POINTS OFF THE BENCH

Looking west towards Lexington from 3rd Ave., the arc of 118th Street in East Harlem falls away towards the setting sun, and it feels to Owen like the curve of the earth itself. Humidity presses into every crack and hole in the cement, every pore in his skin. The low sun is a fierce presence, burning the tops off buildings as it drops into the Hudson. Blue grey shadows halve the sidewalks at the corner of 118th and 3rd, where several preschoolers press brightly-colored Nehi bottle caps into the heat-softened tar around a sewer grating, framing it. Pedestrians walk in slow motion, arms hanging limp. On the stoop across the street from Owen, a young woman in a light blue cotton dress sits on the stone steps with feet apart, fanning herself with the loose fabric. Two older men behind her sit motionless in folding chairs, socks rolled down and pants legs rolled up.

Owen watches from his perch on the stoop next to the stairwell leading down to the PAL storage room. He tightens the two gold-buckled straps of the brown leather band circling his left wrist, strapped into place by Martinez a few minutes ago in an impromptu ceremony that included four Los Reyes lieutenants. The five gang members are standing at the top of the stoop now, waiting for Owen to leave, waiting to take back the street which everyone knows is theirs; even the cops know that this playstreet works because Los Reyes allows it to.

The cool band presses against his sweaty skin; Owen measures his pulse and takes a deep breath to calm himself as he begins the three block walk back to his apartment near the East River. One-by-one, the brown- and grey-stoned facades of the four-story railroad apartment buildings, with their steep stairfronts and tall thin windows, absorb the creeping darkness. The young woman withdraws from her stoop; the old men reposture themselves in their fold-up chairs. A group of four older men walk past Owen with hands in their pockets and heads down. Shouting—an argument between a man and a woman—erupts and spills out of a window three stories up.

He takes one last look back at the gang, and down at the metal door behind which all the Police Athletic League equipment is stored: basketballs, nerfballs, rubber balls, sticks for stoopball, a ping-pong table, paddles and balls, a half dozen easels, watercolors and tempera paints, brushes, paper, chalk, picture books, two sawhorses, two twelve-foot high posts which fit into holes drilled in the street, and two orange baskets with backboards, which mount onto the posts. Every weekday morning between 7:30 and 8am, Owen sets up the two sawhorses and the two basketball posts; the curbs serving as court sidelines.

"Don't never take it off!" yells Martinez, smiling. The wiry 16-year old is young to be a gang leader; but he is also a thug, a drug-dealer, a ruthless fighter, a punk who carries a pistol in the waistband of his jeans. His arms are a frenzied mix of of tattoos and bruises. "Not downtown with your rich white friends. Never," he adds, smiling.

Despite Owen’s athletic physique, tough-guy face with its twice-broken nose, and his willingness to take a hit, his white skin and college education keep the gang members on their guard. The wristband with the four-pronged crown carved into it represents a grudging show of respect, but not trust.

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Not all the gang leaders had agreed with Martinez' decision to award Owen the wristband. Initiation into Los Reyes normally required two dangerous rites of passage: a pummeling at the hands of lieutenants, and an attack on a rival gang member. An acceptable alternative was to commit a felony crime—steal a car, break into a neighborhood store, shake down a shop owner. Two lieutenants had initially balked at honoring *the white guy*: Ricki, only thirteen and already sporting a six-inch scar across his abdomen, and Renny, fourteen, who lost part of his left ear to a gunshot. But Martinez had witnessed the event earlier that afternoon, and had determined some kind of reward was due. And what else was there to give that mattered, that was worth something? *Respect is impersonal, and easier to earn than trust*, Owen's father—a Navy veteran—had always said. *Trust implies a personal stake, and takes time.*

Owen's euphoria is cauterized by a competing sense of dread; the sense—as real as the waves of heat rising from the still radiant cement—that he is slipping further away from the world he came from, but will never be accepted in the one he now inhabits.

