

If anyone listens real close, he can hear its heart beat—

YEE-AH! I feel like part of the shadows that make company for me in this warm *amigo* darkness.

I am "My Majesty Piri Thomas," with a high on anything and like a stoned king, I gotta survey my kingdom.

I'm a skinny, dark-face, curly-haired, intense Porty-Ree-can—

Unsatisfied, hoping, and always reaching.

I got a feeling of aloneness and a bitterness that's growing and growing

Day by day into some kind of hate without *un nombre*.

Yet when I look down at the streets below, I can't help thinking

It's like a great big dirty Christmas tree with lights but no fuckin presents.

And man, my head starts growing bigger than my body as it gets crammed full of hate.

And I begin to listen to the sounds inside me.

Get angry, get hating angry, and you won't be scared.

What have you got now? Nothing.

What will you ever have? Nothing

. . . Unless you cop for yourself!

CONTENTS

HARLEM

1. Cutting Out 3
2. Puerto Rican Paradise 8
3. Playing It Smooth 15
4. Alien Turf 26
5. Home Relief 42
6. If You Ain't Got Heart, You Ain't Got Nada 51
7. Little Red Schoolhouse 69
8. In Business 75

SUBURBIA

9. Babylon for the Babylonians 87
10. But Not for Me 94

HARLEM

11. How to Be a Negro Without Really Trying 101
12. My Marine Tiger 112
13. Hung Up Between Two Sticks 127

SUBURBIA

- 14. Learning Some New ABC's 141
- 15. Brothers Under the Skin 153
- 16. Funeral for a Prodigal Son 160

DOWN SOUTH

- 17. Gonna Find Out What's Shakin' 169
- 18. Barroom Sociology 182
- 19. Las Aguas del Sur, 192

HARLEM

- 20. Home, Sweet Harlem 209
- 21. Hung Down 214
- 22. Real Jesse Jameses 225
- 23. Wish It Were You, Trina 238
- 24. If You're Gonna Pray—Then
Pray Big 243

PRISON

- 25. The House of "Do-Right" 257
- 26. Breaking In 265
- 27. Mucho Days and Nights in Gray 273
- 28. Sex in the Can 280
- 29. No More Mafianas for Us,
Trina 288
- 30. Sweatin', Man, Sweatin' 294
- 31. God, Ain't You for Everybody? 308.
- 32. Great, Man, Great; I'm Thinking Like a Stone
Philosopher 318

NEW YORK TOWN

- 33. Free Side Is the Best Side 331
- 34. Hey, Barrio—I'm Home 341
- 35. I Swears to God and the Virgin 350

HARLEM

*Pops, how come me and you is always on the outs?
Is it something we don't know nothing about?
I wonder if it's something I done, or some-
thing I am.*

1. CUTTING OUT

I had been walking around since 9 p.m. My thoughts were boiling. *Poppa ain't ever gonna hit me again. I'm his kid, too, just like James, José, Paulie, and Sis. But I'm the one that always gets the blame for everything. I'm sorry Momma's gotta worry, but she gotta understand that it wasn't my fault.*

"Caramba," I muttered aloud, "I'm getting hungry."

The streets of Harlem make an unreal scene of frightened silence at 2 a.m. Like everything got a layoff from noise and hassling. Only the rumbling of a stray car passing by or the shy foraging of a cat or dog make the quietness bearable—especially to a twelve-year-old kid whose ability to make noise had got him a whipping from his poppa.

I could see Poppa's face, tired and sleepy, yelling, "Goddammit, can't a man get any sleep around this house? I work my ass off and can't even sleep when I get home. Whatta ya making all that racket for?"

I could feel my mouth making the motions of wanting to say something in my defense. Of how it wasn't my fault that José had almost knocked the toaster off the table, and how I had tried to save it from falling, and in trying had finished knocking it to the floor along with a large jar of black coffee. But I just couldn't get the words out. Poppa just stood there, eyes swollen and hurting

from too much work, looking at a river of black coffee. He didn't give me a chance. Even before the first burning slap of his belt awakened tears of pain, I was still trying to get words out that would make everything all right again. The second whap of the belt brought words of pain to my lips, and my blind running retreat was a mixture of tears and "I hate you."

But Park Avenue—Harlem Park Avenue—was scary, specially that dirty stone trestle of the New York Central that ran right down the middle of the avenue making long, gloomy tunnels at each street corner. I watched the moving shadows in the street. I listened to the crazy noises—a fire engine screaming down a side street, the clatter of a garbage-can lid knocked off by a hungry cat, a broad moaning in pain, "Ohhhh, no, please don't." I wondered if it hurt all that much.

The lampposts made a big shadow on the stoops. I couldn't help wishing I'd run away in the daytime. I kept walking. I saw a tall figure coming toward me about a block away. *Poppa*, I thought, and jumped into the nearest hallway and sat down in the darkness and watched the figure pass. I saw the gleam of a badge. *Policía*. I was glad I hadn't been seen.

I had run away from home but not from Harlem. I decided to sleep on the roof of the tenement across the street from my house. The staircase up to the roof creaked under quiet, careful steps. I felt like giving it a whipping for making all that noise. Up on the roof the night air was more friendly. I peeked over the ledge and saw the street below with sleepy eyes and a hungry belly.

I bet Poppa's worried.

All of a sudden a sick feeling of all this being for nothing shot up inside of me. *Poppa* couldn't be worried, 'cause *Poppa* was working his night shift and wouldn't know about my running away till he got home from work! I felt my eyes brim with tears. I felt so fucking cheated

out of whipping *Poppa* back with worry. I walked back to the hallway.

"I shoulda waited till he got home from work. Man, what a *bomba*! Well, he'll find out soon enough—"

I heard a noise under the stairs. I froze in the hallway and listened.

"Man, you got that stuff?"

"Yeah. Jesus, I'm burning up like with a *puta's* fever."

"So work, man. Here, take the *tapita*."

I laid cool. Even my breathing was cool.

"*Cosío*, man, cook this shit up."

My mouth began to water. I wondered what they were going to cook. I thought probably these two bums copped some shit out of some garbage can. Man, I was so hungry, I wondered maybe if I asked—but wait a minute, that cat said *tapita* . . .

I saw the light of a match flickering from side to side under the bottle cap. I saw the eyedropper with the shining needle. I watched the junkies' faces, taut, like waiting was the worst thing in the world. The match burned out. Another match popped. The eyedropper sucked up what the junkies had cooked in the bottle cap. One of the cats took his belt off, and this brought a twinge of memory of what *Poppa* had laid on me earlier. But this belt wasn't for whipping. I saw the belt go around the cat's arm and tugged tight. Another match was lit, and the eyedropper's needle was pushed into the junkie's arm.

"Come on, man, lemme turn on," said the other cat.

"Save the cotton."

"Yeah, man, this is smooth, but we gotta do some better dealing; this five-cent bag ain't enough. Like man, we is strung out."

I heard the change in his voice. The *cura* was taking effect. He was like normal now that the drug was part of him.

I lost interest. I got up, and the scraping of my shoes

started a panic. The two junkies jumped up and made it. They thought I was *la hara*—a cop. Their running feet down the stairs made me feel sorry for them. But, Jesus, I was hon-gree.

The bad-o feeling came back. About Poppa not knowing I'd cut out from home, and Momma worrying 'cause she knew. That wasn't fair at all. *Cofio*, she wasn't the one that laid that belt on my ass and it wasn't fair that she should get whipped for something she didn't do. So I made up my mind. I made it down the stairs, my feet smashing out loud echoes. I didn't give a shit who heard; I wasn't a runaway any more.

As I came out into the street, I saw the same shining badge. I just kept walking toward him. Man, I was going home. The cop came up to me and passed me without even giving me a second look. After all, a twelve-year-old kid walking the streets at 3 a.m. was a nothing sight in Harlem.

I made it into my building, climbed up two flights of stairs, and knuckled a bold but respectful noise on the door that sounded like a pat instead of a knock.

The door opened and Poppa was there in his undershirt. I looked under his arm and saw Mr. Gonzalez, Mr. Riviera, and Mr. Lopez. There were coffee cups and dominoes on the table, and the radio was playing.

"Well, son, come on in. Don't just stand there," Poppa said, and then he turned and shouted, "Hey, whose turn is it to play?"

"Yours, I think," Mr. Riviera called back.

I slipped under Poppa's arm.

"Go to bed, son," Poppa said, playfully kicking me in the *culo*.

I walked toward my bedroom but Poppa called me back.

"Don't you know how to say hello to guests?" he said.

"*Cómo estás*, Mr. Riviera?"

"*Muy bien*, Piri. Y tu?"

"*Muy bien*, gracias. *Cómo estás*, Mr. Gonzalez?"

"*Bien*, gracias. Y tu?"

"*Bien*, gracias. *Cómo estás*, Mr. Rod—excuse me—er, Mr. Lopez?"

"Fine, *hijo*. You are up late, eh?"

I pretended not to hear him and looked at Momma, who had been watching me with that "*Dios bendito*, what am I going to do with this boy?" look.

"Are you hon-gree, *hijo*?"

"No, Moms." I felt like crying. All that running away for nothing. Poppa hadn't even gone to work. He had known about my cutting out and hadn't even worked up a sweat.

I climbed into bed, taking off just my shoes. There was no use getting undressed; I was gonna be up in a couple of hours. I heard Mr. Lopez asking Poppa where I had been.

"What a kid," Poppa answered. "He probably was up some friend's house. I'm gonna talk to him in the daytime. It's too late to make noise now."

Ain't that a bitch, I thought. *Nobody here even knows I cut out from home. I'm getting an ass-whipping for staying over at somebody's house.*

"Whose play is it?" came a voice from the kitchen.

2. PUERTO RICAN PARADISE

Poppa didn't talk to me the next day. Soon he didn't talk much to anyone. He lost his night job—I forget why, and probably it was worth forgetting—and went back on home relief. It was 1941, and the Great Hunger called Depression was still down on Harlem.

But there was still the good old WPA. If a man was poor enough, he could dig a ditch for the government. Now Poppa was poor enough again.

The weather turned cold one more time, and so did our apartment. In the summer the cooped-up apartments in Harlem seem to catch all the heat and improve on it. It's the same in the winter. The cold, plastered walls embrace that cold from outside and make it a part of the apartment, till you don't know whether it's better to freeze out in the snow or by the stove, where four jets, wide open, spout futile, blue-yellow flames. It's hard on the rats, too.

Snow was falling. "My Cristo," Momma said, "qué frío. Doesn't that landlord have any *corazón*? Why don't he give more heat?" I wondered how Pops was making out working a pick and shovel in that falling snow.

Momma picked up a hammer and began to beat the beat-up radiator that's copped a plea from so many beat-

ings. Poor steam radiator, how could it give out heat when it was freezing itself? The hollow sounds Momma beat out of it brought echoes from other freezing people in the building. Everybody picked up the beat and it seemed a crazy, good idea. If everybody took turns beating on the radiators, everybody could keep warm from the exercise.

We drank hot cocoa and talked about summertime. Momma talked about Puerto Rico and how great it was, and how she'd like to go back one day, and how it was warm all the time there and no matter how poor you were over there, you could always live on green bananas, *bacalao*, and rice and beans. "Dios mío," she said, "I don't think I'll ever see my island again."

"Sure you will, Mommie," said Miriam, my kid sister. She was eleven. "Tell us, tell us all about Porto Rico."

"It's not Porto Rico, it's Puerto Rico," said Momma.

"Tell us, Moms," said nine-year-old James, "about Puerto Rico."

"Yeah, Mommie," said six-year-old José.

Even the baby, Paulie, smiled.

Moms copped that wet-eyed look and began to dream-talk about her *isla verde*, Moses' land of milk and honey.

"When I was a little girl," she said, "I remember the getting up in the morning and getting the water from the river and getting the wood for the fire and the quiet of the greenlands and the golden color of the morning sky, the grass wet from the *lluvia* . . . Ai, Dios, the *coquis* and the *pajaritos* making all the *música* . . ."

"Mommie, were you poor?" asked Miriam.

"Sí, muy pobre, but very happy. I remember the hard work and the very little bit we had, but it was a good little bit. It counted very much. Sometimes when you have too much, the good gets lost within and you have to look very hard. But when you have a little, then the good does not have to be looked for so hard."

"Moms," I asked, "did everybody love each other—I mean, like if everybody was worth something, not like if some weren't important because they were poor—you know what I mean?"

"*Bueno hijo*, you have people everywhere who, because they have more, don't remember those who have very little. But in Puerto Rico those around you share *la pobreza* with you and they love you, because only poor people can understand poor people. I like *los Estados Unidos*, but it's sometimes a cold place to live—not because of the winter and the landlord not giving heat but because of the snow in the hearts of the people."

"Moms, didn't our people have any money or land?" I leaned forward, hoping to hear that my ancestors were noble princes born in Spain.

"Your grandmother and grandfather had a lot of land, but they lost that."

"How come, Moms?"

"Well, in those days there was nothing of what you call *contratos*, and when you bought or sold something, it was on your word and a handshake, and that's the way your *abuelos* bought their land and then lost it."

"Is that why we ain't got nuttin' now?" James asked pointedly.

"Oh, it—"

The door opened and put an end to the kitchen yak. It was Poppa coming home from work. He came into the kitchen and brought all the cold with him. Poor Poppa, he looked so lost in the clothes he had on. A jacket and coat, sweaters on top of sweaters, two pairs of long johns, two pairs of pants, two pairs of socks, and a woolen cap. And under all that he was cold. His eyes were cold; his ears were red with pain. He took off his gloves and his fingers were stiff with cold.

"*Cómo está?*" said Momma. "I will make you coffee."

Poppa said nothing. His eyes were running hot frozen tears. He worked his fingers and rubbed his ears, and the pain made him make faces. "Get me some snow, Piri," he said finally.

I ran to the window, opened it, and scraped all the snow on the sill into one big snowball and brought it to him. We all watched in frozen wonder as Poppa took that snow and rubbed it on his ears and hands.

"Gee, Pops, don't it hurt?" I asked.

"Sí, but it's good for it. It hurts a little first, but it's good for the frozen parts."

I wondered why.

"How was it today?" Momma asked.

"Cold. My God, ice cold."

Gee, I thought, *I'm sorry for you, Pops. You gotta suffer like this.*

"It was not always like this," my father said to the cold walls. "It's all the fault of the damn depression."

"Don't say 'damn,'" Momma said.

"Lola, I say 'damn' because that's what it is—*damn*." And Momma kept quiet. She knew it was "damn."

My father kept talking to the walls. Some of the words came out loud, others stayed inside. I caught the inside ones—the damn WPA, the damn depression, the damn home relief, the damn poorness, the damn cold, the damn crummy apartments, the damn look on his damn kids, living so damn damned and his not being able to do a damn thing about it.

And Momma looked at Poppa and at us and thought about her Puerto Rico and maybe being there where you didn't have to wear a lot of extra clothes and feel so full of damns, and how when she was a little girl all the green was wet from the *lluvias*.

And Poppa looking at Momma and us, thinking how did he get trapped and why did he love us so much that

he dug in damn snow to give us a piece of chance? And why couldn't he make it from home, maybe, and keep running?

And Miriam, James, José, Paulie, and me just looking and thinking about snowballs and Puerto Rico and summertime in the street and whether we were gonna live like this forever and not know enough to be sorry for ourselves.

The kitchen all of a sudden felt warmer to me, like being all together made it like we wanted it to be. Poppa made it into the toilet and we could hear everything he did, and when he finished, the horsey gurgling of the flushed toilet told us he'd soon be out. I looked at the clock and it was time for "Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy."

José, James, and I got some blankets and, like Indians, huddled around the radio digging the All-American Jack and his adventures, while Poppa ate dinner quietly. Poppa was funny about eating—like when he ate, nobody better bother him. When Poppa finished, he came into the living room and stood there looking at us. We smiled at him, and he stood there looking at us.

All of a sudden he yelled, "How many wanna play Major Bowes' Amateur Hour?"

"Hoo-ray! Yeah, we wanna play," said José.

"Okay, first I'll make some taffy outta molasses, and the one who wins first prize gets first choice at the biggest piece, okay?"

"Yeah, hoo-ray, *chevere*."

Gee, Pops, you're great, I thought, you're the swellest, the bestest Pops in the whole world, even though you don't understand us too good.

When the candy was all ready, everybody went into the living room. Poppa came in with a broom and put an empty can over the stick. It became a microphone, just like on the radio.

"Pops, can I be Major Bowes?" I asked.

"Sure, Piri," and the floor was mine.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I announced, "tonight we present 'Major Bowes' Amateur Hour,' and for our first number—"

"Wait a minute, son, let me get my ukelele," said Poppa. "We need music."

Everybody clapped their hands and Pops came back with his ukelele.

"The first con-tes-tant we got is Miss Miriam Thomas."

"Oh no, not me first, somebody else goes first," said Miriam, and she hid behind Momma.

"Let me! Let me!" said José.

Everybody clapped.

"What are you gonna sing, sir?" I asked.

"Tell the people his name," said Poppa.

"Oh yeah. Presenting Mr. José Thomas. And what are you gonna sing, sir?"

I handed José the broom with the can on top and sat back. He sang well and everybody clapped.

Everyone took a turn, and we all agreed that two-year-old Paulie's "gurgle, gurgle" was the best song, and Paulie got first choice at the candy. Everybody got candy and eats and thought how good it was to be together, and Moms thought that it was wonderful to have such a good time even if she wasn't in Puerto Rico where the grass was wet with *lluvia*. Poppa thought about how cold it was gonna be tomorrow, but then he remembered tomorrow was Sunday and he wouldn't have to work, and he said so and Momma said "Sí," and the talk got around to Christmas and how maybe things would get better.

The next day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

"My God," said Poppa. "We're at war."

"*Dios mío*," said Momma.

I turned to James. "Can you beat that," I said.

"Yeah," he nodded. "What's it mean?"

"What's it mean?" I said. "You gotta ask, dopey? It means a rumble is on, and a big one, too."

I wondered if the war was gonna make things worse than they were for us. But it didn't. A few weeks later Poppa got a job in an airplane factory. "How about that?" he said happily. "Things are looking up for us."

Things were looking up for us, but it had taken a damn war to do it. A lousy rumble had to get called so we could start to live better. I thought, *How do you figure this crap out?*

I couldn't figure it out, and after a while I stopped thinking about it. Life in the streets didn't change much. The bitter cold was followed by the sticky heat; I played stickball, marbles, and Johnny-on-the-Pony, copped girls' drawers and blew pot. War or peace—what difference did it really make?

