

## A LETTER FROM MY FATHER

I received a letter from my father today. He's closing down his store after thirty years, and at least in theory he's going to retire. It's a warm letter. For reasons neither of us has ever figured out, letters, and doing things for one another from time to time, are the only ways we know to show that we love each other.

I grew up thinking I was pretty much like my mother. We're both nearsighted, have the same tight, black curly hair, cut of face, delicate temperament; each of us is an oldest child and has those kinds of problems. But as I get older, I come to see more and more of my father in me and in my brothers. Although growing up we saw little of him except on Sundays, he seems to have left his mark.

When we, his children, get together, and we talk about him, we acknowledge how he has always been an anchor for us, there to be depended on, even after his two heart attacks. But inevitably we also acknowledge how none of us can really talk with him, as we have always been able to talk to our mom. It has been an ambition for each of us to get through the barrier before he dies and the barrier is not passable anymore.

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My father had two stores, one after the other, each with the same name: Brothers Furniture. The second one, the one that's closing now, is near the teachers' college, in the Italian part of town. The other was in what by the time of my childhood had become the center of Cleveland's black ghetto. My father ran that store for twenty-five years, first with his brother Sid and then,

after my uncle died, with my mother's help. He left because he felt, finally, that it would kill him to stay there much longer.

The store — we always called it that, as we called the big street near where we lived "the Boulevard" — had been broken into dozens of times over the years. But they never stole much (my father always took the cash box, his tools, and the really valuable things home each night), and he adjusted to his losses.

Following the riots of the mid-sixties, though, a new, more militant element moved in, and things got tougher for white businessmen. Some shops went under; others were torched, by whom was sometimes difficult to tell. Still my father stayed. His was the only used furniture and hardware store around, and he had a loyal clientele. Though business fell off, it was what he knew to do, and in a way he loved it. He could, he believed, endure. (Even during the week of the riots itself, he and my mother had kept the store open, leaving each day only when the police radio announced a break-in elsewhere in the Hough. "We didn't think about it," my mother told me much later. "It seems crazy, but we didn't think anything would happen to us, and nothing did." The store itself also remained unharmed, until the evening following the mayor's announcement that the riots had ended. The windows all around my father's store had been shattered earlier in the week; his glass, though the big panes had mostly been divided into smaller ones from earlier break-ins, was still intact. But just after supper, we received a call from the police down there, saying a boy had tossed a brick through the last undivided panel. It was as if the riots themselves had been the major statement, and this a kind of afterthought, a reminder to my father that he was not exempt. The next day, he boarded up his windows for good, and eliminated the expense of replacing broken glass.)

Then the man who owned the grocery store across the street was shot in the chest and killed in a robbery. My mother — all of us; we were old enough by then — began to worry, and to press Dad to consider another way to make a living. There was some talk of his going into business with my cousin, but my father knew that they would never see eye to eye, and I suspect he worried that the offer was one of charity. He still hoped, I think, the trouble would blow over. But soon they held him up, too; twice, with knives, in the course of a couple of weeks.

My father bought a gun from one of his regular customers, a small, pearl-handled thing smuggled up from the South. He felt uneasy about it, though — it wasn't right, wasn't honest — and so after a couple of months he got a police permit, bought a more substantial pistol legally, and went through the proper training. He carried the new gun in a shoulder holster beneath his vest, and at home he kept it in the top drawer of the night stand by his bed. Sometimes, after school, when my parents were not home, my brother Peter and I would open the drawer to look at it, wrapped in velvety cloth, though we would never take it out.

Things quieted down and for a couple of years nothing of any consequence happened. Then one rainy afternoon, two men came in with a sawed-off shotgun. They took the cash on hand and did not, thank God, check my father for his gun, nor did he try to draw it on them. They wore stockings over their faces; my father couldn't identify them from the mug shots later on, but he told me more than once that he would never forget the deep, coarse voice of the man who held the gun. "Get outa here, white man," he had said. "You better get out."

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Even as a child, I was ashamed that my father had to earn his living as he did. I knew that the fathers of my friends at school didn't come home with their hands dirty, nails and calluses black,

pants torn and stained with grease. I hope he never suspected. It is to this day a source of some pain to me that he might. And yet I could not help the way I felt.

He would need us, sometimes, my brother just younger than myself and me, on Saturdays, to help with a delivery, or to stay with my mother while he went out to look at merchandise. I hated going there so much that the only memories I have are furtive, shadowy: my brother and I carrying some appliance too heavy for my hands, the sharp metal edge digging through my gloves, the houses we entered warm and humid, fogging my glasses; inside, a blur of small children running naked, torn linoleum floors peeling up at the corners and edges, an old chair repaired with tape or a fat red sofa with the stuffing coming out, a feeling of intrusion; and then the man of the house, bigger than possible in his torn white T-shirt, looking up at us from the ball game on TV; or myself trying to listen politely while an old woman with gold in her teeth and liquor on her breath squeezes my arm, tells me about her daughter in a language so unlike the one I am used to hearing that while I recognize some of the words, I can only nod, and pray for my father to come and with his laughing, friendly voice, rescue me.

It was no better in the store itself, except when there wasn't much business and I could occupy myself with cleaning a refrigerator or helping my father fix an old TV. I remember hearing the belled door ring, and hoping before I looked that it was an aunt or uncle dropping in, and then seeing it was not, forcing myself down the narrow aisle between the tables heaped with faucets and dishes and porcelain figurines, all the while sensing my ineptitude, dreading the moment I would have to say, "Can I help you?" I remember feeling the relief and shame that would come when a regular customer called out to my father:

"Hey, brother?"

"Yeah?"

"This your boy?"

"Sure is."

"When you gonna teach him? He don't know what to do!"

And I remember feeling, as well, how my father and the customer chuckled, each of them maybe a little annoyed, but neither of them meaning any harm, I see now, as I could not have seen then.

I believe at first my mother and father thought I was selfish when I would object to coming, but it soon became apparent (to my mother, anyway) that I was genuinely afraid. Within a year, spending Saturdays at the store was no longer expected of me, and although I remember feeling jealous of my brother Peter (who by then earned ten dollars or more for his day's work) and ashamed of my own weakness, I also knew I was better off at home. I was shy, anyway, even among my peers, and the work with my father often threatened to push me past where I could safely go. Once, when I was quite small, my father had tried to make me swim in water above my head. At his insistence, I had jumped in, but I'm certain I would have drowned had he not leapt in after me, even though I knew, in the shallows, how to swim. I was not a particularly courageous child, I suppose.

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When I was young, my father would tell stories at the dinner table of the shwartzes: of their dirty houses, the payments they would miss, the big cars they would drive, the excuses they would make; and of their boyfriends and mistresses and the crimes of their illegitimate children, some of whom he employed from time to time as helpers on pick-ups and deliveries. I accepted what he said, then; but as I got older, his statements about the black people of the Hough began to annoy

me, and by the time I was a senior in high school and fancied myself — bearded, long-haired, and wearing round glasses with gold wire rims — a radical, his comments at the dinner table often triggered arguments between us. I would call him a racist; he would accuse me of ignorance and impudence. What right did I have to talk, he would ask me; as a child, I could not stand to be anywhere near his customers, he would accurately point out.

I went away to school my first year of college, but transferred back to Cleveland after that. I shared an apartment with Anna, my high-school girl friend, at first, and when that fell apart, moved in with a couple of other guys. I came home only every two or three weeks, for dinner. I hoped to get to know my parents better, and thought it would help if we lived some distance apart. I would show them that their fears about what would become of me were stupid. I would not "wind up" a junkie in a gutter because I'd smoked some grass or taken LSD, nor would I languish in prison because I'd gone to demonstrations against the war, nor would I father unwanted children just because I'd lived with Anna, nor become a failure in life because I'd quit training to be an engineer.

