

## POINTS OFF THE BENCH

Looking west, 118<sup>th</sup> Street seems to curve downward towards the setting sun, still a fierce presence at 7pm, burning the tops off buildings as it drops into the Hudson. Humidity presses into every crack and hole in the cement, every pore in Owen's skin. He would be sweating even if he hadn't recently finished an hour-long 3v3 with five members of the Los Reyes gang. In college he wasn't recruited as a skilled position player, but a workhorse. The guy who could get *points off the bench*, as the saying goes. That first summer running the playstreet, 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!" "*Puto!*" "Fag!" and the popular "*Güero!*" But his game improved. He got up quicker on his jumpers, carried his elbows higher, learned a couple moves—and earned regional NCAA honors his last season in college. This is Owen's second summer working as a playstreet director. Even his college basketball coach was surprised when he signed on to work the same street before beginning graduate school at Stonybrook in late August.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue corner, several preschoolers gather in the street, pressing brightly colored Nehi bottle caps into the heat-softened tar around a sewer grating, framing it. The caps are from the bottles of orange soda served at *The Little Burger Joint* a few yards away. Owen

has hauled the sawhorses to the storage room, but no cars have come by yet, and so the kids have extended their design well into the street. 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, hoarding the shade, sit motionless in folding chairs, socks rolled down and pants legs rolled up.

The gangbangers have recruited a group of younger kids and switched to stickball, having promised Owen they will return the equipment by Monday morning. They are all shirtless and look like they just climbed out of a pool. Their frenetic lunges and sprints contrast sharply with the slow-motion that surrounds them. It no longer surprises Owen that the hottest days are when the street is the most crowded, especially as the sun sets. You can count the number of apartments with air conditioning here on one hand.

He checks the lock on the metal door at the bottom of the stairwell, behind which all the equipment is stored: basketballs, nerf balls, and assorted rubber balls; sticks for stoopball, a ping-pong table with paddles and balls; a half dozen easels, watercolors and tempera paints, brushes, paper, chalk, decks of cards, boardgames and picture books; two twelve-foot-high posts which fit into holes drilled in the street, two orange baskets with backboards, which mount onto the posts; and the two red-and-white-striped sawhorses, supplied by the local precincts to help restrict car access to designated Summer Playstreets.

After mounting the stairs, Owen measures his pulse and takes a deep breath to calm himself before beginning the three-block walk to his apartment near the East River. All five Los Reyes gang members have taken a break from stoopball and are standing at the top of the adjacent stoop, waiting for Owen to leave. Their leader is a wiry 16-year-old named Martinez,

his arms a frenzied mix of tattoos and bruises, who smiles at Owen as he passes the group. Two lieutenants—Ricki, only thirteen but already sporting a six-inch scar across his abdomen, and Renny, fourteen, who lost part of his left ear to a gunshot during a skirmish with a Vatos Locos gang member—give him a begrudging nod. The other two boys, Santiago and Gabriel, shy away. They are new recruits.

Los Reyes takes charge of the street on nights and weekends. The cops are savvy—they know that the playstreet works on weekdays only because Los Reyes allows it to.

Owen begins the slow walk east. One-by-one the brown- and grey-stoned facades of the four-story railroad apartment buildings, with their steep stair fronts and tall, thin windows, are absorbed by the creeping darkness. The young woman withdraws from her stoop; the old men re-posture themselves in their fold-up chairs. The street is still active, full of little children and teenagers rattling with nervous energy despite the heat. Shouting—an argument between a man and a woman—erupts and spills out of a window three stories up. A group of four older men walk by with hands in their pockets and heads down.

He is passing by the kids at the grate when he hears the screams behind him. Heads turn west towards Lex, and a crowd has already formed. Fistfights are common, a daily summer activity, but this one sounds different. In the middle of the block, the 'ballers from the game join a semi-circle forming around two combatants.

One is Harold Barnes—a big black man in his late forties, who wears sweatsuits even on the hottest days, the sole cook and owner of *The Little Burger Joint*, handed over to him by his father. His father had bought it when this part of Manhattan was mostly African-American, before the Hispanic influx—the lone black holdout along a stretch of East Harlem known as Little San Juan. With only ten seats lining a single counter, the tiny restaurant serves small and

affordable hamburgers on English muffins—and a refreshing sour orange soda. It is open only from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday, and no one sees much of Harold other than that. He lives above the restaurant and seldom ventures out onto the street in daylight. Word is he doesn't need to work; he has a disability pension from the Army due to a friendly fire incident in Afghanistan.

