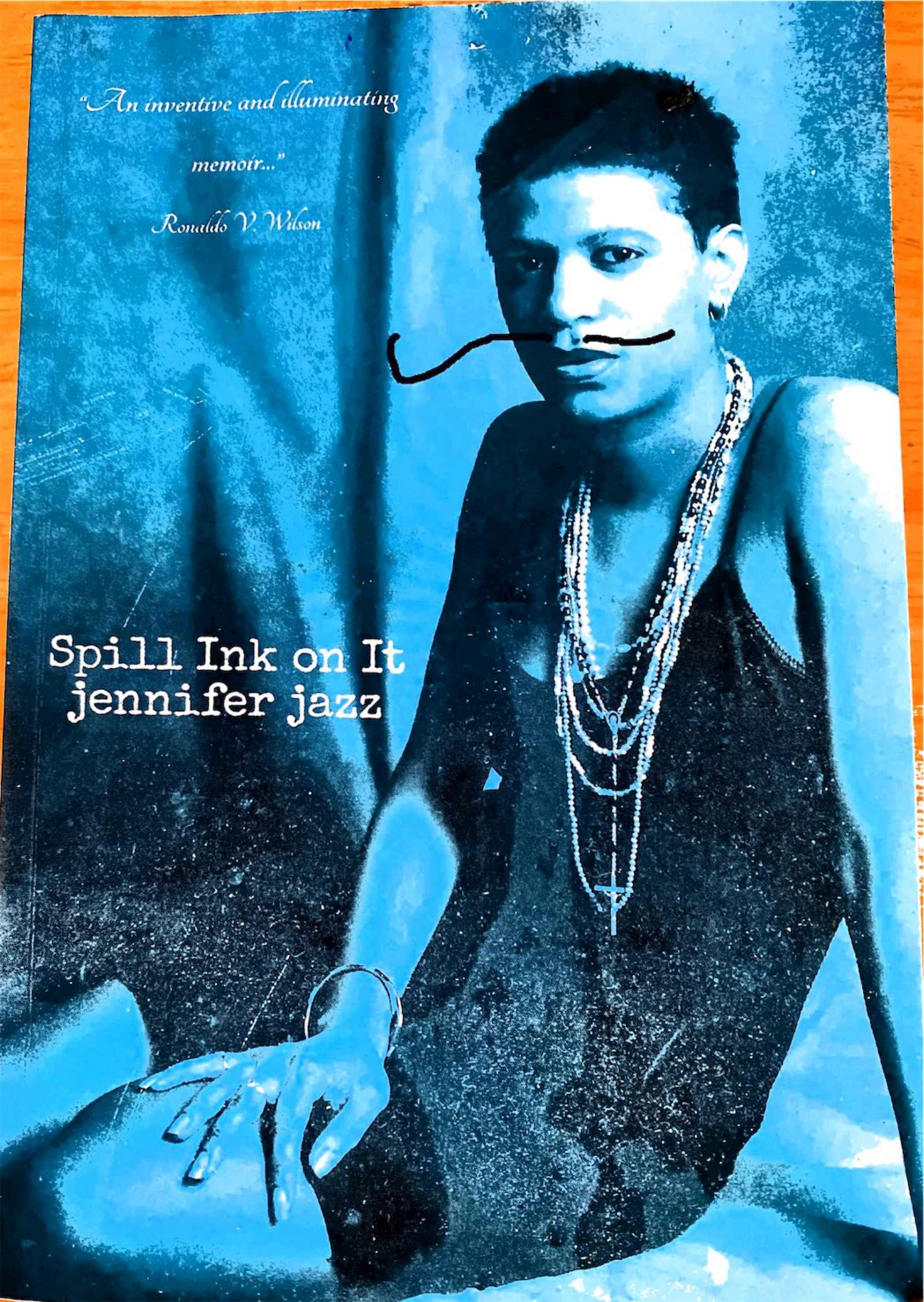


*"An inventive and illuminating
memoir..."*

Ronaldó V. Wilson

Spill Ink on It
jennifer jazz



One day, I'll go back to the street in the Bronx where I lived as a kid to look at the stained glass I used to spy on the world through, but the front door it was in will have been replaced, so my sacred broken mirror will be gone. But windows will always preoccupy me, though never more so than when I cut the police tape crisscrossing my first apartment. Kitchen walls cracked, perforated. Cupboards missing. A stockpile of putrid food in the frig. The stall you can't bring yourself to use at Port Authority my bathroom. The landlord didn't intend on waiting the 30 years it would take for Harlem to become outdoor café friendly. 'You'll be taking the next guys to court for repairs—not me,' he sighed when I signed the lease.

I scrub. I mop. Kill roaches, all of which I prefer to pacing the long shadow between empty rooms when I'm done. You're a selfish bitch. My mother is wont to say. So I'm not the bloody life-size statue of Jesus in the narthex of Christ the King. Okay. But being called selfish by someone whose demands I've always tried to accommodate even if that meant sacrificing my own happiness hurts, so I stay drunk on guilt and am only truly sober when I'm drinking, which is what I'm doing the first time that Junior, the former occupant knocks or I probably wouldn't have answered. Me simply studying him through the depths of the peephole and waiting for him to go away each time he returns and announces that the gate on my fire escape window belongs to him.

Squatting in a warehouse along the Hudson River without electricity or even a locked entrance, I once dis-

covered a derelict at the window watching as I got undressed so it's never been more clear to me that I need to be more careful.

It's 1982. The golden age of getting robbed—of ninja thieves who can tease a 300 pound door from a hinge without anyone hearing— of burglaries committed in broad daylight by phantoms that neighbors don't hear or see. Just make sure your apartment's not more easy to break into than the ones on either side of it, said the locksmith. That's my plan. But shoving a tangle of tiny socks, patent leather women's belts and costume jewelry into a garbage bag, it plays better on my conscience to acknowledge that Junior and his family got evicted and didn't have enough time to get all their things, so the next time he comes around, I just give the damned gate to him.

I'm 21 now, working at the New York Review of Books in the mailroom, a few rungs up at least from washing dishes at downtown hippie cafes, but still a job I believe is below me. Meeting the demands of assorted dilettantes with wide mood swings, including a female editor whose life calling is to be mean, let's just say it's not ideal. Yet there's a certain prestige in having been selected to patch through urgent phone calls from Jack Henry Abbott, Susan Sontag and Noam Chomsky. That's why I'm shocked when they hire Aries after Russell, whose swivel chair Aries' replacing, decides to take his camp humor and sixties beach party persona back to California to publish a xerox magazine. Aries with his flame of feathery hot combed hair. He's broad shouldered. Only

looks me full in the face when it's absolutely necessary, and at those moments it's clear he's trying with all his might not to laugh. His velvety Johnny Cash resonance not matching the girly way he pivots on his toes when backtracking to do something he forgot—or that hair. My first impression of him is that he's an Uncle Tom set on doing such a good job that he's going to make me look even more obnoxious to the powers that be than I already do. Mailroom people have always been frustrated writers, as far as I know. Aries strikes me as this random guy though, but he turns out to be as bright as hell—in an effortless kind of way. He doesn't give a hoot about reading the New York Review of Books. Only when he's broke and needs fast cash does he flip through the unsolicited copies of newly arrived books piled high in the office we share but just to figure out which ones he can sell to the Strand. The truth is that the Saturday he stops by, I would've greeted the Werewolf of London with the same enthusiasm if he too had owned an electric drill. But later there's an undeniable magic to Aries finessing open a pint of gin like a thief cracking the combination to a safe when the two of us sit on the floor of my living room in the soft light filtering through my newly installed window gate.

I'm not in that frigid room in the West Midlands of England anymore where I mistook a long suicide note for a manuscript. It's April, the time of year we most associate with being happy. Still, only men with easy hips and hands like smoke who blow me kisses as Aries parades me around Christopher Street, can save me from my habitual bouts of self-loathing. Whether we're pro-

voking the doormen at Better Days when we're peaking on mescaline or on a laidback road trip to some "geechie" house party his friends decided we should rent a car and drive to in Springfield, Massachusetts, Aries and I are the best buddy movie of all time. I'm thin skinned and combustible and always unsure if my friends are still my friends, but am never able to put Aries on edge, so am elated when he becomes my roommate and fills in some of my three-bedroom apartment's excess space.

His nobody's shit philosophy is beyond the scope of my nervous system, but it's clear he's onto something this night in a shadow of Hell's Kitchen that he stares down a derelict aiming a knife at him until the derelict comes to his senses, folds it back up and strolls away. Convinced that if you threw a pint of his beloved "knotty head" into a tiger's cage at the zoo, Aries would climb right in and get it, inviting the tigers to try and stop him—I had come to believe that he and I were life-size pieces in an easy board game in which every square said "Go" and am not at all prepared for what happens when Country, a guy Aries had a brief fling with, moves in. A prude by comparison to us, Country meticulously outlines his beard, irons his pants and drapes them from hangers all facing the same way. Whenever he accuses Aries and I of being lazy or says the tacky shower curtain I had bought as a form of comic relief looks cheap it's never more obvious that he should buy the money orders we pay our bills with since he's so devoted to tedium.

He could be an axe murderer for all we know, I tell Aries months later when passing a joint his way. Or unemployed and spending the money we give him, replies Aries with the usual slyness after he inhales. We take turns

inventing funny plotlines about Country and laughing, then, in a tone that's sheepish for Aries, he confesses he has no idea where Country works or used to live. I don't know who gets paranoid first, just that the unlit room across the hall becomes a spreading sci-fi like mass that sucks us in. The closet's empty. His shoes are gone too. It's obvious he isn't coming back once we've lifted his mattress and discover a stash of photo ID cards under different aliases, the only evidence he ever existed as for the first time, we're not laughing at Country. He's laughing at us.

Subway cars are the new homes for those too lazy to make better use of Ronald Reagan's smile, but I forget about the misery that's guaranteed if I don't catch up with months of unpaid rent, and am deciding what earrings look best with the vintage military cap with a patent leather visor tilted on my head before I head out to Dave Mancuso's weekly party. Then, Tasia appears behind me in my mirror. Tasia, unlike Aries's other friends, isn't an eye-batting, shrill-voiced Little Richard double from down South. He's svelte with a shoulder shake he does when perturbed by something even if in those moments I can never really tell if he's offended or just playing, but I had gotten used to him marching in swinging bags of designer clothes like a villain with nuclear bomb grade uranium and a scheme. Aries and I making fun of this on occasion. Me preferring to believe Tasia's persona was all harmless pretense. Sales clerks offering to help pick out my clothes as if random opinions have anything to do with what I buy always irritate me. It's no different

when Tasia keeps badgering me on how I should do my makeup and what I should wear.

