

Prom Night Promises

There was a barely perceptible flash; as though reality blinked, and a man suddenly appeared in the doorway of a seedy looking Soho gallery. It was early morning - 1:00, maybe 2:00 - and the streets seemed empty. Stepping from the doorway he smiled and surveyed his surroundings. He seemed to be of no specific nationality or ethnic group with his caramel colored skin and liquid blue eyes. He was well built, but not overly muscled, and his hair was loose rings of dark brown with reddish tints. As he strolled casually down the street, his eyes drank in everything he saw. From the converted warehouse galleries, to the trash and debris that skipped along the sidewalks, he took it all in as if it were new. He stopped under a street lamp and adjusted his corduroy jacket. Straightening the flair of his white turtleneck sweater and checking his watch, he saw that it was 1:34. "So strange," he thought, "To perceive time once again in such confining increments." There were so many things he would have to readjust to, and redefining time was the least of them. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills - fifties, twenties and a couple of tens. Flipping through them quickly he smiled again and returned the bills to his pocket. "Well, the first thing to do," he thought, "Is to get a cab and get out to Long Island." He paused, a tinge of sadness in his face, as he felt 'his' frustration and isolation. "Yes, he must get to him as soon as possible." He began to walk, feeling a slight exhilaration at the feel of cloth against skin once again, and the coolness of air blowing across his face after so long. The polished, maroon surface of a Corvette brought him to an immediate halt. It glistened like ice beneath the cold glare of the streetlight as he stood in awe. "Marvelous," he thought, and reached out to touch the gleaming metal hood. The coldness of

the metal made him almost giddy with sensation. To see, with physical eyes, the many subtle shades of color and bouncing reflections reaffirmed in him that there were so many little things to appreciate in this world.

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The taxi sped through the almost deserted streets as the driver stared disinterestedly through the windshield then down at his watch. The cab was silent except for the methodical click of the meter as it counted up the distance. The driver was obviously near the end of his shift and was not interested in conversation because he took no notice of his passenger. Unlike his regular fares, he had not said two words to the "weird lookin' dude" with the corduroy jacket and the Future Farmer rubber neck since he got into his cab down on Spring and Wooster.

"Yeah, I'm ready to call it a night and get back to Faye for some good lovin'," he thought. "Make up for not gittin' none last night." After he told her he was gonna pull another night shift she was definitely not in the mood for love. "Every time I pull one she acts like I'm going out screwin' around," he thought irritably as he turned a corner. He did sometimes after the shift was over. He even did it sometimes during the shift. "Hell, I'm still young," he said to himself. "How can she expect a young G like me to be satisfied with one woman? Shit, baby, be for real."

The driver glanced up at the rearview mirror to see a knowing smile slide across the face of the passenger in the back seat.

"What the fuck is he grinnin' at?" he thought as he continued to stare through the mirror into the blue eyes of the stranger. The cabbie's eyes darted from the mirror to the approaching train station. Relief washed over him as he realized that the man would soon be getting the hell out of his cab. From the minute he picked him up he felt that there was definitely

something off 'bout this dude. The cab crept up to the entrance of the station and the passenger placed a twenty through the slot into the plastic tray. The taxi creaked to a stop as the driver's eyes furtively returned to the rearview mirror.

"Keep it," the man said as he opened the door and slid out of the taxi. Before closing it, he leaned back into the body of the cab. "You know you're being very immature. You should appreciate Faye and the time you have now. It's not a luxury you can take for granted." He shut the door slowly, smiled and turned toward the entrance to the station. As he entered, he could hear the screech of tires fading into the distance.

Penn Station was old, way past its prime. Like a man who can't afford to retire, it kept working and trying to keep pace with the modern age. He looked around the station, now unadorned with well dressed travelers, and drank in all he felt and saw. He studied the newspaper and concession stands cocooned behind steel shutters waiting for the morning. He saw human refuse and societal rejects laying about nursing old wounds with bottles of Jack Daniels and Ripple. As he wandered through the curving corridors, he felt the walls, the metal doors, everything, until he came to a device that looked vaguely familiar. It was suspended from the wall and made of gleaming metal. It had a handle on the side that was obviously meant for turning, and a chrome spout at one end of the shiny, chrome basin. Reaching out, he gripped the handle - which was cold to the touch - and turned slowly. A small trickle of water flowed from a hole in the spout. The more he turned, the higher and stronger the stream of water grew. Then he remembered that this was a water fountain, it dispensed cooled water to drink. Smiling to himself, he looked around in wonder. He always felt what he had become was unquestionably

superior to what he was, but as he smelled and touched and saw, he gained a growing respect for what he had been.

He stood for several minutes smiling and savoring the feeling of the icy coolness as the water ran through his fingers. Slowly, he felt something creeping into his head; seeping into his mind like smoke through the crack of a door. Turning off the water he stood, staring blankly as the thoughts and feelings came swirling into his consciousness. They were disjointed, muddled and seemed to fluctuate between despair, paranoia, contentment and fear; he was intrigued. He turned and his eyes darted up and down the corridors, searching for the owner of these thoughts, these feelings. He started to walk, slowly at first, through the fluorescent halls letting the sensations swirl and dance through his mind. His steps quickened as the feelings grew in intensity. Rounding a corner of the dingy rail station he stopped abruptly when he saw her. She sat, squatting on one of the grimy benches, surrounded by dirty shopping bags crammed with treasures valuable only to her. Stains of urine and feces patterned her timeworn dress and the obviously scavenged sweater had seen much better days. She sat with her meaty back pressed against the wall as her dark, swollen eyes darted suspiciously from bench to bench, person to person. In a rambling, conversational tone she mumbled gibberish only she understood. Her eyes jerked toward him and her gaze widened. Her lips moved quickly, silently mouthing words that took shape in his head. He walked to her and kneeled down until their eyes were level.