As time passed, our relationship did grow more relaxed, and I saw more of my parents. My mother and I began to grow close again, as we had been when I was a child. With my father, things were harder; he still condoned neither my studies nor my kind of life, though when I started working construction during summers, and part time during the spring and fall, at least we had a neutral topic we could talk about. Dinner with my family became, if not pleasant, at least bearable for us all.

It was at one of these dinners that I learned of what had passed between my father and Roger Johnson, my father's helper.

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My brothers were only available to work at the store on Saturdays, and even then they were often not enough help if a pick-up or delivery was particularly large or heavy. My father's business could not support a regular helper, what with taxes and insurance and everything else the law required, so my father got around the problem by finding men or boys who, for a couple of bucks, would be willing to help him out from time to time. They seldom stuck around for long, but when one vanished, there was usually someone else to take his place. Sometimes, they were men on welfare or disability, but most often they were kids. Roger Johnson was one who worked with my father a good deal longer than most. Roger, my namesake, began to work with my father when he was just thirteen, and he stayed with him for the next two years.

Roger was the youngest son of one of my father's oldest and most reliable customers, one of the few, my father said, who still had a family in the sense in which I had grown up thinking of family; Roger's father, Bill Johnson, still lived with Roger's mother and their enormous passel of kids, all of whom Bill had apparently fathered.

I had met Roger a couple of times. I remember him as broad and tall, big and tough-looking for thirteen or fourteen, but shy and good-natured all the same. Roger and my younger brother Alan, built like me, often worked together on the truck; my brother seemed pale and skinny beside the Johnson boy, though he was a year or so older. My father, in time, came to regard them as a kind of team, and showed more fondness for Roger than he had for most of the other helpers he had over the years. He treated the boy as a sort of foster son. Though he could pay him, he said, only a dollar or two each time he used him, he taught him to read street signs and tell time, and he always had my mother pack an extra sandwich, in case Roger was around when they ate lunch. When he took my brother out for ice cream, he would treat Roger, too. I think my brother

resented the attention my parents paid Roger; he's told me, since, that he never liked the Johnson boy. Still, it was Alan, not Roger, who at the end of the day drove home beside my father, and it was in Alan's wallet that three five dollar bills were carefully folded.

At the time I speak of, it had been at least a year since I'd last seen Roger — I rarely visited my father's store, even then — and it had been nearly as long since I'd heard his name around the house. When I arrived, my father was already sitting at the kitchen table, near the phone, where he had sat for dinner as long as I could remember. (He ran a "Furniture Wanted" ad in the evening paper, and people with something to sell would often call at supper time.) He didn't look up when I walked into the room.

"You know that Johnson kid," he said, setting down his paper, "the one you said I ought to hire on a regular basis?"

My mother set a bowl of thick pea soup with ham and barley in front of each of us. The smell of it made me hungry, but my stomach was tight. I knew I was being goaded, and tried, with less success than I might have hoped, to keep the hard edge out of my voice. "Yeah?" I said.

"I fired him yesterday," my father told me. He turned his face to his bowl of soup and spooned some into his mouth.

I said nothing. Still chewing on a bit of ham or carrot, my father went on: "Caught him stealing. He'd been stealing from us for months." My father put the spoon back in the bowl and stared at me over the top of his reading glasses, as if to say, What do you think of that? "I told him he couldn't come to the store anymore," he said.

My mother sat down at the end of the table, the three of us forming the points of a narrow triangle. I fingered my soup spoon. I remembered how as a kid I had stolen change from the drawer in the den where my mother kept our lunch money. I knew how I would have felt if I'd

been caught at it. Did you have to fire him? I wanted to ask. Don't you understand why he was stealing from you? I wanted to say. But I wasn't so sure about my questions, anymore. "You're sure he was stealing?" I asked instead.

"We caught him red-handed."

I ate a spoonful of my soup, felt the barley slippery against the roof of my mouth. I asked my father what had happened. At first biting out his words, and then warming to the telling, he explained.

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My mother was the first to notice something strange, he said. She was in the habit of wearing a blue smock, and keeping a little change in the pockets so she wouldn't have to return to the register if a customer at the front of the store needed a nickel or a dime. She never bothered to keep track of it, but she did find, from time to time, that change seemed to be missing. Although she didn't say anything about it, she presumed my father had put the change back in the register, and it annoyed her. They were not, anyway, on the best of terms, those days.

She put up with it for months, but finally got annoyed enough to say something about it.

"Ben," she said, "why do you keep taking the silver out of my apron?"

"What? I never touched the silver in your apron."

"Well, I don't know," my mother said. It was the end of the day, and they were getting ready to go home. "Every couple of days, I'm waiting on a customer and I go to my pockets for change, and it isn't there."

"Well, I didn't touch it," my father told her.

I suppose they went home mad at each other, but it couldn't have taken them long to figure out who the culprit really was.

The next day, as usual, Roger came by after school to see if my father had anything for him to do. My father told the boy he had a delivery in half an hour, and he could use a hand. My mother offered him a can of root beer and some cookies, and he stuck around.

From time to time, my parents would leave Roger alone in the store. They trusted him to watch things and tell anyone who happened in that they would be back soon, though they never let him make an actual sale. (He didn't know how to make change, my mother explained.)

"Roger," my mother said, as the boy was finishing up his pop, "Ben and I have to go next door to Al's for a couple minutes. Can you mind things for a while?"

"Sure, Mrs. Brothers," Roger told her — like all my father's customers, Roger called my father by the name of his store, and my mother was always "Mrs. Brothers," never Mrs. Cohen.

"If anybody comes in, tell 'em I'll be right back," my father added.

They left Roger and went across the street, keeping just out of the boy's view. When they returned a few minutes later, my mother picked up her smock from the chair behind the register, where she had draped it, and put it back on; then she checked the pockets. She nodded to my father, as they had arranged, and showed her empty hands.

Roger was sitting at the workbench, watching a soap opera on TV. My father walked over to him and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Rog," my father said, "you've been stealing from us."

"What!" Roger said. "Not me, Mr. Brothers! I like you! I wouldn't steal nothin' from you!"

"Well, Rog," my father said, "I know you just took forty-nine cents out of Flo's smock, because we put it there, and it isn't there now. And I don't think this is the first time you've done it."

"I didn't take no forty-nine cents, Mr. Brothers. Honest I didn't!" Roger said. My father said Roger was crying, then. But he was not persuaded by the boy's tears.

"Rog, you're the only one that's been in the store since we left — we were across the street the whole time and we didn't see a customer walk in. I know the money was there when we left. It's not there now."

Roger continued to cry, and to deny his guilt, but my father would hear none of it. He had hard evidence, now, and had made up his mind what to do. "From now on," he told the boy, "I want you to stay out of the store. You're not gonna be my helper, anymore."

Later that week, my father talked about what had happened with Jack across the street. Jack told him that for the longest time, Roger had been paying him for cans of pop and candy bars and sandwiches with change — nickels, dimes, and quarters, sometimes rolls of them; he assumed my father had been paying him this way. "No, I always gave him a buck or two in bills," my father said, shaking his head at the extent of his loss. The register was always locked when they left the store, but he had kept the rolls of coins in a "secret compartment" in the desk and it had never occurred to him that Roger might know where that was, and how to open it.

My father found another helper fairly easily, an older guy, "on the welfare." From time to time he would notice Roger hanging out on the corner, a cigarette dangling from his mouth (that surprised my father, who had never seen the boy smoke around the store), but they never spoke. Sometimes, my father said, he would see the boy while out on a pick-up or delivery, and give him a beep.

Two months after the smock incident, my father got a call from the police at three or four in the morning. The cop on the beat had noticed the rear door of the store ajar, and suspected a break-in. My father hurried down. This kind of thing seemed to happen a couple of times a year,

but it always shook him up, made him wonder, I imagine, why he kept on — though he never admitted it to me, even when he called on me to help him fix a smashed-in door, or better secure a window.

