

12. MY MARINE TIGER

Fuck Mr. Christian. I didn't need his job anyway. I was selling pot—and smoking it, too—regularly. A bomber here, a bomber there; it kept me going, inside and out. I even visited at home occasionally. I told Momma I had a job on the docks. But I was swinging in Harlem, my Harlem, next to which Babylon was like cotton candy—white and sticky, and tasteless in the mouth.

In the daytime Harlem looks kinda dirty and the people a little drab and down. But at night, man, it's a swinging place, especially Spanish Harlem. The lights transform everything into life and movement and blend the different colors into a magic cover-all that makes the drabness and garbage, wailing kids and tired people invisible. Shoes and clothes that by day look beat and worn out, at night take on a reflected splendor that the blazing multi-colored lights burn on them. Everyone seems to develop a sense of urgent rhythm and you get the impression that you have to walk with a sense of timing.

The daytime pain fades alongside the feeling of belonging and just being in swing with all the humming kicks going on around you. I'd stand on a corner and close my eyes and look at everything through my nose. I'd

sniff deep and see the *cuchifritos* and hot dogs, stale sweat and dried urine. I'd smell the worn-out mothers with six or seven kids, and the nonpatient fathers beating the hell out of them. My nose would get a high-pitch tingling from the gritty wailing and bouncing red light of a squad car passing the scene like a bat out of Harlem, going to cool some trouble, or maybe cause some.

I'd walk on Lexington Avenue, where a lot of things were going on, and hear the long, strung-out voice of a junkie, "Hey, man, you got a couple charlies you can lend me?"

"Sorry, man, I wish I did have two bucks, but here's half a man," and I really wouldn't hear the "Thanks, man," as I slid half a dollar into a hand that somehow would convert that change into a fix of heroin that would drive away for a while whatever needed driving away.

The blocks would fall back, and without feeling the distance I would have gone twenty blocks. At Ortiz' Funeral Parlor there would be a wreath of white flowers indicating that death had copped another customer. I'd try not to become involved in all the sorrow sounds that loved ones made for someone that was beyond their loving.

I'd turn and head back to my block, noticing the overflow wash strung out on front fire escapes and thinking about the people who complain that clothes on front-side fire escapes make the block look cheap, that people who do that have no sense of values and destroy the worth of the neighborhood. But I liked it; I thought it gave class to the front fire escapes to be dressed up with underwear, panties, and scrubbed work clothes.

I'd meet my boys, and all the other hearing and seeing suddenly became unimportant. Only my boys were the important kick, and for good reasons—if I had boys, I had respect and no other clique would make me open game. Besides, they gave me a feeling of belonging, of

prestige, of accomplishment; I felt *grande* and bad. Sometimes the thoughts would start flapping around inside me about the three worlds I lived in—the world of home, the world of school (no more of that, though), and the world of street. The street was the best damn one. It was like all the guys shouting out, “Hey, man, this is our kick.”

The worlds of home and school were made up of rules laid down by adults who had forgotten the feeling of what it means to be a kid but expected a kid to remember to be an adult—something he hadn’t gotten to yet. The world of street belonged to the kid alone. There he could earn his own rights, prestige, his good-o stick of living. It was like being a knight of old, like being ten feet tall.

I was kicking these thoughts around one day, sitting in El Viejo’s candy store, digging the scene. Suddenly everybody looked younger and less experienced than me. I felt like I was one of the few who had broken up into little bits of world. Then I saw across the street Carlito Diaz, his sister Ava, and their momma walking alongside the prettiest, softest, widest-eyed Puerto Rican girl in the whole world. I got up from the twisted fountain stool and went outside.

I whistled and Carlito looked over. With my shoulders I asked, “Who’s she?”

Carlito handed a cardboard-looking suitcase to his sister and crossed the street toward me, in the process letting me know that “she” was his cousin, a year older than he, single, and just arrived from Puerto Rico, and why didn’t I come up to the house?

I made a move with my head that said, “Now?” and Carlito shook a head full of yesses and turned away from me to help Ava lift the cardboard-looking suitcase from its sidewalk gravity and into number 109.

Two hours later I knocked at the door and watched it open.

“Come in, Piri,” said Ava’s momma.

I nodded thanks, and my serious look at Carlito wiped off his shitty grin of knowing that this wasn’t no ordinary visit. I followed them right into the kitchen, where “she” was sitting, eating. I looked at her and said, “My name is Piri. What’s yours, girl?”

“Trinidad,” she answered, smiling shyly.

“Trinidad?”

“Yes, but I like ‘Trina’ better,” she said, cutting out my tongue with her white teeth and red mouth and smile. She started to get up from the table and I thought, *Don’t get up, Señorita Trina. Keep eating; finish your plate of rice and beans. Do you know that your lips shine with the oil from your food?*

She got up anyhow and washed a glass with hot water, filled it with cold water, drank a little, then returned to her place at the table. She didn’t look at me in all this time, and her shy ignoring of me left me helpless. I stood there like a Central Park statue. I was saved by Mrs. Diaz. “Would you like to eat, Piri?” she said.

I nodded, “Yes,” gratefully and sat down at the table right across from Trina. Nothing could be as great as being able to sit close to this girl-woman who had upset my sense of balance. I felt weak in my kneecaps, yet I was able to keep my street face straight. Nothing shook, nothing showed, but my heart said, *Girl, I do dig you.* I wished I could tell it to her, like I was thinking it.

Instead there was a lot of small talk between small mouthfuls, like this meal had to last forever.

“Where are you from, girl?” I asked.

“Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico. And you?”

“Harlem, *Barrio*. Uh—are you here for long?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe long time or *un poco tiempo*.”

I looked at her like I didn’t really care and thought, *No, no, chica, forever, say forever!*

Eventually dinner ended and some kind of rest mixed

with coffee was had in the living room. Then it was time for me to go. I got up and everyone convoyed me to the door.

"I'm glad to have met you, Piri," Trina said.

"Me, too." I grinned, thinking, *Girl, you have set me on a rumble*, but saying, "Well, I'll see you again."

There was no answer, just a shy smile.

I shook her hand and held it too long. I felt like an ass, and finally I let her hand go. The door closed behind me.

Damn, she's fine, I thought, *fine, fine, fine*.

Later I called her my "Marine Tiger," after the ship that brought so many Puerto Ricans to New York. We dug each other, and soon we were going to all the dances together. At Christmas we made a date to go to a party one of her cousins was giving. Man, I felt great. I had some long bread in my pockets 'cause I'd just finished selling some fine pot and had bought some more all rolled up. I had about two hundred sticks. At three for a buck, I'd make about \$65. Like Mr. Christian had said, "Our designated territory was fully capacitated."

It was a fine night, cold but not freezing. I was waiting downstairs in front of El Viejo's for Trina. I was togged real sharp, with a fine suit, boss coat, and soft Florsheims, real dancing shoes. Man, what was taking her so long, I wondered, a little peeved, a little impatient to get going to the party. I started to cross the street and give her another yell to hurry up. But I changed my mind and decided to wait inside the candy store, where some of my boys were. Acting real cool, I walked slowly, deliberately back to El Viejo's, pausing long enough to light up a long, slim cigar. Wild, hot mambo music blared from the jukebox inside. Mambol! My feet automatically reacted and I danced the last few steps to the door.

I stood there a second, listening to the music, and opened the door. I saw they were snorting *tecata*. I smoked marijuana, which was just like smoking cigarettes,

but I was down on drugs. I had seen the young-old cats that dope had messed up, the poor chumps who would try to hustle a buck or steal anything that would bring the price of a cap, a fix, to drive that mean devil away for a while.

I started turning away, snapping and shaking my head as if I'd forgotten something, when Alfredo called me. Alfredo and I had never been too tight and we never seemed to miss a chance to sound each other. Someday, I thought, we're going to have it out for good. "Say, *panín*," he said, "come and dig."

It was too late; I had to bluff. I cool-walked into El Viejo's and slapped skin all around. "What's shakin'?" I asked, like I didn't know.

"Cool, man," warned Waneko, "we've got some bad stuff, real down and we're going high. Cop some."

I felt something thrust into my hand and saw a cap and a piece of match-book cover folded into a V-shaped scoop.

"Snort, man," Waneko said. "It's H."

How can I make out of this? I was thinking. "Nay, dad, I've been blasting *yerba*. I have a going high and I don't want to mess it up."

"Oh, man," said Alfredo, "I'm digging maybe you're fronting now, cool Piri, making like you're a down stud. Now I ain't signifying, but I never dug you for a punk."

I felt myself stiffen and let my face set into a hard black mask, and in a low, just barely controlled whisper I hissed out, "Daddy-o, I'm going to make like I didn't dig what you just put down." I took the match-book scoop and shook out the stuff.

"Say, man," Crip's voice warned, "that's a big jolt you got heaped in your hand."

"Look," I said bad-like, "I've used this stuff before. But some wise motherfucker don't seem to know that I did and maybe like punks gotta be shown." Looking dead at

Alfredo, I inhaled, first through one nostril, then through the other. Then, turning quickly, away I went into the cold street. Almost immediately I felt a burning sensation in my nose, like a sneeze coming. I pulled out my handkerchief and had barely enough time to put it to my nose when the blood came pouring out. *Man*, I thought, *this cap has blown out the insides of my nose*. But in a few seconds the bleeding stopped just as it had started.

Now the night lights seemed to get duller and duller, my awareness of things grew delayed. But the music was clearer and I felt no pain, nothing at all. I seemed sort of detached. I felt a little sick in my belly, but the good-o feeling was even better. I saw Trina coming to meet me, and I crossed the street and walked toward her, walking real light, real dreamy and slow, so she would have to meet me more than halfway. Sometimes I'd make her walk all the way to me, but tonight. I felt good.

"Hi, Marine Tiger," I greeted her. She was a beautiful girl—dark, curly hair, large black eyes, red mouth, and a real down figure. Tonight she had a new dress. *Man*, I thought, *she's action come alive*. But when she asked me how she looked, I merely grunted, "*Buena, nena*."

She told me she felt good to be by my side. *Man*, I love you, *Trina*. I feel good. I felt my face. It was like touching someone else. A little voice bugged me: *You're on your way, baby, you're walking into junkies' alley*. "Aw, the hell with you," I half blurted out and turned the corner, my arms tightly around Trina.

On the stairs leading up to the pad, I said, "Trina?"

"Sí, Piri?"

"Look, baby, I don't want you to drink too much. Like it don't look good and you don't stand much in order to get high. Okay?"

"*Bueno*, but I'm not a little girl," she said.

I laughed. "You sure ain't, but that's how I want it. Okay?"

"Sí, okay."

"That's my Marine Tiger."

There were quite a few cats at the party, and I got separated from Trina. Still feeling easy, I danced with a couple of the broads. I was grinding against one when I heard Carlito's voice. "Hey, Piri," he said, "Trina's drinking. She's talking about how you're making out with—" and he pointed a silent finger at the chick in my arms. "She's had beau-coup."

I looked toward the kitchen. Trina was just finishing a drink. I whispered to the broad that was grinding against me, "Later for you," and walked over to the kitchen, "cool" like I was supposed to. "Trina?" I said.

"Sí?"

"Look, *nifia*, you're drinking too much; better like cool it, eh?"

"Sí, I will. It's just my second one and—and it is Christmas."

"Okay, but no more. Come here."

She swayed a little and gave a dirty look to the girl I had been grinding. I smiled at her and we danced. A little later I was dancing with the grinding broad again and I looked toward the kitchen and saw Trina with a drink in her hand, talking with a guy who I knew was always on the make. She looked at me and the glass dropped out of her hand and she ran into the bathroom. The guy who was giving her the drinks started to say something and I cooled him. Then I went over to the bathroom and pounded on the door. "Trina, open up," I shouted.

A small high voice said, "Go away, I can drink if I want to."

I was high enough to break the door down but I cooled my role. No use starting trouble in a family house. I called Ava. "Look, Ava, you better get your cousin out of that shithouse. Get her out and we'll give her some black

coffee and some grease from that *lechón* on the stove."

A little later the party broke up, and Trina and I and Ava and Carlito left for home. Trina seemed sobered up, but as soon as the night air hit her, it brought back her high. She started talking trash through her hair. "I can drink anytime I want to," she said. I walked on ahead with Carlito and pretended not to hear her. Ava was walking with Trina and I heard her trying to calm her down. But she was just getting wound up. "After all, I'm free, white, and over the age," she said in Spanish. *Damn*, I thought, *why did she have to be so damned hard on the white part?* I felt my anger coming up, but I still cooled myself and we walked down Park Avenue toward 104th Street and number 109.

Trina kept up the yak. It was the drinks talking and I got warmer and warmer. I was damn mad. When we got to our stoop I said to Ava and Carlito, "Go on, kids, I want to talk to Trina."

"Okay, Piri, we'll see you later," said Carlito.

"Piri, don't be too mad, she's a little high," said Ava.

Trina tried to go with them, but I held her back. "Look, girl, I want to talk to you," I said. I held her two arms. She was standing in front of the door with its plate-glass windows.

"Let me go. Who do you think you are?" she said.

"I just want to talk with you, and—"

"Let me go," she said. "Who the hell do you think you are?" And she pushed me. I was high enough to go off balance, and before I could hold back, my fist was crashing toward her face. Somehow I missed and my fist smashed through the plate-glass window. I took back my hand and we both stood and looked at it, all cut up and blood spurting from one of the knuckles. Trina, her face pale, turned and ran. I just looked at my hand and walked up the stairs after her.

