrists and ankles. His ass was lubed with blood oozing down his back into his crack. Then the little man inside Ahmadi’s skull leaned over, pulled hard on a cobweb-covered switch on the wall, and turned off Ahmadi’s brain.

**THREE**



## July 12, 1863

A hallway. The city wasn't nothing but a hallway now. William had been in a hallway once, down at the Five Points, when he sneaked out to visit Michael. Three gangs of men, maybe 60 or 70 of 'em, lived in three rooms. The floor was a deep and crooked scoop of wooden planks, like the bottom of a basket. They had a hallway though, full of piss puddles and men, packed against the walls, pushing past one another with shoulders and curses. Neil and Erin didn't like it when he visited Michael. He hadn't liked it much better. The streets were that crowded now, and hot. If he wasn't sweating too much, he'd not be able to squeeze through the men. William wondered if he could make a joke of it or something: *"Twas so crowd - ed my feet dint touch the ground.* It wasn't that funny, he decided.

William wanted to go home. But he had a goal. Three hundred goals. People were drunk, or running, or just crying on the corners now. Some of them had money and distraction to spare. A note here, a coin there, something to sell downtown or over the river in Brooklyn, and he'd pay off the lottery. William would be safe, and these bloody streets would be empty, thanks to all the men about to turn up a dollar short and a day early for the draft.

Then he felt the eye of God upon him, looking down from the vaulted sky. He craned his neck, pushing past the stiff hissing of his muscle and the clicking of nerve and bone and looked up. Not a bird, not a cloud. The Lord was up there, free, waiting, watching the world and sitting in judgment. Not just the judgment of war either. Maybe God did care about the niggers; He sure didn't seem to. Maybe God cared about William. He didn't seem to give two farts about him either, but what if? What if? Hell is worse than war. War ends, one way or another. Hell is more crowded than a hallway or 9th Avenue, bloodier than war. Everything burns, not just gangrene and shattered arms and legs.

William just wanted to scream "Sweet Jesus, save me!" but he didn't. His lungs were empty, his chest squeezed tight by the sea of men he was drowning in. William couldn't reach out to pick a pocket if he wanted to—even if a purloined note wasn't a steerage class ticket to Hell's gate.

William pushed hard against the crowd, trying to ease out onto the sidewalk, like a drop of water going the wrong way down the drain. Shove. Elbows into ribs. Forearms smacked together, or against a ripe melon of a head. Slide, sweat and cheeks across wool shirts, hard bone buttons. The simmering streets were reaching a boil. Michael said he smelled a riot just before, just before William found himself packed like salt pork and separated from his brothers and his friends. There were no faces he knew on the streets, but they were all familiar. Round and Irish. Scowling like Erin as she hustled Neil to church. Eyes blazing like his own. Crooked, twitching little smiles peppered the crowd. They were the Germans. They seemed scared, William decided. Then he wondered if he wasn't part German, because everyone else seemed to know what was going to happen but him.

Suddenly—cooler air, the buzz of empty space about William's head; he's free. One step forward, snag. A breeze across his arse cheeks.

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*Jesus.*

The back of his pants were gone, torn somehow. William traced the hole with his finger, it was too smooth, not jagged like a rip should be. Someone had sliced the back of his pants open and took his pockets. His coins.

A darkie, slipping through the crowd like oil through gears, waved William's pants like a flag and rushed away. William took off after him, slamming into people, bouncing and stumbling and coming back up, red faced and steaming. Nobody was bothering to tackle or trip or even look at a single nigger, they had more important things to do, like make obstacles for William, like strike by doing nothing in the streets like lazy SOBs.

The chase was a long one, and the darkie didn't even know he was in it. William sprinted behind him, shouting, waving his arms and bulling through the crowds. The spaces the darkie squeezed between with ease slammed shut for William. He bounced off person after stinking, sweaty person, pulled his feet free from ankle-deep mud and shit and spilled garbage, lost the darkie, then found him again. The pocket, like a flag, fluttered above it all, held aloft by a thin and swaying brown arm threading through the riot.

William almost had him. His pocket was only three or four people away—a curse and a leap and outstretched arms would have done it—but a surge of men, howling like women for fire and Jesus, slammed into William and carried him half a block. Behind them, fire ate a building with a healthy, belching roar. William tumbled and rolled through a forest of legs, not caring who tumbled across his back. Boot to the face, then a knee, more mud, a hard crushing foot slammed on his ankle; another just missed taking his fingers off. He squirmed through the mass and thought he saw the nigger he was chasing. Into the street, but just a step, then the wagons were there like laughing walls. The Black Joke Engine

Company had arrived, not to put out the fires, but to chase the crowds away and watch New York burn.

“You, go!” one of the firemen shouted, not just at William, but at all the people already running west. William’s face was hot, not flushed, the dry heat of an oven. He pushed between two wagons and watched the firemen take out axes and start chopping away at a pair of telegraph poles on the corner. The ground wasn’t muddy anymore, but hard and steaming like rain clouds were rolling in from the sewers, or from hell. Someone called out *timber* and sparks escaped flailing wires. A pole fell hard through the crackling frame of a building on fire, collapsing it with a burst of hot wind. The sweat on William’s eyebrows sizzled and the world swam and rippled before him. He ran again, who knew in what direction, following the path of least resistance, following the crowds.

They parted for him now, a little bit, or just broke into clusters to topple a telegraph pole here, to pull up rail tracks with crowbars there, to corner a Republican or a Negro and beat them in a secluded corner. Blood thicker than water, the fires dried the mud but small red lakes and pinkish streaks bubbled on the streets. William rained sweat and breathed cinders. Little air, all of it hot; his head swam and then contracted into a black dot of buzzing semiconsciousness.

And then he was someplace else. Cool air, from the west, breezed not past him, but through him. Roar, but not fire, almost locomotive. The streets rumbled.

*The darkie!*

William floated after him, slipping between cars, ducking behind a video game chained to a lonely bodega, scattering pigeons, losing him, and then running again and flowing through cars and chain link fences and street basketball games when he spotted a blur of brown skin. Like a shadow near sunset, William spilled over the streets, reaching, stretching

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so far he nearly faded. There sure are a lot of niggers on the street, William thought. And thought solidified him, for a moment.

The city was different now. Streets of flat black tar, like the base of a skillet, not cobblestone or mud. The smell, it almost smelled like a hill back home across the sea, with a little soot, a little piss; but the only nasty fumes were coming from him, his drenched skin and heavy, wet shirt, his sweating crotch, the dirt and soot on his forearms and face. William could taste it in his mouth. He wanted to lick the street, it looked so black and clean, like polish, like licorice.

The men were tall and healthy, most of them, but for a cringing, shuffling few—Indians, Latins, what? Shirts with no sleeves, and they were so tall, muscled, like statues, not like workers. Women too, a few of them, with black glasses, maybe masks—*How can they see?*—and hair like little boys, dressed like men. They didn't really fool anyone though, William could see they were girls easy, their busoms were everywhere, like giant ostrich eggs under blouses or even men's shirts. Heaven, died and in heaven. William was pleased to think that heaven at least still smelled a little like piss.

And the niggers, as tall as the whites, with thick arms and clean clothes, walking the same street, heads high. A knot of them moved up the street and through William—he didn't have time to get out of the way. He turned and watched them. None was the man who picked his pocket. They commanded the street; one white fellow even moved out of the way, pulling a little white dog with him, to let the niggers—the niggers who didn't even notice him—pass by. Niggers go to heaven. Niggers go to GD heaven. And there weren't any of his people, not anyone he knew, no mah or dah nor poor lost Kathleen. Not even any St. Peter or Jesus, just some handsome white men and angel whore boy-girls and niggers tromping through this city like they were kings.



Nick Mamatas

“Niggers go to fucking heaven!” William shouted, not caring if he cursed right under God’s nose. He ran up the street he remembered, Greenwich Avenue. Towards the docks. Towards home. Some of the buildings he remembered were still there. He spotted a familiar cornice, then another well-known turn of road. But the riots were gone; most of everything that was his life had been washed away. And replaced by boy-girls and niggers. Niggers in a perfect heaven. Nigger heaven has food on every corner. Nigger heaven doesn’t smell like sweat and shit. Nigger heaven has magic locomotives. But there were no micks in nigger heaven, no boats just offshore in nigger heaven’s own Hudson River, no smoking mills or festival riot. Even the sun was brighter here, as it sank under the brownish-blue stretch of water.

William kept running. He flowed through bricks and mortar and flew across tiny, startled apartments, all previously scrubbed clean of ghosts by the buzz of televisions and the rumble of pipes and toilets. Then he was home, hovering above the basement entrance of the rooms he shared with Neil and Erin, an entrance now concrete instead of crooked wood and packed mud. The day collapsed into twilight behind him.