“Fuck off already,” I plead when I can’t take it anymore without expecting him to shove me with so much force, I land on my back on the floor with him right on top of me ramming a can of hairspray with all his might between my legs. The fact that I have on pants a good thing because I don’t know how far he’d go otherwise at the same time that I’m sure he’ll hurt me even more if I fight back and damn is there a lot of strength in those dainty arms of his as Jennifer Holliday shrieks to high hell on a radio in the background like she’s the one being attacked by some creep with a hateful kabuki mask face.

If I had considered my apartment really mine, I might have revoked its open-door policy but I had been fired as soon as I moved in and begun to depend on Aries to financially carry me through the weeks when I was looking for the next job and the next. And anyway, I also bring in people I barely know like guys who are sure I'm a lesbian and lesbians who are sure I'm really straight for naked encounters that are more fact-finding than sexual but can last for days or even longer if I let them.

Aries sitting on my radiator is always a cue for me to rejoin the living. Tossing whatever shirt and pants at me he thinks I'd wear and laughing at how predictable I am as I get dressed. Peace of mind isn't something you can squeeze from solitude like water from a sponge I'll recall each time we descend the stairs together.

"There's Miss Honeycut," Aries will sing when we're outside again. The more he calls the Afghan in the window of the row house across the street by this make-believe name, the more it really resembles a woman with a curly wave minding everybody's business. And once we break free of the scrutiny of the usual faces puzzled by my second hand clothes and unevenly scissored aubergine dyed hair and we're climbing Sugar Hill, there are a host of other things to comment on like the Adonis at the corner deli who claims he's going to be the first black cowboy in a Camel cigarette ad, but who Aries insists is lying or the pig parts in bodega refrigerators that look like Joseph Beuys art you can actually eat.

Aries moving against the flow of crowds with an air of transcendence, amused by the dog eat dog hymns of traffic. His shoulder will be my pillow in the wee hours when we're wasted in the cars of empty uptown trains. Most of the few sublime moments I'll ever experience, I'll spend with him before the two of us get evicted, but so much will happen first.

Mary Lou Williams once lived in this building. The hallways rang with her piano back in the forties. The super told me. Dizz. Charlie Parker. The heaviest bebop cats rolled in and out of her place to jam on drums, stringed and brass instruments. I have no idea which apartment was hers exactly, but if it were the one where I now live, that would explain why Aries and I just can't stop partying.

But I have to mention Eugene because if not for him, I would've just ended up living in a basement in the boonies of Borough X again. Climbing 145th towards Convent Avenue a few days ago, avoiding the soop soop sound behind me, low and behold, I turned around and there he was looking as fresh as ever in high cuffed trousers that showed off his nicely contoured ankles and buttery leather loafers. You must like it when guys make noises at you, he said smiling. You must like getting mace sprayed in your face, I answered. Is that what you were getting ready to do? He asked. Well, why do you think my hand's in my pocket? I quizzed him. You don't have anything in there, he answered, slinging his arm around my waist. He was pickled in designer fragrance. The usual question mark of meticulously moussed hair

tumbling between his bright snapping eyes. I should call you jive Eugene, I said, removing myself from bronze James Dean's affectionate embrace.

We met at Bentley's, a midtown club with not just the name but polish and scale of a luxury car showroom. Justine's, Pegasus, Leviticus—they used to draw the afterwork set. But now Bentley's is all those spots combined into one and then some, so if you're twenty-something and in the mood to shimmy your shoulders with an air of sophistication in spite of how trifling your salary is, there's no better place to go on Friday after you leave your desk. Niles Rodger's prim and proper guitar licks and Jody Watley's girl next door vocals are actual anthems here. I have never seen a single woman inhaling powder from a folded twenty or even passing back and forth a doobie in the restroom, and when "Always and Forever" plays before closing time, fellas search for partners to sway in time to it with cheek to cheek because the old school customs of our parents are still an influence even with hip hop's bitch and hoe politik nipping at our heels. Green lipstick and knife toed stilettos are my M.O. I mix up stripes and plaids. Worn and faded with brand new, so was on the high road to nowhere the same as I am in Lower East Side hang-outs where the only black records you hear are imports or Motown oldies and the pigeon toed, palsied hand routine passes for a mating signal. Men I'm attracted to are not stressed out. Aren't know-it-alls. Have a smoothness about them, are neatly attired or even better. They should also at some point ask what I'm drinking. Eugene was too broke to afford the trip to the bar part. But the thrift shop Fedora and fifties tweed coat were eye catching. I could tell by his Morris

Day mannerisms that Boho was just one of many tricks up his sleeve. He liked my sense of humor. We looked good together. A woman told us that once when we were strutting side by side along Park Avenue. He slept on a broken cot in his grandmother's living room. Keeping his on again, off again girlfriend around because she foot the bill for shopping sprees at Bloomies. His older sister lived in a homeless shelter. The mom that had given them up, lived on Ward Island in the psych unit. You couldn't talk to him about much. He only really came alive when catching a glimpse of himself in a window pane or was artfully gelling his hair in his bathroom mirror. Burnt greasy fried bologna and eggs he washed down with kool-aid like it was manna from Heaven, the damage done back when he was a foster child living with a string of random crazies who had taken him in for money—that's when it most showed since there was no way in your right mind you could consider such dreck a decent meal. I see a guy I like and create a feel-good story around him. From that moment on, my imagination goes racing because all it wants is one chance to get past reality's disappointing limits. Fantasizing about someone should be like giving them a gift unless you're malicious, so I turned Eugene into someone I thought he deserved to be. I knew he was a messenger in the garment district but he became someone who worked in the fashion industry in my head—not that I was up to having a career conscious boyfriend. Actually, I would've put up with him longer if he hadn't stood me up the last couple of times we were supposed to hang out together.

"Beer tastes good on you," was a good line. I'll give

him points for it as well as his suggestion that we have breakfast in his neighborhood early one morning after clubbing because "Wow," was what I said that first time that we surfaced from the subway into the birth cries of morning on 145th and St. Nick.

Old timers talking lucky numbers, I sometimes smile at them. "Gone with the Wind" is droning on a snowy black and white TV again when I hear what I think is Butterfly McQueen's voice, then and lo and behold there she is next to a brownstone on 144th as hallucinatory as it seems. But only in Harlem is the silver haired lady getting a little afternoon exercise a Hollywood legend. A man gliding by with more pizazz than your average old timer, during another walk I take, has got to be one of the Nicholas Brothers, I figure. Not that I've sat in front of a TV since I left home, but everybody knows Clarice Taylor's the grandmother from the *Cosby Show*. There's something cool about sighting her but if her eyes harden and jawline tightens, I realize I'm gawking and it's rude. Then I'm edging along the block once, the tables turn and she's inside a parked car gawking at the math equations I've written all over my face in black eye pencil. Burt Wallace, the piano player in *Robeson*, the Broadway show about Paul Robeson that Aunt M. and I saw together—he lives around here too. I don't know how my mother met him, but his name has always come up whenever she reminisces about fifties night spots where she rubbed shoulders with people like Bunny, a lady who introduced herself as an aspiring actress.

"You've got a great look. Do you go out?" she asked to which my mom cluelessly replied "Yes." The two of them exchanging numbers with a vague plan to hit the town together. Bunny later calling to basically hire mommy

to sleep with a couple of well-known actors, because mommy hadn't fully understood what, "do you go out sometimes?" actually meant. But Burt was the Svengali that brought out the stifled starlet in Mommy even after she married Daddy who didn't mind her having a male hangout buddy since he was gay. Burt, who adored her Bardot eye makeup and windswept bangs, was performing "Moon River" at a supper club she once told me when he decided to lift her on top of his piano and hand her his microphone on a whim, and man did she love the applause she got for being a moody force of nature that keeps everything around her in flux as she sang-talked her way through a verse of it with the bitterly velvet candor of her idol Carmen McRae.

I was inspired to make my place as comfy as Lisette's, at first. Lisette born in Cap-Haitien. Raised in New York with a goofy way of pronouncing R's like W's who I met in an elevator on our way to the same company to interview for some BS receptionist job neither one of us took seriously. Weekends at her and her roommate's place out in Fort Greene where a Paradise Garage membership card and a brownstone apartment are the black female starter kit, were grounding, but Jean-Jacques Beneix's film *Diva*, which I saw so many times the trance it put me in will never end, reminded me that decorating can't hold a candle to sitting alone in the shroud of blue or amber bulbs in the torch shaped fixture on my bedroom wall.

I begin spending an unreasonable amount of my severance pay on junk a couple of months after I've moved

in. This is after I've already lost my job in the mailroom. I try to spend as little money as possible, but if Lisette and her roommate can't stop buying vintage iron skilletes and earthy ethnic wall hangings, bright plastic tchotchkes in the bins at El Mundo on Broadway and 145th are my fetish. As long as I can remember, I've confused junk for magic talismans, am on my way back there again when suddenly a sick dog's at my feet. I'll never understand where he came from since he's too weak to have to have reached where he is alone. I can see the outline of his ribs. He's small with a pointy nose and high elongated ears. His brown and white fur caked with tar or sewage backup maybe. If only I could cry out for help and someone would come running and take him to the place where he can get the care he needs, I lament when I'm rushing back to my apartment to get him water and something to eat. He strains to lift his head, to open his mouth for the ham I try and feed him and water I drizzle on his tongue. He's a scrapper alright that I can tell didn't end up close to dead on the ground without a fight.

