

Another Olympic gymnast whose taut body we'd used for kindling made the morning cover. Cute black girl. Two time gold medalist with a winning smile. But she wasn't smiling in the picture. You could see the scar on her cheek, under the concealer. And with her hair pulled back in an officious bun, eyes red from crying and hackles high, it looked literally like she'd been burdened by the weight of the headline itself which read, in indelible ink above her head, COACH CAUGHT WITH HAND IN COOKIE'S JAR!

A shame, really, but editors trying not to be the reason people stopped reading the papers was why I stopped reading the papers. I tossed the ragsheet in the trash and checked for time.

Our appointment was for 9. My watch read 9:18. Lateness to be expected for a public school principal, this one in particular, so I sat there like a delinquent awaiting sentence, eyeing the dusty plaques and framed degrees on her office walls, the photos on her desk, listening to announcements over the loud speaker and hormonal eruptions from the hallway—until she showed.

All told, I waited fifty minutes before Suzanne arrived—perfectly coiffed natural and canary sundress gliding by—long enough for me to feel agitated. It was always a kind of ex trance when she walked into a place, already on her way, gone as quickly as she came and tired from moving backward into a future she spent all her time and energy trying not to accede to. We first met as students at Brooklyn College, when her favorite color was the red of Adorno's flushed face and two black sociology majors dating made sense. Until it made too much sense and we tired, having studied our way into the other's nothingness. Nowadays kids called her Mrs. Pettibon. The rock on her left ring finger a testament to the years and what I hadn't given her.

She dropped a short stack of legal-size manila folders on her desk and sank into the armchair behind them. "These are Bobby's files," she began. "He's a really bright boy, but I'm worried about him. Really worried. And worried about the kids around him. We had him take a placement test and he scored in or above the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile in each of the subjects, which is remarkable. One of only a handful of our problem students in our school to do so well. But he's been acting out, demonstrating some anti-social tendencies. Some downright hateful shit, to be perfectly honest with you. At this point, I really don't know what to do."

She slid one of those thick folders across the desk. It fell like a brick in my lap. The files were worse than I thought. Fighting, not uncommon for a boy. But sexual harassment of girls older and much younger. Petty theft. Assault of a teacher. Reports of gang affiliation, hand signs and colors displayed in and out of the classroom. It was a miracle the boy hadn't already been locked up.

"You call Yvette?" I asked.

“Several times. No response. Talk some sense into him,” she pled, her cat eyes wide. “It’s gotta be you.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“We can schedule a meeting today? Tomorrow at the latest. Yesterday the truant officer caught him [REDACTED]. It’s urgent you get to him before he gets to someone else,” she said. “Or someone gets to him. I got a bad feeling.”

“First thing tomorrow morning,” I replied. “Same time. Let me read these files and talk to his people before I meet with him.”

She nodded once in agreement, checked her watch, got up brusquely, and made her way back toward the fray of teen bodies in passing. As she rushed by, I couldn’t help take in her scent again, which hadn’t changed since college and still did something to me—memories of musk that put a sudden ache in my chest. An ache, for a split second, I thought she felt too because she’d turned back from the doorway and opened her mouth as if to say something, something I imagined weighty and impossible to refuse, a word to open wide a book that hadn’t been closed. But the moment had come and gone and instead she said through an unreadable grin, “Thanks, Paul.” And that was that.

I couldn’t help glancing at her thin wrists, remembering when last she’d yanked those wrists loose from my grip. I wasn’t that man anymore. We’d both grown up.

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“I woke you?”

“You know this when I sleep…”

“I wouldn’t have bothered if it wasn’t serious… I got a call from Bobby Jr’s school.”

“What now? Is he ok? What happened?”

“He’s fine, for now. It’s just—is something going on with y’all? At home?”

“Whatchu mean ‘something going on at home…’ You don’t never call here. You don’t never visit. Not even a ‘how you doing?’ just to check in.”

“You sleep all day and work all night. When am I gonna visit?”

“Weekends? Whenever. We family. You don’t need an excuse. And it don’t take but ten seconds to send a text.”

“Nah. You right. I been so busy with my own shit. Head in the sand. How you been?”

“Too late for all that nigga. You said something about the school. What they call for? My Bobby did something?”

“The school’s principal was concerned about Bobby’s behavior. They think he’s [REDACTED]. Say he’s been harassing girls around the school. Bullying. Thieving. Fighting with students and teachers. You notice anything different about him, his behavior?”

“Nothing,” she said, her voice deflated. “Look, I’m taking care of him, making sure he do his homework, putting food on the table and clothes on his back.”

“How’s things at the nursing home?”

“Same old. You know…”

“They paying you overtime?”

“You damn right they pay me overtime. I’m not out here cleaning up shit for nothing. You best believe they pay me extra. I wouldn’t do it for less. And they need me. I know these people. They trust me.”

“How’s your love life? I read your horoscope this morning…”

“Where?”

“The Post.”

“You know I can’t stand they horoscopes. So full of shit.” She laughed her menthol one hundred-hoarse laugh.