By his mid-teens, Owen already had a reputation as a guy you couldn't rattle, who kept his cool. He had learned from his father that most fights were about false honor, or a girlfriend; the impulse to run away from danger was overcome not by courage but by an adrenaline rush and a shaky ego. His father's Iraq stories about bar fights and war battles came from a past that bore no resemblance to the life of Owen's childhood, but they had the hoped-for effect, once Owen's college basketball coach had suggested the PAL job. Coach Ogden was from New York City and had himself worked summers as a Playstreet Director while in college. "Man, you

oughta see the way those boys play three-on-three in the streets. It's a tough game. A rough game. You'll learn a lot. And you'll be doing good. Those boys'll try'n hurt you. They won't like you coming in. You will have to earn their respect." Owen's father had endorsed the idea immediately. That Owen had signed on for a second summer surprised everyone, including his coach, and had earned Owen his father's admiration.

Owen was not a skillful player; he was a workhorse. He was a guy who could get *points off the bench*, as the saying goes. When he played ball on 118th street that first summer, just staying on his feet under the basket was a major achievement; offensively he was reduced to shooting jumpers from 3-point territory. He was fouled incessantly in an effort to get him to retaliate or quit. When he refused, he was taunted verbally: "Pussy!" "Fag!" "Dickless!" and the popular "White boy!" But his game improved. He got up quicker on his jumpers. He learned a couple moves. He learned how to carry his elbows higher. He had earned regional NCAA honors his last season in college. Of course he would come back to 118th Street.

In Martinez' eyes, Owen's actions earlier that day defined bravery—but not to Owen. He had simply come off the bench the way he always did. He had been refereeing a three-on-three well past clean-up time when he heard the screams. Heads turned west towards Lex, and a crowd had already formed. Fistfights were common, a daily summer activity, but this one was different. The 'ballers joined a semi-circle forming around two combatants.

One was Harold Barnes—a big black man in his late forties, who wore sweatsuits even on the hottest days, who was the sole cook and owner of *The Little Burger Joint* on the northwest corner of 118th Street and 3rd, handed over to him by his father who had bought it when this part of Manhattan was mostly African-American, before the Hispanic influx—the lone black holdout along a stretch of 3rd known as Little San Juan. The tiny restaurant with only

ten seats lining a single counter, served small and affordable hamburgers on English muffins—and a refreshing sour orange soda. It was open from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday, and no one saw much of Harold other than that. He lived above the restaurant and seldom ventured out onto the street in daylight. Word was he didn't need to work; he had a disability pension from the Army due to a friendly fire incident in Afghanistan.

Harold held a baseball bat, and stood like he was in a batter's box, ready to swing for the fences. A few feet from him, screaming obscenities and gripping a small-handled knife with a 3 to 4-inch blade, was a young dark-skinned Hispanic man with a natty afro, perhaps in his twenties, whom Owen did not recognize. The two men stood nervously, ten feet from one another, the stranger continuing his run of profanity, Harold tensely quiet.

“Who is the young guy?” asked Owen, to no one in particular. Martinez appeared and whispered, "That's Harold's own kid, man, from when he was married to a Puerto Rican lady."

"I gotta call the cops," said Owen, as if to apologize for doing something no gang member, or for that matter anyone in the crowd, would think of doing until after the drama had climaxed.

“Yeah, whatever,” said Martinez, languidly, as Owen began to force his way through the thick scrum of bodies towards his apartment—and the cell phone he kept hidden there, until he realized that would take too long. Several spectators held up smart phones—the Los Reyes members all had them—and were taking pictures or video, but it was unlikely any of them would give up their phone for a cop call. He was about to tap a high-school aged mother named Rosa on the shoulder when Martinez surprised him from behind and turned him around. He was holding his cell phone. “Call your boys if you wanna,’” he said. "Those two hate each other since forever," said the teenager. "I got nothin' to do with ‘em."

But Owen, believing at that moment he might be able to calm the two combatants, ignored the offer. With Martinez leading the way, respectful watchers parted until the two of them had front row seats. Suddenly the young man charged, catching Harold off guard, but Harold swung the bat, bruising his adversary on the shoulder, causing him to trip backwards over the curb. Harold swung the bat hard again, downward, intending to hit his son in the head. Tiny shards of concrete flew up at impact. The young man was on his feet quickly, swinging his knife hand, in wide half-circles, backing Harold up, forcing the crowd back behind him. The epithets had stopped. All was quiet rage now; the usual chanting was not developing. Everyone sensed the seriousness of the event.

Owen stepped forward, waving his arms, and yelled, “Stop!” But before he could enter the space and be seen, Martinez yanked him back into the crowd.

“It don’t go like that, amigo,” he said, firmly gripping Owen’s arm at the elbow. “Not with these two.”