3. PLAYING IT SMOOTH

Hanging around on the block is a sort of science. You have a lot to do and a lot of nothing to do. In the winter there's dancing, pad combing, movies, and the like. But summer is really the kick. All the blocks are alive, like many-legged cats crawling with fleas. People are all over the place. Stoops are occupied like bleacher sections at a game, and beer flows like there's nothing else to drink. The block musicians pound out gone beats on tin cans and conga drums and bongos. And kids are playing all over the place—on fire escapes, under cars, over cars, in alleys, back yards, hallways.

We rolled marbles along the gutter edge, trying to crack them against the enemy marbles, betting five and ten marbles on being able to span the rolled distance between your marbles and the other guy's. We stretched to the limit skinny fingers with dirty gutter water caked between them, completely oblivious to the islands of dog filth, people filth, and street filth that lined the gutter.

That gutter was more dangerous than we knew. There was a kid we called Dopey, a lopsided-looking kid who was always drooling at the mouth. Poor Dopey would do anything you'd tell him, and one day somebody told him to drink dirty street water. He got sick, and the ambu-

lance from City Hospital came and took him away. The next time we saw Dopey, he was in a coffin box in his house. He didn't look dopey at all; he looked like any of us, except he was stone dead.

All of us went to Dopey's funeral. We were sweeter to him in death than we ever had been in life. I thought about death, that bogeyman we all knew as kids, which came only to the other guy, never to you. You would live forever. There in front of Dopey's very small, very cheap coffin I promised myself to live forever; that no matter what, I'd never die.

For a few days after Dopey's funeral we talked about how Dopey now was in a big hole in the ground till his bones grew rotten and how none of us was afraid of death or dying. I even described how I'd die and breathe my last. I did the whole bit, acting out every detail. I had a kid hold my head in his lap while I spoke about leaving for the last roundup in the ranch house up yonder, an idea I got from a Johnny Mack Brown cowboy flicker. It was swell acting. I ended with a long, shuddering expelling of breath, a rolling of the eyeballs, whites showing carefully, and jaws falling slack amidst cries of "Holy Jesus" and "Man, what a fuckin' actor that guy is!" Then I arose from my flat sidewalk slab of death, dusted myself off, looked around and said, "Hey, man, let's play Johnny-on-the-Pony, one-two-three."

At thirteen or fourteen we played a new game—copping girls' drawers. It became part of our street living—and sometimes a messy part. Getting yourself a chick was a rep builder. But I felt that bragging to other fellas about how many cherries I'd cracked or how many panties came down on rooftops or back yards was nobody's business but my own, and besides, I was afraid my old lady would find out and I'd get my behind wasted. And anyway it was better to play mysterious with the guys at bullshit sessions, just play it cool as to who and how you copped.

It was all part of becoming *hombre*, of wanting to have a beard to shave, a driver's license, a draft card, a "stone-ness" which enabled you to go into a bar like a man. Nobody really digs a kid. But a man—cool. Nobody can tell you what to do—and nobody better. You'd smack him down like Whiplash does in the cowboy flick or really light him up like Scarface in that gangster picture—swoon, crack, bang, bang, bang—short-nose, snub-nose pistol, and a machine gun, and a poor fuckin' loudmouth is laid out.

That was the way I felt. And sometimes what I did, although it was real enough, was only a pale shadow of what I felt. Like playing stickball . . .

I stood at the side of the sewer that made home plate in the middle of the street, waiting impatiently for the Spalding ball to be bounced my way, my broomstick bat swinging back and forth.

"Come on, man, pitch the ball!" I shouted.

"Take it easy, buddy," the pitcher said.

I was burning, making all kinds of promises to send that rubber ball smashing into his teeth whenever he decided to let it go.

"Come on, Piri, lose that ball—smack it clear over to Lexington Avenue."

"Yeah, yeah, watch me."

The ball finally left that hoarder's hand. It came in on one bounce, like it was supposed to, and slightly breaking into a curve. It was all mine.

"Waste it, *panín*," shouted my boy Waneko.

I gritted my teeth and ran in to meet the ball. I felt the broomstick bat make connection and the ball climb and climb like it was never coming back. It had "home run" all over it. One runner came in and I was right behind him. My boys pushed out their hands to congratulate me. We had twelve *bolos* (dollars) on the game. I

slapped skin with them, playing it cool all the way. Man, that was the way to be.

It was hot, and I walked over to El Viejo's candy store for a cold soda.

"Hey, Piri," someone called.

I looked around. It was Carlito, little Carlito, who was always trying to hang around with us big guys.

"Where ya going, Piri?"

"To the candy store, shorty. Wanna soda?"

"Chevere, thanks."

Carlito was a good kid. Someday he was gonna go through hell. Carlito was gonna be a junkie, like most of us would be—but that was in the future.

I wiped the sweat from two Coke bottles and gave one to Carlito. I gulped down the coldness—so cold it hurt my throat clear around to the back of my neck. But it was stone good. I whipped off the handkerchief tied around my forehead. I wore this Apache style to keep the sweat from running into my eyes and because it was a kick—it made you feel a little different from the guy who didn't wear it.

Zero, our second baseman, popped his head into the doorway. "Come on, man, take the field," he yelled.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming," I said. I grabbed hold of a glove the other team's outfielder tossed to me and ran down the middle of the street, dodging a car that screeched to a stop a couple of inches from me.

"Hey, you goddamn kid, why don't you watch where the hell you're running?"

"Cool it, man," I said and grinned a screw-you-*amigo* smile. "I was here before you. This is my block, you're just riding through and we're nice enough to let you, *amigo*."

"What did you say, you little—?"

The door of his car swung open—and closed just as fast

as both teams suddenly stopped playing ball and everybody all of a sudden had a stickball bat in his hands.

"Hey, *amigo*," I shouted as the car pulled away. "What you say?"

He didn't say anything, and everybody fell out with a laugh kick.

"Come on, *chicos*," I said. "Let's get this game going."

Later, walking home, everybody had some kind of excuse for losing.

"Damn Sam," said Waneko. "We should've won that game."

"Yeah," said Zero. "Everybody played like an old puta."

"Aw, next time we'll waste them chumps."

But we couldn't shake off the gloom of losing twelve *bolos*. My God, do you know what it took to hustle twelve *bolos* between us? Every damn bottle we could steal from one grocery store to sell to another. All our movie money. And all the change we could beat out of our girl-debs.

"Man," I said. "What a ball we could've had with all that loot."

"Aw, fuck it," said Little Louie. "Why crap over split milk?"

"You mean *spilled* milk, *stúpido*," said Waneko.

"Split, spilled, what's the difference? We lost."

I got to my stoop, and made it into the dark gloomy hallway. I cut up the stairs and pushed the door on Apartment 3 and slammed it shut behind me with a blast.

"Hey, what's the matter with you?" my mother called from the kitchen. She came to see for herself. "*Qué muchacho!* You would think you never learned how to shut a door. Listen, go outside and come in again like people."

"Aw, Moms, everything bothers you."

"You heard me."

"Okay, okay, Moms."

I walked out the door, stood outside for a moment, and then opened the door. I looked at fat little Moms standing there with a very serious look on her face. I turned and very deliberately, an inch at a time, slowly closed the door, my face all screwed up with gentle effort and my fingers curled around the doorknob. I took a long few minutes to get the doorknob turned around and sweet Momma was shaking all over with laughter. "What a funny *morenito*," she said.

I joined her and we just laughed and laughed. I kissed her and went into the back room feeling her full-of-love words floating after me.

"Hey, Moms," I called out from the back room. "How come you're so pretty, eh? How come, huh?"

"*Ai, qué negrito.*"

I felt happy. I could hear her softly laughing to herself.

"*Qué bueno* to have a Moms like my Moms . . . umm, *qué eso?* What's smelling so great?"

I walked out in my shorts and came into the kitchen, my face screwed up in a funny face, my nose twitching like a rabbit sniffing. I made like I was floating in the air toward the pots. Ah, I lifted the cover and rolled my eyeballs. I looked out of the corner of my eyes to dig Momma. She was holding her sides, my fat little Momma, tears rolling out of her eyes. *Caramba*, it was great to see Momma happy. I'd go through the rest of my life making like funnies if I was sure Momma would be happy. I stuck my finger in that sweet-smelling pot.

"*Vete! Vete!* Get away from that food with your dirty hands. *Dios mio*, you smell bad, all full of sweat and—"

"Gimme a kiss, Moms; come on, *vente*—a big *jalumbo* kiss."

"Get away, you smell bad, all full of sweat. Go, get in that bathtub and let the water and soap make you soft so the dirt has a chance to come off."

"Aw, Moms, you love me any way I am, clean or dirty, white or black, pretty or ugly."

"*Si*, you're right, and, my son, I have to love you because only your mother could love you, *un negrito* and ugly. And to make it badder, you're dirty and smelly from your sweat!"

"Aw, look at her." I made a look of disbelief. "Trying to make like I'm not your big love. Ain't I your firstborn, the oldest, the biggest, the strongest?"

"*Si, si*," Momma came back at me, "and the baddest. *Vete*, soak for a long time or no dinner."

The water in the bathtub was hot and I looked at my fourteen-year-old frame, naked. I was pretty skinny. I should get fatter. Maybe weightlifting would help, like that ad in the funny book about a 97-pound weakling before and after. Man, the water felt good. I ducked under and held my breath as long as I could. It seemed like hours. I was already bursting my lungs when somebody grabbed my hair and pulled me up.

"Hey, whatta ya think you're doing?" I shouted. I could make out my brother James's face through the water in my eyes.

"Whatta ya think, mopey? I thought you were drowning."

I threw some water at him. "Ah, ha," he said. "So you wanna play, eh?" He ducked and turned on the cold water in the sink, filling the glass we used for gargling.

"Cool, cool, James, I was only kidding. Hold that water, man; I can catch a cold. Be nice, James." He held the freezing water over my head. "Come on, man," I added. "Don't play around. Hey, Moms, tell James to stop farting around."

A little drop of cold water hit my back. I crawled under the water and the rest of the cold water came down. Brrr, I almost left the bathtub in one jump.

"James, I'm gonna punch you in the mouth."

"Sez who?"

"Sez me, you little runt." James filled the glass again. "Whatta ya gonna do?" he said. I couldn't help laughing.

"Nothing, brother dear, I ain't gonna do nothing."

"You cop out?"

"Yeah, I cop out."

"You cop a plea?"

"Yeah, man, I cop a plea. Now will you get the fuck outta here?"

"Moms, Piri's cursing again."

"Why, you stoolpigeon," I said hurt-like, "you Puerto Rican squealer."

"Piri," said Momma from the kitchen, "this is a Christian home. I don't want no bad things said inside a house that belongs to God."

"Moms, I didn't say nothing to James."

"You did so say a curse," she said.

"You heard wrong. I said *buck*, get the *buck* outta here."

"You didn't," James piped in. "I heard you say 'Will you get the *fuck* outta here.'"

"Hey, Moms," I yelled out, "did you hear James, huh? Did you hear him? Go on, stoolpigeon," I said to James. "Whatta ya got to say now, huh? Look in the mirror! Hey Moms," I shouted. "Ain't you gonna holler at him too?"

"What for?"

"What for, Moms? Didn't you hear him?"

"I didn't hear nothing."

"Moms, you're deaf. James said, 'Will you get the fuck outta here.'"

"Piri, if you going to keep cursing, when your father comes home you're going to get a strap across your skinny behind."

"My God, there ain't no justice!"

I started to climb out of the bathtub to belt my brother. He didn't back away an inch. He held that damn cold glass of water, and we just looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Okay, man, we call it a draw," I said, and I eased back into the tub. James started to wash his face and hands. "Say, James," I said half-minded.

"Yeah," came a soap-flubbed answer.

"Did you ever notice how when you're in the bathtub and you lay a fart, little bubbles come up and, *blueeee*, they burst and, man, what a stink? Look, look, there's one, two, three, four, five of them coming up."

"Mowoo, whew, Piri, you're rotten, what a stinking smell, let me outta here."

I said nothing. I just looked at his retreat and smiled an I-got-even-anyhow smile. Then I heard all the kids running to meet Poppa at the door. I wanted to run to meet him too, but I couldn't somehow, and it wasn't because I was in the tub. Even when I did run to meet him, I was like a stranger, outta place, like I wasn't supposed to share in the "Poppy, Poppy" routine.

"Piri, have you finished yet?" Momma called. "Your padre's home and he has to take a bath."

Pops, I wondered, *how come me and you is always on the outs? Is it something we don't know nothing about? I wonder if it's something I done, or something I am. Why do I feel so left outta things with you—like Moms is both of you to me, like if you and me was just an accident around here? I dig when you holler at the other kids for doing something wrong. How come it sounds so different when you holler at me? Why does it sound harder and meaner? Maybe I'm wrong, Pops. I know we all get the same food and clothes, anything and everything—except there's this feeling between you and me. Like it's not the same for me. How come when we all play with you, I can't really enjoy it like the rest? How come when*

we all get hit for doing something wrong, I feel it the hardest? Maybe 'cause I'm the biggest, huh? Or maybe it's 'cause I'm the darkest in this family. Pops, you ain't like Herby's father, are you? I mean, you love us all the same, right?

My mind kept up the reverie; my fingers absent-mindedly pulling my floating pee-pee into a long string, like a toy balloon when it's empty, and let it snap back.

Pops, you're the best and greatest Pops in the whole world. It's just that I don't dig why I feel this way. Like I can't get next to you. Jesus, wouldn't it be a bitch if Poppa really didn't love me, I thought. But I doubted it. I mean, you didn't have to dig each other to love each other. Maybe that was it. We didn't dig each other so it made me think he didn't love me. But how come he called Miriam "honey" and the rest of those sweet names and me hardly ever? Miriam gets treated like a princess. I'd like to punch her in her straight nose, I don't care if Pops don't love me a lot. It just don't mean a thing . . .

The door opened and Poppa walked in. I looked at him and he smiled at me and swooped down and scooped a handful of water into my face.

Jesus, Pops, you really love me like all the rest, eh? Don't you? Poppa pulled the chain as he took a long, long leak.

"Look, Pops, I can stay under water a long, long time. Watch," I said. And under I went. I held my breath as long as I could. I felt my lungs bursting, like they were on fire, but I hadda show Poppa. I couldn't hold out much longer, but I hadda show Poppa. The lights in my head started to spin and I couldn't stay under any more. I exploded up out of the water, sputtering but happy.

"You see me, Pops?" I gasped, screwing the water out of my eyes. "Did you see me, Pops? I musta stayed under five minutes." I looked up happily, but there was no one there. The bathroom was empty. I felt like I lost some-

thing, something more, and I couldn't tell the salty tears from the bath water.

I dried myself off, put on my clean clothes, and walked out into the kitchen. Poppa was standing by the icebox. I didn't look at him as I walked toward the back room. If I wasn't there for him, he wasn't there for me.

"Hey, son," he called. I stopped and my back stayed toward him. "I heard you when you exploded out of that water, you sure got a lot of lung power. I bet you could be a great swimmer."

"You mean it, Pops?" I lit up like a bomb. Poppa had noticed my show. "You really think so, huh, Pops? I mean I got good lungs. I'm a little skinny but I'm going to lift weights."

Pops was turning away, losing interest, but who cared? I mean, he had a right to be tired; he needed some rest after working for a wife and kids. I couldn't expect him to be mushy over me all the time. Sure, it was all right for the other kids; they were small and they needed more kisses and stuff. But I was the oldest, the firstborn, and besides, I was *hombre*.

4. ALIEN TURF

Sometimes you don't fit in. Like if you're a Puerto Rican on an Italian block. After my new baby brother, Ricardo, died of some kind of germs, Poppa moved us from 111th Street to Italian turf on 114th Street between Second and Third Avenue. I guess Poppa wanted to get Momma away from the hard memories of the old pad.

I sure missed 111th Street, where everybody acted, walked, and talked like me. But on 114th Street everything went all right for a while. There were a few dirty looks from the spaghetti-an'-sauce cats, but no big sweat. Till that one day I was on my way home from school and almost had reached my stoop when someone called: "Hey, you dirty fuckin' spic."

The words hit my ears and almost made me curse Poppa at the same time. I turned around real slow and found my face pushing in the finger of an Italian kid about my age. He had five or six of his friends with him.

"Hey, you," he said. "What nationality are ya?"

I looked at him and wondered which nationality to pick. And one of his friends said, "Ah, Rocky, he's black enuff to be a nigger. Ain't that what you is, kid?"

My voice was almost shy in its anger. "I'm Puerto Rican," I said. "I was born here." I wanted to shout it, but it came out like a whisper.

"Right here inna street?" Rocky sneered. "Ya mean right here inna middle of da street?"

They all laughed.

I hated them. I shook my head slowly from side to side. "Uh-uh," I said softly. "I was born inna hospital—inna bed."

"Umm, *paisan*—born inna bed," Rocky said.

I didn't like Rocky Italiano's voice. "Inna hospital," I whispered, and all the time my eyes were trying to cut down the long distance from this trouble to my stoop. But it was no good; I was hemmed in by Rocky's friends. I couldn't help thinking about kids getting wasted for moving into a block belonging to other people.

"What hospital, *paisan*?" Bad Rocky pushed.

"Harlem Hospital," I answered, wishing like all hell that it was 5 o'clock, instead of just 3 o'clock, 'cause Poppa came home at 5. I looked around for some friendly faces belonging to grown-up people, but the elders were all busy yakking away in Italian. I couldn't help thinking how much like Spanish it sounded. Shit, that should make us something like relatives.

"Harlem Hospital?" said a voice. "I knew he was a nigger."

"Yeah," said another voice from an expert on color. "That's the hospital where all them black bastards get born at."

I dug three Italian elders looking at us from across the street, and I felt saved. But that went out the window when they just smiled and went on talking. I couldn't decide whether they had smiled because this new whatever-he-was was gonna get his ass kicked or because they were pleased that their kids were welcoming a new kid to their country. An older man nodded his head at Rocky, who smiled back. I wondered if that was a signal for my funeral to begin.

"Ain't that right, kid?" Rocky pressed. "Ain't that where all black people get born?"

I dug some of Rocky's boys grinding and pushing and punching closed fists against open hands. I figured they were looking to shake me up, so I straightened up my humble voice and made like proud. "There's all kinds of people born there. Colored people, Puerto Ricans like me, an'—even spaghetti-benders like you."

"That's a dirty fuckin' lie"—*bash*, I felt Rocky's fist smack into my mouth—"you dirty fuckin' spic."