Then a nigger walked out the door, took the steps slowly with a wince, brushed through William like fingers through bangs and whistled his way down the street.

*Well, ain’t that a black joke.*

William curled up into himself and cried.

The night grew cold and thick with smoke again. Slowly, William’s weight and substance returned. New York returned to him, the way he knew it. His knees sunk into the mud. The rattle of wheels over distant cobblestone replaced the damned growl and hum of the cars. The world smelled like shit again. Mosquito drew blood. Then another.

It was Milo who found him the next morning, with Neil trailing

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behind like a hungry puppy. William knew Milo from the incomplete grip on his arm—he didn't look up. William opened his eyes and saw Neil's shoes, square and scuffed and covered in soot.

"Billy, we been lookin' for yer a day anna night," Neil said. Drunk. Solemn. Church bells rang, deep and hollow, in the distance. The firemen were still burning the city.

"Gotta tell 'em, Neil. Gotta go tell Michael, tell 'em all," William said. "This is all hopeless. There's nothing left to fight for. Ain't no one left to hurt, but us." It was too hot to sob—the tears would have boiled on his flushed cheeks.

Milo opened his mouth to speak, but found William's fist in it, hard as a rock. Milo fell hard and William's feet fell hard on his face. Neil reached for his brother, tentatively, but was knocked back. He staggered and had himself a seat on the ground and watched the blur of his brother tear through the black fellow who spent the last eighteen hours helping to find William. *Oh Mary*, Neil thought—a thought a bit bleary around the edges—*this riot is going out of control*. He burped, and like it was a bell sounding, William climbed off Milo. William's knuckles were bleeding. Milo's everything else was bleeding too.

William said, "We're already going to hell, Neil. I just saw a little heaven and there ain't nothin' for us there. I'm gonna go out and fight, the hard way, with Michael, take it to the darkies. You in?"

Neil just stared, eyes cracked blood red. "I just . . . I'm . . . home. Go home," he said, finally.

William spit and walked off, stepping on, rather than over, Milo. Neil watched him go, noting the bare ass where William's pocket once was. Over Neil's shoulders, low red streams of sunlight came from the east.

## The day before yesterday

A few cigarettes and one old weepy on American Movie Classics later, Ahmadi was calm enough to take a shower. He spent ten minutes looking over his naked body in the mirror. The bump on his head must be a concussion, he decided, since he was receiving phone messages from phantom racists and letting people beat on him. He had another ripe bruise on his stomach and three yellow ones on his right arm from when a cop walked over him to swat that kid like a fly. It was Ahmadi's back that was in the worst shape though—the pain flowed down his skin, like sheets of rain. Almost, but not quite, a comfortable heat.

Ahmadi spun on his heels and stood up straight, craning his neck to look at his profile. Abs tight, butt pronounced, unit neatly packaged, elbow scabbing over, skin brown like caramel, some hair dye dripping down the back of his neck. Not quite an Adonis, but good enough for Sammy or off-Broadway, at least after the bruises cleared up. He briefly considered the emergency room but thought the better of paying three hundred dollars he didn't even have yet to hear some resident say, "Yeah, you have a concussion. Go home and try not to die in your sleep."

He didn't even want to think about his back, or his ass. Sammy had left early, too early, as Ahmadi hadn't even regained consciousness yet. He woke up, his wrists burning but untied, the nylon rope neatly coiled over his answering machine speaker, the only uncluttered surface in the apartment. Sammy listened to the safeword, maybe too well.

Ahmadi winced his way through a hot shower, found a few more bruises the hard way, then slipped on a pink mesh tanktop and shorts for a night out.

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First, the ATM on the corner. Two glances, one over each shoulder, then he hit his PIN. Balance check. Ahmadi was dizzy from the beating he took.

\$0.08.

Poor till Friday. Fuck. The first week he had hit the city and started temping, someone at Sloan sent in a slip or pressed a button on Wednesday instead of Thursday. Three hundred bucks hit his account one day early. Four-day weekend on three days work. Every Thursday since then, Ahmadi came down to the ATM on the corner and checked to see if his money came in early. Not this time.

He prowled past some kids in leather jackets and walked through the cloud of sickly-sweet ganga smoke; dodged a guy walking his little white moptop dog—the guy skittered faster than the dog, thanks to Fear of Negro—and crossed the street. On the corner, Ahmadi stopped. The nausea of high school crawled its way up his esophagus again.

He was going to pier, like every Friday, but this Friday, he stopped, chilled by an odd, acrid draft. A foot on his grave. A young face, white, too pale to be porcelain. Staring, in mute rage. Smoke stuck in Ahmadi's throat like a lump of coal. He knew that face. Not Fear of Negro. Niggerhate, bleached white like bones. The face was stitched together from old sneering rednecks, dull-eyed casting agents, sighing shop owners, gleeful, ham-fisted TV cops. Right on the suddenly empty street, staring through Ahmadi. Staring at home.

Too haunted, Ahmadi searched for something else, another dusty, shameful sensation—something to take the place of staring in a ghost's eye. Cue the ripple dissolve. High school flashback time.

High school. An ammonia-polished cafetorium. A dance, maybe. Not the prom—too informal, too many kids in sweaters or tea-length skirts. Ahmadi, by the door, then darting across the dance floor to the refresh-

ment stand, weaving between dancing couples, just so he could say he'd been on the floor. He danced plenty, in the garage at home, down at a bar named Secrets, but God, not at school, not where dozens of appraising eyes followed his every move.

He nursed a punch, then a second and a third, quickly said "Hi" to some people who acknowledged him, and was cornered by a teacher. Mister Niedzviecki. English. Fag subject, of course. And that night, the fag subject was Ahmadi, as usual.

*Going to ask a girl to dance, aren't we Monty?* Ahmadi and Mister Niedzviecki had already danced before, in a parking lot. A demanded dance with a girl. The coy mispronounced or misremembered name. Little black jokes on a little black kid. During last week's handjob Ahmadi couldn't manage to say Niedzviecki while he came. He tried Neddy instead, and the teacher found it coy, amusing. Now they both had to play it straight.

Ahmadi took a step forward, away from the punchbowl. He wanted to slide in, to take a part of the music, the energy, and gulp it down like Kool-Aid. *Oooooh yeeeeeaaah!* he thought. He wanted to dance with the soccer team, and make them kick their legs high. A fucking joke, of course. But not one as distasteful as dancing with a girl. One had even asked him to dance, earlier than night, probably just to provoke her chaperone parents into cutting eye slits into their sheets.

So Ahmadi sighed and watched his classmates couple and uncouple, bunch together and disperse, line up like little Nazis and swagger down the length of the gym like they were competing for cake, for four hours. He didn't move. He imagined his shadow burned into the floor, like a gaping retard on the wrong street corner when the ICBMs started to fly. He'd be dust and a pair of dark footprints. Everyone else would dance around them, hop into his ghost of a place, and do the hokey-pokey, or a waltz,

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using where he stood like his hole of a life was theirs to live.

Ahmadi clenched his drink tightly and wished it was his own throat. If he was just stronger, he could crush his own windpipe, right in the corner, and fall over, his neck blackened like overripe fruit. The music would warp to a stop, the lights would go up and Neddy would gasp like a woman.

Ahamdi would get a second picture in the yearbook, under 'In Memoriam.' The thought made him feel better.

When the house lights went on, he raised his hand to his mouth and took a sip of punch. It was dusty, warm and sour, like a gulp of piss-tainted Manhattan air in July a decade of term papers, dance steps and shit jobs later. Cue ripple dissolve. Ahmadi spit on the street (*breeder moment!*), lit a cigarette, and walked on.

The talk on the pier was subdued. The light of a full moon cast the sky as a glowing twilight gray rather than midnight blue. Ahmadi could hear the Hudson lapping up against the island of Manhattan. He caught another lungful of pot, not nearly enough for even a contact high, but enough to remind him of the happy day when he last smoked up. Tobacco tasted like a mouthful of Mexican water in comparison. He dropped the cigarette and let it smolder. Ahmadi stopped. He never let ciggies smolder, he always compulsively stomped them out so they wouldn't magically burn down every brick and concrete building on the block. The butt looked up at him with a little red emberly smile. Toe up, heel down, ready to crush it. *Time for a change*, Ahmadi thought, and he moved on, half-listening for a movie-style triple explosion.