When my father got to the store, he discovered someone had crawled in the bathroom window, breaking off the rusty grate and cutting through three layers of screen and mesh. The change in the register and the extra change my father had hidden away in the desk was gone, and so were a number of small items — radios, lamps, knickknacks; "things a person could carry away easily, without a truck," my father told the cop who made out the report. Also missing was the recipe box that contained the store's accounts receivable slips.

The next morning, when he went out back to see what damage had been done in breaking open the window, my father found the box on the ground, two-thirds of the slips still in it, the rest scattered around the yard like autumn leaves. The slips formed a trail, and my father followed it over the back fence, out onto Benjamin Street, and down the block, picking them up as he went. The trail finally petered out near 51 Benjamin, where the Johnsons lived. He returned to the store, where he alphabetized the slips and checked them against his memory. There were several missing, and one of those was Mrs. Johnson's.

My father had figured right off that the thief must have been a kid, because none of the really valuable things, the collectibles, had been taken, and because the bathroom window was too small for a grown-up to have crawled through. Now, he was sure it was one of the Johnson kids, and fairly certain it was Roger.

Later that day, he saw the boy passing in front of the store. He called him over.

"Rog, you broke into my store last night," my father said.

"No, I didn't, Mr. Brothers," Roger told him. "I didn't!"

"You did, Rog. It had to be you. Nobody else knows where we keep the silver," my father said, grabbing the boy by the shoulder.

"I didn't touch your silver, Mr. Brothers," Roger said. He stepped back, out of my father's grip, and ran toward the corner, stopping, trembling, when he was half a block away. My father watched him for a minute, then, shaking his head, returned to the store.

Mrs. Johnson was one of half a dozen customers my father "trusted"; that is, they would get what they needed from him, and he would add the price to their account, and pay him after the first of the month, when the welfare checks came. He knew that Mrs. Johnson owed him about a hundred and ten dollars for items she'd bought over the past few months. He decided to send her a bill for fifty dollars more. When she got it, she came (as he put it) "screaming that she didn't owe me that kind of money."

"Well," my father said, "your slip got lost when they broke into my store last week, but in my mind that's what you owe me."

"Well," Mrs. Johnson told him, huffing and puffing, "I got the slip at home to show I don't owe you that." My father said she shut right up when she said that. They both knew that he had never made up duplicate slips.

He talked to a detective who worked the neighborhood and seemed to have an interest in trying to rehabilitate kids who'd gotten into trouble. He said he didn't want to press charges, but he wanted to get his merchandise back if he could, and he wanted Roger to know he couldn't get away with things like that. "That isn't going to do him or me any good," my father said. "Rog's not really a bad kid," he added.

The detective knew the Johnson family. One of Roger's brothers was in jail right then, for stealing a car, and two of his sisters had been picked up for streetwalking. He said he'd talk to the boy and see what he could do.

In time, Roger came on by. He confessed to having broken the window. He hadn't, he said, actually committed the robbery — he'd sent a smaller kid in, and had told him where the change was and what to steal, and they had split the take between them. Roger refused to identify his partner, but he gave back most of the change and half the merchandise; the rest, he said, they'd sold. The Johnsons remained regular customers of my father's, but Roger never came around again, and my father and Mrs. Johnson avoided talking about him for the two or three years more my parents' stayed on in the Hough.

My father believes Roger probably came to no better end than his brother or his sisters. He is philosophical about the robbery, though. "Rog turned against me," my father told me, not long ago, "but, you know, after he brought the stuff back, Mom and I talked about it. She couldn't understand why Rog did it. And I remember telling her that even our own kids might be tempted if they didn't have a nickel in their pockets, and they saw other people walking around with more than they had. Even I might be tempted," he said.

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I moved to Bedford-Stuyvesant in February or March of 1977 and stayed there nearly two and a half years. I'm still not sure why I stayed there as long as I did, but I am coming to understand why I was able, finally, to leave.

I lived in an old brownstone with an elegant, curved staircase spiraling up the middle. Everyone who lived there worked on the building in lieu of room and board; restoring the

staircase, in fact, was one of my prouder accomplishments. There were white people in only one other house on the block, a couple named Jeremy and Denise. She was a sculptress, he an architect who owned property in the neighborhood that he was renovating for eventual resale. I liked them immediately, and their presence in the neighborhood reassured me.

I had been apprehensive from the first when Jane, a friend of a friend whose place I was to take when she moved out of the house, invited me to dinner. Although in time the scene would grow familiar and plain, that first evening it scared me. Walking from the subway, I felt myself passing through a kind of violence I had not been subjected to in years. Women — I assumed they were prostitutes, though I may have been mistaken — fighting, scratching, tearing at one another's clothes; the streets paved with ice a good half a foot thick — the signature, I found out over dinner, of a fire three nights before; winos, half-frozen in the doorway of a boarded-up hardware store, mumbling and snoring; a burned-out trailer in the corner of a lot strewn with trash. Even the colors of the buildings seemed, somehow, discordant.

But the block the house was on was peaceful, and the next-door neighbors, who stopped by for coffee and desert, were pleasant enough, and spoke with enthusiasm of the neighborhood. True, the house had been broken into a couple of months before, but it was wired, now, with an alarm, and the people I was to share it with said they felt more or less secure. If she had it to do over again, Jane told me, she would.

I waffled for a week or so. I was sick of living in marginal neighborhoods, and this one seemed more marginal than the one I was about to leave, though the actual accommodations were an improvement. But I could neither stand nor afford to live where I was living — my roommate and I never spoke, my unemployment insurance was ending, my savings were almost gone — and I had work I was obligated to complete, for which I'd long before been paid. Living in Bed-Stuy

for a few months could, I hoped, still give me a chance to complete the articles I'd been contracted to produce pretty much on time, and they, I hoped, would give me the cash and the credits I needed to get out.

As it happened, by the time I'd finished my work, Bed-Stuy had become home. I had begun to try to fit in. I spoke to people on the street, played with the neighborhood kids, got to know the keepers of most of the local stores. I felt my father's presence, there, in the competence of the plumbing supply man, and in the scattered bric-a-brac in the windows of the little shops near the bank.

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Late one night I spoke with a young woman on the street. I had come upon a man out cold, drunk, in front of the house next to hers. I had tried to shake him awake, and when he wouldn't stir, I'd headed on home, intending to call my next-door neighbor for advice. She had been watching me, standing inside her gate. She called to me as I passed by.

"Hello," she said, her voice ringing full and round. I stopped and tried to make her face out in the light. "How come you never talk to me?" she asked. I could not remember ever having seen her. "I see you all the time," she went on, "and you never so much as look my way."

I stammered for a moment; "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean anything by it. I never saw you. I get preoccupied, sometimes," I went on. "I'm in my own world, you know?" I tried to smile.

I could see her smiling in the night, and then she laughed. I couldn't tell if she was laughing at me, or just laughing. "That's okay," she said. "I'm just foolin' with you a little." She laughed again, deep and healthy sounding, and her laughter set me more at ease.

Her name, she told me, was Loris. I told her mine was Roger. She said she'd seen me try to wake the man on the ground, and that I needn't have bothered — he was okay, in his own way. She explained how he was the husband of the woman who lived in the basement apartment, and how he had come home drunk, and his wife, who was Loris's aunt, kicked him out; and how he came back again, hours later, and the aunt had kicked him out again, and he had sat outside the gate and drunk some whisky, and sobbed, and even sang a little before he passed out cold; and how this was not unusual for him or them to do, nor was it strange, Loris said, to her. Her own father had been a drunk, as best she could remember, and her first husband had been a drunk, as well. (Nor was it entirely strange to me, as I heard in my mind the stories my father would tell at the table, about the shwartzes; it was painful and bewildering to try to reconcile my father's reports with what Loris was telling me then.)