A little boy named Antonio Vargas, an eight-year old with olive skin and red curly hair, who showed up only occasionally for activities and rarely spoke, was left alone behind Harold when the crowd backed up. A hand stuck out from the crowd stretching for the boy's shoulder, but the backsurge caused it to fall short, and instead of being drawn back into the crowd, Antonio was left isolated as Harold’s son lunged again.

Harold sidestepped and planted his rear foot in preparation for a full swing, a big wide home run swing with both hands. The swing started on the side opposite the boy, and glanced off his son's arm just below the elbow. The bat, its speed and trajectory barely altered, continued it's wide arc and struck the child just above his nose and sent him flying backwards towards the crowd. He landed flat on his back, slapping the pavement as if he'd been dropped onto it from

several feet above. Harold swung the bat again blindly in a wide arc, turning himself nearly 360 degrees. His son, knife hand hanging loosely at his side, had backed up a considerable distance, staring at Antonio. Harold then turned to see Antonio lying still on the sidewalk, blood pouring out of the wound over his nose.

The crowd that had just seconds before been pressed shoulder to shoulder trying to get a better view suddenly fractured and withdrew, distancing itself from the little boy's bloodied body. Harold Barnes' son screamed, "Holy motherfuckin' son of God!" and ran away through the thinning crowd and down the street, knife held high above his head.

"One o' y'all better take care of that boy!" Harold shouted as he too backed away through the thinning throng. His anger, and the weapon he still gripped tightly with both hands, paralyzed the remaining crowd. They were looking at the boy, but they feared the bat. Some women screamed in Spanish and some began crying. "Do something!" someone yelled.

Antonio had fallen just in front of Owen, who knelt down instinctively, cradled the boy's head, tore off his t-shirt, and applied pressure to the wound, careful not to press too hard for fear the boy's skull had been shattered.

"Yo!" said Martinez, kneeling beside Owen, "You know what you're doin'?"

Owen's head was pounding, and he barely noticed Martinez. He felt faint watching the blood soak through his t-shirt. The flow seemed to lessen each time he lifted the makeshift compress, but after a few seconds surged generously again. Owen re-folded the shirt each time and pressed again and again. His heartbeat pulsed in his ears, hammered in every part of his body. He knew he had to get up and start moving, or he would pass out.

Owen slid his arms carefully under Antonio and picked him up slowly, supporting the boy's neck and shoulders with his left arm, the knees with his right—pulling them towards the

boy's face—and across his chest and up to his head so he could keep the compress firmly in place with his left hand. Martinez walked alongside him, clearing a path through the stunned crowd. Several of the older women held necklace crucifixes up to their lips, kissing the cross several times as they passed. Younger women—and some men—murmured, “Oh Dios Mio” and “Christo, Santo Christo.”

"Go find Antonio's uncle!" shouted Martinez to a lieutenant who had just shown up. “Maybe you shoulda made that call, eh amigo?” Owen walked at a fast pace, towards Metropolitan Hospital six blocks southeast, in silence, Martinez a few paces behind.

The quick but basic first aid, the quiet and unrushed care and sensitivity to the boy’s injuries, the six-block-long walk while keeping pressure on the still bleeding wound—these actions had earned him the wristband.

Physically, the actions had not been hard or risky. He had carried a little boy, lighter than a hiking backpack, to the Metropolitan Hospital emergency room, and had stayed with the boy until the uncle arrived. He had done the job his coach would have expected. Assured by the ER docs that the boy would live, he had headed to the exit, having lost track of Martinez. The gangleader was waiting at the exit doors, holding a clean P.A.L. t-shirt.

“I figured you needed a clean shirt,” said Martinez. “Least I could do.” Owen knew he had left his apartment locked; the keys were in his pocket. Martinez had either wooed Lorraine—the landlady—or broken in. “The Vargas family owes you, man. You should get some kinda reward. What you want?”

“A shower.”

Martinez laughed. “Nah, for real man, a solid for a solid. Name it. I’ll steal it for you if I gotta.”

Owen looked at Martinez' thick leather wristband with the gold crown on it. "One of those," he said, thinking Martinez would dismiss the request outright. Only accepted gang members could wear the Los Reyes wristband.