Harold holds a baseball bat, standing like he is 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 4-inch blade, is a young dark-skinned Hispanic man with a natty afro, perhaps in his twenties, whom Owen does not recognize. The two men stand nervously, ten feet from one another, the stranger continuing his run of profanity, Harold tensely quiet.

“Who is the young guy?” asks Owen, to no one in particular. Martinez appears and whispers, “That's Harold's own kid, man, from when he was married to *la Boricua trigueña*.”

“Who’s that?”

“Puerto Rican lady worked in his place.”

“I gotta call the cops,” says 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.

“Aren’t you off-duty?” says Martinez, grinning.

“Yeah, but I gotta,” says Owen. He surveys the crowd. Several spectators hold up smart phones—some of the Los Reyes members have them, too—and are taking pictures or video.

“Yeah, whatever,” says Martinez languidly. Since he started this summer, Owen has been loathe to bring his cellphone to work. The impulse to call for help was so strong that first summer, boiling up so often, that he committed to leaving his cellphone in his apartment this

time around. It is unlikely anyone in the crowd will stop filming to lend the gringo their phone—especially not to call the cops.

Owen is about to tap the shoulder of a high-school-aged mother named Rosa, who he had seen earlier with a phone, when the crowd suddenly backs up like a wave from a rock dropped into water. Owen stands his ground and finds himself closer to the fight. Next to him is Martinez. The gang leader is shaking his head, eyes looking down. He spits on the pavement. "Those two hate each other since *eternamente. Les rechazo*," he adds, spitting on the pavement. "Here," he says, holding up a cellphone.

"Somebody stop them!" a woman yells from somewhere in the crowd. "*¡Que alguien lo pare!*" adds another.

Owen, believing at that moment the requests are meant for his ears, ignores Martinez' offer. "I have to do something," he says, his voice trembling.

Suddenly Harold's son charges, catching his father off guard, but Harold swings the bat, bruising his adversary on the shoulder. The younger man trips backwards over the curb. Harold swings the bat hard again, downward, intending to hit his son in the head. Tiny shards of concrete fly up at impact. The young man is on his feet quickly, swinging his knife hand in wide half-circles, backing Harold up, forcing the crowd back behind him. The epithets have stopped.

The requests to end the fight have stopped. All is quiet rage now; the usual chanting has not developed. Everyone senses the seriousness of the event.

Owen steps forward, waving his arms, and yells, "Stop!" But before he can enter the space and be seen, Martinez yanks him back into the crowd.

“It don’t go like that, amigo,” he says, 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 play activities and rarely spoke, is left alone behind Harold when the crowd backs up. A hand sticks out from the crowd, stretching for the boy's shoulder, but the back surge causes it to fall short, and instead of being drawn back into the crowd, Antonio is left isolated as Harold’s son lunges again.

Harold sidesteps and plants his rear foot in preparation for a full swing, a big wide home run swing with both hands. The swing starts on the side opposite the boy, and glances off his son's arm just below the elbow. The bat, its speed and trajectory barely altered, continues its wide arc and strikes the child just above his nose and sends him flying backwards towards the crowd. He lands flat on his back, slapping the pavement as if he'd been dropped onto it from several feet above. Harold swings the bat again blindly in a wide arc, turning himself nearly 360 degrees. His son, knife hand hanging loosely at his side, has backed up a considerable distance, staring at Antonio. Harold then turns to see Antonio lying still on the sidewalk, blood pouring out of a wound over his nose.

The crowd that had just seconds before been pressed shoulder to shoulder trying to get a better view suddenly fractures and withdraws, distancing itself from the little boy’s bloodied body. Harold Barnes’ son screams, "Holy motherfuckin' son of God!" and runs 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 shouts as he too backs away through the thinning throng. His anger, and the weapon he still grips tightly with both hands, paralyzes

the remaining crowd. They are looking at the boy, but they fear the bat. Some women scream “¡Socorro!” and some begin crying. “Do something!” someone yells.

