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The Corner

A Year in the Life on an Inner-City Neighbourhood

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and Edward Burns

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Extract

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"You can hold back from the suffering of the world. You have free permission to do so and it is in accordance with your nature. But perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering you could have avoided."

—Kafka

WINTER

ONE

Fat Curt is on the corner.

He leans hard into his aluminum hospital cane, bent to this ancient business of survival. His fattened, needle-scarred hands will never again see the deep bottom of a trouser pocket; his forearms are swollen leather; his bloated legs mass up from the concrete. But then obese limbs converge on a withered torso: At the heart of the man, Fat Curt is fat no more.

"Yo, Curt."

Turning slightly, Curt watches Junie glide over from the other side of Fayette, heading into Blue's for the evening's last shot. Curt stops, a few feet from Blue's door, and here's Mr. Blue himself, standing on the front steps of what was once his mother's pristine rowhome, scratching at the edges of his beard between arrivals, pocketing two bills from each, though it's two more if you need a fresh tool. No charge, of course, for share and share alike.

From down the hill near Gilmor comes a short string of gunshots—too even, too deliberate for firecrackers. Barely tensing, Blue allows Junie to edge past him on the marble steps. A regular: no charge for Junie.

"They shootin' already," says Blue.

Curt grunts. "Motherfuckers can't tell no time."

Blue smiles softly, then turns to follow Junie inside.

Fat Curt slips slowly toward Monroe, reddened eyes tracking a white boy who pulls to the curb in a battered pickup. But there's no play here; one of Gee Money's younger touts has already laid hands on the sale.

Curt works his way around the corner to Vine, passing Bryan, who nods acknowledgment. No sale here, either; not with Bryan Sampson out here working his own tired hustle, selling that baking soda. Curt shakes his head: Bryan looking to get his ass shot up again behind that Arm & Hammer shit.

From down the hill, from somewhere around Hollins and Payson

this time, comes more crackling syncopation—the beginning of the deluge to come, though it isn't quite eleven yet. Curt shrugs it off and shuffles back toward Fayette. Time enough left, he knows, to make a little money.

"Wassup?"

Finally, a face he knows from down on Mount Street, a gaunt dark-skinned fiend, scurrying up the hill in the hope of catching a better product. Coming right at Curt.

"Wassup now?"

Curt growls assent. Shop's open.

"Somethin' good?"

Fat Curt, the oracle. Twenty-five years in service on these streets, and everyone knows there's no better tout at the corner where Fayette meets Monroe. Curtis Davis is the gravel-voiced purveyor of credible information, a steadfast believer in quality control and consumer advocacy. No bullshit, no burn bags, no watered-down B-and-Q garbage. Fat Curt, a tout among touts.

"Might try 'round the way," he says, turning and gesturing with his cane toward the entrance to Vine Street.

The fiend takes his hunger down the block as Curt gives a confirming nod to the lookout at the mouth of the alley. Slowly, the aging tout canes his way back to the corner, shuffling beneath the jaundiced glare of sodium vapor. The city has put stage lighting out here; it's harsh and direct, openly contemptuous of the scene itself. Fat Curt is forever exposed in the ugly glow, but he can remember when dull blue light washed more gently over these deeds, a time when the neighborhood was permitted some small privacy. Now, at an hour to midnight, the corner is visible at a full block's distance. Dope and coke. Coke and dope. Twenty-four, seven: twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

More gunshots. Fulton and Lex by the sound of it. But Curt is still on post, waiting for the next sale, when the Western uniforms roll up for a last pass at the corner. The radio cars move slowly down Monroe, but it's not a jump-out this time, just the ceremonial eyefuck and a sullen showing of the colors.

From down near Hollins and Payson again comes a long, staccato string. Ten or twelve in a row and nine millimeter by the report. But the police ignore it, their faces instead scanning the foot traffic, their brake lights showing red.

The lookouts raise up and go. The touts, customers, and runners

stream away, evaporating like mist, moving down Fayette and into the back alleys. Fat Curt, too, turns from the police cruisers, stepping cane-to-foot-to-cane so slowly that any movement is more implied than real—just enough effort to suggest a polite, territorial retreat. From experience, Curt knows that it will be a short visit, that no right-minded police will be out on these streets fifteen minutes from now.