It wasn't just the sight of him heaving, it was the persistence with which he fought to breathe that pulls me back to him early the next morning when a woman hauling planks of wood with rusted nails out of the townhouse she appears to be renovating pauses to scrutinize me. She's definitely not from around the way. Looks more like someone who would own a home in Canarsie or Howard Beach whose doubts that you can turn an inner city fixer up into a sound investment are stoked each time she sees me on my knees on the sidewalk, helping a dog she'd prefer to sweep up and add to the debris in

the dumpster in front of her. But the Christian Avenger appears out of thin air. I became conscious of the uneaten cold cuts, plastic water bowl, and piece of a cardboard box I'd folded over him to block out the sun when I note how fast her eyes are flaming. I know she'd been waiting for the moment to catch me in the act of doing something she considers illegal, and finally has me. I'd seen her before in an array of kooky hats that British aristocrats and black women are known to wear on Sundays. Now that she's not greeting congregants before the service, she's not as personable, unfortunately. Jabbing her finger at the sick dog between us, "You cannot do this here," she emphatically repeats. As hard as it is to stomach the irony that someone from a church is stopping me from being charitable, I know I'd be wasting my time if I argued with her, so a dying dog becomes a guest in one of my empty rooms, an inconvenience I accept because the load I would've carried otherwise would have been heavier. Bathing him with a warm sponge, I expect to soon be carrying his corpse to the park where I've already decided I'll bury him, but the grimy string that trailed from the end of his spine blooms into a high fluffy tail. The tar caked fur that I had clipped away soon grows back in evenly. Spinning around and around my legs all the time practically smiling or licking my face as if he had prayed that someone save him and his cute little dog prayer was heard.

"Is that the same dog Miss?" kids call out when I walk him. Others gape in disbelief. The key is to zone out, just float. Let them pull and follow. Not be Miss Goody Two Shoes who helped the dog that everybody else left for

dead. Kids calling out in singsong voices I largely ignore. If I were to get to know them—I mean the block's so narrow, and unless I've been smoking and I'm paranoid, I don't pay attention. The problem is I already have Spunky. A dog with a Shepherd's mask, shiny hair and the short snout of a Labrador that had been mine since the day in sixth grade when my mother walked in and gently set him in my arms without even asking. He was a puppy that had been run over by a cab that cracked his tiny hip. Wherever I went, he went. Hopping at first until he healed. There were times when I'd take him with me and others when I'd leave him with her since I'd been tagged to be his caretaker when I was too young to understand how restrictive my life would be. But as soon as she'd whine that he was my responsibility, I'd feel like a deadbeat, even taking him to the unlocked warehouse where I squatted and Epistemology stopped by before he left for England. He, Spunky and I that day crossing West Street to sit along the high ledge above the waves. Spunky vaulting in before realizing that he was in a river, not the simple brook where he'd cooled off on hot days up in Westchester. Trying to keep paddling, his head sinking as he lost strength. Watching my childhood dog drown in the Hudson, I would surely have od'ed on pain killers later. Epistemology scaling down the wall somehow and shouting Spunky towards him. A good Samaritan tugging them both up by a cable. The startling visits to the end and back again you take with pets. I sleep with bent legs to make room for one more now on my mattress.

Harlem's one big attic that extends even further than the *jumbie* possessed crawl space in our former house where we stored things we'd outgrown but couldn't bring ourselves to part with. Lanes as posh as photos of London you see in Tatler downshift into blocks of tapped out tenements where apartments have holes cut into their doors that you can shove five dollars into for a nickel bag of weed. Young white males fresh off the George Washington Bridge from Jersey poking their heads out cars to ask where they can cop. Now that gets to me, especially when I see some naively hospitable neighborhood kid encouraging them to keep coming by giving them directions as if you could roll through the streets where they live and expect the people you pass to help you buy drugs.

"Ask your mama. She knows," I say, not caring if I just found out what a dream book is or that most of my neighbors think I'm sick in the head.

Harlem's my new home and homes defend their secrets, though there's one secret everyone who lives near St. Nicholas Park does a damned good job of keeping or maybe they really don't know about it. Usually I let Kipper and Spunky off their leashes as soon as we enter the gate at the Saint Nicholas Terrace entrance, an almost always deserted block of yesterday's facades frozen in time that becomes a black hole as soon as the sun sets. Down by the basketball court, you see other people. The park though, is not the most popular destination and is always basically empty. I get lost in my thoughts when the dogs roam the hill behind me, turning to call for them when I'm ready to leave one night, I don't see them and

can't figure out where they've gone. Shuffling into a trail of thick vines I'm braced for a living composite sketch to leap out and grab me when a man whose face I can't make out surfaces. Damn, I think. No one would even hear if I screamed, but he ignores me, leading another man by the hand into brambles so dense at points I'm worried I won't be able to find my way back out again as another, shirtless with his chest rounded appears, crosses my path as if under a trance, also blending into the murmuring leaves. It's usually something I just stumble across when the weather's nice, though it's nippy outside and I haven't freed the dogs of their chains yet when I see a young nerd and a chunky older man in the throes of something heavy against some rocks another night near the entrance. If they had just taken a few steps, they would've been in the bushes and had more privacy. I would've never imagined the younger one in an unlit park having sex. He strikes me as a geek who'd spend all of his time mastering chess strategies. The older man though, I've seen him a few times eating grits and eggs at the counter at Miss Pearl's with a woman that's most likely his wife.

Athletes with muscular asses, hands on hips, sweaty and switching across a field. That's how the guys in the park strike me once I'm used to them and pay as little attention to their nocturnal sex rites as the sports event humming on a bar TV. Guys, gay or straight are puzzles I can't solve and it would be the worst form of masochism to want to. I'm just ending another relationship. Threw out the mattress we slept on together to wipe the slate clean. Vaguely cute random men I use for recreation like a seesaw or swing, then later make fun of with Aries, that's easy. But opening up and telling one things I otherwise keep to myself as they listen and tell me secrets in return, I can't get enough of, which is such a "don't" for we girls who laugh at the words "wife" and "husband" and don't expect more from the men we sleep with but for them to pass the joint and chip in what they can towards our abortions. Clinics around Gramercy Park run box ads in the classified section of almost every newspaper. Waiting rooms crammed. Freaky Right to Lifers waving photos of bloody foetuses at you before you walk in. Abortion has become a form of birth control for some of us even if we don't realize it. Nobody uses condoms. The pill will make you depressed or give you acne what I keep hearing and diaphragms are useless when you wake up too horny to even think about reaching for some rigid rubber device that takes patience to put in.

Beefsteak Charlie's on Times Square is where Motor C. and Fiodhna are waiting on tables lately and where we all recently drunkenly chanted the chorus to "You Dropped a Bomb on Me" by the Gap band in response to a nuclear war with Russia that's supposedly about to pop off because we live in a country where war drums never stop beating and the apocalypse is just another day of the week. Tylenol caps nicked off by unknown fingers that poison the pills inside and place the bottles back on store shelves as well as what happened to Aries' friend, Don—well, that's something else. I didn't really know him but found him likeable enough to be troubled by news he died from a new mysterious venereal disease. Aries and I had stopped by his posh penthouse on King Street to drink with him and the crew of Rican B-Boys always installed on his couch, one of whom was his lover but is now denying it. But that's just gossip. The moment you hesitate to put a straw into a container of orange juice because you're afraid it might be spiked with a toxic substance or think that making love can kill you, the shadow, a kind of correction that reinforces conservatism, division and distrust before it retreats like a blood bloated mosquito to wherever it came from, has caught up again. It appears at least once per generation, yet I'm outrunning it when after almost a year of sleeping on the floor between my two dogs mourning the loss of the next to last sadist I will ever let toy with my feelings, my moody flight through the street continues with new vigor.

Aries laughing at how full of shit men are, me suggesting he get a girlfriend, him telling me I should do the same. Believe it or not, that drunken conversation was the catalyst. That and the acute pinch of the autumn season as well as the fact that I'm androgynous and have only scraped the surface of what that means. The bar looks small from outside but its corridors zigzag. A puzzle of lounge areas. Chicks stalking balls on a pool table. Women body to body, eyes closed, glowing. Are you a butch or a femme? one asked the first time I came here. Dingle queen. Snow queen. Tranny. Fish. Fag hag is what a drunk at the bar at Peter Rabbit once called me. Gay men slang is all I speak. I can't imagine women being half as technical or distilling who I am into a couple of words. Of course, Yoruba might say I like keeping my distance because I'm a middle kid. Yoruba the master mind reader with bottle blonde dreads she adorns with girly cowrie shells and other earthly accessories.

"Hi Leo," she growled sizing me up the first time.

I asked how she could tell.

"You remind me of my ex," she answered. The music louder than whatever she shared in the next few minutes. Not that she seemed to care. She stops by for an after work drink and splits before they start stamping hands, collecting money and the mayhem begins.

"Well, I've looked around and you're the only one in here I want to talk to," a middle aged swinger in a cowgirl hat waxes poetic. She and her two rodeo girlfriends who have been on the prowl all night for someone who wants to have a little fun with them back at their hotel room, trying their luck now with me I guess, and I can't decide whose more obnoxious, the guy with the melted plastic

mask for a face right there whispering at me no matter where I am in the first shy hours of morning, or them. Regulars bitching that straight women are infiltrating only get on my nerves as long as they're not outing me. A lesbian photographer I met when I still washed dishes once took me on a tour of her favorite bars. New York City became a folksy Cape Cod beach town that night. But I survived it. It's rare that I find being in a group of other women inspiring, but the dark has become a psychedelic church revival and "Let No Man Put Asunder" is so soul stirring, I wish I had a tambourine to bang on my leg when Cassette takes my hand and pulls me into the heart of the thanks and praise euphoria and overly ripe smelling pheromones of women enjoying themselves. The black zippered catsuit. Hips drifting. Eyes offering me space to run in. I'd admired her outfit earlier. She has this mystique. I can see her kneeing James Bond in the nuts, stroking his face and humming "The Girl from Ipanema," in his ear next. She watches me back like she knows I'm impressed by her moves and doesn't blame me. Half-smiling. Glassy-eyed. She's high on something. I'm not sick drunk but do feel woozy. She has me by the hand again. I don't know if she's playing a male kind of role or mommying me. Either way I'm in. Ordering me a seltzer, feeding me the glass. Her lover watching us from a corner scowling. Cassette. Wow. Cassette.

The next morning, I grab the phone on the first ring, hoping it's her. It is. She wants to take me to a theater where *First Blood* is still playing. Her treat. Rambo is ridiculous I moan. "Oh? I've never heard anyone say that," is her reply. I'm too groggy to want to win an argu-

ment. We meet on the corner of Time Square. She buys the tickets. I'm hungover, forgot to put a bra on I vent in an old school restroom with back in the day faucets and mirrors in garish frames. Lifting my shirt, her mouth tilts halfway again as she admires my tits. I'd say I was going to get popcorn, then make a beeline for the exit if a guy I barely knew were to hold my hand as firmly as she does once we're seated. Counting the minutes until the credits are rolling. I'm hyper. Can't sit still.

