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by

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Crisp leaves blew all around the empty chess tables. The old men in fedoras having ended their season after the first cold front. Old newspapers and racing programs from Aqueduct skittered across the dirt, making me nervous. With each passing A-train, I felt time slow. My heart, too. The handball and basketball courts were empty. Outside the precinct, yards away, two cops sat on the outer railing near the burnt out bathroom, smoking cigs and telling dirty jokes.

Crazy Joe said he'd be in and out in under fifteen minutes. He said he'd muzzle the .38 so no one would hear it. Thirty minutes had already passed. Sick to my guts, I eased through the hole in the fence. The traffic on Liberty Avenue seemed to crawl quieter.

I walked slowly down 103rd, running my fingers against the fence of the *A&P* overflow parking lot. It wasn't until I came to Faye and Lou's house, first on the right, that I saw the green and white parked at the alleyway.

A tall cop sat leaning against the car, driver door opened, reading *The Daily News*. Just across the street sat a black car. I slowed my step, my heart in my throat. As I came to the alley, he looked up at me, said nothing. He folded the paper, tossed it in the front seat and shut the door. I heard all this but was too afraid to turn around. Only glancing back once, thinking I saw someone in the back seat. I tried the side door. Locked.

The side window was opened. Unusual for a chilly day. I stepped back, straining to see inside: three people sitting quietly at our table. I tried the door

again. Still locked. I fussed in my pockets, searching like I'd lost something. I heard the officer's steps coming up behind me. I turned. We were nearly face-to-face. He held out his meaty hand.

"Try this, kid."

My key was in his hand. The key I gave Crazy Joe of the White Rebels. I took the key, feeling the need to shit. It felt like the world was slowly tilting into gray. Just over the cop's shoulder, I saw Crazy Joe, the junky, slip from the back seat. He grinned and took off for 102. To score some H, no doubt.

I slid the key into the small lock. Right beside me, shoulders touching, the cop shifted side-to-side, his dusty heels squeaking on the cement. I couldn't unlock it from the shaking.

"Problem? Le'me."

He took the key, eased it right in and opened the door. I heard a chair scrape the kitchen floor.

"Let me ask, John. I mean, you are John. Right?"

He stared at me from beneath the black shiny brim. I managed to nod. My mouth was a desert.

"How old are you, kid?"

I took a moment and held up ten and then four fingers.

"That's pretty young for this kind'a stuff," he shook his head incredulously. I stepped into the dark hallway. He handed me the key.

"People in there gonna have a chat with you."

He stepped back, leaning against the alley wall to let me know he wasn't going anywhere. I opened the kitchen door and heard someone moving about and a spoon swirling in a cup. In the center of the room was my little suitcase, baseball

glove, and my books in a bag. I glanced toward the kitchen table. Three faces sat quietly staring at me.

A social worker nun, my foster mother, and a man in a suit with a gold shield on his belt and a black gun in a shoulder holster. My foster father was in the living room sitting in the dark smoking a stogie. He would not look my way. I set the key on the table and stood back. The man with the gun spoke first. The nun just stared at me, shaking her head ever so, “Tsk tsk.”

“Get this kid something to eat. Before he faints.”

“Don’t need nuthin from nobody.”

Lu didn’t move or even look at me. She stared out the window, sniffing on tissues and dabbing her fat puffy eyes.

“Oh? Tough guy I see. You sure, kid?”

Then I looked at my suitcase and thought, ‘Fuck it.’ I got two *Ding-Dongs* from the freezer. From Lu’s secret stash. I dug right in, licking my fingers loudly, and leaving the wrappers stuck to the table.

“How old?” the detective asked.

“Fourteen,” said the nun.

“Let’em answer, Sister, please,” the detective insisted.

He opened a small note pad and turned his dark-eyed stare on me. I stared at his holster, wondering if...

“Know why we’re all just sittin here waitin on you?”

“Nothin better to do?”

I looked toward the alley. The other cop was blocking the door with his back. I glanced toward the back bedrooms. The doors were shut. There was no way out. The detective waited.

“Cause I lost my house key?” I replied, staring at his badge.

The detective, Mancuso, clicked his pen, “Wanna try again?”

I did not answer, I just looked for a way out.

