



GLASS MEN

*WINNER OF THE KNICKERBOCKER PRIZE

by Avery Irons

Anthony

The last time I rode the A train home with Saan, he went straight to the car's center. I was coming off my shift working a door in the Financial District and wanted to relax and catch up, but I held my tongue. Who was I to take the story from him? He and Matthias had loved me and called me brother, but it only seemed right that their shared blood gave priority to Saan's pain. I sat a few seats away, loosened my tie, and unbuttoned my

suit coat, but could find no comfort as I watched him resurrect Matthias and kill him once again.

It was after midnight and the dozen of us passengers fanned throughout the subway car slumped in our seats with heavy, impatient eyes. Saan stood upright, with one hand in the pocket of his baggy jeans and the other on his chest. He watched us for several seconds, like a teacher summing up his students, and led with his favorite opener: “When is it illegal for a kid to fight to get his brother off drugs?” Several people pulled their heads up from their newspapers or half-sleep. That was Saan’s gift—his voice, with its touch of bass and humble confidence. At twenty-one, he stood the same height he had our sophomore year in high school and wore three layers of t-shirts to hide his skinniness, but he carried himself like someone used to lecture halls. It helped that his black-framed glasses and curly afro made him look like a mad political scientist in training. After letting the question ride for several seconds, he answered for the tired folks around us: “When he’s a black kid.”

Unfazed by the train’s screeching and rocking, or the grimaces around him, Saan laid our story bare for examination, one hard turn after another. By the time he maneuvered our family through Brooklyn’s cruelest rites and his final fight with Matthias, we all held our breath. We rolled into the Nostrand Avenue stop exchanging uncomfortable but empathetic glances as Saan thanked everyone for listening and urged us to look out for one another. I gave him the obligatory Seven Brother’s handshake as he sat beside me. A few eyes lingered on him, trying to

figure him out. Who was this kid? If all this had happened—a boy killed having committed no crime—why hadn't they heard about it? The eyes drifted to me, searching for a link between the light-skinned street kid and me, the bulky, dark-skinned brother in a doorman's get-up. At Throop, a departing sister with an over-stuffed rasta tam offered Saan five dollars. He refused it, explaining that “the truth shouldn't be a hustle.”

This was 1994's Brooklyn. Koch had cleaned the tags off the subway cars, and Giuliani was crushing in the streets. Saan always said Dinkins never had a chance to make the city what it should be, or what it could be. I never understood what he meant. I couldn't see past what it was. Hard to live in. Hard to get ahead in. Hard on its people. Back then I wanted out. I wanted a car. A few feet of grass. A quiet block. I thought I was the only nineteen-year-old kid fuming because I understood that I'd have to sell my soul to buy a place in my own crumbling neighborhood.

We took the piss-fouled stairs at the Utica station two at a time. As we emerged into Fulton Street Park, we inhaled deep from the night air. The sliver of a park, mostly asphalt with patches of green and thin trees, was empty except for shadows and two cops hovering near the subway entrance. They were rookies; we could always tell. Only rookies stood straight, with their chests pushed out, while gripping their security belts like security blankets. New York's Finest scanned us up and down. Passing quickly over my uniform, they locked onto Saan and his layers of clothing and small backpack. He returned their glares, giving their egos all

the probable cause needed. To interrupt this Brooklyn boy-versus-cop ritual, I made a show of claspng Saan's shoulder, like a wiser and law-abiding brother, and directed our steps down the sidewalk and out of the park.

"Come on," I insisted, sensing Saan's resistance to following my lead. "Sherry sleeps with one eye open until I get home."

"I should be able to walk home without getting stared down," he grumbled, but kept up with my pace.

"Consider me your personal escort service." Smiling, I boxed his arm.

"Ha-ha. Yassuh." He ran his fingers through his afro and lit one of his trademark cigarettes. That was one of those quirky things about him. He had a two-pack-a-week habit, but never smoked a single cigarette in his life, as far as I know. He theorized that holding a cigarette made you invisible. How often do you pay attention to the guy you always see outside smoking on the stoop or the corner? After years of watching Brooklyn's streets, he'd developed a habit of having a lit cigarette in his hand and waving it around to pass the time and punctuate his points.

"Be easy, Saan. I'm tired. I've been in these damned dress shoes since before noon." I shrugged at my own complaining. "Gotta make that paper."

"That's what they say." He walked staring straight ahead of us, with his eyes narrowed and breaths deep. He was building up to something. He stubbed out his cigarette on a light post, flicked the butt

into a gutter drain, and jammed his hands in his pockets. We walked in silence down Troy Avenue and into Crown Heights. The blocks showed subtle signs of life. The few folks who crossed our path gave us wide berth and walked like their lives depended on getting home. Television screens flickered and cast blue rectangles on the apartment walls of the Albany houses. A few brothers lingered in the bright lights at the entrance of one of the buildings. I hoped Saan wouldn't want to go over and speak and was glad as we passed the houses and kept it moving to my street.

We stopped in front of my brownstone. "You coming up?" I asked.

"You gonna liberate baby girl from her crib?" he asked, as if his trek up the four flights of stairs to my apartment depended on it.

"Not a chance." My ten-month-old daughter Corrinne had been teething, cranky, and fussy for days. If she was sleep, we were keeping it that way.

"She never cries when I hold her."

"Cause you don't hold her that often."

"Just let me kiss her. Come on, Tony." He folded his arms and tilted his head back. Translation: quit being chicken with your woman.

Saan never held back on his silent and not-so-silent opinions about me, Sherry, and Sherry's rules. He probably thought his looks worked on me, but I had a plan. I figured that ideas about having his own place, a girl, and maybe even a baby, eventually had to get through that

thick hair and thick skull of his. He could be happy, too. He just had to look ahead, and not back so much.

After pointing Saan to my sagging and patched couch, I peeled off my shoes and dress shirt and slipped across the tiny apartment to the bedroom. Light from the living room cast a slit of yellow over Sherry's legs as she slept facing the door. I paused, watching her for any movement. I crept to Corrin's crib. She lay there in a lavender onesie and was too perfect and peaceful to move. I turned around. But going back to Saan empty-handed felt wrong. What kind of man refuses to let his brother hold his niece? So I spun back around. Halfway back to the door, with Corrin snug in my arms, Sherry raised herself up, "Really, Anthony?"

"He just wants to kiss her," I said. "Who knows when he'll come by when she's awake?"

"I don't believe you two. You tell him no. That's how you get him to come by when she's awake." She turned over, using her back to end the exchange. Saan surely heard all of this. I imagined him sitting back and shaking his head at me. I carried Corrin to the living room. Sherry would have words for me in the morning, she always did. But of all the ways a man could wrong his woman and child, I considered this one minor.

Back in the living room, Saan stood and I held out my daughter for him to kiss. Knowing I wouldn't risk waking her, he scooped Corrin up in his arms and went back onto the couch. I sat beside them and stretched my feet onto the coffee table. With delicate and deliberate

movements, he held each of Corrin's cheeks to his own and kissed her black curls.

"Raise your seed, Tony, but you've got to teach her too."

"That's what she's got an uncle for." I chuckled, hoping he wouldn't notice the dust bunnies growing on the books beside our television stand. He'd brought them over weeks before. They hadn't moved. I had a wife, a baby, and a full-time job. I didn't have time to read about invisible men or mis-educated blacks.

Saan passed Corrin back to me and settled back into the couch with an exhale. He watched with a faint smile as I sank deeper too so Corrin could lay mostly flat on my chest. As if on cue, she nestled her face against my cotton under-shirt.

"This could be you," I said beginning to believe that he'd picked me up to just hang out.

He raised an eyebrow but shook his head in that way he always did before saying something to test me.

"We found him. Seven Brothers is gonna get him."

"You found who?" My throat and stomach tightened, Corrin wriggled a bit in my arms and I forced myself to relax.

Saan kept his voice soft, but his look told me to stop playing stupid. "You know who I'm talking about. His name's Hinton. He trains rookies in South Jamaica now, but lives in Flatbush. Today's the day."

I'd dreaded this conversation for years. I'd played it out in my mind thousands of times; and now I still scrambled for words. "Saan,

getting one guy isn't gonna do a thing. There are hundreds more out there. You of all people know that. You could really change things in big ways. Go to Medgar Evers or something." I wanted to pull every word back as I said them. Everything sounded "reactionary," as Saan would have described it.

He shook with silent laughter. "Answer this for me, Tony. Why don't they name white colleges after murdered black men?" He glanced at the television stand. "You gotta read the books I give you, lil bro. Might doesn't make anybody right or invincible. People have to see that cops break too."

"They're gonna break *you!* This is crazy." The words came out louder and harder than I intended.

Saan held his finger to his lips. His eyes, a little hurt, softened like those of a father deciding to spare his son a lesson only time can teach. "We're already broken, Tony."

His words were a confession and a challenge. Five years after Matt's death, we were both broken, but it showed itself in different ways. Saan was a Maroon without sanctuary and willing to bleed on Brooklyn's streets if it would do anything to topple the real and imagined walls around us. My answer was to get the hell out of New York City, but Saan wouldn't consider moving anywhere else.

I tried calling his bluff. "All right, I swore the Seven Brother's oath. From the beginning to the end, that's what we said. I'm going with

you.” I lowered my voice in case Sherry was awake, which probably didn’t make my declaration and intention to honor it any more convincing.

Saan saw through me and smiled. “You’ve been my brother through it all, Tony. Thank you for that. You’ve got to raise up that queen.” He heaved himself off the couch with an old man’s grunt.

I should have wrestled his skinny self to the ground, tied him up, and called all the brothers over to reason with them. What did they think they could do, other than get hurt and sentenced? I wish I’d squashed the whole Seven Brother’s Club years before, thrown out all of Saan’s books, and found a girl to get him laid. Jumping up to stop him, I moved too quickly and Corrin cried out. Saan watched and waited as I kissed and calmed her.

“Stay the night. Let’s talk it out,” I said.

He shook his head and gave me an awkward half-hug to avoid pressing on Corrin. “I love you. Take care of Ma.”

I didn’t know how to stop him or what else I could say. Saying “I love you” back would have been giving in to the madness he had planned. So I just stood there as he shut my front door behind him without looking back.

I lay on the couch and re-settled Corrin on my chest. Her breaths were soft and worry-free; she had no clue her last uncle had lost his damn mind. Possibilities for stopping Saan played through my head like movie scenes, but in each scene I was that guy who didn’t know where to go and had nothing worth saying. I’d messed up. I should have

kept closer tabs on Saan and the guys. After Matt's death, Saan had dreamed of an army of Brooklynites to avenge him and all the others lost. He managed to gather six of us and dubbed us the Seven Brothers Club, giving the last spot to Matt's memory. We were young—Saan was the oldest at sixteen and I was the youngest at fourteen. We thought we were big time, but the things we did were small at first. We tagged a little room that cops hid in to catch turnstile jumpers with: *New York's finest hide here*. For all the graffiti in the New York City subway stations, that one always came down within a few days.