The pier. Sammy spotted him and waved him over to meet a few guys. Ahmadi froze for a moment again, unsure. The welts on his back stung like gossipy mouths. Was he going to be yelled at? Laughed at? Invited to

take another beating? One way to find out. *Welcome to New York*, he thought. *Fuck me or kiss me, who can tell?*

Sammy gave Ahmadi a hug and a surprisingly hard kiss with what Ahmadi liked to think of as a guest appearance by the tongue. “How’s your head, girl?” Sammy asked teasingly, with a palm brushing Ahmadi’s crotch. For a moment, Ahmadi just wanted to cave Sammy’s head in with one brute-knuckled fist. *Fucker*, he thought, *leaving me, fucker fucker fucker*. But the crowd was still eyeing him, only half friendly. Anger bad. Misstep bad. Big city lonely. Ahmadi regressed to a simple fourth grade playground logic. Play along. Be calm, like a folded napkin on a nice lap. That odd little image made him chuckle and gave him the power to act normal for a few seconds.

Ahmadi winced at his bruise, “Bad, I think. Tried hard to get some sleep, but I was feeling restless.” And the studio walls had been closing in on him. His tv wasn’t loud enough to hide every bump, groaning hot-water pipe and muffled grunt from the other apartments. He didn’t want to be there if the phone rang again. Not alone. Not with his hands free. The others crowded closer to examine Ahmadi’s black and blue badges of courage from the demo. So what if most of them were from Sammy’s half-assed domming? Sammy sure as hell wasn’t going to tell anyone.

“Those fucking pigs,” one of the men said, affecting a little hissy-fit voice. “I’d love to shove it right up their asses!” He slammed his fist into his palm for emphasis and peered at Ahmadi from under the rims of his sunglasses. It was Steven, and it took Ahmadi a second to recognize him without a scarf.

“How the heck can you see, wearing sunglasses at night?” Ahmadi took Sammy’s forty and steeled himself with a huge gulp.

“I am not here to see, brother—I am here to be seen.” Steven wore

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neon green pants and a tight yellow top, with an enormous leather jacket over it, and he twisted his limbs into a little vogue pose. More a central casting moment than a fag moment.

“With those clothes, it looks like you’re here to guide the boats into the harbor.” They all laughed.

“Why weren’t you at the demo the other day, Steven?” Sammy asked the day-glo man. “We could have used someone to blind the cops.” Sammy’s attention was on Steven, but his arm snaked around Ahmadi’s waste, proprietarily, and about as subtly as a branding iron being pushed into a cow.

Steven just shrugged and said, “Sounded like it would be a disaster to me. The cops can pen us in too easily on Gay Street. They do it all the time. God knows why they keep holding the demos there. The name doesn’t mean anything.”

“What, why not?” asked Ahmadi.

Steven grinned. “What, did you think the mayor named a whole entire street after us? Gay was an old-fashioned term for a free black in the Civil War days,” he explained. Then he did a pirouette, “Probably because they were so happy and gay to be away from some cruel overlord with a whip.” He winked at Sammy, “You wouldn’t know anything about being happy about that though, would you?” Sammy chuckled and Ahmadi stepped forward and said, “I don’t even want to hear about that kind of stuff, guys.” He offered Steven an I-will-punch-the-meat-sauce-out-of-your-head smile and danced out of the tight knot of people, and drifted towards the edge of the pier. Then his eye caught something. Ahmadi’s limbs went numb, peppered with the feel of a thousand cool needles.

A drag queen barreled down the dock, whooping and waving her thick, ropy arms. Her dress was torn, plain and flapping like a dozen bro-



ken wings, and she wore an old straw hat, one that performed the miracle of staying on her head with every step. The world around her rippled and dissolved into a foggy tunnel as she made a beeline towards Ahmadi and bowled him over. Ahmadi saw a white flash of light and smelled wood and rope as his head slammed hard against the deck. A splash rang in his ears and he scrambled to his feet, bulled past Sammy and Steven and with a deep breath, jumped off the pier and into the river.

Hitting the Hudson River, even in July, was like slamming into a hill full of crushed ice. Ahmadi exhaled as he hit the water and swallowed some of the liquid shit. It was dark, but he could see the drag queen splashing about and shouting. Above him, on the dock, he heard a din of complaints, hollered questions and dropped beer bottles shattering against the dock. Ahmadi swam towards the queen and tried to wrap her up in his arms.

“Hey, take it easy, you’ll drown us both. Let me get you back to the pier.” The man’s hat fell off and Ahmadi saw his face for the first time. It was black as a shoe and worn deep with wrinkles. His eyes were huge and yellow, most of his teeth were gone and his skin felt like splintering wood.

“No no, gotta go. This is my wife’s dress. I ain’t crazy, I’m gonna swim to Jersey!” the man said, gasping as his head sunk below the water. Behind Ahmadi, a few more splashes hit the river.

Ahmadi struggled to drag the man back to the surface, “What, why? Jesus fuck, just swim!” And Ahmadi tried to swim, though an arm and two legs were tangled up in the drag queen’s wet dress.

“Why, why, ain’t you seen! They gone plum crazy!” The man stared into Ahmadi’s eyes and whispered, “They got a hanging tree. They gotta branch for me, and the got one for you too. Now let me go. They don’t lynch no women, and they ain’t lynching nobody in Jersey. They got a hanging tree!” The drag queen wrapped his arms around Ahmadi’s shoul-

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ders and went limp.

Ahmadi felt clammy hands pulling him away. “Madi Madi,” Sammy’s voice rang out, “What’s with you man, you’re fucking nuts.” With Sammy’s thin arm around his shoulders, Ahmadi’s tunnel vision cleared. He let go of the grip he had on an old wooden stump from the old piers and fell limp in his friend’s arms. “This is no time for a swim,” Sammy reminded him.

“They have a hanging tree,” Ahmadi whispered. The crowd of pale faces on the Chelsea Pier stood silent against the railing to watch Sammy drag him back to the dock. A few glanced at Steven, but even Steven, Trivia Wizard, could only shrug and guess, “Effexor overdose?” a little too obliquely. Ahmadi stared up at the crowd, open-mouthed and dumb, but Sammy kept his eyes on the ladder and slowly brought his friend back to safety.

“Jesus, Jesus” he muttered, addressing Ahmadi but talking to himself. “What’s happening to you?” Ahmadi writhed on the dock like a gasping fish, the welts on his back burning from the Hudson’s thick pollution.



Jeremiah Robinson got as far as the pier before William caught him. He had slipped on his wife’s shift, put on a hat and hustled through the twisting streets of the West Village while his tenement burned behind him. One more screaming woman didn’t mean anything on that night and Jeremiah screeched like a little girl whenever he saw ruddy dock workers walking five abreast down the streets. He stumbled down a blind alley and slammed face first into a pair of swinging feet. The hanging tree, right by the market, creaked under the weight of the dead, but a few branches were free. Free and waiting. Creak. Wide dead eyes stared down

at Jeremiah, not beckoning, just waiting, just waiting till the blood swelled so much that they would explode out of their sockets. Creak. Black men. Creak. White men too, a couple of them. For or against the draft, only the crows knew now, but they were dead as niggers anyway. Dead and waiting for the company of one more neck and a few more blood soaked gasps and gurgles. Creak.

Jeremiah ran north into Chelsea, making a beeline for the Hudson. William spotted him though, and recognized him from the strike back in March, the one where Jeremiah got to work for two whole weeks at twenty cents a day. William and Neil got to borrow money from Michael, who lorded it over them all spring. Jeremiah had a hump the size of an apple between his shoulder blades, and William wondered if it was solid as bone or just full of pus. One way to find out, he thought.

Jeremiah had hoped one of the rowboats would still be there, but they were all burning on the water—the rioters had made sure that the docks paid for hiring coons. Even the river was smoldering like liquid coal. The night smelled like damp sawdust. Jeremiah heard footfalls behind him and quickly took to one the ladders and started lowering himself down into the smoke of the Hudson. Someone dropped a rope. A rope tied into a noose.

“Goin’ for a dip, coon?” William asked, his voice painted black with beer, “not for a swim?” William staggered slightly and swallowed a hiccup as he peered down at Jeremiah. Jeremiah’s hat fell off and into the river where it floated for a moment and then tipped and sank.

Jeremiah blinked past his tears and sweat and saw a kid wearing pants too long for his legs waving a lynch-rope at him. “Oh sir, c’mon. Give a body a chance. Let the river take me, if I don’t make it to Jersey.”

“Bugger that. Bugger you. Hang you and bugger you. You always wear dresses, gay?” William grinned and swung the rope lightly, letting the

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noose brush across Jeremiah's head. Jeremiah took a breath and turned to jump but William flopped down onto his stomach and grabbed Jeremiah by the shoulders. They danced for a moment. Jeremiah struggled, like a marionette tied up in nylon strings. Then William grunted hard and pulled. He slammed Jeremiah's head against the rung of the ladder and forced the rope over his head. Snug. Bleeding lip, choked open mouth. Dress hem waved in the wind. William wanted to sneeze.

Jeremiah had to climb the ladder to keep from choking as William reeled him in.