I got dizzy and then more dizzy when fists started to fly from everywhere and only toward me. I swung back, *splat, bish*—my fist hit some face and I wished I hadn't, 'cause then I started getting kicked.

I heard people yelling in Italian and English and I wondered if maybe it was 'cause I hadn't fought fair in having hit that one guy. But it wasn't. The voices were trying to help me.

"Whas'sa matta, you no-good kids, leeve da kid alone," a man said. I looked through a swelling eye and dug some Italians pushing their kids off me with slaps. One even kicked a kid in the ass. I could have loved them if I didn't hate them so fuckin' much.

"You all right, kiddo?" asked the man.

"Where you live, boy?" said another one.

"Is the *bambino* hurt?" asked a woman.

I didn't look at any of them. I felt dizzy. I didn't want to open my mouth to talk, 'cause I was fighting to keep from puking up. I just hoped my face was cool-looking. I walked away from that group of strangers. I reached my stoop and started to climb the steps.

"Hey, spic," came a shout from across the street. I started to turn to the voice and changed my mind. "Spic" wasn't my name. I knew that voice, though. It was Rocky's. "We'll see ya again, spic," he said.

I wanted to do something tough, like spitting in their

direction. But you gotta have spit in your mouth in order to spit, and my mouth was hurt dry. I just stood there with my back to them.

"Hey, your old man just better be the janitor in that fuckin' building."

Another voice added, "Hey, you got any pretty sisters? We might let ya stay onna block."

Another voice mocked, "Aw, fer Chrissake, where ya ever hear of one of them black broads being pretty?"

I heard the laughter. I turned around and looked at them. Rocky made some kind of dirty sign by putting his left hand in the crook of his right arm while twisting his closed fist in the air.

Another voice said, "Fuck it, we'll just cover the bitch's face with the flag an' fuck er for old glory."

All I could think of was how I'd like to kill each of them two or three times. I found some spit in my mouth and splattered it in their direction and went inside.

Momma was cooking, and the smell of rice and beans was beating the smell of Parmesan cheese from the other apartments. I let myself into our new pad. I tried to walk fast past Momma so I could wash up, but she saw me.

"My God, Piri, what happened?" she cried.

"Just a little fight in school, Momma. You know how it is, Momma, I'm new in school an' . . ." I made myself laugh. Then I made myself say, "But Moms, I whipped the living — outta two guys, an' one was bigger'n me."

"*Bendito*, Piri, I raise this family in Christian way. Not to fight. Christ says to turn the other cheek."

"Sure, Momma." I smiled and went and showered, feeling sore at Poppa for bringing us into spaghetti country. I felt my face with easy fingers and thought about all the running back and forth from school that was in store for me.

I sat down to dinner and listened to Momma talk

about Christian living without really hearing her. All I could think of was that I hadda go out in that street again. I made up my mind to go out right after I finished eating. I had to, shook up or not; cats like me had to show heart.

"Be back, Moms," I said after dinner, "I'm going out on the stoop." I got halfway to the stoop and turned and went back to our apartment. I knocked.

"Who is it?" Momma asked.

"Me, Momma."

She opened the door. "*Qué pasa?*" she asked.

"Nothing, Momma, I just forgot something," I said. I went into the bedroom and fiddled around and finally copped a funny book and walked out the door again. But this time I made sure the switch on the lock was open, just in case I had to get back real quick. I walked out on that stoop as cool as could be, feeling braver with the lock open.

There was no sign of Rocky and his killers. After awhile I saw Poppa coming down the street. He walked like beat tired. Poppa hated his pick-and-shovel job with the WPA. He couldn't even hear the name WPA without getting a fever. *Funny, I thought, Poppa's the same like me, a stone Puerto Rican, and nobody in this block even pays him a mind. Maybe older people get along better'n us kids.*

Poppa was climbing the stoop. "Hi, Poppa," I said.

"How's it going, son? Hey, you sure look a little lumped up. What happened?"

I looked at Poppa and started to talk it outta me all at once and stopped, 'cause I heard my voice start to sound scared, and that was no good.

"Slow down, son," Poppa said. "Take it easy." He sat down on the stoop and made a motion for me to do the same. He listened and I talked. I gained confidence. I went from a tone of being shook up by the Italians to a tone of being a better fighter than Joe Louis and Pedro

Montanez lumped together, with Kid Chocolate thrown in for extra.

"So that's what happened," I concluded. "And it looks like only the beginning. Man, I ain't scared, Poppa, but like there's nothin' but Italianos on this block and there's no me's like me except me an' our family."

Poppa looked tight. He shook his head from side to side and mumbled something about another Puerto Rican family that lived a coupla doors down from us.

I thought, *What good would that do me, unless they prayed over my dead body in Spanish?* But I said, "Man! That's great. Before ya know it, there'll be a whole bunch of us moving in, huh?"

Poppa grunted something and got up. "Staying out here, son?"

"Yeah, Poppa, for a little while longer."

From that day on I grew eyes all over my head. Anytime I hit that street for anything, I looked straight ahead, behind me and from side to side all at the same time. Sometimes I ran into Rocky and his boys—that cat was never without his boys—but they never made a move to snag me. They just grinned at me like a bunch of hungry alley cats that could get to their mouse anytime they wanted. That's what they made me feel like—a mouse. Not like a smart house mouse but like a white house pet that ain't got no business in the middle of cat country but don't know better 'cause he grew up thinking he was a cat—which wasn't far from wrong 'cause he'd end up as part of the inside of some cat.

Rocky and his fellas got to playing a way-out game with me called "One-finger-across-the-neck-inna-slicing-motion," followed by such gentle words as "It won't be long, spico." I just looked at them blank and made it to wherever I was going.

I kept wishing those cats went to the same school I went to, a school that was on the border between their

country and mine, and I had *amigos* there—and there I could count on them. But I couldn't ask two or three *amigos* to break into Rocky's block and help me mess up his boys. I knew 'cause I had asked them already. They had turned me down fast, and I couldn't blame them. It would have been murder, and I guess they figured one murder would be better than four.

I got through the days trying to play it cool and walk on by Rocky and his boys like they weren't there. One day I passed them and nothing was said. I started to let out my breath. I felt great; I hadn't been seen. Then someone yelled in a high, girlish voice, "Yoo-hoo . . . Hey, *paisan* . . . we see yoo . . ." And right behind that voice came a can of evaporated milk—whoosh, clatter. I walked cool for ten steps then started running like mad.

This crap kept up for a month. They tried to shake me up. Every time they threw something at me, it was just to see me jump. I decided that the next fucking time they threw something at me I was gonna play bad-o and not run. That next time came about a week later. Momma sent me off the stoop to the Italian market on 115th Street and First Avenue, deep in Italian country. Man, that was stompin' territory. But I went, walking in the style which I had copped from the colored cats I had seen, a swinging and stepping down hard at every step. Those cats were so down and cool that just walking made a way-out sound.

Ten minutes later I was on my way back with Momma's stuff. I got to the corner of First Avenue and 114th Street and crushed myself right into Rocky and his fellas.

"Well-l, fellas," Rocky said. "Lookie who's here."

I didn't like the sounds coming out of Rocky's fat mouth. And I didn't like the sameness of the shitty grins spreading all over the boys' faces. But I thought, No

more! No more! I ain't gonna run no more. Even so, I looked around, like for some kind of Jesus miracle to happen. I was always looking for miracles to happen.

"Say, *paisan*," one guy said, "you even buying from us *paisans*, eh? Man, you must wantta be Italian."

Before I could bite that dopey tongue of mine, I said, "I wouldn't be a guinea on a motherfucking bet."

"Wha-at?" said Rocky, really surprised. I didn't blame him; I was surprised myself. His finger began digging a hole in his ear, like he hadn't heard me right. "Wha-at? Say that again?"

I could feel a thin hot wetness cutting itself down my leg. I had been so ashamed of being so damned scared that I had peed on myself. And then I wasn't scared any more; I felt a fuck-it-all attitude. I looked real bad at Rocky and said, "Ya heard me. I wouldn't be a guinea on a bet."

"Ya little sonavabitch, we'll kick the shit outta ya," said one guy, Tony, who had made a habit of asking me if I had any *sen-your-ritas* for sisters.

"Kick the shit outta me yourself if you got any heart, you motherfuckin' fucker," I screamed at him. I felt kind of happy, the kind of feeling that you get only when you got heart.

Big mouth Tony just swung out, and I swung back and heard all of Momma's stuff plopping all over the street. My fist hit Tony smack dead in the mouth. He was so mad he threw a fist at me from about three feet away. I faked and jabbed and did fancy dance steps. Big-mouth put a stop to all that with a punch in my mouth. I heard the home cheers of "Yea, yea, bust that spic wide open!" Then I bloodied Tony's nose. He blinked and sniffed without putting his hands to his nose, and I remembered Poppa telling me, "Son, if you're ever fighting somebody an' you punch him in the nose, and he just blinks an' sniffs without holding his nose, you can do one of two

things: fight like hell or run like hell—'cause that cat's a fighter."

Big-mouth came at me and we grabbed each other and pushed and pulled and shoved. *Poppa*, I thought, *I ain't gonna cop out. I'm a fighter, too.* I pulled away from Tony and blew my fist into his belly. He puffed and butted my nose with his head. I sniffed back. *Poppa*, I didn't put my hands to my nose. I hit Tony again in that same weak spot. He bent over in the middle and went down to his knees.

Big-mouth got up as fast as he could, and I was thinking how much heart he had. But I ran toward him like my life depended on it; I wanted to cool him. Too late, I saw his hand grab a fistful of ground asphalt which had been piled nearby to fix a pothole in the street. I tried to duck; I should have closed my eyes instead. The shitty-gritty stuff hit my face, and I felt the scrappy pain make itself a part of my eyes. I screamed and grabbed for two eyes with one hand, while the other I beat some kind of helpless tune on air that just couldn't be hurt. I heard Rocky's voice shouting, "Ya scum bag, ya didn't have to fight the spic dirty; you could've fucked him up fair and square!" I couldn't see. I heard a fist hit a face, then Big-mouth's voice: "Whatta ya hittin' me for?" and then Rocky's voice: "*Putanal* I ought ta knock all your fuckin' teeth out."

I felt hands grabbing at me between my screams. I punched out. *I'm gonna get killed*, I thought. Then I heard many voices: "Hold it, kid." "We ain't gonna hurt ya." "Je-sus, don't rub your eyes." "Oooooohhhh, shit, his eyes is fulla that shit."

You're fuckin' right, I thought, *and it hurts like coño.*

I heard a woman's voice now: "Take him to a hospital." And an old man asked: "How did it happen?"

"Momma, Momma," I cried.

"Comon, kid," Rocky said, taking my hand. "Lemme

take ya home." I fought for the right to rub my eyes. "Grab his other hand, Vincent," Rocky said. I tried to rub my eyes with my eyelids. I could feel hurt tears cutting down my cheeks. "Come on, kid, we ain't gonna hurt ya," Rocky tried to assure me. "Swear to our mudder. We just wanna take ya home."

I made myself believe him, and trying not to make pain noises, I let myself be led home. I wondered if I was gonna be blind like Mr. Silva, who went around from door to door selling dish towels and brooms, his son leading him around.

"You okay, kid?" Rocky asked.

"Yeah," what was left of me said.

"A-huh," mumbled Big-mouth.

"He got much heart for a nigger," somebody else said.

A spic, I thought.

"For anybody," Rocky said. "Here we are, kid," he added. "Watch your step."

I was like carried up the steps. "What's your apartment number?" Rocky asked.

"One-B—inna back—ground floor," I said, and I was led there. Somebody knocked on Momma's door. Then I heard running feet and Rocky's voice yelling back, "Don't rat, huh, kid?" And I was alone.

I heard the door open and Momma say, "*Bueno*, Piri, come in." I didn't move. I couldn't. There was a long pause; I could hear Momma's fright. "My God," she said finally. "What's happened?" Then she took a closer look. "Ai-eeee," she screamed. "*Dios mío!*"

"I was playing with some kids, Momma," I said, "an' I got some dirt in my eyes." I tried to make my voice come out without the pain, like a man.

"*Dios eterno*—your eyes!"

"What's the matter? What's the matter?" Poppa called from the bedroom.

"*Está ciego!*" Momma screamed. "He is blind!"

I heard Poppa knocking things over as he came running. Sis began to cry. Blind, hurting tears were jumping out of my eyes. "Whattya mean, he's blind?" Poppa said as he stormed into the kitchen. "What happened?" Poppa's voice was both scared and mad.

"Playing, Poppa."

"Whatta ya mean, 'playing'?" Poppa's English sounded different when he got warm.

"Just playing, Poppa."

"Playing? Playing got all that dirt in your eyes? I bet my ass. Them damn Ee-ta-liano kids ganged up on you again." Poppa squeezed my head between the fingers of one hand. "That settles it—we're moving outta this damn section, outta this damn block, outta this damn shit."

Shit, I thought, *Poppa's sure cursin' up a storm*. I could hear him slapping the side of his leg, like he always did when he got real mad.

"Son," he said, "you're gonna point them out to me."

"Point who out, Poppa? I was playin' an—"

"Stop talkin' to him and take him to the hospital!"

Momma screamed.

"Pobrecito, poor Piri," cooed my little sister.

"You sure, son?" Poppa asked. "You was only playing?"

"Shit, Poppa, I said I was."

Smack—Poppa was so scared and mad, he let it out in a slap to the side of my face.

"Bestial Ani-mul!" Momma cried. "He's blind, and you hit him!"

"I'm sorry, son, I'm sorry," Poppa said in a voice like almost-crying. I heard him running back into the bedroom, yelling, "Where's my pants?"

Momma grabbed away fingers that were trying to wipe away the hurt in my eyes. "*Caramba*, no rub, no rub," she said, kissing me. She told Sis to get a rag and wet it with cold water.

Poppa came running back into the kitchen. "Let's go, son, let's go. Jesus! I didn't mean to smack ya, I really didn't," he said, his big hand rubbing and grabbing my hair gently.

"Here's the rag, Momma," said Sis.

"What's that for?" asked Poppa.

"To put on his eyes," Momma said.

I heard the smack of a wet rag, *blapt*, against the kitchen wall. "We can't put nothing on his eyes. It might make them worse. Come on, son," Poppa said nervously, lifting me up in his big arms. I felt like a little baby, like I didn't hurt so bad. I wanted to stay there, but I said, "Let me down, Poppa, I ain't no kid."

"Shut up," Poppa said softly. "I know you ain't, but it's faster this way."

"Which hospeetal are you taking him to?" Momma asked.

"Nearest one," Poppa answered as we went out the door. He carried me through the hall and out into the street, where the bright sunlight made a red hurting color through the crap in my eyes. I heard voices on the stoop and on the sidewalk: "Is that the boy?"

"A-huh. He's probably blinded."

"We'll get a cab, son," Poppa said. His voice loved me. I heard Rocky yelling from across the street, "We're pulling for ya, kid. Remember what we . . ." The rest was lost to Poppa's long legs running down to the corner of Third Avenue. He hailed a taxi and we zoomed off toward Harlem Hospital. I felt the cab make all kinds of sudden stops and turns.

"How do you feel, *hijo*?" Poppa asked.

"It burns like hell."

"You'll be okay," he said, and as an afterthought added, "Don't curse, son."

I heard cars honking and the Third Avenue el roaring

above us. I knew we were in Puerto Rican turf, 'cause I could hear our language.

"Son."

"Yeah, Poppa."

"Don't rub your eyes, fer Christ sake." He held my skinny wrists in his one hand, and everything got quiet between us.

The cab got to Harlem Hospital. I heard change being handled and the door opening and Poppa thanking the cabbie for getting here fast. "Hope the kid'll be okay," the driver said.

I will be, I thought. I ain't gonna be like Mr. Silva.

Poppa took me in his arms again and started running. "Where's emergency, mister?" he asked someone.

"To your left and straight away," said a voice.

"Thanks a lot," Poppa said, and we were running again. "Emergency?" Poppa said when we stopped.

"Yes, sir," said a girl's voice. "What's the matter?"

"My boy's got his eyes full of ground-up tar an'—"

"What's the matter?" said a man's voice.

"Youngster with ground tar in his eyes, doctor."

"We'll take him, mister. You just put him down here and go with the nurse. She'll take down the information. Uh, you the father?"

"That's right, doctor."

"Okay, just put him down here."

"Poppa, don't leave me," I cried.

"Sh, son, I ain't leaving you. I'm just going to fill out some papers, an' I'll be right back."

I nodded my head up and down and was wheeled away. When the rolling stretcher stopped, somebody stuck a needle in me and I got sleepy and started thinking about Rocky and his boys, and Poppa's slap, and how great Poppa was, and how my eyes didn't hurt no more . . .

I woke up in a room blind with darkness. The only

lights were the ones inside my head. I put my fingers to my eyes and felt bandages. "Let them be, sonny," said a woman's voice.

I wanted to ask the voice if they had taken my eyes out, but I didn't. I was afraid the voice would say yes.

"Let them be, sonny," the nurse said, pulling my hand away from the bandages. "You're all right. The doctor put the bandages on to keep the light out. They'll be off real soon. Don't you worry none, sonny."

I wished she would stop calling me sonny. "Where's Poppa?" I asked cool-like.

"He's outside, Sonny. Would you like me to send him in?"

I nodded, "Yeah." I heard walking-away shoes, a door opening, a whisper, and shoes walking back toward me.

"How do you feel, *hijo*?" Poppa asked.

"It hurts like shit, Poppa."

"It's just for awhile, son, and then off come the bandages. Everything's gonna be all right."

I thought, *Poppa didn't tell me to stop cursing.*

"And son, I thought I told you to stop cursing," he added.

I smiled. Poppa hadn't forgotten. Suddenly I realized that all I had on was a hospital gown. "Poppa, where's my clothes?" I asked.

"I got them. I'm taking them home an'—"

"Whatta ya mean, Poppa?" I said, like scared. "You ain't leavin' me here? I'll be damned if I stay." I was already sitting up and feeling my way outta bed. Poppa grabbed me and pushed me back. His voice wasn't mad or scared any more. It was happy and soft, like Momma's.

"Hey," he said, "get your ass back in bed or they'll have to put a bandage there too."

"Poppa," I pleaded. "I don't care, wallop me as much as you want, just take me home."

"Hey, I thought you said you wasn't no kid. Hell, you ain't scared of being alone?"