After a long pause, the gangleader responded. "Ok, man." He cocked his elbow and offered Owen his hand. "You got it. Come back to the street. Me and the boys'll fit you up." *A solid for a solid.*

* * * * *

It's after 10 pm when Owen approaches his apartment. He clenches his fists again, his left wrist straining against the leather. The bloodstained t-shirt is still in his right hand. The mixture of dread and euphoria that had made his skin tingle after the ceremony, have been replaced by a calm acceptance of reality: his membership in the Los Reyes gang is an honorific. Tomorrow morning he will open the street same as usual. Nothing will change—except perhaps a few punk tweens will show him a little more respect, fearing retribution from one of Martinez' lieutenants.

Lorraine, his 80-year-old landlady, sits in her K-Mart-weave folding chair at the head of the stoop. She waves a wrinkled arm, gesturing to him as a queen might to her subjects. She smiles broadly; she is missing several teeth, the remaining ones randomly spaced like a jack'o'lantern. Had she *led* Martinez into his apartment a few hours ago? Or just let him pass? Next to her, in the shadows, stands someone Owen has not expected to see, waving his right hand, holding his left hand behind his back.

"You fuckin' forgot, didn't you?" says Tommy Belton, Owen's college roommate,

whose family lives on the upper east side, and who is interning all summer at his father's ad agency in SoHo. Tommy's left hand swings into view holding two bottles of Medalla beer; he hands one to Owen as Owen mounts the stairs. "You're up here in the friggin' heart of darkness, and I am left holding the proverbial bag with the lovely Carla and her gal pal Lucie. Dude—you gotta answer your phone!"

"Sorry," says Owen, only faintly remembering he had promised to meet Tommy after work today for drinks and a double date. "You know I don't take my cell to work."

"First off," says Tommy, "Carla thinks less of *me* now because my pal—that's you—stood up *her* best friend—that's Lucie, who did I tell you is a fuckin' knockout? Jesus! You gotta change your phone policy. And second, I'm here now so what is there to do in this shithole after 10pm besides steal cars and dance?"

"Don't be an asshole," Owen counters. He heads into the building, down the long center hallway to his apartment. He throws the blood-stained t-shirt over his shoulder to search for his keys.

"I'm joking!" says Tommy, following him into the apartment like a puppy. Owen tosses the shirt into the sink, squirts some dishwashing liquid on it, and runs the water. Tommy stands over the sink while Owen enters the bathroom and closes the door. "Dude! Your t-shirt is, like, more blood than shirt! What the fuck!"

"I gotta shower, Tommy. I'm exhausted. Go home," Owen shouts from behind the door. He has turned on the shower and the pipes whistle and clank as the water heats up.

"No way, Jose!" shouts Tommy. "You gotta tell me about this day of yours! You owe it to me. What say we get some coquitos and tostones at that place on 116th. My treat, amigo. And don't tell me you can afford to turn down a free meal. What's it called?"

"Juanitos."

"Juanitos. Perfect."

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A half hour later, they are standing at the southeast corner of 2nd and 116th Street in front of Juanito's. *Out Of Business* posters cover all the windows.

"Dude, how could you not know this place was closed?" says Tommy.

"I don't eat out. I never come anywhere near here except to get the train or a bus to the park."

"So what now? I need a drink, and you gotta fess up about the blood."

They continue walking west, stopping at 3rd. Owen downplays that afternoon's event on the playstreet. "All I did was cart a kid to the hospital E.R. I was Mr. Nice Guy as always. The kid was hurt pretty bad. I used my t-shirt to cover his wound. That's it."

Owen shows Tommy the wristband, which he barely glances at "That's it? You didn't get in a fight? Man, I thought you got in a fight and like popped some guy who bled on you or you got your nose broke again like in that SUNY game—and we know that shit bleeds, right?"

After crossing, Owen looks north up 3rd towards 118th when he hears sirens. Two police cars are stopped at the corner of his playstreet, blocking traffic going south, turning it east on 118th. Behind the cop cars are two ambulances. Above the sea of blinking red, blue and white lights is the sign for *The Little Burger Joint*. And above the sign, smoke is pouring out of the second story windows.

"Damn!" says Owen, running back across 3rd against the light to get a better look. A yellow cab brakes for him, the driver sits on his horn.