“In case you ain’t seen, it says of Pisces…*these days may feel like a drag on your soul. Everything you once dreamed would be seems to have gone the way of the dodo. But have you considered an alternative path? Something (or someone) may really surprise you beyond your wildest Piscean fantasies…You seeing someone?*”

“I started dating. Yeah. So what?”

“Yvee, stop it. I’m just curious. We haven’t talked in a while. I just wanna know what’s good with you. Tell me about this…guy?”

“Yes, nigga. A man. You know I’m strictly dickly. Stop playing.”

“I’m just messing with you.”

“Whatever, nigga. You corny.”

“So what’s his name?”

“His name, believe it or not, is Robert. He’s a deacon at l’Eglise de Dieu on Flatbush and Church. A good man. He got his mother in the nursing home. That’s how we met.”

“Wow, you swung wide right on the pendulum. Does Robert Sr. know?”

“I knew you was gonna ask me that. No he don’t know and you better not be talking to him behind my back either. It’s none of his business. He forfeit that privilege a long time ago. You better not tell him, Paul.”

“Why would I? You a grown ass woman. He don’t need to know your business unless you tell him yourself. And it sounds like you’re not on speaking terms. I respect that one hundred percent.”

“Good. Cause I know you like to talk.”

“Hush.”

“So what’s this with my Bobby?”

“They gave me a stack of his disciplinary records. I haven’t read all them, but it doesn’t look good.”

“What they say happened?”

“It’s a lot. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]”

"Lord Jesus," she sighed. "That's not the boy I raised. That's not my Bobby."

"You think maybe he's mad you got a new man?"

"The few times they met he seemed fine. But honestly I don't know. Bobby just like his father that way. I don't know how he feeling. He keeps it all in. I guess it's normal for boys his age, when they start becoming men. He's maturing. But this? Not my Bobby."

"These are serious allegations. Has he talked to Bobby Sr. lately?"

"No. Not to my knowledge. Why the school ain't call me first?"

"They said they did. Several times. And got nothing."

"You know I work nights. Sometimes I got the house phone disconnected, cell on airplane mode. And I don't answer numbers I don't recognize."

"I should've asked her to be more specific about the ways they tried to get in touch with you."

"Suzi?"

"The one and only."

"She still over there?"

"Yep."

"You a fool. The day you let go of that woman was the day I knew you was a jackass."

"She's married now."

"Good for her."

"Yep."

"You dating?"

"Trying."

"It's slim dickins out there, huh?" Her soft-mouth laughter again.

"Stop it."

"Oh you can give it but you can't take it? Waffle-colored niggas real sensitive out here."

"You funny."

"Mmhm. You a fool."

"That I am...Lord knows."

"So what you gonna do about Bobby?"

"I'll talk to him."

"Please do. Set him straight. I been tryna keep him level since they locked up Robert Sr., but it's hard with these hours and living single. I'm tryna raise this boy into a man, tryna keep him from going down that path, tryna..." She spiraled into a coughing fit.

"I know, sis. I know."

"Daddy asks for you." More coughing.

"Yeah?"

"Always asks when you'll visit."

"I'll go check on him this afternoon."

“He’d appreciate it.”

“I bet. Hey, listen. Is there anything Bobby’s interested in? Any hobbies?”

“He likes his music. Rap and shit. He’ll sometimes listen to my old soul records, if I got them on, but mostly rap or trap or whatever they call it now.”

“Ok... Music... He into sports?”

“I catch him watching games now and then, but he don’t really play. Not to my knowledge. He’ll play 2K though. He used to ask me every year round Christmas ‘Mama, can you get me the new 2K such and such?’”

“Video game?”

“Yeah.”

“Bet. Sorry I woke you. I’ll set him straight.”

“Please do.”

“Love you, sis.”

“Mhm. Talk later.”

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Funniest thing about Spring Creek old folks home is the smell—of shit and piss—and people polite about it perfume the air with flowers and fragrances, but it’s impossible to hide what old age does to your body when finally spared the vitality that compelled a younger you to make the mistakes you knew (and couldn’t have known) someday you’d regret. More embarrassing still, we suppose it’s the lucky ones who even have time to regret a misspent youth, but it seems to me a fate crueler than death. Half of them lamenting what they did, the other half lamenting what they didn’t do (or do enough of)—and the exceptional one or two who could smile frfr knowing they’d had their fill of life. Any way you look at it, there’s no hiding from the fact of mortality. Not that he ever bothered to hide from it.

Assuming he made peace with the indignity of death on a rental cot, Spring Creek rehab wasn’t a bad place to turn in one’s gun and badge and bid a final farewell to the world. Because Yvee worked there we got a significant discount and I could rest easy knowing she’d watch over him. Aside from the Stink of Starrett City, the care center was comfortable enough, had plenty for residents to do, and a mostly West Indian staff that seemed attentive to the fugue my father had become.