By the time I left the brothers, four years later, we had graduated to more aggressive tactics. We'd intentionally get stopped on the streets (not that we had to try hard), so we could out undercover cops and Saan could draw and circulate their pictures around the neighborhood. We quit tagging in the Utica stop. Instead, we hung out in the station and signaled to other kids when cops were in the hideout. One day a stumpy white cop in the room figured out what we were up to and stormed out shouting about obstruction and interference. Saan started in on him with a barrage of questions.

“How much does the city pay you to hide in closets while people smuggle crack and smack into our neighborhoods? Why doesn't NYPD use these tactics on the Upper East Side? How do you think a kid who can't afford a token can pay a ticket?”

Every time the cop ordered us to stand against the wall, Saan asked if it was illegal to ask questions. Me and a couple of the guys stood

at attention behind him trying to look hard as five back-up cops arrived and a small crowd of people gathered. Saan re-directed his questions to our neighbors as the cops shoved our faces into the filthy, sour-smelling wall. When they cuffed me, my body went numb except for the bricks in my stomach. I could only hear Saan's voice and my heart thumping. Barely able to force words out of my dry throat, I tried to calm him down. Didn't he see the cop leaning hard on Devan, and Devan struggling to breathe? Memphis was cussing and getting heated as two cops patted him down. He was almost as big as they were, and they handled him as rough as they could. Saan was there beside me, but his mind was someplace I couldn't get to. Looking at him and the others, for the first time I saw us for what were: kids. Boys with just a few dollars, our pride, and not much else to claim as our own.

The situation might have gotten completely out of hand except for this Puerto Rican cop. He looked as tired of the whole mess as I was and convinced the others that we weren't worth the paperwork. They ran our names and we were all clear except for Memphis who was on probation. They took him in on a violation.

When Saan and I made it back to the bedroom we would share for just a few more months, he paced the little bit of space beside our bunk beds, describing the battle (as he called it), like I hadn't been there. As he talked, I lay on the bottom bunk watching him and thinking about Sherry. Scared Saan and Ma would be mad, I hadn't told them that she was pregnant or that we were going to City Hall as soon as I turned

eighteen. What would Sherry do if I got arrested, or worse? What would happen to my baby? The more Saan talked, the more I understood that, for the first time, I didn't want to go down his road, at least not the one leading to his revolution.

“Saan, somebody's gonna get hurt,” I said standing up. “You gotta cool it.”

He stopped mid-step and turned to me with widened eyes. “Don't let them scare you, Tony.”

“I'm not scared, I . . . I just think there's a better way than us getting beat down and sent to jail. I'm done. I want out.”

“What about the oath,” he asked the question, but his face was already tight with hurt.

I still couldn't bring myself to tell him about the baby. I nodded but said, “I gotta go my own way, Saan.”

From the beginning to the end. We spoke power into those words a million times. Why we didn't we promise ourselves a middle?

Saan

Saan pauses on the stoop of his brother's brownstone and examines the empty street. The night is warm and the clouds have given way to a blue-

black sky holding a handful of stars. He reaches for a cigarette, but checks the motion—there’s no time. The night is moving and he needs to catch up. A dim, yellow light shines from his brother’s window. He half expects Tony to appear and wave him back upstairs and into one of their all night “conversations of life,” as they used to call them. The visit tonight had gone mostly as planned, although Tony calling him crazy stung more than Saan imagined it would. It’s crazier to smile and open doors for people who believe they can buy and sell you, Saan thinks. His disappointment simmers. All he really wants is for his brother to understand him. He grasps for the words that would reconnect their drifting worlds. He finds none, once again, and so begins another solo walk home through the night. He zig-zags up central Brooklyn’s residential streets, through Crown Heights and into Bed-Stuy. He usually haunts Gates, Utica and other well-traveled avenues trying to attract the attention of those more than eager to give it to him. His knack for this has earned him street nicknames like “Cop Bait” and “Mr. Clean.” Folks call him “Cop Bait” because he slouches as he walks Sunday slow and carries a book bag in the middle of the night. His front pockets bulge with loose change, making him easy lure for any cop chasing a quota. He’s “Mr. Clean” because the cops never find a thing on him and he flushes out undercover detectives, or DT’s, by the dozen.

On this night, he has shed everything but his backpack. His eyes rove ahead of him, but he relaxes a bit with each still block. This is his favorite time of day, what he calls Brooklyn’s buffer hour. The night falls

back and its crawlers, hawks, and vultures begin their retreat. The near-silent streets exhale for a few moments before the new day trudges up and the city's backbone workers descend their stoops, marching to the buses and subways they'll ride blocking out thoughts of their warm beds and refusing to think of the jobs ahead of them: getting the city's coffee steaming, construction sites pounding, and next waves of buses and ferries rolling and rocking.

For now, the sounds are the streets' own: buzzing stoplights, metallic clicks as the walk signals change, and a dog's bitter yelping for being left outside too long. And there's the song Saan hears as he passes Stuyvesant Ave. He pauses to make sure he's really hearing Babyface's "You Are So Beautiful" blast down the street. He doesn't believe it until he walks up on the crooning man. The man is middle-aged, brown-skinned, slightly rounded in the stomach and wearing a white tuxedo and far too much sheen in his short-cropped hair. He leans against the passenger door of a beat-up green Chrysler Cordoba. Without shame he sings and snaps his fingers in unison with the music straining his car speakers. Saan slows his pace to watch as the song ends and the man reaches back into the car, rewinds the tape, and starts it up again. As the first chords chime, a window down the block slams up and a man's voice threatens to use his beautiful foot to break the crooner's face. The songbird doesn't flinch or miss a beat. He continues his serenade even though the brownstone in front of him stays dark and closed.

The sight makes Saan laugh aloud. As he passes by, he wishes the man good luck and allows himself to slip into one of his “I love Brooklyn” moments. For a few blocks, Bed-Stuy is sweet like a sleeping baby. All the tantrums, fits, and fights of the day are forgiven, forgotten, and even worthwhile. The competing graffiti tags fade into the shadows. The night’s few stars shine a little brighter.

Saan reaches Malcolm X Boulevard as a city bus lugs itself through the intersection, stops and deposits two women in gray custodian uniforms. They chatter like it’s the middle of the afternoon, but walk stiffly, as if they’d walked the whole day through. Unlike Saan who watches but doesn’t want anyone to know he’s watching, the women glance obviously around as they turn right onto Hancock Street—making sure Saan sees them seeing him. Their suspicions don’t offend him, he understands them well, but his I-love-Brooklyn moment evaporates.

Saan shortens his stride and considers going up a block and out of his way, but it seems wrong, like a mixed-up version of Jim Crow. He shouldn’t have to avoid women who look like his own mother to prove he means them no harm. He wishes he could talk to them for a few minutes, ask them questions. Were they raised in New York? In Brooklyn? On these very streets? If they were, what was it like for them trying to get home late at night after a Harlem rent party or a trip to a dance club in the city? How can they tell he’s not a teenage boy trying to make his way home? Would they have seen him as that back in the day?

Would they have stopped and asked him the names of his mother and father? Would they have made sure he made it home safely?

The women cross Patchen and stop in front of a graystone apartment building. By the length of their goodbyes, Saan knows they're waiting him out. He picks up his pace. Without blinking or speaking, they inspect him as he passes by. He's used to this, but for the second time tonight, people he cares about have stung him. Within ten steps, he regrets that he has switched places with the woman now walking behind him. Ahead of them, at the next corner, three young guys are posted in front of a brownstone. Two stand against a rusted wrought-iron fence and the third sits on the stoop. Saan reads the scene. The style and speed of his approach will depend on the guys. Are they relaxed or broadcasting glares? If they're searching for a fight, are they looking for someone in particular, or will anyone do? If the scene is friendly, he'll maintain his purposeful stride and offer a quick word. If something's off, his feet and breaths will slow. Only the scared rush by.

As Saan gets closer, he sees nothing familiar in them except for their bandanas and the hardness in their eyes. He suspects they are new frontline kids; the leaders are more discrete. If the leaders hang at all, they chill and joke; they don't have anything to prove. But the young kids in front of him watch the world around them with a resolve to do whatever's required to stop being new. The woman behind Saan has dropped back. Speed it up, Ma, he thinks. Saan reaches the young men and stops. It's his turn to wait her out.

The two kids standing aren't leading this crew, so Saan offers his greeting to the one sitting. Saan guesses the leader is in his early twenties as well. He's thin but all muscle and watches Saan with an unnerving patience, that makes clear who is calling the shots in this interaction. "Seven Brothers. What's happening?" Saan's voice is as deep and steady as he can make it.

The leader tips his head back as he recognizes the name. "What you know, Seven Brothers?" The two guys standing rest back against the gate, disappointed with the exchange. Their eyes follow the woman who has now safely passed them.

"Two barneys south and moving up and a van three blocks west," Saan warns.

The crew leader nods and looks in Saan's direction of travel—Saan's cue to keep it moving. Saan walks away relieved he's run into them. They'll never know he hasn't seen a cop since Fulton Street Park, but maybe the misinformation will keep them in check and other passersby safe for the night.

Saan slips into his mother's apartment at half-past three. Surely, he knows that his mouse-like movements will wake her. She encourages his noise: the banging of kitchen cabinets, the loud fall of his sneakers on the hardwood floors, the bass of his stereo humming through his bedroom door—all signs of his safe return. But his key turning near silently into its lock, his socks sliding on the floors, an unflushed toilet, and an unclosed bathroom door bring her running out of her room with her burgundy

sleeping scarf twisted to the side. She squints at him under the hallway's yellow light.

“What’s . . . What’s wrong?” Her voice is hoarse and her left hand flaps for the tie to her mint green house robe.

“Ma, nothing’s wrong. I didn’t wanna wake you.” He angles toward his bedroom door, but her iron-mother grip on his arm holds him in place. “God, Ma. You gotta calm down.”

“Don’t ‘God, Ma’ me. You tell me what’s going on Rahsaan James. There’s no reason for you to be sneaking around this house.”

Saan tries his best, but when it comes to his mother, he is no actor. His eyes bounce around the hallway, over family pictures posed in front of picnic tables, Coney Island rides and big shiny cars that always belonged to other people. “I’m not sneaking around. I know you worked late.”

“Don’t lie to me, Saan. You coming in all quiet and Walter ringing my phone all night. You better tell me what’s going on right now. I’m calling Tony.” She turns to get the phone in the living room.