“Look, I can’t put you in jail. If that’s your worry. But I doubt it.”

I glanced towards my foster father. He’d extinguished his stogey and shut his eyes with a trembled sigh.

“I think Spofford would be a good fit for one like you.”

“Whateva, copp’a,” I replied in my best James Cagney.

He quickly stood up, scaring me. I stepped back. He set a wooden chair beside the nun, Sister Teresa, and told me to sit. The nun turned her sad blues on me.

“You gave this key to Crazy Joe. Am I exact?”

I nodded with a sigh, licking chocolate from my fingers.

“How do you know a gang member?”

“I play ball in 102. It’s their park. They let me play there. I know’em, so we talk.”

“About what?” he asked, leaning into me, clicking his pen, as the nun leaned away.

He was unshaven, smelling a bit of alcohol.

“Did you ask him to harm these nice people here?”

I didn’t answer right away – feeling edgy and scared. I shrugged.

“Don’t shrug, kid. Own up. Did you?”

“Told’em to scare’em a bit. That’s all. Rough’em up.”

“So you admit it.”

I nodded along.

“Did you ask him to shoot them?”

“I don’t remember. Nah. I-I don’t think so.”

Sister turned to the detective, “I think you’re trying to confuse this boy. He said no.”

“This boy ain’t confused, Sister. I know his type. He’s just gettin started.”

“He’s still a minor. I’m his guardian. Don’t ask him anymore questions.”

“A nun as guardian for a boy like this? Good luck.” He clicked his pen and put the pad away. “They sent a lamb to guard the wolf,” he grumbled, throwing up his hands in disgust.

Finally, Lu spoke, holding a tissue to her nose. “You wanted to h-harm us?”

I would not look at her. I looked out the window as they studied me.

“Sista, could we talk out back?”

She seemed perplexed and looked to the detective.

“Officer Jones is out there. You’ll be safe with him out back.”

We stepped outside. I made sure to let that door slam. Officer Jones stood nearby, within listening distance. I sat on the old bench. The one I was restricted to every July Fourth.

“My word, you are shaking, child,” she said with a light tone of concern.

“Need a sec,” I replied, sitting on my hands, rocking, struggling to catch my breath. She gently touched my shoulder. I flew off that bench. Officer Jones eyed me hard, grabbing at his night stick.

“Could you please not touch me? Shit. Don’t want nobody touchin’ me.”

Officer Jones stepped closer with an eyebrow raised.

“I’m sorry. Please sit. Please. Take your time, child.”

I sat. She scooted closer. I slid to the end of the bench.

“Ain’t somebody gotta read my rights or somethin?”

“No. But what do you want to say about this placement?”

I sat up, pointing to the rear window above the storm cellar doors.

“Girls died in there, Sista. In that backroom.”

She shot forward, her eyes wide, “What? You said what?”

She stood and clutched her black cross in her fat white hand.

“Child, child, y-you’re saying a murder happened here?”

“Man, don’t be so silly, Sista. Not like that,” I replied, spitting on the doors.

The detective came out. “We’re done for now.”

He turned dark eyes on me, a hand on the holster.

“Figure you’n me’ll meet again, Dillinger. A few years. Til then, tough guy.”

He and Jones headed for their cars sharing laughter about nuns and lambs.

She resumed her concern, “Like how then? I don’t understand.”

“Killed’em little bits at a time, like the ocean eats up paint. Disappears it.”

“They took you in when you were living in Central Park. Doing god only knows what to survive. They took you. Lordy, whatever changed so fast?”

“You read my file?”

“Yes. I somewhat perused it. So I’m familiar with your case. Yes.”

“So then it’s your damn fault.”

I stood and turned toward the alley.

“What do you mean by that, boy?”

She gathered the habit about herself and stood straight. My suitcase and books were tossed into the alley and the locks clicked into place.

“Ya know I threw that desk through my classroom window at P.S. 108?”

She nodded agreement, "Yes. Third floor, I do believe."

“I did that to get out of here. Because ain't nobody heard a word I said.”

“ I don't understand. There's no note in your case files about anything bad.”

“But they wrote that I started fires in school, the park, in my own yard?”

As we walked down the alley there came a slow lowering down of blinds.

We set my stuff in the trunk as neighbors stood gawking. I slid in back as she leaned in the opened door.