She and the girl she was at the club the other night with got pregnant at the same time during high school, deciding to move in together after they graduated. I can't go home with her. She can't come home with me at the moment as much as she'd like to she sort of explains. Daylight triangulates as we head down the steps to catch our trains. She's riding out to Cortelyou. I'm going up to One Four Five. Transit cops get their rocks off watching us goodbye kiss.

Our relationship is exhibitionistic. We're really only lovers in public who offer hope to lonesome looking girls watching us mop the sweat from each other's faces in the ladies' room at Bentley's. The gauntlet of fab young men at a party growling, "Git it ladies" one night that she tugs me around behind her like a show dog on a chain. A serious short's in the wire, however, when we're alone together. The first time she steps inside my bedroom, sees the dogs, my books, spiral notepads scribbled with lyrics and clutter I always seem to have so much more of than anyone else, I can see her cracking up until her eyes are tearing, trying to describe me to her status conscious Brooklyn friends. The typical Fashion Institute of

Technology dropouts with exquisite taste in drugs, decor and apparel. Devout members of the cult of Larry Levan who live in blue-collar complexes around Linden Boulevard that they max out credit cards to furnish and rent by the skin of their teeth. The good news is that I have a mattress again. Cassette and I are not rivals pecking each other's eyes out over some petty lying man destroying us. We're nursing each other, nesting in each other's body heat. Then, "Look at your nails," she says looking exasperated. It occurs to me I'm supposed to cut them, but wouldn't know what she'd expect if I did. I've never wished I were being fingered. So can't imagine anyone else would want such a thing. My idea of sex is hopelessly hetero. The learning curve versus instant pleasure. Is it possible to be just a quarter or third lesbian? Bisexual is an okay description for a chrysanthemum beetle, but not me. One day, a god with a bronze bell for a head named Ronaldo will describe me as "split," in one of those rare moments in which someone I know will look me in the eye and share their most candid impression. If Cassette had it her way, I think she'd organize our erotic tension into a task like folding laundry since she's always in a hurry. I bounce into her and her girlfriend's apartment days later and briefly see what it's like to be a mother way before you're supposed to. The disputes with her kid's dad. A massive house divided into units that different relatives rent who are all kind of judging her for something she was supposed to do but didn't. Washing down beef patties with Irish moss drinks as she walks me to the subway station. Embracing each other to the usual sound of men catcalling us. Preferring to believe

God's got something better in mind for me and not accepting the mean serrated boxcutter she takes out of her pocket and offers in case I should need it, before we go our separate ways.

I'm in a band. The Guerilla Girls Hand to Hand Combat Young Ladies' Cultural Exchange Program was our original name. Alexa came up with it, but we shortened it to The Guerilla Girls, of course, wanting something easier to say. Jamming in a cellar that belonged to another band at first, The Honeymoon Killers I believe. I wasn't paying as much attention then. Would just pound drums and guzzle cheap brandy from a pint I kept on the floor next to my hi-hat pedal before I couldn't stand the labor of drumming and began to just sing and write lyrics. Fiodhna's on cello. She can keep a melody and bow with feeling. She's from Dublin and so's Vanessa even if she looks like a translucent blue Hare Krishna deity. She uses a mute on her trumpet. It helps mask the fact that she's just learning how to play. Miss A doubles down on one bass lick. Won't let go of it. Like Jah Wobble, she's a dub disciple. Dub is what unites us. It's our religion.

Death to the cock rock poses of Van Halen and Prince.

We're firmly united in refusing to deal with either a guy or girl guitarist, actually. Fiodhna and Alexa recently knocked down the wall between their apartments in the walkup where they live on East 12th Street between A and B. so it's one big space now where we spread out and compose music whenever we want. We're getting deeper into whatever it is that we're up to. I've never been a natural at writing poetry or fiction, but words written to music come easily. I really like the verse chorus verse

thing. How one minute you're an individual, but then it's like you're part of a crowd chanting, "Back door. Back door," and slamming the sides of the bus until the driver submits and lets the rider in the rear off. I mean that's how I feel when I sing a chorus. I respond to a good hook. Jody Watley's pouty vocal tics. Bacharach's felt refrains. How Ari Up can make a torch song snotty or Astrud Gilberto always sounds unaware that anyone's listening.

I'm still hiding behind an invented identity that I'm getting tired of. Talking with an accent, behaving as if I'm a foreigner—so soon I'll stop, but then I won't make as much sense, so will flee the U.S. in search of the freedom of being a stranger again. Trying to learn how to be myself, mostly under social pressure when I'd really rather not narrow myself down to accommodate anyone else's demands. I can think of at least two guys who dress like aliens and claim they're from Outer Space that no one ever questions. There are people down here who were destined to do what they're doing. The ones whose names are in block letters on Xeroxes pasted everywhere or stenciled into the asphalt in the street. Then, there's me.

Paranoid during rush hour.

Why did I decide to smoke a joint as I was getting dressed? I march through the tunnel to 42nd and Fifth the same as everyone else that just got off the downtown D even if it feels like I have three or four more legs. I'm getting worried that no matter how much I keep walking, I'm not going to reach the staffing company where

I meet and greet job applicants and test their typing speed because I'm still equidistant from where I started and my destination. The tunnel keeps bending and extending until a guy with a sweet smile says, "Whoa now. You okay?" offering me his arm and leading me towards the turnstile, which really really helps. I've seen him in the West Fourth Street basketball court in the flux of bruthas dodging and driving towards the net as if on some lifesaving mission or at least I think that was him, but he has on a tie now and my best guess is he's a bank teller because he has a customer service-oriented way about him.

"Here," he says when we're outside. Grabbing an orange from a cart, paying the man selling them, peeling it and explaining the citrus will cut the high. I'm so glad we met, not that I'm any less stoned when I reach my office after which the husband and wife couple I work for and I exchange intense vibes the whole day. But it doesn't matter how freaked out they are about my pushing "the office attire envelope" and my unprofessional behavior. I'm fed up with being a receptionist and quit, applying for a messenger job at Archer Courier days later. Messengers dress any way they want and delivering things is so easy, you don't have to pay attention. Don't quit your day job they say, but I'm not listening.

Sun dried horse shit. Dumpster roasted waste. Midtown in heat. Trains tagged with graffiti that rolls by like movie credits. Windows so spray painted, you can't see what station you're pulling into. You ride the same subway lines with the same other messengers delivering

letters and boxes to the same places. Secretaries and receptionists in polyester suits hoggin up the sidewalk are nine-tenths of the workforce. Vendors hawking gawdy bracelets, belts that go with career shoes. Hot dogs and pretzels. Monotony. Stress. Sit down and wait they say sometimes when I get back to the base near Battery Park, so I take a seat until the dispatchers give me more manila folders without any idea of what's in them and drift back out into the thick of faceless pedestrians and fleets of yellow taxis. Am in the elevator of a kryptonite green skyscraper within walking distance. Some dingy upper West Side office after that—rushing to pick-up a package a couple of blocks away afterwards, only it's pouring and I don't have an umbrella.

Bike couriers, now they run things. They own the street. Lined up at the light in shiny tights like racers waiting for the gun to fire before state-of-the-art pedaling full speed ahead. Pushing cabs and buses out of their way. Leaning to one side. Crouching. Dismounting. Lifting the bags from their chests like dance partners they're spinning. To think that something as trifling as the fax machine will make such a quixotic culture extinct.

It's the summer of '82. The summer I stop combing my hair and let it dread. Bleach it. Rock rhinestone chandelier earrings and rakishly slanted vintage military caps. Honestly, I enjoy being me more than ever. Friends of friends roam into Guerilla Girls rehearsals to observe us because what we're doing is interesting. We played at The Busker's Club. A pit in the ground in which I had to be wasted to handle the audience circling,

I must admit. Giving a mob a license to gape at me was a stretch, but soon I'll have enough to pay my bills I tell myself because our records are going to sell.

The dispatchers give me carfare, but I'm making close to nothing so am on a financial dead end just like when I washed dishes only at least then, I was able to steal wine from the walk-in frig and eat for free, but I dress any way I like and am not confined to a desk. At the base sometimes I check out who's who. The messengers are all men except for a lady who just had a baby and says she's only delivering packages to lose weight and a girl from Long Island with a mullet who never smiles but leans over suddenly one pay day and asks if I know where she can cop some "angel dust." We're independent contractors, not even co-workers. None of us will stick around for more than a few checks, so there's no point in even acknowledging each other, never mind schmoozing. But there's usually someone who can't resist like this man older than the rest of us who suddenly confesses he walked into a company in the garment district to pick up a package on an empty desk in the reception area recently, saw two fur coats hanging in an open closet and decided to grab them, hurrying outside with one over each arm and roaming past other low paid delivery guys with clothes on wire hangers slung over their shoulders or on racks they wheeled through the street, knowing he didn't stand out in an area full of fashion industry activity. He wasn't worried about getting caught as much as blowing a once in a lifetime opportunity to make some big bucks in a fast few minutes. The coats on his arms looked plush. Figures danced in his head. He sold them

he said but it must not have made much of a difference as down and out as he looks leaned to the side telling us this with his hand over his mouth so the supervisor can't hear.

Uptown, then downtown, then back up again. East then west, then west again. Packed insufferably humid trains. Working for a hip graphic design shop in Soho that pays a bit more next. Knocking down icons. Spitting at success. Romancing mistakes, accidents, dead end experiments. I survive the mean winter months until one sublime early summer day I'm on West Fourth Street in the heart of the drum beat of basketball players and break dancers in blingy gold medallion necklaces 'tryna to get paid. One spins on his head and I'm amused by the state of shock the crowd forming around him is in when I run into Stephan, an ex-boyfriend's running buddy and ask what he's been doing.