“Walter called? When?” The word damn edges to Saan’s lips, but even in his panic he doesn’t dare let it slip in front of his mother. “Never mind. Ma, I gotta go.” If Walter’s nerves have gotten the best of him, the only thing that matters is finding him and talking him down. Saan runs into his room and drops his book bag onto his unmade bed. He surveys the pile of dirty t-shirts in the far corner, miles of unfinished sketches, and books poking out of everywhere including from under his bed sheets. He

regrets that he doesn't have the time to at least sort the library books from his own, one more thing his mother will have to do. It occurs to him that there should be more to him, more left of him. But he tells himself he's built knowledge, and that's better than a whole lot of other stuff people have made. He grabs three new t-shirts from a pile he suspects is clean and stuffs them into his bag.

Marsha stands in his doorway gaping at his newly blank bedroom walls. The one hundred and thirty-two sketches of suspected undercover cops that had once wallpapered his room are now in a manila folder that he also shoves into his bag. As Marsha gasps at his walls, which have become like sheets of white graph paper with sun-faded gridlines, she slams the door behind her, braces herself against it, and forces all her weight into her feet.

Saan finally braves a look at his mother's face. Her eyes are black flames. Her shoulders shake. He lowers his backpack and leans against the edge of the bunk beds he used to share with Tony. Why can't she understand? Saan thinks. It was her first born they killed. He looks to his right, where there had once been a third twin bed. The room was small and had been set up so tight that as a boy, Saan could reach across the narrow space between the beds and touch his brother Matt. He can see them all in the room, barreling boys, squeezing around each other, roaming in and out, day in and day out. Needing space from each other. Needing each other.

How does a little boy save his brother—his sun? For Saan, this is the riddle of his life. He's never forgiven himself for not recognizing the question when he should have, an October night in 1987 when he was fourteen and Tony had just turned twelve. Marsha had covered a late shift at her restaurant job in Manhattan. Matt set their dinner of fried hot dogs and mushy boxed macaroni and cheese on the dining room table with a proud, "Dig in 'lil bros." He was tall and lean, a shade darker than yellow, with an always tight fade, and was perpetually dressed in his Boys and Girls High track uniform. When Matt sat down, he looked at his plate and mirrored his younger brothers' frowns. "This is . . . bad. We're gonna need extra juice to get through this." He rummaged in the back of the cabinet under the sink, pulled a fresh bottle of grape juice from Marsha's hidden supplies, and topped off their cups.

"Can we play *Double Dribble* after we eat?" Tony had asked hopefully, playing out the boys' well-practiced routine.

"Did you finish your homework?" A breathless Matt managed after a long chug of juice.

"Come on, can't we do it on the bus tomorrow?" Saan said as their self-appointed negotiator.

"Not on your life." Matt leaned over to Saan and put him in a playful headlock. "This is what Ma's gonna do to me if we don't leave your homework out for her to check over. If you guys focus and don't get all whiny about it, I'll let you read my basketball magazines before bed."

The younger brothers perked up at this offer and bounded into the crowded bedroom after dinner and rushed homework. They dug deep through Matt's box of basketball magazines frustrated that their older brother had stopped purchasing new issues for his and their enjoyment.

After pulling up one last handful, they peered into the box's bottom at a glass cylinder, a few inches long and slightly thicker than a pencil. A funnel-like bowl stuck out from one of the cylinder's sides. A baggy, holding four white pebbles, lay next to the pipe.

Tony and Saan had seen enough movies to know what the rocks were and that they fell under Marsha's most sacred and repeated pleadings: "Don't drink anything, don't smoke anything, and for god's sake don't put anything up your noses."

Saan picked up the pipe and sniffed the bowl. His nose and lips twisted at the bitter smell. Tony had just taken the thing to sniff it himself when Matt opened the bedroom door and stopped mid-step.

"What the hell are you doing?" Matt yelled. He snatched the pipe from Tony's hand, grabbed the box, and stomped out of their room, slamming the door behind him.

Tony was frozen on the floor staring at Saan, who stood up, took a step for the door, and then dropped onto his bottom bunk.

"Everything's okay. Okay?" Saan said after a couple of minutes. "I'll talk to him."

"You'll tell him it's not mine? If Ma thinks it's mine, she'll send me back to my Dad's."

Realizing that it hadn't yet occurred to Tony that the pipe was not at the bottom of Matt's box by accident, Saan managed a reassuring smile and told him to stay put. He found Matt in the living room. Having regained his calm, Matt laughed through Saan's questions. "Ty's picking it up this week." he explained.

Saan searched his brother's smirk.

"He asked me to hold it for him, until he can sell it. I thought it would only be here for a day or two. I'll make him come get it tomorrow." Matt smiled at him. "Come on. Do I look cracked out?"

At that moment, Matt looked like an idiot, not like the endless stream of addicted people rambling around the neighborhood blind to everything but their next fix. "Tony's freaked out," Saan said to help them turn the corner past Matt's awkward mistake.

They called for Tony who plodded down the hall like a boy headed to his sentencing. Tony and Saan sat on the couch, Matt on the coffee table across from them.

"Listen here, fellas. I screwed up," Matt rubbed the back of his neck. "I shouldn't have let Ty hide his stuff here. If anybody ever tries to give you anything like this, you tell me. You understand?" Saan and Tony nodded. "And let's not tell Ma about this. It'll only upset her. Like I said, it won't happen again. Why don't we play Nintendo before bed?"

Tony jumped to set up the game console. Poking around and pulling out games they'd tired of, he called out, "Where's *Double Dribble*?"

“Oh,” started Matt, his voice sheepish, “I lent *Double Dribble* to a friend. Let’s play *Mario Brothers*.”

“You lent *Double Dribble*? To Ty?” Saan asked.

“Nah, to Stanley. He wanted to try it before blowing all his cash. I’ll get it back tomorrow.” Matt picked up one of the gray, rectangular controls, and waited for the game to load on the screen.

“You got a lot to do tomorrow.”

Matt nodded without looking at Saan.

The fire in Marsha’s eyes gives way to tears. One hand rises to her mouth and the other to her stomach. Saan senses that some part of her is beginning to understand and she’s trying to hold herself together. “What did you do with the sketches, baby?”

“I took ‘em down.” Her concern about the sketches of suspected DT’s he’s drawn for five years surprises him. “Don’t tell me you want them back up.”

“No, I want to know why now.”

“Ma, you’ve been telling me to take them down.”

Marsha steps closer to Saan, moves her hand to his chin and pulls his face toward hers. “Please don’t do whatever you’re about to do. I don’t know what your friends have gotten themselves into, but they don’t need no help from you. You’ve got to trust me, son.” Her left hand rises to his chest. He can see her hesitation and the second of resolve as she pulls him into her arms. He fights for only a second. The almond scent of

her lotion takes him back to his earliest years. How has she managed to use the same lotion for decades when their world has changed so much? Matt buried. Tony moved away with Sherry. He barely recognizes anything around him but the sweet smell of almonds.

He can't recall the last time he's been in his mother's arms. "I'm tired," he whispers. All he wants to do is sleep, right there, standing in her arms. Laying his head on her shoulder, he looks across his room and sees Matt leaning on the closet door. Saan opens his mouth to call out to him, but then he remembers and wants to cry, he wants to scream, to burst open. He feels himself coming apart.

"It's the anger that's hurting you," says Marsha. "Let it go. It's the only way to make it better."

The anger won't let go of me, he thinks. There's too much to be angry about not to be angry. He looks around again for his brother; Matt is gone. The DT Hinton stands in his place with his fist raised and cocked. Hinton's smile, his enormous fist, and the swing of his arm are burned into Saan.

"Saan, stay, let's talk. We can get help." Marsha steps back and smiles through her tears.

"I hear you, Ma. I always have. I love you and am thankful for you."

Marsha moves faster than Saan anticipates and is back between him and the door. He assumes her crying has weakened her, but he has to pull with all his strength to open the door wide enough to slip through.

She cries out behind him. He hears her drop to the floor sobbing, but he can't go back. Pausing at the apartment's front door, he looks back at the last picture they took as a complete family: all together on the stoop of somebody's brownstone. Matt does his folded arm, cool pose on the bottom step. Tony and Saan beam and lean on his back. Marsha sits beside them with her arms raised in laughter. Saan blinks back tears and eases the door shut behind him, so she will know he wasn't angry when he left her.

Anthony

Sherry rose with the day and swished back and forth between our bedroom and bathroom. I lay with my eyes closed dreading the day Saan had dragged me into. I imagined Sherry glancing at me, seeing Corrin snug on my chest, and debating whether to let our argument go since I'd done a night of solo feeding and changing. I prayed for this truce so I'd be freed from explaining about Saan and what I needed to do. She ventured into the corner of the living room that passed for a kitchen, and I continued my act. The coffee pot churned, and I considered the pros and cons of throwing my free arm over my eyes.

“Anthony, what did Rahsaan want last night?”

Stretching and yawning, I embraced my grogginess like a cloak. Already dressed in her bank teller's navy skirt and blouse, Sherry leaned against the kitchen counter as she ate cereal. Her lip liner accentuated the tension in her lips. But her eyes were wide with a slight hint of mischief. I was in trouble, but we were both doing a fair bit of acting.

I downplayed the conversation with Saan. "You know, black men rise up, read the books I give you, let me kiss the baby. The usual."

She crossed the room and kissed our daughter's hair and shoulder before giving me a smooch. My lips tried to hold onto hers, but once she pulled away, I couldn't meet her gaze.

"I guess I should be thankful you're a bad liar." Her pink fingernails traced the puffy bags under my eyes.

"Really, baby, it was nothing."

"Anthony, please don't go getting involved in any of Saan's craziness." She lifted Corrin from my arms and laid her in her swing. She was never one for either of us holding the baby during our "discussions."

I stood up and inhaled deeply for firmness, but scratched my head to mix in a little indignant innocence. "Sher, I just gotta keep him from doing something stupid. That's it."

She pressed against me and wrapped her thin arms around my waist. She smelled of vanilla perfume and the polyester of her uniform.

"He's my brother," I said softly.

"Which is exactly why he shouldn't try to get you into any of his trouble." She kissed my neck, and I felt myself weaken.

“He’s not trying to get me into anything. Don’t you want a man that looks out for his brother?”

“Not when his brother is trying to get himself killed.”

“Sher, don’t exaggerate.”

“Promise me, Anthony.”

“I already promised you. I’m here now ain’t I? Don’t I deserve a little credit?”

Her eyebrows shot up as if to say, watch it. And I did. I sometimes fancied myself a big deal, because I’d proposed as soon as Sherry told me we were expecting. She was good at reminding me that we were both doing what we were supposed to as far as Corrin was concerned.

“I’m not signed up to be with anybody hanging on the streets,” she reminded me as she pulled away and headed to the door for her flats. This line had been a common refrain from the earliest days of our relationship. She’d used a variation of it three years before when I first offered to abandon my Seven Brother’s street surveillance duties to push her laundry cart home for her. She finally gave me her number after I did my family’s laundry beside her for another six Saturdays.