“So what exactly is your point, boy?”

“Why'da send me back here? Why'da ya think I said hell no after Astor Home? Why ya think I lived in that park, Sista? Because it was fun?”

“Why did you live in such a god-awful place, child?”

“Safer than the places you send me. Gosh, don't you nuns understand shit?”

I yanked the door from her hands, slamming it. She pulled away in time.

“I'll be right back,” she whispered, tapping the glass.

The nosy neighbors stood gossiping because I cursed a nun. I ignored Faye and took in the yellow leaves in spiral-falls from all the pretty trees. Sister Teresa returned. She got her white habit situated beneath her, leaning this way and that, huffing and puffing. Finally she started the black car. After she'd said a prayer. She adjusted the rearview and sighed. Her tired eyes with dark rings looked sadly.

“I'm wondering what salt water has to do with that backroom, child?”

I looked at the floorboard, closing my eyes.

“They took the color from my sister's eyes. They was real pretty once.”

She pulled from the curb and adjusted the mirror for driving.

“You know child, I like you. You got a spark about you. I hope it's good.”

We turned right onto Liberty as the A passed overhead dropping sparks on the avenue.

“Want to know where you’re going next?”

“Don’t matter. No good people anywhere. Everybody takes something.”

“I’m sorry you’ve had such a hard time in your placements. I thought that after...”

I leaned forward, talking to her over the seat.

“Driver, do me a favor. Just shut up and drive.”

I leaned back, folded my arms and waited for it.

“There is no need for that language or worry. You’re going to Chester. A nice place for troubled boys like yourself. We have a beautiful chapel and a pond. Lots of trees. I think you’ll adapt better out of this god-forsaken city.”

“Why are you still talkin? Every shit place I go, you’s guys take me there.”

She adjusted her seat as we drove along at 10 miles below the speed limit with horns blasting behind us. They’d pass, ready to give’er the finger, see a nun hunched over the wheel and speed on by.

She asked, “Conspiracy to commit murder is very serious. Is it true?”

“Since no one can arrest me. Yea. I wanted’em shot to shit. Like that cheese with all’a’da holes. For what they did.”

She crossed herself several times with a long tsk-tsk cadence, sounding like a stopwatch. She rolled the window down, sucked in air and shook her head.

“Would you like to pray with me? Pray of your forgiveness? Pray with me.”

“Can’t do that, Sista. I’m making a list. For later. For when I grow up.”

“Please pray with me child. It’ll make things better. Get the dark sin of hatred outta you. It’s bad to hate in that way at such a tender age.”

“It’s not hate. It’s love, see. Nobody hurts my sister.”

“I must ask, John, is 103rd street on that list of yours?”

“Top of it.”

“Why is that?”

“Gosh, man, please listen! Cause they hurt my sister. She's got stitches.”

“But what about you? You, John? You must have been hurt. Yes?”

“Nah. Don't feel much inside. And I'm nobody. Only Bridgey matters.”

She changed lanes for the expressway, scaring the drivers around her.

“Want to sing Michael rowed a boat ashore with me? It's a joyous song.”

“Oh, brother. I'd rather hear the radio. Some rock, okay? Rock.”

She sat up straight and snapped it on with attitude and cranked it up.

Don Mclean sang, “Do you have faith in god above, if the Bible tells you so?”

She clapped in all her glory to the celestial timing. I couldn't believe it.

“Well thank you, sweet Jeez-us! Amen. Oh Lordy, Lordy, thank you.”

We sang together, laughing in to tears. I couldn't believe this old nun with grays showing, driving in two lanes, was singing rock-n-roll. Holy shit!

“Can music save your mortal soul and can you teach me how to dance real slow?”

At the close we belted it out loudly, like in choir, nearly ripping the roof off, “This'll be the day that I die.” We high-fived. She winked at me. Nuns don't wink. Ever. She's trying to be cool. I eased into the seat, staring out at the city blurring past. As gray city cement and blacktop surrendered to trees of song, I glanced back, “G'bye my city. I'll be back.” I closed my eyes and said good-bye to the angel of the waters in Central Park and to Carnegie Hall.

Note: My records indicate that foster home was permanently closed by the State of New York 30 days after my removal. No reason indicated. There never is.