Over his shoulder, he watches as the brake lights go dark and the cruisers roll quietly through the traffic light, first one car, then its companion heading down Monroe. Curt, having covered barely half the distance to Lexington, turns back again. Shop is still open, but the salvos are now coming seconds apart, hitting all points on the compass. Six in a row echoing from over by the hospital; the snap of a .22 up on Lexington; the roar of what has to be a shotgun from somewhere down on Fairmount.

Time to go, thinks Curt. Time to go before they're digging some hopper's bullet from my lonesome black ass. He staggers around the corner and up the steps to Blue's house, rapping the front door with his cane. Blue cracks the door, then gives way; Curt slips inside. The corner watches its aging wise man; Fat Curt tells them it's time to go and the last soldiers take heed and drift in behind him. Eggy Daddy and Hungry, then Bryan and Bread and finally Curt's brother, Dennis, who's got a hospital cane all his own since he spiked himself in the neck and caught some spine. One by one they cross Blue's threshold and cluster together amid the cookers and candles and syringes, most of them waiting for Rita to make her rounds. Rita, the corner physician, works a rare magic, finding veins in cold, dying places where no living blood vessel has a right to be.

Outside, the streets are empty. No touts, no runners, no fiends. No police either, as Curt predicted. At a quarter to the hour, all the radio cars are in Western District holes, parked hood-to-trunk behind tall ware-houses and school buildings, or, better still, below something solid.

All across the west side, the distinct reports of individual shots now blend into cacophony. Down Fayette Street toward the harbor, and up Fulton toward the expressway, the bright orange-yellow of muzzle flashes speckles from front steps, windows, and rooftops. They look like fireflies amid the crescendo, beautiful in their way. A window is shattered on Monroe Street. Another on Lexington. And a block north on Penrose, some fool without sense enough to come in from the rain suddenly winces, grabs his forearm, and races for the nearest doorway to examine the wound.

The hour approaches, and the great, layered dissonance grows even louder, the flashes of light racing up and down the streets as visible proof of this explosive percussion. It is a sound both strange and familiar: the signature sound of our time, the prideful, swelling cannonade of this failed century. Shanghai. Warsaw. Saigon. Beirut. Sarajevo. And now, in this peculiar moment of celebration, West Baltimore.

On Fulton Avenue, two teenaged girls stand in the vestibule of their rowhouse, ready for a run to a girlfriend's apartment on Lexington. They start down the steps, giggling, edging into the maelstrom, but they don't even make the curb when the next-door neighbor appears in his doorway, grinning drunkenly, gripping a .38 long barrel with both hands in a crude military stance, aiming up into the ether.

Six flashes light the street; the girls dive back to their front stoop. Still laughing, they peek across the marble steps as the reveler returns to his vestibule, reloads, then chimes out six more in perfect sequence. Like a statuette in some bastardized Swiss timepiece, the gunman drops his arm and slides backward through the door to reload again, and the girls, having timed the process, now risk the run up Fulton. They race up the block, consumed in adolescent laughter, holding their ears against the din.

The hour itself arrives with perfect vacancy—a rare midnight with no one soldiering on the Monroe Street corners or down Fayette. No touts, no slingers, no fiends on Mount Street. No crew manning the intersection of Baltimore and Gilmor. And certainly no stray citizens either—most taxpayers with sense fled this neighborhood years ago; the few that remain are now nestled inside hallways and interior rooms, as far from a stray bullet's reach as they can manage. Twenty blocks east, there are thousands milling around Inner Harbor promenades and downtown hotel lobbies, watching fireworks of a different kind in the night sky. But here, in West Baltimore, the celebration of sound and light requires an empty landscape.

The crescendo continues for ten full minutes before individual salvos can be distinguished from the din; another ten beyond that before the tempo slips noticeably; a full half hour before there are only odd, scattered reports from the belated few. Then, slowly, this world begins to stir. A Vine Street drunk drifts down the alley and makes for Lexington. A tout materializes on Mount, and a police radio car glides past the crumbling commercial strip on Baltimore Street. A fiend skates across Fayette and bangs on the door of Blue's house; Blue answers, collects

two bills, and peers outside at the sudden calm as the man slips wordlessly past him.