Upstairs, Trina brought me a towel and I wrapped it

around my hand and walked out of the apartment and to Mt. Sinai Hospital, from where I was sent to City Hospital in an ambulance.

Man, City Hospital was like a butcher shop. All kinds of cases were coming in—guys with broken heads, broken arms, stab wounds, and bullet holes. There were no more beds, and bloody and busted guys were lying all over the floor. The doctors were working like mad. The ambulance attendants brought a colored man in on a stretcher. His eyes were rolling.

"What've you got there?" said one of the nurses. She was colored, too.

"Stabbin'," an attendant said. "One in the neck, another in the back."

"Oh, oh, oh," moaned the colored guy. "Ain't gonna die, am I, mister? Ah ain't gonna die? Oh sweet Jesus, Ah ain't gonna die?" Blood oozed out red against his sweating dark skin.

The doctor examined him and patted him on the head and laughed. "Boy, you just got a couple of scratches. You could have put a couple of band-aids on them and nothing more said."

"Ya mean Ah gonna be okay?" the colored cat asked. "A-huh."

"Man, jus' wait till I git' outta here. Ah gonna get that black sonovabitch. E-magine that cat shanking me like that."

"Nurse, put some medication on his wounds after he gets a couple of stitches," the doctor said. The nurse nodded and the colored cat looked at her and began smiling. "Hey there, hon-nee," he said, "take care of your man."

"Mind your tongue," said the nurse.

"Now, hon-nee, I may be dying and—"

"Don't put on a brave act with me, home-boy. You were about to crap when you thought you were dying."

"Ah still may die," he said. "But if Ah makes it, will you go out with me? We can make it down to the Baby Grand and do some shuffling."

"Listen, mister, I'm just interested in them two scratches you got. The rest of you don't count."

"Ah, now, baby, don't act like that. If I don't make it you can have my shoes."

"If you don't shut your mouth," she said, "I'll have the doctor sew it up along with them little scratches."

"Okay, okay, baby. And you nurses is suppose to be sweet and gentle-like. You Negroes are all the same."

Two big cops pushed their way into the room and walked over to the colored cat. "Well, fella, what happened?" asked one of the cops.

The colored cat's face got innocent-looking all of a sudden, and his voice sounded small and weak. "Wal, officers, Ah sure don' know 'xactly for sure. I was walking down the street and Ah passed a dark street and somebody jumped me and tried to cop my wallet. I fought back and he shanked me. I didn't even get a good look at him and I couldn't identify him no matter what. Ah sure wish Ah could help you out."

The two cops looked at each other and, without a word, left. The colored cat watched them leave and smiled and said, "What do they care? It's just another nigger gettin' cut up. Man, when I get aholt of that Scotty who shanked me, I'll take care of him myself."

I looked around and a guy was looking at me. His wrist was all cut up. He looked at my hand with the bandage on it. "Got into a fight?" he asked.

"Naw, no hassle," I said. "I was just swinging out on my old lady and missed. My hand went through a plate-glass window."

He smiled and said, "Me, too, but I put my fist through a window for kicks."

I looked at him and his face said "junkie." I decided to find out.

"I wish I had me some stuff."

"You on, man?"

"Yeah, you?"

"A-huh, yeah," he said, and looked around. "I got some H," he whispered. "Come on over here and we'll turn on." I sat next to him. "I got no works," he said, "but we can snort." He brought out two caps and handed me one. I carefully opened the cap and let a little jolt of H fall on my thumbnail. *Man, who cares about a cut-up hand? This is the stuff that counts. This is the coolness that'll fix everything.* I held one nostril closed and sniffed hard, then the other, until all the cap was empty. Then I just sat back, and all that misery and pain in that hospital ward became unimportant, like my being there was no concern of mine.

"How you feel, man?" the junkie asked me.

"Cool, man. Say, what's your name?"

"Hector; what's yours?"

"Piri."

"Hey, fella," a voice called, "you're next."

I turned to the voice and it was talking to me. It was a Chinese doctor. My mind was nice and warm; my separation from all was complete.

"Okay, son, let's see your hand," he said.

Man, I thought, he speaks better English than I do. I held my hand out. He held his out and there was a needle and thread in his fingers. He started to sew up my gashed hand, but it didn't hurt. Nothing at this point could hurt me.

"Can take it, eh?"

"Yeah," I mumbled. "A-huh." I looked extra bored and cool.

"You hooked?" he asked matter-of-factly.

I looked hard at him. "Whatta ya mean, hooked?" I said.

"You know what I mean. I saw you and that other fellow sniffing."

I was thinking fast now, wondering if the Chinese doctor was planning on getting us busted. "What's on your mind, doc?" I asked cautiously.

"Why don't you guys learn? You can't beat junk. It always ends up beating you."

"Aw, I ain't hooked. Besides, it ain't none of your damn business."

"Okay, son, forget it. Take some of these pills and go to your doctor for a change of bandages, and—"

"Thanks," I said, cutting off any song and dance.

The doctor shook his head. "Okay, you there," he called to one of the walking wounded, "you're next."

I went back to my place on the floor, but it bugged me that the Chinese doctor should know I was hooked. Jesus, did it show so much now? A funny line went through my head: *No stuftee, no druggee; no habit, no junkie*, and I wondered if I really was hooked.

For a few days my hand felt pretty bad. Christmas kicks turned into New Year's kicks, and I took Trina to a big set at the Palladium Dance Hall downtown. The hand still throbbed, but I had gotten a small fix and that pain didn't stay anything special.

It was crowded at the Palladium. I looked around and saw a lot of my boys. I looked at Trina. She was really a good-looking blip, stone-smooth. Some of the guys dug my bandaged hand and I played it cool, like it was nothin'.

"Hey man, Piri, what's with your hand, *hombre*?" Louie asked.

"*Nada*, just a little trouble," I said. I left it hanging

there so if he wanted to think I had been in a drag-out fight, he could.

My hand started throbbing worse, so I went into the Palladium toilet. It was packed, and the smell of pot sweetened out the smell of piss from the toilet bowls. I didn't shoot up. I just wasted that stuff up my nose. I wondered how some guys could take the chance of cooking up and shooting up in any public place like a shit-house, where anybody can walk in, but when a cat's in need, he's a fool indeed.

I walked back to our table and a guy was asking Trina for a dance. I heard her saying, "I'm sorry, but my *novio* isn't here and I don't dance with anyone unless he says it's okay." I was feeling good now.

"Say, man, is it all right if I dance with your chick?" the guy asked me.

I didn't care too much for the cat, but it was New Year's Eve, so I said, "Sure, man, I expect you're cool, eh?"

"Yeah, I'm cool."

A little while later Louie said, "Hey, Piri, look out on the dance floor."

I looked, and that cat was trying to cool-lay Trina. He was rubbing close against her, and when he threw her out, he slammed her in fast so that her whole body slammed into him. I got so mad that I clenched my fist, and the pain it caused got me madder.

"Let me get the guy," said Louie.

"Naw, I go first," I said. "It's my old lady. If I ain't cool enough to take care of her, I ain't cool enough to have her."

The music was way out and the well-timed beat of hundreds of feet made a *chevere* noise on the wooden floor of the Palladium. I nodded to Louie and made my way through the twisting mambo-mad people. The cat

had just swung Trina out again with the intention of slamming her into him again when I stepped in between them and snatched her cool, without losing a dance step, and kept dancing with her. The cat looked like a fool and jumped stink. "Hey, man, whatcha putting down?" he said angrily. "Can't you see I'm dancing with the broad?"

I stopped dancing and didn't even look at the cat. I took Trina by the hand and walked off the dance floor.

"It's not my fault, Piri," she said.

"I know, baby, forget it."

The cat followed us off the floor, still bullshitting. I sat Trina down and turned toward the cat. "Make it, motherfucker," I said.

"What you say?"

"Make it, motherfucker," I repeated, "while you still able."

Two of the cat's boys walked up and stood looking bad. "This guy giving you any trouble, Tony?" one of them said.

The cat looked badder now and said, "Yeah, but I'll take care of him. He figures that on account of he's got one bad hand it's gonna save him."

I looked at him hard. "I got many hands, motherfucker," I said, nodding my head in the direction of my boys. "Enough for you and them two faggots you got with you." Louie and about fifteen of my boys surrounded us, smooth and quiet. "Wanna leave now, cool, or get wasted, motherfucker?" I said.

The motherfucker and his two faggot boys looked, and without another word, left.

What a world! Whether you're right or wrong, as long as you're strong, you're right.

"Let's dance, Trina," I said.

13. HUNG UP

BETWEEN TWO STICKS

Not long afterward me and Louie got a little bit of that shit ourselves. Only we didn't get no choice to cut out. We got hung up by a white clique from downtown as we were coming out of the RKO flick on 86th Street. There were about eight paddies. We tried to cut out, but they got us tight inside their circle. Louie quickly punched his way out and made it. It took me a little longer. I caught four belts for every one I could lay on them. Finally I got out and started putting down shoe leather. But the paddies were hot on doing me up real nice. One of them got so close to me I saw his face over my shoulder. I stopped short and he ran right into a slap with all my weight behind it. He went down on his ass and I told him cool-like, "Motherfucker, I punch men and slap punks." His boys were too near for me to play my grandstand to the most, so I started to make it. I heard him scream out from between his split lips: "You dirty, fucking shine! I'll get one of you black bastards."

I screamed back, "Your mammy got fucked by one of us black bastards." *One of us black bastards. Was that me?* I wondered.

It really bugged me when the paddies called us Puerto Ricans the same names they called our colored aces. Yet

it didn't bother Louie or the other fellas who were as white as him; it didn't bother Crip, or the others, who were as dark as me or darker. Why did it always bug me? Why couldn't I just laugh it off with that simple-ass kid rhyme:

Sticks and stones may break my bones,
But words will never harm me.

I had two colored cats, Crutch and Brew, for tight *amigos*. All the time I heard them talk about Jim Crow and southern paddies' way-out, screwed-up thinking. Crutch told me once that he was sitting on the curb down South where he used to live and some young white boys passed in a car and yelled out to him, "Hey, nigger, git outta that gutter and climb down the sewer where all you black niggers belong."

It really bugged me, like if they had said it to me. I asked Crutch if he knew any colored cats that had been hung. "Not person'ly," he said, "but my daddy knew some." He said it with a touch of sadness hooked together with a vague arrogance.

Crutch was smart and he talked a lot of things that made sense to any Negro. That was what bothered me—it made a lot of sense to me.

"You ain't nevah been down South, eh, Piri?" Crutch had asked me.

"Uh-uh. *Nunca*, man. Just read about it, and I dug that flick *Gone with the Wind*."

"Places like Georgia and Mississippi and Alabama. All them places that end in i's an' e's an' a whole lotta a's. A black man's so important that a drop of Negro blood can make a black man out of a pink-asshole, blue-eyed white man. Powerful stuff, that thar white skin, but it don't mean a shit hill of beans alongside a Negro's blood."

Yeah, that Crutch made sense.

The next day I looked up at the faces of the people

passing by my old stoop. I tried to count their different shades and colors, but I gave it up after a while. Anyway, black and white were the most outstanding; all the rest were in between.

I felt the fuzz on my chin and lazily wondered how long it'd be before I'd have one like Poppa. *I look like Poppa*, I thought, *we really favor each other*. I wondered if it was too mean to hate your brothers a little for looking white like Momma. I felt my hair—thick, black, and wiry. Mentally I compared my hair with my brothers' hair. My face screwed up at the memory of the jillion tons of stickum hair oils splashed down in a vain attempt to make it like theirs. I felt my nose. "Shit, it ain't so flat," I said aloud. But mentally I measured it against my brothers', whose noses were sharp, straight, and placed neat-like in the middle of their paddy fair faces.

Why did this have to happen to me? Why couldn't I be born like them? I asked myself. I felt sort of chicken-shit thinking like that. I felt shame creep into me. It wasn't right to be ashamed of what one was. It was like hating Momma for the color she was and Poppa for the color he wasn't.

The noise of the block began to break through to me. I listened for real. I heard the roar of multicolored kids, a street blend of Spanish and English with a strong tone of Negro American.

"Hey, man," a voice called, "what yuh doing thar sitting on your rump? Yuh look like you're thinking up a storm." It was Brew, one of my tightest *amigos*.

"*Un poco*, Brew," I said. "How's it goin' with you?"

"Cool breeze," he said.

I looked at Brew, who was as black as God is supposed to be white. "Man, Brew," I said, "you sure an ugly spook."

Brew smiled. "Dig this Negro calling out 'spook,'" he said.

I smiled and said, "I'm a Porty Rican."

"Ah, only sees another Negro in fron' of me," said Brew.

This was the "dozens," a game of insults. The dozens is a dangerous game even among friends, and many a tooth has been lost between fine, ass-tight *amigos*. Now I wanted the game to get serious. I didn't know exactly why. Brew and me had played the dozens plenty and really gotten dirty. But I wanted something to happen. "Smile, pussy, when you come up like that," I said. "I'm a stone Porty Rican, and—"

"And . . ." Brew echoed softly.

I tried to dig myself. I figured I should get it back on a joke level. What the hell was I trying to put down? Was I trying to tell Brew that I'm better than he is 'cause he's only black and I'm a Puerto Rican dark-skin? Like his people copped trees on a white man's whim, and who ever heard of Puerto Ricans getting hung like that?