Antonio has fallen just in front of Owen, who kneels down instinctively, cradling the boy’s head. He tears off his t-shirt, and applies pressure to the wound, careful not to press too hard for fear the boy’s skull has been shattered.

“Yo!” says Martinez, kneeling beside Owen, “You know what you’re doin’?”

Owen’s head is pounding, and he barely notices Martinez. He feels faint watching the blood soak through the layers of his t-shirt. The flow seems to lessen each time he lifts the makeshift compress, but after a few seconds surges generously again. Owen re-folds the shirt each time and presses again and again. His heartbeat pulses in his ears, hammering in every part of his body. He knows he has to get up and start moving, or he will pass out.

Owen slides his arms carefully under Antonio and picks him up slowly, supporting the boy’s neck and shoulders with his left arm, the knees with his right—curling both arms towards the boy’s face so he can keep the compress firmly in place with his left hand. Martinez walks alongside him, clearing a path through a group of older women. Several of them hold necklace crucifixes up to their lips, kissing the crosses several times as the two men pass. Younger women—and some men—murmur, “¡Oh Dios Mio!” and “¡Christo, Santo Christo!”

“¡Ve a byscar al tio de Antonio!” shouts Martinez to a lieutenant in the crowd. Then, to Owen, “Maybe you shoulda made that call, eh *amigo*?” Owen walks at a fast pace, towards Metropolitan—the closest hospital—twenty blocks southeast, in silence, Martinez a few paces behind. He is aware that he is shaking, not from the sight of his blood-soaked t-shirt, but from the thought that the boy’s injury may be life-threatening. It takes twenty minutes to carry little

Antonio, lighter than a hiking backpack, to the Metropolitan Hospital emergency room. He stays with the boy until the uncle arrives. He has done the job his coach would have expected.

Two hours later, assured by the ER docs that the boy will live, he heads to the exit, having lost track of Martinez. But there, waiting at the exit doors, holding a clean P.A.L. t-shirt, is the gang leader. Owen is certain he had left his apartment locked; the keys are in his pocket. Martinez had either wooed Lorraine—the landlady—or broken in. “The Vargas family *te debe*, man. You should get some kinda reward. What you want?”

Owen looks down at his chest, still covered in Antonio’s blood. The dried blood is the color of Martinez’ skin. “A shower,” he says. He holds the blood-stained t-shirt in one hand, and the clean one in the other.

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

Walking together down the exit ramp, Owen eyes Martinez’ thick leather wristband with the gold crown on it. “One of those,” he says, thinking Martinez will dismiss the request outright. Only accepted gang members can wear the Los Reyes wristband. Initiation into Los Reyes normally requires two dangerous rites of passage: a pummeling at the hands of lieutenants, and an attack on a rival gang member. An acceptable alternative is to commit a felony crime—steal a car, break into a neighborhood store, shake down a shop owner.

After a long pause, the gang leader responds. “Ok, man.” He cocks his elbow, takes off his wristband and holds it out for Owen. “You sure that’s all you want?”

Owen hands the clean t-shirt back to Martinez, then grasps the band firmly, as if it were a live thing, and might jump out of his hands and back to its rightful owner.

“Put it on, man,” says Martinez.



“What about Riki and Renny? They went through hell to get theirs.”

“They’ll fall in line. Gang-banging ain’t hard, you think about it. Doing the right thing when it counts—that ain’t always easy.”

“Well, thanks, Martinez, I’ll wear it proudly.”

“You gotta, man. And don’t never take it off, neither. Not when you sleeping. Not when you—you know—” He makes a gesture of poking one finger through a circle made by the thumb and forefinger of his other hand. “*Nunca jamàs!*” he adds, smiling.

Owen fastens the leather bracelet to his wrist and holds up his arm. The dark leather shines when the fading sunlight reaches it.

“You can’t always get what you want, eh *Güero?*” says Martinez, slapping Owen on the shoulder, handing back the clean t-shirt. “But you might get what you need.” Martinez heads west, and Owen north, towards his tiny apartment at the easternmost stretch of 118<sup>th</sup> Street. Owen laughs at the Puerto Rican’s misappropriation of the Rolling Stones lyric. What Owen had *wanted* was the wristband. What did Martinez think that Owen *needed*?