She broke off at this point. "That girl I seen you walkin' with: she your wife?"

"No," I told her. "Just someone I know."

"She your girlfriend?"

"No," I told her, feeling queasy, "she's not my girlfriend, either. I don't have a girlfriend now,"

I said, immediately wishing I had not.

"You still married?" I asked. I wanted, I think, to turn the conversation back on her.

"No," she said, and she looked toward the bottom of the black, iron fence posts before she looked back to me. "My husband, he used to drink, but that wasn't so bad. But he was mean."

"Mean?"

"He used to hit me. And the last time, he cut me, and he beat my baby black and blue, and after that happen, I said to myself I wouldn't take no more of that kinda treatment. That was when

we were livin' over on Jefferson Street, in the projects. We been a number of places since then. Now we're here."

She had a daughter, who was three, then ("She's a little doll. You have to see her."), and she was pregnant once again. We stood and talked at least a half hour about each other — about her family, and about my job, and about her hopes of getting educated and finding some way to make a decent living, and not having to depend on a man, or on the welfare. I tried to encourage her, but felt foolish doing so. She was only twenty-three, and I was twenty-six, but I felt younger than she by half a century.

When I left for home, we made vague plans to get together some time. At that moment, I thought we would, but passing her on the street in the daylight, I found I was reluctant to say more than hello, as friendly a "hello" as I could muster, and then as the days passed, even that came uneasily, until finally I went to Fulton Street the other way, around the corner, so as not to pass her house. I kept that up for several weeks, until I felt enough time had passed so I was sure that "hello" was all it would ever come to.

In the next few months I would see her, sometimes, standing at the gate, as she had that night, or sitting on her stoop, round and swollen. Once I saw her little girl. She was a doll, with pigtails and a little pink dress. I wanted to talk to Loris again, by then, but too much time had passed; and then the months went by, and once while working on the roof I saw her again, standing by the fence, and I suppose she'd had the other child, because she looked much thinner; and then she must have moved, because I never saw her anymore, after that.

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Most of my work on the house was in the nature of general home repairs and renovation, but I also worked on two major projects, for which my landlady, Martha, paid me extra. One, as I've mentioned, was the central staircase, which I rebuilt and refinished; the other was an oriental-style porch I built from scratch that extended out from the kitchen into the back yard. Martha designed it to go with the rock garden she'd set up three years before; when it was done, it was a sturdy, handsome thing of redwood, cedar, and yellow pine, with an enclosure below, sheathed in reed fencing, for storing bicycles and garden tools. It was during the construction of this porch that I met Dwayne and Rodney.

This was in my second summer in Bed-Stuy, one more than I'd reckoned on. Temperatures hung near a hundred for close to two weeks, bad weather for the heavy work of digging footers and setting posts, cutting and planing the pine boards for the deck so they fit tight and waterproof together; but I was nearly out of cash, and tired of borrowing. I worked, drank quarts of water, and ate bags of pretzels and peanuts to make up for the salt I lost in sweat. It was hard, lonely work, and though I kept at it, I also welcomed any chance to interrupt it. So I was pleased when I noticed, peering at me from behind the peak of the neighbor's garage, two small sets of eyes.

"Hello!" I said, "you interested in this kind of work?" But they stayed where they were, half hidden, and said nothing. I stared at them a minute, then shrugged and went back to work. Still, their presence made the work seem somehow more important, and I felt my movements growing more precise and sure. I looked up again after a minute or so had passed, and saw they hadn't moved. I looked again a minute later, and they were gone. I worked through the day alone.

Next day, though, there they were again, hanging their heads over the edge of the garage roof upside-down, giggling and snickering. They held their ears with their hands when I started the

circular saw. "Hey! What's that thing makin' all that noise?" the smaller of the two boys asked me, showing me his wide, thin smile.

"It's a saw," I said, holding it up to show them. "The blade goes around and around, real fast, like a bicycle wheel, and these teeth cut the wood." I flicked the blade with my fingernail; it made a hollow, ringing sound. "Watch!" I picked up a scrap of two-by-four and sheared off a corner. "See?" I held up the part still in my hand, then grabbed the corner I'd cut off. I tried to toss it to the garage roof, but the wind caught it, and it clattered against the side of the building, splitting in two. The boys, apparently frightened, vanished.

The following day, they came to the gate, instead; walked through unannounced, as far as I could tell, though they might have called to me and I hadn't heard.

I was planing the edge of one of the planks for the deck — you could smell the resin when the blade cut into the wood; that's what keeps yellow pine from rotting when it rains. I didn't see the boys until they were right in front of me.

"Hey!" I said, smiling at them, "Where'd you guys come from?" I put my plane down and wiped at the wood chips that clung to my face and arms. The taller of the two boys hung back, his hands in his pockets. The one who had asked me about the saw stood with his arms crossed in front of him, smiling that wide, thin smile. "So," I said, "how're you doin'?"

"Fine," the smaller boy said.

"That's good." I made to pick up my plane again, but sat down on the sawhorse instead. "Who are you guys, anyway?" I asked.

They told me their names: Rodney, the smaller and more talkative one, and Dwayne, the quieter and obviously older boy. Rodney lived a block over and was, I'm certain (though I let on I believed him when he denied it), one of two kids who had broken up a barbecue the summer

before by throwing rocks at us from that same roof. Dwayne was his "cousin"; he lived on my block, down toward Fulton Street. They were seven and nine, respectively.

Rodney had been doing all the talking, but then, just as I was about to announce that I had to get back to work, Dwayne spoke up. He pointed to my tool belt. "What's that?" he said.

I patted my left side and found the metal tape clipped to the belt. "This?" I asked, offering it to them on my palm. "It's a measuring tape. You use it to see how long things are. I'll show you. Stand here," I said to Dwayne, backing him up against one of the posts of the porch deck.

I got Rodney to hold the bottom of the tape near Dwayne's foot. I pulled the tape up to his chin and held it there. "How long have you been around?" I said, smiling, and then embarrassed when I realized that neither boy would get the joke. I pulled the tape up to the top of Dwayne's head.

"You lock it with this button," I said, slipping the mechanism down to their eye level, pointing with my thumb. "This is how tall you are: 54 1/2 inches; four foot six and a half."

Dwayne smiled, and looked at Rodney, and then both of them began to laugh as if at some private joke. It threw me a little, but I laughed, too. I released the lock and the tape was sucked into its container like spaghetti.

"Lemme see that!" Rodney said, grabbing for it.

"Hold on a second!" I said, raising it above his head. It was a good tape — a 3/4", sixteen-foot Lufkin — and I was afraid they might break it if I let them play with it. It was Martha's tape, and I'd have a hard time paying for a replacement. But I didn't want to get them mad. "Let me show you first," I said.

I taught them how to pull the tape out without over-bending it, and how to draw it back into the case without hurting their fingers, and how to hook the end on things, so you could measure

something larger than your reach. They set to wandering around the yard, measuring trees and wood and parts of walls, naming improbable figures and giggling all the time. They could not read the numbers. After a while, I began to worry about the time, and my tape, so I asked them for it back. I had to ask them several times, and I was afraid, for a minute, they might get crazy on me.

"I gotta get back to work," I told them. I was going to be planing down a few more planks, then drilling them out and nailing them with copper nails. "It might not be too interesting to watch, but you can stick around if you want to."

While I went back to work, they sat down on big stones in the rock garden. I looked up to them from time to time, to explain what I was doing, but the work was repetitious, and they soon lost patience with me. I was sorry I had nothing more exciting-looking to do.

Rodney got up first. "Well," he said, "we be goin' now."

"Okay, you guys," I told him. I set my hammer down and wiped the sweat from my forehead; it stung my eyes. "C'mon back any time. I'll be here."