"I'm seeing a light skinned sister from New Orleans with green eyes and long hair," he tells me and I'm hoping he's joking but realize he's serious before moving on politely because I'm anxious to get to Washington Square. It's Friday. "Freaks" from Jersey City, Newark and the surrounding boroughs hold down the center lane of the side facing Sixth Avenue. "Freaks" being what uptown homeboys hauling heavy beat boxes say to each other about us when they roll through. Fierce cat-calls and music instantly resuscitates me. It's the summer that restless gay or gay curious kids of color have co-opted the streets between Greenwich Village and the Christopher Street pier. The other "Summer of Love" I call it, comparing what's happening to a West Coast

hippie phenomenon because anyone sitting shoulder to shoulder on this runway is considered bugged out in the neighborhood they come from. Plus, we all like to trip on mesc. Yo. Zootie Bang, what's up? A female construction worker says to me from her throne on the backrest of a bench. She always cracks up when she sees me. I have no idea why she calls me "Zootie Bang" but if it were a sign of disrespect, she wouldn't be aiming the joint between her fingers in my direction. The friend beside her, also in a hard hat and dusty work boots, pours beer from a bottle in a brown paper bag into a cup, and I accept another award for being the weirdest girl that ever lived before I prop myself up on the bench rest next to her. A light buzz is creeping up on me when I see this chick who has a toy poodle who uses a dildo as a chew toy. The last time I saw her was at her apartment near the Clinton-Washington stop on the G. We were going to a party. Before we set out, I flung open the door to the bathroom thinking it was empty and found her with one leg up on the sink wash-clothing her twat like she had big plans for herself later. I'm wondering if I said "Hi," right now if she'd be embarrassed or even remember that awkward moment when a boy suddenly jumps to his feet from the bench facing mine. Another one slamming a ghetto blaster down between them and hitting the play button. The walking bass line to "Love Break" easing in as a sense that we're all in danger, but in a good way starts to build. The two of them circling each other. Faces deadpan. Demonstrating the art of the tease. One in a sheer low-cut shirt with arm raised high and taut, snapping his fingers. The other stalking him. Shoulders

thrust back, hands on hips, taking his time. Both spinning. Shuffling with palms towards the sky, oddness on overdrive. Irrepressible attitude. One minute war, the next a spoof. Bodies doing anything they want them to.

"Werk ladies. Werk," someone yells, tossing a rose on the ground in deference to the gods of couture and ateliers. I've totally zoned out though when, "Five-O," one of the female construction workers warns under her breath while a police car that has subtly hopped the curb creeps towards us through the tight space between the benches.

"Five-O," I murmur to someone near me.

"Five-O," everybody's repeating and whoever can, conceals their liquor and snuffs out their joint before it's too late. We all know the drill, including the cop gliding through tightening his eyes at us when he's parallel, to drive home the point that we're all under surveillance.

Stacy rushing across the grass behind the bench where I just got faded.

"Hey. Long time," she says, pointing towards a throw blanket her boyfriend Malik is on. Washington Square Park dropping at me from such an odd angle it looks like some other place once I get past how manky the grass is and just sit. I met Stacy outside the Loft one weekend. She and Malik taking me in that night as their guest. Asking them how they became members, however—that was a waste of time. They couldn't stop guarding the, "If I told you, I'd have to kill you," secrecy of Dave's party. "Around the way" kids that downtown "it" spots don't let in, being the beautiful people for once and loving it. I got it. But was tired of not being able to just pay

and enter when I wanted, so I'm delivering a package on Prince Street when it occurs to me that the Loft's right there and knock without even really knowing if it's where Dave Mancuso really lives. Him sticking his head out almost instantly. I want to become a member, I tell him. Giving him my name, and I've got the black and white ID card with an image of the Little Rascals on it within a few minutes. Aries complaining after the first time I took him there that Dave was this long-haired messianic cult figure conducting some kind of weird experiment, but the fact that the Loft doesn't have a bar is what ticked him off the most I think. Potato chips. Hot dogs. Old school party balloons. Bowls of fruit punch. The side by side men and women's dressing rooms where everyone changes from street clothes into workout gear before dancing. Dave's sets so happenstance. Boys baby powdering the floor to accelerate the speed at which they spin, girls peaking on two for five gremlins clutching their heads the better to process "I Want to Go Bang" by Dinosaur Jr.'s over the top prog rock jazz madness.

Malika and Stacy finish off a box of pizza. Best Sella with an aura that simply gleams crouching on the grass next to me.

"I've known him since high school," Stacy says, pecking him on the cheek. "Right Malik?" she asks. Malik rocking his head. He and Best sella bumping fists. This is the first time we've ever met, but as cliché as it sounds, there's a déjà-vu thing between us that I'm feeling. He's a promoter. I've always wondered what exactly that involves or why young 'bruthas are so gifted at spreading the word without a budget. Any late seventies under-

ground spot of legend, Best Sella was behind its success. He's back in New York for the first time in years now though, was in England where he had branched into managing a couple of singers he describes as "major talents." Usually I'm turned off by discussions about music in which the word "hit" has any significance. But there's something I like about him, especially once the sun begins its retreat, leaves giggle in the breeze and our conversation drifts.

Delivering packages is a straitjacket. I escape its tight grip by cutting through the park and touring the secret world of outliers clever enough to survive without the restrictions I want to free myself of but haven't yet. There's the kid always next to the arch that sells so many balloons during the summer, he spends winter in Thailand on the beach. There's Charlie Barnett. Funny as hell, but too real for Hollywood or TV. The fountain's his Colosseum when the water's off. Kids gathering around him chanting, "Charlie. Charlie." Him conducting them like they're his orchestra as "Charlie. Charlie," they shout louder with more feeling until an audience of a hundred or more have formed a ring around him within minutes.

"The KKK wants to march through Harlem. They're waiting for the permit." he shouts out in a voice with the range and power of a megaphone. Pausing, working the silence before saying, "I hope they get it. We could use the sheets." Reckless laughter. Ear splitting whistles following. Passers-by rushing to be part of something that seems better than the usual. Him making sure that everyone puts cash in his hat.

"He would've been part of the cast of Saturday Night Live if they hadn't decided to go with Eddie Murphy," a fan still rooting for him to get his big break says in my ear. A girl usually on the grass on the LaGuardia Place side of the park who keeps \$25 bags of high-grade smoke tucked between the pages of a textbook is who I check out next. A man is following her instructions to sit down beside her as if they're friends. He waits before finally paying her and rushing off in disbelief he had to jump through so many hoops to smoke a doobie. The Rastas by the fountain stash Ses and lambsbread under stones and bushes. One named Hylton spiking a ball from his forehead and catching it on his knee before dribbling it towards a wastepaper basket and diving down to tug a half pound of fluffy green weed from under it.

Best Sella on a bench facing a row of fancy townhouses. I'm surprised to see him again. I know he wants to start his own record label in London but didn't realize he was raising the cash to get it up off the ground by selling weed—but that's what he's doing hey as he sits there so freshly laundered smelling, spooning butter pecan from a Haagen Daz container and browsing the sports section of the Daily News.

"Smoke, smoke," he says just above a murmur each time someone passes. A man who could pass for an NYU professor handing him a ten all of a sudden and I think damn because I'm not making close to what I need and am restless as always.

"So how does someone get started doing this?" I find the nerve to ask. Looks easy, huh?" he asks back like he's talking to a scrappy younger kid.

"As long as there aren't cops anywhere, yeah." I answer.

"Well. Looks are deceiving," he disagrees for my own good.

Maybe he's in a better mood. Maybe he thinks having a girl with him helps because he doesn't mind my going with him to an appointment in a bar a couple of steps below the sidewalk, with a forgotten quality to it on 14th near Third where we take seats at a booth without ordering drinks. The customer's arm fading below the table to pay for the product Best Sella subtly hands him. Me closing my eyes mentally. He's a go-getter, making the world do what he wants it to, not the other way around. At times it feels like we're dating. Laughing shyly, but with deep eye contact during an idyllically greasy Cuban Chinese meal. I've already quit my wack messenger job when he says okay, this is all you have to do. Aries puts up the money. Best Sella and I agreeing to meet in the park at which point I'm supposed to hand it over, and he'll buy my first starter bag of weed with it. I'm too early as usual and waiting when this power drunk cop stomps by handcuffing Fuller and dragging him along the ground by his locks like that's what they were designed for. Fuller limp, not resisting, back flat against the pavement in surrender.

Babylon runnings.

All's clear except for sightseers and a juggler. The usual posse of dreads later coming back with their tantric

sex goddess girlfriends with cannabis in their strollers instead of kids. Best Sella warning me for the nine hundredth time that I don't want a police record. Okay. Okay. I'm with you, I say. It'll be decent grade, not the best, what I'm going to get. You don't need the best. The people who buy from you—you'll never see most of them again. He says, taking my money, saying he'll be back tomorrow same time, same place with everything I need to go into business. I'm ready to start my new career, waiting for him on a bench near the entrance where old men way too down and out to live in such a high rent area always play chess. But Best Sella's a no-show no matter how long I wait. I walk around, hitting the usual spots around West Fourth where I'd normally see him, but no luck.

"Why so down? Not like yourself," a dealer everybody calls Above the Sky says inspecting me from over the top of the round sixties style sunglasses hiding his bizarrely small oval shaped face. He's on his bike as always, pedaling around, casing the surroundings, mumbling, "Red and purple. Red and purple. Right here. Got 'em." I tell him how I handed over all the cash I had to somebody that was supposed to help me and how that's left me up a creek without a paddle.

"You can lose a lot of money out here," he replies. Taking a cough drop tin from the grungy bookbag he's wearing, he peeks over the top of his shades first. Shakes some red stars into my palm and says: A little gift sis.

After a week of looking for Best Sella, I give up. If not for the dogs moving in hyper circles around me, I'd stay

in bed eyes shut, knees to face, unborn and not budging. But the park draws me back towards it and two weeks later, I'm there again listening, watching when I hear an interesting conversation.

"Now Stanley he was one of the great con artists."

"People put money in his hand. Lots of dough. No second thoughts. He won their trust."

"Stanny Stan."

"Stan the man."

"Now Stan was a legend."

"He was."

"The hustle he did with the vacant apartment?"

"Heavy."

"He got the keys, advertised it in the newspaper. Took rent and security from like five, six different people that wanted it. When you're too stupid to check and see if you're paying an actual real estate agent, that's you."

"Nobody ever came looking for him either."

"How much did he clock do you think?"

"Four or five grand? Then things got hot. But hey, nothing lasts except for them making money off shit we get locked up for."

They're not ghetto flower children, are business casual. Frustrated go-getters. Romanticizing someone who made cash by any means necessary. Meanwhile, I still don't get why pennies, nickels and quarters are any different from screws or thumbtacks. Change tumbling from my pockets when I get undressed, rolling in different directions and not worth chasing and cash, well. I confuse it for receipts, throw it away all the time by mistake. Maybe all I had wanted was for Best Sella to con-

vert me into a capitalist I think after running into him later the same day. This is what happened: The police rushed in with their sirens on blast and scooped him. They catch you off guard, shoving as many kids that have drugs on them that will fit inside vans. Friday sweeps. You spend the weekend in a cell at the sixth precinct. Monday you're free again. I've never been busted during a raid. I've been lucky. He laid low after that, sticking around his girlfriend's and trying to re-up on the smoke and money the po-po confiscated.