A moment or two later, Fat Curt appears. Cane-to-foot-to-cane, he moves across Blue's vestibule and onto the front steps, pausing there to take stock. Head tipped to one side, bloodshot eyes scouring the corners from Monroe to Mount, Fat Curt is the oracle again, the keeper of this lost world's cumulative knowledge, the presignification of whatever still passes for truth out here. He stands on the threshold like a village shaman, reading the street for the pagan hordes clustered behind him in the shooting gallery, his antennae tuned to who knows what frequency. If the fat man sees his shadow, perhaps, they'll all stay inside and shoot dope for another half hour. If not, shop's open.

A semiauto's long crackle carries from somewhere down by the crabhouses, but Curt pays no mind. Too little, too late, and too far away; the flood has crested and gone. Once again, he hobbles to the corner of Fayette and Monroe, laying claim to the pavement.

Fat Curt is on the corner.

Gradually, the entire neighborhood seems to take the cue. By ones and twos, the shooting gallery gives up its wraiths; Junie and Pimp and Bread slide out onto the sidewalk and get back into their game. The touts reappear at the mouth of Vine Street. They're back in business on Mount Street, too, where Diamond in the Raw has the best package. And around the corner on Fulton, where the Spider Bag crew has set up shop. And down the bottom at Baltimore and Gilmor, where it's all Big Whites and Death Row and whatever else the New York Boys are using to market dope this week.

The fiends begin to drift back toward the corners. Rail-thin coke freaks and abscessed shooters press dirty singles and fives into waiting hands, then line up for the quick run down into the alley, where the slingers work ground stashes hidden in used tires, behind cinder blocks, or in the tall grass by the edge of a rear wall. Tattooed, toothless white boys, up from Pigtown in battered pickups and rusting Dodge Darts, idle nervously on Mount, watching for trouble through cracked rearview mirrors, hoping that whichever nigger took the twenty dollars is coming back with some product. Soon enough, all of them will be heading to some shithole rowhouse in absolute, dick-hard anticipation, battering their way past every remaining shard of their life to reach the room with the spikes and the pipes and the burnt-bottom bottle caps. They'll fumble with these things impatiently, kicking the old sofa's ass in a futile hunt

for matches or jabbing themselves a dozen times in search of a vein. But at last they'll slam it home and wait for that better-than-sex feeling to crest. Then it's back again to the corner.

Fat Curt, up on post, watches them come. Year in and year out, he tells it true, steering them away from the trash, hooking them up to whatever will work. As always, he weds his timeworn credibility to some younger soldier's dope.

"Who got that Gold Star?"

"Come right here with it."

"Good as yesterday?"

"Man, that shit's a bomb."

"Awright then."

By one in the morning, this night is like any other, and Curtis Davis knows that it can never end, that money and desire will not be denied. He can tell this story going back a quarter century, back to when he stood on these same corners and the game was just beginning. He had some money in those days, and God knows he had the desire. He has stayed out here nearly every night since, until only his desire remains. He was out here yesterday and he's out here tonight, and come tomorrow, he'll be at Monroe and Fayette, watching the same scenes play.

No point in talking about changing, or stopping, or even slowing down. In his soldier's heart, Curt knows that everyone talks that shit and no one believes it a minute after they say it. Like Blue—running and gunning tonight, but telling himself he's going to quit come tomorrow. A resolution, says Blue. Naw, Curt tells himself, the shit is forever.

"Yo Curt."

"Hey, hey."

"Wassup, Mr. Curt?"

Curt smiles sadly, then growls out simple truth: "Oh, man, ain't nuthin' here but some of the same foolishness."

He touts for another hour at Fayette and Monroe, then drags himself back to Blue's for his last blast of the night, the syringe finding a way through one of the fat man's swollen limbs. When he leaves the shooting gallery, he's fortified with a good cap and carrying a small eighth of cheap rye in his hand—a rare liquid concession to this evening's traditions.