"You," she screamed as she pointed her callused finger at him. "You know what waits for me! You know what waits for me!" She grabbed the crumpled bags of her existence and stumbled off into the corridor screeching; trailing the last remnants of her sanity.

He rose slowly to his feet as the last traces of the woman's psyche faded from his mind and the echoes of her screams rang in his ears. Suddenly, he felt a different emotion - old and powerful - swarmed into his head. A sense of urgency and apprehension overtook him as he turned to find the source of it. As he did, a bright white light exploded in his head. His mind reeled as the corridor spun and danced in his fuzzy vision. The blow dropped him to his knees and a dull, sickening ache welled up in his head. His mind spun with uncertainty and his vision was hazy with pain as he struggled to focus on the face of his attacker. The man was big, or so he seemed, with a gaunt bearded face that beamed with sadistic delight at the act of inflicting pain.

A wide, maniacal grin split the antagonist's face the attack resumed. The man landed a kick to the ribs, then another to the stomach in merciless, rapid-fire order. The blows rained down with painful repetition as he lay gasping and doggedly clung to consciousness. Finally he succumbed gratefully to the closing darkness. Sadly, he realized how naively confident he was to think that he could come back here, after being away so long, and function as if he'd just left. As his thoughts floated downwards, spinning into nothingness, his last conscious memory was that of his pockets being turned inside out.

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Alex stood in the corner of the densely packed gallery hoping to remain as inconspicuous as possible. Generally, he would fade into the crowd or the walls during the early part of the opening night exhibition and observe reaction to his work unmolested. It was Friday night at L'endroit DeCulture, and tonight was the culmination of eight months of hard work and correspondence. Tonight, he hoped, would change his future. "It was a good,

varied group of paintings," he thought. The oldest of this group, "Fly by Night", was done about five years ago. The newest, "The Septian Monarchy", was only months old. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a young man, thirty-ish, studying another one of his paintings titled Beyond the Wall. The man wore a well-trimmed beard, expensive suit and a very intense look on his face. His hand went slowly to his beard, stroked it a couple of times and then stopped. He continued staring at the piece for what seemed like hours when suddenly he looked up, turned and began scanning the crowd intently. "That's your cue," Alex thought and began making his way toward, what he hoped would be a buyer. If not that, at least it was someone who seemed to be interested in content rather than investment. The man spotted Alex coming toward him through the milling crowd and watched him intensely. "Uh, oh, I don't think this guy's a customer," Alex thought after seeing the set of the man's jaw.

He approached the patron, whose arms had now crossed smugly in preparation for a confrontation. "Hi," Alex said, trying to anticipate what criticism this guy would have about this particular painting.

Like most of Alex's paintings, the composition of the piece was surreal and detailed. In the foreground, a bullet-ridden brick wall was scarred with graffiti of pro and anti-war slogans. In the center of the wall, a large hole opened up to the scene of an unidentified soldier huddled near a barely recognized body. The soldier clasped his head in anguish and dejection, refusing to look at the equally unidentified victim. The corpse had bullet holes in its back and its lower half was draped in an American flag bearing no stars. A phantom skull wearing an army helmet with a single starred American flag loomed in the background. Alex approached the man en guard in what had become an all-too-common scenario since he first began exhibiting

his paintings. "I'm the artist," he began, "And I noticed you seemed interested in this particular image."

The man stood stiffly erect as the trace of either a smile or a smirk played across his face. "I was wondering," he said, gesturing toward the painting, "If you would not agree that the blatancy of this composition, unfortunately, makes the painting, as a whole, interesting but ... banal?"

At the tone of the man's voice, Alex felt the anger well up in him. Not at what was said, but at the way it was said. This type of asshole could put a damper on an opening quicker than the time it took to say 'no sale.' Alex hesitated before replying, ambivalent at entering into such an obvious sparring match. "What exactly about my composition makes you say it's blatant?"

"Well," he began, his smugness almost suffocating. "In my opinion, and I certainly don't consider myself an artist, only a ... lover of art."

"His kind always seems to make a statement like this in order to exonerate themselves from the accusation of professional jealousy," Alex thought.

"But the theme is time-worn," the man continued. "The soldier bending over his fallen comrade; war is hell. It's, to be sure, sentimental but also truistic and, to be quite honest, contrived." He continued, smiling patronizingly. "I don't mean to be critical, and I do feel the painting is heartfelt, but I must say, I've seen this before." The man folded his arms and took a half a step back.

Inwardly, Alex took a deep breath. "Well, it seems you've given this a bit of thought Mr. umm."

"Caldwell, Robert Caldwell," the man answered smugly.

"Well, it seems you've given this a bit of thought, Mr. Caldwell. I think, however, you've misconstrued some of the symbols I used which alters the statement I was trying to make." Struggling to maintain an air of congeniality Alex asked, "What do you think I'm trying to say with this painting?"

Robert, feeling he had drawn blood, became slightly irritated that Alex seemed so slow to self-defense. He shrugged slightly and began, "It seems obvious to me it is a statement about war ... Vietnam, specifically. I think it says that war is ... wrong and that soldiers go to war, fight and die, and in the process lose some of their buddies. I suppose you're trying to illustrate the pain of that loss. Again, I don't think it's very original although, technically it's done pretty well." Robert fought back a smile as he studied Alex's face for any sign of acquiescence, there was none.