When I remember Daddy, I try to remember him slow walking a ways ahead of us in the gray of a church day, black trench like a cape with collar popped to hide the scabs on the back of his neck and sleeves hemmed not to hide his daddy’s gold watch. From his wrist hung a miniature umbrella, large enough for one, that swung like a censor as he walked and lent him a vaguely sacerdotal air.

But a holy man, he was not. Daddy was a dirty cop. The kind of man who, for as long as I knew him, reveled in witness of a person willing to wipe his ass. So to speak. If there was one thing he knew and always would know, it was how to get over—his inner Gantry not even the dementia could rob. Though rob it had, of some (not all) of his memories and motor skills. Sometimes he was so present, so wholly the man that raised us, I thought he was faking it—maybe even willfully “forgetting” what in his old age he could give a shit to remember. Other days the dementia transformed him into something wild, riven entirely from any sense of the familiar, a glimpse of his body made flesh in succumbing to social death. Yvette knew. She worked at the home and had to care for him on nights he woke up screaming because he didn’t know where he was, who he was, why he was there. On today he would prove, thank God, the former.

Daddy shared his room on the first floor with Mr. Grandal, who sat half-sleep in a recliner by the window. An old black Cuban fond of telling tall tales about his escapades in Africa with *Cbé*, Mr. Grandal was in relatively good health and quasi-mobile. He took his daily walk around campus after lunch and could make trips to the bathroom by his lonesome. Daddy, on the other hand, had been assigned to a wheelchair—and those wheels, when I’d arrived, were nowhere in sight. Hat in hand, I knocked once gently on the open door and announced myself.

“Buenos días señor Grandal. It’s Gerard’s son. May I come in?”

The old Cuban, never in a rush to do anything, turned slowly to face the sound and when he realized who it was standing in the doorway, his eyes lit up. He waved me in with both hands, like I was a trucker backing into his garage.

“Mira quien ‘ta’qui! Como estas papa?”

“Bien, gracias a Dios. Y usted?”

He shrugged. “I’m ok. Ya tu sabes. Soy biejo.”

“Hey, me too. It’s coming for us all.”

He smiled and shook his head. Perhaps amused by the eager over-identification of a man who hadn’t quite lived half a life.

“So where’s my old man?”

“You father went pa’fuera. Solo.” He gestured toward the courtyard with a cool flick of the wrist.

“Oh yeah? Out there all by himself? I’ll find him. Bendición?” I pled, turning to leave the room, and could hear him faintly bless me... *Que Dios te bendiga mijo*. Seven years of Spanish and the saints still with me.

Back the way I came and all the aunties with IVs later, I found Daddy outside in the sun and wind staring at a pair of Jordans dangling from a power line. Sight of the old man triggered feelings of fear and juvie awkwardness. I started to sweat. Walking toward him felt like wading through waist-deep mud.

“Who you figure those belong to?” he asked to no one in particular or perhaps sensing the body on pins and needles behind him. Hearing his voice startled me, like I’d been caught out. But it was too late to walk away and I figured I was grown enough to pull myself out of the mud and attempt adult conversation. Maybe he could give me a bit of fatherly wisdom for my talk with Bobby tomorrow.

“Daddy, it’s me. It’s Paul.”

“Paul?” he said, spinning round to meet my gaze with eyes narrow and suspicious. “Look what the cat dragged in...I thought you was one of the nurses.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

He started laughing. His expression changed altogether. “Boy, I ain’t seen you hide nor hair. Where you been? What you doing here?”

On today he was, indeed, the former. As sharp as ever. And Lord forgive me, I began to wish for the dementia’s return. But as soon as I found myself daydreaming about his death, his eyes narrowed again and flitted suspiciously back and forth between me and a third, invisible listener—an awkward reminder of that preternatural sense my father always seemed to have for the sins of his son not yet committed.

“I think,” he leaned in and lowered his voice, “one of these dreadhead rasta bitches stole my daddy’s gold watch...”

And it never occurred to me that the dementia maybe amplified the worst parts of my father, that my sister had to deal with this nightly, that the disease was more than just the silence of dust settling over old age, but the violent stripping-away of what made a man defer to any humanizing sense of shame or decency.

“Daddy, you gave me the watch when I turned thirty.”

“I did?”

“Yeah. See?” I pulled back my jacket sleeve to show him what he already knew and couldn’t in the moment remember.

“Oh that’s right.”

He looked like he’d just shit in his pants and couldn’t admit to himself the indignity.

“Yeah, that’s right,” he repeated. “Looks good on you too. Daddy woulda been proud of that.”

“Yessir.”

“Remind me...how old are—”

“I’m thirty eight years old this May.”

“Wow. Time flies. You married yet?”

“Nah. Still living that bachelor life.”

“Whatever happened to that girl...? Whatsername...”

I cocked my head to the side, looked at him vexed, pretended not to know who he was talking about. But of course—*of course*—he pulled the name out of his ass, cobwebs and all.

“Suzanne. Right? Suzi. That was her name. Right? What happened to her? Boy I woulda lick the sweat off that girl’s ass she was bad.”