“I’m not hanging anywhere. I’m just gonna make sure my brother’s okay. So Ma doesn’t freak out.” She left it there and headed to work, leaving with me with my predicament and a not-so-subtle warning.

I scrambled eggs for Corrin and studied the mess my brother had me in. The problem was easy to see: I’d made everybody the kind of

promises a kid makes to the few people who care whether he lives or dies. I'd promised myself I'd be a good son to Marsha, and I swore the Seven Brothers oath with Saan. I promised Sherry I'd be the kind of man she could believe in and Corrin could be proud of. It's a hard moment in a young man's life when he realizes that it's impossible to be everything everyone needs him to be. I stood on the edge of that realization but didn't see it soon enough.

The pre-war building of my childhood stood in decent repair. The blue mosaic tiles on the foyer's floor had faded and chipped, but they were clean and their swirling pattern remained clear. I stood in front of the narrow elevator and hesitated as Corrin grabbed at my face to make me smile. Over the years, I'd learned to ignore the corridor that led to the right—the corridor to the apartment I first lived in with Louis and Crystal, my parents. I turned to the brightly lit hallway lined with black doors. I'd lived in the third one on the right until I was five. All those years ago I only knew Saan, Matt, and Marsha as family friends who lived four floors above me.

I pushed the elevator button again and kissed Corrin's cheek as I thought about the four or five days Louis shut himself and me into the apartment after Crystal split. The days were an unending dream of crying, Reading Rainbow, Dr. Who, Dr. Ruth, and PBS news shows because my little fingers weren't strong enough to turn the thin plastic tube on the TV set where the dial used to be. Louis was drinking from the bottles Crystal

told me to never touch, so things would be bad again for a while. The bottles always ended up empty, Crystal came home and shouted. But eventually my life returned to what I considered normal. I knew how to wait it out.

Marsha knocked on our door on the fourth or fifth morning in the middle of Sesame Street. Not caring about the trouble I'd get in, I opened it hoping it was my mother. Marsha walked slowly into the darkened, stuffy living room. The doors and windows were closed and the trash was full. My toys were everywhere, as were trails of peanut butter and jelly sandwich crusts—the one thing I knew how to make myself.

“Where’s your mama?” Marsha had asked after taking stock of the place.

I shrugged.

“Where’s your daddy?”

I pointed to my parents’ bedroom. She knocked softly on the door and waited a few seconds with her hand on the knob before stepping in. She seemed just as scared as I was and this comforted me, until she closed the door behind her. I thought she would come right back out—that she would just check to see that he was okay. But she stayed longer and longer. So long that I convinced myself she wasn’t coming back out either. I was crying on the couch when she finally reappeared and shut the bedroom door behind her.

Seeing my tears, she lifted me into her arms and secured me on her hip. “We’re gonna get some of your clothes, and you’re gonna come stay with me for a little while. Does that sound okay?”

“When is my Mama coming back?” I asked. Going to Marsha’s didn’t sound bad, but I really just wanted Crystal to come back and make everything better.

“I don’t know, baby. Let’s just get your stuff, okay?”

“A while” turned into thirteen years, for which I’ve always been thankful. I wouldn’t have said that I felt indebted as I stepped into the elevator. I’d say I understood that love means making sacrifices and taking risks. Ma had taken in one more man to raise; the least I could do was find Saan.

As I exited the buzzing elevator with Corinn, we just about walked into Ma. At first I was relieved that I’d caught her at home; it was only when I took all of her in—black skirt, button-up, blue satiny shirt, and hair brushed tight into a bun (her three-times-a-year church outfit)—that I wondered where she was going on a Wednesday morning. I had a hunch.

Ma gave us a weak smile and placed her finger in Corinn’s tiny palm, but she made no move back toward her door.

“Where you going, Ma?”

She cut her eyes at me. “Since when does a son ask his mother about her business?”

“Ma, let’s go in.”

She reluctantly opened her door. The apartment smelled of Pine Sol and peppermint tea. Over the years, as the number of us living in the apartment dwindled, it had only increased in hodge-podginess. A lifetime of knick-knacks, angel figurines and family photos in shiny gold and silver frames blanketed the living room’s tables and shelves. Corrinr struggled in my arms, reaching for her grandmother, ready for their rituals of smiles, nuzzles and kisses. Knowing Ma wouldn’t put the baby down once she had her, I held out Corrinr who reached the rest of the way into her grandmother’s arms.

“You can’t go to the precinct, Ma.”

She sat down on the couch and stood Corrinr up on her lap. With a sigh she turned to me. “I’m just gonna tell them he’s been acting strange and talking about hurting himself.”

I wasn’t completely against this plan; it was in several of my own scenarios. But I’d decided against it because I wasn’t sure the Seven Brothers would go through with the whole thing anyway. Keeping it all in the family was the safest bet. As I explained my reasoning, Ma’s eyes lifted to the ceiling and tears fell.

“Yes, I raised an addict.” Her words were slow and choppy. “But I didn’t raise no killer.”

It was only after hearing her fears, that I understood my own silent ones. When I was with the brothers, it was about outing undercover detectives. Saan did have a crazy plan to get his lumps on the DT who’d

killed Matt and a DT involved in another death, but it didn't involve killing anybody.

"He's not a killer, Ma." I inhaled. Enough of me still believed this about my brother. "They're just gonna rough the guy up."

Ma nodded hopefully. "I called Chicago," she said. "Two of Yusef's brothers are gonna take him for a while. I just gotta get him there. I'm renting a car as soon as he gets home."

"I'll bring him home."

"No, Tony! I've heard that too many times." The pitch of her voice dropped and she shook her head. "You stay out of this. I got God and Yusef working on this. They can see it all and do it all."

"I'm right here, Ma. I'm real. I can do this. If I find him, I can stop him. If he won't listen, I'll do what I have to. Worst case scenario, we get tickets for fighting and maybe spend a few hours at the precinct." Saan would hate me, but he'd be alive. I ignored the voice in the back of my head yelling that I was repeating history.

Ma fiddled with the laces of Corrin's tiny shoes as she considered my plan. I'm sure part of her did want me to get Saan and maybe believed I could do it, but she'd hoped like that before. We all had. She'd been terrified every time Saan had gone out to search for Matthias to take him some food, something warm to wear, or make sure he could still be found. Each of those long nights, she'd let me wait up with her, snuggled beside her on the couch until Saan came home. And there I was five years later, standing in Saan's place but going to get Saan. Seeing Ma crying, in

the same situation all over again, made me understand all the ways life can be cruel to a woman.

“You can’t save Rahsaan.” Ma fought against the words forcing themselves out of her. A mother should never have to tell someone to give up on the last of her blood. “I know you want to, but baby you can’t. And you’ve got your own family to think about.”

“I can do both, Ma.” I stood.

She jumped up, swung a startled Corrin on her hip, and grabbed my forearm with her free hand. “Tony, we couldn’t save Matthias. He wasn’t ready, and then it was too late. People make their own choices. Saan is making his own. I birthed two sons, and the Lord gave me a third. Let me see at least one of my boys grow into a man.”

I couldn’t begin to imagine how she must have felt to try to save me by letting Saan go. I didn’t know how to explain how I felt. How Saan must have felt all those nights he searched the streets for Matt. The pressure in our chests. A man always has to fight for his brothers. If they can’t be saved, how can he?

The phone rang as the clock hit ten thirty. It had to be Sherry on her first break. My stomach jumped with every word Ma said. She watched me as she spoke. “They’re here . . . came to check on me.” She forced the tears and shakiness out of her voice. “I don’t know what Saan’s doing. I’m waiting for him here. . . We’ll be here. Come by when you get off. . .”

Ma returned the receiver to its cradle. By not telling Sherry, she'd given me a silent blessing. Her hope had won out. She reminded me that Sherry got off at five, but I already knew Sherry would trade and leave an hour early and would be at Ma's door by four. I looked back at Corrin as I reached for the doorknob. The tension and tears had quieted her. Her beautiful face turned from me to her grandmother and back again. Her worried eyes hurt. I had lived through that moment before. I'd been the worried child, watching my parents walk out the door. But they never meant to come back, and I did, I told myself. "Corrin," I said, "Daddy will be right back." I smiled big and blew her a kiss. She smiled back and giggled as she repeated my motion. Holding on to her kiss as a good luck charm, I stepped out into Brooklyn's fickle mercy.

Saan

The morning's edges brighten. A thoroughly graffiti'd metal gate stands between Saan and the Seven Brothers Club. As he prepares to raise the gate and step into his headquarters, it occurs to him, for the first time, that this is his door of no return. Years before, the gate and club had promised freedom, or at least peace. He and his friends could stop the men who took their brothers—and somehow their hurt would lessen.

Now as he stands before the gate, pained and exhausted, he sees his mistake. The only balm is having Matt back, and that is impossible, no matter what he does.

Saan turns around to face the block and wants to run as hard as he can. To push himself until he finally falls down. Maybe, when he wakes, he'll see a different Brooklyn. Or a different life. This temptation wields a power that both draws and shames him. But what would he do once he stood up again? He's focused so much on this day and batted away all the visions that have tried to root themselves in his mind, including one set in a rundown apartment like Tony's, with a son reaching for him. A chocolate little boy named Matthias, perhaps. He tries to gather this could-be son into his arms, but coarse, hot hands pull at him and knock him down. His son-brother fades away. With the blow of this familiar loss, Saan remembers himself and his resolve. Whether it is strength or weakness, he won't bear a child he can't protect. And there's no point in suffering such a world.

With a deep breath Saan raises the narrow side gate and steps into the club. The former hardware store is a small rectangle that smells of wood and metal, like a place for building things. Saan is the last to arrive at this meeting. The other five members look visibly relieved as he walks into their space. The relief in his friends' faces strengthens him. If these brothers—the most fearless he knows—look up to him, he must be all right. Devan glances up from his nap on the mat in the far corner. Les is sprawled out on the sofa. Memphis and Hakeem pause their card game to

acknowledge his arrival. Walter paces the middle of the room. They've all worn the day's uniform—a non-descript t-shirt and blue jeans. Each man appears relaxed and smiles at him, except for Walter, of course.

Saan thinks he should say something inspirational, but for once words escape him. “Everybody all right?” he asks. Four of the five speak or nod, but Walter keeps on silently wearing down the concrete floor. Something is coming, but he decides to make Walter bring it to him. He only has to keep them together, keep their nerves in check for a little while longer. He moves to his small, wooden writing desk and picks up the unsealed envelope laying on it. It is addressed to 1 Police Plaza, Manhattan, NY. Devan has mailed the other envelopes, all addressed to major and local newspapers. This last envelope for NYPD's headquarters will be mailed after they leave the club. With the packets in the mail, there is no backing down; the battle flag has been raised. If they don't go for the cops, the cops will come for them.