I looked down at my hands, curling and uncurling, looking for some kinda answer to Brew's cool echo. "Brew," I finally eased out.

"Yeah."

"Let's forget it, Brew."

"Ain't nothin' to forget, baby."

I lit a butt. Brew offered me a whole weed. "Thanks. Nice day out," I said.

"So-kay," he said, and added: "Look, I ain't rehashin' this shit just went down, but—"

"Forget it, Brew. I'm sorry for the sound."

"Ain't nothin' to be sorry about, Piri. Yuh ain't said nothin' that bad. Mos' people got some kinda color complex. Even me."

"Brew, I ain't said what I'm feeling. I was thinking a little while ago that if you could dig the way I feel, you'd see I was hung up between two sticks. I—"

"Look, Piri," interrupted Brew, "everybody got some

kinda pain goin' on inside him. I know yuh a li'l fucked up with some kind of hate called 'white.' It's that special kind with the 'no Mr.' in front of it. Dig it, man; say it like it is, out loud—like, you hate all paddies."

"Just their fuckin' color, Brew," I said bitterly. "Just their color—their damn claim that white is the national anthem of the world. You know?"

"Yeah."

"When I was a little kid in school," I said, "I used to go to general assembly all togged out with a white shirt and red tie. Everybody there wore a white shirt and red tie; and when they played the national anthem, I would put my hand over my heart. It made me feel great to blast out:

My country, 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing . . .

And now when I hear it played I can't help feeling that it's only meant for paddies. It's their national anthem, their sweet land of liberty."

"Yeah, I knows, man," Brew said. "Like it says that all men are created equal with certain deniable rights—iffen they's not paddies. We uns thank you-all, Mistuh Lincoln, suh. Us black folks got through dat ole Civil War about fair, but we all havin' one ole helluva time still tryin' to git through the damn Reconstruction."

We both laughed. "That's pretty fuckin' funny if you can laugh," I said. "Let me try some of that creatin'. Be my straight man."

"What they evah do to yuh, Piri? Yuh ain't never been down South."

"No, man, I ain't," I said, remembering that Crutch had said the same thing.

"So yuh ain't never run into that played-out shit of

"If you white, tha's all right.
If you black, da's dat."

"Yeah, Brew," I said, "it must be tough on you Negroes."

"Wha' yuh mean, us Negroes? Ain't yuh includin' yourself? Hell, you ain't but a coupla shades lighter'n me, and even if yuh was even lighter'n that, you'd still be a Negro."

I felt my chest get tighter and tighter. I said, "I ain't no damn Negro and I ain't no paddy. I'm Puerto Rican."

"You think that means anything to them James Crow paddies?" Brew said coolly.

"*Cofio*," I mumbled.

"What yuh say, man?"

"I said I'm really startin' to almost hate Negroes, too," I shot back.

Brew walked away from me stiff-legged. His fists were almost closed. Then he came back and looked at me and, like he wasn't mad, said, "Yuh fuckin' yeller-faced bastard! Yuh goddamned Negro with a white man's itch! Yuh think that bein' a Porto Rican lets you off the hook? Tha's the trouble. Too damn many you black Porto Ricans got your eyes closed. Too many goddamned Negroes all over this goddamned world feel like you does. Jus' 'cause you can rattle off some different kinda language don' change your skin one bit. Whatta yuh all think? That the only niggers in the world are in this fucked-up country? They is all over this whole damn world. Man, if there's any black people up on the moon talkin' that moon talk, they is still Negroes. Git it? Negroes!"

"Brew," I said, "I hate the paddy who's trying to keep the black man down. But I'm beginning to hate the black man, too, 'cause I can feel his pain and I don't know that it oughtta be mine. Shit, man, Puerto Ricans got

social problems, too. Why the fuck we gotta take on Negroes', too?" I dug Brew's eyes. They looked as if he was thinking that he had two kinda enemies now—paddies and black Puerto Ricans. "Brew," I said, "I'm trying to be a Negro, a colored man, a black man, 'cause that's what I am. But I gotta accept it myself, from inside. Man, do you know what it is to sit across a dinner table looking at your brothers that look exactly like paddy people? True, I ain't never been down South, but the same crap's happening up here. So they don't hang you by your neck. But they slip an invisible rope around your balls and hang you with nice smiles and 'If we need you, we'll call you.' I wanna feel like a 'Mr.' I can't feel like that just yet, and there ain't no amount of cold wine and pot can make my mind accept me being a 'Mr.' part time. So what if I can go to some paddy pool hall or fancy restaurant? So what if I lay some white chick? She still ain't nothin' but a white blur even if my skin does set off her paddy color."

"So yuh gonna put the Negro down jus' 'cause the paddy's puttin' yuh down," Brew said. "Ain't gonna bring nothin' from us exceptin' us putting you down too."

"Like you're putting me down?"

"I ain't put you down, Piri. You jus' got me warm with that 'I'm a Porty Rican' jazz. But I know where yuh at. You jus' gotta work some things out."

Brew shoved his big hand at me. I grabbed it and shook it, adding a slap of skin to bind it. I looked at our different shades of skin and thought, *He's a lot darker than me, but one thing is for sure, neither of us is white.* "Everything cool?" I said.

"Yee-ah. I ain't mad. I said I dig. Jus' got worried that you might turn to be a colored man with a paddy heart."

Like Poppa, I thought, and my eyes followed a fast-moving behind going up the stoop across the street.

"Nice piece of ass," Brew said.

"Naw, Brew, I—"

"You sayin' that ain't a nice piece of ass?"

"That wasn't what I was gonna say, you horny bastard. I meant that what I want out of life is some of the good things the white man's got. Man, what some of them eat for weekday dinner, we eat for our Sunday dinner—"

"Tain't only Porty Ricans."

"Yeah, American Negroes, too."

"That's a lotta white people got it kinda bad, too," Brew said. "Some even worse."

"What you doing now, man, defendin' the paddies?" I asked.

"Jus' sayin' like it is."

I thought for a long while and finally said, "I'm gonna have everything good they have for living even if I gotta take it. Fuck it, I care about me a whole lot. Even the poor white people you're talking about are down on the Negro—more so than the paddy that got bread, 'cause since the poor paddy ain't got nothin', he gotta feel big some way, so the Negro's supposed to lie down and let the paddy climb up on his chest with his clodhoppers just so's he can feel three or four inches taller standing on another man's ribs."

"Yuh talking all this stuff, and yuh ain't evah been down South," Brew said disdainfully.

"Brew," I said with quiet patience, "you don't have to be from the South to know what's happenin'. There's toilet bowls wherever you go. Besides, I learn from you and Crutch and the others. I learn from what I read—and from the paddies."

"But it ain't exactly like being down South, Piri," Brew insisted solemnly.

"What's the matter, Brew?" I asked sarcastically. "A cat's gotta be hung before he knows what's happenin'?" I began to whistle, "Way Down Upon the Swanee River."

Brew went on like I hadn't said nothing, "So yuh can't appreciate and therefore you can't talk that much."

"That's what you say, Brew. But the same—"

"Yuh gonna jaw about the difference and sameness up here and down there," Brew broke in. "Man, you think these paddies up here are a bitch on wheels. Ha! They ain't shit alongside Mr. Charlie down thar. Down South, if one ain't real careful, he can grow up smilin' his ass off and showin' pearly whites till his gums catch pneumonia or workin' his behind off fo' nothin'."

"Yeah, but—"

"Let me say it like it is, Piri. It ain't as bad now as when my daddy was a kid, but it's bad enough. Though I guess bad is bad, a little or a lot. Now those Indians sure had some kinda hard way to go, but they had heart."

"Whatcha mean, man?" I asked, wondering what the hell Indians had to do with all this.

"My daddy use to say that

"The Indian fought the white man and died
An' us black folk jus' wagged ouah tails,
"Yas suhses," smiled and multiplied."

I cracked a smile and got up and yawned and stretched. "Brew," I said.

"Still here, man."

"Maybe it wasn't a bad idea to take it low when the weight was all on the other side. Dig it, man, the Indian fought the paddy and lost. And the Indian was on his own turf."

"We mighta won," Brew said.

"Yeah, we mighta, Brew," I said hollowly.

"Okay, man," Brew said, smiling.

"You know, Brew?" I said suddenly. "I'm going down South. Wanna come?"

"What fo', man?"

"It might just set me straight on a lotta things. Maybe

I can stop being confused and come in on a right stick."

My man's face screwed up like always when he wasn't sure of something. "Ah don't know, Piri," he said. "Down there it ain't like up here. You can do and say more, but down thar in some of them towns yuh jus' blow your cool and yuh liable to find yuhself on some chain gang or pickin' peas on some prison farm—or worse yet, gettin' them peas planted over yuh."

"That's okay, *amigo*, I still wanna make it. How 'bout it?"

"Ah dunno."

"Don't worry, Negro," I said. "I promise not to pull no Jim Crow act on you when we get there. Some of my best *amigos* are Negroes."

"It ain't that," Brew laughed. "It's jus' that bomb on your shoulder. We go down South and you start all that Porty Rican jazz and we's liable to get it from both sides."

"Brew, I'm serious," I said.

"So am I, man, so am I. How yuh figure on goin'?"

"Merchant Marine's the big kick around here now. All we gotta do is make it down to the NMU."

"What's that?"

"The National Maritime Union," I explained. "That's where we can take out some papers or something. Dickie Bishop works down there and we're tight, so no sweat."

"Okay, man," Brew said, "Ah'm with yuh. But only on the condition you cool your role."

"Till somebody starts something?"

"Till somebody else starts, not you. An' if trouble does start, don't go looking for too much police protection down there. Mos' of the fuzzes down there are cops by day and walkin' bed sheets by night."

"I won't look for it, Brew," I said.

"Sometimes yuh don't hafta, Piri. Sometimes you don't hafta. When we gonna make it over to the NMU?"

"*Mañana*, man. First thing in the morning. You can

meet me here around eight. Better yet, stay over my house tonight."

"On Long Island?"

"Yeah."

"You still go out there?"

"Once in a while," I said. "I still have my people there."

"Yeah, Ah know."

"Meet me about six o'clock," I said. "It's about two now."

"Tha's nice," Brew said. "It'll give me a couple hours with Alayce."

"Yeah, how is she?" I asked. "That's a nice woman."

"A-huh. She's awright. Gets me warm sometimes, but they don't come no motherfuckin' better, in or outta bed."

"Give 'er my regards."

"Sure will."

"Well, cool it, faggot," I smiled.

Brew grinned and said, "Dozens? Evah notice how your pappy walks?"

"Nope, I've been too busy diggin' how your mammy walks."

We laughed and slapped skin going away. I watched Brew make it and then walked off toward Penn Station. Some thoughts were still working in my mind. *Jesus, if I'm a Negro, I gotta feel it all over. I don't have the "for sure" feelin's yet.* I waved to one of the cats in front of El Viejo's candy store and kept on walking.

SUBURBIA

"You and James are like houses—painted white outside and blacker'n a mother inside. And I'm close to being like Poppa—trying to be white on both sides."

14. LEARNING SOME NEW ABC'S

The next morning I was awakened by a shrill clacking. I reached out with eyes closed, found the alarm clock with the sight of outstretched fingers and, click, I killed it by turning a little knob. "Hey, Brew, get up," I called sleepily. I let my eyes open slowly, like it was a luxury they had always deserved. The soft half-light made its way into my room like a bashful intruder.

I felt my face and wished I could spit out my tongue, which tasted like shit. I scratched my belly and smothered an itch that was becoming familiar with my balls, then I jumped outta the bed and took a look at the dead clock. Its sad face said 7:45. "Come on, Brew," I said, "shake a leg." I pulled the covers off my *amigo* and gave the lifelike corpse a mighty goose and it came to outraged life.

"Hey, man, cool that shit," Brew said. "Ah might get to like it, and it'll be your fault if I'm ruint for evah an' evah." Brew very daintily got outta bed and, wrist-limp, swished his way over to where his pants were and pulled them on like a broad getting into a girdle. We both cracked up and fell all over the room on a laughin' kick.

"Hey, will you stop yelling so I can get some sleep?" a

voice called angrily. "A man sleeps when he's not working. I work nights. So dammit—"

"Sorry, Poppa," I said. "It was pretty funny. You should have seen it." But Poppa had fallen out again, sound asleep. I jumped into my clothes, made it to the toilet, and went into the same old routine: 1. Take a leak. 2. Brush my teeth. 3. Wash myself—sometimes a shower. 4. Shave—sometimes. 5. A dab of Dixie Peach and a lotta brushing, always. I looked at myself in the mirror. *Damn*, I thought, *I sure favor Poppa. Wonder how come we got a last name like Thomas.* Lots of people had asked me how come my name wasn't Puerto Rican, like Rodriguez or Cruz. "Who evah heard of a Porty Rican with a name like Thomas?" Brew had said when we first met. "Ah thinks maybe your daddy is a home boy trying to earn some overseas status on a Porty Rican kick." We had tangled and dealt up a storm. I had gotten my lumps from Brew's fists. But he had caught some Thomas knobs on his side jaw, too.

I winced at the memory and attacked a patch of killer hair that refused to lie stuck under the Dixie Peach. "Man," I called, "ain't that cat up yet?" I opened the bathroom door and made it to the kitchen. I smelled the bacon and eggs and Momma's fine coffee.

"*Buenos días, hijo,*" Momma said to me.