“She’s married now. I saw her—”

But before I could finish my thought he started laughing.

“Married?! Oh you fucked up! She left you for a real nigga. See, I woulda put it down on her so bad they’d have to pry her off this dick with a crowbar. You don’t let no woman like that go, son. But I guess it’s too late, ain’t it?”

“It’s too late.”

“Well, shit. Whatever then. That uppity bitch wasn’t for you anyway. A man got to inoculate himself against that kinda hoodoo. Take the nickel out her nation sack and keep it pushing.”

He took my hand in his own dark, bony hand. He glanced at the decades-old watch on my wrist, then looked me dead in the eye.

“It don’t matter anyhow. I’m proud of you, son. You done good by me and your sister. Especially after she let that no good nigga in her life. You took care of us. And I know your mother looking down from heaven proud of you too.”

“I appreciate you saying that, Dad. Love you”

“Yeah,” he replied and let go of my hand. “Me too. It’s getting cold out here. Wheel me back inside.”

I wheeled him back to his room with Mr. Grandal, passing all the aunties and their IVs, Daddy with a wink and a grin proclaiming to each as we passed *this my son*, and each returning a sad, sweet smile. Then I left.

I knew my mother wasn’t looking down from heaven, *proud of me*, because I’d done nothing to merit pride and she hadn’t died. She was still alive in East New York, not ten minutes away, and visited him twice monthly.



When I remember Daddy, most of the time I remember him in his policeman's uniform, flashlight in one hand, nine in the other. I remember me and the boys out in the park after dark passing a joint back and forth between us, thin white smoke curling under the orange glow of the sodium lamps. I remember a voice, grotesque and familiar, barking orders for hands up and against the fence. I remember a flash of white light so startling I could only make out the black outline of a cop, head sunk oddly into its shoulders, like it had no neck. I remember my boys without hesitation tossing the joint and sprinting in opposite directions. Gone. And I remember feeling frozen in place, ice in my veins as my father patted me down, as he commanded his partner not to bother with the other boys because they already had their nigger and he was going down to booking. I remember riding in the back seat of the cop car cuffed and staring through the cage at the scars on the back of my father's neck, the car silent save the radio dispatch humming its white noise. I remember the noise.

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After I left Spring Creek Rehab, I drove over to GameStop on Rockaway Pkwy to see about getting a copy of NBA 2K19 for Bobby Jr. The store was quiet, even for a weekday afternoon, and had that oddly enticing consumerist odor of plastic and vacuumed carpet. I was greeted by a young, presumably Latino, man with tattoos all over and hair slicked back into a short, curly ponytail. *Jaime*, read his nametag.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"Yeah, thanks for asking. I'm looking for NBA 2K19?"

"Of course," said Jaime. "What system you want it for?"

It hadn't occurred to me to ask Yvee what system my nephew was using. And Jaime, reading my uncertainty, suggested I purchase instead a gift card. Seventy bucks. More than enough to buy the game with a little left over for taxes and trinkets. *POP Toys*, Jaime noted as he handed me the gift receipt, were very popular with customers of all ages—and my nephew would most certainly want one of those bug-eyed pieces of plastic to go with his 2K19. *Like a souvenir*, he said. *For some kids, a trip to GameStop is like a destination vacation. Ya know?*

"Sure," I said. "Makes sense. Thanks for all your help, Jaime."

"Come back anytime. And feel free to call if you or your nephew have any questions."

Leaving the store I couldn't help feeling the gift was a flimsy attempt to convince a child at risk that he should go the straight and narrow. No matter how I tried to justify the purchase, the uneasy feeling wouldn't leave me.

I stopped at a McDonald's on the way home and ordered a black coffee, two apple pies, and a quarter pounder—in that order. No fries. No soda. *Just the sandwich, please*. The girl in the pick-up window, Amanda, dropped a

third pie in my bag and made sure I saw. *On the house*, she said before closing the window and resuming her duties. I sat in the parking lot feeling about ready to cry, but too tired to remember how. I drank the coffee, but couldn't touch the food. Not until I got home and hit the chillum twice.

On my living room floor sat a small box from Northwestern University Press filled with published copies of my dissertation. Six years of research and study stuffed into one tiny, unopened box. Downing reheated apple pies while high on the couch, I wondered what my book looked like, felt like. This had become part of my nightly ritual. The box arrived weeks ago with a congratulatory note from my editor and I still couldn't bring myself to open it and hold an actual copy. I enjoyed the fantasy and mystery of not-knowing, *Schrödinger's cat* style. I couldn't remember if the books were published hardback or soft, what the cover looked like (if they went with the Paul Pfeiffer *Fragment of a Crucifixion* still), or how many pages it totaled, and I was absolutely prepared to spend the rest of my life not-knowing. Which maybe honestly meant I was afraid to feel the weight of its failure in my hands and admit to myself the work had not been finished, that there was more to do, always more to do, and who was I doing it for anyway?