Inside my head there was a running of *Yeah, yeah, yeah*, but I answered, "Naw, Poppa, it's just that Momma's gonna worry and she'll get sick an' everything, and—"

"Won't work, son," Poppa broke in with a laugh.

I kept quiet.

"It's only for a couple days. We'll come and see you an' everybody'll bring you things."

I got interested but played it smooth. "What kinda things, Poppa?"

Poppa shrugged his shoulders and spread his big arms apart and answered me like he was surprised that I should ask. "Uh . . . fruits and . . . candy and ice cream. And Momma will probably bring you chicken soup."

I shook my head sadly. "Poppa, you know I don't like chicken soup."

"So we won't bring chicken soup. We'll bring what you like. Goddammit, whatta ya like?"

"I'd like the first things you talked about, Poppa," I said softly. "But instead of soup I'd like"—I held my breath back, then shot it out—"some roller skates!"

Poppa let out a whistle. Roller skates were about \$1.50, and that was rice and beans for more than a few days. Then he said, "All right, son, soon as you get home, you got 'em."

But he had agreed too quickly. I shook my head from side to side. Shit, I was gonna push all the way for the roller skates. It wasn't every day you'd get hurt bad enough to ask for something so little like a pair of roller skates. I wanted them right away.

"Fer Christ sakes," Poppa protested, "you can't use 'em in here. Why, some kid will probably steal 'em on you." But Poppa's voice died out slowly in a "you win" tone as I

just kept shaking my head from side to side. "Bring 'em tomorrow," he finally mumbled, "but that's it."

"Thanks, Poppa."

"Don't ask for no more."

My eyes were starting to hurt like mad again. The fun was starting to go outta the game between Poppa and me. I made a face.

"Does it hurt, son?"

"Naw, Poppa. I can take it." I thought how I was like a cat in a movie about Indians, taking it like a champ, tied to a stake and getting like burned toast.

Poppa sounded relieved. "Yeah, it's only at first it hurts." His hand touched my foot. "Well, I'll be going now . . ." Poppa rubbed my foot gently and then slapped me the same gentle way on the side of my leg. "Be good, son," he said and walked away. I heard the door open and the nurse telling him about how they were gonna move me to the ward 'cause I was out of danger. "Son," Poppa called back, "you're *un hombre*."

I felt proud as hell.

"Poppa."

"Yeah, son?"

"You won't forget to bring the roller skates, huh?"

Poppa laughed. "Yeah, son."

I heard the door close.

5. HOME RELIEF

In two days I was home, sitting on the stoop with my roller skates. I wasn't blind, and I hadn't ratted on Rocky. I was in like a mother. I could walk that mean street and not get hurt; I was king shit and bottle washer.

As I took my roller skates off, Rocky came over. "How ya doin', kid?" he said. "Wanna go steal some clams on Second?"

"Later, Rocky," I said. I watched his back leave me, and it wasn't too hard to like him. But I still wanted Poppa to move outta this block. I flung my skates over my shoulder and walked up the stoop, thinking Italianos wouldn't be so bad if they spoke Spanish. In the dark hallway I thought how nasty "spic" sounded hand in hand with "guinea." I looked at the roller skates, and I felt a little bad about how I had held Poppa up for them.

I pushed my door open and heard the noises of anger: "Goddammit, woman, goddammit to hell! I can't stand no more of this shit. For Christ sake, can't you understand? I'm just like any other man, one hunk of shit hung up." I was home again. I walked into the apartment. *Jesus, Poppa*, I thought, *you talk like I feel*. I held the thought close; Poppa was slapping the side of his leg.

"Hon-nee," Momma said, and I saw Poppa's look turn to gentle anger.

"Can't you see," he said, "I'm plastered in between Home Relief and the WPA? I'm tired, woman, tired. I'm so goddamned tired of making believe all this shit ain't happening."

Momma looked as always, like she only understood a little of what Poppa was saying in English.

"Poppa, Poppa," my name for my creator came shouting from inside of me. In the other room my sister was crying.

"Goddammit, goddammit, goddammit, goddammit . . ." Poppa hung on to all his "goddammit" like it was the only record in the world.

"Poppa, Poppa," I cried. The shouting had sunk into a copped-out plea of less understanding and more fright. *How can gods like Momma and Poppa receive and give anger that should only belong to strangers?* I wondered.

"I can't take it any more!" Momma screamed. "I can't take it any more!"

Why are you fighting each other from in between your love that is also for us?

"I'm leaving," Poppa shouted.

Damn, Poppa, don't say that.

"Go to hell if you want to," Momma screamed.

Poppa started to walk toward the door, but Momma's fat little body ran by him and spread itself across the lock. "No go," she said in a tone that sounded like love.

Poppa, I thought, *don't you love Momma any more?*

Poppa turned away from the door and ran into the back room, almost knocking me down. I smiled for both of us. Poppa slammed his fist against the wall. The flaky, time-worn wall shook under the pressure of the angry blow. I could almost hear the dust burst from the hundred-year-old wall of paint and plaster.

The rest of us waited in the kitchen, listening to the sounds of Poppa pacing the floor. Then we heard the sound of Poppa opening the back window; he was climb-

ing out on the fire escape. Momma began screaming, "I'm going! I'm going!"

Don't go, Poppa, I thought. Don't go, Momma.

Sis began to cry, and I heard my little brother mumble something about wanting a pacifier. *Shit!* I thought. *All this shit going on an' he's buggin' for a fuckin' pacifier.*

"I'm going! I'm going!" Momma screamed. She stomped out of the kitchen.

Damn, Momma, you're wearin' the needle out.

I heard the door open. "Momma, don't go," I called. "Hey, Moms, don't go. Momma!"

The door closed and Momma walked out. I ran to the back room and leaned out the open window to the fire escape. "Poppa! Poppa! Momma's going," I shouted. But the fire escape was empty.

I walked back into the kitchen and put a smile on my face. My sister and brothers smiled back at me. *Oh, you shitty world, why do you have to smell so bad?* I thought. *Why do you make me choose sides?*

About an hour later Momma and Poppa came back. They didn't talk much to each other. Momma made supper for us kids and put us to bed. After lying awake for a while trying to think out some of the confusion of Momma and Poppa fighting again, I went to sleep. Some time later I awoke to the noise of my little brother's crying. Momma came into the room and made some cooing sounds, and the noises stopped. I heard her go back to her room. The bedsprings squeaked as she got into bed, and there was a long silence. After a while I heard her and Poppa talking. It was something about Poppa having lost his job with the WPA. Poppa was saying that foreman or no foreman, he wasn't gonna take crap from nobody. I fell asleep again.

The next morning Momma said to me, "*Hijo*, today you no go to school. I want you to go to the Home Relief

Office and help me explain about your father losing his job with WPA."

An hour later we got off the trolley and walked into the ugly brown Home Relief building. We climbed up to the second floor and walked into a room that looked as big as Madison Square Garden and was just as packed with people. Most of the people were Puerto Ricans and Negroes; a few were Italians. It seemed that every mother had brought a kid to interpret for her.

Momma and I walked over to a desk titled INFORMATION. A thin woman sat behind it. Momma pulled her yellow Home Relief membership card out and handed it to the thin woman, who plucked it from Momma's hand without even looking up. She handed Momma a card with a number on it and made a motion with a thin finger where Momma was supposed to sit and wait for the investigator to call her number. Momma smiled at the thin woman; she didn't smile back—one smile wasted. I stuck my tongue out at her; she didn't see it—one stuck-out tongue wasted.

We sat down and started a long wait. I tried to bring my patience to the long-waiting point. I listened to all the murmuring around me—the sounds of pleading, of defense, of anger—and in my mind I broke the sounds into separate conversations:

"But you don't understand, Mr. King," said a woman to a most understanding investigator. "It's not that my husband don't wanna work—it's just that he can't. He's been sick an' he—"

"Mrs. Romero, I understand, but we've asked him to submit himself to a medical examination, and he's constantly refused—"

"He's so proud—my God, he's so proud that even when he should be in bed he just gets up and staggers all over the place. He does not like the sickness to knock

him down. When he is well, no man can stand up to him. But now even I can take him back to bed. Mr. King, I do not ask for him, only for the kids and myself. I do not ask for him—he hates you all. He screams, I'm gonna get me a gun—I ain't been born to beg—no goddam man was born to beg. I'm gonna get me a gun and take whatever I can get to live on."

"Hush-sh," Mr. King said nervously. "He says things like that because he's just overwrought."

I wondered what "overwrought" meant. It sounded like a word you'd use when somebody had split his wig.

"Please, please," the woman said, "my husband is sick. He's sick and proud; don't drive him to death. Why can't you trust him—trust us? We don't want something for nothing. We don't want to be ashamed of being poor. Don't make us. Don't make us."

"I'll see what can be done."

"Aghh," the woman said disgustedly, then quickly added, "No-o, I didn't mean that, Mr. King. Yes, please—try to do the best you can. Try to . . ."

I turned my attention elsewhere. Her pleading was too close to my people's: taking with outstretched hands and resenting it in the same breath.

"What you-all mean, man?" a colored woman asked another investigator. "That Ah'm taking help frum you-all an' hit ain't legal? Ah tole you-all that mah man done split one helluva scene on me an' the kids. Shi-it, iffen that sonavabitch evah showed his skinny ass round ouah pad, Ah'd put a foot up his ass so fast his eyebrows would swing."

"Mrs. Powell," the investigator said impatiently, "we happen to know that he's living there. As a matter of fact, the last time I was at your house, I heard him climbing out on the fire escape while you were opening the door."

"Deah gawd, how can you-all say that? How come you-all can be so suspicious?"

"Very simple, Mrs. Powell. I heard you telling him it was me at the door. I heard him breathing—er, he's a heavy drinker, isn't he?"

"Ah swears to mah mudder, Mr. Rowduski, Ah ain't never seen that man touch so much as a malt beer—leas' not whilst he was livin' wif me. Ah knows he ain't too damn much ta be proud of, but shit, there's a whole lots worstah. 'Sides, he's the only one Ah evah known."

Investigator (not at all convinced): "He's got a car, hasn't he?"

"Caa-ah? Mah gawd, no. Closes' we evah got to a ca-ah was a taxi—an' damn near couldn't pay it. Nah, man; trolleys, buses, an' subway trains are ouah speed. We all mos'ly walks," she added.

Mrs. Powell put up a defense that would have made any trial lawyer proud. But I got tired of listening and started to think of the many times Momma and I had been in Home Relief offices, and all the scenes that had gone down. Like cops dragging screaming parents outta the Home Relief office, and one woman lying down with her three small kids in the middle of the office and saying over and over that if she couldn't get any help, she was gonna live with the investigators until Christ came. (I wondered just how long that would be, 'cause ever since I was a little kid I'd heard He was coming.)

Then I felt Momma pulling at my arm. "Vente," she said, "they just called our number."

I followed Momma to a desk and stood by her side as she sat down at the signal of the investigator's pointed finger. He asked Momma all kinds of questions that meant, "What was the problem?" I broke down his words into Spanish for Momma, all the time thinking about the stiff, cardboard Home Relief checks and how they

brought life to many. Then Momma told me, "*Déle que tu padre perdió su trabajo, porque el boss le tenía anti-patía.*"

I moved closer to the investigator's desk. Swersh-swersh went my corduroy knicker pants as one knee brushed against the other. "My mother says that Poppa lost his job 'cause the boss got not to like him," I said.

"I gathered that, son," the investigator replied. "My Spanish is not that great, but I catch a little here and there. Er, ask your mother why your father didn't come with you."

I asked Momma. Momma looked like she was hung up tight, then said something.

"My mother says that Poppa is out looking for a job that don't belong to the WPA."

"I see," said the investigator, and he started to read a stack of papers that had all our personal life put down in good English for all to dig. After a while he said, "Tell your mother that if your father finds a job to let us know."

I told Momma. She shook her head up and down.

"What was it you needed again, señora?" he asked.

Momma said, "*Piri, déle sábanas, frizas, un matre, zapatos para los nene, abrigos y unos pantalones para ti.*"

Damn, I thought, *don't beg that maricón, don't get on your knees no more, Momma.* But I said: "My mother says she needs sheets, blankets, a mattress, shoes for the kids, coats and a pair of pants for me." Then I bent down and whispered into Momma's ear, "Can I tell him I need some gloves too?" She nodded "yes," and I added the gloves to the list.

The investigator wrote very fast what we needed. I wondered if we'd get it just as fast. When he stopped writing, he smiled gently at us and handed Momma her

yellow Home Relief card. "*No se apure, señora,*" he whispered, reaching for somebody else's number.

Momma thanked him and got up slowly, like she was old and wasted (although she was only something like thirty). We went down the stairs and left that ugly brown building. We caught the trolley and watched Third Avenue go by. As we passed Joe's Pet Shop I began thinking about all the business he and I did. Joe gave me a pigeon for every three cans of Home Relief corned beef I brought in. I picked up cans of corned beef that had been chucked into empty lots and garbage cans by members of the welfare rolls who had copped a corned-beef complex and just couldn't think of other ways to cook the stuff. Sometimes I ended up with fifteen cans of the stuff and came home with five pigeons. But even that wore off, after eating pigeon soup, fried pigeon, pigeon and rice, rice and pigeon, and pigeon and pigeon and pigeon.

We passed the secondhand-clothing store, and I thought of all the business that Poppa gave it and all the others like it. It was fun going with Poppa to buy secondhand clothes. When it came to buying clothes, no dealer living could take Poppa. He knew everything about material, and he knew the prices in all the stores in Harlem. He always got his price, 'cause he promised to send more customers if he got a good deal—and to keep them from coming if he didn't. When the dealers saw Poppa coming, they turned their backs on him.

The trolley stopped on 114th Street and we got off; Momma wanted to go to *La Marketa*. The Market ran from 110th to 116th Street on Park Avenue. It splat out on both sides of the street and all the way up the middle, and there wasn't anything you couldn't buy there. It was always packed with a mess of people selling or buying, and talking different languages. Most of the vendors were Jewish, but they spoke Spanish like Puerto Ricans.

Momma and I walked into the Market. The *vendedores* were shouting that their stuff was better and cheaper than anybody else's, and the suspicious looks on the customer's faces said, "Ya fulla crap." Momma felt some tomatoes, and the vendor said, nasty-like, "Lady, you want to buy or you want to squeezing?" Momma kept on squeezing, and every one she squeezed, she bought. Momma never argued.

It was more fun to go with Poppa to the Market. He fought down to the last penny and sometimes came out winning. The vendors seemed to enjoy the hassling. In a bag of apples they would put four good apples on top of a pile of soon-to-rot ones. Poppa called this selling irregular goods at first-class prices. He fought to get first-class goods at the price of irregulars.

Poppa discounted the vendors' friendly "*Cómo estás?*" He said that "How are you?" were the first Spanish words the vendors learned so they could win the people's confidence and gyp them in their own language. I wondered if Poppa didn't like Jews the way I didn't like Italians.

6. IF YOU AIN'T GOT HEART, YOU AIN'T GOT NADA

We were moving—our new pad was back in Spanish Harlem—to 104th Street between Lex and Park Avenue.

Moving into a new block is a big jump for a Harlem kid. You're torn up from your hard-won turf and brought into an "I don't know you" block where every kid is some kind of enemy. Even when the block belongs to your own people, you are still an outsider who has to prove himself a down stud with heart.

As the moving van rolled to a stop in front of our new building, number 109, we were all standing there, waiting for it—Momma, Poppa, Sis, Paulie, James, José, and myself. I made out like I didn't notice the cats looking us over, especially me—I was gang age. I read their faces and found no trust, plenty of suspicion, and a glint of rising hate. I said to myself, *These cats don't mean nothin'. They're just nosy.* But I remembered what had happened to me in my old block, and that it had ended with me in the hospital.

This was a tough-looking block. That was good, that was cool; but my old turf had been tough, too. *I'm tough,*

a voice within said. *I hope I'm tough enough. I am tough enough. I've got mucho corazón, I'm king wherever I go. I'm a killer, to my heart. I not only can live, I will live, no punk out, no die out, walk bad; be down, cool breeze, smooth.* My mind raced, and thoughts crashed against each other, trying to reassemble themselves into a pattern of rep. I turned slowly and with eyelids half-closed I looked at the rulers of this new world and with a cool shrug of my shoulders I followed the movers into the hallway of number 109 and dismissed the coming war from my mind.

The next morning I went to my new school, called Patrick Henry, and strange, mean eyes followed me.

"Say, pops," said a voice belonging to a guy I later came to know as Waneko, "where's your territory?"

In the same tone of voice Waneko had used, I answered, "I'm on it, dad, what's shaking?"

"Bad, huh?" He half-smiled.

"No, not all the way. Good when I'm cool breeze and bad when I'm down."

"What's your name, kid?"

"That depends. 'Piri' when I'm smooth and 'Johnny Gringo' when stomping time's around."

"What's your name now?" he pushed.

"You name me, man," I answered, playing my role like a champ.

He looked around, and with no kind of words, his boys cruised in. Guys I would come to know, to fight, to hate, to love, to take care of. Little Red, Waneko, Little Louie, Indio, Carlito, Alfredo, Crip, and plenty more. I stiffened and said to myself, *Stomping time, Piri, boy, go with heart.*

I fingered the garbage-can handle in my pocket—my home-made brass knuckles. They were great for breaking down large odds into small, chopped-up ones.

Waneko, secure in his grandstand, said, "We'll name you later, *panín*."

I didn't answer. Scared, yeah, but wooden-faced to the end, I thought, *Chevere, panín*.

It wasn't long in coming. Three days later, at about 6 p.m., Waneko and his boys were sitting around the stoop at number 115. I was cut off from my number 109. For an instant I thought, *Make a break for it down the basement steps and through the back yards—get away in one piece!* Then I thought, *Caramba! Live punk, dead hero. I'm no punk kid. I'm not copping any pleas.* I kept walking, hell's a-burning, hell's a-churning, rolling with cheer. *Walk on, baby man, roll on without fear. What's he going to call?*

"Whatta ya say, Mr. Johnny Gringo?" drawled Waneko.

Think, man, I told myself, think your way out of a stomping. Make it good. "I hear you 104th Street coolies are supposed to have heart," I said. "I don't know this for sure. You know there's a lot of streets where a whole 'click' is made out of punks who can't fight one guy unless they all jump him for the stomp." I hoped this would push Waneko into giving me a fair one. His expression didn't change.

"Maybe we don't look at it that way."

Crazy, man. I cheer inwardly, the cabrón is falling into my setup. We'll see who gets messed up first, baby! "I wasn't talking to you," I said. "Where I come from, the pres is president 'cause he got heart when it comes to dealing."