"Let's take a walk, yeah?" He says.

So we walk until we reach a block in Soho desolate enough that it's safe, sit down on some steps and he gives me the bag of weed finally.

"I thought you'd run off with my money," I tell him.

"Maybe someone else's, but yours never," He says.

It's a Saturday, the day of an arts and culture festival. Tourists take pictures of the Empire State Building without needing it to be there. Nothing happening beyond the usual. Balloon Boy's back under the arch, making a killing.

"Smoke, smoke right here," I say whenever I find the courage. An older lady with hippie bangs in a sixties style embroidered chiffon shirt pausing finally. I show her the bag in my hand, hold it to her nose.

"That it? Nothing harder?" she asks with a grimace.

"What do you mean?" I ask in confusion.

"No Black beauties? Coke? No speed?" she checks. I apologize, telling her I'm no help when it comes to that stuff and ask if she's okay because she seems stressed

out or something at which point, she leans her mouth towards my ear, shows me her badge and whispers, "Look, we're doing a sweep. I don't want to bust you. Just go."

I rush to the other side of the park instead though and tell Best Sella.

"Split while you have the chance," he advises looking over my shoulder to make sure that she's not following me to him.

If it's not the police, it's all the dealers competing. You need to be aggressive or been around long enough to have regulars, so Christopher Street's where I head next and stay in the coming days, knowing the Rastafarians and macho boys who hold down most of the sales in the park wouldn't be comfortable on a block of bars and shops that cater to gay men. I wouldn't exactly say the dealers on C Street are carefree. But they're not heavy hitters either. Prestige has the chest of a beast. He bench presses. When he smiles, he has dimples. Men done up like cowboys and Nazis who strut in and out of nearby drinking holes take a liking to him especially when he's shirtless with his doo rag spilling down his back like a young pharaoh from the so and so dynasty, but the other dealers don't have time for cute. Prestige sells wack. It casts doubt on what everybody else has, I've heard a few say. He cuts pictures out of the packets of sugar in the containers on the table in a booth I sit across from him in at the Sheridan Square Diner one day. Moving fast, using a razor to create what looks believably enough like tabs of paper acid. That's when he gives me his recipe for fake mesc: Boil spaghetti until it's al dente, chop it up and dye it in food coloring. A strange thing to confess, but he'd aged out of a boy's shelter not long ago and isn't about to be out on the street broke, he said.

Rust never stops reading the traffic that runs west towards the Hudson or east towards Seventh. I have no idea what he even sells. He never smiles, plays it so close to the vest.

"DT's," he'll say like he's sleep talking.

"How can you be sure?" I ask.

"Unmarked car. Two in the front, one in back. Big dudes. Huge assed necks," he answers.

Junky Marvin's old. Walks slow. Conks his hair. Swollen hands and ankles swell over the sides of his sneakers. He's rehabilitated. Not a junkie anymore, so they really shouldn't call him Junky Marvin but there's no malice intended. You get caricaturized out here. It's not a big deal. Valiums and other prescription medicine you'd pay triple for if you went to the pharmacy, he sells that kind of thing. You could stand right next to him and think you're alone, he's so quiet. The exact opposite of Marv in the Kufi reading to everyone from the newspaper and linking heinous crimes to passages in the Bible.

"I keep telling people it's the end of days," he sighs before checking out the sports section. He sells a little of everything.

Eileen pulling along by a cane delicately, with caution, covering the area between the park and the piers, selling two for five mesc. Everyone knows her. She's been out here for years.

"Hope it's a good night. Yesterday was dead."

"Really? I heard the park was alright." She replies.

"But it's more chill down here." I say, unable to believe she could ever really like how I'd shown up all of a sudden on a street where she's always been the only female dealer.

"What do you have? What do you have, Miss Fabulous?" men in and out of the bars already stop and ask me. Hamptons tanned pretty boys in an open top Jeep scooping me off the corner and speeding off to a more

quiet corner where nobody's watching to buy a couple of dime bags from me. Not that I'm trying to be popular. That's just how it's turning out. Then, time stops or that's how it feels this night that I'm alone on the corner of C Street and Greenwich.

"Must be something special happening I don't know about," Eileen remarks approaching.

"The world's hiding," I suggest, a novel thought lighting up her expression when she says: You know what? I'm going to do something I haven't done in ages. A hit of my own mesc 'cause I just feel like it."

Nothing wrong with that," I agree before she shakes a purple dot from her palm into mine and the watered down version of a sixties hallucinogen brings all the wonders of a lava lamp to a night without sense. The anxiety I had about her resenting me dissolving during the hours that we sit side by side under the hypnosis of clouds rolling back and forth. Eileen more relaxed after that. Laughing at my antics and accepting that I was just someone else who'd washed up on the shore of the river like the two runaways from Arizona who had recently shown up and this exotic male prostitute who likes to kick it on the stoop with us.

Enter Shiny, a mariney yellow dude no one could ever mistake for bright, only he isn't slow either. Coming alive with a blinding fascination for everything Eileen introduces him to now that he's her boyfriend. I get along with him. He laughs the first time we meet before I even say anything like maybe she briefed him on who's who, and her description of me was that I'm "funny."

"Gotta make some money," Eileen says limping in circles, looking pressured but with a lightness about it. Shiny rubbing his arm across the sweat on his face, head bobbing, saying: More shrimp and Grand Marnier margaritas. Now that's all I'm about. The delight he shows when talking about the meals they have together putting the biggest smile on her face I've ever seen. Eileen happy even if she's footing the bill for the fun things he's always saying he wants to do again. Resigned to the fact that Shiny's who you end up with when men have never shown much interest and you're lonely, I overlook what an obvious moron he is. Then, I arrive on the corner of Greenwich and Christopher one night and find out that Shiny lost his temper with Eileen and struck her. Blood everywhere. Dealers rushing to scoop her teeth up from the ground. Putting them in a cup of water. They took her to St. Vincent's. Don't want to see that punk back around here, Rust says when I run into him. Eileen limping towards me down C street the next day. "He broke my jaw," she says, suffering to speak through wires and braces. In her hand a cement filled pipe she says she'll slam Shiny in the knees with if he dares come anywhere near her, carrying it with her wherever she goes the next few days. The sun has fully set when she and I are trying to earn a few bucks. The whole Shiny situation's supposedly behind her when don't you know he's there in the halo of a street light like some mutant villain no one but a superhero could defeat. Eileen stands. He's in front of her, his shadow dropping over my head and falling around my feet so it's like I've been erased am not even there when he orders her to put the pipe down the way you'd

command a dog. Her obeying, shoulders bent, walking off with him to talk privately. Back in her life again. That simply. Accompanying her when she does her rounds, telling her what she's not doing right, like he'd know. Rust and Marv with the kufi sizing him up at times a certain way.

The last night of the year. My last chance to earn some of the back rent we owe instead of going to the courthouse on Centre Street again to fill out papers to delay getting evicted. I had imagined I'd be running from car to car counting cash, closing sales. But the rain hasn't let up once all day. In an hour, it'll be 1983. No one's out though except dealers consoling each other. Eileen and I under umbrellas, sipping flat seltzer that's supposed to be champagne. Shiny, unable to accept how hopelessly dead the corner we're on is, saying he's going down to the spot next to St Veronica's where Rust and them always stand. Down there it's better, he declares. But he's back much faster than he intended in a blood soaked party mask with a gory eyeball bulging out of it, which might have made sense on Halloween, but it's New Year's Eve. Blood mixing with the rain dripping down his face, he goes marching into the distance with Eileen. Rust and Marv in the kufi telling me later that they were tired of him cutting off their sales, so had used a set of brass knuckles and Eileen's discarded cement filled pipe to teach him a lesson.

I would've preferred to never have run back into Shiny, but one morning I take a seat on a train whose destination might as well be hell because there he is

smiling, and I'd be a fool to confuse those limpid asking eyes of his for a sign that he's changed. Rocking by the straps, talking to a gray-haired man in a jacket and tie seated next to me.

"He didn't have an easy life. I'm surprised he's still alive," the man leans over and mentions after Shiny gets off at his stop, and my best guess is he was once Shiny's social worker, but morning's an epidemic, a morgue, a fortune teller—a phantom, a microscope, a broom like Washington Square Park where I like to sit by myself in the wee hours coming down from the usual hallucinogens as rats hunchbacked, nervous with their claws pointed riptide every inch because morning's a concierge too. A bad case of acne. A coat of arms, eulogy, onyx, asteroids, fresh cream and apricot even.

Early one mildly sunny balmy afternoon, a procession of pretty boys moves towards the riverfront.

"Loosies. Loosies," I repeat.

No other dealers serving Christopher. Just me. I've never had much luck at selling dime bags. A dollar's a helluva lot easier to ask for, so I'm grabbing cash faster than I can put it in my pocket the same as my idol in the park who sells balloons. Then, the person I've been fearing since the moment earlier when I started to run out of weed when I was rolling joints and decided to stretch what was left with oregano appears and lights up to test the quality of my smoke. We're shoulder to shoulder when he exhales a telling bouquet of spaghetti sauce into the air. Not knowing how to react if he accuses me of selling wack, I'm running scared, but "Mmm. That's

some good shit. Give me a couple more," he says. I'm sold out. In only a couple of hours, I have a hundred single dollars bills just like that, but morning is zero, so this gimmick will never work again.

Down on Edgecombe and 145th they peddle a piss poor strain of weed that grows between crushed glass and fallen brick. It's the new spot to cop. Talk about violence. They're intense. Doing transactions there is ferocious, not fake. Constant disagreements about who owes who money. Gently tapping a bottle against the curb, some psychopath methodically removes the base, then lunges forward, growling "bumba claat" and grinds the shards into another man's face. His victim not reacting, just standing with his hands on his hips profusely bleeding afterwards as it occurs to me that demanding that the men in my life be more sensitive, forces them to compromise the pressure they're under to not feel pain. But I don't buy out in the open. I go into a building on the same block in which every apartment is occupied by different warlords that protect the weight they sell with meat cleavers and Uzis. I won't be around luckily when the police raid. I just know it'll involve helicopters and a SWAT team unless they're insane. I have no idea where the actual tenants went, but I climb the steps until a dread with the spooky countenance of an obeah man appears at a door and invites me in to sniff the weed in an open suitcase on the floor of an unfurnished two bedroom. Grumbling in shantytown English, but softening the price when he realizes I don't have much to spend. My plan is to buy from him on a steady basis. But the

next time I climb the stairs, he's not there. I don't hear a sound or see anybody until a voice behind another door calls out for me to slide money into a slot on the wall beside it, which I do once we agree on the amount they're going to sell me, sum likkle bag damned near empty what they push through. Pounding and shouting my whole life story so they'll understand what's at stake. Them pushing my money back out just when I've given up and am about to walk away.