This began a pattern we three repeated every other day or so over the course of the next week. I taught them what I could of measuring and numbers in the few minutes they stayed with me, and I let them try out a few cuts with the handsaw and hit (and bend over, and try to straighten) a few nails. Once in a while, things got weird. One time, Dwayne asked me if he could have my tape, and wouldn't give it back to me when I told him I needed it for my work. Rodney got hold of the circular saw and started it up. The kick of the motor knocked it out of his hand, but I think I scared him even more than the saw did when I hollered at him. "Those tools are really dangerous," I explained afterwards. "I've seen guys with their fingers cut off by saws like this," I lied. "I don't want anything like that happening to you." Basically, though, we got along. The kids added something to my day, as I did, I gathered, to theirs.

The following week it rained and I stayed inside, glad of the chance to do my own work for a change. But by the end of the week, the weather cleared, the rain leaving the air cooler and sweeter than it had been before. Saturday, I brought out the tools and again commenced to work.

Martha, my landlady, was out for the day, and toward noon my roommates headed down to the Village to see a movie. They invited me along, too, but I thought I ought to take advantage of the weather and work. Later in the afternoon, I heard the phone on the third floor. I let it go a couple of times, and then had a strong feeling the call was important — I get those kinds of feelings sometimes; I'm never sure what to make of them. This time, I dropped my tools and ran through the kitchen, took the stairs three at a time, and arrived out of breath at the phone on its sixth and, I hoped, not final ring. It was a wrong number; our number must have been a digit or two off from one of the two whorehouses in the neighborhood, because we were always getting calls for women, always from men, and the callers were usually embarrassed or annoyed when they found out it was one of us on the other end of the line. I was already down one flight of stairs when the phone rang again, and this time it was Bonnie.

\* \* \*

I hadn't gotten together with Bonnie for weeks, not since she started seeing this other guy, and I wasn't sure how glad I was to hear from her voice. I had been trying to get over her, to keep her from my thoughts; talking with her, soon all the old sadness and resentment, and a little of the joy, came back to me. I stood there, staring out the third floor window at the desolation of my neighborhood, feeling the grit and sweat between the tool pouch and my belly, aware of the gulf between what she'd wanted me to be and what I was, what I'd wanted from her and what little we had, together, now.

About twenty or thirty minutes into the conversation, I heard the front gate swing open and shut, and saw below me two small dark bodies walking along the house, to the back yard. I thought to yell down to the boys I'd be there in a few minutes, but I was afraid to break the mood of what Bonnie and I were saying. I heard the gate groan again a minute later. They'll be back, I thought.

I felt the weight of the phone call and the fatigue of another day's work as I dragged myself downstairs. I stopped in the kitchen for a glass of iced tea. When I got out to the porch, I stood there for a while, trying to remember where I'd left off; I couldn't clear my head. I patted my tool pouch, looking for my tape, but it wasn't there, and it wasn't on the railing I'd been working on, either.

I got a little frantic, I guess. I checked everywhere I might have put it — my tool apron again, beneath the porch, even in the basement, thinking I had somehow forgotten I hadn't had it with me all day — before I came to the conclusion I might have leapt to right away: that the boys had stolen it. What had they done that for? I thought, more hurt than angry. And what should I do now that they had?

Though I knew I shouldn't let them get away with it, it didn't seem very wise to go knocking on doors, making accusations. I decided to wait till Martha came home before I did anything. It was her tape, anyway, and she who would be living in the neighborhood long after I was gone.

We talked about the theft at dinner. Martha was content to let it go, but had no strong feelings about the matter. I decided to pursue it, anyway, to give the boys a chance to return the tape, and get things back on a friendly footing. The next day, Sunday, I wandered around the neighborhood, asking kids if they knew Dwayne and Rodney; eventually, I found one who knew where Rodney lived.

Rodney's mother was a heavy, tired-looking woman, older than I'd expected. She didn't know what I was talking about when I said something about Rodney and his cousin, but she knew who Dwayne was. She said Rodney wasn't home, but she'd talk to him, and I should come back at supper time to talk to her. "I just want the tape back," I explained. "I don't want to get the kids in trouble or anything."

I returned at six, and she was there with Rodney. "He said the other boy took it, and he still got it." Her eyes shone. "I gave him a good lickin' anyway," she said, as if to satisfy me. Rodney stood in the corner, glaring at me. I felt cold all over.

Rodney's mother told me Dwayne lived down the block from me, in the hotel, with another "uncle." I thanked her, and left, wishing for Rodney's sake and for my own that I had not come, but feeling compelled not to let it go, I had taken it this far.

I had never been in the corner hotel before. The outside doors hung open like a slack mouth. Inside, it was even gloomier, darker, shabbier, than I had imagined. I heard a radio, and a baby crying behind the streaked brown door of apartment 1-B, where I hoped to find Dwayne. I pressed the dirty, painted doorbell, and when I heard nothing, knocked several times.

The radio noise ceased and the baby's crying grew more muffled. I heard footsteps, and took in a deep breath, then a short one, to relax my voice. I was determined to somehow put everything right.

A stocky man with a short mustache opened the door. He looked a little dazed. Behind him stood a boy about two, naked except for a grubby T-shirt. I cleared my throat, but stood speechless for a moment, the script I had been rehearsing all the way over wiped clean. I cleared my throat again, and began.

"Hi," I said. "My name's Roger Cohen? I live up the block?"

The man said nothing, only gazed at me. "Is Dwayne around?" I asked.

"Dwayne's around the corner. What do you want with him?"

"I just came from his cousin's house, Rodney's house. His mother told me Dwayne lived here." The man nodded. In broken sentences, I explained how Rodney's mother had said Dwayne had stolen my tape measure. "I'd like it back," I said.

"Dwayne don't have any cousin Rodney," the man said.

"Uh, look," I said. I didn't know what to make of that, at the time. "I don't know whether he's Dwayne's cousin or not, but he's a kid Dwayne plays with, and he said Dwayne had my tape. I want it back. Do you know anything about it?"

The man looked me over carefully, now. "What's it look like?" he said. I described it to him. He said he thought he'd seen Dwayne playing with it, and that Dwayne had said he'd found it. He'd talk to Dwayne, and get the thing back. I should come by the next day to get it.

But as we were talking, Dwayne came in the building. My back was to him, but he must have started back when he saw me, because the man called to him, "Dwayne! You get over here!"

I turned. Dwayne took a couple of steps in our direction.

"This man tol' me you took his — what'd you say?"

"Tape. Measuring tape."

"His tape machine. He wants you to give it back."

Dwayne stood back from both of us, his hands in the pockets of his ratty cutoffs. The expression on his face was horrible. "I don't have it!" he cried. "A man got it! I sold it to a man!" he said. "He give me two dollars!"

"What man you sold his tape machine to?" the uncle asked. Now there was an edge to his voice, though I could not tell for whose benefit.

"Just a man," Dwayne said. "A man!"

None of us said anything. Then the uncle asked, "Can you get this man's tape machine back for him?"

Dwayne's eyes searched the floor. "I don't know," he mumbled, hardly audible. I saw his bare feet, his skin smeared with dirt and sweat, the cigarette butts near the doorway. What am I doing here, I thought. What am I doing here?

"How much that tape machine of yours cost?" the man asked me.

I thought somewhere between fifteen and twenty dollars; "Ten," I said, "ten dollars," but I knew even that was too much.

"Well," the man said, "how about it you give Dwayne and me a couple days to see if we can get it back, and if he can't find that man I'll give you the ten dollars. Okay?"

"That'd be fine," I told him, eager to let it drop. I had taken it plenty far enough. I would not come back.

\* \* \*

The boys, of course, did not come by again. I guess it was their company, as much as anything, that I had hoped to save, and I had failed horribly. I did see Dwayne once more, though, about a month and a half later. I was walking down Fulton Street, toward the subway, preoccupied, as was usual for me then, and in something of a hurry. Coming toward me, kicking a beer bottle along the curb, was Dwayne.