Cane-to-foot-to-cane he struggles up Monroe Street, heading nowhere in particular, wandering a bit beyond the usual boundaries of his shrunken world. Penrose Street. Saratoga. Curt limps on, nipping at

the bottle and caning his way down the pavement until this short, spontaneous excursion toward the expressway overpass becomes a modest declaration of free will. Tonight in West Baltimore, for no reason whatever, Fat Curt is no longer on post. At last report, he's left the corner traveling due north. He's walking; goddamn if the fat man isn't taking a walk.

At Mulberry Street, a passing Western radio car slows at the sight. Maybe the cop is pausing to consider invoking the city liquor laws, which in this neighborhood would be a little like handing out littering citations in a hurricane. More likely, a veteran roller, familiar with Fayette and Monroe, is stunned to see one of that corner's fixtures several blocks north of where he should be. Either way, Curt senses the attention and tries to palm the bottle in his bloated hand. It's enough of a gesture to imply submission. The cop gives a little nod, then rolls away.

Walking on, Curt almost manages to smile.

Happy New Year.

Gary McCullough waits in front of the Korean joint, just off the Mount Street corner, shifting his weight from one foot to the other in the morning cold. One hand plays at a rubber band loose against the other wrist. He hums a Curtis Mayfield tune, the notes coming soft and barely discernible beneath the din of the nearby touts and slingers. Gary is in the background, just barely scenery. He is here, yet not here. He is good at waiting.

Tony Boice comes around the corner from Mount Street, back from the marketplace, smiling knowingly at Gary. Warmed to his soul, Gary grins beatifically at his running buddy. Hooked up: got that good thing from Family Affair. Yes, oh yes. The two men turn together, pushing back up Fayette, heads bowed into a rush of frigid January wind. Gary cups a hand to his mouth and coughs deeply.

"Dag."

"What?" says Tony Boice, looking around.

"Cold," says Gary.

"Oh yeah," agrees Tony. "Motherfuckin' hawk is out."

Gary looks furtively down Fayette, then across the street at the Death Row crew—all of them busy with business and paying no mind. They pass the trash of the vacant lot, back to where the New York Boy was lying dead a week earlier, the top of his head oozing away beneath a White Sox cap, a nine with a full clip useless in the waist of his sweats.

Gary edges past the spot and glances over despite himself; his eye finding the dull rust-red oval that still stains the weeds and dirt. Dag.

They move past the vacant lot and draw even with a redbrick rowhouse. Plywood greets them at the door of 1717 West Fayette, a street address that never fails to pull Gary back into his past.

"In here," he decides, bounding up the steps.

"Around back," says Tony, furtive.

"No, this'll work," Gary insists, suddenly impatient. He steps to the front door of the derelict house, glances once again down Fayette, then presses his weight against the plywood barrier, bending it enough to slide through. Tony follows and Gary shoves the plywood back into place. The two listen in the darkness for an extra moment, assuring themselves that the place is empty, though the piss-stench in the front hallway says it isn't always so.

"He was okay with that?" asks Gary.

Tony Boice grunts affirmatively. Negotiations went well enough: The corner boy gave him two Death Row bags for eighteen, which was all Tony carried. Short the two bills, Tony offered lamely to have a little more on the next go-round, and the younger dealer gave it up for the cash on hand, knowing anything else was money he would never see.

By fixed memory, Gary leads the way back through the darkened corridor, turning and reaching out for the rounded rail of the center stair. He holds it a moment, remembering the beautiful curve of the thing.

"Victorian," he says, savoring the word. "This is a Victorian design."

Tony says nothing.

"Look at that trim. That was original."

Tony stays silent as they climb the stairs.

"Know what that means, Mo?" Gary stops at the second-floor landing. "Money. There's big money in a house like this."