The title, *Get Mad: Anger's Affect e<sup>3</sup> Effect on Performance*, came from my young adult fascination with Paddy Chayefsky's "Network". Peter Finch as parodic prophet Howard Beale exhorting the masses to "Get mad!" managed to touch a post-adolescent nerve in me that hadn't yet gone numb.

*All I know is first you've got to get mad. You've got to say, 'I'm a human being. God Dammit, my life has value.' So, I want you to get up now. I want all of you to get up out of your chairs. I want you to get up right now and go to the window, open it, and stick your head out, and yell, 'I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!'*

Not the film's finest scene. It can't hold a candle to the brilliance of Beatrice Straight's scorned rebuttal to a cheating husband or said husband's later interactions with the mistress. But "Get mad!" obviously became the movie's most meme-worthy moment. If you've ever been to a hockey game, you've probably seen Finch qua Beale raving on a jumbotron after some home-team goon landed in the penalty box for driving his fist clean through a winger's helmet. Exactly the kind of spectacle Chayefsky's script satirized. Even having seen the movie in an era before social media and reality television, something about the pathetic, parabolic irony of the whole ordeal moved me.

So I used Beale's tirade as the epigraph to what would become the dissertation, my attempt at a comprehensive sociological analysis of anger's relationship to performance outcomes. In order to complete my analysis, I realized I had to categorize performance as either *competitive* (mediated by an objective/connective system of rule) or *social* (mediated by a subjective/conjunctive or cultural system of codes) and control for an operational definition of anger (when not explicitly self-reported). Data aggregated over a twenty year period (with a supplementary

four-year intensive study) suggested that anger had no significant impact on *competitive* performance, but severely hindered one's *social* performance.

One example of *competitive* performance I used in the study was Serena Williams's infamous match against Kim Clijsters at Indian Wells (unfortunately I had already submitted the final draft when Serena faced off against Naomi Osaka in the 2018 U.S. Open). And, staying with tennis, I needed look no further than the good-but-not-great career of a temperamental young player like Nick Kyrgios, whose tremendous talent was often overshadowed by his behavior. Kyrgios, who I had the unfortunate pleasure of interviewing, provided a fascinating pivot-point between competitive and social performance, illustrating how the constructs of the study overlapped.

In keeping with the general framework, the primary example of *social* performance used in the study was matriculation rates at New York City public and private high schools from 2007-2011. A wide net, some said, but I'd fished those waters long enough to know what I was doing.

Perhaps it seems obvious now that students with a record of misconduct are less likely to find their way into a healthy and productive environment following high school, but few sociologists were controlling for race in instances of anger that were potentially rational, if not outright healthy. I found, regarding social performance, that the so-called "anger" of problematic [black] actors was a catachrestic misnomer. This anger was sometimes an expression of righteous indignation. And the self-aware subject's indignation was, more often than not, a rational response [to unjust circumstances] belying another set of unaccounted intellectual benchmarks. In other words, yesterday's rabble rouser could be tomorrow's revolutionary. Malcolm X today we consider reactive to the status quo rather than reactionary, where once he was (and sometimes still is) considered nothing more than a reformed criminal. What's at stake is how this kind of anger was expressed between the ages of ten and twenty-four—a critical juncture. Without intending to, I'd begun to track a relationship between "anger" and "intelligence" in black boys—fodder for a follow-up to *Get Ma!* (tentatively titled *Keep That Same N.R.G.*). In these "problem" cases, it became impossible to measure positive outcomes in any conventional sociological sense because black anger as it animated radical thinking and transformation had so little to do with a subject's socio-economic status or professional development, and more to do with a spiritual or political or philosophical awakening. That's why, I think, the Rev. Dr. North was right when he said the greatest literary proponent of a Black Judeo-Christian ethos was James Baldwin. "Black literacy is the scandal that never stopped being scandal," I wrote, somewhere in the concluding chapter, thinking of Baldwin, thinking of boys like Bobby Jr. But the line was cut. We can't be black and free at the same time.

Anyway. Both my agent *and* my editor said the book was finding great success not only in academia, but in mass market as well. Requests were coming in for panels and speaking engagements and book signings, but really all I wanted was a fourth apple pie. I wanted to go back to McDonald's, vault the counter, and tell Amanda that she

was the most beautiful creature on God's green earth. Maybe she was waiting all day just to hear me say *Amanda, you're the most beautiful creature on God's green earth* and for my bravery she'd reward me with a fourth, fifth, and sixth apple pie. And black coffee. But I wasn't at McDonald's and Amanda definitely wasn't waiting for her Prince Smarming and all I had left was a burger too petrified to eat.

Per the eco-friendly insinuations of several exes, I started sterilizing my pants in the freezer and peeing in the shower before bed. The idea was to save trees, but it just made my pants smell like raw meat and my shower smell like piss in rain. I'd already been peeing in the shower for two months, well over the twenty-one days it took for an isolated behavior to become a habit, and I didn't yet have it in me to break the spell. So I peed in the shower again to save trees.