"And what tells you of the soldier's pain?" Alex asked, gesturing toward the painting?

"Well," Robert began as he shifted uneasily and pointed at the figure, "The position of the soldier for one. He's sitting with his hands over his head and his legs drawn up as he bends over his fallen comrade; would seem to be obvious."

"So," Alex said patiently, "You don't see any other symbols or metaphors that may make you want to either change or expound on your premise?"

"Not really," Robert answered dryly. "However, I suppose the brick wall could represent the ostracization of the Vietnam vets when they came back to society. Quite honestly," the irritation in Robert's voice became more pronounced, "I have to stand by my first observation."

Alex was quickly growing tired of the conversation and decided it was time to end it. "I always find it interesting," he began, smiling deceptively. "That so many people look at my work, but never seem to see it."

"What do you mean," Robert asked warily.

"Well," Alex continued, "Although it is true I meant it to be a statement about war and the men who fight in it, I think you've oversimplified the message. For example, I wasn't painting about any particular war, just as I'm not focusing on any particular soldier. If you notice," he said, pointing to the figure of the soldier. "He has no nationality or rank because I think the trauma of war doesn't respect that. Secondly, what you described as his buddy or comrade is actually a victim or casualty of the war. Now, as to whether the victim is Jewish, Vietnamese, Black, or whatever is irrelevant; that is why I didn't give the victim a nationality. I didn't want the viewer to focus on any particular war because this tragedy applies to all wars. I'm also curious," Alex continued, pointing to the dead figure in the painting. "Why you would assume the body is a comrade or buddy when they're not dressed the same?" He paused as Robert leaned closer to the painting to examine the figure. He found that indeed, the soldier was dressed in green army fatigues with canteen and boots, while the body wore only a bloodstained white shirt and a pair of pants.

"I hadn't really noticed that they were dressed differently," Robert said hesitantly. "I suppose I thought he was a different rank or just dressed in civilian clothes."

"Yeah, you see military uniforms like that every day," Alex thought. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a middle-aged woman motioning for his attention. "I'm afraid I have to go in a second, but I wanted to also point out that the wall isn't literal as much as it is symbolic, a metaphor of the

soldier's memories and emotional influences. The graffiti, the poster of "Uncle Sam", the bullet holes and the different phrases represent the sometimes mixed messages that make him ambivalent about being a soldier." For a moment Alex considered continuing his critique of Mr. Caldwell's critique. Deciding against it, he instead feigned a smile, extended his hand with masked reluctance and waited as it hung in mid-air. Slowly, Caldwell's arms unfolded and his hand sluggishly made its way toward a grudging truce.

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Margot Vincent Waring was more than what you would call a handsome woman at age 45; she was a real beauty. She had chestnut brown hair with bright green eyes that picked up the highlights of almost any eye shadow she wore. She was sartorially chic with impeccable taste in clothes and accessories; she was the type of woman that everyone liked. All these attributes lent themselves well to the business of running an upscale art gallery. She drifted toward Alex leaving a trail smiling faces and the perfumed scent of Ysatis. "I really think it's going very well," she said as she surveyed the crowded gallery, beaming. "All the artists are getting such wonderful responses and Alex; I just love your work, it's so much more powerful in person." Alex shifted uncomfortably as her green eyes locked on him like a laser sight. Margot was also the type of woman that loved to touch. "Touchy-feely," he called it, showing a personal interest in people she called it. Whatever you call it, it made him uncomfortable as hell. She took his arm with one scented hand and swept back her dark hair with the other, continuing her steady chatter. "Everyone seems so interested in the work; I can't believe we won't get some sales out of this. But Alex, all you seem to want do is hide in the corner. Come on, let's circulate and remember, if you want to sell you have to take the plunge." With that, they made their

way through the crowd with Margot navigating like a sonar guided missile. Their first encounter was a young, Latin-looking woman bombarding her husband with some stream of consciousness babble about the painting she was facing. As they approached, Margot leaned into Alex's shoulder and whispered, "I think you'll really like these people, especially Ana. She says she's very psychic, into the metaphysical and she told me she adores your work." The closer they got to the couple, the more of the conversation Alex could make out.

"You see Jimmy time, time is fluid, and what he's saying is that time flows around us, through us, between us and, if you look at the ... oh, Margot, I just love this work," she said, drawing out the word love. "Darling you've outdone yourself." Ana was a small woman with a dark beauty common to most women of Latin descent. Her hair was long, black and shiny and her eyes, which were equally dark, traveled from person to person deliberately. She wore a silky, turquoise dress with a white stitched leaf pattern and offset it with a black matador jacket. Finally, a delicate necklace with a silver ankh bearing some kind of stone in the top center dangled from her slender neck. Her husband, Jim Tarklan, sold stocks in some "boiler room" on 57th street. He looked straight laced and button-down and probably married Ana because Latinos were in that year.

"Ana, my dear, you look beautiful," Margot purred as she traded in Alex's arm for Ana's as skillfully as a square dancer. "You always make these dreadful openings a sheer delight." Reaching out a hand to Jim her smile, though it didn't seem possible, became forced. "Jim, it's always wonderful to see you and I hope you're enjoying the exhibit as much as Ana. There is so much good, young talent here that a smart collector could really pick up on what could be tomorrow's stars," she said throwing a sidelong glance to Alex.

Turning back to Ana, she continued. "And Ana, as I see you are so taken with this piece, I thought you might like to meet the artist. Alex, this is Ana and her husband, Jim. Ana is very sensitive and I think you two will simply adore each other so, the three of you talk while I see to the other guests." As she was about to go Margot turned to Alex and whispered, "With the tiniest of effort you could sell this piece; do try." That said she drifted away like a cloud vanishing over a well-dressed horizon.