Two steps below him. Tony stares at some lead-painted piece of shit-brown wood, no doubt wondering how there can be a dollar left anywhere inside this rowhouse. They've been through the place two dozen times, liberating every last bit of copper pipe and aluminum window guard, cannibalizing the vessel of Gary McCullough's earlier life in their daily pursuit of the perfect blast. Whatever obvious money there was in this house had already been dragged ten blocks south to the scales of the United Iron and Metal Company, weighed up, paid out, and melted down. But Gary climbs to the third floor, his frozen breath clouding in

front of him as he talks, rambling on about period restorations and licensed subcontractors and real estate values.

". . . I'm serious as a heart attack, Mo. There's money to be made if you know how to go. You just don't know . . ."

Tony grunts his way up the stairs.

". . . like with the market. Some of those technology stocks, like computer companies and all, man, I'm telling you. You can turn ten thousand dollars into ten times that inside of six months if you know what you're doing."

"Aw yeah," says Tony.

"No, really," says Gary, insistent.

"Yeah, no," says Tony blankly. "You right."

"Man, you just don't know."

And Gary McCullough, perhaps the only living person in a twenty-block radius who knows the difference between a price-earnings ratio and a short-term capital gain, shakes his head in sad frustration. The past is past, and Gary can't reconcile any part of it with the likes of Tony Boice, who is laboring only in this moment.

"You just don't know," he says again.

It wasn't so long ago that Gary had everything figured. He was a workaholic with two full-time jobs and his own home development company on the side. He held the deed on several properties on Vine Street. He drove a new Mercedes-Benz. Every workday, he scoped the inside columns of the *Daily Investor* for stock tips, parlaying a Charles Schwab brokerage account into $150,000 cash money. And Gary had a plan, too, for this three-story rowhouse, which had been purchased not merely as another investment, but as a centerpiece to the fine, righteous life he was busy constructing. He would renovate this place, make it beautiful again, make it his castle.

Tony slides past him on the landing, intent on nothing beyond the business at hand.

"Where at?" he asks.

"In back," says Gary, nodding to the rear bedroom.

Gary finds two bottle caps on the windowsill, but his partner takes care of everything else. Tony is a whirlwind of efficiency as the glassine bags are opened and the powdered heroin meted out. Water from the syringes, flame from a match, then the slow draw of liquid up into the plastic cylinders. Thirty on the hype, cocked and ready. No coke to go on top, but this is enough to get them out of the gate.

Tony pokes softly at the back of his arm, a red droplet collecting there to mark the landing zone. Gary uses his left forearm, choosing a midway point on a darker brown stretch of oft-used roadway. Tony slams everything home, indifferent to the notion of an overdose. Gary sees a puff of pink in the bottom of his spike, fires, then stops short at the halfway point, gauging the rush, waiting cautiously. A few moments more with the syringe resting gently between thumb and forefinger, and then the sprint to the finish.

"It's something," mutters Tony, vaguely disappointed, "but not like yesterday was."

"Yesterday was a bomb," Gary agrees.

Tony steps back into the sunlight, which is pouring through the rear window panes, measuring a patch of crosshatched warmth on the bedroom's stained carpet. Oblivious to the cold, Gary sits in the shade by the far wall, watching a universe of suspended dust float across the room in rays of light.

Tony nods.

"Better than you thought, Mo," laughs Gary.

"Gettin' there."

For a while they simply sit, letting the chemistry happen, warming themselves in the rush. Both of them at perfect ease, feeling nothing more of the freezing cold. Soon they are laughing together about the caper that got them here.

Caper. That is Gary's word for it, and it is Gary's mind-set, too. For him as for any dope fiend, the raw adventure of the thing always has to be acknowledged and on some level, enjoyed. In West Baltimore, you can be proud of a good caper; hell, a working, viable caper is to be celebrated. And though it might be lost to any prosecutor reading the Maryland Annotated Code, everyone living off a corner understands and accepts the distinction between a caper and a crime. Stick a gun in a man's face and take his wallet; that's a crime and, hey, you're a criminal. But steal the copper plumbing from a rowhouse under construction and sell it for scrap; that's a caper. Shoot a corner dealer in the knee and take his stash; you're a stickup boy and fair game for either the slingers or police. Watch the same dealer sling vials for two hours until he turns his back, and then sneak off with his ground stash; a caper, plain and simple. Breaking into a house where honest-to-God taxpayers are sleeping is definitely a crime. Breaking into parked cars and liberating cassette tape players is nothing more than caper. In Gary's mind, it isn't only

the severity of the act that qualifies a crime, but the likelihood that any human being other than yourself might get hurt. In the life of Gary McCullough, this point is essential.