"Sir, please, please, I got a wife," Jeremiah said, scrambling back onto the dock. Then he slammed his bare foot into William's stomach and started running, right into Michael and the rest of the gang.

Rough hands. Yelp like a woman. Stumbledrunk tackles, punches so quick and furious that they land on other punches. Michael, sprawled backwards, heels over head and cackling. Then back up and with the gang. Jeremiah, over the pier again. He swung on the rope and gurgled, his limbs like lead. Almost, he climbed back up, but a few kicks and drunken yowls from the mob knocked him back over the edge, where he hung between the sky and dark water. William was still on his side, clutching his stomach and drooling warm beer and bile. Michael planted his foot on Jeremiah's head, keeping him away from the pier. Jeremiah could smell the dirt and shit on Michael's sole and died with the heel of the boot burned into his eyes forever. A few feet away, William kept from crying.

Michael grunted and swung the corpse, letting it land on the smoldering husk of a boat. Most of the gang moved on, stepping over the boy and the pool of his own vomit. It was too dark to see, but William waited till the last lick of red flame sizzled and the boat sunk under the waves. He smiled then, but he wasn't sure why.

## Evening, the day before yesterday.

Ahmadi dried out thanks to a few stiff shots of brandy some older man with a leather vest and a bald head like a searchlight happened to have in a flask. Steven offered him some weed—“Purely as a calmativ, and to put your unique and terrible vision into perspective,” he said—but Ahmadi waved it, him and his crappy wardrobe away. Sammy kneaded his shoulders and together they waited for the small cluster of people to lose interest in two wet queers and wander off into the corners for drinks and blow.

“I think you should go to the hospital. You came here with a concussion, then keeled over and hit your head again. Now you’re seeing things,” Sammy said.

Ahmadi shook his head. “Can’t afford it.”

“I’ll help—we’ll split it fifty-fifty. I’m worried about you, man.”

Ahmadi shrugged. “I’ll be fine. Maybe someone slipped me some acid.”

Sammy snorted, “I don’t think anyone can slip you anything without your knowledge, Madi.” He pinched Ahmadi’s shoulder. “At least go home, you can get sick being wet in this draft. I’ll walk you. And I won’t even stick around to fuck you.”

Ahmadi grinned for the first time, “Thanks, Sammy. I know I can depend on a friend like you not to bugger me while I’m in a coma,” he said. Clever, maybe. People in New York were always being clever. He really wanted to grab Sammy, grab him and wrap his hands around that wire neck, crush in that bobbing Adam’s apple and howl “Why the fuck did you whip me so hard, you crazy fucking moron?”

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But Ahmadi realized that even phrasing that as a question made him an outsider. A real New Yorker would have just said something like “You crazy motherfucking moron motherfucker!” and probably wouldn’t have waited for the whipping to end either.

Together they walked to 21st and 8th. Sammy smelled the smoke first, but it was Ahmadi who broke out into a run and saw his brownstone burning from the foundation. His apartment was on fire, raging sheets of flame chasing one another up the façade in a race for the roof. Sirens sang in the distance. Red flickering light painted the quiet block, but only for a few moments. Smoke. Smoke in billowing clouds rolled onto the street. Smoke in sooty splatters painted the brickface and brown Italianate slabs. Some like the tentacles of some giant squid picked their ways between cars and around lamposts. Smoke and tongues of flame shaped like pale men ran down the street. Ahmadi could have sworn he saw someone, a glowing spaghetti silhouette, dancing a ghostly escape.

He had nothing to say to Sammy now. Sammy, for his part, was pretty much fixated on “Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck, that’s your fucking house, motherfucker!”

By the time the fire department got there, there was nothing left to burn. Ahmadi stood in the middle of the street and watched his life blacken to ash and float on the warm air. Night faded to a blue dawn. Sammy stood a few feet away all that night, just staring at his friend and mouthing a half-remembered novena.

“There was nothing we could do,” they heard some firefighter tell a neighbor. “We had to let it burn.”



## July 13, 1863

The Civil War Draft Riots lasted four days, and they were busy days for William and Michael. They raided liquor stores for free beer, and visited other stores to shut down or burn them to the ground. Mass meetings outside churches, factories and the piers formed instantaneously whenever enough men with brogues showed up to shout orders.

“We need to end the violence! This is a strike, not an anarchy!”

“He’s a Republican! A Unionist! Shout him down! Abolitionist!”

“Burn the coons, burn the factories!”

“Bugger the coons, take the fight to the East Siders! We won’t fight for the fat cats, but we can bring the fight to them! Ward Nine for the Sons Of Erin!”

“The lads need for ale! McSorley’s at four o’clock!”

William missed that particular call for alcohol. He followed Michael, now, and the gang from the Five Points. He had tried to go home, to get his other shirt—the one he wore was stiff with dried sweat, it was like wearing a box—but met Erin on the warren entrance. She had a snarl and a pot of scalding water ready for him.

“Come one more step, and I’ll boil you,” she said. “You’re a bad one, William. Neil and me ain’t want nothin’ to do with ya.” She was calm. She smiled now. Like she was looking forward to William taking that one provocative step down so she could blanch the skin off his bones.

William wasn’t that drunk. He left, and rejoined the throng, hooking up with Michael and a crowd of rioters enjoying a quiet afternoon of flames and milling about. The streets were theirs to rule. Michael had a plan, and a frigid smile, not unlike Erin’s. William wasn’t afraid this time.

“Ho, brah,” he said, voice deep, like a man’s, thanks to two days of sucking down smoke. “What’s transpirin?”

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Michael shrugged. He spoke to the little crowd around him, not William. “I am getting’ tired, my friends. I am getting’ tired of seeing niggers in our city. They keep turnin’ up, like bad pennies. They’re the reason we’re in this mess, they’re the reason the Republicans are getting’ all riled up, and they’re the reason our workingmen’s association keeps gettin’ broke and bothered,” he said, peaceful as church.

“I want nothin’ anymore to do with them,” William said, stepping forward. He was relieved—surprised, too—that the men turned their attention from Michael to him. “I can’t stand these niggers. They’re all over the city, like they own it. Like wharf rats. I tell ya, it is us or it is them. It ain’t even about the war now—win or lose, we got ourselves a city that’s getting’ real dark.”

The knot of men weren’t sure whether to nod or cheer or look down at their shoes or rush out and push someone. But *us or them* they understood.

“Lemme tell ya, I don’t have any children. We don’t do something now, I won’t have any. We’ll be slaves ourselves, or worse, and the darkies will have the run of the town. I say we burn ‘em! Burn em out!”

The city was still except for distant fires crackling like leaves crushed underfoot. Then one of them roared, “Burn ‘em out! Smoke ‘em blacker than they are already!” Then they ran, nearly leaving William behind. Michael picked up a banner, a scarf wrapped on a broomstick and rushed down the street, bringing the boys with him.

William, his mouth open and about to say something else, noticed, shut up and ran up behind them.

The Colored Orphans Asylum lay on a patch of land right on Fifth Avenue. The building was splendid, like spun white glass. Wide low steps, stretching across the length of the building. Bay windows, larger than caves, covered with thick curtains. Bought and paid for by Manhattan’s



greatest Republicans and abolitionists—the old biddies in Temperance, the grouzers uptown, the moneymen who got rich just by looking at ledgers. Much of the rest of the block was in shambles, but the Asylum floated free on a pond of grass, the tilting wrecks of nearby buildings too far for fires to spread.

Irish orphans depended on the goodwill of men on Fridays tossing a penny in a jar.

Michael and four strong men rushed a flaming wagon up and over the steps and into the double doors. They buckled, but held. The nose of the buckboard splintered. Flaming wood, blaze over jagged, splintered edge, spiraled and skittered down the steps. And again. William picked up a piece of wood and hurled it through one of the windows. Curtains went up like paper and shook with every battering the doors took, hurling embers, remnants.

The door collapsed to ragged cheers and stumbling as the wagon rolled out from under the men and rolled into the asylum. William waited for waves of little raisin-headed kids to pour out. A rock? His fists? Just let 'em run to starve in the streets or be picked off? But nobody came out. The others ran in, whooping and screaming, and not a minute later, a couch flew out the window and landed hard on the steps, splintering and chipping stone. William rushed halfway up the steps, crouched to avoid any other furniture or little flaming nigger babies that might get tossed out, but stopped himself. He wasn't crazy enough to run head first into a burning building yet—he was going to live, *GD*, he swore. Riots are for other people to die in, not William Patten.