Turning back to Ana and Jim, Alex steadied himself for the arduous and distasteful task of delivering a sales pitch. Struggling to turn his inward grimace into a smile, he looked at Ana. "I agree with Margot, I love that outfit you're wearing; it's very unique." Reaching out, he gestured toward her necklace. "Is that an ankh? I've seen them before, but I don't recognize the stone."

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Randolph Huan Yu sat on the overstuffed sofa with one leg draped over its arm. He was a handsome young man with a petite nose, small but perpetually sensual lips, a relatively thin mustache and straight dark hair with tints of brown. Across from him, in a wicker chair with a floral print cushion, sat Robin Reeder. She was thin and pretty with long brown hair that flowed like silk over her shoulders and down to mid-torso. She had a freckled pug nose and looked like she had been first pick for her cheerleading squad. Her long, thin legs were crossed and her arms hung lazily over the curved wicker arms of her chair as she sank back into its billowy cushions. Alex watched both of them, half listening to the subdued but steady conversation as they bathed in the afterglow of the gallery opening. All were artists and understood that the first night of an opening was always exciting and an inevitable boost to the ego. They were also aware that, for emerging artists it

rarely resulted in concrete sales. As Alex's eyes moved from Robin to Randy, he watched the enthusiasm in their face as they chatted about who liked what pieces and debated the potential for sales in the coming month. "Opening nights," Alex thought, "Are not much different from prom nights. Prom nights are almost magical as everyone is dressed up, on their best behavior and trying to impress both themselves and the crowd. They say things that they mean, or think they mean at the time, get caught up in the illusion of the moment and it seems as if nothing outside that room exists. Whether it's with their date or with others, they are either gentlemanly and gracious or arrogantly bold." Alex shifted in the brown leather chair and reached for the drink on the glass inlaid oak coffee table. "Prom night can be a cruel thing if you believe in it," he thought, wincing at the flatness of his tepid coke. "So many promises made, probably sincerely at the time, but in the morning you find you're just a student with mediocre grades, trying to figure out what you'll do with yourself when schools out."

Randy rolled over, propped himself up on one elbow and looked toward Alex. "So, what did you think of the show man? Was it kick-ass or what? I was tellin' Robin I got easily, half a dozen offers to buy my stuff; what 'bout you?" Robin looked expectantly at Alex who shifted under her gaze.

"Well, I didn't do as well as you guys; a lot of conversation but, nobody really wanted to buy." Feeling a little guilty about being so morose, he gave a faint smile and continued. "I really don't think that much about sales, my main reason for showing is to get the feedback from people. That's more what I get off on."

Feeling his disappointment Robin leaned forward in her chair, "Alex, I heard some wonderful things about your work. People were really impressed with how powerful your pieces are and Margot is great, isn't she? I mean she

really went all out to make sure people saw everyone's work and that we got to meet almost everybody that showed up. She is so great," she gushed, stretching the out the word so. "I mean, I am so psyched that she found a place for all of us to stay. I mean, it can't be easy to find hosts for twelve artists for two whole weeks."

Out in the kitchen they could hear Margot and Jennifer Adler fixing a late night snack for everyone. Jennifer was a heavy set, dishwater blond who did collage mixed media paintings and was the fourth artist of the group that Margot was hosting. Alex could barely hear their voices but could tell Margot was basking in what was admittedly a successful opening, especially for a Friday night. He rejoined the conversation between Robin and Randy, which had turned to the subject of art marketing.

"People will always want beautiful things," Robin continued in a singsong voice. "I think a good painting or drawing can sell itself. I mean, I really think people still buy art because they want to enjoy it."

Randy glanced at Alex, then back at Robin. "Hey, Robin, you may be right about making a couple 'a hundred here and there, but if you are going to make a living from it you gotta have a strategy. Look, art is an investment, right?" he said gesturing toward Alex. "People got better things to do with their money than buy art, so you got to make 'em want what you got." His earlier sluggishness now gone, Randy sat up and tucked one leg under the other. "Yeah, you got a few people who want something to hang over a sofa, but the people who count are making an investment. C'mon, you think that Japanese firm that bought that Van Gogh for 80 million paid that kind of money because it was pretty? Companies invest, and that's what they got it for, an investment." They were silent for what seem like forever as Randy's hands hung pleadingly in the air.

Robin took in all that Randy said, but it only seemed to strengthen her commitment to her point. "Well Randy," she answered, her small voice taking on an air of determination. "I can't believe you don't see that of all the artworks that are sold, in all the exhibitions," her petite arms made a sweeping gesture as if to imply absurdity at even having to state the point. "That 80 million Van Gogh or 10 million dollar ... whatever, are only a small part, probably a very small part." Now her gesture took its turn at being pleading as her shoulders lifted in a slight shrug accompanied by slow shaking of her head.

Randy looked toward Alex, exaggerated exasperation in his voice. "Alex, help me out here? Tell this girl where the big money is." He turned back to Robin who leaned forward with her elbows on her knees. "I'm not talkin' quantity here, Robin. Yeah some guy may make a couple 'a hundred roastin' in a mall all weekend selling prints for twenty-five bucks a pop. Maybe somebody else gets three or four hundred selling their paintings in some small town public library, but they ain't gonna make a living from that. I'm talking serious money. Twenty or thirty thousand a piece! Sure, somebody's got to like a piece to buy it, but the type of money I'm talkin', if they can't turn it over for more money down the line, they ain't buyin' it, no matter how much they like it." Robin rolled her eyes slightly and so did Randy for exactly the same reason, then looked at Alex.