"*Buenos días, Momma,*" I said. "Smells good!" I sniffed my eyes toward the table. There was Brew stuffing his big face. "Man," I said to him, "you're eating and you ain't even washed your mouth out yet—forgetting about washing your face, which wouldn't even be noticed."

Brew looked up. "Whatta yuh think Ah am," he said, "some kinda pig? I washed my mouth. Ah drank me two big glasses of watah."

"Ugh!" I said simply.

Brew put an offended look on his face, but didn't stop

eating. "Ain't yuh-all gonna eat, bro?" he asked between swallows.

"Why, shore, *panita*. Soon as you're finished, we'll stop off at some restaurant and get me some breakfast," I said.

"Man, yuh sure starts playing the dozens early in the a.m."

"Only kiddin', baby," I said. "Knock yourself out."

"Thankee kindly, suh," Brew said and continued chomping away. "I just dug your brother James make it to school," he added. "He's kind of a funny cat. Nice and po-lite, but kinda cold."

"Aw, he's all right," I said. "It's José who's the funny one. I got an idea about what's shakin'—and you know what's shaking, too. What'sa matter, forget all that shit we talked about yesterday?"

"Ah remembah," Brew said. "But it's a hard thing to try an' dig."

"Pass the bread," I said.

"Knows what Ah hate mos?" Brew asked, handing me a slice of bread.

"What, man? Lemme have the butter."

"Ah hates combread and sugar watah. Ah hates cardboard in mah shoes. Ah hates wakin' scared. Man, Ah nevah had much o' schoolin', Piri; the only lessons Ah evah got was from my mom. You know, Ah used to speak some terrible English. It's only now I'm talking better."

"Your moms taught you school stuff, didn't she?" I asked.

"Naw, man, schooling was for few in my country."

"Where's that?" I asked.

"Near Mobile, Alabama. Won't say where, man, 'cause I almost forgot its fuckin' name. A black man there could appreciate what a boot in the ass and in the chest at the

same time can be. But a lot of black men couldn't dig that style. Some left for here, and others hadda leave. Anyway, my mom showed me some lessons she figured would keep me and my brothers alive and well. Kind of an ABC."

"Damn, man," I said, "you coulda left me some bacon."

"Ah did. Here you is," Brew said, handing me an inch-long piece of bacon. I gave Brew a grateful smile. "Mom was asking us to cop a plea to the white man," he continued. "A—accept. B—behave. C—care."

"Care?" I asked.

"Yeah. Mom wanted us to do all three, but especially the last one. She wanted us to care for the white man, not hate him. Goddammit, *care* for those motherfuckers! That's what dear, sweet Jesus does for our people:

We is all God's chillun,
So we gotta care.
We is all God's chillun,
So we gotta share.

Poor Mom," Brew added. "We shared awright—white man got the sun and we got a black night."

"Brew," I said.

"Yeah, man."

"You're sure a prejudiced Negro. You're almost as bad as me."

"A-huh. What time is it?"

"Damn, le's go, it's 8:45."

"Bye, Moms," I whispered.

"Adiós, hijo."

"Bye, ma'am," whispered Brew.

"Adiós, hijo."

"Thanks for the breakfuss."

"De nada, you welcome any time," Momma said, and added, "Hijo?"

"Yeah, Moms?"

"*Ven acá.*" I walked back to Momma and she whispered, "Why do you always have to go back to the Barrio? Ever since you leave the hospital you are in the Barrio. Why don't you get a job here? You seventeen years old now. Where do you get money?"

"*Caramba*, Moms, I told you I work at the dock unloading ships with Soto's old man. He's the shape-up man and he gives me plenty of work. I make out good," I lied. How could I tell her I was pushing pot and making good bread? "And besides, Moms," I added, "all my friends are there. I don't dig the *blancos* around here, and they don't dig me 'cause I'm black to them."

"You are not black," Momma said, "you're brown, a nice color, a pretty color."

"Not to them, Moms. They—aw, let's forget it, Moms. Give me a kiss and your blessing."

Momma kissed me and her *benedición* breathed itself on my back.

An hour later Brew and I were in Penn Station walking quietly toward the subway. Brew was lost in thought. I wondered if maybe he was thinking about getting down South again or about when he had said, "Bye, ma'am," and Moms had put him under her wing with her "*Adiós, hijo.*" Jesus, I thought, *even if she's some kinda paddy, she's got some kinda balance inside. Maybe Poppa turned her inside when he made me take hold inside her belly.* "Brew," I said aloud, "let me take care of the talking at the Union. I can run it to Dickie an' we'll make out all right."

"Yeah, tha's cool with me," Brew said, and added, "Say, yuh knows what Ah been thinking?"

"Was sorta wonderin', Brew. You been kinda quiet."

"Thinkin', man, about maybe Ah's been a little hard on yuh. Ah means, that shit Ah got mad about."

"Don't worry, *panín*," I said. "Here comes the train. Let's make it."

The train roared to a stop and all kinds of people pushed and shoved themselves into a sameness. The doors slid shut and the train jerked itself out of the station like it was sure of where it was going. I looked around. Everyone was in his own private world despite the close packing of bodies. I was squeezed in between a Chinaman and a soft broad. The Chinaman I ignored, but the *chica* was something else. Her ass was rocking to and fro, from side to side. The friction against my stomach caused a reaction, and the reaction kept time with the motion and the roaring insanity of the train.

I tried to think of other things, like cowboy flicks, lemonade and "mind over matter." *Git down, stiff joint*, I commanded. *This broad's liable to think I'm some kind of weirdo instead of a nice normal Puerto Rican*. I pushed back, away from her. "Sorry," I mumbled.

Brew was reading the subway ads so he couldn't see what was happening to me hung up between the Chinaman and the soft-assed broad. The train lurched and that soft pile of rump crashed hard against my innocent joint. *Damn, she hadda feel that*, I thought ruefully. *Hope this bitch don't start yellin' up a storm*.

She didn't. She just turned and smiled expressively. It was a very damn-liberal smile. She didn't move away, and I could feel my joint playing it cool between her thighs. She pressed hard against me and let herself roll with the train. Man, I did the same. The train rooshed-sooshed to a stop at 42nd Street, and the doors slid open. Nobody got off; instead, more people piled in, and the pressure of the added closeness pushed me into the corner of the train. The softness before me went the same way. "Sorry," I said.

"It's all right," she said sweetly. "Let me see if I can get my balance."

I pushed back against the Chinaman and he, in self-defense, pushed back against the enemy. I held the weight back long enough for the girl to shift her weight and turn to face me. She looked flushed, and she smiled.

We said nothing else. The great weight came back and pushed us close together again. I felt her breasts hard against me and my joint bursting its wide vein between her thighs. Pressed together, we let ourselves roll in that hung-up closeness. I looked at her. Her eyes were closed. I made my hips dance a slow grind, and I let my hand think for itself and bite those liberal breasts. The whole motherfuckin' world was forgotten in the swingin' scene of stress and strain, grind and grain on a subway train.

We were roaring into the 14th Street Station. *Hurry, hurry*, our bodies urged, and *swoom-ooo-mmm*—girl and me and train got to the station at the same time.

I felt her tremble and shiver as I boiled over. The train slowed down, and we held on tight. I dug her face, her paddy-fair face. Her eyes were still closed, and her teeth were biting into the corner of her lower lip.

The train stopped and the opened door shifted people out, releasing the pressure. We were swept out onto the platform and separated by the going-everywhere crowd. I reached out to touch her one more time, but the broken dam of people wasted the distance between us.

I tried to see which way she was cutting out, but all I caught was a pin-look see of her looking back for someone. I thought of calling out her name. But I didn't know her name, and I couldn't just start yellin', "Here I am, paddy girl." She disappeared, and I heard a voice call, "Piri! Hey, man, here Ah am. What you-all lookin' ovah that way for?" It was Brew. He chuckled and said, "Yuh lookin' for me an' here Ah am right behin' yuh."

"Yeah, Brew," I said absently, "ain't that a kick?" I felt kinda weak, like you feel when you've seen something glittering down a subway grating. You figure it's worth

something, but you ain't got nothing to get ahold of it with. So you comfort yourself by saying, "Aw, it probably was a washer or something," and you never know whether or not it was for real.

"Man," Brew sighed, "I sure am glad to be off that mother-loving train. I-mag-ine," he added mockingly, "havin' to be crushed up by them smelly white folks! They should have a special train for them. Ah's gonna write a letter to the N-A-double-C-P and have the law changed. Ah don't mind their havin' equal rights, but we black folks draw the line at havin' ta socialize." People looked at us cracking up and that made the crack-up even worse.

"Come on, let's get over to 17th Street," I said.

"Yeah, Ah hope we can cop them seamen's papers," Brew said.

"Don't work up a sweat, Brew. It's in the pocket right now," I assured him. "But say, ain't you the cat that wasn't so sure about going down South?"

"Ah still ain't too sure. It's damn hard leaving the South and harder still goin' back. But now that it's come down to it, Ah'd like to see what's shakin' home. What's your feelings?"

"Like I said, I wanta find out why I'm sharing the pain."

"You're startin' again?" Brew asked suspiciously.

"No, *señor!* I'm lookin' to end it," I said.

"There's the place," Brew said. "National Maritime Union."

We walked in, and a couple of hours later we walked out feeling like able-bodied seamen. "Whatta'd I tell you?" I said. "Wasn't it a cinch?"

"Yeah, but it sure took a lotta walkin' an' talkin', man. Ah sure is tired."

"Yeah, but we got the papers."

"Man, this sure don't look like me," Brew said, looking at his Coast Guard pass picture.

"Sure doesn't, *panín*. You're more ugly."

"Fuck you, man," Brew said with malice and friendship. "But it ain't bad," he added. "You think I oughtta shave my pussy tickler? It don't look too good in the picture."

"What mustache you talkin' about?" I sounded.

"This one, man," Brew said, carefully smoothing down the thin line of hair on his upper lip.

I looked at it critically. I even ran my fingers over it as if to convince myself there was something there. "Man, I don't know what to say. It don't show too much," I said. "Maybe it bein' black hair and, er, eh, you, er—well, er, kinda bein' the same, uh—you know—shade . . . Do ya think maybe if we painted your pussy tickler blond it, er, would stand out a little bit better?"

Brew threw a friendly punch. I ducked and threw a couple of dummy punches, and Brew came back with a flurry. We stopped before it got serious, slapped skin, and kept walking. Brew put his arm around my shoulder, and I put my arm around his. I wondered what was the name of the girl on the train.

"You know, Brew," I said, "Dickie said we'd have to make it down to Norfolk, Virginia, for a ship. Shipping is slow right now in New York."

"When we leavin'?" Brew asked.

"How about tomorrow?" I said. "I'll go home now and tell my folks."

"Your folks don't know you're goin'?"

"Not all the way. I've been running the idea to Momma about joining the army or something. That something is now gonna be the merchant marine."

"Think they'll come for the idea?" Brew asked.

"Hope they go for it," I said. "But if they don't, I'm

making it anyway. We're gonna need some bread," I added. "You got any bread, Brew?"

"Ah got about \$63 put aside. Think that's enough?"

"Should be," I said, "with the 118 pesos I got from hustling the pot I had. Bus fare is about \$17 one way."

"One way?"

"A-huh. What we gonna need a round trip for? We gonna get us a ship, ain't we?"

"I almos' forgot that," Brew said.

We got to the corner of 14th Street. "Well, cool it, man," Brew said. "Ah'm splittin' here. Think Ah better make it up to Alayce's."

"Why don't you come over to my house and cop some good-o Porty Rican cookin'?"

"Nay, man, Ah better see her while Ah can, cause after we leaves, there ain't no mo'; besides she got some good grit waiting for me."

"Yeah? like—"

"Like greens, an' black-eye peas, an'—"

"Papihas," I broke in.

"Wha's tha'?"

"Ham hocks, Daddy-o."

"Later, turkey. Be good."

"Yeah, baby, take it slow," I said. "I'll pick you up at Alayce's tomorrow morning." I cut down the subway steps and walked up to the turnstile. I took a quick look at the cat in the change booth and, like a million times before, when I was a kid, I jumped the turnstile so fast and smooth that it looked like I'd paid. The subway platform was almost empty. The herds of working slaves were still working. I looked down the tunnel and saw the little green lights of the train going from side to side, getting bigger and bigger. I was thinking about that paddy girl.

The train jerked to a stop and I got in. I looked around, expecting to see the broad again, and sat down across

from a wino who was spread out all over the seat. He looked a mess and I dug how peacefully dirty he was.

An hour and some thirty minutes later I was turning up the walk to the house in my other world. I whistled like always and heard Momma's voice.

"Is that you, *hijo*?"

"Sí, Moms." I kissed Momma a noisy kiss on the back of her neck. "Hey, Moms, is Poppa home?" I asked.

"Not yet," Momma said.

I decided to wait till he got home and break the news all at once.

"Wan' to eat before you wash?" Momma asked.

"Later, Moms. I want to take a shower first," I said. I undressed and got into the shower and let the water dig into me like shotgun BB's.

My shorts were stiff and starchy from the great strain on my vein, so I soaped and rinsed them and tossed them into the washbowl. The memory of that train ride stirred my joint again. I wondered if the broad was rememberin' how great it was, or if she was tellin' her friends how she made a horny Porty Rican climb the side of the wall on a subway train just by wiggling her white snatch against his black cock. I frowned. I'd thought "black cock," and that meant the broad was prob'ly sayin' "nigger" instead of "Porty Rican." I had a mental picture of all her friends hanging on her every word . . . "You know, of course, that niggers got pricks two and three times as big as a white man . . . I tell you, girls, even through my dress I felt like I had about half of it inside me . . ."