Approaching his apartment, Owen clenches his fists again, left wrist straining against the leather as his fingers squeeze the clean t-shirt. The bloodstained t-shirt is still in his right hand.

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.

Tommy's family lives on the upper east side, and he is interning all summer at his father's ad agency in SoHo. His left hand swings into view holding two bottles of Medalla beer; he hands one to Owen when Owen reaches the top step. "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. "Look, I waited all this time and told Carla the date was off, because I wanted to see you. I hardly see you anymore." Owen tosses the clean t-shirt onto a chair, and the bloodied shirt into the kitchen 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 happened?"

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

“Were you in a fight?” shouts Tommy. “Did you lose? Cuz it looks like you lost. You can tell me all about it over some coquitos and tostones. My treat, amigo. And don’t tell me you can afford to turn down a free meal. What’s that place on 116<sup>th</sup> called?”

“Juanito’s.”

“Juanito’s. Perfect.”

A half hour later, they are standing at the southeast corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 116<sup>th</sup> 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.

“Because I never eat out, Tommy. I never come anywhere near here except get the train or a bus to the park. The only time I’ve been to Juanito’s was with you, that one time.”

“So what now? I need another drink, and you gotta fess up about the blood.”

They continue walking west, stopping at 3<sup>rd</sup>. 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 reacts to the sound of sirens and looks north up 3<sup>rd</sup> towards 118<sup>th</sup>. Two police cars are blocking traffic going south. 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*. Two jets of water are trained on the second-story windows, a single jet pours water through the front door. Smoke is pouring out the openings, but no flames. One of the ambulances maneuvers around the two cop cars and heads south towards where Tommy and Owen are standing.

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

“What the fuck?” screams Tommy, catching up to his friend. At the edge of the curb, they are joined by a few other gawkers.

A second ambulance catches up to the first, roof lights pulsing. The crosstown traffic on 116<sup>th</sup> Street is light heading west but heavy eastbound.

The lead ambulance approaches the intersection from the north. The traffic heading south on 3<sup>rd</sup> pulls over for them. A pale blue station wagon, heading east on 116<sup>th</sup>, speeds up when the light turns yellow, while other traffic, acknowledging the sirens, 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, pinballing off the tires of a car parked on 116<sup>th</sup> 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 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 gurney, one set of its roller 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 sideways, scraping the pavement—remains securely strapped. Rolling south past 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 wobbly gurney, 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 snags on a strap and 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, skitter across the pavement like confetti. The ambulance weaves slowly south, backwards, as if it too were drunk, until it stops, 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 the man lying in front of Tommy. Tommy, his face a contorted mix of fear and revulsion, looks away. He stares south, towards his parents' home, towards the world he knows, where he feels comfortable and safe.

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 116<sup>th</sup>. It slows down and he yells, "Downtown, godammit!"

They do not speak again. Owen watches Tommy's cab take off down 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue when someone taps his shoulder. It is Martinez.

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

"Jesus! What are you doing here? Is Antonio OK?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," says Martinez. He tugs at Owen's sleeve. "Remember how I said you deserved a reward? 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 rolling up their hoses in front of the gutted and charred 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 to avoid becoming someone else's. There is a whole life's energy in his walk—power he began amassing before the swing of the bat, before the lunging of the knife, before Antonio got hurt, before the summer began, before he could walk.

Martinez does not stop to observe the smoldering building, or to examine the burned-out hulk of Harold Barnes' tiny eatery. He kicks at the water pouring out through the front door.

Owen follows him north, deeper into the heart of El Barrio, and they turn east.

"Somethin' has to be done, you know?" he says. "Things gotta be set right. *Las cosas derecho*." On 120<sup>th</sup>, halfway down the block, Martinez guides Owen to an abandoned 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 Barnes' 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; the father lying on the street four blocks south, covered by a sheet. Owen's head aches from the insane sequence of events. An accident. A crazy, stupid driver rams his station wagon into an ambulance. And 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.

"*Cállate*, 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. He has learned this much: for the people who live on 118<sup>th</sup> Street between Lexington and 3<sup>rd</sup>, the fight between Harold and his son was significant, but not life-changing. Antonio is going to live. *The Little Burger Joint* is gone, and Harold Barnes with it, but life will go on, and in a few hours—maybe already—his boarded-up building will become home to drug addicts. Martinez and the other gang members will supply them their drugs, and ensure that none of the dopers cause trouble on the street.