The migration is East tonight on Christopher past the bars, Dave's Potbelly and the Haagen-Dazs next to it as most of us move in the opposite direction of the patrol car lights probing the black hole of the harbor. It takes only one clown to mess things up for everybody else. Some diva named 'Twan poking his finger in a boy named Andre's back, pretending it was a knife and taunting, "Jump bitch." The police lifting Andre out of the waves. An ambulance rushing him to the hospital to get a tetanus shot. At least he didn't drown, says a girl with the cuttest ink tail dangling down her neck. Twan belongs to the House of Versace and Andre to a rival house that hates them, what I hear later, but nobody comes to the Village to fight, so the bass quickly gets back to banging for the dainty chosen boys along the pier who Arabesque and death drop with rounded torsos like nomads performing a sunset ritual.

There are two worlds: day and night. Day's the enemy of freedom, but night is a blindness that benefits us. A balancing out. A moment when the meek inherit the Earth and go beserk. A power move. A coup.

I'm a fake street hustler, depending on instinct too much, just winging it is all I'm good at. Money, I resent the importance it has and am always kind of bitter about the pressure I'm under to work instead of being able to sit on a pissy palmetto bug infested stoop and share my opinions with anyone who shows interest. I earn \$20 and spend it. Empty my pockets fast as if I don't want money anywhere near me. Like money's bad luck or something. I don't feel that way consciously. I'm saying that's the way it seems. Every time I ate a slice when I was younger, I felt lucky because I was always worried I'd lose the right to eat pizza due to the grotesque politics of place in this country. I get burnt out from the espionage with the cops and the walking around looking for a good spot where I can sit without being watched through binoculars. In the calm of a warehouse driveway on Great Jones I'll eat a Sicilian sometimes and become one with the garlic and grease or hide in this cafe on MacDougal nobody but me seems to know about with only two tables and a huge cooler of rose petal flavored water. You drink that stuff and go on a pilgrimage to a holy site, especially if you have the munchies. No shit. The falafels are something, and I'm eating one right now that's like the best I'll ever have. Sour sweet rancid smooth rough creamy.

The kid at the counter having put avocado, beets, feta cheese, dried fruit—as much as he could fit inside it. It's this paradox of sensations I take my time chewing before I order a glass of tea. Sip and turn the pages of *La Familia de Pascual Duarte* until the text dissolves and I'm in the dining hall in college again, eating alone under the watchful eye of the black table where I had sat only once before returning to my senses and deciding not to cooperate with the pressure black students were under to huddle shoulder to shoulder over meals. The only thing justifying carrying my tray towards a bunch of do-gooders I had zero in common with, being a vision ingrained in the human imagination of unrelated blacks cramped into the cargo areas of ships, which may be an overly bitter observation—though saying that we'd been selected by admissions based on our ability to make the best of being stranded is just telling like it is.

"I've been assigned to help you feel at home on campus," a black junior at my door obviously recited from a script. I was already rebelling style wise in the first days of the semester by not combing my hair, exaggerating my slouch and wearing shirts with the sleeves cut off. She, however, had on this polite little outfit and Ben Franklin eyeglasses. Was straight out of a test tube in the African-American Dream Lab. As soon as we met, she was freaked out. It didn't help that she hailed from some part of the U.S. more foreign to a New Yorker than Sicily or Trinidad. Nothing about her was familiar enough for her to have been handpicked to be my guide during Orientation Week. In fact, accompanying her that day was so similar to grunting and groaning up the side of a cliff with my bare hands that by the time we were seated at a

gospel choir performance in a house a short walk across the lawn, watching Black students in church robes sing negro spirituals to white administrators clapping in time with them in delight, "Drop," a voice in my head whispered, "and that's what I did."

At least I still have "La Familia de Pascual Duarte," required reading in a senior seminar in Latin American literature conducted in Spanish that the visiting professor from the University of Havana teaching it gave me special permission to take. If someone that society had written off as a monster put a knife to the throat of a Poet Laureate and forced him to write his life story, it's the strangely familiar missing truth you'd get and the only souvenir I have of the three months I wasted trying to do what everybody else was after high school.

"Now you know this is not what I ordered," Aries bitches, blaming my incoherent Spanish for why he doesn't recognize what's on his plate.

"Queso de freir, mangu, longaniza. Eat," I command with my mouth full. Him eyeballing me back with unfazed attitude.

"Tell it to the Marines," I recommend as we're stumbling home later, both of us still acting the fool. Singleton's is one of a few soul food restaurants still standing, but nobody eats there anymore. The fewer customers they have, the longer the food sits.

"The collards taste old," Aries complained the last time we went there. Aries—he can make a whole feast out of a can of jack mackerel in tomato sauce and a box of pasta, so sometimes in the wee hours when we're

starving, a quick trip to Ojo del Agua bodega is the best idea. What we do when we're too wasted to realize we're drunk already: Descend One Four Five to a storefront in the valley where there's nothing but a couple of boxes of detergent and rolls of toilet paper on the shelves and grab a bottle hidden behind the counter God bless them because not selling liquor on Sunday is a sin.

"We should've seen if he had gin," Aries is saying after we've already reached the corner of Convent, but are heading back down the hill again one Sunday as the sun's just rising when Sylvester the great disco legend's rising towards us in a windblown garb with the message that the battle between the norm and the restless is over and we've won, across his face.

It's a wrap once the masses close in, a dealer outside Paradise Garage pontificates counting his cash. Remember how much we'd clock back in the day? You couldn't compare the crowd inching towards the door now to the black fashionistas so far ahead of everyone else that top designers in stealth mode would sketch pictures of them from blacked out windowed limousines. A rare kind of sexy. Better drugs. The same glorious lightning that struck every week. I didn't come here then, but know the dish. Best Sella dips through the traffic jamming Watts now, asking if I want to go inside with him or back down to the piers. We haven't hung out in some time. Let's go, I say following him in. Handshakes suffice with the crowd control team, old running buddies of his, so I don't have to pay and that's great. Looking for a guy named Niamey. Money to be made if he finds him. The whole urban free love cult in full force. Figures radiant. Rippling. Up-

town faces I've nodded off in the same subway cars with in the wee hours now and then. Best Sella pausing to talk to a snooty girl he says is a producer who I overhear say "Larry," like he's just someone she's done business with and not the force behind this erotic deja-vu moment without end we're immersed in. Best Sella knows what he wants isn't going to happen. Not tonight I guess, he says, so we creep back out, smuggling illegal quantities of Chaka Khan with us into the pre-dawn street. What a ghost town Hudson is. Nobody else is around. An off-duty taxi rolls by. That's it. But homie's still all about his money. Grabbing a public phone as soon as he sees one to call an insomniac who lives on Waverly who can only sleep if she smokes a little first. Best Sella never gives up, is relentless. He's leaving for England next week and I don't know when I'll see him if ever again, so hurry to her crib with him before we're sipping diner coffee through plastic lids in a car on the uptown D in which we're the only passengers and just as I always do in the early hours when the train stops at 145th I ask him if he wants to crash with me, since he's got a long ride left. Him taking me up on my offer for once, finally. I shut my door, locking my dogs out. We get undressed and sit naked on the floor in my bedroom without any furniture except for a mirror that's fallen so many times, a map to a land where no one's ever been runs through it and when I rest my head on his shoulder and he places the most flawless spliff ever crafted between my lips, my mind floats back to the electric fireplace I spent so much time in front of in Birmingham being that anything I do in New York I can tie to a city where the young once tried to mash down the empire just seems more valid.

I'm ugly. Something I find startling each time I hear someone say it, which is usually a spoiled glamour girl upset by the heavy conversation I'm having with her boyfriend. Once, a man I walked past on 125th and Lex frowned, then called me "fea." The two of us awkwardly bonding as I scrutinized him for the reason he'd chosen such a vicious way to break the ice. But ugly is a rare form of beauty or tourists wouldn't point their cameras at me. Fashion operatives wouldn't thrust business cards in my hand. The lady who said she worked for Essence Magazine asking if I wanted to be part of a photo spread of women with dreads would have had to have told me how much the pay was right there and then for me to have dialed the number she offered. Resting on a car in a garland of botanica beads, saggy vintage men's trousers and a washed out t-shirt without sleeves as I stand in front of Badlands on C Street talking to Louie and Sherise, who I haven't seen in a long while though, I'm feeling just fine and free of the curiosity of people who make me uneasy. That is before the police show up.

"Come on," Sherise says.

"I would start walking if I were with you," Louie advises out of the side of his mouth like a ventriloquist trying to divert attention from himself before he rushes away as if we have to avoid the cops even if we're just talking about how nice the weather is, which was not illegal the last time I checked. But I overestimate my ability to read situations when maybe it's just better to do what everybody else is because no sooner than they run off, "May I ask what you've got in your pockets?" an

officer looking me up and down with a curious expression, asks. He finds what he finds. The weed first. I forgot about the pills. Eight black beauties a dealer I hardly know had talked me into taking in exchange for two nickel bags. The handcuffs come out, the flat part that rests against my wrist kind of hurting. They tell me they need to find a female officer to frisk me, cruising in and out of the surrounding blocks of prissy townhouses with flower pots on their steps like they've got all the time in the world. No siren on, asking how long I've been on C street. Making small talk in a way that's straightforward, not a major power play. Who do you know of that sells anything heavier than weed and pills? Like heroin? The one whose driving asks watching me with special interest through the rear view mirror. That's not what guys strolling down to the piers are looking for, "Come on," I say laughing.

"Yeah. True," the other one answers.

"What about guns? Whose got any?" his partner asks with a dumb smile.