With nothing left to do, Saan pulls out and flips through the envelope's pages which hold copies of his sketches, the story of the Seven Brothers Club and the rationales for the actions they are about to take. Saan wouldn't call the documents a manifesto. He sees no point in giving sleeping people a philosophy. The Seven Brothers consider themselves the wake-up calls. Their words make no claims; instead, they tell stories—the stories of each loved one a club member lost at the hands of NYPD officers. Matt's story is one of the last pieces in the packet. Never one to trust his own words on paper, it took Saan months and many tears to

write the few pages. He returns them to their envelope, unable to bring himself to read the pieces again.

Saan wants to clear his mind and prepare himself for all he's about to do, but Walter is close behind him and inching closer with each lap. Saan waves the worried man over to him.

"Saan, brother, can we rap?" Walter pulls up a metal folding chair. A low groan from Memphis floats over from the card table.

"I've been thinking about today," Walter stutter-starts. "Maybe we should wear masks or something."

Saan eases the air out of his chest while he chooses his words. Reading Walter, Saan sees a sleepless night and too much marijuana. He'd tried to get them all to abstain from weed and liquor yesterday, so they'd be sharp. It's my fault, Saan tells himself. They'd needed a sixth man after Tony left them, and Walter had wanted in. But the trouble ahead should have been clear by the way Walter claimed the title with pride and swagger instead of burden and grief. Saan had hoped that the large and shamefaced man in front of him would eventually understand what the brotherhood was about. "We aren't robbing banks, Walt. And we can't be walking down the street in masks in broad daylight in August."

"I figured we could put them on right before we start."

Memphis throws down his cards. "Come on, Saan. I told you this fool was too scared. What you gon want next, Walt? A cape? Maybe we can crash through some windows and then fly off back here to the bat cave."

“Even if we wear masks, people will know it was us when the newspapers get the packets,” Saan reminds Walter, ignoring Memphis.

“Yeah, yeah I know. They definitely went out?”

Always ready to stir a pot, Devan sits up on his mat grinning. “I put them in myself. You’re gonna be famous tomorrow, brotha.”

“Too bad I’ll be dead.”

“Maybe just severely beaten and in the bookings,” says Devan.

“Great.”

Memphis is done and bolts up. “Saan, I’m not going with this dude. He’s gonna fuck everything up. I told you, man. I told you.”

“Kendra thinks she’s pregnant.” Walter jumps to his feet. “I didn’t tell her nothing, she said it out of the blue. I told her I need to know. She’s gonna go to the clinic as soon as it opens.”

The other brothers watch quietly. Saan can’t tell if Walter is lying or telling the truth, but it doesn’t matter. “It’s up to the brothers,” he says.

“It would be hard with only two of us,” says Memphis. “You ain’t the biggest brother on the block, Saan.”

Saan leans back in his chair and gauges the men around him. One more twitch of hesitation and it’s all over. . Each man is alert, sitting or standing with a straight back and neck. Each one returns a convinced gaze. It’s set. There’s no turning back. Saan is proud; and he is terrified.

“Don’t worry y’all. We can do it without Walt if necessary. We stood together before him and will keep on standing after him.” He casts a glance at Walter.

“Either way you’re still gonna to get out of town today anyway,” says Hakeem with a calm tenor, as he collects and stacks Memphis’s thrown cards. Saan is glad Hakeem has finally spoken up. With two of them calm and reasonable, Memphis will hopefully back down and Devan will stop trying to escalate things.

“I know, but . . .” Walter can barely make words. His hands and arms are open in a silent request for his friends to have mercy on him.

“Ahh, I get it.” With three huge, effortless steps, Memphis stands chest-to-chest with Walter. “But you can say you backed out, tried to stop it, tell everybody we wouldn’t listen.”

“Nah, man, is not like that. You putting words in my mouth. I’m trying to tell y’all what’s going on with me.” Walter backs up, seconds from tears. “I’m trying to be a man about this, all of it.”

Again, Memphis steps forward. He’s six-one and seemingly expanding by the second. His muscles are flexed and stretching his black t-shirt to its limits. Saan jumps between them to stop the brewing explosion of fists, but Memphis keeps talking. “The way I see it, you got two options. You can high-tail it out of here and make a run for the Port Authority and do your best to disappear. Make sure you never get arrested and never take a job that’s gonna get your name on any government rolls. You might have some luck in Mexico or something, but don’t think the NYPD’s gonna leave you alone even there. Them Jersey State crackers is still hunting all over Cuba for Assata and that was twenty years ago. Or you can honor the pledge you swore to us and the baby brother you lost

and then try to make a break for it. Nobody made you come here. Nobody made you be one of us. You been walking around here for two years repping Seven Brothers, getting Seven Brothers cred, and Seven Brothers pussy. And now the bill is due, and you wanna punk out.”

Walter buckles under the heat on him and drops onto the couch. “Alright, but I’m out as soon as it’s done.”

Saan holds his ground between the two men until Memphis heads to the weight bench in the room’s far corner to cool off. Walter’s face is in his hands. Saan is sure it isn’t over with Walter. Between Memphis and himself, they likely have Hinton matched. Walter is the tie-breaker. Saan hasn’t planned on everything going right—or remotely close to plan. Most of his nervousness about this day circles around all the unknown ways things will go wrong - a bystander getting injured, or that or his mother will call the police. Saan glances again at the faces around him waiting for directions. He does what he can and gathers everyone around to review their timetables and go through each three-man team’s plan step-by-step for the thousandth time.

Anthony

The difficulty lay in finding Saan, who'd slyly not said whether the Seven Brothers planned to get Hinton in Flatbush or South Jamaica. I could only guess Flatbush since Saan knew that neighborhood better and had more connections there. I ran by the Seven Brothers' headquarters first, but the gates were down, and a homeless man camped under scaffolding across the street said they'd all marched out early in the morning. While half of me panicked, the other half trusted that I wasn't too late. Saan was precise and patient in his planning. As I bolted for the A-train, I imagined all the brothers flung across Brooklyn like running backs on their routes. Buying sneakers, picking up groceries, going to the post office, and somehow all arriving at the designated points on time and ready to rock. I just had to spot one of the guys on his route.

I was big and urgent as I dashed onto the arriving C train. The rush hour stragglers grumbled at me and held their messenger bags and purses close as I wedged my way in front of the car's subway map. I made a mental note to be more forgiving to the next desperate looking fool who jostled me on my way work. The tiny map loomed before me like a life-sized Brooklyn. I groaned. I'd never thought about all the subway stations in Flatbush. Should I take the shuttle to the 2/5 or the B/Q? What stop would Saan pick? Where would he or one of the brothers blend in best? I bet on Church Avenue and by the time I got there, it was already a quarter after ten and the day was steaming. Taking a page out of

Saan's playbook, I picked a bodega wall half-a-block away from the main subway exit, leaned, and watched.

I regretted not having Saan's trademark cigarette or gaze that absorbed the world around him. I felt lame, like my coolness had rusted. A few years before, I'd mastered the art of standing on a block for hours at a time, but now my doorman job had me hovering at building entrances looking polite and helpful and nothing like a street kid from the Stuy. For the rest of the morning and into the afternoon, Flatbush passed me by. The discount shops and Jamaican roti and meat patty spots had their doors open and fans humming. Those who dared hang despite the heat huddled together in twos and threes under tattered awnings as Dollar cabs slid up and down Church Avenue. Stop-and-go salesmen sold their bootleg CD's, nutcracker bottles, incense, cheap earrings, kids' toys, anything, and everything. Women pushed grocery carts ahead of them while keeping track of the children dragging their feet behind them. Bums shuffled down the street in too many clothes for the weather, all of them black with dirt except where they were threadbare. The thing about Brooklyn, I thought, is that she gives and she takes, but her scales are off. She'll give a man a little bit of money, but it'll cost him his freedom. She'll give him two brothers and take each one of them back. Maybe it's not a Brooklyn thing. Maybe it's a black folks thing. Me and Saan's story is rough, but it isn't the roughest I've heard. Half of the crazy people you see walking around are crazy because they had too much taken from them—everything but their lives.

I bought jerk chicken fresh off a steel drum for lunch. The flesh burned my fingers and mouth, but my hunger and the layers of spice kept me eating. Groups of teens strolled up and down the street shouting and laughing at each other, all the while earning glares from the men and women veering around them. The boys wore their basketball shorts or baggy jeans and teased the girls in tight shorts and tees. The younger kids imitated the older ones, and the trouble makers searched for their own. I couldn't help but smile; I'd been one of them just two or three years before. Brooklyn in the summer used to feel so good. Almost like a freedom impossible to touch in other seasons, or outside of this place.

I didn't let myself get too nostalgic though. At the end of the day, all the kids had to go home, or worse. I used to chill with Hakeem and Les from the Seven Brothers any chance I got. Still, Saan, his sadness, and the sinkhole that was Matt's absence, waited for me at home. Standing to watch the kids, I forced myself to admit that I shouldn't have left the Seven Brothers the way I did. They'd never treated me funny when I wanted out; I was the one who'd done that. Toward the end, I'd walked around with them but was nervous they'd pick the wrong fight or piss off the wrong cop. Once Corrin was on the way, and Sherry was really on my case about staying out of trouble, I'd been too uptight to hang, always wanting to know where they were going, what they were going to do, and who would be there. Saan earned the nickname "Mr. Clean," and they started calling me "Mommy." I should've kept up with them though. They wouldn't have turned me away, and maybe I could have stopped all this.

The owner of a discount store dispersed an especially rowdy group of kids soaking up the shade under his awning, and I saw something I should have seen long before: three guys chilling beside them and staring me. They were a few years older than the kids and wore white tees, black jeans and Timberlands. Unbothered by my watching them watch me, they didn't look away. I checked them for beads, bandanas or tattoos and cringed as I found none. They were either DT's or generals. It was the wrong day to get arrested or caught up in anybody's gang mess. I gave them the smoothest "brotha nod" I could muster, hoping this would set them at ease.

My head swung back and forth as I tried to cover the four staircases, two on either side of me, and the guys across the street. They handled whatever business people brought to them, but every few minutes, the largest guy in the clique looked my way, like he was checking to make sure I was still there. I wished I could walk around. We always kept it moving when I was part of the Seven Brothers; standing anywhere too long, without a crew or any business, was like wearing flashing lights. So I wasn't surprised when the big guy crossed the street, cutting through traffic, and headed straight for me. He was in his mid-twenties, brown-skinned and had the most unsettling bug-eyes I have ever seen.

"Hey, brotha," said Bug-eyes, "Can I bum a smoke?" He stood on my left trying to force my line of vision away from his clique.

"Sorry, man, I don't smoke?"

"You out here getting some sun?"