I shut my eyes to keep the soap out and saw her face clearly, her eyes closed and her teeth bitin' her lower lip . . . "And when he grabbed my breast, I almost screamed, but I didn't want him to stop . . ."

"Oh! I'd die if it were me," said one of the listening broads.

"I almost did," said my broad. "I felt myself tremble

all over and that black boy pushing all the weight of his thing into me and I felt my knees get weak and I'm pretty sure he had an orgasm, too, because he sort of sagged against me."

"And what happened after that?"

"The train stopped and I got swept out along with him. We were separated. I'm glad 'cause I couldn't bear to have him say anything to me after my practically going to bed with him."

"Don't be foolish, that's not the same as when you're with your husband."

"I know, but regardless, it was with a colored boy. I just got away from there. I looked back once to see if he was following me and saw him looking over the heads of people as though he was looking for someone. In that one second, I was never so ashamed of myself."

"Oh, you needn't feel that way. It was just one of those nasty-delightful things one does in rare moments."

"You don't understand. I was ashamed because I wanted to fight my way back to him."

I bent down and turned off the water tap, satisfied on the ending of my mental production of "Beauty and Black's Best." But inside me, I felt hot and real stink about this funny world and all the funny people in it.

15. BROTHERS UNDER THE SKIN

My daydreaming was splintered by my brother José kicking at the door in sheer panic. "Hey, who's in there?" he yelled.

"Me, man, me," I yelled back. "Whatta ya want?"

"Let me in. I gotta take a piss so bad I can taste it."

"Taste good?" I asked softly.

"Dammit, open up!"

I laughed, and reached out a dripping hand and flipped the latch. José rushed in like his behind was on fire. His face had a pained look on it. "Chri-sus sake," he said, "you made me piss all over my pants."

"It'll dry, man, it'll dry."

"Aggh," he said as he relieved himself. "That feels good."

I looked at my brother. *Even his peter's white, I thought, just like James's. Only ones got black peters is Poppa and me, and Poppa acts like his is white, too.*

"Poppa's home."

"Yeah. Hand me the towel, simple."

"Damn, Piri, you made me piss all over my pants," José said again. He pulled back the towel he was offering me and began to wipe his pants with it.

"Man, turkey, what you doin'?" I said. "You drying that piss and I gotta wipe my face with that towel."

"It'll dry, man, it'll dry."

I yanked the towel outta his hand and carefully wiped with what seemed to be the part he hadn't used. "You know somethin', José?" I said.

"What? Jesus, I hope this piss don't stink when it dries."

"I'm goin' down South."

"Where?"

"Down South."

"What for?"

"Don't know all the way," I said, "except I'm tryin' to find somethin' out."

"Down South!" He said it like I was nuts.

"Sí. I want to see what a *moyeto's* worth and the paddy's weight on him," I said.

"Whatta ya talking about? You sound like a *moto* who's high on that *yerba* shit. And anyway, what's the spade gotta do with you?"

"I'm a Negro."

"You ain't no nigger," José said.

"I ain't?"

"No. You're a Puerto Rican."

"I am, huh?" I looked at José and said, "Course, you gotta say that. 'Cause if I'm a Negro, then you and James is one too. And that ain't leavin' out Sis and Poppa. Only Momma's an exception. She don't care what she is."

José didn't look at me. He decided that looking at the toilet bowl was better. "So whatta you got to find out, eh?" he said. "You're crazy, stone loco. We're Puerto Ricans, and that's different from being *moyetos*." His voice came back very softly and his hand absent-mindedly kept brushing the drying wet patch on his pants.

"That's what I've been wanting to believe all along,

José," I said. "I've been hanging on to that idea even when I knew it wasn't so. But only pure white Puerto Ricans are white, and you wouldn't even believe that if you ever dug what the paddy said."

"I don't give a good shit what you say, Piri. We're Puerto Ricans, and that makes us different from black people."

I kept drying myself even though there was nothin' to dry. I was trying not to get mad. I said, "José, that's what the white man's been telling the Negro all along, that 'cause he's white he's different from the Negro; that he's better'n the Negro or anyone that's not white. That's what I've been telling myself and what I tried to tell Brew."

"Brew's that colored guy, ain't he?" José said.

"Yeah—an' like I'm saying, sure there's stone-white Puerto Ricans, like from pure Spanish way back—but it ain't us. Poppa's a Negro and, even if Momma's *blanca*, Poppa's blood carries more weight with Mr. Charlie," I said.

"Mr. Charlie, Mr. Charlie. Who the fuck is he?"

"That's the name Brew calls the paddies. Ask any true *corazón* white motherfucker what the score is," I said.

"I'm not black, no matter what you say, Piri."

I got out of the shower and sat on the edge of the tub. "Maybe not outside, José," I said. "But you're sure that way inside."

"I ain't black, damn you! Look at my hair. It's almost blond. My eyes are blue, my nose is straight. My motherfuckin' lips are not like a baboon's ass. My skin is white. White, goddamit! White! Maybe Poppa's a little dark, but that's the Indian blood in him. He's got white blood in him and—"

"So what the fuck am I? Something Poppa an' Momma picked out the garbage dump?" I was jumping stink in-

side and I answered him like I felt it. "Look, man, better believe it, I'm one of 'you-all.' Am I your brother or ain't I?"

"Yeah, you're my brother, and James an' Sis, and we all come out of Momma an' Poppa—but we ain't Negroes. We're Puerto Ricans, an' we're white."

"Boy, you, Poppa and James sure are sold on that white kick. Poppa thinks that marrying a white woman made him white. He's wrong. It's just another nigger marrying a white woman and making her as black as him. That's the way the paddy looks at it. The Negro just stays black. Period. Dig it?"

José's face got whiter and his voice angrier at my attempt to take away his white status. He screamed out strong, "I ain't no nigger! You can be if you want to be. You can go down South and grow cotton, or pick it, or whatever the fuck they do. You can eat that cornbread or whatever shit they eat. You can bow and kiss ass and clean shit bowls. But—I—am—white! And you can go to hell!"

"And James is *blanco*, too?" I asked quietly.

"You're damn right."

"And Poppa?"

José flushed the toilet chain so hard it sounded as if somebody's neck had broken. "Poppa's the same as you," he said, avoiding my eyes, "Indian."

"What kinda Indian?" I said bitterly. "Caribe? Or maybe Borinquén? Say, José, didn't you know the Negro made the scene in Puerto Rico way back? And when the Spanish spics ran outta Indian coolies, they brought them big blacks from you know where. Poppa's got *moyeto* blood. I got it. Sis got it. James got it. And, mah deah brudder, you-all got it! Dig it! It's with us till game time. Like I said, man, that shit-ass poison I've been living with is on its way out. It's a played-out lie about me—us—being white. There ain't nobody in this fucking

house can lay any claim to bein' paddy exceptin' Momma, and she's never made it a mountain of fever like we have. You and James are like houses—painted white outside, and blacker'n a mother inside. An' I'm close to being like Poppa—trying to be white on both sides."

José eased by me and put his hand on the doorknob.

"Where you going?" I said. "I ain't finished talking yet."

José looked at me like there was no way out. "Like I said, man, you can be a nigger if you want to," he said, as though he were talking with a ten-ton rock on his chest. "I don't know how you come to be my brother, but I love you like one. I've busted my ass, both me and James, trying to explain to people how come you so dark and how come your hair is so curly an'—"

I couldn't help thinking, *Oh, Crutch, you were so right. We shouldn't have moved to Long Island.* I said, "You and James hadda make excuses for me? Like for me being *un Negrito*?" I looked at the paddy in front of me. "Who to?" I said. "Paddies?"

Lights began to jump into my head and tears blurred out that this was my brother before me. The burning came up out of me and I felt the shock run up my arm as my fists went up the side of his head. I felt one fist hit his mouth. I wondered if I had broken any of his nice white teeth.

José fell away and bounced back with his white hands curled into fists. I felt the hate in them as his fists became a red light of exploding pain on my tender, flat-nose. *Oh, God!* I tried to make the lights go away. I made myself creep up a long sinking shit-hole agony and threw myself at José. The bathroom door flew open and me, naked and wet with angry sweat, and José, his mouth bleedin', crashed out of the bathroom and rolled into the living room. I heard all kinds of screaming and chairs turning over and falling lamps. I found myself on top of José. In

the blurred confusion I saw his white, blood-smearred face and I heard myself screaming, "You bastard! Dig it, you bastard. You're bleeding, and the blood is like anybody else's—red!" I saw an unknown face spitting blood at me. I hated it. I wanted to stay on top of this unknown what-was-it and beat him and beat him and beat him and beat him and *beat beat beat beat beat*—and feel skin smash under me and—and—and—

I felt an arm grab me. It wasn't fair; it wasn't a *chevere* thing to do. In a fair rumble, nobody is supposed to jump in. "Goddammit, are you crazy?" a voice screamed. "Goddamn you for beating your brother like that. My God!—"

I twisted my head and saw Poppa. And somewhere, far off, I heard a voice that sounded like Momma crying, "What's it all about? What's it all about? Why do brothers do this to each other?"

I wanted to scream it out, but that man's arm was cutting my air from sound. I twisted and forced out, "Lemme go, Poppa. *Coño*, let me go!" And the arm was gone. I stayed on bended knees. My fists were tired and my knuckles hurt at this Cain and Abel scene. As the hurting began to leave me, I slowly became a part of my naked body. I felt weak with inside pain. I wondered why.

"José, José," Momma screamed, and I wondered why she didn't scream for me, too. Didn't she know I had gotten hurt the worst?

"Why in God's name?" Poppa was saying.

Fuck God! I thought.

"Why in God's name?"

I looked at Poppa. "'Cause, Poppa," I said, "him, you and James think you're white, and I'm the only one that's found out I'm not. I tried hard not to find out. But I did, and I'm almost out from under that kick you all are still copping out to." I got up from my knees. "Poppa," I

added, "what's wrong with not being white? What's so wrong with being *tregeño*? Momma must think it's great, she got married to you, eh? We gotta have pride and dignity, Poppa; we gotta walk big and bad. I'm me and I dig myself in the mirror and it's me. I shower and dig my peter and it's me. I'm black, and it don't make no difference whether I say good-bye or *adiós*—it means the same."

Nobody said anything; everyone just stood there. I said, "I'm proud to be a Puerto Rican, but being Puerto Rican don't make the color." Still there was silence. "I'm going," I said.

"Where?" Poppa asked.

"I don't know . . ."

"He's going down South," said José, sitting on the floor with his head in his hands and the almost-blond hair, the good, straight hair that could fall down over his forehead.

"Where?" Poppa asked.

I looked at José and felt sorry for me. I looked at the wall and said, "Down South. I joined the merchant marine and me and Brew's going, and—"

"Who? Brew? That's that colored boy, ain't it?" Poppa said.

"—and I wanna find out what's happening, and . . ." I wondered why everything I was saying didn't sound like it was so important to anybody, including me. I wondered why James wasn't there. I wondered why Sis wasn't there . . .

I walked away. Momma put her hand on me and she asked, "Why does it hurt you so to be *un Negro*?"

I shook my head and kept walking. I wished she could see inside me. I wished she could see it didn't hurt—so much.

16. FUNERAL FOR A PRODIGAL SON

Breakfast the next morning was kinda quiet. The whole scene looked strange. Poppa, who worked nights and never sat at the kitchen table unless it was Saturday or Sunday, had joined us. It was like a Puerto Rican funeral for a baby, when everybody plays games like pinning twisted paper tails on people and setting fire to them, then making a roar of soundless laughter and drinking coffee and eating *tocino* sandwiches.

Momma put everything on the table as though she had never done it before. James tried hard not to look at anyone. José tried, through a swollen eye, not to look like he'd made a choice between a brother and a color. I love you *all*, I thought, but nobody heard my thoughts, so I said aloud, "I love you all. I just can't dig your—"

"Please, Piri," Momma said, "don't start this thing again."

"Sure, Momma," I said, "I'm just trying to say I don't wanna leave no bad-tasting feeling in any of you after I ain't here anymore." I tried to look everybody in the face at the same time. I made words: "You understand, Momma—I gotta find me. Maybe if I had come outta you with the same kinda color as them"—my eyes swept

across my paddy-fair brothers—"maybe I wouldn't feel like I do. Who knows? Maybe I'm jealous. Maybe I hate 'em for what I'm not—"

"*Dios mío*," Momma said, "you speak of hatred against your own *familia*—"

"Not against my family, Moms," I said, "just against their color kick. Like Poppa, for trying to show what's not inside. Goddammit, can't he see that the whole white world don't care what he feels like inside? Poppa, they don't care how you feel inside. They don't care if you look white. No mix, no mingling—for Christ's sake, even your shit gotta be practically white!"

I looked at all the faces. Nobody said anything. "Ain't nobody gona say *nada*?" I asked. The silence was a bitch, unbearable. Intolerable, like prejudice. I pulled my chair back.

"You haven't eaten anything," Momma said.

"Sorry, Moms, I—" What the fuck could a guy say under all that strain? A strain that had been a long time coming. And now it had happened and it couldn't ever be forgotten. "Er, I gotta be going," I mumbled.