William trotted a long arc around the building, to the back, where the fire hadn't yet spread. He saw the kids, the nigger children, climbing out a back window and then shooting off to the east. Some held hands and skipped off in pairs, free from the asylum finally, and ready to explore

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the city. Others sat and cried on the grass. One boy, maybe nine, walked up to the corner of the building and pissed on the side of it, oblivious to the rain of ash swirling down on his head. And there was Neil, arms up, holding a little nigger and hoisting her down from the ledge of a window.

Then a second, and a third child. Two other men, burly firemen, were taking to the back door with axes.

"Neil!" William called out. "Neil! What the haitch are ya doin'? Michael is in there?" He didn't dare run up to his brother.

"Michael can get his own self out," Neil said, rushed and bothered.

"We're the ones burnin' this place!"

"An' bugger you all for it," Neil said. He turned and marched up to William. "They're just babes, Will. Babes. Nothing is being gained with all this. The rallies are over. All the honest men have stayed out, but it is the hooligans running the streets now."

"Your whore wife threw me out of the house, Neil. Am I a hooligan too?"

The back doors finally collapsed under the axes. Rush of air. A huge tongue of fire licked the sky like the devil's tongue. The firemen tumbled backwards. Neil ran, jumping over one of them and rushing inside, ducking the flames.

William just watched for a moment, then ran back around to the front of the asylum. The fire was raging, spilling out of the windows and dancing up onto the roof. The spun towers on the corners burned like torches and lit the otherwise dirty gray sky like a bowl of sunrise and sunset overturned and placed atop the world. William craned his neck far back, watching and listening to the ropy muscles of his neck hiss and bubble. He didn't notice the Black Joke wagons arrive, or hear the scuffle, till Michael called out, "We're dyin' here, bugger boy!"

William twisted and sprung, and scrambled to the edge of the brawl.

The Engine Company's last three wagons had arrived, with water instead of flaming sheaves. *They've turned, the bastards!*

The men were climbing off the wagons, ready with their hose, their buckets and their axes. Michael was grappling with one of them over the handle of an axe, and being forced to the ground. A few more of his gang were swinging wild haymakers, knocking over buckets and wrestling with the drivers.

William watched. He didn't want to ball up his fists and punch anybody. *Niggers are just bodies, they ain't any body. And the Black Joke's fightin' back.* He looked to run, but stepped into the jaw of the company's dog, a lanky dalmatian with a mouth big enough for William's ankle. Teeth tore right through William's pants and bit deep into calloused flesh and bone. William didn't know what to do—he shouted, windmilled his arms like a lunatic, and kicked helplessly. He shouted, "Bad dog!" and even wondered to the Virgin Mary if he had the right to call a dog a bad one anymore.

Two more wagons, beer wagons, rattled down the Avenue, overflowing with workingmen, workingmen ready and jumping off the edge and into the fight on the now-smoldering lawn. The horses, foaming with sweat, wouldn't break, and sent a few more of the boys tumbling into the street, but even they picked themselves up and haved-at the Black Joke. William knew what to do now. He took a heavy step, then another, and limped, pulling the dog with him like an enormous, cursed foot, back around the side of the building, so nobody would see what a buffoon he was.

William ripped a switch from a sapling and swung at the dalmatian till it retreated. He chased after it, whipping it hard, feinting and weaving, as it crouched, growled, feinted then sprung, teeth bared. William got it right between the eyes, and was rewarded with a gushing stream of blood and a plaintive howl. Black and white and red all over. The stick was slippery in his hand, bark splitting and twisting into his sweaty palm.

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He reared back and hit the dog again, and again, splitting open its flank, its shoulder, the crown of his head, taking a nip of its snout. The dog bared its teeth and leaped, but too slow, and stumbled into the wilted grass. Arm up and down. Like a piston. Branch ripped through the air like a whip. More blood, more howls, the dog closed its eyes and whimpered, fight leaking out of it in red puddles. William's arm tired, that's why he stopped, he told himself. His bicep throbbed and just gave out. The switch, greased with blood and sweat, flew out of his hands anyway. The dalmatian lurched away, dragging its ass a few feet while William watched through teary eyes and breathed smoke. It didn't look back when it tipped over like a bag of blood, or even yelp. God damn dog, William thought, God damn that dog to nigger heaven, nigger hell. The dog took to its feet again and tried to scuttle away but couldn't. Then it whimpered once, choked and spit out its last mouthful of bloody life. William had won.

He smiled. And he knew why. It was right, after all, to fight for something you believed in. He could taste it, like blood in his mouth. And William believed in staying alive and making sure other people did the dying now.

"Let it burn, boyos," Michael told the fire truck, "just let it burn."

They got home after midnight. Erin was gone, and she had taken the babies with her. They raided the storage bin for turnips and cheese, bathed in brown laundry water, slept fitfully and were out the door at six o'clock in the morning to pick up their torches and their morning pints.

They dragged another black man down Sixth Avenue on Wednesday, leaving a five-block long red and black streak down the middle of the dirt road. Neil took the man's fingers and feet with an ax and William pissed in the corpse's mouth till the urine bubbled over and dribbled over the man's dusty cheeks. The crowd cheered and William raised his fists in victory.

"Freedom!" he shouted. "Freedom!"

## Yesterday.

Ahmadi didn't sleep. Sammy had lied. He still lived with his mama, and with his sister, his nephew, his sister's boyfriend, his kid, and two dogs, in Brooklyn. No crashspace for him. That afternoon and most of the evening, Ahmadi made calls from a payphone, using his calling card and then a pocketful of change he had gotten from a laundromat. His landlord. His renter's insurance. His mother. Pony up some cash. They were all out. Together, Ahmadi imagined them, in a park, with a picnic. Mama made enough sandwiches for every insurance agent in the company. The gray suits of his building's management company held a three-legged race. Mama won, with the help of the very nice woman with the southern drawl who answered the phone at Ahmadi's credit card company. She was awarded a purple sash.

After three hours of dial tones, microchip accents and pressing one, then two, then one, then three, then eight, he sighed and went for a walk. He fingered the few singles in his pocket and headed to the bodega for Twinkies and a Sprite. He wouldn't be dancing for a few weeks now, so he could afford to eat some junk food. His bank account still read \$0.08 on the dingy green monitor of the store's ATM; the three hundred dollars was still missing. One step outside the market his vision dissolved into a tunnel of black fog.

The air around him still smelled of smoke and the sponge cake tasted like salty blood and river water. He ran to the curb and vomited, sinking to his knees while the passers-by muttered and buzzed around him. Ahmadi tried to curse, but the words stuck in his throat. His neck tightened and his windpipe squeezed shut as the world spun around him. He

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fell to the hot sidewalk and lay there for an hour before a blue-suited cop nudged him along with the toe of NYPD regulation leather. Ahmadi swore to himself and walked a circle around Chelsea again, trying to stay awake, and away from the pigs. He was among the hunted now, for no reason at all.

And at dusk, walking along an oddly empty Eighth Avenue he saw Chairman Gene The Maoist. He was alone, unlike most chairmen, Ahmadi noted. A snarling face, seemingly carved out of a potato and decorated with a Brillo Pad beard. A hero for the people. Ahmadi was an alien in the city now. He had just finished unpacking when he had lost it all. Even Chairman Gene was something, something he already knew. Something comforting, the evil little troll.

So Ahmadi asked him for money. "Chairman Gene," he said, happy as a used car salesman, "How are you? I'm wondering if you could help a little worker who is down on his luck?" He offered his hand, not for cash, but for a firm and asexual breeder handshake.

Gene rolled his twisted eyes in different directions and placed his dead fish hand in Ahmadi's. "I only give advice for free and only three minutes. I don't pay out to bums."

"I'm not a bum," Ahmadi said, trying to keep annoyance from spilling out. "I just need a little help."

"No you don't," Chairman Gene said, drawing in a deep breath. Ahmadi tensed. He'd heard of this. One deep breath could fuel fifteen minutes of Gene's bullshit. "You don't need help. The system needs to be smashed through the organization of the masses into a people's army that can fight the international bourgeoisie and increase the contradictions of the system. Helping you out would blunt those contradictions; it would forestall the revolution by offering you a privilege relative to the rest of the lumpenproletariat. On the one hand you might wonder why that even

matters,” (Ahmadi didn’t) “since the lumpen are objectively counter-revolutionary, but political line is decisive, not abstract class position, at least not when boiled down to the level of the individual.” Ahmadi started to back away.

“Also,” Chairman Gene continued, “Giving you money would simply reinforce a petit bourgeois notion of individual charity and would also suggest that we—members of the working class—are somehow responsible for members of the reserve army of the unemployed, who might be workers but who also might be lumpenproletariat, depending on what the exact impact their social being has had on their social consciousness. Giving you money would also reinforce my particular petit bourgeois tendencies, and I am way too important to the revolution to be corrupted.”

“I just want a dollar for a coffee,” Ahmadi said, deflated like a balloon.