"Jesus Christ!" screams Tommy, shocked at his friends disregard for his own safety. At the west end of the block, two fire engines speed north up Lex, horns and sirens screaming. A half-minute later the fire engines arrive and stop in front of the cop cars. Within another thirty seconds, two jets of water are trained on the windows. Tommy waits for the light to change, then races back across 3rd and shoulders up to Owen; they are standing right at the edge of the curb, joined by a few other gawkers.

The roof lights on the two ambulances begin revolving and they pick up speed heading south on 3rd. The crosstown traffic on 116th Street is light heading west but heavy eastbound towards FRD Drive.

As the lead ambulance approaches the intersection from the north, traffic seems to have thinned. A pale blue station wagon, moving eastward, speeds toward 3rd. The light turns yellow, prompting the driver of the station wagon to urge his vehicle to an even higher speed, while other traffic, acknowledging the siren, slows.

"Lookit that asshole," remarks Tommy. Instinctively, Owen backs away from the curb. The ambulance reaches the intersection first. For an instant, it appears there will be no crash.

The sound of the impact is like a slap in the face. Owen backs up against the corner building as the scene unfolds in front of him; Tommy is frozen curbside a few yards west of him. The ambulance is broadsided near the rear wheels and its trajectory altered. It slides—tires screaming like multiple pieces of chalk on a blackboard—in a southeasterly direction towards Tommy; it spins clockwise, slowly, and the rear doors fly open, one tearing itself from its hinges and bouncing east across the pavement like a skipping stone, sparks flying, pin-

balling off the tires of a parked vehicle a few feet from where Owen is standing. His eyes are fixed on the ambulance's open rear, which, after the vehicle completes another revolution, comes into view again. Out of it flies a paramedic, short white coat billowing broadly like an unsecured sail, followed by a gurney.

"Oh God!" screams Tommy, legs suddenly liquid; he is backing up awkwardly, like a baby learning to walk, as the ambulance spins slowly towards him. The paramedic hits the pavement, rolls, then skids to a stop against the curb north of Owen. The gurney, one set of its rollered legs springing to vertical as it drops to the pavement, takes a slightly different angle, its injured passenger's limbs flapping while the torso—head down, scraping the pavement—remains securely strapped. Rolling south through the intersection, the gurney bounces and twists, threatening to topple, but it continues upright until it, too, strikes the curb, partially dislodging its cargo. The head and torso slide through the restraining straps, coming to rest in front of Tommy. Two more drunken steps back and he falls, arms gyrating, to a sitting position facing the still wobbly Gurnee, one set of its upright rollers propping it at a 30 degree angle. As one of the victim's legs begins sliding off, the other, still strapped in, pulls the gurney over on its side with a comical clink. From his sitting position, Tommy can look past his feet to the crushed and bleeding skull of the gurney's former occupant.

The blue station wagon, front end accordioned up to the windshield, has also spun through the intersection, tires smoking, hubcaps flying. It comes to rest beyond the white lines of the pedestrian walkway, facing west. The rear door has flown open, discharging a colorful array of clothes. Jackets and shirts, pants and shoes, are scattered over the intersection like confetti. The ambulance weaves slowly south, backwards, as if it too were drunk, until it stops, almost magically, on its own.

"Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ! Did you see that?" Tommy yells at the top of his lungs as the second ambulance comes to a screeching halt just south of the intersection. Both front doors open simultaneously, as if orchestrated. One paramedic heads towards the station wagon, another towards Tommy and the man lying in front of him. Tommy, his face a contorted mix of fear and revulsion, looks away. He is staring south, towards his parents home, towards safety, towards the world he is comfortable in.

For the second time in a six-hour span, Owen gives in to his natural urge to comfort a fellow human being. He squats behind Tommy, who is shivering, and puts both arms around his chest. There is a broad spattering of blood on the sidewalk around Tommy, on the front of his elegant white shirt and more thickly on the rotund black man lying on his back just a few feet away. Two trickles of blood—from beneath the man's misshapen head, and from a piece of tubing protruding from the man's arm—are seeping into the gutter. The man's eyes are open, as if he were staring at the sky.

Owen recognizes Harold Barnes.

"I got to get back home," says Tommy, standing up and pushing himself away from Owen. "I gotta clean up, man." He is holding his arm up, waving frantically. "Taxi! Taxi!" he screams at the first yellow cab to turn right off 116th. "Downtown, godammit!"

They do not speak again. Owen is watching Tommy's cab take off down 3rd Avenue when someone taps on his shoulder. It is Martinez.