“Nah, waiting on somebody.” A few years back, when I was younger and cockier, I would have gotten mouthy and told Bug-eyes I was minding my own business, meaning he needed to do the same. But age and marriage had taught me plenty of lessons about when it’s best to keep my mouth shut. I thought about claiming to be Seven Brothers, in case he was down with Saan, but figured that could go wrong for me if he was a DT or I couldn’t stop the Brothers’ plan.

“It don’t look like your somebody’s coming,” Bug-eyes said.

“That could be,” I said, frustrated by the truth of it.

Bug-eyes examined my neckline and the front of my shirt. By the time I realized what he was doing and that I should do the same, he was turning back to re-cross the street. About fifteen minutes later, the other two guys in his clique moved on, but Bug-eyes stayed. Another twenty minutes passed and he still kept steady watch on me. I couldn’t tell if this confirmed he was a cop or not. I couldn’t imagine watching somebody stand on a corner for hours unless I was getting paid to do it, but a DT wouldn’t be so obvious. He’d call a new officer to stand unseen on another corner until I let my guard down and did whatever dirt I had planned.

Two o’clock rolled around and I imagined Sherry at the bank, ordering the clock to move faster so she could get to Ma’s. I begged the time on my wrist to slow down. All I needed was Saan or one of the brothers to pass by. Then, at least, I had a chance to find and stop them. The odds were against me without a doubt, but I had a feeling. As the

minutes passed, I started doing Brooklyn transportation math. Catching the B46 bus right then would have gotten me home with plenty of time to spare. Waiting fifteen more minutes would mean hopping on the Q to Prospect Park, waiting another ten minutes for both the shuttle and the C, and hauling ass from there. If I gave my brother another half hour, I'd have to spend my last ten bucks until payday on a gypsy cab, get as close as I could, and run the rest of the way. I scanned the subway exits, Bug-eyes, and my watch, crossing off one plan after another as the minutes passed. I was three minutes from hailing a gypsy cab when I spotted Walter slipping out of the train exit farthest from me.

At about two hundred and twenty pounds, jiggling and sweating, Walter loped down the street making a sight of himself. He was definitely off his route. He glanced around like he expected the boogey-man to jump out at him. I panicked and wondered if the deed was already done and whether Walter was making his getaway. If it's done, I thought, I still need him to point me to Saan, so I booked it down the block and across the street. I only remembered Bug-eyes when I spotted him creeping up the street behind me. I was in a tough spot. If Bug-eyes was a DT, I was leading him right into Walter's getaway or right to Saan.

Walter slowed down and turned left onto a side-street. I sped up and caught him as we rounded a corner onto a quiet, residential block lined with pre-war buildings. He struggled at first; the sweat poured down him and he fought for breath. He was relieved when he saw it was me, and then his relief turned to panic as his eyes shot farther down the block

to Memphis who'd stepped out of a courtyard across the street. My heart had just a second to leap as Saan approached from the block's far end. Hinton emerged last, making a right out of an apartment building, placing himself between Saan and Memphis. In my memories, he was a giant. Those memories were accurate. His chest and biceps filled out of his muscle tee and his thighs stretched his jeans. Saan and Memphis by themselves were not going to take him.

Everything was timed down to the second. Saan registered Hinton, Memphis, and then looked for Walter, who should have been cutting across the street to flank on Hinton's left. Saan's face didn't change: he was a kid walking, but his eyes started working and scanning until he saw me clamped on to Walter. His mouth dropped and his step faltered. He raised a hand and I thought he was about to signal the whole thing off, but Hinton, seeing Saan's move, spun around and right into Memphis's outstretched arm. Memphis' huge hand slid over his mouth before he could yell for help. Saan's gaze rested on me for a second longer, before his face hardened into a stranger's. He gut checked Hinton who twisted and struggled. They needed Walter who stood beside me staring, too. It looked as if Hinton might finally break free, before Memphis locked his arm around Hinton's neck and Saan threw himself around Hinton's knees. Memphis dragged them both through a gate to a building's garbage area.

I turned around in time to see Bug-Eyes skid to a stop behind us. His eyes almost popped and his arms flew up in front of him as if to ward

off whatever trouble he'd stumbled into. He turned and ran. Walter tried to run, but I pushed him into a building's lobby where he broke down into a hot, sobbing mess. "I was gonna do it man. You gotta tell 'em. I didn't punk out. But it's suicide, man. Suicide," he kept saying to me.

I had a second to decide what to do. I was much closer to the deed than I'd ever intended. If I went into the alley and brought Hinton out, I'd still go up with the rest of them. There was no way to explain how I'd arrived at the exact moment and spot of the attack if I wasn't in on the planning. I saw Corinn in my mother's arms, scared and confused. Sherry, I thought, had to be on the train. She would find Ma and the baby and learn I'd gone after Saan. That I'd chosen him over her and Corinn. My stomach seized and dropped. What in the world had I been thinking? Ma was right. Saan had made his choice. I should have done the same.

"Clean your face up, man," I said to Walter who still wheezed and cried beside me. He didn't move. "We gotta get out of here." I pointed across the street. Finally, he got it and mopped his face with his t-shirt.

He tried to steady his voice. "Kendra's gonna have a baby." I met his eyes and nodded. It could have easily been me standing in his shoes and a ton of trouble. I patted him on the back, offering the mix of congratulations and consolation due given his situation. "Go right and don't look over at them," I said. He left and I waited two minutes before walking the other way.

Saan

Saan is jittery as he approaches his block's corner bodega. His chin and right cheek are bruised. Suspecting at least a fracture, he is careful not to move his right arm too much. His three fresh t-shirts are slightly wrinkled from their time at the bottom of his book bag. After a Caesar cut from a random barber and an evening behind a stack of books at the public library, he has wandered Brooklyn's blank streets searching for a feeling of triumph. Instead, his mouth is dry and his stomach churns. He'd known something would go wrong today: maybe one of the guys would panic or Hinton would win the fight. But he never guessed Anthony would show up. Saan aches from the deep love in this act of brotherhood. Anthony had tried to live up to their oath, in his own way.

Emerging from the shadows cloaking him, Saan extinguishes his cigarette. The bodega passersby who know him shake their heads and wonder if the young fighter has finally slipped over the edge they all saw waiting for him. They are sad, but reconciled. This loss isn't the first. He won't be the last. After several measured breaths and a straightening of his shirts, Saan surprises everyone by hopping onto the roof of a parked car. He raises his hand with a burdened seriousness that stops them all. With his young but practiced voice, he speaks.

“Brooklyn. Brooklyn. Bed-Stuy. What you know other than the rent is sky high and sewer rats never die? I’ve got a question for you. Can you see a glass man if you only have a glass eye? Don’t worry folks; I won’t keep you long tonight. Shiny badges and black batons are coming for me soon enough. When they haul me away they’re gonna tell you it’s ‘cause I’m a crazy nigger, a lunatic, and a degenerate. That I’m another angry black man, as seen on your TV, and they are your protectors. When they say these words about me, or the next brother tomorrow, or the brother they’ll take the day after that, what will you do? Will you believe them, drop your heads as they pass by, open your doors so they can shackle your sons and once again drag them away to a distant land—this time Attica or Sing Sing? Or will you find a way, anyway, to look these trappers, white or black, in their eyes? Will you reach down into the frightened place deep within you, find your voice, and tell them ‘Not this time.’?”

Saan pauses a few seconds to catch his breath and control the rage finally easing out of his chest. The faces looking up at him are familiar and worried. The old men who always stand around the bodega in their flat caps and loose trousers move a little closer. The women’s drawn faces show discomfort from the sweat at the edges of their hairline and the direction this young man has just swerved their night. While the teenagers sent on a quick errand for over-priced bodega goods welcome this curious distraction from their return home. The crowd’s sober eyes help Saan find the soles of his feet and steady himself.

“Don’t stop now,” an old man shouts from the gathering crowd. “If you gon tell it, tell it all.” Saan searches for the voice’s owner. The pot-bellied man leans against the bodega’s door, a silhouette against fluorescent lights. Saan nods to him and smiles for the first time.

“I don’t mean to put this kind of pressure on you,” Saan continues. “It’s wrong that we live in a world where men and women, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters have to ask themselves these kinds of questions. But I need you to understand, Bed-Stuy—understand what we’re up against. I need you to see what so many of us have wanted to ignore. Because, trust me, I know it’s easier not to see. We’ve been trained not to see. To bite our tongues and swallow the blood. To ignore the war around us—the war on us, until it’s too late. By then too many will have fallen or been dragged away.”

“Two weeks ago there was a fire on this block, a few steps from here. It was about five in the morning when we poured out of our houses and buildings still in our boxers and bathrobes, slippers and head rags. The flames jumped out the graystone and we all stood there wishing it away from our homes and our neighbor’s homes. As families escaped the smoke into the morning’s chill, people ran to bring jackets and blankets for the children and water jugs to pass around. I saw you say kind words to people you’d been too good or too bad to speak to the day before. You put your arms around the shocked and let strangers into your homes to use your bathrooms. You muttered a prayer for the distraught mother

who wasn't sure if her daughter couldn't be found because she'd stayed out all night, or because she'd never made it out all."

Saan gives the crowd a few seconds to murmur with remembering. Some folks exchange knowing and grateful glances, while others look away, as if embarrassed by this memory of momentary unity. "We did these things in the face of fire. When we couldn't ignore the heat or the smoke, we opened our eyes—we couldn't tear them away. Well, Bed-Stuy, I know you know this, but let's just put it out there. These blocks are still on fire, all of them, and you can't reach your children. What are you gonna do? I ask you this as a child of Bed-Stuy and as a young man who loves Bed-Stuy. Those of you who know me, know I was born at Kings County and raised not five minutes from this corner. You know my Ma was a single mother raising three men, although I don't think my brother Anthony would mind me clarifying that he joined our family through spiritual adoption. And maybe you knew my brother Matthias, who sewed his own name on the back of a Knick's jersey, dreamed of Iroc-Z's, and wrote love letters to Deniece Williams."

"Maybe you even saw how my brother's dreams ended? How the cops took him from us?" Saan lets these questions hang in the air. More men and women have stopped and stand wavering between curiosity and caution. Saan reads all of the silent and grim faces around him. They will go a little farther with him. "If you know me and my family, you know Matt got strung out on crack and ended up on these streets, and yes, we

didn't know what to do other than pray to the miracle lottery. But our number never hit—it was just up.”

“Were you here that day? Did you see me and Anthony heading for this bodega as Matt stood on the corner begging money from our neighbors?” Saan points to a spot on the sidewalk, a few steps from the bodega's door. His hand hovers in the air so long, that the people standing there step back a bit, clearing space for Saan's memories.

“Did you see my brother's skin splotchy and thin, like fitted sheets over his ribs? Or the pain in my eyes? The water I thought manhood required me to hold back? Did you see my shame blaze into anger and the way I charged at my brother with my fists like rocks?”