Waneko was starting to look uneasy. He had bit on my worm and felt like a sucker fish. His boys were now light on me. They were no longer so much interested in stomping me as in seeing the outcome between Waneko and me. "Yeah," was his reply.

I smiled at him. "You trying to dig where I'm at and now you got me interested in you. I'd like to see where you're at."

Waneko hesitated a tiny little second before replying, "Yeah."

I knew I'd won. Sure, I'd have to fight; but one guy, not ten or fifteen. If I lost I might still get stomped, and if I won I might get stomped. I took care of this with my next sentence. "I don't know you or your boys," I said, "but they look cool to me. They don't feature as punks."

I had left him out purposely when I said "they." Now his boys were in a separate class. I had cut him off. He would have to fight me on his own, to prove his heart to himself, to his boys, and most important, to his turf. He got away from the stoop and asked, "Fair one, Gringo?"

"Uh-uh," I said, "roll all the way—anything goes." I thought, *I've got to beat him bad and yet not bad enough to take his prestige all away.* He had *corazón*. He came on me. *Let him draw first blood,* I thought, *it's his block.* Smish, my nose began to bleed. His boys cheered, his heart cheered, his turf cheered. "Waste this chump," somebody shouted.

Okay, baby, now it's my turn. He swung. I grabbed innocently, and my forehead smashed into his nose. His eyes crossed. His fingernails went for my eye and landed in my mouth—crunch, I bit hard. I punched him in the mouth as he pulled away from me, and he slammed his foot into my chest.

We broke, my nose running red, my chest throbbing, his finger—well, that was his worry. I tied him up with body punching and slugging. We rolled onto the street. I wrestled for acceptance, he for rejection or, worse yet, acceptance on his terms. It was time to start peace talks. I smiled at him. "You got heart, baby," I said.

He answered with a punch to my head. I grunted and hit back, harder now. I had to back up my overtures of

peace with strength. I hit him in the ribs, I rubbed my knuckles in his ear as we clinched. I tried again. "You deal good," I said.

"You too," he muttered, pressuring out. And just like that, the fight was over. No more words. We just separated, hands half up, half down. My heart pumped out, *You've established your rep. Move over, 104th Street. Lift your wings, I'm one of your baby chicks now.*

Five seconds later my spurs were given to me in the form of introductions to streetdom's elite. There were no looks of blankness now; I was accepted by heart.

"What's your other name, Johnny Gringo?"

"Piri."

"Okay, Pete, you wanna join my fellows?"

"Sure, why not?"

But I knew I had first joined their gang when I cool-looked them on moving day. *I was cool, man,* I thought. *I could've wasted Waneko any time. I'm good, I'm damned good, pure corazón. Viva me! Shit,* I had been scared, but that was over. I was in; it was *my* block now.

Not that I could relax. In Harlem you always lived on the edge of losing rep. All it takes is a one-time loss of heart.

Sometimes, the shit ran smooth until something just had to happen. Then we busted out. Like the time I was leaning against the banister of my stoop, together with Little Louie, Waneko, Indio, and the rest of the guys, and little Crip, small, dark and crippled from birth, came tearing down the block. Crip never ran if he could walk, so we knew there was some kind of trouble. We had been bragging about our greatness in rumbles and love, half truths, half lies. We stopped short and waited cool-like for little Crip to set us straight on what was happening.

"Oh, them lousy motherfuckers, they almost keeled me," he whined.

"Cool it, man," Waneko said, "what happened?"

"I wasn't doin' nothing, just walking through the fuckin' Jolly Rogers' territory," Crip said. "I met a couple of their broads, so friendly-like, I felt one's *culo* and asked, 'How about a lay?' Imagine, just for that she started yelling for her boys." Crip acted out his narrow escape. We nodded in unimpressed sympathy because there wasn't a mark on him. A stomping don't leave you in walking condition, much less able to run. But he was one of our boys and hadda be backed up. We all looked to Waneko, who was our president. "How about it, war counselor?" he asked me.

We were ready to fight. "We're down," I said softly, "an' the shit's on."

That night we set a meet with the Jolly Rogers. We put on our jackets with our club name, "TNT's." Waneko and I met Picao, Macho, and Cuhee of the Jolly Rogers under the Park Avenue bridge at 104th Street. This was the line between their block and ours. They were Puerto Ricans just like we were, but this didn't mean shit, under our need to keep our reps.

"How's it going to be?" I asked Macho.

Picao, who I dug as no heart, squawked out, "Sticks, shanks, zips—you call it."

I looked at him shittily and said, "Yeah, like I figured, you ain't got no heart for dealing on fists alone."

Macho, their president, jumped stink and said, "Time man, we got heart, we deal with our *manos*. Wanna meet here at ten tomorrow night?"

"Ten guys each is okay?"

"That's cool," Macho said and turned away with his boys. The next night we got our boys together. They were all there with one exception—Crip. He sent word that he couldn't make our little 10 p.m. get-together. His sister, skinny Lena, was having a birthday party. We took turns

sounding his mother for giving birth to a *maricón* like him.

Our strategy was simple. We'd meet in the Park Avenue tunnel and each gang would fight with its back to its own block to kill any chance of getting sapped from behind. Our debs sat on the stoops watching for the fuzz or for any wrong shit from the Jolly Rogers.

It got to 10 p.m. and we dug the Jolly Rogers coming under the Park Avenue tunnel. We walked that way too. Macho had heart; he didn't wait for us in the tunnel; he came with his boys right into our block. My guts got tight, as always before a rumble, and I felt my breath come in short spurts. I had wrapped handkerchiefs around each hand to keep my knuckles from getting cut on any Jolly Roger's teeth. We began to pair off. I saw Giant, a big, ugly Jolly Roger, looking me over.

"Deal, motherfucker," I screamed at him.

He was willing like mad. I felt his fist fuck up my shoulder. I was glad 'cause it cooled away my tight guts. I side-slipped and banged my fist in his guts and missed getting my jaw busted by an inch. I came back with two shots to his guts and got shook up by a blast on the side of my head that set my eyeballs afire. I closed on him and held on, hearing the noise of pains and punches. Some sounded like slaps, others hurt dully. I pushed my head into Giant's jaw. He blinked and swung hard, catching my nose. I felt it running. I didn't have a cold, so it had to be blood. I sniffed back hard and drove rights and lefts and busted Giant's lip open. Now he was bleeding too. *Chevere*.

Everybody was dealing hard. Somebody got in between me and Giant. It was Waneko, and he began dealing with Giant. I took over with the Jolly Roger he'd been punching it out with. It was Picao. He had been fighting all along—not too hard, I suspected. I got most happy. I'd

been aching to chill that *maricón*. He didn't back down and we just stood there and threw punches at each other. I felt hurt a couple of times, but I wanted to put him out so bad, I didn't give a fuck about getting hurt. And then it happened—I caught Picao on his chin with an uppercut and he went sliding on his ass and just lay there.

I felt king-shit high and I wanted to fight anybody. I had the fever. I started for Giant, who was getting wasted by Waneko, when one of our debs opened up her mouth like an air-raid siren. "Look out, ya gonna get japped," she shouted.

We saw more Rogers coming from Madison Avenue. They were yelling their asses off and waving stickball bats.

"Make it," Waneko shouted. "Then *cabrones* wanna make a massacre!"

Everybody stopped fighting and both gangs looked at that wasting party tearing up the street toward us. We started cutting out and some of the Rogers tried grabbing on to some of us. Waneko pulled out a blade and started slashing out at any J.R. he could get to. I tore my hand into my back pocket and came out with my garbage-can-handle brass knucks and hit out at a cat who was holding on to one of my boys. He grabbed at a broken nose and went wailing through the tunnel.

We split, everybody making it up some building. I felt bad those *cabrones* had made us split, but I kept running. I made it to number 109 and loped up the stairs. "Adiós, motherfuckers," I yelled over my shoulder. "You *cabrones* ain't got no heart!" I crashed through my apartment door with thanks that Momma had left it open, 'cause two or three Jolly Rogers were beating the air inches behind me with stickball bats.

"*Qué pasa?*" yelled Momma.

The Jolly Rogers outside were beating their stickball bats on the door for me to come out if I had any heart.

I hollered to them, "I'm coming out right now, you motherfuckers, with my fucking piece!" I didn't have one, but I felt good-o satisfaction at hearing the cattle stampepe down the stairs.

"What happened, *muchacho?*" Momma asked, in a shook-up voice.

I laughed. "Nothing, Moms, we was just playing ring-a-livio."

"What about your nose, it got blood on it," said Sis.

I looked bad at her. "Bumped it," I said, then turning to Momma, I asked, "Say, Moms, what's for dinner? Je-sus, I'm starvin'."

The next day I was back on the stoop, slinging sound with my boys, yakking about everything we knew about and also what we didn't, placing ideas on the common altar, splitting the successes and failures of all. That was the part of belonging, the good and bad; it was for all of you.

The talk turned way out, on faggots and their asses which, swinging from side to side, could make a girl look ridiculous, like she wasn't moving. There were some improbable stories of exploits with faggots. Then one stud, Alfredo, said, "Say, man, let's make it up to the faggots' pad and cop some bread."

We all looked at him. He was a little older—not much, but enough to have lived the extra days it takes to learn the needed angles.

"Whatta you cats think?" he said. "Oh, shit, don't tell me you ain't down."

Eyes shifted, feet scratched gravel, fingers poked big holes in noses—all waiting to see who would be the first to say, "Yeah, man, let's make it."

The stud snapped his fingers, as if to say, "Motherfuckers, who's a punk?" Nobody, man. Without a word

we jumped off the stoop and, grinning, shuffled toward the faggots' building.

The apartment was on the fifth floor, facing the street. My hand hit the tin-covered walls of the hallway—pam-pa-pa-pam-pa-pa-pa-pa. I was scared, but I wasn't gonna show it. *You know what going down is. You've heard about the acts put on with faggots.* Mother, I had heard that some of them fags had bigger joints than the guy that was screwing. *Oh shit, I ain't gonna screw no motherfuckin' fag. Agh—I'm not gonna get shit all over my peter, not for all the fuckin' coins in the world.*

"Yeah, man, you get a blow job," someone said.

"*Sarito, ain't those faggots the sickest motherfuckers yet?*" I said, but I was thinking *I don't wanna go! I don't wanna go! Shit, imagine getting your peter pulled like a motherfuckin' straw. I don't wanna go—but I gotta, or else I'm out, I don't belong in. And I wanna belong in! Put cara palo on, like it don't move you.*

All the guys felt like I did. Not one of them looked happy. So why were we making it up to the *maricones'* pad? Cause we wanted to belong, and belonging meant doing whatever had to be done.

There was forced happy talk of pot, sneaky pete, smooth music on the record machine, and all the coins we were going to hustle—but no talk about the down payment that had to be made by all of us. I wondered how the fuck I was gonna react. I hoped that somebody would punk out before me so I could slide out too, but I wasn't gonna punk out first.

The pad drew nearer. I climbed the steps to the fifth floor and wondered if hell wasn't up instead of down. We got to the fifth floor and we all walked like backward toward the apartment facing the street. Alfredo put the back of his hand to the door and made a sound. "*Quién es?*" said a woman's voice.

"It's me, Antonia—open up."

"Who ees eet, Antonia?" said another woman's voice from behind the closed door.

"Eet ees Alfredo," said the first voice.

"*Bueno, let heem in,*" the voice said.

The door opened and I saw that the women's voices belonged to men.

"Come on, fellas," Alfredo said, leading the way.

The apartment smelled sweet with the stink of women's perfume and powder. I dug the place. It was clean, spotless—like any home-lovin' woman would keep a pad.

"Who are you, frien's of Alfredo?" Antonia asked.

"Fellas, this is Antonia, an' this is Concha, an' the one on the bed is called La Vieja." The first two faggots were boys in their twenties; La Vieja—"the Old Lady"—was maybe thirty or forty.

"My name is Waneko."

"My name is Louie."

"Indio."

"Piri."

Antonia smiled and made a sly gesture for us to follow him into the living room. It was a pretty cool living room. There was a record player, a pretty red sofa, and a bar with shiny bottles of high-proof stuff. The lights were red and blue and green.

"Sit down," said Concha.

All us young cats obediently sat down, looking at each other with the swiftest world-wise grins. Antonia put some records on the machine and turned it on. The needle made sharp, scratchy noises as it failed to take hold in the grooves. "Oh, sheet," said Antonia. "Thees needle is for the birds."

Concha made a girl's smile and said, "When needle is no more good, get a sharp one." Antonia giggled. I didn't get it, until Antonia wiggled and said, "The sharper, the better; the longer, the wetter."

Disgust was on all our faces, except for Alfredo's. He tore himself up laughing.

"Anybody wan' drinks?" asked La Vieja from the bed. He was stretched out like a movie queen. All of us nodded, yeah. There's one thing about whalin' on booze—it kills all kinds of bad taste.

The scene continued like it wasn't for real. Time rolled on and so did the drinks. I was gettin' stoned—but I was still there. I listened to the conversations.

"He was like an animal," Antonia was telling Concha. "I tell heem to take eet easy, but that sonavabitch, he pooshed eet in until I think I was gonna die. I trus' him so moch an' I was leetle an' there was nobody else in the house. He was a beeg man. I could not walk for long time without feelin' pain. An' then, after that, every time we was alone, he do eet to me an' teach me to do udder things too. He like for me to put hees thing in my mouth. Thees go on for long time an' then he go away an' I miss what he do to me, so I look for somebody else. I let the janitor do eet to me. He give me mon-nee so I go to his room in the cellar every day."

"You teenk tha's sometheeng?" Concha protested. "I get rape by four boys one night an'—"

"Don't make eet sound so *importante*, beetch," said Antonia. "You can take feefty time that over."

"You no unnerstan'," Concha insisted in a hurt tone, "I haf my period an' eet ees all right for some womans to make love like that, but I no one of them. For me eet ees not comfortable."

If I had had my eyes closed, I would have sworn these were real broads talking.

The whiskey buzz was now in my head and the rest of the insane sounds became blurred without becoming unclear. I closed my eyes and listened to sweet refrains in an unnaturalness without restraint. I smelled sweetness mixed with acidity hanging in the air, the unmistakable,

most inhalable smell of all—pot: green dark-dry leaves that have been freed of their seeds. Its pungent, burning smell sticks on you and yours even after you've left it.

"You wan' some?" I heard a voice near me say.

I opened my eye a little. I saw a hand, and between its fingers was a stick of pot. I didn't look up at the face. I just plucked the stick from the fingers. I heard the feminine voice saying, "You gonna like thees pot. Eet's good stuff."

I felt its size. It was king-sized, a bomber. I put it to my lips and began to hiss my reserve away. It was going, going, going. I was gonna get a gone high. I inhaled. I held my nose, stopped up my mouth. I was gonna get a gone high . . . a gone high . . . a gone high . . . and then the stick was gone, burnt to a little bit of a roach.

I got to thinking way-out thoughts on a way-out kick. The words went wasting each other in a mad race inside my head. *Hey world, do you know these mean streets is like a clip machine? It takes, an' keeps on taking, till it makes a cat feel like every day is something that's gotta be forgotten. But there's good things, too, man. Like standing together with your boys, and feeling like king. Like being down for anything, even though you're scared sweat will stand out all over you and your brave heart wants to crawl out through your pores.*

Man! You meet your boys and make it to a jump, where you can break night dancing. You walk down them streets and you feel tall and tough. You dig people watching you an' walk a little more boppy. You let your tailor-made hang cool between tight lips, unlit, and when you talk, your voice is soft and deep. Your shoulders brush against your boys. Music pours out of candy stores, restaurants and open windows and you feel good-o at the greatness of the sounds. You see the five-story crumbling building where the dance is happening. You flick your eyeballs around from force of habit, to see if any of the

Jolly Rogers are around. The shit's on. But nobody like that's around, so you all make it up the stairs, and the sounds of shoes beating them long, dead wooden steps make it sound like a young army going to war. It's only nine guys, but each is a down stud. You think about how many boys you got an' it's more than you need.

The set is on the fifth floor and the floor is creaking an' groaning under the weight of all the coolies that are swinging. You dig the open door of the roof and smell burning pot. It smells like burned leaves. You and your boys dig each other for the same idea and, like one, make it up to the roof. Joints are pulled out of the brims of hats and soon there's no noise except the music and the steady hiss of cats blasting away on kick-sticks.

Then it comes—the tight feeling, like a rubber band being squeezed around your forehead. You feel your Adam's apple doing an up-an'-down act—gulp, gulp, gulp—and you feel great—great, dammit! So fine, so smooth. You like this feeling of being air-light, with your head tight. You like the sharpness of your ears as they dig the mambo music coming up the stairs. You hear every note clear. You have the power to pick out one instrument from another. Bongos, congas, flute, piano, maracas, marimba. You keep in time with your whole body and swinging soul, and all of a sudden you're in the middle, hung up with a chick; and the music is soft and she's softer, and you make the most of grinding against her warmth. Viva, viva, viva!

Then the Jolly Rogers walk in and everybody starts dealing. Your boys are fighting and you fall in with them. Bottles are hitting everything but the walls. You feel somebody put his damn fist square in your damn mouth and split your damn lip and you taste your own sweet blood—and all of a sudden you're really glad you came. You're glad you smoked pot, you're glad somebody punched you in the mouth; you're glad for another chance

to prove how much heart you got. You scream mad and your mouth is full of "motherfuckers!" and you swing out hard. Ah, cheverel! That broke his fuckin' nose.

Everybody's screaming; there's sounds of feet kicking fallen bad men; there's sounds of chicks screaming "Po-leece" outta open windows. Then the police siren is heard. It sounds like a stepped-on bitch. A blank is put on the rumble and everybody puts the law into effect. The fight stops and everybody makes it outta the place like it had caught fire. We still hate each other, but we hate the cops worse.

Everybody splits and beats it over hills and over dales—and over rooftops. You feel so good that when the cops make it up them five flights, they ain't gonna find nothing but a sad Puerto Rican record playing a sad bolero called "Adiós, motherfuckers."

Yeah. But the best is the walk back to the block, with the talk about the heart shown in the rumble, the questions put down and the answers given. The look of pride and the warmth of hurts received and given. And each cat makes it to his pad to cop a nod and have his dreams sweetened by his show of corazón. Yeah, man, we sure messed them Jolly Rogers up . . . swoommmmm-swoommm . . .

I came back to my present.