I looked at each of their faces—Poppa's, Momma's, José's, James's, and Sis's. Momma came toward me and took my face in her warm arms and just looked at me. She was quiet for a long while, then she said, "*Be un hombre*, wherever you go."

"Sí, Moms, I'll be a man."

"God bless you and guard you."

"*Gracias*, Momma."

"Son," Poppa said, "there's a lot of things I'm right in and there's a lot of things you don't understand just yet. Maybe you see something in me I haven't seen yet, or maybe won't admit yet. I don't like feeling to be a black man. Can you understand it's a pride to me being a Puerto Rican?"

"What kind, Poppa, black or white?" I didn't want to

get mad, but I couldn't help myself. I was trying to blame somebody for something that was hurting me, and I couldn't say it in words without getting mad. "What kind, Poppa?" I repeated. "Don't you say you're mixed with Caribe or Borinquén Indian blood. Poppa, don't you know where you at? Or are you seeing it, Poppa, and making like it's not there? If you're really so sure you're white, come on down South with Brew and me and see where you're really at. You don't even have to go down South. You can see where you're at right here. Only thing you don't hafta worry about is sitting in back of trolleys or buses. But then, you only go to places where you're sure you ain't gonna have no trouble. You protect your lying dream with a heavy strain for a white status that's worthless to a black man. You protect your dream, Poppa, protect it, but that's all it is—just a dream. You gonna have to wake up to the fact that you ain't white, but that's all right, Poppa, that's all right. There's pride galore in being a Negro, Poppa."

I looked at Poppa's face and saw it get kinda tight, and I waited for his big hand to smash into my mouth. But Poppa just got up from the table real slow and mumbled, "I'm not very hungry, Momma . . ." He walked away, hurt for having had this truth pushed out at him by a son who looked like him but didn't want to be like him. Suddenly he stopped in mid-step and turned around. "Uh, do you need any money?" he asked me. His voice was flat, neither calm nor angry.

"No, Poppa," I said.

"I have a few pesos," he said.

"I got some money, Poppa."

Poppa turned away and his voice trailed behind his back ". . . think I'll get some sleep . . . working nights is tough . . . hard to sleep daytime . . ."

Poppa, I thought. *I'm sorry, but I can't help it. I want you all to share my hurt.* "Poppa," I said, and took a step

toward him. He kept on walking and mumbling ". . . be good to work days . . ."

I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was José. "Piri," he said, "I can't help what I am, or what I look like, or how I feel, any more than you can. You wanna be black. You wanna find out if you can fit better. That's you. You're still my brother, if you can overlook my color. That's me. I'd like to hug you, but it don't seem right. At least not right now. One of us might think we don't mean it."

"Thanks, José," I said. "I don't have no bad feelings. At least I won't like me to have any. One thing I do know I got. I got some bad confusions going on inside of me."

José's fingers started to tighten on my shoulder, then relaxed. I thought, *José got my fist in his eye and I've put a doubt on him, like something he might forgive but won't forget.*

I made it to my old bedroom and threw a few things into a suitcase. I looked at my wallet and counted \$118. With Brew's \$63 that was plenty. We'd get us a ship going coastwise through all those southern ports. You gotta have faith, brother. You gotta have faith, saith the good book. Why? I thought. I picked up my suitcase and made it into the kitchen. James was looking at the wall. José had his swollen eye. And Momma and Sis were crying softly. Nobody except Poppa had moved. Courtesy is a must at a funeral. *Poppa's got a way-out dream, I thought, and Momma's got his pain—an' us kids share both.*

I let the suitcase feel the floor and walked over to Poppa an' Momma's room. "Poppa," I called. He was on the bed. My Poppa, a man who had put some kinda seed in Momma; a seed named Piri. I called louder, "Poppa!"

"Uhhhh?"

"You ain't asleep, huh, Poppa?"

"No, honey," he said.

Honey. Poppa only called us kids "honey" when he was feeling something big, like hitting the numbers or getting a raise. Or real sad. "Poppa, forgive me," I said. "You try to understand me. I can't fool me any more. I can't dig another color and make it mine just 'cause it's some kind of worth. It's not my worth. My own is what I want, nothing more. If there's anything in between, and it makes me belong, then that's what I want. I don't wanna choose Momma's side and I don't wanna pick your fooling dream. Poppa, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I gotta say it like it is. I got something that's been growing inside of me for a long time. It started growing in the *Barrio* and it got going out here in Long Island. I got two big kinds of hate getting bigger inside me, Poppa, understand?"

Poppa was quiet. He turned over slowly.

"Poppa," I said. "You favor the other kids over me, don't you?"

"I love you like I love the rest," he said.

"Sometimes, Poppa, didn't you favor them a little more?"

"I—I got pride in you, *hijo*," he said slowly. "Maybe I—I mean, maybe it looked like I did, or maybe deep down I have. I don't know. Maybe." Poppa's eyes were on his hands, and one fingernail was trying to peel the broken fingernail from another finger. "I ain't got one colored friend," he added, "at least not one American Negro friend. Only dark ones I got are Puerto Ricans or Cubans. I'm not a stupid man. I saw the look of white people on me when I was a young man, when I walked into a place where a dark skin wasn't supposed to be. I noticed how a cold rejection turned into an indifferent acceptance when they heard my exaggerated accent. I can remember the time when I made my accent heavier, to make me more of a Puerto Rican than the most Puerto

Rican there ever was. I wanted a value on me, son. But I never changed my name. It was always James Thomas. Sometimes I was asked how come, if I was Puerto Rican, I had James Thomas for a name."

"What'd you say, Poppa?"

Poppa's one fingernail finally peeled the broken fingernail off the other finger. In a voice like crying, he said, "I'd say, 'My father was so proud to be an American that he named all his children with fine American names.' God, I felt like a *puta* every time. A damn nothing." Poppa started looking for another broken fingernail.

I believed everything Poppa said 'cause I'd never heard his voice cry before. I didn't know what to say. I felt ashamed, but I didn't know who for. I had a going-away pain of wanting to be some place else.

"—even said I had Indian blood in me," Poppa mumbled.

That's what José had said. I backed away from Poppa's bed. "Bye, Poppa," I said. It didn't sound gentle enough. "Bye, Poppa," I said again, more gently.

Poppa didn't answer. He was way back when he was a young man and running into his own kinds of walls. I walked back into the kitchen. "I'm going," I said. I hugged Momma and Sis. I half put up my hand for a good-bye to my brothers and thought I saw James do the same. José winked and maybe even smiled. I made it out the door.

I hate funerals, I thought. Too fuckin' sad.

DOWN SOUTH

*I felt like maybe I bought a ticket to the wrong
Technicolor movie.*

17. GONNA FIND OUT WHAT'S SHAKIN'

I walked up to the brown-faced building on 118th Street and Lenox Avenue where Alayce lived. Her windows on the second floor were covered with newspapers instead of shades. I whistled, and Brew's face appeared between the newspapers and he motioned me to come up. I took the worn marble steps three at a time, and when I reached the second floor, Brew was leaning on the banister.

"Real modern joint you got here, Brew," I said with a straight face.

"Don't knock it, rich boy," he laughed. Then he saw the lump on my face where my brother had scored. "Man," he said, "who jumped you, a Red Wing? Them paddies got to go."

"It was a paddy all right, but no Red Wing."

"Jus' one paddy?" We went inside. "Ah hopes yuh busted his dick string. Who wuz it? Anybody Ah knows?"

"My brother José," I said. "And he didn't jump me. I cooled him first."

"Wha' cause the shit?"

"Same old shit—the black an' white story; but let's forget that. I got my suitcase from El Viejo's candy store. Ready to make it? We can cop a Greyhound bus for

Norfolk, Virginia, and be there in seventeen hours if—"

The toilet door opened and Alayce came out. "Hi, Piri," she said and came over and hugged me. "What Ah heah about you two goin' to Norfolk?"

"Damn Alayce, you always sure do look fine. If you ever want to leave that Negro and make it with me, we can swing. Us Puerto Ricans can make some bad lovin'—"

Brew cut me off with a pillow looped into my face from across the room. "Down boy," he grinned, "les' Ah lay a heavy hand on yuh."

"Now, Brew," Alayce said, smiling, "yuh all knows Ah'm yours an' yours alone. What time yuh gonna pick me up, Piri?"

Brew's face went into a comic look of betrayal. Throwing one hand across his eyes, he began beating his chest with the other, moaning, "Mah best frien' and mah only gal. But Ah won't stand in your way. Be happy, mah chillun, fo' as long as you both shall live. An tha' ain't gonna be fo' long. Whar's mah shotgun?"

We all cracked up laughing and couldn't look at each other without splitting our sides.

We sat there quiet for a while, and then Alayce asked again: "What's this stuff about goin' to Norfolk, Virginia?"

Brew looked at me sideways. "Din't Ah tell yuh, baby?" he said to Alayce.

"No, you din't tell me, baby."

"Ummm. Wal, it's like this, honey, Piri wants to go on down South to find out what's shaking."

"To find out what's shaking? What's he wanta find out, an' why you gotta go, too?"

"About Mistuh Charlie, an' peoples. An' Ah sorta promised Ah'd go along."

"What people?"

"Our people."

"He makin' some kinda research or something?"

"No, baby—Ah mean, yeah—Ah mean, our people is his people and he wants to be sure about whar he's at, 'cause his momma's a paddy and his poppa ain't, an' he's got trouble with his brudders 'cause they feels to be paddies and they's overlookin' the fact they got some tar-brushing on 'em, and his poppa doan' wanna believe that, an'—"

"What the hell you-all talkin' about, Brew?" Alayce burst out. "He's a Porto Rican and that's whar he is. We's Negroes and that's whar we're at."

Shit, I thought, *this broad sounds just like José.*

"Hold on, baby," Brew said. "Sure he's a Porty Rican, but his skin makes him a member of the black man's race an' hit don't make no difference he can talk that Porty Rican talk. His skin is dark an' that makes him jus' anudder rock right along wif the res' of us, an' tha' goes for all the rest of them foreign-talkin' black men all ovah tha' world. When you're born a shoe, yuh stays a shoe."

I lit a cigarette and sat back on the beat-up sofa. A lotta lovin' had broken its back.

"But honey," Alayce insisted, "Porto Ricans act different from us. They got different ways of dancin' an' cookin', like a different culture or something."

"What's culture gotta do with the color of your skin?" Brew asked sarcastically.

"I dunno, but Ah've met a whole lot of dark Porto Ricans, an' I ain't met one yet who wants to be a Negro. An' I don't blame 'em. I mean, like anything's better'n being a li'l ole darkie."

"What you say?" Brew said. He got a funny wasting look in his eyes. "Bitch, did Ah heah you right?"

"I said what I felt, honey. It's hard to be just plain black."

"Yuh think Ah doan' know that? Ah'm a black man, gur-ell."

"It's harder bein' a black woman," Alayce replied. Her voice was soft, like she knew her man was getting mad but she couldn't stop, or she didn't want to. "Ah ever tell you what happened—"

"Goddammit!" Brew said, "it don't make no fuckin' difference what happened, yuh supposed to be proud of being a Negro. Don' yuh know that's what red-neck Mr. Charlie wants us to feel? Yee-ah, be so fuckin' ashamed of being black you lose all your damn worth and git to feel lesser'n shit so's when they han' y'all that shit yuh jus' take it, 'cause shit is shit an' his own can stant his own."

I took a long drag and stared at a picture on the wall. It was a picture of Christ kneeling with his hands clasped together and looking up at the sky with a hangdog look. The picture was covered with dust and a pair of Alayce's stockings were draped over one side, making it hang lopsided. The Christ in the picture was paddy. I blew smoke toward the picture and watched the blue smoke form clouds around the kneeling figure. I half expected the Christ to cough. He didn't.

"Honey," Alayce said, still softly, "you once told me about yuh mamma an' how she raised so many kids and taught you all something you call ABC's, remember?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"How proud you feel, honey, smiling at Mr. Charlie from clear down yuh asshole?"

Smack! I looked down from Christ's picture in time to see Alayce go sliding across the room on her ass, blown there by Brew's big-handed slap. Brew stood there, his face twisted, and I couldn't tell if he was fighting to keep the tears in or to let them out.

"You bitch!" he said.

I looked at the picture and thought, *Pray for her, Christ, she's gonna get wasted.*

"You bitch!" He blew it out with real tears. "You

think Ah didn't feel all that shit? Ah ate and lived with that ABC bullshit Momma put down, an' one day I couldn't no more. Ah was about sixteen yeahs old. Ah was comin' down the back road headin' home and two motherfuckin' crackers were comin' toward me. One yelled out, 'Hey, niggah, whar yo'-all goin'?' An' Ah smiled and smiled clear down to my ass, jus' like Momma said Ah should. Man, Ah almost tore my ass off, Ah wagged it so hard."

Alayce was still sitting on the floor; Brew was trying not to blow his cool; I was looking at the picture on the wall; and Christ was still praying.

"One of the white boys," Brew continued, "put his hand on my haid and rubbed it jus' like he musta done a thousand time to one of his dogs, an' then he winked at the other white boy and said, 'You know, John, I bet heah's one of them good nigras. Ain't you, boy?'"

"Ah said through a smile, 'Yassuh.'"

"'An' bein' a good nigra, you-all won't mind doin' a favor for us . . .'"

"'Guess not, suh.'"