Chairman Gene grunted and reached into the satchel on his side, the one he wore so the strap would be vaguely reminiscent of a bandolier stretched across his melon belly. He slapped something into Ahmadi’s hand.

Ahmadi looked down at the pamphlet, a zine-y looking thing on red paper called *Smash The State Now! Chairman Gene*. That’s what the title seemed to be anyway. Maybe it was by Chairman Gene rather than full of advice for Chairman Gene.

Now Chairman Gene held out his hand. “Hey, that’s a dollar.” Ahmadi sighed and handed over three quarters, two dimes, a nickel, and even a few extra nickles, he realized.

It was time to leave. The city had won. Ahmadi wasn’t even angry enough to rip up the pamphlet and throw it in Chairman Gene’s face, and Gene had already zipped across the street like a pudgy video game character hopping across a row of mushrooms anyway. “Message received, loud

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and clear, Jesus!” Ahmadi shouted up at the empty sky. Someone glanced at him. He wished he had a cell phone. Nobody to call but Jesus, but he could just imagine standing there, with a dead phone to his ear, howling at the Lord. “How could you do this to me!” he’d shout, and people would think he was yelling at a lover, his mother, or a shrink. “Gimme a break,” he’d say, his voice heavy with a lungful of sigh, and he could have passed for someone talking to a broker, or a connection, or the impatient, unforgiving evil robot who tallied up the free minutes for cell phone companies.

If Ahmadi had a cell phone, he might be able to sell it to someone on the street. Maybe. In the past day, Ahmadi’s harmless hick vibe had been fading, and his Negro Horde aura had been growing in strength. Already, the man in the bodega knew not to smile at him, to stare when he used the ATM and didn’t take any money out. Yesterday, he could smile to old ladies, and they would smile back. Today, they scurried past him as if they were strolling on a puddle of marbles, clutching their bags for support. Yesterday, he was home. Today, he was the vanguard of an invading force of muggers, crack addicts, and homeless, toothless street-pissers and cup-rattlers. Today, Chairman Gene had rooked him for one eighth of his total net worth. One touch from a cop’s toe and he wasn’t a happy fag anymore, he was a muscular and possibly deranged illiterate nigger.

So Ahmadi probably wouldn’t be able to sell his cell phone. But if he shouted into it, or minced about with it, he might feel more at home in his own skin, in his own town.

Intelligence guided by experience—he had read that in a book once. He had tried Manhattan for a few weeks, and the city had fucked him, big time. That’s what his intelligence told him. And experience chimed in too. If something as big and old and smelly as Manhattan was fucking you, the you in question should leave. Seven dollars and fifty cents wouldn’t get Ahmadi far, but it would get him out. Intelligence, guided by



experience. That was the ticket, a train ticket.

Penn Station was oddly empty that afternoon. The Amtrak concourse was almost breezy. The few travelers were rumped and deflated enough from the heat outside and the air conditioning inside that Ahmadi blended in with them more easily than he did with the vulture hobos who circled the garbage cans and stared at him with wild eyes. Tickets were pricy though, so Ahmadi headed downstairs to take the Long Island Railroad. Seven-fifty would get him halfway down the North Shore. He'd chill for a day or two in some chock-full-of-snore town, sleep on a beach, or on the couch or floor or bed of a friend he'd make on the trip, wait for his check to clear, and then head back into the city, triumphant, ready to stay at Steven's or the YMCA. *It's fun to stay at. . .*

The police swam through the small crowd and rushed by Ahmadi, down into the tracks. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. The doors sealed behind them. Ahmadi hadn't even known that the track gates had doors, but they all rolled down as one, so he had to believe it. The master schedule sign clattered loudly as every plastic train line time flipped and spun, searching for its time and destinations. The sign went black. Then the voice, hollow as a melon and crackling like gun nuts on AM radio announced, "Aahhl drun ah deld doo two uh polz aksha onth trik."

Blood rushed to his face. Ahmadi made a bet. He was a New Yorker. He would understand the announcement the second time. If he did, he'd give himself . . . something. If he lost, he'd stop doing . . . something. Yes. Motivation. Focus, like jumping off a diving board. But he couldn't even hear the message as it was repeated. "Aahhl drun ah deld," was drowned out by a chorus of what. Huh. What did he say? Polkas are a trick? Police Alaska something? Nobody understood, but everyone got the message. The trains weren't going anywhere.

*Consolation prize, Ahmadi thought. A magazine. Don't think about the bad*

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*stuff. Picture something else. PMA, positive mental attitude, that's what it is all about in this town.*

He read on the way to the Port Authority. A bus was as good as a train, and would get him farther away from shithole Manhattan. The crispy stench of the clothes the firefighters had recovered for him would blend in with the human puddings who took the bus better than swank Long Island commuters anyway. He'd head south, into the Jersey pines, drink at bar, find a nice old man to put him up for a day, and then counterattack the city with a surprise push north, the way Robert E. Lee wanted to. Yeah.

Arms out in front, magazine stretched between big hands. One foot in front of the other, toes tapping to feel a curb, a puddle, the opposite curb. Ahmadi almost felt it—the hum of the hive. The subtle click of a street lamp killing the DON'T and letting him finally WALK. The tides of people making that metabrain decision to take on the cars if nobody felt like waiting, or if the cabbies and delivery truck drivers smelled weak on the downdraft.

We can beat 'em. We can stop traffic forty blocks down, if we all just work together and cross as one. Don't dart, don't freak, never back up. An unpredictable scold of jays is a dead scold of jays, the city told Ahmadi, and Ahmadi loved it. He darted west, then north, past the porn shops and diners named DONUT EATS COFFEE. He jumped over puddles and snaked through crowds, crowds of people on the same buzz as he. Ahmadi nearly changed his mind about leaving. Things were still sooty and dirty up here, and two-dimensional poster women still posed with five-pointed stars over their plum-like nipples on the storefronts. This was the New York Ahmadi had been expecting when he packed up and moved up, the one that had spoken to him on TV and in dreams.

"Howyoodoin'?" Big Frankie Manhattan asked Ahmadi.

And Ahmadi was doin' oh-kay.

The city wasn't talking to the cab driver barreling down West 40th Street and 7th Avenue. Wild, hash-stoked and screaming Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the squat yellow taxi tried to stop, screeching a terrible getout-ofthewaygetoutofthewaygetoutoftheway and burning rubber and asphalt, but tapped Ahmadi anyway. He crumpled like wrapping paper, and his magazine took to the sky, faster than a flock of pigeons. *Horns and gasps and damn always an asshole cabbie*. The cab driver spilled out of the car, but Ahmadi was already back up on both legs, then down again, then back up on one, hopping and crying towards the curb.

"No, no. I'm okay," something snapped, and half a shout escaped, but Ahmadi kept hopping, his arms kept churning and flapping, he tried to make the curb. He made the gutter, lost his footing in a puddle, and fell again, right on the hip that had already left a ding on the nose of the cab's grill.

The worker bees gathered around and buzzed with concern. Ahmadi twitched, tensed, twitched again. Call an ambulance. He needs a hospital. Is he hurt? Is he dead? Where's the driver? Kill the driver. It was the black guy's fault. He walked in front. It was going too fast, all too fast. Who's a doctor. Get a doctor. Internal bleeding, shock maybe. These weren't said, they were buzzed, vibrated directly between brains rather than through the midtown air.

Finally the cab driver, thick as a barrel, pushed through the crowd and asked Ahmadi what he wanted. Was he okay? Ahmadi was sure he wasn't, but said he was.

"I just want to get out of this damn town. Just let me leave. Let me get on the bus." No bus would take him now, of course.

"Where you live?" the cabbie asked, and without waiting for an answer. Mutter mumble and Eighth Avenue. He picked Ahmadi up gen-

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tly and poured him into the back seat of his cab. A few minutes later, Ahmadi found himself lying on the sidewalk, under the twisted yellow CAUTION tape that had been stretched across the lamp posts and bus signs outside the rubble that used to be his home. He wasn't going anywhere. The city had spoken.

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The rope holding the coon split as a musket ball tore through it. William spun on his heels and barely dodged as the man fell in a heap. The Union was in force and marching down Eighth Avenue. They swarmed off the tall ships like very orderly rats. Scuttlebutt had it that the soldiers were everywhere. From barges, they marched up Wall Street and reinforced the Battery. Ships filled the Hell's Gate. So many ships you could walk from deck to deck all the way across the East River if not for the troops and their bayonets. William didn't care about those soldiers; he was too busy running from the ones a few paces behind him.