He will shoot dope, to be sure. And if there is no paycheck on the horizon, he will steal a bit to get the money for that dope. And then, if he has to—if there is no other sensible alternative—he will tell a lie or two about his stealing and his doping, though in actual practice, Gary is too honest a soul to carry a deceit past anyone in this neighborhood. But it ends with this: no crime, no cruelty, nothing beyond the simple caper. The sad and beautiful truth about Gary McCullough—a man born and raised in as brutal and unforgiving a ghetto as America ever managed to create—is that he can't bring himself to hurt anyone.

Like this morning, when the caper almost went bad in the basement of that rowhouse on Fairmount. Gary and Tony were down there in the dark, groping for the cold water cutoff even as a half-dozen crackheads were arguing over cocaine a floor above them. He and Tony were stumbling around, bumping into things until Gary found the valve and shut off the water. They cut out that good No. 1 copper as quietly as they could, while above them the voices rose and fell in profane cadence.

"My turn."

"Fuck it is. This mine."

"Man, that's my time. That ain't right."

"Bitch, everything I say, you hear backwards."

Tony began squeezing air through his lips, trying to suppress laughter. Gary struggled with it, too, until they couldn't so much as look at each other without losing control. Side by side in the dark, they were holding it together as best they could, wincing inside with each soft squeak as the pipe cutter did its work. Then, from above them, a loud, shrewish wail—a woman's voice.

"MAW-REECE . . . MAW-REECE!"

"What?"

Gary and Tony froze, scared and still at the woman's shout. Gary guessed that Tony was willing to fight if it came to it, but in his own heart, he was down for capers only. Gary would take all of an ass-whipping if Maurice brought his coked-up self downstairs.

Tony recovered first, giving the cutter another go, until one last stretch of copper came away from the plumbing with a dull thump.

"MAW-REECE!"

"What?"

"AIN'T NO WATER IN THE TAP."

"Say what?"

Then both of them were racing toward the back basement door, laughing through the adrenaline rush. Gary paused at the far wall only long enough to collect the rest of their copper haul. Somewhere above them, Maurice was still berating his woman for smoking up whatever money was supposed to pay the water bill. Out in the rear alley at the far end of the block, Tony began laughing freely.

"Dag," said Gary, his strongest expletive.

Smiling and shaking his head, he gripped some of the soon-to-be-melted copper in his outstretched hand like a royal scepter, holding it up in daylight for a proper examination.

"At least thirty."

"Yeah, thirty," Tony agreed.

Reality deferred. The joy of the caper allows that no matter what you snatch—copper pipe, tin roofing, aluminum screen doors—it's always, at first glance, worth more than it actually is. Gary and Tony, at that moment, held up the pipe length and figured thirty dollars easy. Enough for two good blasts of dope and then coke to go on top. The sweet anticipation made the ten blocks to United Iron and Metal feel like a stroll through the yard.

"Tally ho," said Gary, beaming.

But, of course, eighteen even was all they got at the United Iron scales—eighteen dollars that went directly to the young boy working the Death Row package. In return, two $10 glassine bags at a discount, all of it now in the pipeline.

Comfortable in his own patch of sunlight, Tony looks over at Gary and laughs softly.

"Got-damn," says Tony.

Gary laughs back.

"Got-damn if she wasn't right upstairs trying to turn the water on and we was down below."

"And you was makin' me laugh," says Gary.

"Man, I couldn't help it."

Each true caper brings its own rush, a childlike thrill that stays close to the heart of every addict, no matter how many years he's played the game. It's the same feeling any hot-blooded twelve-year-old gets when he walks from a five-and-dime without paying for a candy bar, or when he tosses a crabapple at a passing police cruiser, gets chased by the cop,

and manages to escape. It's down there in every one of us—the unbridled joy that accompanies any unpunished sin, the self-satisfaction that often follows when you manage to get something for nothing.