I was still in the faggots' apartment; the red and blue and green lights were still burning. I dug the sounds of Charlie Christian guitar playing. Alfredo was dancing with Antonia. Indio pushed another stick in my hand. I wasted it down to nothing, closed my eyes, and fell asleep.

I awoke because somebody was touching me where only me or a girl should touch. I came back, but my body was still relaxed. I felt my pants zipper being pulled open and cold fingers take my pee-pee out and begin to pull it up and down. I opened my eyes to a shadowy scene of smoke

and haze and looked at the owner of the cold fingers. It was Concha.

I tried to make me get up and move away from those squeezing fingers, but no good; I was like paralyzed. I pushed away at the fingers, but they just held on tighter. I tried to stop my pee-pee's growth, but it grew independently. If I didn't like the scene, my pee-pee did. I couldn't move.

I dug the lie before me. Antonia was blowin' Waneko and Indio at the same time. Alfredo was screwing La Vieja. The springs on the bed were squeaking like a million mice. Waneko's eyes were closed and he was breathing hard. Indio's face was white and scared and expectant, but his body was moving in time with Antonia's outrage. I tightened my own body. It was doing the same as Indio's. It was too late. I sucked my belly in and felt the hot wetness of heat. I looked down in time to see my pee-pee disappear into Concha's mouth. I felt the roughness of his tongue as it both scared and pleased me. *I like broads, I like muchachas, I like girls*, I chanted inside me. I felt funny, like getting dizzy and weak and lazy. I felt myself lurching and straining. I felt like I wanted to yell. Then I heard slurping sounds and it was all over.

Concha was gone. I was left alone, weak and confused. "Here, babee," somebody said, holding out a stick of pot. I took the pot and got up. I smelled the odor of shit and heard Alfredo say, "Ya dirty *maricón*, ya shitted all over me."

"I'm sor-ree," said La Vieja, "I no could help eet."
"Ya stinkin' faggot—"

I floated toward the door. I had to get air inside me. I heard the last sounds of Alfredo's anger beating out against La Vieja—blap, blap, blap—and the faggot's wail, "Ayeeeee, no heet me, no heet—"

I walked up on the roof and breathed in as hard as I

could. I wanted to wash my nose out from all the stink. I felt both good and bad. I felt strong and drained. I hadn't liked the scene, but if a guy gotta live, he gotta do it from the bottom of his heart; he has to want it, to feel it. It's no easy shake to hold off the pressure with one hand while you hold up your sagging pants with the other. But the game is made up as you go along, and you got to pick up what you have or dive out the top-floor window.

I lit the stick of pot. Damn, that whole scene was a blip. I looked over the roof ledge and dropped imaginary bombs on the people below. I felt nice an' high, sailing.

I decided to take a long walk down Fifth Avenue, downtown to the streets of big rich buildings with cool doormen and even cooler rich men. What a smooth idea, I thought, to live right across from Central Park. I tried not to be too jealous. After all, like people said, money wasn't everything—just 99 per cent of living and one per cent of dying. Your insurance took care of the last.

I crossed Fifth Avenue and walked into the wide-open country of Central Park. What a great feeling. I struck out for the hills and picked a cool-looking tree with grass underneath it and lay down under it and chewed up the blue sky through the thick leaves. The afternoon was fading. I felt around without looking, trying to find a nice piece of twig or a blade of country Central Park grass to chew on, just like they do in the movies.

Isn't this boss, I thought, *just lying here, like this was my whole world? Someday I'm gonna buy this here country Central Park—and anybody can come in, but only if they promise not to chew more than one twig or a blade of country Central Park grass. On second thought, not everybody can come in, only people like me. Along with the "No Dogs Allowed" signs, I'll have "Only People Like Me Allowed." I'll tear down the "Keep off the Grass" signs. And while I'm doing this, I might as well tear down the "No Dogs Allowed" and the "Curb Your*

Dogs" signs also. Maybe I'll put up "Curb Your People" signs. Man, if this is gonna be my country Central Park, I might as well do it up right. Let's see, "No Bopping Allowed" signs, or better yet:

BOPPING ALLOWED FROM
9 P.M. to 1 A.M.—MON. TO FRI.
1 A.M. to 6 P.M.—SAT.
NO BOPPING ON SUN.
LORD'S DAY

7. LITTLE RED. SCHOOLHOUSE

When you're a kid, everything has some kind of special meaning. I always could find something to do, even if it was doing nothing. But going to school was something else. School stunk. I hated school and all its teachers. I hated the crispy look of the teachers and the draggy-long hours they took out of my life from nine to three-thirty. I dug being outside no matter what kind of weather. Only chumps worked and studied.

Every day began with a fight to get me out of bed for school. Momma played the same record over an' over every day: "Piri, get up, it's time to go to school." And I played mine: "Aw, Moms, I don't feel so good. I think I got a fever or something."

Always it ended up the same old way: I got up and went to school. But I didn't always stay there. Sometimes, I reported for class, let my teacher see me and then began the game of sneaking out of the room. It was like escaping from some kind of prison. I waited for the teacher to turn her back, then I slipped out of my seat and, hugging the floor, crawled on my belly toward the door. The other kids knew what I was doing; they were trying not to burst out laughing. Sometimes a wise guy near me made a noise to bring the teacher's attention

my way. When this happened, I lay still between the row of desks until the teacher returned to whatever he or she had been doing.

I sneaked my way to the door, eased it open and—swoom!—I was on my way. It was a great-o game, slipping past the other classes and ducking the other teachers or monitors.

One class I didn't dig at all was the so-called "Open Air Class" for skinny, "underweight" kids. We had to sleep a couple of half hours every day, and we got extra milk and jelly and peanut butter on brown bread. The teacher, Miss Shepard, was like a dried-up grape. One day I raised my hand to go to the toilet, but she paid me no mind. After a while, the pain was getting bad, so I called out, "Miss Shepard, may I leave the room?"

She looked up and just shook her head, no.

"But I gotta go, Miss Shepard."

"You just went a little while ago," she said.

"I know, Miss Shepard, but I gotta go again."

"I think it's sheer nonsense," said the old bitch. "You just want an excuse to play around in the hallways."

"No, ma'am, I just wanna take a piss."

"Well, you can't go."

I had to go so badly that I felt the tears forming in the corners of my eyes to match the drops that were already making a wet scene down my leg. "I'm goin' anyway," I said, and started toward the door.

Miss Shepard got up and screamed at me to get back to my seat. I ignored her.

"Get back to your seat, young man," she screamed. "Do you hear me? Get right back—"

"Fuck you," I mumbled. I reached the door and felt her hands grab out at me and her fingers hook on to the back of my shirt collar. My clean, washed-a-million-times shirt came apart in her hand.

I couldn't see her face clearly when I turned around.

All I could think about was my torn shirt and how this left me with only two others. All I could see was her being the cause of the dampness of my pants and hot pee running down my leg. All I could hear was the kids making laughing sounds and the anger of my being ashamed. I didn't think of her as a woman, but as something that had to be hit. I hit it.

"Ohhhhhh, you *struck* me," she cried, in surprise as much as pain.

I thought, *I did not, you fuckin' liar. I just hit you.*

"You struck me! You *struck* me! Oh, help, help!" she cried.

I cut out. Man, I ran like hell into the hallway, and she came right after me, yelling, "Help, help!" I was scared now and all I could think about was getting back to my Moms, my home, my block, where no one could hurt me. I ran toward the stairway and found it blocked off by a man, the principal. I cut back toward the back stairs.

"Stop him! Stop him!" dear Miss Shepard yelled, pointing her finger at me. "He struck me, he struck me."

I looked over my shoulder and saw the principal talk to her for a hot second and then take off after me, yelling: "Stop! Stop!" I hit the stairs and went swooming down like it was all one big step. The principal was fast and I could hear him swearing right behind me. I slammed through the main-floor door that led to the lunchroom and jumped over benches and tables, trying like hell to make the principal trip and break a leg. Then I heard a muted cry of pain as a bench caught him in the shin. I looked over my shoulder and I dug his face. The look said that he was gonna hit me; that he wasn't gonna listen to my side of the story; that I had no side. I figured I better not get caught.

I busted my legs running toward the door that led to the outside and freedom, and with both hands out in front of me I hit the brass bar that opens the door. Be-

hind me I heard a thump as the principal smacked into it. I ran down the block, sneaking a look behind me. The principal was right behind me, his face redder and meaner. People were looking at the uneven contest.

I tore into my hallway, screaming as loud as I could for help. The apartment doors opened up, one right after another. Heads of all colors popped out. "Qué pasa?" asked a Puerto Rican woman. "Wha's happenin'?" said a colored lady.

"They wanna beat me up in school and that's one of them," I puffed, pointing at the principal, who was just coming into view.

"Hooo, ain't nobody gonna hurt you, sonny," said the colored lady, whose name was Miss Washington. She gently pushed me behind her with one hand and with the other held it out toward the principal roaring down at us.

The principal, blocked by Miss Washington's 280 pounds and a look of "Don't you touch that boy," stopped short and puffed out, "That—that—kid—he—punched a teacher and—he's got to be chastised for it. After all, school disci—"

"Now hol' on, white man," Miss Washington interrupted. "There ain't nobody gonna chaz—whatever it is—this boy. I know him an' he's a good boy—at least good for what comes outta this heah trashy neighborhood—an' you ain't gonna do nuttin' to him, unless you-all wan's to walk over me."

Miss Washington was talking real bad-like. I peeked out from behind that great behind.

"Madam, I assure you," the principal said, "I didn't mean harming him in a bodily manner. And if you knew the whole issue, you would agree with me that he deserves being chastised. As principal of his school, I have his best interest at heart. Ha, ha, ha," he added, "you know the old saying, madam, 'A stitch in time saves nine.' Ha, ha, ha—*ahummp*."

I could see him putting that stitch in my head.

"I assure you, madam," he continued, smilingly pretty, "we have no intention of doing him bodily harm."

Once again I peeked out from behind Miss Washington's behind. "Yeah, that's what you say," I said. "How about alla time you take kids down to your office for some crap and ya start poking 'em with that big finger of yours until they can't take it any more?"

There were a lot of people in the hall by this time. They were all listening, and I knew it. "Yeah, ask any of the kids," I added. "They'll tell ya." I looked sorry-like at the crowd of people, who were now murmuring mean-like and looking at the principal like he didn't have long on this earth.

Smelling a Harlem lynch party in the making, I said, "An'—you—ain't—gonna—do—it—to—me. I'll get me a forty-five an'—"

"Hush you mouth, boy," Miss Washington said; "don't be talkin' like that. We grownups will get this all straightened out. An' nobody's gonna poke no finger in your chest"—she looked dead at the principal—"is they?"

The principal smiled the weakest smile in this smiling world. "I—I—I—er, assure you, madam, this young man is gifted with the most wonderful talent for prevarication I've ever seen."

"What's that mean?" Miss Washington asked suspiciously.

"Er, it means a good imagination, madam. A-ha-ha—yes, *a-hummp*."

"That's a lie, Miss Washington," I said. "He's always telling the kids that. We asked Mrs. Wagner, the history teacher, and she said it means to lie. Like he means I'm a liar."

The look in the principal's eye said, "Oh, you smarty pants bastard," but he just smiled and said nothing.

Miss Washington said, "Ifen thar's any pokin' ta be

done, we all heah is gonna do it," and she looked hard at the principal. The crowd looked hard at the principal. Hard sounds were taking forms, like, "So this is the way they treat our kids in school?" and "What you-all expect? These heah white people doan give a damn," and "If they evah treats mah boy like that, I'd . . ."

The principal, smiling softly, began backing up.

I heard Momma's voice: "Piri, Piri, *qué pasa?*"

"Everything all right, Mis' Thomas," Miss Washington assured her. "This heah man was tryin' to hit your son, but ain't, 'cause I'll break his damn head wide open." Miss Washington shifted her weight forward. "Damn, Ah got a good mind to do it right now," she added.

The principal, remembering the bit about discretion being the better part of valor, split.

Everyone tried to calm Moms down. I felt like everybody there was my family. I let Momma lead me upstairs to our apartment. Everyone patted me on the head as we went by.

"You're going to school with your *padre* in the morning," Momma said.

"Uh-uh, Moms," I said. "That principal will stomp my chest in with that finger of his."

"No he won't, *muchacho*. Your father will go with you an' everything will be fixed up."

I just nodded my head and thought how great it would be if Miss Washington could go with me.

8. IN BUSINESS

Living in number 109 was snap breeze. I knew practically everybody on the block and, if I didn't, they knew me. When I went to the barbershop, José the barber would ask me, "Shape up or trim?" He liked to trim because in three hot minutes he could earn fifty cents. But I always gave him a hard way to shovel and said, "Give me the works with a square back." "*Ay coño*," he groaned and started to cut hair and breathe bad breath on me, on spite, while I ignored him on spite.

Just being a kid, nothing different from all the other kids, was good. Even when you slept over at some other kid's house, it was almost like being in your own house. They all had kids, rats, and roaches in common. And life was full of happy moments—spitting out of tenement windows at unsuspecting people below, popping off with sling shots, or even better, with Red Ryder BB rifles, watching the neighbors fight through their open windows or make love under half-drawn shades.

The good kick in the hot summer was to sleep on the fire escape. Sometimes I lay awake all night and thought about all the things I would do when I grew up, about the nice duds I'd have like a champ uptown and come back around the block and treat all the kids to *cuchifritos* and pour tons of nickels into the jukebox and help any-

body that was in trouble, from a junkie to a priest. I dreamed big; it didn't cost anything.

In the morning I stood on Lexington Avenue in Spanish Harlem, one finger poked through my pants pocket, scratching myself, while I droned, "Shine, mister—good shine, only fifteen cents. Shine, mister . . ." It was hard to shine shoes and harder to keep my corner from getting copped by an early-rising shine boy. I had to be prepared to mess a guy up; that corner spot wasn't mine alone. I had to earn it every time I shined shoes there.

When I got a customer, we both played our roles. The customer, tall and aloof, smiled, "Gimme a shine, kid," and I replied, "Sí, señor, sir, I'll give you one that you'll have to put sunglasses on to keep the bright down."

My knees grinding against the gritty sidewalk, I adopted a serious, businesslike air. Carefully, but confidently, I snaked out my rags, polish, and brushes. I gave my cool breeze customer the treatment. I rolled his pants cuff up—"That'll keep shoe polish off"—straightened his socks, patted his shoe, assured him he was in good hands, and loosened and retied his shoes. Then I wiped my nose with a delicate finger, picked up my shoe brush, and scrunched away the first hard crust of dirt. I opened my bottle of black shoe cleaner—dab, rub in, wipe off, pat the shoe down. Then I opened my can of polish—dab on with three fingers, pat-a-pid, pat-a-pid. He's not looking—spit on the shoe, more polish, let it dry, tap the bottom of his sole, smile up at Mr. Big Tip (you hope), "Next, sir."

I repeated the process on the other shoe, then picked up my brush and rubbed the bristles very hard against the palm of my hand, scientific-like, to warm the brush hairs up so they would melt the black shoe wax and give a cool unlumpy shine. I peeked out of the corner of my eye to see if Mr. Big Tip was watching my modern

shoeshine methods. The bum was looking. I hadn't touched his shoe, forcing him to look.

The shoe began to gleam dully—more spit, more polish, more brush, little more spit, little more polish, and a lotta rag. I repeated on the other shoe. As Mr. Big Tip started digging in his pocket, I prepared for the climax of my performance. Just as he finished saying, "Damn nice shine, kid," I said, "Oh, I ain't finished, sir. I got a special service," and I plunged my wax-covered fingers into a dark corner of my shoe box and brought out a bottle of "Special shoe lanolin cream for better preservation of leather."

I applied a dab, a tiny dab, pausing long enough to say very confidently, "You can't put on too much or it'll spoil the shine. It gotta be just right." Then I grabbed the shoe rag firmly, like a maestro with a baton, and hummed a rhythm with it, slapping out a happy beat on the shoes. A final swish here and there, and *miral*—finished. Sweating from the effort of my creation, I slowly rose from my knees, bent from the strain, my hand casually extended, palm flat up, and murmured, "Fifteen cents, sir," with a look that said, "But it's worth much more, don't you think?" Mr. Big Tip dropped a quarter and a nickel into the offering plate, and I said, "Thanks a mil, sir," thinking, *Take it cool*, as I cast a watchful eye at his retreating back.

But wasn't it great to work for a living? I calculated how long it would take to make my first million shining shoes. Too long. I would be something like 987 years old. Maybe I could steal it faster.

In Harlem stealing was like natural—and usually a partnership deal. Some of the scores came off like to meet conditions. Like the lemonade syndicate which we started one hot summer day. All of Harlem was melting under the fire of the sun. The stoops and fire escapes groaned under the weight of sweat-drenched humans looking for

a way out of their ovenlike pads. We were sitting on the stoop of number 109 reading comic books when Little Louie said, "Hey, dig what it says in the funny book about these kids setting up lemonade stands and—"

"Making money?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Come on, let's go."

"Where to, Piri?"

"Make money."

"How?"

"You dope, like in the funny book. Let's sell lemonade."

"We ain't got no dough to buy the stuff with."

"Okay, how much we got between us?"

Eight guys searched themselves and came up with fourteen cents between them.

"Aw, we can't make it," said Little Louie.

"Oh yeah we can. Dig, we all go over to the A & P."

"Yeah, and what?"

"Well, it's self-service, ain't it, so we buy a pound of sugar, and cop all the Kool-ade and lemons on the side. Man! You know how much Kool-ade and lemons eight cats can cop?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

"But what?"

"But a poundo' sugar ain't gonna be enough."

"Okay, okay, so we buy two bags of kool-ade and cop as much sugar as we can, along with the resto' the stuff. But let's make it up to our pads and put on some jackets, 'cause five pound bags of sugar sure are gonna show under our tee shirts."

A few minutes later eight guys sweating under their jackets with the club name "TNT's" shining on them walked into the A&P one at a time. We all quickly gained weight in the shape of five-pound bags of sugar and pack-

ages of Kool-ade hidden under our jackets. "Come on, panins," I said, "Let's make it."

"Hey," Crip asked, "ain't you gonna pay for them bags of Kool-ade?"

"Naw, if we cop a steal, we might as well go all the way."

Everything was going great, until Little Louie, his pockets bulging with Kool-ade packs and lemons and a five-pound bag of sugar, decided to cop a glass pitcher.

"Hey you, kid! Drop that!" the manager yelled.

All us kids stopped dead. Then we saw the manager bearing down on Little Louie.