Another volley of shots ripped through the crowd watching the lynching and splattered bright red across tree trunks and brickface. William broke out into a run with the rest of the crowd and was swept up into a river of harsh cloth and wild limbs. Every step, he was sure he was dead. Every bouncing pebble was a ball, or shrapnel. Arms and legs, every one of them owned by a Union soldier in disguise. Not nearly enough people behind him, too many streaming ahead of him. Hot wind on his back, and not from the fires he had set. Hot blood on his face, and not from the joy. William Patten, the King Of New York, was being overthrown. He was being driven into the sea.

William smelled the horse before anything else. The noise in his head, the rush of blood was too loud to make out the slamming hooves.

He didn't dare turn around, of course, none too anxious to see what in Hell was coming up behind him. He couldn't feel anything but his own twisted back and neck, stiff from three days of flexed tension. But he could smell it, hot and sweaty, like shit wrapped in burning straw. William fell like a feather, so slow. Dust and pebbles drifting in mid-air, he could count the grains as he passed by on the way to the muddy ground. It was nice, warm and wet. Better than bed. Better than home, inch deep in the mud of Manhattan.

Consciousness returned slowly, like a dusty memory. William twisted his face and lips to flake off the scab of mud, and moved to stretch but couldn't. Rope, a thousand sharp and tiny strands, cut into his wrists. He tried to pull, even tried to breathe, but rope snaked around his torso too, at three points—chest, middle and belly. His legs too were tied, to one another, and to the trunk of the hanging tree in the Village Market. He wasn't alone; two corpses—white corpses—drifted in the breeze. The flies were already orbiting his head. One flew up William's nostril, impatient. He spit the fly to the ground.

"He's awake, Sir" some kid said. The kid had a rifle leveled at William, face twisted into a wink, tongue stuck between his lips. Lick. Lick. His bluecoat was far too huge for his body. William couldn't help but think that the kid looked like Punch.

"Too bad for him," Sir said. Sir was a taller man, but not much older than the kid. He wasn't wearing a medal or anything that William could see. His coat was less dusty. Newer.

"What's the charge?" William called out, his eyes wild. "I'm a good man, a family man! I've got a union job, I'm a man of character! I had nothing to do with the riot. I never harmed a hair on nobody's head." He struggled against his ropes and shouted for help in English and Gaelic, but the sky was darkening and the streets had been cleared. He swallowed

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a fly. A couple more soldiers came from around the back of the tree and took up positions next to the kid.

“You were asleep for the trial,” a soldier told him. “We have good information about you and your little party at the Colored Orphans Asylum. You’re guilty. And you’re going to die, mick.”

“You don’t have nothing on me for that! I didn’t do it! I only whipped a dog, I’m gonna die for that?” William pulled hard, rope cut into his shirt and skin. he felt like his skull was going to split his face in half, to beg to be shot first.

The soldier shrugged. “You wanted to. Arms, gentlemen!” And the soldiers raised their rifles.

“Why yer shootin’ me?” William asked. Spit on the ground. “Save your bullets for the rebs and hang me decent, like an American.”

“Bodies keep getting cut down,” Sir explained, like he had nothing better to do. “Yours will stay a while, though. Parts of it will anyway. You folk don’t seem to be much for cleaning up after yourselves.”

William kicked up a cloud of dirt, “Bugger you, bugger abolition, bugger the niggers and bugger Abraham Lincoln. You don’t care if no coon died, you don’t care if nobody dies! What about my rights! I’m free, I’m white, I’m twenty-one, I’m --”

The smoke and thunder of four rifles swallowed William’s cries and the bullets sunk into the trunk on the other side of his back. He screamed, like a woman, and pissed himself from the pain, but forgot to die. He tried to speak, and coughed up a mouthful of blood, splattering it on his shirt. *Erin’ll have to clean that when I get home*, he thought, then he remembered he was dying and started to cry.

The soldiers started cleaning out their weapons. The kid kicked at a pebble morosely.

“Ah gawd, yah SOBs. Make it quick! Can’t you make it quick?”

William shouted. The kid looked at him, but William couldn't hear if he said anything. Smoke obscured his vision, his skull was ringing from the reports. "Please, please, please!" Two holes burned in his stomach. Breakfast barley dribbled out onto his crotch. Blood dripped into his pants, sliding down the crack of his ass. The musket balls were in the tree. They had gone all the way through.

William breathed. Sir examined a roll of paper and nodded over to the wagon. The soldiers started packing up the weaponry, except for the kid. He walked over to William and whispered, "Listen. I'm with you. I aimed high, see. Look up, c'mon, look up." William did. The bullet hole rested about a foot over his head, with a thin finger of smoke playing in the twilight breeze. "I couldn't bear to shoot ya, you see?" the kid sang into his ear. "I think you all were heroes, what you did in this city. I'd of done the same thing, had I thought of it. You don't want to be down south, no Sir. Terrible, terrible things happening down there." William smelled the taint of whiskey on the kid's breath. He could have used some himself, he thought. "So that's why I couldn't bear to shoot you."

"McKinley, move your arse!" Sir called out. McKinley ran. His pants were too big too; he waded in them back to the wagon. William watched them go. He breathed. Too hard, and blood spurted out of his wounds. Too shallow, he felt his brain wilting. In and out. In and out. Nice and steady.

Someone will be here, someone will come for me. The moon rose and split the low-hanging clouds. William was still alive. His legs were dead though, and buckled. He slumped in his ropes, and waited. He drew a spiral on the toe of his boot with a thread of blood-streaked spittle and waited.

Briefly, William considered praying, begging the Virgin to forgive him for his sins. He laughed, inside, to himself. Outside would hurt. The Blessed Virgin would forgive anything, they said, but William felt his

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positioned compromised by being tied to a tree and bleeding to death. He laughed again, this time allowed. God, it hurt.

The streets were empty, but bright. Curfew in the west, but the city was still burning downtown, and to the East, like two little suns come to earth. Sir was right, nobody came to cut down the carcasses. *Thank God, Thank God, Thank God*, William thought—his nose was full of blood and snot, he couldn't smell those poor bastards.

William slept, then woke again when the bells struck one. It wasn't quick. He spent the night, bleeding and sleeping, then waking to the creak creak of weight and wood on ropes. Then it was dawn, and the crows came for his eyes.



## Today

Sammy had never liked Bellevue. Too full of fucking crazy people; his father had died there besides. Bellevue didn't look like a hellhole from the outside. It had a wall and a wide arch over the path leading to the smaller, original building, and a nice lawn with a few tall trees and lots of friendly traffic. Some of them were patients. Outpatients, just crazy enough to be let out to go back to their jobs bagging groceries or sweeping corners for the city. Much better than the inpatients who filled the wards of the monstrous modern high-rise planted on top of the old hospital.

Did Sammy know about Jesus? asked an older woman, a slouched near-midget with a twitch and a voice like a broken muffler. Yes, yes he did. Did he know about her medication? It's the Body and the Blood of the Lord, not like that grape juice the priest keeps trying to force-feed her. "That's AIDS-tainted blood from some Faggot Iscariot, damnit!" she



announced, and then wandered off to sit on a stone bench. Another person greeted Sammy like a son and gave him a limp hug with scarecrow arms, then asked for cigarettes. He was that weird kind of crazy, Sammy knew, the kind of crazy where you couldn't tell if they meant what they said or if they just liked yanking people's chains all the time.

"Sorry Popi, I don't smoke." Popi didn't like that. He trembled and bared his huge-gummed teeth. "Then what the motherfuck good are ya!" he asked. "Fucking robots, what are you—the ATF trying to kill me?" Sammy was so tempted to say *Yes, I am a fucking robot from the ATF here to kill you*, but the Jesus Woman yelled, "Keep it down or I'll call an orderly for Christ's sake!" so Sammy moved on.

Only seven more feet to the door. Wrinkled leaves fell from the trees by the entrance, like rich people's carefully designed snow. A white girl stood by the door, smoking a cigarette. She wasn't an ATF robot. White girls like that are never crazy, Sammy thought, she's a worker, or here for an abortion or something. So he smiled and offered up a "Yo." She looked at him—through him—and asked, "I'm sorry, is this Bellevue? I need to get to Bellevue. Are we in Bellevue?" Sammy glanced up at the signs reading BELLEVUE HOSPITAL CENTER and briefly considered pointing to one. Instead, he nodded to the cigarette, said "The government is trying to kill you with those," and moved on.

Ahmadi smiled weakly to Sammy when he walked into the ward. There were eight beds, all full, mostly of old folks breathing through thin tubes or thick. Ahmadi's was right by the entrance, and outfitted with traction gear for his right leg and arm. The casts were thick, so thick Sammy almost missed seeing Steven, who was already there, sitting next to Ahmadi.

"Hi Ahmadi. Hello, Steven," Sammy said in his job-interview voice.

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The street lyricism and too-softesses were squeezed out of his voicebox like he was being choked. Sammy was about as far uptown as he ever got, and surrounded by people with uniforms and syringes. Better play it straight. “How are you feeling, Ahmadi?”