The crowd holds its breath and watches the few feet of empty sidewalk as Saan describes Matthias and himself wrestling, grunting, cursing, and crying at each other. Finally, when both boys were spent, they clenched like two tired boxers. When Matt pulled away, Saan held on. When Saan pulled away Matt held on. When they couldn't pull anymore, they held each other and Saan whispered for his brother to come home. Matt had shaken his head no, but let his brother put his arm around his bony, trembling shoulders.

Saan's voice rises an octave as his memory turns him around to watch himself and Matt walk down the street with Anthony crying a few steps behind them. The crowd's eyes follow his. “Did you see us halfway down this block, halfway home, when the DT's ran and swerved up on us. They said we'd been fighting as they parted us and threw us up against a

wall. I tried to explain that we'd squashed it. That my brother was ill. That I needed to get him home. None of that mattered to them. Seeing the cops on me, Matt fought with everything he had to get to me. A white DT almost had him down, but he broke free and spit in the face of a black, bald dude named Hinton. With one punch, Hinton sent my brother down hard. His head slammed into the curb."

Saan holds out his good arm to steady himself on the car's roof and wipes his eyes with the hem of his t-shirt. "Forgive my tears, folks. It was the battle of mine and my brother's life, and we lost."

The crowd whispers its sympathy and commiseration. "Come down from there, baby," pleads a woman swaying with her hands clasped in prayer. "Let me tell you about a man who can give you peace that surpasses understanding."

Saan shakes his head. "Thank you, ma'am. I've already made my own way." He glances warily down the street in both directions and speeds up his delivery. "Bed-Stuy, we are conditioned. During slavery our ancestors had no choice but to watch the brutalities committed against other slaves – beatings, rapes, murders. The masters gathered them around and promised punishment to whoever tried to look away. Now, centuries later, we turn our heads when our would-be masters and their overseers attack men and women on our streets. That little power of closing our eyes that was denied to us, we use now, but we have so much more power. We have the power to see and to intervene.

“The police know we won’t do anything. They think we don’t care, so they don’t care, and we prove them right every day. We act like they are men made of glass—that we can’t see and are afraid to touch. We must show and teach them otherwise. If you can see a glass man, you can see a way around him, or through him, if need be. So today, a few of us started their lessons. The Seven Brothers Club tracked Hinton and a white detective named Riley, who also killed a black man. We made them visible for you. We gave them the least of what they deserved.

“What we did today were the actions of six members of the Seven Brother’s Club, and no one else. Brooklyn please know that the cops can only round up a thousand black men tonight if you let them. And please don’t let them bring our families into this. My brother Anthony shares my pain over Matt’s death, but my anger is not his.”

At the crowd’s edge, a tiny teenage girl hops, points, and sends up a panicked shout for Saan to run. Saan’s focus follows her trembling finger to the stone-faced men a block away and the black vans slowly rolling behind them. “For what we’ve done, they will call us violent,” he shouts straining for breath and volume, “I won’t say we’re not. As I held my knee against Hinton’s neck, all of me wanted to break him—to take at least one more killer off our streets. But I’m better than that—and better than him. So I won’t let this injustice system judge my criminality. I leave that up to you Bed-Stuy. Call me what you will.”

Jumping off the car, Saan walks into the middle of the street and down the block toward his home. At the block’s opposite end, another

mass of blue and plain-clothes approaches. The neighbors glance warily between the flanking police and the young man. Expanding and contracting, as if struggling between their qualms and sense of obligation, a few folks slip away, but most of the crowd clings to the sidewalk and follows Saan.

Anthony

Hesitating outside of Ma's door, I understood how Saan must have felt after his night searches for Matt. Exhaustion, regret, and disappointment were all I had to show for my day and all Ma's worry. And then there was Sherry. I pictured her sitting, consoling Ma from across the dining room table. Pressing my forehead against the door, I took several deep breaths to prepare myself for everything Sherry would say. She wouldn't leave me immediately, but she would go. She'd always been upfront about what she expected from me.

I stepped through the door barely able to hold my tears. The women in my life sat at the table just as I'd imagined them. Ma looked through the doorway behind me and lowered her head into her hands. No explanation was necessary. Sherry sat with her back straight, rocking Corrin in her arms. Even if I could have pulled my voice together, I

couldn't have said sorry. There wasn't enough in the word to heal the hurt in my wife's eyes.

As I took my seat, Ma picked up a framed picture lying in front of her and rubbed its edges. It was a picture of us all lounging and clowning on a neighbor's stoop. We couldn't have known how good we had it. She believed the three boys in the picture would all grow into healthy, successful men who drove nice cars, wore ties every day, and would move the family out of the hood forever. "I must be a horrible mother. Who loses all of her babies?" she said.

I didn't know what to say. It wasn't her fault. A woman can do her best, but that rarely beats the world doing its worst. "I'm still here," I reached across the table and took her hand. Sherry reluctantly accepted my other hand. When Ma steadied herself, I explained what I'd seen in Flatbush.

Ma cried again and Sherry asked the question I'd hoped she wouldn't. "Did the cop see you?" Her voice was as tight as her jaw.

"He looked in my direction, but I'm not sure he saw anything." I wish I could have left it there, but I had to say the rest. "I'm his brother and used to run with them. Everybody knows that. The cops could come for me anyway."

Sherry's face reddened. "That's why you should've stayed here, stayed away from him. You could've had an alibi."

Ma's hands hit the table. "My boys didn't do anything wrong. None of them."

“It doesn’t matter—” I started to say.

“Yes, it does.” Ma’s voice was stubborn, like her words were final and the world had better fall in line. “We’ll tell them you came by and I told you Saan was acting funny, and you went out looking for him.” She stared at us and we nodded like children frightened into obedience.

Channel nine broke the news first around eight o’clock. Two undercover detectives attacked, one black and one white, one in Flatbush the other in East New York. Several suspects at large. The descriptions were generic—early twenties, black men, baggy jeans and dark t-shirts, weights ranging from one hundred thirty pounds to two hundred fifty pounds. It was a bad night to be a black man in Brooklyn.

Unable to listen to any more of my reality, I snapped off the television and hit play on Ma’s CD player. Marvin Gaye floated across the living room. Sherry got Ma to change out of her skirt and blouse and into jeans and a t-shirt. They made spaghetti, not because anybody could eat, but because they needed something to do. I danced Corrin through the dining and living rooms, whispering along as Marvin worked his way through “Pride and Joy” and “How Sweet It Is.” She giggled and squealed as we twirled around the apartment. My heart hurt with each step and each glance at the clock.

Marvin kept singing as we pushed the spaghetti around our plates. “Trouble Man.” “What’s Going On?” and “Where are We Going?” Only Corrin ate. She babbled, holding out noodles for each of us to take,

as if concerned that we weren't eating. Sherry cried softly as she placed Corrin's noodles on her plate. I didn't know how to explain myself. I thought I was doing what a man must, but I'd never felt more like a boy-- a foolish boy. The girl I loved was crying because she trusted me and believed in the man I said I was. What had I thought I could do? If Saan was crazy, I was crazier. Saan had married his mission and was willing to die for it. I'd married Sherry and my life was hers and our daughter's. I grasped her hand. It shook like it had at the justice of the peace. I held on tight as I'd done back then, and again prayed that my strength would convince her that we and our baby girl would be okay.

The phone rang at ten as the opening chords and drums of Marvin's "Makes me Wanna Holler" drifted out of the stereo. Ma held the table as Sherry answered it. With her back to us, Sherry spoke into the receiver, giving nothing away with her words. When she hung up she explained, "That was Deltreعه. Saan just gave a speech on the corner and the cops started after him. He was headed this way."

I turned to the door and then back to Sherry. I couldn't bear to look at Ma as I kept my seat. I'd never again leave my wife by choice. Sherry crossed the room and reached me as three hard pounds shook the door and everything in the apartment. She held onto me like she could protect me from what was in the hallway. I stood to hold her fully in my arms for just one more second. "I'm sorry," I whispered into her ear and released her. "You gotta take Corrin to the back." Her eyes hung onto me, still asking me for something I could no longer control. "I will do

whatever it takes to get back to you,” I promised. She pressed her lips to mine before gathering Corrin from her high chair and running back to Ma’s room.

The pounds came again, a man’s voice shouted “Police.” I wondered why they didn’t just break it down. Long, shaky strides carried me across the living room. I clicked the deadbolt and unhooked the chain. Marvin’s voice was a crying horn and I wanted to wail right along with him. As the door opened, light from the hallway streamed in, and there on the other side stood six men in black helmets and protective gear. Their rifles were raised, and fingers bent around the triggers. Their fingers were black, brown, white, and twitching.

I raised my hands high. One of the cops said my name and I claimed it. A gun butt rocketed to the center of my chest knocking me back a couple of feet and onto the floor. I gasped for air as two cops jumped on me, flipped me on stomach, and slapped and snatched at my shirt, my jeans, and the flesh beneath. Black combat boots swarmed around me. The hardwood floors groaned under their stomping as the men shoved Ma’s furniture every which way.

A voice in the apartment’s back yelled freeze. Sherry screamed and Corrin cried out. I strained and twisted my head to find Ma as the cops rough cuffed my hands and legs. I finally found her clinging helplessly to a dining room wall with a rifle pointed at her. “Leave them alone,” I yelled three or four times. I’d heard of too many family members caught and killed in raids that had nothing to do with them. As I lay caught, bound,

and unable to protect my family, the understanding of my powerlessness in the world scalded my core. I vomited and wept as arms hauled me through door of my childhood home. The tiny elevator's door slid shut as the first punch closed in on my face. The metal box rocked and shuddered with the punches. "Sherry. Corrin. Sherry. Corrin. Dear God, Sherry." I whispered their names until I couldn't hear the cops cussing or feel their knuckles. My family was my shield and my strength as they lifted me upright to pretend that I could actually walk out of the building. I staggered blindly between the cops on either side of me until Saan's voice pulled me back to lucidity.

I doubt he ever saw me that night. He stood in the middle of the street, turning around in a circle shouting "Open your eyes. Open your goddamned eyes." He was so small trapped there in the ring of overgrown men shrinking around him. I wasn't sure if I was seeing Saan or the boy from five years ago. His hair was cut neat and close. His yellow-brown skin glowed as he moved closer to a street light. How could such a young man be standing alone in a sea of cops in the middle of our street? I screamed my brother's name and the cops holding me slammed me onto the trunk of a car. They said they were happy to let me see it all. One cop stabbed his baton into my back and wedged it by my spine, forcing all of the air out of me. The baton twisted and I flattened despite my desperation. All I could do was watch them take my last brother from me.

Our neighbors stepped out onto their stoops, leaned out of windows or peeked from behind curtains in their pajamas, houses dresses,

and occasional work uniforms. They shrank back a bit as Hinton broke ranks with the six plainclothes cops backing him up. He limped and lurched toward Saan. A white bandage crowned his forehead where Saan and Memphis had gone through with the Brothers' plan to brand him with the words "Glass Man." Saan looked around the block, at all of the people watching. He pointed to Hinton and the other cops. "They break, too," Saan shouted and scanned our neighbor's faces for any kind of understanding. When satisfied, he squared his shoulders and stepped to Hinton.