"You got to come with me, " he says.

"Jesus! How did you find me? Is Antonio OK?"

Martinez tugs at Owen's sleeve. "I said you deserved a reward, right? That thing on your wrist? That ain't nothin'. We got somethin' better for you now, man."

Martinez leads him north towards the fire engines that are still pouring water into the corner greystone that housed Harold Barnes's 10-seat hamburger joint. The lithe Puerto Rican walks briskly yet quietly, like a cat, head turning left and right. It is the walk of a hunter seeking prey—or some action that will continue the violence that had its beginnings before the swing of the bat, before the lunging of the knife, before Antonio got hurt, before the summer began, before Martinez was born.

Martinez does not stop to observe the smoldering building, or to examine the burned out hulk of Harold Barnes' tiny restaurant. He does not watch the streams of water entering through the second-story windows, and pouring out through the front door. Owen follows him north to 120th, deeper into the heart of El Barrio, and they turn east.

"Somethin' had to be done, you know?" he says. "Things gotta be set right." Halfway down the block, on the south side of the street, Martinez guides Owen to the stairs of a brownstone, down narrow steps that lead to a basement apartment. This is the gang's headquarters, sanctuary, boardroom, recovery room. "We got you somethin' money can't buy."

After one hard forearm knock, the door opens with several sets of hands. The broad expanse of cement floor is illuminated by two dim light bulbs dangling from the ceiling.

What money can't buy turns out to be sitting underneath the furthest bulb. Marvyn Barnes—Harold Barne's son—sits cross-legged, shaking, duct-taped around the shoulders to a cheap plastic chair, arms in his lap. Owen pictures Marvyn wildly swinging the knife that afternoon; and the father now lying on the street four blocks south, covered by a sheet. Owen's head aches from the craziness, the insane sequence of events. An accident. A crazy, stupid driver rams his station wagon into an ambulance; but not just any ambulance, the ambulance carrying Harold Barnes, the man who almost killed Antonio Vargas.

The basement smells of dank water, mixed with oil, of rat shit and piss, of dead animals and wet plasterboard. During the long, slow walk to the far end of the basement, Owen feels untethered, slightly dizzy. He feels a need to pull the events together, to make sense of the day. As they get closer, he sees Marvyn's face, puffy and discolored, hanging back and to one side, head held up by the back of the chair. His nose is broken. His eyes are swollen shut. There is a large lump above his left eye. There is blood beneath his nose, dripping down over his lips and off his chin into his lap. He does not appear to be breathing. On the floor is a small pool of vomit.

Martinez and some of the other boys are behind Owen, forcing him closer to Marvyn. He can feel the young man's hot pukey breath, and can smell the blood.

Owen closes his eyes for a moment, imagining himself next to Tommy, sitting in a cab speeding south towards a comfortable air-conditioned bedroom. He opens them when he hears Marvyn speak.

"Please," says Marvyn, in barely a whisper, stretching the e-e-e sound.

"Shut up, motherfucker!" says Ricki, the voice coming from somewhere behind Owen.

"Take your time, Owen," says Martinez.

Owen is not sure what Martinez is offering: the opportunity to participate in the final stages of a brutal beating; or the dramatic choice of what should come next. That there might ever be a moment like this in Owen's life had never occurred to him. For the people who live on 118th Street between Lexington and 3rd, the fight between Harold and his son was significant, but not life-changing. Antonio was going to live. The Little Burger Joint was gone, and Harold Barnes with it, but life would go on, and in a few weeks the boarded up building would become home to drug addicts who would keep to themselves.

Ricki circles the room nervously. “I told you he’s no gangbanger!” he calls out from the somewhere in the darkness.

“No shit he ain’t,” says Martinez. “And he don’t gotta be. Owen’s his own man. He’s got his own idea about what’s right, don’t you Owen?”

Owen says the only thing he *can* say; the strength to speak comes not from a confident sense of morality, not from a religious belief—because he has learned up here that religious beliefs can be used to justify the most heinous acts—but from his own past, from which he has drifted away while living up in East Harlem, the same past that Tommy has returned to; the comfortable, safe haven only for those who can easily disengage from the horrors of war, or poverty, or sickness, or hate. In Martinez’ world, there is no such luxury. This realization makes the gift Martinez is giving to him all the more valuable. He is merely a puppet in Martinez’ show; he is a nice guy in a bad guy world, where emotions are like wounds, and scabs form easily. Up here, between inaction and violence there is little room, little time for a soft touch or a generous gesture. He is not hard like Martinez; he is soft. No matter how worn the leather on his wrist, no matter how rough his hands or tough his body becomes, he is—for the gang, for the neighborhood—the white boy who can, and will—sooner rather than later—leave.