"Hey!" I called to him, smiling the smile I save for kids, "hey, Dwayne!"

He took another step, then his whole body stiffened.

"Hey, how're you doing?" I said. I had by then, for a moment, forgotten the terms we'd parted on. Dwayne hadn't. He said nothing. I think he was afraid I'd hit him, or holler at him. Stupidly, remembering, I asked, "Hey, what ever happened to that tape?"

"I'm gettin' it back," Dwayne told me, at once furious and about to cry. "I'm still tryin' to get it back."

My face had a hard set to it; I could feel it, but I couldn't change it. "Okay, Dwayne," I said quietly, sick at my response. "Okay, you bring it by when you get a chance. Don't worry about it," I said, knowing it was far too late to tell him that.

\* \* \*

In time, I got used to living in Bed-Stuy, in the sense that I hardly ever questioned it anymore, though occasionally — walking past the burned-out shell of Thriftees Super Market and Grocery, where the numbers runners used to have coffee, or talking with Sandy who at eighteen had already aborted her third child, or passing the bottle caps embedded in the asphalt and knowing from them the habitation of the corner, or listening to crazy Jessie sing gospel outside the abandoned garage she lived in — I would start at the fact that I was still there, this was my life, my home; I was an alien, a foreigner, as much as if I had spoken another language, and I don't think I ever completely ceased to feel it. It was much more than my white skin.

Still, I stayed, even after I could reasonably, from a strictly monetary point of view, have left. I found, always, some reason to linger, much as my father, perhaps, had found reason to remain where he was for so long. I can remember him, after he'd closed down his first store, telling me he wished he'd been the kind of man who was more willing to take risks, to give up what he had to

try for something grander. I remember observing to myself, then, the risks he took in remaining where he was.

His store was just a few blocks from where he was born. I wonder how he must have felt, my father, when the neighborhood began to change, the old Jews moving out or dying, the blacks moving up from Georgia, the Carolinas, Alabama, and spreading out from the city's south side. I wonder what made him stay, how he reckoned with it in his mind.

He had spent his childhood there among his kind; even at the start of his business the neighborhood must have been mostly Jewish, judging from the remnants of that culture which in my childhood still remained: the old stone temples were now churches with rummage sales, and Bingo on Saturday, our Sabbath. I see him stolidly persisting, adapting to the changes, their implicit threats, more by failing to acknowledge them in his heart than by any other means. And yet he could not have kept them all in check: his feelings, his fears, his sense of something lost.

It was my mother, in the end, who finally got him to leave. I was in college, still, and not at home that often, but even so, I was witness to their arguments more than once; or more precisely, to my mother's railing at my father, and his increasingly less certain self-defense. He would sit at the table eating, and at some point in the meal would make some justification for an unpleasantness of that particular day, some remark that indicated his intention to remain. My mother, who had long before convinced herself that my father had agreed to move the store, would get angry.

"We've been through this already," she would say. "We've decided."

My father's face would grow hard and set, and a beleaguered tone would come into his voice as he spoke my mother's name. Within minutes she would be crying.

"You and that stupid store," she would say. "You're so stubborn! What about me? What am I going to do if they come in and decide to shoot you?"

My mother would sob and accuse, my father would alternately fight back and try to comfort her. My siblings and I would keep quiet, as we had done when we were younger, and they would argue about us.

It may have been the part of my mother in me that in my case, too, won out. As my mother must have decided for my father and herself, so one half of me seemed to decide for the whole: that I deserved a different sort of life, that it was time to go.

\* \* \*

During one of the winter months in the year before I left, a fourteen year old Bed-Stuy kid was shot to death by a policeman. The kid had jumped a turnstile, and the transit cop who killed him claimed he had to shoot because the boy came at him with a knife. No weapon of any kind was found near the body, but the cop was never charged.

That spring, a black priest was choked to death in a struggle with several police officers, his larynx crushed by a billy club. The papers reported that his death was an accident, but my next-door neighbor, who had been a friend of the dead man, told me witnesses described it as murder. When it became clear no charges would be brought against any of the cops involved, angry blacks organized a demonstration that closed down the Brooklyn Bridge for several hours; it made headlines in the Daily News, half the front page taken up by the photograph of the great stone structure, the technological marvel of its day, clotted with angry black faces and raised fists. For weeks thereafter, black storekeepers on Fulton Street hung poster-sized portraits of the dead

priest, blown up from a snapshot, in their windows. I remember his cool, sad eyes staring at me, accusing, from half a dozen sites as I walked along the street.

By the time muggings became a regular topic of conversation among the white people in my neighborhood, I'd been in Bed-Stuy close to two years. At first, I attributed these muggings largely to their victims' inexperience, rather than to any change in the neighborhood. I'd lived with students on and off since I'd come to the area, and I knew them to be somewhat cavalier — as I had learned not to be. But after a friend of one of my roommates was robbed and stabbed on his way out of the subway, I began to attach more significance to some of the small things that had happened to me. My roommate's friend, a third-year painting student at Pratt, was in the hospital for weeks with internal injuries — he'd been stabbed several times in the gut — before anyone could say for certain whether he was likely to live. When he came to, he said he hadn't put up a struggle. They had cut him, as far as he could tell, for kicks.

A few incidents stand out as personal warnings that things were changing.

One cold, gray, autumn evening, while on my way home for supper, I noticed a couple of guys on the stoop of the hotel on Fulton Street. I was nearly upon them before I heard the chanting. At first I couldn't quite make it out, but when I'd gone a few more steps, I understood it clearly: "Wring that honky's neck," one of the young men was saying; "Wring that honky's neck! Wring that honky's neck!" he sang, as if performing an incantation.

Some months later, on a summer-like, spring afternoon, I was walking home from the hardware store on Myrtle Avenue with some curtain rods and nails. I'd taken the back way, past the beverage center and the ramshackle garage in which crazy Jessie lived. Although this route was shorter, I tended to avoid it; but that afternoon I was tired of zigzagging from safe block to safe block, and besides, there were people up and down the street. Not far from my corner, I saw

two bare-chested kids chasing each other in the roadway, their slick bodies gleaming in the sun. The smaller of the two looked about thirteen; the other was a few years older. They stopped as I drew nearer, and stood together in the middle of the street.

"Lotta white mothafuckers movin' in here these days," I heard the young one say. His voice was musical; I pretended not to hear.

"Hey, whaddaya say let's rag that mothafucker," his high voice said this time. I was by then past them. I shifted my grip on the curtain rods I was carrying, and wished I had bought something with more heft.

"What motherfucker?" a deeper voice asked.

"That white mothafucker, over there," the first one said.

I began to measure in my mind my distance from the corner, and to listen for the fall of footsteps from behind.

"Him?" asked the deeper voice. "That motherfucker don't got no more money than I have," he said.

When I reached the corner, I let out the breath I had not realized I'd been holding. Later, telling the story to my roommates, I had to laugh, though even then I could not feel laughter was the most appropriate response.

About two months after the painting student was stabbed, a white shopkeeper from Queens who had worked in the neighborhood for nearly thirty years was shot to death by two sixteen year old kids while he waited on the subway platform for a ride home. My roommate Elliot moved out shortly after that. Noel, a theater major, soon replaced him, but a few weeks later he came in, breathless, and reported that he'd almost been knifed. Then within a month my other roommate, Drew, was mugged. He'd just walked out of the liquor store on Fulton Street and was on his way

to a friend's house for dinner. One guy blocked him from the front while two more came up from behind. They dragged him around the corner and pushed him to the ground, face down, and one held a knife to his neck while the others went through his pockets.

"I couldn't see their faces," he told me, "but I got a good look at the knife. It was about eight inches long, shaped like a triangular file."

"A stiletto, I think that's called," I told him.

"They call it a pig sticker around here," he said.