Alex shifted uncomfortably, not wanting to be dragged into this kind of discussion tonight. "Well ... I think you're both right. I think most big time collector's primary reason for buying artwork is because they hope it will appreciate. I think that, once a certain style of art becomes popular or collectable, dealers and influential collectors will do whatever they have to do make sure that the work they bought or sold increases its value." Alex be-

gan to realize that no matter what the results of this dialogue; it did feel good to say what he had felt about the art world for so long.

Behind him he could hear Margot and Jennifer coming through the passage that led from the kitchen.

"... interesting and very good patrons. Of course, they can afford to be, they live in the Hamptons," Margot said as they emerged from the passageway with trays loaded with food and drink. There were sandwiches of lean ham, beef and turkey with various cheeses on the side. In separate small bowls were carrot sticks, celery sticks and cherry tomatoes as well as assorted crackers and dips. On Jennifer's tray were glasses of coke, orange juice and ginger ale. Under their respective arms both she and Margot carried the 2-liter parent of the glasses of coke and ginger ale. As they navigated the furniture with their burdens, Alex studied the movements that seemed to define both women. He found the sluggish gait of the younger, plain, heavy-set girl a stark contrast to the spry, fluid steps of Margot who was 22 years her senior. He was also surprised by the look of the two women. Margot - who was attractive for any age - had a face and figure that was easy competition for those 30-year-old mommy-trackers who killed themselves at the gym three times a week. Her bright smile and perpetually bouncy personality made it game, set and match for the plain-jane Jennifer.

Alex and Randy stood as the two approached the sitting area, and reached for their individual trays. "Thank you, gentlemen," Margot said with her usually enthusiasm as she nodded toward each of them. A faint smile brushed Jennifer's lips as she whispered a quiet "thank you" and sat crossed-legged on the polished wooden floor. Margot folded her billowy lounge dress around her, crossed one leg under her on the couch and settled in beside Randy.

Robin turned to Margot and, with a tone of genuine appreciation said, "Margot, I think we are all really grateful that you and the others opened your homes to us. I don't think most of us could have come here if you guys hadn't."

Alex clapped and added, "We know how important it is to be at an opening, to meet and actually talk to people about our work. I think it's rare when gallery people understand how important it is to artists both career-wise and psychologically to be with their work when it's shown."

Randy reached forward and picked up a glass of coke. "I think Margot and the other hostesses deserve a toast," he said, lifting the glass high in the air.

The others smiled, followed suit and in unison said "Hear, hear," as Margot beamed. She reached over and touched Randy's hand lightly, then smiled her thanks to the others.

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His vision was finally beginning to clear and, though the ringing in his ears had stopped, his brain still felt as if it was wrapped in gauze. He sat up, feeling the cold of the concrete floor radiating through the seat of his pants. He gingerly felt his jaw, which echoed pain with the slightest touch or movement. Upon probing the inside of his mouth with his tongue, he winced as it touched the large cut on the inside of his swollen lip. He moved to stand but the pain of his throbbing ribs forced him to reconsider the idea. He eased himself against the iron bars which immediately began biting into his back. He tried to force his uncooperative brain to think but it refused. Disjointed pictures darted out of the blackness of his mind, then just as quickly darted back. Giving up he opened his eyes and looked around. The cell was littered with the human refuse swept off the streets in the

earlier night's raid of Penn Station. He looked around the dimly lit cell at the sitting and prostrate figures that sported addictions from alcohol to drugs and moaned a desperate chorus of pain and repentance. Fear crept upon him once again, caressing his shoulders with its familiar chill. His blue eyes squinted and focused on a ragged tenant sitting huddled on the crowded wooded bench. He wore a dirty plaid coat which was well-worn at the elbows and two sizes too small. His multi-stained pants were not of a fabric to give any substantive resistance to the chill of a New York fall. One grimy pant leg was crossed over another revealing a dirty, bare ankle. The foot hung limply in the air as the laceless, oversized shoe dangle precariously on the end of his foot. Periodically it was almost jerked off by the involuntary tremor of alcohol withdrawal. The man raised his bearded face from the shadows, where it had laid resting on his chest, and the bloodshot brown eyes met the wounded stranger's. As the dim light fell across the transient's face, deep lines could be seen even through the dirty tufts of beard. In every respect, the crevices served as an atlas to the pain and trauma of the last few years of his wasted life. As he stared into the dull brown eyes he began to feel a nausea rising in the pit of his stomach. He could hear voices echoing in his head as he felt himself being pulled deeper into the derelict's empty eyes. Out of the darkness of his mind, a woman appeared. She was plain, tired with eyes that were red from crying. Her lips moved, mouthing words of pain and frustration, words which he could not focus on but which he knew were directed at him. The black smoke parted slowly around her revealing a small kitchen which bore all the standard amenities. He looked down at his hands, folded before him on a table covered with a white embroidered table cloth. At the end of the table the woman leaned, white

knuckled, throwing tearful glances from him to a small girl sitting dejectedly next to her.

The woman's words lapped toward him in waves and slowly began to take audible form. "You mean it's all gone; your whole paycheck? You mean you gambled away your whole paycheck?"

The pain and feeling of betrayal in her voice compounded his guilt and embarrassment as he shrank inside trying to find a safe place to hide. His mind struggled to comprehend the scene unfolding before him. They were his hands, but they were not. This was his wife, his child, his house, but then again it was not. He felt like an understudy in someone else's dream, and the fear caressed him again.

She was shouting now, "What are we supposed to do for the next three weeks? Ariel needs books, clothes for school ... and our bills; what about our bills? Michael, we have the car payment due, insurance. What were you thinking?"