"'Fine, fine. Jus' take your pants down an' we jus' do a li'l corn-holin' with you-all.'"

I looked at Brew. He was like one of those statues in Central Park. Only the tears running down his cheeks made him real. He went on talking. "No, suh, Ah couldn't do that."

"'Why not, nigger?'"

"'Cose Ah'm a man.'"

"'Wal, nobody'll know, boy.'"

"'Ah'll know.'"

"'Ketch holt of him, John—'"

Brew's big fist was pressed against his palm. I looked at Alayce. She was still sitting where Brew put her. There wasn't any expression on her face. She just kept her eyes on Brew.

"You-all know what Ah did, Alayce?" he said. "Ah kicked John daid in his balls and got ahold of the other cracker's neck and squeezed and squeezed until his goddamn red face got redder and he went limper'n a mother-fucker."

"You kill him, Brew?" I asked the wall.

"No, Ah din't. He jus' laid thar like he was snorin'. Ah got me a big rock an' walked over to the white boy named John. He was holdin' on to his balls an' twitchin' all over. When he saw me standin' over him with that big rock, he began to whine like one of his dawgs. 'Damn, boy,' he said, 'we's only funnin' with you-all. We warn't goin' do you no harm at all. Please, boy, don't drop that damn rock.'

"Say *suh*,' I told him,

"Suh.'

"Say, *Youh better'n Ah am—suh?*

"You're better'n Ah am—dammit, boy, I tole you we was funnin'—"

"Say, *A black man's better'n a white man.*' He sat there lookin' at me funny-like. Ah raised the rock an' said, 'Say it!'

"*A-black-man-is-is-bet . . . You goddamn black bastard! I won't say it, you goddamn nigger!*"

Brew stood there and his hands slowly let go of an imaginary rock. "Ah dropped that fuckin' rock dead on his mouth and watched him spit out blood an' teeth, an' then Ah went home an' tole Momma what I done, an' next thing Ah was in a car with mah Uncle Stevens drivin' like hell ovah the state line an' on a train to New Yawk. That was three years ago . . ."

"Goodness," I said in a fake voice, "that was a close shave, *amigo*. You almost lost your cherry."

Brew laughed, and with that his body relaxed. I looked at him *serio* and said, "Lucky you didn't kill him."

"Same thing, Piri. Hittin' a white man down thar is same as killin' him."

"How about your folks? Nobody tried getting even?"

"Naw. They din't know who Ah was, an' as for discriptions, 'One nigger looks like anudder.'"

"Going down South now ain't going to put you in no binder?"

"Naw. Ah was big then, but Ah'm bigger now. 'Sides, that was three thousand years ago."

Alayce said from where she was still sitting, "Ah'm sorry, honey."

"What for, girl? Paddies gotta be sorry, not us."

"Ah mean Ah'm sorry for not being proud of what we are. Ah guess Ah can't forget the so many times them white boys tried to pull me into the bushes like Ah was one big free-for-all pussy. Ah can't forget the one time they finally did. Ah fought them as hard as Ah could. There were four of them, an' Ah was fifteen, an' they hurt me an' hurt me an'—"

Brew walked over to Alayce and bent down and picked her up gently. He looked at her face and his big hands made her look at him. They didn't say anything, not a word. Brew put his arms around her. I'd never seen my boy so gentle.

"Alayce, honey," he said, "there ain't nothin' so bad can happen that'll make one ashamed of what they is, if they's proud enough."

I almost couldn't hear Brew saying it. Alayce held on to him real tight and they walked-over to the newspaper-covered window. Brew's fingers gently tore the paper away and they both stood there, looking out. I dug Christ's picture. He hadn't moved. I got up and walked over to the door. "Brew," I called.

"Yeah?"

"You don't hafta go down South with me."

"Ah'd like to see Momma again."

"She'll surely be happy to see you again," said Alayce.

Brew looked at Alayce. "Ah wants to find you waitin' right heah when Ah gets back," he said.

"Be right here waiting for you, Brew."

"Pack mah stuff, girl. Want a drink, Piri?"

"Chevere!"

Brew got a bottle.

"I wonder if I gotta right to be as mad as you, Brew?" I said, thinking aloud.

"Man's got a right to what he feels. Your mad is jus' as important as mine or anybody's."

I pointed toward Christ's picture. "You think he was prejudiced against something?"

"Ah dunno, man." Brew kept his eyes on the picture for a long while and finally added, "He was white, wasn't he?"

I waited downstairs while Brew said his good-byes to Alayce. After a long time, he finally came down. "Man," I said, "how long do your farewellings take?"

"Ah made out with her one more time. Have yuh seen your broad yet?"

"No," I said, "and Trina ain't no broad. She's damn fine and she's good. She don't go in for shackin' up with everybody."

"Jus' close frien's, huh, buddy?"

"I'm serious, Brew. She even goes to mass and stuff like that."

"Man, Piri, she must of got off at the wrong station. She shoul'da kept right on goin'. Like heaven-bound."

I laughed. "I mean it, Brew. I really dig her. She ain't hip and that's what I like."

"So, daddy-o, you-all gonna be the first one to break cherry."

"Hey, man! Nothing like that. I ain't gonna *chinga* her till we're married."

"You-all that close already?"

"Not yet, man, not yet. But we will be. Hey, let's cop a cab an' pick up my suitcase at El Viejo's and make it to the bus terminal." We got a taxi, and ten minutes later we turned into 104th Street. "Right there, cabbie," I pointed, "on your right."

"A-huh," he muttered, "will you be gone long?"

I laughed. "Don't worry, cabbie. This ain't gonna be no *bomba*. I'll even leave my good *amigo* here for security."

"Oh, hell, I didn't mean it that way," the driver said quickly, "I just meant—"

Brew laughed and said, "Tha's all right, mistuh, we knows what you meant. There's all kinds of turrable people in this heah neighborhood."

I walked into El Viejo's, got my suitcase, and said *adiós* to my boys. The driver had the trunk of the taxi open and I put my bags in and started to climb into the cab when I saw Trina.

"Hold it, Brew," I said, "I'll be right back," and I called Trina and ran up to her. She looked oh-so-fine.

"*Cómo está, Piri?*" she said.

"Fine, Trina," I said. "Look, I'm leaving town and I wanted to say so long, an'—"

"Wait!" she said. "No talk so fast the Engleesh."

I apologized and repeated in Spanish what I had said.

"Is for lon' time?" she asked.

I told her maybe, maybe not, but that I would write to her, if that was okay.

"Sí, if you like," she said.

"Will you answer my letters?"

"No *comprendo—ans-sur?*"

I said it in Spanish.

"Sí," she replied, "surely."

"Hey, Pi-ri!" Brew called, "shake your ass, man. This heah meter is countin' his mother off."

"Hold it, man," I shouted back, and then to Trina I said, "Mira, I wanna tell you something. I ain't got time to tell you what I should've when I had time, but I dig you a whole lot."

"Deeg you?" she asked, puzzled.

I explained to her what it meant and told her that I would write it to her in Spanish and say it like it was. "Adiós, Trina," I said, and I touched her hand and held it for a hundred years.

On the way downtown to the Greyhound terminal, Brew asked me, "Piri, your girl, Trina, she's white, ain't she?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Ah mean, ain't you-all so down on paddies?"

"Trina's Puerto Rican, Brew."

"But still white, man. Jus' like a Porty Rican spade is still a spade."

"Shit, Brew," I said, "you getting things all fucked up. Trina ain't like the other kind of *blancos*. She's different."

"How many kinds is thar, Piri?"

"Good-o an' bad-o. *Trina's* good-o."

"White is white," Brew insisted.

I didn't answer him. I just dug pretty girls until the cab rolled into the terminal.

We got our tickets and boarded our bus, which was bound for Washington, D.C., and points south. I started to sit in a front seat but Brew caught my arm and motioned me to follow him. He walked all the way to the back of the bus and sat down. "What's the idea?" I said. "Don't you know back seats on buses are the bumpiest?"

"Yeah, baby, I know," he said. "But let me tell yuh like it is. Once we all cross the Mason-Dixon line, all spades will commence to sit their asses in the ass of the bus. I thought it right good fo' yuh to git used to the idea from the jumps."

I laughed and said, "Dig it." But in my mind I hadn't thought it was gonna apply to me.

We changed buses in Washington, and when we started to roll again, the colored people, who had sat wherever they wanted to on the bus from New York, were not sitting where they wanted to any more. It was black from back to front and white from front to back. I looked at Brew and he said, "Getting used to the idea, Piri?"

"Who the fuck can get used to any shit like this, man?"

"Wal, baby," he said, "forget 'Glory, Glory, Hallelujah' an' quick memorize 'Dixie.'"

I looked through the darkness of the bus and took another slug of the whisky which we had brought with us. I wondered about Poppa and Momma and the kids, about Harlem, about Trina. "Hey, Brew," I said.

"Yeah."

"That stuff you was saying about Trina being a paddy—"

"What 'bout it?"

"She ain't prejudiced. She don't dig that kinda shit."

"Yuh sure?"

"Sure, Brew. There's a lot of light Puerto Ricans married to dark Puerto Ricans."

"You-all think she'd marry a dark cat who wasn't no Porty Rican, like me, fo' instance?"

"I believe it, Brew, if she loved you."

"Thar's a lotta white Porty Ricans that's prejudiced, Piri."

"Yeah, I know. But they caught that played-out sickness over here."

"Sure?"

"I'd like to believe it, Brew."

"Likin' to believe it don't make it so, man. Ah'd like to believe Ah ain't prejudiced, but Ah am. Ah'd like to

believe a lotta things, but they jus' ain't that way. You're prejudiced, too, Piri."

I didn't answer that; I went back to Trina. "There's plenty like Trina," I said. "It's like Alayce said, 'Puerto Ricans got a different culture.'"

"Don't git too hung on that idea, man," Brew replied. "They may have a different culture, but they's probably got some different way of discrimination. Maybe them that got bread are down on them that got none. Dig it?" I let it rest.

An hour later we checked into a Negro hotel in Norfolk. We grabbed some breakfast—it was still early morning—and made it down to union headquarters on the other—the white—side of town. On the front of a small, wooden building hung a "National Maritime Union" sign. We walked up to a window and waited for the cat behind it to give us some attention.

"Yee-ah," said a paddy with a colored voice.

"We'd like to ship out," I said.

"Le's see your union books."

"Ain't got any yet. We're trip cards."

"Wha' kinda ratin' y'all got?"

"Messman, wiper, an' ordinary seaman."

"No good. Ah got calls fo' three AB's, one cook, and an oiler. An' besides, union memba's come first. Maybe tomorrow."

Brew got close to the window and said, "Think we can git us a ship tomorrow? We got us about twenny dollas left—er, twenny apiece—an' if we could get us a ship real soon, we shore wouldn't need no money on the ship. Say," Brew added, "maybe you could take the money and donate it or somethin' to the Seamen's Fund."

"Whar y'all lookin' ta ship out to?" the paddy asked.

"Coastwise—anywhere around southern ports," I said.

"Some ship due in a couple days an' thar's a pretty good chanct for you two . . . Tell you-all what. Come

back day afta tomorrow. Purty good chanct you-all make out all right."

"Wal, thanks a lot, mistuh," Brew said.

"'S'all right. Ah likes ta help fellers jus' gittin' started." I started to turn away. "Uh, wait a sec," the paddy said, "didn't y'all say somethin' 'bout how you'd like to contribute about forty dollas to the Seamen's Fund?"

"Now?" I asked. Mr. Paddy smiled a big "now." Brew and I looked at each other, wondering if this could be a hyep, like him takin' the bread an' not coming through. But it was a risk we had to take. I nodded my head and Brew pulled out forty *bolos* and smiled at the cat. "We almos' forgot," he said. "We sure got some bad mem'ries. Hope we all don' forget we gotta be heah day afta tomorrow so's we can ship out. Tell you what, Piri," Brew added, looking innocent, "you remind me an' Ah'll remin's you so we don' forget."

I grinned at the paddy and said, "Thanks a lot, mister. We really appreciate your giving us a hand. Lotta people wouldn't give a damn."

"Tha's all right, boy. Glad ta help out."

I started to give him a funny look at that "boy" shit, and Brew put his arm around me and moved me toward the door, saying, "Ain't it great, man! We're gonna ship out." Outside he said, "Piri, what'd Ah tell you about that jumping stink? These paddies call us 'boy' jus' as nat'ral as they calls us niggers. It's jus' part of they vocabulary. Jus' don' blow your cool, okay?"

I promised I wouldn't.

18. BARROOM SOCIOLOGY

That night, after a nap, we walked around the colored part of Norfolk. The night air was cool and everything was living and going someplace. It reminded me of Harlem. We were on our way to the Blue Bell, a place Brew remembered from another life. It had a dance floor, a hot combo, and some rooms nearby for sitting out dances.

It wasn't a big place, but it swung. Inside it was dark except for red and blue light bulbs that gave the walls the shadows of the patrons. Brew and I got to a table and almost right away a waiter came up to us. "May I help you, gentlemen?" he asked.

We gave him our order, and a few minutes later he returned with our drinks. He spoke so well I asked him if he was from New York.

"No," he said, "I'm from Pennsylvania. But I can tell you're from New York, and," he added, looking at Brew, "you're not."

"Yuh right," Brew said, "Ah's a home boy."

"Been here long?" asked the Pennsylvanian.

"Couple of days," I lied. "We're on business. How about you?"