I fell asleep that night mid-yank in a fantastic vision of Amanda topping me off while I took her customers' orders at the drive-thru window. We were almost there when someone ordered a Happy Meal and I just kind of gave up tugging and let the sleep have me.

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I arrived promptly at 9 am for our meeting at 9:30 and after a gruff, female guard frisked me for weapons, I was escorted into Suzi's empty office. The receptionist, an older woman with a comparatively kind demeanor, informed me that the principal would return to the office shortly. In preparation for a long wait, I brought another copy of the Post. Today's headline: MAYOR DEFENDS PLAN TO RID CITY OF RIKERS! It was just enough distraction to keep me from anxiously over-preparing while I waited. The goal was to have a conversation, not give a lecture. I wanted *not* to rehearse what I'd say to the boy.

Bobby. Robert Whittier Jr., my sister's boy, was a hellion from birth. Foolish to pretend otherwise, especially in the presence of a child quick to take advantage of adult naïveté. In that sense he was extremely perceptive. Capable of reading people with deadly accuracy. I'm not surprised he tested so well. And though he'd been well taken care of by my sister, he was old enough to know why Robert Whittier Sr. would never come home again. He was there when it happened. Saw it all. Something he'd since assimilated into his personal narrative. He knew things. Perhaps more than most his age. At fourteen he was only just a freshman in high school and he was already *angry*.

He'd been such a cute little boy, though. Precocious. With a bad habit of biting people for amusement (because he thought he was a velociraptor). I remember the sweet, gap-toothed grin that made his *Hi Uncle Paul* sound like *Hi Unkew Paw*. And I remember how small and fragile his hand was in my own. But that was before Bobby Sr. got locked up and at some point in the lives of all black children, they stop being cute and start being the sacrificial panic the world needs to see itself upright. Call it a dark-mitzvah. Bobby Jr. already had his. I'm sure

Suzi was hoping my presence on today was early enough intervention to steer him clear of that wide American shoal called black tragedy.

A soft knock on the door jolted me out of my pre-meeting stupor. Suzanne, lo and behold, made her fragrant entrance at exactly 9:30 am. On today she wore a black jumpsuit and dangling afro-centric earrings. Her natural was perfectly quaffed and she wore light make-up, matte lipstick. But this time, maybe for the first time, I could see decades of world weary darkness under her eyes, where vessels and nerves had strained to support the weight of her watching. This in her otherwise unchanged face gave me pause. Broke the spell. Exposed the seam that made her body flesh.

“Good morning, Principal Pettibon.”

“Hi Paul,” she said, not bothering to sit down. “Thank you again for coming in. I have Bobby Jr. waiting outside. Are you ready to chat with him?”

“Of course,” I said, “bring him in.”

She opened the door and called for him to come. Bobby Jr., clad head to toe in blue, sauntered in and stood idle by the door with his head down and hands in pockets. He was tall for his age, like his father, and the spitting image of his mother. It was so strange. Like looking at my sister through one of those stupid gender-swap filters.

“Bobby, I’m sure you know Mr. Armstrong. You can have a seat beside him.”

He didn’t bother to greet me or even look at me. He just dropped his blue JanSport by the door and sank with startling weight into the old, wooden armchair next to mine. Suzanne sat across from us, hands folded over her stomach, waiting for me to start us off.

“Been a while, nephew. How you been?”

He nodded once. Said nothing. Kept his head down. I looked at Suzi as if to ask without words *did something happen?* and she looked back with no more to contribute than the raised eyebrow of a *you read his file, you know what happened...get to work*. I realized then that in order to get through to him, we’d need some privacy, some space for male bonding.

“Principal Pettibon, would you give us some privacy?”

She looked at me like *what are you doing?*

“I’d like to talk to my nephew one-on-one, if you don’t mind?”

“Alright,” she conceded and got up to leave. “I’ll be in the next room if y’all need me.”

As soon as the door shut behind her, I reached into my pocket for the gift card.

“I know I missed your last birthday kiddo, so I got you something. Your mama said you like 2K19?”

“I got that already.”

“Well it’s a good thing I got you this gift card instead. Seventy dollars.”

I was surprised by the timbre of his voice when finally he spoke, the silvery-grey of a gap-toothed grin verging on manhood. He looked at the card in my hand, then up at me.

“For real? That’s for me?”

“Of course, nephew. Happy belated birthday. Fourteen is a big deal.”

“Wow. Thanks,” he said, examining the card before shoving it in his pocket. “I thought I was in trouble.”

“Well, I heard you were [REDACTED] around school. Among other things.”

He retreated back into silence. If he was indeed [REDACTED] he knew not to cooperate. But he was young yet. His heart hadn’t hardened. There was still some fear, some need, some vulnerability I could appeal to.

“Been a long time since we talked. I’m sorry it had to be in the principal’s office, but I promise you’re not in trouble or anything. Principal Pettibon asked me to come talk with you cause she was worried. That’s all.”

“She got nothing to worry about.”

“Maybe so. But you know how women get. You know how your mama gets. They worry. They worry about *uw*. Of all things.”