He shifted uncomfortably in the wooded captain's chair. The hardness of the wood fought its way through the decorated cushion and throbbed against the bottom of his spine. He tried to meet the eyes of the distraught woman and could not. His daughter's dejection and disappointment permeated the room as his inner hiding places vanished one by one.

"Well, Michael, aren't you going to say anything?" she pleaded, her eyes boring into the top of his head. The resulting silence seem to last for years as all he could think to do was chase one thumb with the other in a mindless game of tag. The woman straightened up and hugged her shoulders as she turned away from the table. Small shudders in her back told him the tears had begun to flow again as she walked slowly away from the table. Blackness closed in around the scene and, once again, he focused on the widening eyes

of the transient and the spark of emotion that began to smolder behind them. The spark became an ember that erupted into the hot fire of guilt and exposure as tears welled up in the derelict's eyes.

Trapped, he tore his eyes away from those of the perplexed stranger and shuffled away to the dark recesses of the tiny cell.

His panic rose again and his mind raced, searching for answers to rapid-fire questions. "I've got to move, walk around," he thought. "I've got to stand up!" Ignoring the fire in his ribs, he moved to stand. Gripping the cold bar with one hand and holding his aching chest with the other, he slowly rose to his knees. Breathing heavily, bands of pain radiated through his chest as he rested his head against the bars. He rolled his forehead from side to side as the formerly uncomfortably cold bars now acted as a soothing compress for his feverish forehead. Gritting his teeth, he got slowly to his feet. With eyes closed, he stared deep into his mind's blackness trying to ignore the darting figures that played hide and seek there. Hesitantly, he opened his eyes and turned toward the interior of the cell. As he did, waves of depression, resentment, anger and resignation flooded his psyche; pouring out from his zombie-like co-tenants and washing over him like breakers. He felt he had to walk, to move, if for no other reason than to feel grounded. He took one faltering step, then another toward the least occupied corner of the cell. Avoiding eye contact with any of the other prisoners, he moved slowly, purposefully to the opposite side. As he reached the bars, he stopped and took a deep breath, testing his chest to see if the pain had subsided; it hadn't. He turned, refocused his attention on the bars across the room and prepared to make the trek again. He took a furtive step, his eyes trying not to meet any that may be searching for his. He took another step, his concentration a beeline on the opposite bars. With a third step, his walk

steadied so he ventured a fourth, unaware of the shabby figure making it's way desperately toward him.

"What's the matter with me? Why can't I remember anything? What am I doing here?" The questions went around in his head, the last one chasing the tail of the first. They repeated themselves like a mantra until his reverie was broken by the weight of a hand on his shoulder. He froze in mid-stride and squeezed his eyes shut. He tried to will his mind to remain blackness, to force the smoke not to part; afraid of what it would reveal. Taking the lesser of the two, he opened his eyes to face the owner of the disembodied hand.

The man was short, black with nappy unkempt hair. His dirty, short beard was patched with traces of dried vomit and saliva. Yellow teeth shone through the blackness of his beard and face as his tongue darted out between the gap in the front of his teeth. His eyes were red with the glazed look of a dedicated crack addict and the smell emanating from his clothes told he was sorely in need of a bath.

"Help me," the man slurred as he swayed on unsteady legs. "You gotta help me."

The stranger took a step backward as the man's grip tightened on his shoulder.

"I don't wont dis no mo'," he said, his face contorting in pain, "But I cain't git free." He bowed his head dejectedly, "Dis ain't me," he said slowly, quietly. "I know you know dis ain't how I am."

He wanted to move, to turn and run away, but something held him firm. The transient looked up at him ashamed, and continued.

"I'm hurtin', man; hurtin' so bad. Seem like hurts wid it, hurts widout it."

Mesmerized, the man stared back into the derelict's eyes and understood.

"I tries so hard to stay away from it, ya know," the derelict continued as the stranger nodded. "But den it starts sangin'. First, way in da back of my head, den in my ears, den finally, all da way through my veins."

"Through your veins," the stranger repeated, his own voice sounding far away.

"I tries not to lissen, don't wants to lissen, but den," he shrugged his tattered shoulders. "I cain't hear nuthin' but it sangin'."

In the back of his head the man could hear the siren song of the addict's crack. It sang through his ears and down through his veins. He looked at the pathetic form in front of him. "After a while you say to yourself, 'I just need a little taste, just to quiet the song,'" he said. "Just a hit so I can think, just one hit and I won't touch it again. But that reminds you of the first time."

The addict nodded, bobbing the dirty wool cap up and down on the top of his head.

"That first time," he continued. "That first time when you said to Mojo and Slim, 'This shit ain't gonna git me. Ya'll hooked on da shit, but I show you it ain't no worse'en coke.'"

The transient's hand dropped to his side as his eyes dropped to the floor. The blue eyes remained fixed on the creature in front of him as he spoke along with the addict's personal nightmare.

"No, you never forget your first time, do you?" The stranger's words bored into the addict's brain. "Fear is crawling down your back, mixed with excitement."

Now he reached out and grabbed the vagabond's shoulder. The bearded face jerked up as if startled by the movement. His eyes widened with a look that said he'd gotten in over his head but resigned because now he was here, facing him, talking to him and there was no turning back.

"That first hit," the words continued to echo in the addict's ears as he felt himself drowning in two pools of blue.

"Dat firs' hit," he repeated, shaking his head slightly. "Firs' hit kicked my ass, baby, been kickin' it every since." The blue eyes smiled, compelling him to continue. "Scared me at firs', man, scared me real bad, but ..."