"Man," says Gary, finally. "That was wild."

They laugh again, loudly at first, feeding on each other's good humor, then softly for a time. Then they fall silent as the heroin rides over them.

Gary pulls down his hoody to scratch the top of his head. With both legs stretched in front of him, he feels the edge of his receding hairline and frowns. Every day he's looking a little more like his father, which would be just fine if his father didn't have more than thirty years on him. Gary wonders for a moment whether it's heredity or drugging or both that is balding him out. Dope and coke have definitely changed him; this he knows. Every day, his skin seems to him a little darker and his eyes a bit more dusty, even when he isn't riding a blast. The smile stays the same, of course. You can pick Gary out of a crowd a block away if he has that wide-mouthed beam working. And save for the tracks on his arms, his body, too, is about the same as he remembers it—compact, proportioned, athletic. Then again, Gary has been hardcore drugging for only four years; he can look across the room into Tony's yellowed eyes and see the future. Tall and firm, Tony Boice is still a powerful man—Gary has seen him deliver an asskicking on more than one occasion—but now there is a little less flesh to the face, a little more shadow in the eyes. The more Gary looks at Tony, the more he is drawn to comparison. After all, both of them are wearing the same hooded sweatshirts and camouflage gear, looking like lost commandos on some doomed mission. It was Gary who had argued for the uniforms. We're out here chasing capers every day, he reasoned; if we're hardcore soldiering, we could do with some military styling.

But now, with the rush weakening, Gary takes a close look at Tony, then down at himself, then back at Tony. He feels a chill in the moment, as if something dread has slipped into this house. Gary tries to laugh again, but the noise gets caught in his throat. Instead, he's left wondering whether the virus has caught Tony and thinned him out. Nowadays, The Bug is all over Fayette Street.

"Wassup?" asks Tony, looking at him.

"Huh?"

"What you wonderin' at?"

Gary catches himself and straightens. He looks away from his partner, focusing for the first time on the empty room. "This was Andre's," he

says finally. His son DeAndre's room. Third floor rear, with the blue carpet and the southern exposure.

Slowly, Gary rises from the floor, stretches, and steps over Tony to look out the back window. His breath clouds a cracked pane as he stares down at the mounds of trash in the backyard. Clothes, grocery wrappers, Clorox bottles, broken furniture. If Gary had his way that yard would be fully enclosed in cement and Plexiglas, a private refuge with a patio and small lap pool. For a moment in Gary's mind, it is just so: Fran and Gary and DeAndre together at poolside, living large, showing this tired old city a little something.

DeAndre. Where is he now? A block down on Fayette Street, maybe, in that shithole of a shooting gallery where his mother lays her head. Or more likely around the corner at Baltimore and Gilmor, slinging for one of the New Yorkers.

Gary silently curses himself for thinking these thoughts, for ruining his own hard-won high. Leaving Tony to nod, he steps from the window, looks around, and then walks back out into the hall. The staircase: so beautiful, his favorite part of the house. He wanders down to the second floor and the master bedroom, admiring the ornate trim along the top of the built-in armoire. All of it original. And the twelve-foot ceiling, too. Fran had loved the high ceilings most of all.

This used to be their bedroom, though it's hard to see that now. The only bed remaining is a solitary mattress on the floor, covered by dirty linens. Milk crates stand in for furniture. A battered pine bureau sits in the corner with every drawer broken. A dozen pornographic pictures are taped to the four walls—every breast and crotch highlighted by crude circles and triangles drawn in thick black marker.

The art gallery was DeAndre's contribution, still on display from the summer before, when Gary's son turned fifteen and began slinging heroin on Gilmor Street. When his mother found out, Fran got so angry she put him out of the house. DeAndre stayed here for a while, and Gary did, too, using this place as a hideaway during his heroin binges. That summer, father and son would sometimes pass each other in these empty halls, both of them unable to manage any real connection. DeAndre was furious at his father's descent, yet refused to part with any emotion. And Gary, though filled with real pride to see his firstborn becoming a manchild, could never risk words. Too much shame lurking there. Too much history.