“Let him go,” says Owen, quietly but firmly. He can see the disappointment on Ricki and Renny’s faces, the sour look turning bitter. And for the first time that day, perhaps the first time in his life, Owen allows all his emotions—a cocktail of anxiety, fear, confusion, and alienation—to burst forth.

He goes for the rim, elbows high, ready to take the hits. “His father is dead! Isn’t that enough?” screams Owen. The two lieutenants hold tight to Marvyn.

“Motherfucker!” says Ricki.

"Yo!" Martinez snaps his fingers at Ricki, and growls, "Do it!"

All four lieutenants help to un-tape Marvyn and stand him up. As soon as they let go, Marvyn runs for the door. Owen can hear him slip and fall on his way up and out of the basement. Slowly the gang members walk out. Owen and Martinez are the last, and walk out together.

"You can't always get what you want, right?" says Martinez. "But sometimes…"

Owen knows that Martinez has taken a hit for him. *A solid for a solid.* And that the Rolling Stones reference is aimed at himself, not Owen.

Tomorrow, Tommy will wake up to bacon and eggs and coffee, and talk to his mother and father about their plans and his plans, and he might or might not talk about his night up in El Barrio with Owen. Tommy won't try to make sense of what happened, because there is no need. When you have a lot of money, thinks Owen, you can afford to have the world be abstract and arbitrary in its distribution of fate: someone lives, someone dies—its just tough luck if it's you, and people get on with life. But up here, things have to happen for a reason. When you don't have money, you had better have some beliefs that will support you. Belief systems are like currency up here, and there are payouts every day. Part of Owen thinks he should feel good about having the power to save Marvyn, but another part of him thinks its likely that one day, after Owen has returned to college, Renny and Ricki will take Marvyn east to the river, stick a knife into his gut, and drop him into the water.

Owen emerges into the moonlight on the dimly lit and deserted street; he sucks in air that a country boy would think unfit, but compared to the basement it is rosemary and jasmine, beaches and fir trees; it replaces the combination of urine, decay and the stench of Marvyn's fear that had filled his nostrils. He keeps taking deep breaths, unnecessarily, hoping the air will

rejuvenate him; that it might contain a belief system *for him* that could explain what had happened today. If he breathes it in deeply enough, he hopes to find a reason that might put Martinez' simple tactic of revenge in perspective, something he might be able to take back to his world. Perhaps this anxious emptiness is what Martinez and all the others feel before they rush in to fill the void with fierce actions, to ionize the air with their power, with the willingness to believe *in anything*—anything but the apparent randomness of acts. Up here, the religion of Owen's youth—with its benevolent, forgiving, all-seeing God—is just a funny story told on Sundays to little children to help calm them. In this world, on this street, the tsunami in Indonesia is seen as punishment, or a warning, or a cleansing of some sort, not a random act. Tomorrow, on 118th Street, the fire, the accident, the deaths, will be spoken of as vengeful retribution for human sins. For Owen's sake, Martinez will wait. But not forever.

Owen feels his wrist, sweaty and itchy from the tight leather wristband. He takes it off, scratches and rubs where it had been fastened, and holds it in his other hand. As he walks south, Martinez calls out from the middle of the block, "See you Monday, compadre! Everything's gonna be back to normal!" Owen stops scratching, letting the sweat evaporate. As he passes the still smoldering corner greystone where only a day earlier he had eaten two of Harold Barnes' juicy little burgers, the world far south of 118th Street looks no more real to Owen than a movie set. From a distance he sees Lorraine, still sitting on the stoop of his apartment. He will sleep soundly tonight, despite the incessant drone of traffic on FDR Drive and the noisy busses on 1st Ave.

And tomorrow, when he steps onto the street for his daily three-on-three, he will drive to the basket with his elbows high—ready to take a hit. His opponents will see the wristband, but it

will change nothing. He will still pull up short for the jumper he knows he can make, to score the points the ballers expect from him.