"But then," the stranger broke in. "Your fear melted like ... grease on a hot skillet." The transient smiled a smiled that, for the first time in years, was not drug induced. His eyes brightened as he remembered that his grandmother used that phrase all the time. "So you sat down on the mattress and went with it. You went with it because you thought," he paused and his hesitation prodded the man toward his cue.

The addict shrugged and smiled sheepishly, "Cuz, I thought dat would be the firs' and las' time, so I mize well jus' enjoy it. Wuz the firs', but wasn't the las'." His voice dropped off, "Shit'll get you, baby, an' after it got you they ain't no turnin' loose."

"No turning loose, Willy?" the stranger questioned. The silence between them seemed interminable as they stared, unblinking, at each other and the question hung in the air begging a reply.

Finally the message of the question dawned on him, and he responded. "You cain't shake it, man, you cain't," Willy said almost pleading. "I done 'em all; the programs, the treatments, but it don't do no good."

Releasing the tattered shoulder he asked genuinely, "What do you want them to do, Willy?"

Willy straightened up and answered, his voice filled with indignation, "Fix me, man, help me!"

The stranger took a step back and looked perplexed. "How," he asked as though he could not fathom an answer.

Willy stared at the floor, his eyes darting back and forth as his mind searched for a suitable answer. "I don' know how man, I ain't no damn doctor." His red eyes glared into the stranger's. "Ain't dat what dey pay 'em for?"

The man's hand went to his brown curls and his brows knotted as he turned from Willy. He couldn't understand what Willy expected from the doctors, expected from him and most importantly, what was it he wanted from Willy. Why was he standing here talking to this ... addict, and why did he care what this man felt? A hint of realization peeked through the haze of his thoughts and he turned back to Willy, whose eyes were now brimming with tears.

"Do you want help?" he asked, walking up and standing only inches away from Willy as their eyes met again.

Willy's voice faltered as he stuttered, "Y..Yea...Yeah."

The man's unyielding stare burned all the way to the back of Willy's head as he asked again. "Do you really want help?"

Willy lowered his head and answered quietly, "Yes."

The man started to speak, hesitated, and shut his eyes for a moment. When he opened them he said solemnly. "I'll help you Willy, but first you have to tell me why you want to change."

Willy walked over to a dingy corner of the cell and slumped against the wall. Years of postponed resignation finally caught him and settled heavily on his shoulders. The man followed slowly and leaned against the wall beside him.

"Why, Willy," he prodded. Willy's mouth opened as if to speak, but nothing came out. Silently, the word bounced around in his head as he sought in vain for a painless answer.

Finally, in a voice that was almost a whisper he said, "I'm tired of hurtin', man. Seem like I hurts all da time and cain't nuthin' stop it. I'm tired of waking up wid the smell of ma' own puke in my clothes and not carin'. Tired of being a slave to dis shit; not thinkin' of nuthin' but smokin' what I got and gittin' some mo'. Mostly tired of dis shit pimpin' me wit nuthin' to show for it."

"Show me what you mean," the man said, his voice sounding far away in Willy's ears.

Intuitively, Willy understood as the walls of his mind fell away. He saw a street, dingy and deserted to the untrained eye. The yellow streetlights shone grudgingly on the huddled forms in the doorways of the vacant buildings. The glow of disposable lighters flashed intermittently down the length of the block as he hurried down the street. In an alley he saw the discarded form of a fellow comrade. He was caught up in the rapture of the rock as his heart and soul grew smaller and smaller in its miserable shell. He looked past the filth, ignored the degradation and despair and tried to listen only to the call of the crack. Only two more blocks and he too would be able to feel its embrace, inhale its understanding and sail away, for an hour or so, to the place where it was only the two of them. Willy walked up

to the metal door and knocked on the mail slot. The slot jerked open and he leaned down to speak into it.

"Yo, man, dis Willy. As' Ritchie kin I hav' some credit," he said trying to hide the desperation in his voice. A pause, then the disembodied voice poured back through the slot. "Ritchie say you had enuff credit." He felt the panic begin to rise in him. He was so close; he couldn't let it go now. "Think, Willy, think."

"Look, man, I need to be fixed real bad. I been to 42nd Street and the Square and won't nobody fix me, man. Please, man, tell Ritchie don't diss me like dis, man. All the shit I done fo' him; it ain't right him dissin' me like dis, man."

Irritation permeated the voice as it answered back impatiently. "Ritchie say you backed up almos' 300 bills, man, he say don' square off on him with dis bullshit 'bout owe. Dis a biznes, brother, don' fuck with the man's money."

Sensing the battle was lost Willy tried one last attempt. "Tell Ritchie ma sista be gittin' her check tomorra. Tell 'im just treat me right tonight I settle up wid him tomorra." He waited, staring at the mail slot and tapping his foot nervously as time crept by.

Finally, the voice responded. "Naw, man, Ritchie say you settle tomorra, you score tomorra."

With that the slot slammed shut as if to punctuate the denial. Crushed and desperate he turned forlornly from the door, his head pounding as he took a step toward the curb. Unbelieving, he turned back to the door then stopped. A step forward, then no. He resigned himself; his credit here was tapped out.

He tried to think. "Where could he go to get fixed? There must be someone." He began to walk, feeling colder and more lost with every step. He

could roll somebody, get some cash. No, he couldn't risk being caught and locked up for three days. He could hit up his brother, maybe. No, his credit was even worse there. After that last incident with the television, he couldn't even go to his parents. The more he thought the more afraid he became and, as he saw his options falling like nine pins, he could see no more on the horizon.