Ahmadi fluttered his eyelids. “Goddamn, I feel bad. The painkillers are wearing off already. There goes my fucking dance career, my whole fucking life.”

Steven patted Ahmadi’s cast, “Come on, don’t get down on yourself.” To Sammy, “The physical therapist said he might still recover fully.”

“They’re putting pins in my leg, Sammy.”

“Well, at least you’ll have a funny story for airports or something. You can become a gun runner—just tell them it’s your leg.” Sammy laughed, and Steven laughed a little bit. Ahmadi just stared.

“Well,” said Steven, taking off his sunglasses, “I have something that might cheer you up.” He rubbed his eyes and dug through his little satchel, and pulled out an old 45, still in its paper sleeve. “I was poking around the rubble of your apartment and found this. Not a scratch on it—it’s a miracle.” He held it up for inspection. Sylvester. “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real).”

Ahmadi said, “Uhm. . . I never owned that record.” Sammy edged closer to the bed. “You bought that for yourself, didn’t you?” he asked.

“No, of course not, of course not! I bought it for Ahmadi. I just thought he might have had an old copy and lost it and I was trying to make him feel better.”

“You know, his turntable probably burned up too.”

Ahmadi murmured, “My place wasn’t big enough for a turntable anyway. I never had one of those either. Oh God, my stuff. . .” He whimpered, head lolling to the side.

“Damn, now you upset him. Why don’t you go?”

“Well,” said Steven, “I’ll keep the record then, if you’re feeling territorial.” Steven swung his bag onto his shoulder, stood up quickly and slipped his sunglasses in one fluid move, “Ta.” He turned. “And goodbye, Ahmadi. I do hope you feel better. Give me a ring if you really need anything.”

Sammy watched him leave, then sat down in the still-warm cheap plastic chair next to the bed. “There’s something wrong with that kid, ‘Madi. I don’t think they’ll let him leave.”

Ahmadi chuckled a bit, and licked his lips. In silence, Sammy poured him a paper cup of water and held it to Ahmadi’s lips.

For a long moment, nothing but the occasional groans of the other folks in the ward, and the static-y murmur of salsa on a clock radio by one of the patients’ beds. Sammy looked down at his hands.

“You know,” he started, “this is pretty weird. It’s like I’ve visited people in the hospital a lot, but only with family, so my mother always did all the talkin’, you know? I feel like. . .”

“What the hell am I going to do with my fucking life, Sammy?” Ahmadi cut Sammy off. “I don’t even have audition clothes or my credit cards anymore. I paid a grand for that studio and don’t have it for three weeks before it goes up in smoke. I’m a good person—why is this happening to me? I’m cursed. I’m fucking cursed. My mother told me this would happen. This is just so fucking absurd. I couldn’t even leave town right.”

“Geez, relax, dude. You had a bad week, but maybe you can sue and get a million dollars. The Hurtline!” Sammy hoped he was funny.

“I’m going to fucking die. My head is still spinning from two days ago. I might be sick. I’m in the hospital, of course I’m going to be sick. I’m going to catch pneumonia from these sheets and die. A rusty needle. A crazy with an IV tube. How did I get caught up in this? I feel sick already. . .”

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Sammy paled. “Sick? You mean—” He reached for the bedpan.

“I mean I need Prozac or something. I keep seeing things, thinking things I shouldn’t be. I thought I saw people in the smoke, burning down my house, trashing my stuff. I mean, my house was in the basement, but I was still sure I saw ‘em. And, when we were. . . together, the other day, my mind kept wandering.”

“Yeah, that I noticed.” He tried to laugh.

“Bad thoughts. Being a slave, being raped, having my balls cut off. Not subspace, just you know. . . terror, but like a memory too.”

“And then you jumped in the river. That was pretty fucked up. Were you on anything?”

“No. I’m just. . . cursed. Really, it’s a curse. I believe in them. I never should have left Mama down in South Carolina,” Ahmadi said, nervous. He struggled, trying to sit up with half his body in traction. “God—fuck, damn.”

Sammy put a hand on Ahmadi’s chest, feather-light, “Look ‘Madi, just relax.”

“I’m cursed.”

“Well, you’re not so cursed you can’t relax.”

“I’m going crazy.”

“Welcome to Bellevue. Fuck, welcome to New York. You’ll just make yourself crazier if you don’t relax. You’ll burn the painkillers out of your system too fast.”

“Listen. Do you know. . .”

Sammy listened.

“. . . what sort of candle to light. Or tea, or something for under the pillow?”

“What are you talking about, ‘Madi? Are you okay?”

Ahmadi twisted in the bed till it creaked. “Look, I want something.

You should know, some kind of, you know—Spanish santería thing. A candle. A saint. Chicken bones. Magic. How to get rid of a curse.”

Sammy stared. Very slowly. Very carefully. “A Spanish. Santería. Thing? Chicken bones?”

Ahmadi nodded, “Yeah. You’re Puerto Rican. I mean, you know. Something from a botanica. For the curse.”

“What the fuck?” Sammy hissed. “What the fuck? You *are* crazy, or you’re so medicated you’re not making sense. I’m Catholic. I live in *this* fucking century.” It was a struggle to keep his voice down, Sammy knew the orderlies and their tranquilizers were nearby, watching. Cops wandered the halls. Not every visitor left Bellevue. “You’re not cursed, and I’m not some *brujo*.” Sammy lost the battle. “And what’s the matter, don’t you know some nigger voodoo thing to get rid of your fucking curse?”

The wards in Bellevue’s old building echo. Sammy found that out the hard way. *Nigger*. The word hung in the air of the ward like a particularly large and ugly paint Elvis on black velvet. The other patients stared. The guy in bed seven even stirred, as though “Nigger!” woke him from a coma.

Regret and anger battled for supremacy. Manhattan’s mad house, the threat of straightjackets and pill-popping crazies, beat the slightly prurient, if pitiable, site of Ahmadi in medical bondage. Anger, round one, 10-8.

“Fuck you, ‘Madi,” he said softly, then loudly, “Well, goodbye!” and Sammy left, trotting out of the ward and down the hall.

Ahmadi leaned back in his bed, too numb to even feel the splintered bone digging around his hips. He pressed the call button for the nurse and was given more painkillers without even asking for them. His pillow was flat as paper, so the nurse gave him a second one, so he’d be just as uncomfortable, but at a slightly better angle. Ahmadi drifted into sleep in a haze of green—his brain an olive in a giant Nyquil cocktail. He laughed a tiny bit, picturing that.

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They came for him that night. The moon was high and full and pale light spilled through the ward's one huge window. They were white. Caucasian. White too: dead, bleached white. White boots, white overalls, white suspenders, white shorts, threads coarse like sewn pasta. First they skittered along the floor, spider-like, albino, huge. Ten, five, two dozen, rolling across the ward like they'd slipped out a hole in someone's pocketful of stars. Burned, shot, stumps for hands, limbs and empty space for legs on one or two of them, they took on a near-formless form, held together in wrapped bandages and baggy clothing. If Ahmadi could have just focused his eyes, they would have fallen apart, margins blurring into infinity.

Ahmadi couldn't bring himself to see. Like a cloud of cigarette smoke they hovered about him, shifting form, blending together—a mob. Not real enough to be real, just real enough to be felt, like a concussion you're not sure you have yet.

"That's the one," they said. It said. One face in the crowd, round as an apple with a young smile, peered in close. Close enough to count the beads of sweat on the nigger's face. No eyes, just chewed and frayed sockets, staring at him.

"Take my home away, take my town away, nigger," it not quite said. Intimated. It intimated, like a caw and hurried flapping signals the arrival of a crow. "Kill you kill you like you people killed me."

Ahmadi breathed. It was hard. Brain scrambled and throbbing in his skull, his right arm and leg nothing more than four feet of pain strapped to the air with chains, blood sluggish like molasses, lungs heavy with soot and smoke, and half-crumpled.

William almost felt sorry for the poor ol' darkie, and was glad he didn't have to look. Painkiller overdose, shock, bone marrow in the blood stream, contusion leading to blood clot: a million ways to die in a New

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York hospital.

Seven men slept, one fitfully, one in a fetal position. One snored thick bubbles of snot. The ward, wide with high ceilings—better than any Chelsea apartment—was a little emptier.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Nick Mamatas is a New York writer currently living in exile in a former crackhouse in Jersey City. His essays and reportage have appeared in *The Village Voice*, *In These Times*, *Artbyte*, *Mr. Beller's Neighborhood* and *Maximum Rock-n-Roll*, and his fiction in *Talebones* and *Strange Horizons*. He is also the co-author of *Kwangju Diary* with Kap Su Seol.