Ricki circles the room nervously. "I told you he's no gangbanger!" he calls out from 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 prepares to say the only thing he *can* say. The words well up in him. They are from his past, the past he has been drifting away from while living here in East Harlem. Here—now—he battles the overwhelming tick-tock-tick-tock countdown that the combination of poverty, anger, and violence inevitably initiate. The gang is waiting for his response. Time itself feels like hands grabbing him, squeezing him, hurting him. He can see in the gang members' eyes that they have no room for a generous gesture. They are uncomfortable with Martinez' offer. No matter how worn the leather on his wrist, no matter how rough his hands or tough his body becomes, the gang will always see Owen as the white boy who can—and will, sooner rather than later—leave.

“So?” asks Martinez.

“Motherfucker set fire to his own home!” snaps Ricki. “You think he didn’t know his old man was inside?”

Renny adds, “He don’t give a shit about nobody but hisself.”

Martinez restrains Ricki when he lunges towards Marvyn, then turns back to Owen. “So what do you wanna do to make things right?”

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.* “Let him go,” he says, quietly but firmly. He can see the disappointment on Ricki and Renny’s faces, the sour looks turning bitter. Every muscle in him tightens, his hands curl into fists, held above his head and brought down quickly. Renny and Ricki take a step back; they have never seen the white boy so heated up. But the two lieutenants keep a tight hold on Marvyn. “I know you want to kill him,” Owen says to Ricki and Renny. He turns to Martinez. “But I don’t.”

“Mo-ther-fucker!” says Ricki.

“Shut up!” Martinez snaps his fingers at Ricki, and growls, “Do it! Let him go.”

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

“I look at it this way,” says Martinez. “You can’t always get what you want, right?”

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. He takes deep breaths, hoping the fresh air will rejuvenate him. Unexpectedly, it is his body that relives the day’s events, not his mind. His skin tingles. His muscles vibrate. He wants to put the fight, the accident, the reward, and the offer of revenge in perspective—but the belief system he’d brought with him to the job two years ago feels less like the life preserver it was meant to be, and more like a heavy weight. This is how Martinez and all the others must feel before they resort to violence, hoping to impose their will over the randomness of acts. Up here, the *ancianas* tell the children the tsunami in Indonesia is a punishment, a warning, or a cleansing of some sort, not a random act.

Tomorrow, the whole neighborhood will speak of the fire, the accident, Harold’s death—as vengeful retribution for human sins. Martinez and his gang will walk past them and laugh.

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 will mention only in passing his night up in *El Barrio* with Owen. Tommy won’t try to make sense of what happened, because he feels no need

to. In addition to comfort, money has afforded him the luxury of a world view untroubled by the arbitrary distribution of pain and poverty, and the accompanying burden of constant anxiety that propels Martinez and the others into thug life. What Tommy saw will quickly become an abstraction, something he can toss away like everything else rich people consume. Into the trash, and forgotten. Up here, no one will forget. The *ancianas* will protect themselves with the tough hide of religious dogma; the gang with brutal action. The wristband serves as a reminder that Owen has no such armor. Staring at it, feeling the smooth exterior and the still damp inner lining, Owen sees his future: while he is sleeping tonight, Renny and Ricki will search for Marvyn. If they find him, they will finish the job they started. A punishment, as the *ancianas* would say; a warning to others, a cleansing. Because he is still tethered to his past, Owen hopes they do not find the young man.

Martinez calls out from the middle of the block, "See you Monday, *compadre*! Everything's gonna be back to normal!"

*So what exactly is normal?* Owen wonders as he passes the still smoldering corner Greystone, where a day earlier he had eaten two of Harold Barnes' juicy little burgers. The world south of El Barrio seems no more real than a movie set. Reaching the block where he lives, he spies Lorraine in the distance, sitting on her stoop.

He falls asleep picturing himself playing in the Monday morning three-on-three, driving to the basket with his elbows high—ready to take a hit. His opponents will see the wristband, but he will still pull up short for the jumper he knows he can make, to score the points the ballers expect from him.