"Kids get buzzed before they head to the clubs. Men cruise each other. It's not heavy like that out here. Come on," I say. They nod in time, suddenly falling silent. They must be avoiding doing real work by zigzagging the safest blocks in Manhattan and making small talk with me I've decided when a female officer without a partner pulls up. I get out of the car. She's a wild one herself who I think I might have run into when she wasn't in uniform. Either way, she'd light up with me in a heartbeat later I can tell when she searches my tits like she thinks it's too soon for heavy petting. The whole ordeal is so kooky and

awkward, she's picked up on it and is too freaked out to lift the legs of my pants to search my socks where most of what I'm carrying is hidden. Then, I'm back in the car, asking how long I'll be in a cell and if I'll be given more than bread and water because I'm hungry, which makes one smile and the other shake his head and I've gotten out of the car in the parking lot at the precinct when they tell me to turn around, remove the cuffs strangling my wrists and say: Just stay out of trouble, kid. We're not taking you in. I'm in a rush to pick up where I left off so don't spend much time thanking them, just say goodbye a couple of times before I hurry back towards the river. The night is young. Junkie Marv's the first person I run into. Word having spread that I'd been put into a police car, no doubt, I figure he'll ask if I'm alright but "No. I'm not falling for that," he says raising a been there done that palm to discourage me from coming any closer. Every dealer I run into treating me with the same disrespect as it gradually occurs to me that they think the reason I'm already back on the street is that I turned and am helping the police to bust people.

Riding a bike for Good Rush in Chelsea. The monotony. Mere pennies I make in the heart of the nine to five rat race delivering letters and packages. Every time my life makes the slightest bit of sense, I chop it to pieces, so needless to say, The Guerilla Girls are history, though I haven't entirely stopped making music, am in this on and off project with Motor C., out jazz horn players, guys with synths. We rehearse at Charas, a former Lower East Side public school. I've performed at Neither Nor, the Shuttle Theater and a couple of raw fleeting spaces without names. Written some of my best songs to date lately. Songs with poignant choruses and memorable lyrics, one called "Witness to Violence" about the obligation to act that knowing about something that shouldn't have happened gives you. The only time that performing live will ever feel like I'm serving a concrete purpose will be when I sing it at a benefit at Danceteria for Michael Stewart, a young inspired graffiti artist beaten into a coma by transit police.

I was still subletting Alexa's apartment and sleeping on a mattress that Jean Michel had vacated, the first time I saw the Bad Brains tumbling down the steps into an open cellar on Avenue A.

"God save the helpless instruments they're throttling the last breath out of as well as anyone who lives nearby trying to sleep," what I'd think any time I'd hear them play. A new Afrocentric coalition's carefully plotting to integrate the Lower East Side gig scene. Meanwhile the Bad Brains are a posse of outlaws with a maniacal Rasta

punk ideology that fell from the sky into its pack of feral mostly white fans. Biking from Washington Square Park to their rehearsal space at Westbeth early evenings I try and sing over their arrangements in spite of my aversion to heavy action guitar. Doc and Darryl are wise crackers. Mischief incarnate. We hop on an uptown train to Columbia University to see HR perform with another band he's in for a minute. Bolt through a turnstile, rush through a dead zone just south of Harlem together, and it's like I'm an out of control teen again outnumbered by boys egging me on to race the one who's fastest. Hanging out at Doc's crib with his wife and kids. Laying down vocals over a song that the musician who introduced me to them remixes without ever believing for one minute that HR is gone for good or that I could ever fill his shoes.

In the heat of an argument in a hall on Avenue A with a boyfriend I was starting to realize was in monogamous relationships with like four, maybe five other girls as well as a couple of men, a petite punk neighbor of his lunged out of the door of her apartment shrieking, "You're a nigger! A nigger!" at me during my emotional exit from his apartment. The odd plot twist here is that lover boy was also black but an insider known by the other tenants for being good at repairing runny faucets. Maybe he was banging her too. I don't know. I must've removed her tongue from her mouth with a surgical knife 100 times in my imagination but have never been a violent person so am incapable of becoming one even when appropriate. As for the word "nigger," it's inescapable in America. You're wasting your time if you think you can outrun it

just by hanging out with people with radical taste in art and music.

I bounce from east to west, uptown then downtown, then back up again. The only thing that matters when I get off the 6 train at Astor is that Motor C's is near. Her apartment's still my sanctuary. Cuddling her bass, playing some dub riff on it and humming as we take turns trying to solve the mystery of men, talking each other off a ledge or bracing ourselves for something better. Always, ultimately laughing at how tacky reality is and relieved that it's never had much to do with us. The crates where she used to keep records now jammed with instrument cables. The 808 drum machine and four-track tape recorder. The SP 12, Korg. Voyetra. DX-7 and other once must-have machines sold or in a closet. I'm a sucker for songs that make me feel like I'm in a movie. White noise. Hand claps. The latest special effects, at the same time that I notice that we're all falling under an evil spell of blinking cursors and glowing screens.

Lately, the joy of just winging it has been replaced by a rising anxiety that unless you have a trick up your sleeve, the end is near. But success is unnatural. Nothing proving that more than Jean-Michel of all people shouting my name from the other side of St. Mark's Place and jogging towards me as if he could save himself by speaking to anybody he recognized who hadn't been mentioned recently in the gossip section of the New York Post.

It's 1984 and the East Village isn't the ghost town of my teens. Young snobs drawn towards urban blight

continue to flood in, each wave less art damaged than the last. Fast food restaurants with Coney Island style awnings have replaced the hippie cafes and bar that advertised a 99 cents chicken dinner that was actually a hard-boiled egg. Homeless psych patients clutching styrofoam plates from the nearest food kitchen lost in a maze of members only gardens inside padlocked gates. Thank God Motor C's apartment really hasn't changed. Visitors still ring the buzzer, climbing up to her living room like they're boarding a rocket to someplace better such as Snuky Tate, the artist behind the cult record, "He's the Groove." Barrel chested with eyes that bug out of his head when you express an opinion that differs from his. He dressed in drag in San Francisco, according to rumor, but has settled into an any old sneakers, jeans and unkempt dreads look, but a lot of us are less fabulous and have entered a more introspective phase. Snuky never misses the subtlest gesture that swings the balance of power in his direction. He pontificates on shit others have got to notice but aren't vocalizing like how rhymes and breakbeats make rock and roll sound snooty or Greg Tate is bringing Harlem and the outer boroughs to the Village Voice newspaper like never before and since the Village is just a Bohemian museum without the misfits of color from Queens, Brooklyn and Jersey electrifying the "Cage," the park, the piers, Tate's more of a spokesperson for a lot of us than a reporter.

"I had to hang out with my white friends if I wanted to listen to the blues when I was young in Delaware," Snuky complains, playing defense one second. Then offense the next.

"But the comfort that white audiences derive from listening to the sagas of black folks without a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of raises red flags," I say before picking his brain for insights into why I don't like being on stage.

"The minute you're up there, and they're down there, the balance of power instantly swings in your favor," Snuky reassures me.

"Yeah. But that's the problem. I don't want all that." I say.

"Okay," he goes, coming at me from another angle without citing Artaud or Stanislavsky thankfully, and it's cathartic but doesn't help.

I'd read about Joan Littlewood's radical traveling theater when I was in England, which had helped me to realize I'm an agitator. Not an entertainer, but I'd always been offended by the fan/star dichotomy. Stuck with songs that aren't meant to be sung and texts that aren't meant to be read. Lyrics and notes inked on stray pieces of paper in my always changing handwriting keeping me in suspense. Why am I so compelled to record how I feel about everything? Should I be giving such a dead-end compulsion even more of my time and attention? It all just comes down to dedication when I talk with free jazz musicians. Now that the Loft Jazz scene has atomized, Daniel Carter, Jemeel Moondoc and other horn players who tend to revere Cecil Taylor are suddenly on the same shabby couch that used to be my bed slurping tea between Motor C's steadfast rock and reggae record collection.

"What Cecil wants from his musicians is loyalty," says a flautist named Bernard, a true Cecil devotee, still fig-

uring it all out as he reflects. That arm paddle. That bop. That snide out the side of your mouth way of talking that my father and his musician friends have passed down another generation. They're men who've studied and taught composition and theory at the most prestigious conservatories in the country but an audio engineer I know simply refers to as "jazz bums." Charles Gayle who's strategically homeless and unemployed in order to live as one with his sax may fit this description but is also someone any critic worth their salt considers a genius. The stubborn romantics who drop in from Beirut, Dakar and other parts of the world eliciting raised eyebrows as they lay witness to life off the beaten track. Louis Sarno's home is in the forest of the Central African Republic where he lives with a Pygmy wife whose tribe's otherwise soon to be extinct music he's recording in spite of the malaria and intestinal parasites that come with such a commitment—we'll meet at Alexa's. Voices, especially those from childhood advising me that when things aren't working out for you in the country you're in, go elsewhere—will play a part in my decision to donate what little I own to charity, hole up in cheap foreign rooms and defend my calling to write for better or worse, but I'm light years from any of that when Cassette, who I haven't seen in ages, knocks at the door of my Harlem apartment, hurrying through the shadows of the unlit hall with my dogs scuttling between us, saying she wants to share some opium she was fortunate to score. Riding so far to hang out for only a second. Go figure. Hunting through a tote bag for a ball of something she runs a lighter flame across like a birthday party

magician performing a coin trick until I'm alone in the dark revisiting daddy in silhouette at a table with a glass of brandy brooding. Blank pages of Ibsen's *Wild Duck* and Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata* that I fill in with my own dialogue and characters, trusting what I write enough to submit it all to black box venues downtown before I get overwhelmed by the whole application bureaucracy. Only after walking into National Black Theatre and talking to Nabii Faison able to locate a space to rehearse with the cast I had gathered by taping a call for audition to walls in the subway, and finally share the text I divided into two short plays titled "I Heard about Your Cat," and "A Table by the Window" with an audience. All I had to do was organize the mess that had collected in the men and women's dressing rooms over the years and the theater was mine to use, an informal agreement made with a local Harlem organization that will allow me to hear my writing spoken for the first time instead of sung.

As for smoke, pills, booze. I won't need those bells and whistles once I mature and calm down some. And once every damned inch of the street becomes prime real estate whose profitability is ensured by a police force with drone surveillance capability, New York will become a sorry extension of cyberspace in which every blink and sneeze is corporate sponsored, that I'll wholeheartedly reject.

Maybe the lack of foresight with which my parents dismantled our home when I was 18 predisposed me towards guitar smashing or I was destined to be the teenage squatter who boosted electricity off the sign of a

Shell station. I'll be relieved to be evicted from my Harlem apartment. My move, a kneekerk effort to avoid an armed sheriff will be that of an avant-garde dancer rushing surreal props—and as for the window gate that was supposed to have divided order from chaos, I'll leave it, but it will already be unlocked and hanging from a loose hinge way before then of course.