After Drew was mugged, I made it a point to stay off the streets in my neighborhood much after dark. If I was going to be out late, I made plans to stay with friends whenever I could. I started calling realtors, looking around for apartments in the Village or Park Slope, though even there, I knew people who'd been hassled. I thought about leaving New York altogether, but didn't know where to go. I bought myself a knife.

Walking home on those evenings that I did end up returning late, I must have fought a thousand muggers in my imagination. Sometimes I'd win, sometimes they would. I could never tell, in advance, which way the battle would go:

***one:***

I am turning the corner from Fulton to Washington and it is dark and warm, nobody on the street. But leaning against the wall of the grocery on the corner, skulking in the shadows, is one man with a knife. He leaps into the light and I can see the gleam of the street lights in his blade. He is fast, but I am faster, and have taken the corner wide enough to leave myself room to move. I carry an umbrella with a weighted handle; I have been holding it like a club, and in one motion, I whirl and swing hard and fast across my attacker's eyes, breaking his nose. As blood begins to trickle down his face in thin, black lines, I kick him in the groin. He doubles over, dropping his

knife. I ram him with my shoulder and knock him to the ground, then stomp on his wrist when he reaches for his knife, hear it snap. I leave him on the sidewalk, groaning, then slowly walk away.

***two:***

I am coming home and at the corner of Fulton and Washington there are two of them waiting, and I do not see or hear them till they are upon me. Although I have my knife, each of them has one, too; I am slow, hesitant, and when I reach for it they grab it from me easily. They rush me, and I feel the steel pierce my gut, a coldness. I am suddenly weak, and sink to the ground, and now it is warm where they have cut, and the warmth oozes down my side. My head hits the pavement but I do not feel it. I hear them laughing, sense them rifling my pockets while my body begins to feel colder and the sky turns black and purple around me. I hear their voices talking far away. "Fucker pulled a knife," one says.

"You don't pull no knife on me!"

There is no pain but I cannot move. "Hey, let's split," I hear another voice say. "I think you hurt him bad!" And then I feel a boot smack against my head, the concrete scraping the flesh from my cheek as my head is jerked across the pavement. The faraway voice growls inches from my face: "Mothafucker, you don't pull no knife on me!"

\* \* \*

Linda and I had met several months back, when I was visiting my parents in Cleveland, where she worked as an elementary school teacher. Since then, we had tried without much success to get to know each other through letters and long distance telephone calls. Then she came to New York for a weekend conference. We met in Little Italy for dinner, and I wound up escorting her

back to her aunt's, near Coney Island, and staying around there for a while. We had a really nice time, but it was past two before I finally started home.

It was early summer, but the weather had turned cold and wet. I considered taking a cab home, but was short on cash, and dubious of being able to catch one out there at that time of night. I took the F train to downtown Brooklyn, then caught the A train home.

By the time the train pulled into my station, I was the only white left in the car. Two or three people got off at my stop; I stayed close as we climbed the stairs to the outside. Breathing in the smell of piss and stale tobacco, I told myself that in ten minutes I'd be home, and what fears I'd had would seem senseless to me then.

Fulton Street was quiet up and down its length, and the bright, pink lights gave it an eerie feel, like a movie set for a ghost town. There was still a heavy mist in the air, but it wasn't raining anymore. I zipped my leather jacket and stuck one hand in my pants pocket. I'd hoped one of the people who'd gotten off the train with me would be heading my way, but they all went in different directions and were absorbed into the mist. I walked to the corner and tried to pick the safest route home.

I heard somebody suck his teeth. To my right I saw his object, a woman swaying her hips, walking down the street. Between me and her were two men slouching in a doorway, smoking cigarettes. I decided to cross Fulton Street to avoid them.

Halfway across, I heard one of them shout, "Hey you." I didn't look back. I remember trying to walk tough and feeling, instead, awkward and stiff. When I got to the other side of the street, I picked up speed, trying to put some distance between me and the two guys on the corner. I hadn't taken ten steps before I heard a tandem patter from behind. I looked over my shoulder and saw

the two men from the doorway trotting toward the curb. They reminded me, somehow, of a team of horses, their movements were so neatly paired.

I could feel the texture of the pavement through my boots, and hear the beat of my footsteps keeping pace with theirs. The mist left a taste like metal in my mouth and made my body feel buoyant and sluggish, as if I were moving through water. I heard the two men's footsteps growing louder, moving faster. I forced myself to quicken my own pace, and moved closer to the curb.

It was four blocks to my house, and three to the turn off Fulton Street. I wasn't confident I could outrun them all the way home, and I knew that running would give me away. I walked even with them for another block or so, trying to figure out what to do, and then I heard them gaining on me again. My chest tightened; I was getting short of breath. I fought to make myself understand this was really happening, there was something that I really had to do. I veered off the sidewalk and into the street itself. I opened my jacket, to let in some air.

Walking in the middle of the road, I felt for the moment safe, but my turn was coming up and the two men were nearly parallel with me, now; I could see them from the corner of my eye. I had the sense they knew they could afford to wait.

I had only half a block to go before the turn, and I didn't know yet what to do. I remember actually praying for a cop, begging God for a cab to happen by or a car I could flag down, but the street was quiet and empty as far as I could see. I scanned the sidewalk, but saw only a couple of drunken men and giggling women near the after-hours club across the street, and, barely visible in the mist, a man in a white raincoat coming toward me from a couple of blocks away.

Moving at a clip just this side of a run, I took the corner sharp, cutting directly across their path. I saw them clearly for the first time, not half a dozen feet away: tandem specters, hooded,

one in army green, the other in iridescent blue. Immediately, I heard their footsteps round the corner, too.

I crossed the street. It was my last evasive tactic, and it put me on the side of the street opposite my house, but at least it also put some space between us. If I had to, I thought, I could wake my friends Jeremy and Denise, the architect and his wife, if I could just make it a few houses further down.

I was nearing the second entrance of the hotel on the corner when I saw the taller of the two motion to his partner with his thumb. I watched them start across the road. For a moment, I indulged the thought they weren't after me at all, they just lived in the hotel, they were simply heading home. I almost laughed. Then I saw how they had gauged their path to mine. I felt in my pockets. All I found were my keys and a penknife I'd had since I was a kid. I thought of scratching at their eyes, and felt my sweaty fingers slip on the worn plastic of the handle. It was, I thought, too late now to run.

When they were hardly more than a car's width from me, I stopped. "What's happening?" I asked.

They took another step or two and stopped, as well. "What's happening?" the taller one repeated. Their rain hoods left their faces in shadow, but I could still make out their teeth and eyes. "Whaddaya mean, 'what's happening?'" he asked me. They each took another couple of steps ahead, cutting off the sidewalk in front of me. We were no more than two or three feet apart.

The tall one giggled, and slapped his partner on the shoulder. "'What's happening?' he says." He said it in falsetto. He laughed again, then turned a colder look on me. "Do you know me?" he asked. I didn't know what to say. "You don't know me," he went on. "Whaddaya mean, tellin' me

'what's happening?'" They shifted apart a little, backing me toward the wrought-iron fence in front of the hotel, effectively surrounding me.

I tried to assume a casual air; "You know," I said, "that's just something you say to people when you pass 'em on the street." I could hear the failure of my tone. "Sort of a friendly greeting," I went on. "I live just up the block; I see somebody on the street in my neighborhood, I'm gonna say hello."

The tall one showed his teeth again in a kind of smile. "Yeah?" he said. "Well, we live around here, too. That don't mean nothin'. What're you tryin' to say?"

I could feel them circling, figuring. I nudged forward just a little, to see if they would let me through. The short one jerked his hand in his jacket pocket; he took a half step back. "He's got a knife," he whispered, then pulled his own blade out part way.

The taller one kept his footing. "Hey, you don't got a knife, do you?" he said. I could see his teeth again, shining through his snarl. I stepped back, and bumped into the fence. "What is this, huh?" I said quickly. I could feel the iron against my spine.

