

City of the Sun

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Extract

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ONE

JAMIE GABRIEL WAKES AT 5:44, as the clock radio's volume bursts from the silence. He rolls and hits the sleep bar, clipping off the words to an annoying pop song by some boy-band graduate who wears the same clothes and does the same moves as his backup dancers. The worst. Kids at school say they like him. Some do; the rest are just following along. Jamie listens to Green Day and Linkin Park. It's three-quarters dark outside. He clicks off the alarm and puts his feet on the floor. Waking up is easy.

In the master bedroom sleep Mom and Dad. Carol and Paul. The carpet is wall-to-wall, light blue. New. The liver-colored stuff that came with the house when they bought it is gone. The blue goes better with the oak bedroom set, Mom says.

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It was a good move for the Gabriels, to the split ranch-style on Richards Avenue, Wayne Township. Trees line most all of the blocks here. The houses have yards.

Jamie walks past his school photo, which hangs in the hall on the way to the bathroom. He hates the picture. His wheat-colored hair lay wrong that day. He takes a pee. That's it. He'll brush his teeth when he gets back, after breakfast, before school.

He moves through the kitchen – *Pop-Tart?* *Nah* – and goes out the utility door into the connected garage. Mom and Dad love it, the garage on the house, the workbench, and space for the white minivan and the blue Buick.

He hoists the garage door halfway up; it sticks on its track. A streak of black fur darts in and hits him low in the legs.

'Where you been, Tater?'

The gray-whiskered Lab's tail thumps against the boy's leg for a moment. After a night of prowling, Tater likes the way the boy ruffles his fur. The boy pushes him aside and crawl-walks under the garage door.

A stack of the morning *Star* waits there,

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acrid ink smell, still warm from the press. Jamie drags the papers inside and sets to work, folding them into thirds, throwing style.

He loads white canvas sacks and crosses them, one over each shoulder, then straddles his bike. The Mongoose is his. Paid for with six months' delivery money after the move to Richards Avenue. Jamie ducks low and pushes the bike out underneath the garage door, when Tater rubs up against his leg again. The old dog begins to whine. He shimmies and bawls in a way that he never does.

'Whatsa matter?'

Jamie puts his feet on the pedals and cranks off on his route. Tater groans and mewls. Dogs know.

'Should've gone to McDonald's, you fat fuck,' Garth 'Rooster' Mintz said to Tad Ford as he reached across him for a French Toast dipper. Tad's face squeezed in hurt, then relaxed. The smell of gasoline, the fast-food breakfast, and Tad's Old Spice filled the battleship-gray '81 Lincoln.

'You're eating same as me,' Tad said back. 'You're just lucky it doesn't stick to you.'

Rooster said nothing, just started chewing a dipper.

Tad was unsatisfied with the lack of reaction, but that was all he was going to say. Rooster was seventy-five pounds smaller than him, but he was hard. The guy was wiry. Tad could see his sinew. He'd once watched Rooster, piss drunk, tear a guy's nostril open in a bar scrap. The whole left side of the dude's nose was blown out, and just flapped around on his face with each breath after the fight was broken up and Rooster was pulled off.

Tad had plenty of targets of opportunity with Rooster – the small man stank much of the time. He didn't shower most days. He left his chin-up, push-up, and sit-up sweat in place, only bothering to wipe down his tattoos. His red-blond hair hung limp and greasy as well. Then there were the scars. Nasty raised red ones that ran up and down his forearms like someone had gone at him with a boning knife. When Tad finally screwed up the nerve to ask where he'd gotten them, Rooster merely replied, 'Around.' Tad left it there.

'You're just lucky it doesn't stick to you,' Tad repeated, chewing on his own French toast.

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‘Yeah, I’m lucky,’ Rooster said, turned, and looked down the street, still dark beneath all the goddamn trees. ‘Should’ve gone to McDonald’s.’

Jamie Gabriel, rider, pedals. He flows by silent houses, houses dark on the inside. He tosses papers into yards and onto porches. He works on his arc and velocity with each throw. An automatic sprinkler quietly sweeps one lawn, still blue in the bruised morning light. Jamie slings for the front door of that house so the paper stays dry. He works his pedals. A line of streetlight goes dark with a hiss as morning comes. Dad thinks it’s great that they moved to a neighborhood that supports tradition: newspaper routes. Mom’s not so sure – her boy needs his rest. Few people know the streets like Jamie does. Dark and empty, they’re his streets. Jamie wasn’t so sure either, at first, when he was still getting used to the work and slogging through the route on his old Huffy. But then he earned the new bike. He read an old story of a mailman who became an Olympic biker. *Why not him, too?* He has a picture. The black man’s thighs bulge and

ripple. He looks like he's set to tear his bike apart more than ride it. Jamie checks his watch. His time is looking good.

Rooster glanced at the clock inside the Lincoln. Goddamn Lincoln now smelled of an old fuel leak and Tad's farts over the sickly sweet of the aftershave. But the car was clean. Riggi bought it in a cash deal and dropped it off with fixed-up tags. Rooster hated these goddamned pickups. He flexed his forearm, felt the corded muscle move underneath his wounded and roughly healed skin and light red arm hair. His forearm was thick for his stature. He was ripped. He was disciplined with working out, but he was a lazy bastard, he suspected, when it came to certain parts of the job. Yeah, he hated the fucking snatches. Anybody could do 'em. It wasn't like the house work. *That* was rarefied air, sir.

'Start the car,' Rooster said low, glancing sideways at the clock again. He scanned out the windshield of the Lincoln. The goddamn thing was like the bridge of the starship *Enterprise*.

'Oh, shit,' Tad said, his last bite of

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hash-brown cake sticking in his gullet. The car turned over, coarse and throaty.

They saw movement at the corner.

Jamie puts his head down and digs his pedals. He's got a shot at his record. He's got a shot at the *world* record. He throws and then dips his right shoulder as he makes the corner of Tibbs. The canvas sack on his left has begun to lighten and unbalance him. He straightens the Mongoose and glances up. Car. Dang. Jamie wheels around the corner right into the rusty grill and locks them up.

Tires bite asphalt and squeal. Smoke and rubber-stink roil. Brakes strain hard and hold. The vehicles come to a stop. Inches separate them.

With a blown-out breath of relief, Jamie shakes his head and starts pushing toward the curb, bending down to pick up a few papers that have lurched free.

Car doors open. Feet hit the pavement. Jamie looks up at the sound. Two men rise out of the car. They move toward him. He squeezes the hand brake hard as they approach.