"Cut out, fellas!" I shouted, and everybody was on his own. Some of the guys lost their sugar, and packs of Kool-ade were strewn all over the store, but nobody got snagged. Back on the block, we made it to the back yard and counted what we had copped.

"How much stuff we got, Piri?"

"Well, let's see . . . fourteen, seventeen, twenty-four, twenty-seven—twenty-seven packs of Kool-ade, fourteen lemons, and five bags of sugar, five pounds each."

"And one glass pitcher," added Little Louie.

"Yeah," I said, "we almost blew the jewels behind your copping that." But we all smiled, and Little Louie felt great. Why not? He was the only one that copped a glass pitcher, besides the other stuff, so he was one up on us. It was like doing something above and beyond the call of duty, just like in the war flicks.

"Okay, let's go," I said. "We're in business."

An hour later, there were four lemonade stands spread throughout the block with two cats to each stand, and we made business. So much so that, at five cents a large glass, we soon sold out. We got together and counted our gold.

"Man! It sure looks like a lot."

"Yeah, we got \$4.75, \$5.25, \$8—man! we got \$8.35, \$8.37!"

"\$8.37? How come it came out \$8.37?" Crip asked. "We were selling at a nickel a glass."

"Oh, that was me," said Little Louie. "My girl only had two cents, so I sold her half a glass."

"Well, don't let it happen again," I said. "A nickel or nuttin'."

"Man, but that was my girl—"

"Okay, just our girls, and we can give them a whole glass for two cents, okay?"

"Yeah," says everybody, "that's *chevere*."

"Okay, what's next?"

"Well, we're outta Kool-ade and stuff," I said, "so we better get some more."

"Yeah," said Waneko. "We can afford to buy the stuff now."

"Do what!" I said. "Man, you getting low or something? That'll eat up the profits."

"Yeah, ain't they got another A & P uptown some place?" Little Louie said pointedly, and within minutes eight young businessmen sneaked under the turnstile of the subway at 103rd Street and Lexington Avenue, on the uptown side.

But the lemonade syndicate, like copping milk bottles, was nickel and dime. We dreamed of bigger scores. One day I was in the grocery with Little Louie and Crip. I was buying something for Momma—on credit, as usual. I saw the groceryman quickly shove a paper bag down into a big burlap bag of rice. He didn't think anybody saw him.

The *bodega* was a drop-off for the *bolita* runners, and I figured the day's bread was in that bag. That was a lot of *dinero*. I nudged Louie, "Hey, man, dig that?" I whispered. He had seen it, too; we both played it cool.

Outside we made plans to cop that bag. This would be a real score—Coney Island, movies, food, girls—man, the

works. Around one a.m. the next day we pried a couple of bars off the window in the back of the store. Three of us went in for the bread; Crip stayed behind to play chicky.

Once inside the store we decided we may as well make the whole scene—cigarettes, candy, the cash register, everything.

"Hurry up, man," Crip called from outside. "The fuzz may be coming around any minute."

"Cool it, man, we're almost finished," I whispered back. We found \$40 in the cash register. Now let's look in that bag of rice, I thought. "Hey, Louie," I whispered as I dug into a hundred-pound bag of rice and beans, "plenty of rice and beans for the Marine Tigers."

"*Cofio*, hurry up!" Crip called.

Jesus! I thought, *he's scared to death. I wonder why the fuck he came in the first place. If anything brings the fuzz, it's gonna be his knocking knees.*

"Hey, is the back window open?" Louie asked.

"Yeah," I answered.

"Groovy," came the reply.

"Hey, *panitas!*" came the urgent cry from Crip, "here comes the fuzz. I'm making it." And he was gone.

"*Caramba!*" I choked out, "those cops are bound to see him running and put one and one together. Let's get out of here!"

We scrambled out through the back window, slid down the drainpipe, and cut out. Louie had dropped the cigarettes, and I had left the cash drawer open. How many clues could three fifteen-year-old burglars leave? As we ran out, I thought, *We can't lose ourselves in no crowds at two in the morning, and we're two blocks from home.* I could imagine the fuzz shining their flashlights through that store door, and digging the smokes all over the floor and the cash drawers open. I could see them making it to the back window, digging the pried-out bars.

Right about now they'd be cruising the area looking for suspicious-looking cats like us.

We caught up to Crip.

"Stay in the shadows, man," I whispered to Louie and Crip, "and don't make no loud walking noises."

But Louie had steel taps on his shoes, and every step he took made a click-clack, click-clack.

"For God's sake, Louie," I said, "take off those shoes."

Crip froze. "There they are!" he said, pointing to a police car coming up the street.

We melted into a dark alley with a high fence and watched the pretty red light on top of the car as it went around and around. I felt hypnotized, like in the flicks at the movie house. Like in the jungle pictures, where the big snake's head moves around and around, and whoever he's diggin' gets froze.

"Whatta we gonna do?" Crip said. "Man, whatta we do?"

"Hey!" yelled one of the fuzzes, "there's somebody in that alley!"

"Shine the light."

"Yeah, just a minute."

I scraped my eyesight through that black alley and measured that fence, almost twice as high as me. I'll try it, I thought. I got my sneakers and I'm good. I can run, jump, split better than most. And if I can make that fence, they'll be looking for their mothers all night.

"Let's try for that fence, panitas," I said.

"I can't make it," said Louie. I'm gonna try it out the front. Once I'm out there, only a fuckin' bullet is gonna catch me."

"Jesus, I'm scared as hell," Crip said.

"Punk," I said; but I was scared too.

"Okay," Crip said, "I'm down, Piri, I'll go for the fence, too."

The light from the patrol car shone in the alley. It was

like the world was all day. Louie split it down the street, putting down shoe leather and picking up gravel.

"There goes one!" yelled the fuzz.

"Now," I whispered, and swoom! I ran at that fence like I was going right through it, like Superman. I scrambled up the side and, thank God, my fingers found the top and I hoisted myself over. I heard a shot and I thought, *Hey, cops, you're supposed to say, "Halt in the name of the law." You ain't playing fair, fuckos.*

I dropped to the other side and I listened for Crip. I heard the cops yelling and Crip's running feet, then the crash of garbage cans. I peeked through a hole. Crip had tripped over a garbage can. The fuzzes were coming into the alley. Crip got up to make another try. *Fly, Crip, oh sweet shit fly, Crip*—but he didn't have enough running space. Crip's feet left the ground, and I felt the smashing of his body as he crunched against the fence, falling short of the top.

I felt him lying on the ground, and I heard him breathing hard. He was crying. Not because he was afraid, but because he didn't know how to fly.

"Don't move, kid," the fuzz told him.

I started to run. "Crip," I yelled, "don't talk. You're a minor, dig it? You're a minor!"

"I got the other one," said a cop's voice. "That makes two."

I ran through dark yards and over rooftops and climbed fences and fire escapes, all the time crying. I felt the wet tears making salt in my mouth. I felt like I was in a war and I had lost my two best buddies. "The bastard fuzz," I said aloud. "I should've stayed there with Crip and Louie. I should've thrown rocks at them *maricones haras*." *I should've, I should've . . .*

I climbed up to my pad and sneaked into bed. I was sweated up, and I smelled shook up. I tried to go to sleep, waiting for the knock on my door that would tell me my

boys had squealed on me. I should've stayed there . . .
Our Father who art . . . I hope them cats don't squeal
on me . . . "Naw, they won't, naw . . ."

Man! They better not!

SUBURBIA

*This Long Island ain't nuttin' like Harlem, and
with all your green trees it ain't nuttin' like your
Puerto Rico.*

9. BABYLON FOR THE BABYLONIANS

In 1944 we moved to Long Island. Poppa was making good money at the airplane factory, and he had saved enough bread for a down payment on a small house.

As we got our belongings ready for the moving van, I stood by watching all the hustling with a mean feeling. My hands weren't with it; my fingers played with the top of a cardboard box full of dishes. My face tried hard not to show resentment at Poppa's decision to leave my streets forever. I felt that I belonged in Harlem; it was my kind of kick. I didn't want to move out to Long Island. My friend Crutch had told me there were a lot of paddies out there, and they didn't dig Negroes or Puerto Ricans.

"Piri," Momma said.

"Yeah, Moms." I looked up at Momma. She seemed tired and beat. Still thinking about Paulie all the time and how she took him to the hospital just to get some simple-assed tonsils out. And Paulie died. I remember she used to keep repeating how Paulie kept crying, "Don't leave me, Mommie," and her saying, "Don't worry, *nene*, it's just for a day." Paulie—I pushed his name out of my mind.

"*Dios mío*, help a little, *hijo*," Momma said.

"Moms, why do we gotta move outta Harlem? We don't know any other place better'n this."

"*Caramba!* What ideas," Momma said. "What for you talk like that? Your Poppa and I saved enough money. We want you kids to have good opportunities. It is a better life in the country. No like Puerto Rico, but it have trees and grass and nice schools."

"Yeah, Moms. Have they got Puerto Ricans out there?"

"Sí, I'm sure. Señora Rodriguez an' her family, an' Otelia—remember her? She lived upstairs."

"I mean a lotta *Latinos*, Moms. Like here in the *Barrio*. And how about *morenos*?"

"*Muchacho*, they got all kind." Momma laughed. "Fat and skinny, big and little. And—"

"Okay, Momma," I said. "You win. Give me a kiss."

So we moved to Babylon, a suburb on the south shore of Long Island. Momma was right about the grass and trees. And the school, too, was nice-looking. The desks were new, not all copped up like the ones in Harlem, and the teachers were kind of friendly and not so tough-looking as those in Patrick Henry.

I made some kind of friends with some paddy boys. I even tried out for the school baseball team. There were a lot of paddy boys and girls watching the tryouts and I felt like I was the only one trying out. I dropped a fly ball in the outfield to cries of "Get a basket," but at bat I shut everybody out of my mind and took a swing at the ball with all I had behind it and hit a home run. I heard the cheers and made believe I hadn't.

I played my role to the most, and the weeks turned into months. I still missed Harlem, but I didn't see it for six months. *Maybe*, I thought, *this squeeze livin' ain't as bad as Crutch said*. I decided to try the lunchtime swing session in the school gym. The Italian paddy, Angelo, had said they had hot music there. I dug the two-cents

admission fee out of my pocket and made it up the walk that led to the gym.

"Two cents, please," said a little *muchacha blanca*.

"Here you are."

"Thank you," she smiled.

I returned her smile. Shit, man, Crutch was wrong.

The gym was whaling. The music was on wax, and it was a mambo. I let myself react. It felt good to give in to the natural rhythm. Maybe there were other worlds besides the mean streets, I thought. I looked around the big gym and saw some of the kids I knew a little. Some of them waved; I waved back. I noticed most of the paddy kids were dancing the mambo like stiff. Then I saw a girl I had heard called Marcia or something by the other kids. She was a pretty, well-stacked girl, with black hair and a white softness which set her hair off pretty cool. I walked over to her. "Hi," I said.

"Huh? Oh, hi."

"My first time here."

"But I've seen you before. You got Mrs. Sutton for English."

"Yeah, that's right. I meant this is my first time to the gym dance."

"I also was at the field when you smashed that ball a mile."

"That was *suerte*," I said.

"What's that?" she asked.

"What?"

"What you said—'swear-tay.'"

I laughed. "Man, that's Spanish."

"Are you Spanish? I didn't know. I mean, you don't look like what I thought a Spaniard looks like."

"I ain't a Spaniard from Spain," I explained. "I'm a Puerto Rican from Harlem."

"Oh—you talk English very well," she said.

"I told you I was born in Harlem. That's why I ain't got no Spanish accent."

"No-o, your accent is more like Jerry's."

What's she tryin' to put down? I wondered. Jerry was the colored kid who recently had moved to Bayshore.

"Did you know Jerry?" she asked. "Probably you didn't get to meet him. I heard he moved away somewhere."

"Yeah, I know Jerry," I said softly. "He moved away because he got some girl in trouble. I know Jerry is colored and I know I got his accent. Most of us in Harlem steal from each other's language or style or stick of living. And it's *suerte*, s-u-e-r-t-e. It means 'luck.' " *Jesus, Crutch, you got my mind messed up a little. I keep thinking this broad's tryin' to tell me something shitty in a nice dirty way. I'm gonna find out.* "Your name is Marcia or something like that, eh?" I added.

"Ahuh."

"Mine's Piri. Wanna dance?"

"Well, this one is almost over."

"Next one?"

"Well, er—I, er—well, the truth is that my boyfriend is sort of jealous and—well, you know how—"

I looked at her and she was smiling. I said, "Jesus, I'm sorry. Sure, I know how it is. Man, I'd feel the same way."

She smiled and shrugged her shoulders pretty-like. I wanted to believe her. I did believe her. I had to believe her. "Some other time, eh?"

She smiled again, cocked her head to one side and crinkled her nose in answer.

"Well, take it easy," I said. "See you around."

She smiled again, and I walked away not liking what I was feeling, and thinking that Crutch was right. I fought against it. I told myself I was still feeling out of place here in the middle of all these strangers, that paddies weren't as bad as we made them out to be. I

looked over my shoulder and saw Marcia looking at me funny-like. When she saw me looking, her face changed real fast. She smiled again. I smiled back. I felt like I was plucking a mental daisy:

You're right, Crutch
You're wrong, Crutch.
You're right, Crutch
Your wrong, Crutch.

I wanted to get outside and cop some sun and I walked toward the door.

"Hi, Piri," Angelo called. "Where you going? It's just starting."

"Aw, it's a little stuffy," I lied. "Figured on making it over to El Viejo's—I mean, over to the soda fountain on Main Street."

"You mean the Greek's?"

"Yeah, that's the place."

"Wait a sec till I take a leak and I'll go over with you."

I nodded okay and followed Angelo to the john. I waited outside for him and watched the kids dancing. My feet tapped out time and I moved closer to the gym and I was almost inside again. Suddenly, over the steady beat of the music, I heard Marcia say, "Imagine the nerve of that black thing."

"Who?" someone asked.

"That new colored boy," said another voice.

They must have been standing just inside the gym. I couldn't see them, but I had that for-sure feeling that it was me they had in their mouths.

"Let's go, Piri," Angelo said. I barely heard him. "Hey fella," he said, "what's the matter?"

"Listen, Angelo. Jus' listen," I said stonily.

"... do you mean just like that?" one of the kids asked.

"Ahuh," Marcia said. "Just as if I was a black girl."

Well! He started to talk to me and what could I do except be polite and at the same time not encourage him?"

"Christ, first that Jerry bastard and now him. We're getting invaded by niggers," said a thin voice.

"You said it," said another guy. "They got some nerve. My dad says that you give them an inch them apes want to take a yard."

"He's not so bad," said a shy, timid voice. "He's a polite guy and seems to be a good athlete. And besides, I hear he's a Puerto Rican."

"Ha—he's probably passing for Puerto Rican because he can't make it for white," said the thin voice. "Ha, ha, ha."

I stood there thinking who I should hit first. *Marcia. I think I'll bust her jaw first.*

"Let's go, Piri," Angelo said. "Those creeps are so fuckin' snooty that nobody is good enough for them. Especially that bitch Marcia. Her and her clique think they got gold-plated assholes."

"... no, *really!*" a girl was saying. "I heard he's a Puerto Rican, and they're not like Neg—"

"There's no difference," said the thin voice. "He's still black."

"Come on, Piri, let's go," Angelo said. "Don't pay no mind to them."

"I guess he thought he was another Jerry," someone said.

"He really asked me to dance with him," Marcia said indignantly. "I told him that my boyfriend . . ."

The rest of the mean sounds faded as I made it out into the sun. I walked faster and faster. I cut across the baseball field, then ran as fast as I could. I wanted to get away from the things running to mind. My lungs were hurting—not from running but from not being able to scream. After a while I sat down and looked up at the sky. How near it seemed. I heard a voice: "Piri! Holy

hell, you tore up the ground running." I looked up and saw Angelo. He was huffing and out of wind. "Listen, you shouldn't let them get you down," he said, kneeling next to me. "I know how you feel."

I said to him very nicely and politely, "Do me a favor, you motherfuckin' paddy, get back with your people. I don't know why the fuck you're here, unless it's to ease your—oh, man, just get the fuck outta here. I hate them. I hate you. I hate all you white motherjumps."

"I'm sorry, Piri."

"Yeah, *blanco* boy, I know. You know how I feel, ain't that right? Go on, paddy, make it."

Angelo shook his head and slowly got up. He looked at me for a second, then walked away. I dug the sky again and said to it, "I ain't ever goin' back to that fuckin' school. They can shove it up their asses." I plucked the last mental daisy: *You was right, Crutch.*

10. BUT NOT FOR ME

I really hated Long Island and was makin' the scene in Harlem most often for pot parties, stompings, and chicks. On the train rides to Harlem, I watched the cool frame houses and clean-looking kids roll by and my memory scratched itself and brought back things I didn't like.

This Long Island was a foreign country. It looked so pretty and clean but it spoke a language you couldn't dig. The paddy boys talked about things you couldn't dig, or maybe better, they couldn't dig you. Yeah, that was it; they didn't dig your smooth talk, and you always felt like on the rim of belonging. No matter how much you busted your hump trying to be one of them, you'd never belong, they wouldn't let you. Maybe they couldn't. Maybe they didn't belong themselves.

Momma was having her troubles, too. One day she told me that Poppa had another woman.

"What are you saying, Moms?"

"I said that your father has another woman."

"Naw, Moms, it ain't so. Man! Pops is only for you."

"No, *hijo*, I know. Her name is Ruthie."

I knew it, too, but I'd lie my ass off to make it a lie so that Moms wouldn't have to make it any harder for herself. Moms was dying. I guess she knew it as well as I,

but it was different for both of us. I wanted her to live. She didn't want to.

"Naw, Moms, it ain't like that," I lied, and we just looked at each other quietly, both knowing that it was like that.

I got a job, as a kitchen attendant at Pilgrim State Hospital in Brentwood, Long Island. I had the crazy idea that I could save some money and take a pad in Harlem, maybe for Momma, the kids, and me.

The work at the hospital was shitty and the pay was shitty, but it was some kind of independence. There was a cafeteria for employees on the hospital grounds. I went there to eat lunch. As I opened the cafeteria door, a girl was coming out. She was blond and *chevere*-looking. I held the door open for her.

"Thank you," she said, smiling openly.

"You're welcome," I smiled. We looked at each other.

"Er, are you new here?" she asked.

"Yeah, just started today."

"It's a big place, isn't it?"

"You ain't kidding."

"Are you from nearby?"

"Yeah, West Babylon, but originally from the *Barrio*."