He wasn't sure how far or how long he had walked. He wasn't sure of anything except that he was tired and starting to feel the pains of withdrawal. His mind searched every avenue of income or favor and came up dry. He didn't remember exactly how Clarence's name came to mind or why, but now he was willing to grasp at straws.

Clarence, or Leo as he preferred to be called, was one of the brothers he used to hang with in the 'hood' in Bed-Sty. Back when they were both running with Black Mariah, the boys used to 'yolk' on Clarence calling him, "Clarence, the crossed-eyed Lion." That's probably what gave him the drive to eventually become the leader of the Mariah. It seemed after he became leader, he became meaner, almost as if to make up for all the shit he'd taken before. Now, he was taking absolutely no shit from anybody. It was also after he became the leader that he changed his name to Leo, probably to make up for the 'crossed-eyed lion' image. Willy remembered that, in the beginning, he and Clarence had felt almost a brotherhood being that they were both considered low men on the totem pole. Willy was considered low because he was always afraid to 'gangbang,' and Clarence because he was the smallest. Clarence began working with weights and, although he was still short, he became very powerfully built. The stronger he got, the more he fought, the more he fought and won, the higher he moved up in the gang. Pretty soon he

was Leo and they had nothing in common at all. Now, he was the lone peon with no insight on how to improve his lot.

He became a 'mule' for the brothers who were selling, which gave him drugs and a small sense of indispensability. He used his wits and ability as a born snitch to find out about other gangs through his drug connections. He would find out where they met, when and how many would be there to give an edge to the Mariah when it came time to make a hit, but it gave him very little comfort. Leo's Mariah was a very tough gang with respect even outside the 'hood. Leo wanted every one to earn the privilege of being a member of the toughest gang in the city. Whether it was doing a 'hit,' running a 'gauntlet' or gangbanging, Willy knew that sooner or later he would have to prove himself. For a while his fast talking and misdirection saved him, but inevitably his time came.

Another gang, the Ol-orun, had a running feud with the Mariah and the drive-by shootings and gangbanging had escalated to a fever pitch. As an ultimate insult to Leo and the Mariah, one of the Ol-orun - a weasely little brother who had changed his name from Rodney to Orishna Nla - raped Leo's fifteen-year-old sister as she was coming from the store. This was not only to insult Leo and the Mariah, but to also show disrespect for the Mariah's territory. When Leo found out he went crazy and ordered everybody to prepare for a rumble. But not just any rumble, one that would wipe out every one of the Ol-orun and specifically, Orishna Nla. After which Leo would rape and kill his sister.

Willy knew there was no talking his way out of this and started to plan how and when he would run. He knew if he ran before the fight he could never come back to the 'hood again and would probably end up dead for betraying the gang by running. He decided that he would do it at the very beginning of the

fight. No one would notice, in all the commotion, if he slipped away down an alley or side street.

It started, and all went as he had planned. The gangs clashed with all the fury of two wildcats. Guns, bricks, knives, bottles; whatever was at hand was used as the sea of bodies slashed, shot and pummeled each other. Willy, at the back of the pack, searched desperately for a convenient alley. The gun hung heavily in his hand and became slippery as the sweat ran down his arm and lubricated the handle. Time was running out as the crowds broke off into little groups of battling fury. It was now or never Willy thought as he spotted an alley about fifty yards up through one of the crowds. He quickly looked to see if anyone could spot him as he prepared to make good his escape. Firing the 9mm, he ran blindly toward the alley leaving the sounds of his past behind and realizing that he may never be able to go back.

After three years he had returned. The crack demanded it and he had to obey. Not a whole lot seemed to have changed. The walls carried the graffiti of gangs he didn't recognize and the neighborhood had died a little more but, all in all, it was the same. He walked down Leo's street unnoticed, listening to the assorted sounds of moans and laughter, televisions and stereos floating down from the windows. Clusters of young men dotted the block talking jive, drinking and smoking. Finally, he came to Leo's rundown Brownstone - which he spotted by the Midnight Black Jaguar parked in front of it. It's not that he recognized the car as much as the chain with the pearl-inlaid gold crucifix. Beside the crucifix dangled a gold gun of the same design. This had always been a sign for everyone in the 'hood that this was Leo's ride and it was not to be fucked with.

He climbed the stairs toward the group of men who were collected at the top. They eyed him suspiciously as he neared the top of the stairs and hands went to variously hidden weapons.

Willy's hands came out of his jacket pockets and hung down at his sides in order to appear as unthreatening as possible. "Lookin' for Leo," he said, his voice sounding a little too loud and threatening.

One of the men stepped forward, his hand inconspicuously behind his back. "Don't know no Leo, man," he answered as he took another step forward.

Willy's hands went up in a gesture of concession, "Chill, brother. I heard Leo got some shit and I just want to buy some. Heard he carry some of the best shit 'round and just want to score."

The man looked back at the others, who seem to relax just a little, then jerked his head slightly, "Alright, man, go on up." The man backed up slowly, eyeing Willy as he ascended the stairs. "Hol' up, man," he said as Willy stepped onto the landing. One of the others stepped up behind him and slowly, cautiously patted him down. "He's cool," the other said as Willy stared straight ahead, afraid to breathe. A third man, standing nearest the door, reached out a muscled forearm and threw open the door. Willy rushed through, fighting the urge to run.

Inside, the bright glare of the bare bulb seemed blinding as Willy scanned the mailboxes for Leo's name. According to the mailbox Leo had now moved upstairs to the third floor. When Willy knew him he lived on the first floor with his mother, sister and brothers. Before him loomed the wooden stairs, sagging and peeling. At the top, he hoped, lay his redemption.