The tall one took up the space between us. His head was silhouetted against the street light, and in the mist, it seemed to have a halo around it. "Okay, now," he said slowly, "whaddaya got in those pockets?" Their circling, I understood, had come to an end.

I stood there, my right hand still in my pocket, for what must have been a full minute, trying to think of something else to say, something else to stall them or appease them. But I'd used up all I had. Then from behind I heard a quiet voice say, "Don't shoot him yet," like a waiter in some comedy calling out, hot soup! hot soup! The man in the white raincoat I'd seen some minutes earlier stepped into our midst. "Hey, anybody got a dollar?" he continued. "I sure need to borrow

a dollar." The two muggers and I looked at each other as if to say, What the hell is this? And then I saw he might be my ticket home. I took one step forward.

The four of us began to move up the block, the man in the raincoat in the lead, I following a foot or two behind him, and the two muggers bringing up the rear. I felt extraordinarily elated, if at the same time still afraid.

"Hey, now," the tall one repeated, "what you say you got in those pockets?"

I wasn't thinking anymore, but I was moving, inching around the man in the white rain coat, trying to position him between me and the other two. "My keys," I said, "my wallet" — should I have said? Of course they would know that — "a packet of kleenex, and a Boy Scout knife I've had since I was a kid."

"A knife! See, I told you!" the short one said.

"Ooooooh, gimme some kleenex, I gotta wipe my nose," the tall one taunted, but they were beginning to drop back.

I automatically reached for my back pocket. "Watch it," the tall one warned. It embarrassed me. I hadn't realized I didn't have to listen, anymore; I was nearly home.

When I was within easy reach of the house, I made a break. I ran hard across the street, vaulted over the gate, and leapt up the stairs. I heard the tall one calling after me, "Lookit him run! Look how scared he is!" I didn't turn around until I was just about in the door. They started toward me, then stopped in the middle of the street.

"You wanna know what's happening?" the tall one asked me. "I'll tell you what's happening," he said. He pulled back the hood of his rain jacket, revealing in the light of the corner street lamp a cap made from a nylon stocking. He pulled it down over his face. "This!" he said. "This is what's happening, m-a-a-an!" He made another dash toward me, then aborted it.

I slipped inside and locked the door. Leaning against it, I could still hear their quick, derisive laughter.

\* \* \*

There is an argument my father and I have repeated, with variations, for many years:

- Ever since you were sixteen, you've been telling me, 'Dad, I'm sixteen, I have my own life, I know what I'm doing. Dad, I'm seventeen, I have my own life, I know what I'm doing, Dad, I'm
- Okay, Dad.
- eighteen, I know what I'm doing, Dad I'm nineteen —
- I said okay! I get your point! I said that then, and I'm saying it now, and I still mean it. It's my life, and I wanna live it my own way. I'm sick of fighting with you about it. I don't tell you how to live your life.
- Can't I talk to you like a father talks to his son? You say I don't talk to you. Every time I try, you contradict me. Every time I've ever given you any advice, you've turned around and done the opposite. And where has it gotten you? It's always worked out bad.
- What do you mean, it's always worked out bad?
- Look at you! Would you call your life a shining success?
- Would you?

But with each repetition, the argument gets less severe, and the gap between sessions grows longer; it has been several years, now, since the last time we spoke this way to one another.

Whether this is because my life is more to his liking — I have a job, and live in a neighborhood he would find acceptable, and have long since cut my hair — or because he has grown more to

accept the choices I make, or because he is simply tired of trying to change me, I don't know. I think it is he, not I, who has changed. I believe my father sensed he would lose me, as my mother's family lost my Uncle Paul, if he and my mother continued to treat me as the child they struggled to correct. I have enjoyed the way things have been, these past few, quieter years.

\* \* \*

I left Bed-Stuy and New York City a few weeks after my encounter with those men. I didn't know, then, where to go save out, and so I packed up my things in cardboard boxes from the beverage center up the street, rented a U-haul truck, and drove off to Cleveland, to my parents' house. I remember feeling, as I headed over the bridge and onto the New York State Thruway, that I was leaving something behind, had given up. I could feel the weight of all my belongings stacked behind me, the accumulation of five years in the city, letters and books and so many uncompleted projects. As I eased off the Thruway and onto Route 17, I skidded, slightly — I was unused to driving trucks — and had a vision of the truck overturning, all I owned catching fire, burning quickly to nothing. I recovered control of the truck, but the image stayed with me for a while. As I gained Route 17 and felt myself beyond the bounds of the city at last, I understood I did not need the fire to release me, after all.

\* \* \*

In his letter, my father talks to me of his reasons for retiring. "As you know," he says, "we are in the process of closing down the store, after thirty years of good times and bad times. I haven't told Dr. Glick yet, because he advised me not to retire, unless I had plenty of money and wanted to travel and do things I couldn't do when I was working. He said I'm much too young.

"I guess he's concerned that I'd just sit around and do nothing but eat, get fat, and wreck all the good things that surgery, work, exercise, and keeping busy have done to put me into the shape I'm in today. However, after working most of my life since graduating from High School, I think I can stand loafing for a month or so, especially the cold, snowy, blowing winter months, and then look for something to do later on.

"Mom has also worked hard, right alongside me, and many times, even harder, especially since my surgery, when she had to practically run the business all by herself. To this day, she still does a lot of the buying, selling, taking care of the bills, plus running the household, which is itself almost a full-time job. So for Mom's sake as well as my own, we both decided to call the store quits. Two more broken windows since you were home, and calls from the Police Department in the early morning hours, have helped us make that decision."

My father does not know that from my mother I have already heard a somewhat different version of this story. I imagine them sitting up in bed together after the second call to tell them of the broken windows:

- We're closing down the store.
- What?
- I said we're closing the store.
- What do you mean, closing the store?
- We're closing down the store. Two calls in the middle of the night is too much.
- We can't close the store!
- Yes, we can.
- How can we close the store? We'll never get rid of all that stuff.

— We'll get rid of it. You said we couldn't move off Edison Street, and we did. We'll have a going-out-of-business sale. We'll put ads in the paper. We'll call Sol. Other people go out of business. We'll manage.

— We can't close down the store.

— Yes, we can.

— What're we going to do? We can't live on Social Security.

— We'll figure something out. I'll get a job. We'll take care of kids. We'll do what Pearl and Bertha do, with the auctions and the flea market. We'll manage.

— We're not closing the store! Don't be ridiculous!

(short silence)

— Ben, we're closing down the store. If you don't want to close it, you can run it yourself, because I'm not coming in anymore.

(long silence)

— All right. Can we wait till the first of the year?

But so be it. My father's version, too, has meaning to me.

His letter goes on to describe how they're liquidating their merchandise. "As it is," he writes, "I've been slowly bringing home all the good stuff, things that are new and that I hate to sell at a loss, so I can just about stock a small store right now with what I have in my closet and basement." (He exaggerates, I'm sure.) "Mom has also been bringing a lot of the good dishes and collectibles home. We spray everything real good, so we don't bring home a few of our friends, the cockaroachillas — that's the affectionate word for cockroach." He goes on about what the rest of the family has been up to since I was last in town. My brother Art is "skinnier than ever and working very hard and long hours. I'd like to see him put some of the weight he lost back on

and work less hours, but there again, just like you and I and Alan and Leslie and Mom, we Cohens just don't settle for mediocrity. I personally think we can be proud of our attitudes. I hate the poor workmanship and salesman's attitudes I come across every day."

Like I say, it's a warm letter. Underneath, there is a message of support, and though I know we still have a few more arguments left us, I believe him when, in closing, he says he wants me to succeed in whatever it is I do. "I love you, son," he says. "Remember that — always."

We still don't see eye to eye, and perhaps we never will; but I'm not sure it really matters anymore.