"The what?"

"The *Barrio*. Ain't you ever heard of it? Man, girl, it's the coolest place ever. Everybody's always on some kind of kick."

"Is that in New York?" She looked interested.

"Yeah, in Spanish Harlem." I was interested. "How about some coffee," I said, "so I can tell you all about Harlem?"

She smiled and said, "Thank you."

I held the door open, like any gentleman in Harlem would have done, and we sat down at a table. I sensed something. Every eyeball in the cafeteria was pointed our

way. But the girl in front of me didn't seem to notice it. I knew what it meant, and she looked at me and I knew she knew. I smiled and said, "Looks like everybody here knows you."

She laughed and said, "Or you."

Her name was Betty. I can't remember her last name. We went for each other after that. We didn't even mind the looks our way. I took her to Harlem to meet my people. We had a ball; my boys made her feel at ease, at home. Everything went smooth for a while. Then one night we were returning from New York and I heard a steady murmur from two cats seated diagonally across and behind us. It was a while before I dug that they were talking about "some nigger."

"Will you look at that damn nigger with that white girl?" a voice said.

"Sh," said another voice, "he'll hear you."

I looked toward the voice.

"Let him hear me, that black son of a bitch," this cat said, looking straight at me.

I was "that damn nigger" and "that black son of a bitch." I sprang from my seat and through the blur of my rage I heard myself screaming something like "World full of shits!" and "Motherfuckin' supermen!" I wanted to kill, but Betty pulled me back and someone pulled that cat out of our car into another car and off at the next station.

We got off in Babylon and found a field, and I made love to her. In anger, in hate, I took out my madness on her. She understood and kept saying, "I don't care what they think—I love you, I love you."

But inside me I kept saying, *Damn it, I hate you—no, not you, just your damn color. My God, why am I in the middle?*

When it was over we lay there, real beat. She wanted

to talk about us, but that was crazy. I took her home. It was the last time I saw her.

The next morning I told Momma, "Moms, I'm going back to the Barrio."

"But *hijo*, stay here; why do you want to go?"

"No, Moms, I can't. I can't get along with anything, no matter what I do. Nothing falls right. I don't like Long Island and *los blancos*, and this world full of shits. I can't put my hand on it, but there's something wrong with all of us—Pops, José, James, Sis, me, and the whole world. Moms, I think the only ones got the right to be happy is dead." I looked at Moms, and she looked so beat, so tired. She hadn't been the same since Paulie died. "Look, Moms, I'm going back to Harlem and save some money so I can set up an apartment in the Barrio and you come live with me, okay?"

My little Moms looked at me sadly and said, "Take care of yourself. *Que Dios te bendiga y te guarde*. God bless you and protect you."

"Thanks, Moms, I'll make some money and we'll all go back to Harlem. Pops too, if he wants to." I hugged Momma close to me. Her smallness made me want to cry inside. I made myself think, *Hard, man, like, you're a big man*. At the door I looked back, "'Bye, Moms," I said.

"*Adiós. Escribel*"

"Sure, Moms."

I walked down the path toward the main road. I knew Moms was standing at the door, dressed, as always, like somebody that's secondhand. I wasn't gonna look back, but I did. "Moms," I called back.

"*Si, hijo?*"

"This Long Island ain't nuttin' like Harlem, and with all your green trees it ain't nuttin' like your Puerto Rico."

"I understand, *hijo*."

"It'll be okay, Moms. Give me your blessing."

"*Que Dios te bendiga, que Dios te bendiga, que Dios te bendiga.*"

I didn't look back any more.

HARLEM

It wasn't right to be ashamed of what one was. It was like hating Momma for the color she was and Poppa for the color he wasn't.

11. HOW TO BE A NEGRO WITHOUT REALLY TRYING

I had been away from home maybe three months, knocking around, sleeping in cold hallways, hungry a lot of the time. The fucking heart was going out of me. Maybe I should make it down to the Bowery, I thought, and lap up some sneaky pete with the rest of the bums.

No, I decided, one thing still stood out clear; one thing still made sense and counted—me. Nothing else but me—and I hadda pull outta this shit kick.

It was winter, and all I had on was a paper-weight sports jacket. The cold winds were blowing my skin against my chest. I walked into a bar at 103rd Street and Third Avenue, trying to look like I had a pound on me and was warm. In front of the jukebox was a colored guy and a big, chunky broad. The guy was beating out time and the girl was digging. Not all of her moved, just the right parts.

I smiled. "Cold, eh?" I said, and added, "My name is Piri."

"Sure is, kid," he said. "Mine's Pane, and that's my

sistuh, Lorry." I followed his finger as he pointed to her.

"It's cold," I mumbled to no one in particular.

"Want a drink, kid?"

I tried not to act too anxious. "Yeah, cool man," I said casually. Pane took a bottle from his back pocket and handed it to me. "How strong can I hit it?" I asked, holding the bottle to my lips.

"Roll," he said, and I put inside me the warmth and affection of my new friends.

After half an hour a new bottle popped out and I got another long taste, and home was with me, I wasn't so lonely. The hours slipped by. I talked and Pane and his sister were one with me. Then the place was gonna close and I knew it was going to get cold again. Pane was high but not plastered. He nudged Lorry and said, "Let's go." I just sat there.

They got up and walked away. As they reached the door I saw Lorry nudge her brother and whisper something. He shook his head and looked back at me. I waved at him, hoping that the look on his face meant what I thought it did.

"Hey, kid, what's your name again?"

"Piri—some guys call me Johnny."

"Have you got a place to sleep?"

"Uh-uh," I said. I made a mental list of the places I had slept since I had left home—friends' pads at the beginning, with relatives until the welcome was overdrawn, then rooftops, under the stairs, basements, stoops, parked cars.

"Well, we ain't got much room, but you're welcome to share it," Pane said. "You gotta sleep on the floor, 'cause all we got is one room for Lorry, her two kids, and me."

"Crazy, man. Thanks a lot," I said. I almost felt my luck was going to change. I tightened up against the cold and hustled down the street. A couple of blocks over, between Park and Madison, we went down the stairs into

a basement. I felt the warmth from the furnace greet me and I welcomed it like a two-days-late home-relief check. Pane fumbled with the key and opened the door into a small room. I noticed that the cellar had been partitioned into several rooms and one kitchen for sharing. Lorry smiled at me and said, "Honey, it ain't much, but it beats a blank."

"Gracias." I smiled, and it was for real. "Thanks, Lorry."

She spread a quilt on the floor between the big bed where she and the two kids slept and a couch where Pane slept. I lay down on my back, my hands behind my head. The room was so small I could touch both the bed and the couch. I felt almost safe.

Soon Pane was sleeping hard on his whisky. In the dim darkness I saw Lorry looking down at me. "You asleep, honey?" she asked.

"No, I ain't," I answered.

She slowly made room in her big warm bed, and just like that I climbed in and made love to her—"love" because I was grateful to her, because I wanted her body as much as she wanted mine. It was all natural, all good, all as innocent and pure as anything could be in Home, Sweet Harlem. That was that—she was my woman. No matter that I was sixteen and she was thirty-three. Her caring, her loving were as young or as old as I wanted it to be.

Months passed. I got a job—Lorry inspired that with carfare and lunch. Every week I gave her a few bucks and loved her as much as I could. Still, I had the feeling that I was in a deep nothing and had to get on. Then I lost the lousy job.

I decided I couldn't stay with Lorry any more. I had been playing around with this Puerto Rican girl who lived in one of the basement rooms. She was sure a pretty bitch, with a kid and no husband. I didn't want Lorry to

cop a complex, but I couldn't dig her the way she wanted me to. One night I cut out. The Puerto Rican girl had just hustled ten bucks, and she was talking about all the things it would buy for the kid. They needed food and clothes real bad. I saw where she put her pocketbook and waited till she was in the kitchen getting some grits for her kid. Then I went to her room and copped the ten bucks and made it up to the Bronx. I had a hangout up there. I gave a street buddy five bucks and he let me share his pad for a couple of weeks till I could cop a job.

A few days after I'd copped the ten dollars I ran into the girl. She knew it had been me. She made a plea for her bread back, for her kid. I said I didn't take it and brushed past her. I didn't have to look into her eyes to know the hate she bore me. But it was her or me, and as always, it had to be me. Besides, I had bought some pot with the five left over and rolled some good-size bombers that immediately put me in business. I had a good-o thought: soon as I was straight, I'd lay her ten *bolos* back on her.

I looked for work, but not too hard. Then I saw this add in a newspaper:

YOUNG MEN 17-30

GREAT OPPORTUNITY

LEARN WHILE WORKING

EARN WHILE TRAINING

Door-to-door salesmen in household wares. Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping. Salary and commission.

603 E. 73 St. 2nd fl.—9 a.m.

"Dig, Louie, this sounds good," I said to my boy. "Let's go over in the morning. Hell, with our gift of *labia* we're a mother-hopping cinch to cop a slave."

"Chevere, Piri, man, we got all Harlem and we know

plenty people. Bet we can earn a hundred bucks or more on commissions alone."

We went down the next day and walked into the office and a girl handed me and Louie each a paper with a number on it and told us to please have a seat. My number was 16 and Louie's was 17. Man, me and Louie were sparklin'. We had our best togs on; they were pressed like a razor and our shoes shone like a bald head with a pound of grease on it.

"Number 16, please?" the girl called out.

I winked at Louie and he gave me the V-for-victory sign.

"Right this way, sir, through the door on your left," the girl said.

I walked into the office and there was this paddy sitting there. He looked up at me and broke out into the friendliest smile I ever saw, like I was a long-lost relative. "Come in, come right in," he said. "Have a chair—that's right, sit right there. Well, sir, you're here bright and early. That's what our organization likes to see. Yes sir, punctuality is the first commandment in a salesman's bible. So you're interested in selling our household wares—guaranteed, of course, by *Good Housekeeping*. Had any experience selling?"

"Well, not exactly, sir, but—er—when I was a kid—I mean, younger, I used to sell shopping bags in the *Marketa*."

"The what?"

"The *Marketa* on 110th Street and Park Avenue. It, er, runs all the way up to 116th Street."

"Ummm, I see."

"And my mom—er, mother, used to knit fancy things called *tapetes*. I think they're called doilies, and I used to sell them door to door, and I made out pretty good. I know how to talk to people, Mr.—er—"

"Mr. Christian, Mr. Harold Christian. See?" and he

pointed a skinny finger at a piece of wood with his name carved on it. "Ha, ha, ha," he added, "just like us followers of our Lord Jesus Christ are called. Are you Christian?"

"Yes, sir."

"A good Catholic, I bet. I never miss a Sunday mass; how about you?"

"No, sir, I try not to." *Whee-oo!* I thought. *Almost said I was Protestant.*

"Fine, fine, now let's see . . ." Good Catholic Mr. Christian took out some forms. "What's your name?"

"Piri Thomas—P-i-r-i."

"Age?"

"Er, seventeen—born September 30, 1928."

Mr. Christian counted off on the fingers of one hand . . . "twenty-eight, er, thirty-eight, forty-five—ahum, you were just seventeen this September."

"That's right. Paper said from seventeen to thirty."

"Oh, yes—yes, yes, that's correct. Where do you live?"

I couldn't give him the Long Island address; it was too far away. So I said, "109 East 104th Street."

"That's way uptown, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Isn't that, um, Harlem?"

"Yes, sir, it's split up in different sections, like the Italian section and Irish and Negro and the Puerto Rican section. I live in the Puerto Rican section. It's called the *Barrio*."

"The *Bar-ree-o*?"

I smiled. "Yes, sir, it's Spanish for 'the place'—er—like a community."

"Oh, I see. But you're not Puerto Rican, are you? You speak fairly good English even though once in a while you use some slang—of course, it's sort of picturesque."

"My parents are Puerto Ricans."

"Is Thomas a Puerto Rican name?"

"Er—well, my mother's family name is Montañez," I said, wondering if that would help prove I was a Puerto Rican. "There are a lot of Puerto Ricans with American names. My father told me that after Spain turned Puerto Rico over to the United States at the end of the Spanish-American War, a lot of Americans were stationed there and got married to Puerto Rican girls." *Probably fucked 'em and forgot 'em*, I thought.

"Oh, I—er, see. How about your education? High school diploma?"

"No, sir, I quit in my second year . . ."

"Tsh, tsh, that was very foolish of you. Education is a wonderful thing, Mr. Thomas. It's really the only way for one to get ahead, especially when—er, uh—why did you leave school?"

My mind shouted out, *On account of you funny paddies and your funny ideas in this funny world*, but I said, very *cara palo*, "Well, sir, we got a big family and—well, I'm the oldest and I had to help out and—well, I quit." Then, in a sincere fast breath, I added, "But I'm going to study nights. I agree with you that education is the only way to get ahead, especially when—"

"Fine, fine. What's your Social Security number?"

I said quickly: "072-20-2800."

"By memory, eh? Good! A good salesman's second commandment should be a good memory. Got a phone?"

"Yes, sir. Lehigh 3-6050, and ask for Mr. Dandy. He's my uncle. He doesn't speak English very well, but you can leave any message for me with him."

"Very, very good, Mr. Thomas. Well, this will be all for now. We will get in touch with you."

"Uh, how soon, about, Mr. Christian? 'Cause I'd like to start work, or rather, training, as soon as possible."

"I can't definitely say, Mr. Thomas, but it will be in

the near future. Right now our designated territory is fully capacitated. But we're opening another soon and we'll need good men to work it."

"You can't work the territory you want?" I asked.

"Oh, no! This is scientifically planned," he said.

"I'd like to work in Harlem," I said, "but, uh—I can make it wherever you put me to sell."

"That's the spirit!" Mr. Christian bubbled. "The third commandment of a good salesman is he faces any challenge, wherever it may be."

I took Mr. Christian's friendly outstretched hand and felt the warm, firm grip and thought, *This paddy is gonna be all right to work for.* As I walked out, I turned my head and said, "Thank you very much, sir, for the opportunity."

"Not at all, not at all. We need bright young blood for this growing organization, and those that grow with us will be headed for great things."

"Thank you. So long."

"So long, and don't forget to go to mass."

"No, sir, I sure won't!"

"What church you go to?" he asked suddenly.

"Uh"—I tried to remember the name of the Catholic Church on 106th Street—"Saint Cecilia's!" I finally burst out.

"Oh yes, that's on, er, 106th Street between Park and Lexington. Do you know Father Kresser?"

"Gee, the name sounds sort of familiar," I cooled it. "I can almost place him, but I can't say for sure."

"Well, that's all right. He probably wouldn't remember me, but I was a youngster when he had a parish farther downtown. I used to go there. Well, if you run into him, give him my regards."

"I sure will. So long, and thanks again." I closed the door carefully and walked out to where Louie was still sitting.

"Man, Piri," he said, "you was in there a beau-coup long-ass time."

"Shh, Louie, cool your language."

"Got the job? You were in there long enough for two jobs."

I smiled and made an okay face.

Louie cupped his hand to his mouth and put his head next to mine. "That cat ain't a faggot, is he?" he whispered.

I whispered back with exaggerated disgust, "Man! What a fuckin' dirty mind you got."

"Just asking, man," he said. "Sometimes these guys are *patos* and if you handle them right, you get the best breaks. Well, how'd you make out?"

"In like Flynn, Louie."

"Cool, man, hope I get the same break."

"Number 17," the girl called.

"Here I go," Louie said to me.

"Suerte, Louie," I said. I gave him the V-for-victory sign and watched his back disappear and dimly heard Mr. Christian's friendly "Come right in. Have a—" before the door closed behind Louie.

Jesus, I thought. I hope Louie gets through okay. It'll be great to work in the same job. Maybe we can even work together. He'll cover one side of the street and I'll cover the other. As tight as me and Louie are, we'll pool what we make on commissions and split halves.

"Hey Piri," Louie said, "let's go."

"Damn, Louie, you just went in," I said. "You only been in there about five minutes or so. How'd Mr. Christian sound?"

We walked down the stairs.

"Okay, I guess. Real friendly, and he asked me questions, one-two-three."

"And?"

"And I'm in!"

"Cool breeze. What phone did you give?" I asked.

"I ain't got no phone. Hey, there's the bus!"

We started to run. "Fuck running," I said, "let's walk a while and celebrate. Man, you could've gave him Dandy's number like I did. Aw, well, they'll probably send you a telegram or special delivery letter telling you when to start work."

"What for?" Louie asked.

"So's they can tell you when the new territory is opened up and when to come in," I said. "Cause the other territory—"

"What new territory?"

I opened my mouth to answer and Louie and I knew what was shakin' at the same fuckin' time. The difference between me and Louie was he was white. "That cat Mr. Christian tell you about calling you when some new territory opens up?" Louie said in a low voice.

I nodded, "Yeah."

"Damn! That motherfucker asked me to come and start that training jazz on Monday. Gave me a whole lotta shit about working in a virgin territory that's so big us future salesmen wouldn't give each other competition or something like that." Louie dug that hate feeling in me. He tried to make me feel good by telling me that maybe they got a different program and Mr. Christian was considering me for a special kinda job.

"Le's go back," I said coldly.

"What for, Piri?"

"You see any colored cats up there?"

"Yeah, *parín*, there's a few. Why?"

"Le's wait here in front of the place."

"*Por qué?*" asked Louie.

I didn't answer. I just watched paddies come down out of that office and make it. "Louie," I said, "ask the next *blanco* that comes down how the job hiring is. There's one now."

Louie walked over to him. "Say, excuse me, Mac," he said. "Are they hiring up there—you know, salesmen?"

"Yes, they are," the guy answered. "I start Monday. Why don't you apply if you're looking for work? It's—"

"Thanks a lot, Mac," Louie said. "I might do that." He came back and started to open his mouth.

"Forget it, *amigo*," I said. "I heard the chump."

We waited some more and a colored cat came down. "Hey, bruh," I called.

"You callin' me?"

"Yeah. I dug the ad in the paper. How's the hiring? Putting guys on?"

"I don't know, man. I mean I got some highly devoted crap about getting in touch with me when a new turf opens up."

"Thanks, man," I said.

"You're welcome. Going up?"

"Naw, I changed my mind." I nodded to Louie, and he came up to me like he was down for whatever I was down for.

"Let's walk," I said. I didn't feel so much angry as I did sick, like throwing-up sick. Later, when I told this story to my buddy, a colored cat, he said, "Hell, Piri, Ah know stuff like that can sure burn a cat up, but a Negro faces that all the time."

"I know that," I said, "but I wasn't a Negro then. I was still only a Puerto Rican."