My brother didn't make a sound when Hinton's first punch dropped him. Scrambling back up, holding his right arm, he ducked and dodged a bit. He swung awkwardly with his left arm and got one hit, but Hinton was two of him. Our neighbors inhaled when Saan took an especially hard hit. As he stumbled around the circle, the outcome was clear. An old man's voice yelled out into the darkness, "Y'all need to stop this, you gon start a riot." The men, women, and children of Do-or-Die Bed-Stuy stood still. The blue circle contracting around Saan laughed.

"Do more than shout," I begged, as the cop managed to dig the baton even deeper into my back. My vision blurred and bounced as Hinton launched a power-punch that dropped Saan again. The fall was hard, and my brother lay still and crumpled. *Get up. Get up. Please. Someone, help him*, I prayed.

Hinton waved the others forward to get their kicks in just as Ma ran into the street. "Saaaaann!" she howled. The thunder of mother-pain

woke the block, if not Brooklyn itself. As if to clear a way through the cops for Ma, our neighbors found their legs and rushed off the sidewalks and into the street. Ma ran through the fray to kneel down and cradle Saan as the glass men pulled their pistols and batons. Disoriented and sensing the rage and resolve closing in on them, the police shouted for people to return to their homes. Their pistols swung wildly and glinted in the street light, but hundreds of unflinching eyes glared at them. And my neighbors continued into the street gathering themselves into a circle around the cops, Ma, and Saan. Glimpsing the inevitable, perhaps for the first time ever, the glass men ran to their vans and peeled away, taking me with them.

I was blank, empty and shut down at the precinct. Lights, hard faces, badges and cell doors swam around me. Hands dragged me one way and shoved me the other. A man's voice questioned me about the whereabouts of the other brothers. I couldn't lift my head to look at him, let alone work my mouth to answer him. I heard Ma's voice saying the story about Saan acting funny, but I couldn't make the words. By the time the precinct cops gave up on their questions and transferred me to the house of detention my eyes had swollen into slits.

That first night in jail I saw only blinding overhead lights and glimpses of brothers moving around me. Everyone cleared out of my way without a word when I crawled to the back wall. I must have looked a mess: too jacked up to pick on and too pathetic to help. With my

adrenaline gone, every inch of me was sore. It hurt to sit, and it hurt to lean. So I lay down on the filthy floor and cried for my brother and myself. The entirety of the last twenty-four hours flung itself at me like a beast out of the darkness. But I had no fight left against the accusation in Sherry's eyes, my mother cowering against her dining room wall, or my brother lying broken in the street. Everything pressed down on me so hard that I don't know how my heart or my bones withstood it. I tried to find hope but could only think that I was going to be gone upstate for a long time. And worse than that, I'd made my wife into the kind of woman she never wanted to be – a woman struggling because her man couldn't or wouldn't help her.

I had no clue about Saan's fate. Given the crowd, I thought, maybe, the police at least left him on this edge of living. But I knew Saan's plan for himself would never include him sitting in a prison. He'd done his thing, and if he had his way, he was done with this world, even me. I knew then what I should have said as he sat on my couch. I should have told him that I needed him. And I needed him to stay. Brooklyn was his world. He'd been mine for as long as I could remember.

I replayed that last conversation with him over and over again, moving in and out of guilt, anger, and sleep until a bologna sandwich thudded at my feet the next day.

"Don't let one of these suckas get your lunch too, kid," said an old guy, at least fifty, but dressed in wide-leg jeans, a t-shirt and sneakers.

He squatted next to me. “They sure did a number on you, boy. How long you been in?”

“Last night,” was all I could say. The pain had settled into and tightened up my jaw.

“Last night? You should have been out of the cell and onto the next by now. You gon keep getting closer and closer til you get to the courtroom.” He pointed at the cellophane wrapped sandwich in front of me. “If you not going to eat that I will.”

My aching stomach didn’t like that idea and I tried to unwrap the plastic, but my hands shook and the sandwich fell back to the floor.

“Damn, boy, what did you do?” He unwrapped and ripped my sandwich, pressing half into my right hand.

I concentrated on lifting the sandwich to my lips and taking small bites I could swallow without chewing. As clearly as I could, I mumbled “My brother beat a cop in the Stuy?”

“You mixed up in that mess?”

I almost choked. “No. You heard anything about him?” I grunted through the pain.

He gave the front of the cell a quick, distrustful glance before answering me. “Nothing on the news. I heard that the cops beat him real bad.”

“But is he okay?”

“I don’t know, son. You got a ma or a girl? For a few bucks, I’ll find ‘em when I get out and tell ‘em what these suckas is doing to you and to get you a real lawyer, not no Legal Aid.”

Everybody’s got a racket. I shook my head and said, “Those phones?” I asked, looking at the two pay phones on the other side of the cell.

“Maybe when you switch to the next cell. The phone on the left ain’t got no cord, and the other ain’t got a receiver. Good luck, brother, if a cop got hurt, they ain’t just lost yo’ paperwork. They done burned that shit.” I gave him the second half of my sandwich as thanks as he left me with this information and the realization that I was dumb for thinking I’d have any kind of normal process. Saan used to say that the gears grind together.

The bookings shuffled me around for three days before the Brooklyn DA claimed he needed more time to decide about charges against me. On the third day, a bunch of NYPD and Department of Correction brass rushed me past a crowd of shouting reporters, and into a cab with Ma.

Dizzy, I sat for a moment, surprised by freedom. Ma took in my bruises and lumps and whimpered. “Saan?” I asked her, surprised by a sudden flutter of hope.

“He’s gone, baby.” Ma took my hand. “We’re doing a private service tomorrow at the funeral home. Just us.”

I sat with this for a few minutes as Atlantic Avenue slid by us. And then there was one, I thought. I'd never felt lonelier than I did in that moment. Still, the full meaning of her words and this realization could not reach my center. I can't say I was numb, this new version of pain was duller than the raw pain I'd felt that first night in the precinct, but it reverberated and I suspected it would linger, maybe forever. This was the pain of manhood. Some hurts don't heal. You just find a way to live with them, or you don't.

"Did Sherry move back to her mom's?" I asked. I was terrified of Ma's answer, but I had to know.

"She's not happy with you, but she's at home. I told her to let it all fall where it will before she makes any decisions."

I exhaled. I'd beg, leave New York, switch jobs, go back to school: whatever it took to keep her. "What happened? Why'd they let me go?"

Ma didn't say anything for a moment. "Because Saan looked out for all you guys." She shook her head and wiped her tears. I scooted across the cab's vinyl seat and put my arm around her. She relaxed into my hold and sobbed into my shoulder for a few blocks. I sucked my teeth at this life and wondered what we could have done to have avoided this day. Maybe if Saan and I had told Ma about Matt's pipe as soon as we found it? Or maybe if I'd jumped between Saan and Matt that day at the bodega? There was no going back, so I'd never know.

Once Ma pulled it together, she explained what Saan had done. "They mailed packets to the newspapers and stations the day before

everything started. The packets had everything about Matt and the other boys in them and what the cops did to them. When the packets hit the news stations, the news people started asking about the suspects, and there was already a block full of people ready to tell what had happened to Saan. NYPD can't explain what happened and they can't deny it. You didn't have any info or fingerprints in the packets, Tony. Saan doing what he did that night saved the rest of you. They can't afford to let anything happen to any of you."

Ma and Saan were right. The cops brought in Les, Hakeem, Devan and Memphis without a scratch on them. It took the feds a year to catch up with Walter. He'd made a run for it right after we parted ways. They found him in Dallas living with his girl and their baby son. City Hall worked at it for months, but never got the DA to press charges against me. Hinton swore he'd seen me when Saan and Memphis jumped him, but he also swore he saw some other guy named Jackson that he'd once investigated. NYPD launched a manhunt and had to eat piles of crow when it came out that Jackson was in an upstate rehab. I laughed when I saw a picture of Jackson in a paper—he had bug eyes. The brothers all received double-digit sentences. I was clear, on paper at least, but that didn't stop the cops from following me around and making enough trouble on my job to get me fired, which was probably for the best. I found a part-time doorman gig in Jersey and started going to Brooklyn College for a few classes at a time, studying psychology and eventually studying writing.

In those months after we lost Saan, I waited for people to close their eyes again and forget what happened to him. Bed-Stuy proved me wrong. My family made it through because of the people here. Whenever anybody, uniformed or not, tried to bother me, Sherry or Ma, people gathered around, walked us to the train stations, stood next to us on the platforms and in subway cars. And we weren't the only ones they looked after. Old ladies stopped and wagged their canes at cops who ticketed kids for jumping the turnstiles. If a raid did go down, you'd see everybody out on their stoops, or watching from their windows. The cops test us, but they are hesitant and uncomfortable under our eyes.

I found some comfort in this victory for Saan but walking around Bed-Stuy was almost impossible for longer than I care to remember. Each block held years of memories of my brothers. We'd filled our wait at every bus stop with some kind of horse play. Tossed eggs on Halloween. Panted behind Matt during his training runs for the track team. Mastered the art of haggling for French fries at our favorite Chinese food place. Everywhere I turned I saw everything I'd lost. Sherry and I socked away our pennies to try Baltimore or Atlanta. But with every dollar we saved, I grew stressed and tense about our departure. I couldn't live with the ghosts of my brothers and I couldn't live without them.

I first found peace in those years as I walked Corrin around the neighborhood telling her stories about her uncles. I taught her Brooklyn's highs and lows through tales of our mischief and adventures. On one of our first tours, I showed her where Matt had made me and Saan waste our

little bit of allowance by running past the pizza shop we'd just exited, shouting that a dog was chasing him. Saan and I ran like hell for at least two or three long, hot blocks (throwing our pizza and sodas every which way) before we'd wised up. Corrin, probably five or six at the time, pictured the chase and giggled as if she could see it all as clearly as I could. Through her eyes I learned to walk with my brothers again. I felt what Saan felt. The beauty of the brownstones. The safety of being so close to one another. The pulse of the crowds on Fulton Street. It's like he's walking beside us and telling us about what he's reading or what's been happening on a block.

The miracle of how our lives can still braid into each other makes me marvel and slowly softens the pain that is never too far away. I understand now how brave my brother's heart was, and how much love it held. I could write a thousand more pages and still not do him justice or give him to you fully. Instead, think of a young man you know and love; that you have watched grow deep and pensive from hurt; have seen struggle in and against this world. Imagine his smile. His voice. His laugh. His arm on your shoulder. That's Saan. If he's still with you, hold tight to him. Don't let him go, even if he says he must.



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