“Like I said, she got nothing to worry about.”

“You’re hard-headed. Just like your mama. I talked to her yesterday. She told me you like music. Is that right?”

“Yeah. I fuccs wit it.”

“What you into?”

“Trap.”

“Trap? Like who?”

“Migos. Future. Travis. Uzi. Kevin Gates before he got locked. ASAP Mob.”

“That’s a lot of Atlanta niggas…”

“So?”

“You don’t like no New York rappers?”

“ASAP Mob from Harlem.”

“But they not really New York. Like Black Moon. See I grew up with that mean *boom bap* bass. Black Moon. Mobb Deep. Nas. M.O.P. Biggie. That was the era.”

“That’s old shit.”

“Whatchu mean?! That shit still bump. It’s classic. You tryna call me old?”

He shrugged and smiled, inklings of the little boy who liked to bite ankles.

“Damn, nephew. That’s cold. What about O.D.B. and Return to the Thirty-Six Chambers? Wu-Tang and Da Mystery of Chessboxin’?”

“It’s cool, but I’m telling you it’s old.”

“Nah chill. You about to get your card revoked. Listen to this…”

I pulled out my phone, scrolled through the music library, and started playing *C.R.E.A.M.* Because the speakers on the phone had so little juice on the low-end, I knew half the heart-pounding sound of the RZA’s production wouldn’t be there, but I had some hope the baroque piano loop and jaded lyricism could change his mind about the significance of old things.

“*C.R.E.A.M.*, to *this day*, sounds fresh to me,” I said after Raekwon’s verse. “It’s like you get to be the monster in someone else’s nightmare. That’s some grimy New York shit.”

“You sound like Funk Flex and all them old heads and everybody talking about the good old days. But I’m not interested in the good old days. It’s not right now. It’s not *my* era.”

“Alright, fair point, nephew. Someday, Lord willing, this’ll be your *good old days* of music. But what you think you know about trap?”

He got up, walked over to his bag by the door, reached in, and pulled out a white compact-disc sleeve. He sank back into the chair and handed it to me without a word, aware that what he’d given me spoke for itself. Written across the top in black marker was what I assumed to be the title of his mixtape ~~BAD~~•~~BXTCH~~•OP•OLIS, and his nom de mic along the bottom fold, *Yung Alpo*. On the back of the sleeve was written a dedication, *4 Nesha BX*.

“*Yung Alpo*?”

“Yeah.”

“*Alpo*? Like the dog food?”

“Nah.”

“This your mixtape?”

“It’s just three tracks I recorded in the AV room. Wrote and produced them myself.”

“That’s cool. Like an E.P. You got it on your phone?”

“Yeah.”

“Lemme hear it.”

The songs were nothing out of the ordinary for a nascent trap rapper. But the bouncy hi-hat, lack of sample, and dark, surging bass (programmed slightly off-rhythm and all of it obviously unmixed) were complemented by a promising triple-time flow from a clever, if inexperienced, lyricist.

“You got talent, nephew!”

“Thank you.”

“You may have changed my mind about a few things. Something I realized I really love about trap.”

“What’s that?”

“The hi-hat. It’s incredibly evocative. You know that hi-hat sound, right? *Tcktcktcktcktck*. It’s like a stove igniter that won’t light when you’re tryna cook up. Ya know?”

But he didn’t know. Not the feigned know-nothing of a man trying not to incriminate himself. He sincerely had no idea what I meant.

“You really have a future as an artist. I can get you some studio time if you want.”

“For real for real?”

“Yeah, a friend of mine from the good old days runs a studio in Flatbush. He used to mix tracks for Red Café and Maino and them.”

“Bet.”

“But, only on the condition that you give this stuff up. Put away all the blues, let go of whatever crew you’re running with, get serious in class—because I know you’re smart—start taking life seriously now, nephew. You’re not gonna get a second chance at this.”

He looked down at his hands. Twiddled his thumbs.

“Listen, I know your father. I know he’s the O.G. But he wouldn’t have wanted any of this for you. And if he found out you were going down this path, son, lemme tell you, he’d order niggas killed dead *from his cell* just to keep you out of these streets. These streets not for you. You are special. You are smart. You are talented. Nephew, you’re a star. If I had half your wit, I’d be on top of the world. Which is exactly where we all want to see you. Me. Your mother. Your father. Principal Pettibon. The world is yours. It’s yours. Do you hear what I’m telling you?”

He nodded.



“Here’s my card. It’s got my number on it. You call me for any reason. I got connects. Text me tonight and I’ll set up a meeting at the studio. Ok?”

He nodded, took the card, and shoved it in the same pocket.

“I’ll be waiting to hear from you. In the meantime, keep a clean nose, nephew. I don’t wanna hear anymore bad news because the next person to hear about it will be your father and he will not be pleased. And don’t let me find out you’re disrespecting women. You’re a black king. It’s your job to protect black queens. I remember someone in the hood looked at your mother wrong. You know what your father did? Shit. We don’t disrespect women out here.”

He nodded.