Gary walks across the bedroom toward the front windows, trying to

wrap his mind around some better thought. Two plastic milk crates filled with old record albums are stacked hard by one window—flotsam from that happier time. Gary leans forward, hands on both knees, scanning the remains of his collection. Marvin Gaye. Barry White. The Temptations. And, of course, Curtis Mayfield, who used to mean everything to Gary. Curtis, always speaking for sanity, warning that if there's hell below, we're all going to go. Gary pulls out an album, looks at it, then returns it carefully to the crate.

Ancient history here, too; vinyl sound-of-soul relics gathering dust in the age of hip-hop rhythm kings and gangsta posers. Gary has no ear for what the younguns call music nowadays.

He sings.

"If you had a choice of colors . . ."

A beautiful voice. A strong tenor for any church choir.

". . . which one would you choose, my brothers."

The sound echoes through the house. Gary hears Tony stirring a floor above him. Gary starts another couplet, but the moment is broken by a tumult below the front windows. The lyric is lost amid angry cursing.

"On the ground! On the ground, motherfucker!"

Gary creeps to the right window, peering around the edge of the dirty sheet that passes for a curtain.

"Get your hand out of your pocket. You hear me? Get your hand out of your pocket."

Plainclothesmen. Knockers. Six police jump out of two unmarked Chevrolets and shove two men to the sidewalk right below Gary's window.

"What?" asks Tony from the doorway.

"Shsshhhh," Gary hisses. "Poh-leece."

"Who is it?"

Gary shakes his head.

"Bob Brown?"

Bob Brown is the predominant constabulary scourge of every doper in the Franklin Square neighborhood—fiends in this part of town invoke the name as something distinct from the rest of the Baltimore Police Department. Whenever he makes an entrance, lookouts actually shout "Bob Brown," rather than the generic "Five-Oh" or "Time Out."

Gary shakes his head. Not Mr. Brown, not this time. "Knockers," he whispers. "I don't know none of 'em."

Tony steps softly toward the edge of the other window and looks down at the encounter. These police aren't regulars in the neighborhood,

and the two on the ground aren't familiar faces either. Both are on their backs; one on the sidewalk, the other in the dirt where the pavement breaks at the base of a small tree. Both are pleading innocence. Three of the plain-clothesmen stand over them, shouting; a fourth stands in the street, eyefucking the crews on the Mount Street corners. The other two are waiting next to the unmarked Chevrolets, both cars idling in the fast lane of Fayette Street, the front and rear doors splayed open.

"Don't fucking lie to me!"

"No, we just . . ."

"Motherfucker, get your pants down."

Gary and Tony stand silently at the windows, watching the scene play out. A white police is doing the shouting; two black companions poke through jacket pockets. The young man in the dirt is still trying to argue the case, but his partner has already gone cold, his hardest game face now showing only hate. Slowly, still on their backs, the two lower their pants to their knees, their exposed legs shaking in the winter air. A police picks at the waistbands of their boxers, looking south. Dickie checks in ten-degree weather, but there's no dope down there in those Jockeys or anywhere else for that matter. On the sidewalk is the brown sandwich bag one man was carrying. A knocker picks it up, looks inside and then, satisfied, drops it back on the pavement.

The white police checks the sidewalk farther down Fayette Street, looking for loose paper or vials.

"I didn't see anything get thrown," a black police says. A subtle suggestion, perhaps; one cop trying to tell another that, hey, maybe he got this one wrong.

"Man, I swear we clean," says the man in the dirt.

"Shut up," says the white police.

But the sidewalk search yields nothing. After a moment or two more, with the wind whipping trash and dead leaves down Fayette Street, the young man in the dirt looks up at the black police and risks another plea.

"Man, can we put our pants on?"

The cop gives a quick, cursory nod and both men hoist themselves up on their elbows, undulating like crabs on the sidewalk as they work to dress themselves.

The white plainclothesman tires of the game. He walks back toward one of the idling Chevrolets, turning to shout a final line at the two men on the ground. Dope or no dope, there's always a moral to the story.