“Alright then. Love you, nephew.”

“Thanks,” he replied. “You too.”

He got up slow, picked up his bookbag, reached for the doorknob, and paused.

“Can I get my CD back? It’s the only one I got and I made it as a gift for a friend.”

“Yeah, of course,” I said, handing it back to him. “Is it *4 Nesha*?”

He shrugged and smiled. Then he left.

That night I dreamt I kept something like a pet grub. It had the sweet, rebel sentience of a wayward puppy and I was training it to be house-broken. Over time, it grew into the spindly legs and body of a vinegaroon with the face and wan smile of an anthropomorphized moon, if you can imagine it. And it burrowed into (and out of) a small, cracked conch that it used as a shell. Kind of like a hermit crab. Anyway, I kept trying and trying to train it to piss outside like a good pet. But all of the positive reinforcement and treats and woopy woop had proven useless. Nothing seemed to work. That is, until I reached a breaking point. My odd little friend learned how to go *number one* the right way only after I put it on its back and pressed my elbow into its abdomen or thorax, presumably where its bladder would be (if it had a bladder), and it all came whizzing out in a high arc over my shoulder. Then we both knew he’d piss when and where I commanded. I’d asserted my dominance. I was finally his alpha. Then I woke up.

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I thought about getting coffee and breakfast at McDonald's, but the odds I'd see Amanda again made me slightly uncomfortable. Instead I went to the bodega, got my coffee and a turkey sandwich, and walked back to my place. The coffee was good and the sandwich satisfying and the view of Gowanus from my apartment window an odd tonic and I started to wonder what new podcast I might listen to when my phone started buzzing on the kitchen counter. Incoming call from SUZANNE.

"Hey, Suzi. What's up?"

"You seen the paper?"

"No. Why?"

"Bobby Jr. They been tryna reach Yvette, but she hasn't picked up."

"Oh Lord, what happened to Bobby?"

"He's in the hospital. Allegedly went to Castle Hill, [REDACTED]"

"Castle Hill? In the Bronx? He was supposed to text me last night."

"He's in critical condition at St. Johns Medical on Westchester Ave."

"Fuck. Alright. I'll get up there asap. You ok?"

"I'm fine."

"And the girl?"

"I don't know. I'm reaching out."

"Alright. I'll hit —"

"Hey listen, I have to tell you something."

"What? What's up?"

"Your conversation with Bobby yesterday? I had it recorded. And I listened to it last night."

"Why would you...?"

"It's just something I got in the habit of doing. Occupational hazard. I'm not saying this to alarm you and I certainly don't intend to do anything with the recording. I don't even think such a thing would be admissible in court. I just want to say that I know you tried and it's not your fault. I just wish..."

"You just wish what, Suzanne? What are you trying to say?"

"You knew he had [REDACTED]. It was in the files I gave you. But you never mentioned it. When it's black boys y'all ready to raise hell. When it's black girls victimized by these same black boys...? You niggas got your heads so far up your own asses you got used to the smell of your own bullshit. Look, Paul, it's not your fault. I know you tried your best to talk to him. You said some nice things. And I think maybe he was hearing you. But this was bound to happen. I was just hoping we could get to him before they did. And you know what, that's my fault. Text me when you get to the Bronx. I gotta go."

End call.

Hands sweaty and trembling, I reached for the car keys, and on my way out was startled by the mocking smile of a white man gazing down at me from a window opposite my apartment, in the complex across the street. That I was being watched and laughed at by some blanc-faced spectator set the bile rising and suddenly the rage that I'd repressed had found its secret source and I wanted nothing more than to reach across and drag him and all the suffering he'd caused to his end in the toxic waters of the Gowanus. But when my brain had finally caught up with my racing heart, I realized it wasn't some evil white man, per se, orchestrating and amused by the hard ache of my futility. Whoever lived there kept in the window a life-size cardboard cutout of Barack Obama beaming over a hopeless world, a world that hadn't quite changed. I'd seen it before, so many times, but it never failed to startle me. Probably kept as a collector's item. Or memento mori. And it'd been there so long and had become so sun-bleached that all the color faded and what remained of his visage was the never not-frightening rictus of a promise that couldn't possibly be kept. It all felt like a big joke—all the laughter and mundane conversation by white couples with mortgages planning their weddings over bonfires or at cafes where muffins cost thirty forty dollars dusted in gold leaf while the manager hummed *What's Going On* and grumbled under his breath that he was sick of serving niggers—all of it seemed a channel tuned 24/7 to the sublime irreality of a black boy somewhere elsewhere clawing at a black girl's throat for the sake of his manhood, just so he could die trying to hold on to it.

I stopped at the bodega on my way and ran inside just to see what I hadn't been looking for. Not sure how I could've missed the headline. The papers were stacked right under the cash register. BROOKLYN BOY BRUTALIZED BY BRONX BULLIES! The photo beneath it of a young man clad in blue, cuffed and on his stomach, spit mask pulled over his head.

3/12/2018 – 5/26/2019

Providence, RI