"Well, I've been here—excuse me, somebody's waving

for service. Look," he said as he moved away, "I have my relief in a few minutes and if you don't mind, I'll join you for a chat."

We nodded "okay," and the Pennsylvanian saluted his thanks and drifted off through a mass of bodies. I eyedrilled a hole in the dress of a pretty baby leaning on a jukebox across the dance floor. "I'd like to get workin' with her like real fast," I said. "Dig, she got my eye."

"Well, play it cool," Brew said, "'cause tha's what she's heah fo', to ketch yo' eye an' yo' bread."

As I rolled my eyes around the broad's curves, the Pennsylvanian returned with fresh drinks. He sat down and told us he had been in Norfolk about three months. He looked about twenty-five or twenty-six. "I'm writing a book on the Negro situation," he said, "and I came down for the sense of personal involvement. I wanted the feel of what it means for a Negro to live here in the South. Background and such, you know what I mean?"

"Damn, man," Brew said, "yuh sho' coulda picked a tougher place than Norfolk fo' your book. Ah means a place whar you li'ble to get a kick in yuh background."

The Pennsylvanian smiled. "Oh, I'm not looking for that kind of personal involvement," he said. "I'm not seeking violence but rather the warmth and harmony of the southern Negro, their wonderful capacity for laughter and strength, their spiritual closeness to God and their way of expressing faith through their gospel singing. I want to capture on paper the richness of their poverty and their belief in living. I want the words I write to blend with the emotions of their really fantastic ability to endure and absorb the anguish of past memories of the slavery that was the lot of their grandparents. I want to write that despite their burdens they are working with the white man toward a productive relationship."

I glanced at Brew. He was studying the shadows on the walls. I took a good look at the Pennsylvanian. He was

tan-colored and not really very negroid-looking. I got a funny, almost proud feeling that I looked more negroid than he did.

The Penn State man continued, "You see, I really feel the large part of the publicity being given the southern situation is adverse and serves only to cause more misunderstanding. I realize that there have been incidents, and white men have been cruel and violent toward the Negro, but only an ignorant and small minority—"

Brew broke in quietly with a wave of his hand, "You not a southe'ner, are yuh?"

"No, I'm not."

"Evah bin down South before?"

"No, I haven't."

"Evah notice any of these problems you was talkin' 'bout up No'th?"

"Well, I suppose there is some bigotry up there, but it's not the same, or at least I find it doesn't have the same meaning as here in the South."

"Ah sees," said Brew, barely hiding a growing disgust. "You-all been any other places inna South?"

"No, but I've been making plans to go to Atlanta, and—"

"You oughta go to some of them small towns whar a rock better fuckin' well know his place."

"Well, I don't think that's totally necessary. The problem of the southern Negro is the same whether he's in the large cities or in back-wat— I mean, backwood counties. I believe that the southern Negro of today is marshaling his dignity and preparing himself for a great social revolution."

"Yuh-all gonna be a part of it?" Brew asked.

"I certainly feel that my book will contribute in some effective way to the Negro's cause."

"Ah means," said Brew, "if it comes down to fightin'

an' havin' black an' white mixing their blood on big city guttals or goddamn dirt roads?"

"If in looking for a solution to this problem," the Pennsylvanian replied, looking at me, "it comes to the point of violence, I know that many will die, especially Negroes. Those that fight, of course. And that will be their contribution to their cause. Some whites may die, and that will be their contribution to their cause. But it falls to others, black or white, to contribute in some other way. Perhaps one of these ways is by writing. By writing I will be fighting."

"About what? an' foah who?" said Brew. "Yuh gonna write 'bout Negroes' warmth an' harmony, an' their won'erful ability to laugh an' rejoice, an' that shit 'bout the richness of their poverty? Yuh gonna write 'bout their fantastick 'bility to endure fuck-up mem'ries of slavin' an' smilin'? Prissy, wha's your name? Mine's Brewster, Brewster Johnson."

"My name, Mr. Johnson, is Gerald Andrew West," the Pennsylvanian said in such a way to let Brew know that he didn't like being called "Prissy." It was like the way you let someone know your name when you think he's inferior to you.

There was a fifth of whisky on our table. It hadn't been there before, or had it? It was almost empty, and I felt high, and Brew seemed high too. "You-all don' mind if ah calls yuh by your first name, eh, Ger-rul?" he said.

"If you like—er, Mr. Johnson—I hope I haven't caused any misunderstanding between us. I didn't mean to cause any resentment. I hope . . ."

Brew didn't answer.

"Don't worry, man," I said, "say it like you feel it," and I nudged Brew to keep his cool. He smiled gently, like a hungry tiger, and I knew he'd stay cool. "Suave, panita," I added to Brew.

"Oh, you speak Spanish," Gerald Andrew West said to me, "Mr.—"

"Piri—Piri Thomas. Yeah, I do."

"How wonderful! Are you of Spanish descent?"

"No, just Puerto Rican father and moms."

"I speak a little Spanish, also," said Gerald Andrew West. "*Yo estoy estudiano español.*"

"Ah di'n't order any more drinks," Brew said as another fifth of whisky found its way to the table.

"This is on me, Mr. Johnson. Uh—do you speak Spanish fluently, Mr.—Piri? May I call you by your first name?"

"You 'ready did," said Brew. "Damn p'lite prissy."

I nudged Brew again; he made pop eyes and mumbled, "'Scuse me." Gerald Andrew West looked like he hadn't heard him or like Brew wasn't there.

"Yeah, you can call me Piri—uh, Gerald," I said.

"You know, Piri, I've been taken for Spanish many times, and Indian, too. I know that many dark people say that, but it's really happened with me." Gerald smiled almost too pat and added, "So you're Puerto Rican?"

I looked at the shadows over Brew's head and then at the jukebox. Pretty baby was still leaning on it.

"A-huh," I answered, "Puerto Rican *moyeto*."

"*Moyeto*? What does that mean?"

"Negro," I said.

"Oh—er—do Puerto Ricans—er—consider themselves—uh—Negro?"

"I can only talk 'bout me," I replied, "but *como es, es como se llama*."

Gerald thought for a second and translated, "Like it is, is how it's called. Am I right?"

"Word for word, *amigo*," I said. "I'm a Puerto Rican Negro."

"Wha' kind is you-all, Gerald?" Brew said, smiling.

"What kind of what?" Gerald asked. "I'm afraid I don't understand you, Mr. Johnson."

"Ah means, what kinda Negro is yuh?"

"Oh! I understand now. Well, uh—according to—er—my—according to a genealogical tracer—you know, those people who trace one's family tree back as far as possible—well, according to the one my parents contracted to do the tracing, I'm really only one-eighth colored."

Brew was shaking his head slowly up and down. He made a move with his head at the bottle and Gerald said, "That's what it's there for, Mr. Johnson. By all means, please be my guest and help yourself."

"How's that work?" I asked Gerald. "I mean, tracing and all."

"Well, you see, they check back to your grandparents and get information so they can trace back to your great-grandparents and so on. For example, my great-great-grandfather was an Englishman named Robert West. He was on my father's side. His wife, my great-great-grandmother, was from Malaya. You can see my eyes have an Oriental cast about them. Well—"

"A-huh, Ah sees," Brew said absently.

"—he—my great-great-grandfather—was a ship's captain and married his wife on one of his trips to Malaya. Then his oldest son, my great-grandfather—his name was Charles Andrew West—married a woman whose father was white and mother was half Negro. They had children and their second son, my father, married my mother, who had Indian blood, from, uh, India, and, uh—some Spanish blood and uh—some Negro, colored blood. I—really—I'm so blended racially that I find it hard to give myself to any, ah—well, to any one of the blends. Of course, I feel that the racial instincts that are the strongest in a person enjoying this rich mixture are the ones that—uh—should be followed."

"What is your instincts, ah, Gerald?" asked Brew, staring at our blended friend.

Gerald laughed nice-like and answered, "I—rather—feel—sort of Spanish-ish, if I may use that term. I have always had great admiration for Spanish culture and traditions. I—er—yes—feel rather impulsed toward things Spanish. I guess that's why I have this inclination to learn Castilian. Of course, I don't disregard the other blends that went into the making of me, which—"

"Yuh evah been mistook fo' a Caucasian?" Brew interrupted.

Gerald smiled politely and answered, "Well, like I said, I'm always being mistaken for one of Spanish, uh, origin, or Puerto Rican. It's the same thing, I guess, and—"

Unpolite Brew broke in again, "Ah said *Caucasian*."

"Er, I rather think that Spaniards, even though some are swarthy like Italians from Sicily, uh—are considered Caucasians. Yes, I probably have been taken for white."

"How 'bout gittin' mistook fo' a Negro?" Brew asked. He was tight and his voice sounded like it did that day on the stoop in Harlem when he was sounding me on the same subject.

"Well," Gerald said hesitantly, "I've seen looks of doubt, and I've had some rare unpleasant experiences. But I find that I am mostly taken for a Negro by Negroes. I guess there are many like myself who, because of their racial blends, find themselves in the same unique position."

"An' what's your answer when yuh ast?"

"By the Caucasians?"

"Naw! Ah can figger what yuh tells 'em. Ah wanna know what you says to the rock people."

"Why, I say 'yes.' I—er—couldn't possibly say anything else under the circumstances. It would at best create resentment if I attempted to explain that I don't feel one

hundred per cent Negro, since I am only one-eighth Negro."

"Don' yuh-all feel a leetle bit more Negro than that?"

Gerald looked at me for assurance that this wasn't going to be one of those "under the circumstances" situations that would lead to resentment and make his "personal involvement" physically painful. I smiled at him that I'd do what I could to keep everything cool.

"Don' yuh-all feel a leetle bit more Negro than that?" Brew repeated. "Tell me, is the book you're writin' gonna be from the Negro's point o' view? It's gonna be a great book. Yuh-all fo' sure the true picture of the workin's toward a productive relationship 'tween the Mistuh Charlies and the rock people. Ah am sure that your book will tru'fully show who all is enjoyin' the producin' part from that there relationship."

Gerald stayed quiet for a long time, then he said, "Mr. Johnson, I'd like to tell you something." For the first time he sounded like he was going to say what he had to and fuck Brew and whatever he thought or whatever he was going to do. Brew looked at him *carapalo*. "I'm not ashamed for the so-called 'Negro' blood in me and neither am I ashamed for what I feel myself to be. Nor how I think. I believe in the right of the individual to feel and think—and choose—as he pleases. If I do not choose to be a Negro, as you have gathered, this is my right, and I don't think you can ask or fight for your rights while denying someone else's. I believe that my book will contribute. I believe that the so-called 'Negro writers' are so damned wrapped up in their skins that they can't see the white forest for the black trees. It's true I don't look like a true Caucasian, but neither do I look like a true Negro. So I ask you, if a white man can be a Negro if he has some Negro blood in him, why can't a Negro be a white man if he has white blood in him?"

Gerald tenderly squeezed the flesh of his left shoulder

with the fingers of his right hand. I dug the jukebox and its ornament. Brew watched Gerald.

"I believe the Negro has the burden of his black skin," Gerald continued. He was in focus now. "And I believe the white man has the burden of his white skin. But people like me have the burden of both. It's pretty funny, Mr. Johnson. The white man is perfectly willing for people like me to be Negroes. In fact, he insists upon it. Yet, the Negro won't let us be white. In fact he forbids it. Perhaps I was a bit maudlin in describing what I was looking for in the southern Negro, and this may have set you against me. But I would like you to know that if, because of genetic interbreeding, I cannot truly identify with white or black, I have the right to identify with whatever race or nationality approximates my emotional feeling and physical characteristics. If I feel comfortable being of Spanish extraction, then that's what I'll be. You might very well feel the same way, were you in my place."

People were still dancing and Gerald was still tenderly squeezing his shoulder. I was thinking that Gerald had problems something like mine. Except that he was a Negro trying to make Puerto Rican and I was a Puerto Rican trying to make Negro.

Gerald got up. "Do you know, Mr. Johnson," he said, "it's easier to pass for white down here than up North. Down here, a white man thinks twice before accusing another white openly of being a Negro for fear of getting slapped with a lawsuit or worse. And the Negro only has to think once for fear of just the 'worse.' But up North it's not an insult according to law, and I've never seen or heard of the 'worse' happening. Anyway, I've come down here to find what I couldn't find up North, and I think I've gotten what I came looking for. I've wanted to taste, feel, and identify with what was fitted for me. Even Negro. But I cannot. Not only do I not feel like a Negro, but I cannot understand his culture or feelings or his

special kind of anger. Perhaps it's because I was born and raised in the North and went to white schools and white boys were my friends from childhood. I've mingled with colored boys up North, but I never felt like I was one of them, or they of me. Tonight, Mr. Johnson, I started out of place. The same feeling I've lived with a long time. And I found out tonight that I *am* out of place. Not as a human being, but as a member of your race. I will say that you hit it on the head when you insinuated that I was trying to be a Puerto Rican so I could make the next step to white. You're right! I feel white, Mr. Johnson; I look white; I think white; therefore I *am* white. And I'm going back to Pennsylvania and *be* white. I'll write the book from both points of view, white and Negro. And don't think it will be one-sided. That one eighth in me will come through; it's that potent, isn't it?"

Gerald stood there waiting for Brew or maybe me to say something. Brew was looking at a fat broad sitting at the bar. I looked at the jukebox. Gerald smiled at the shadows on the wall and said, "Good night, Mr. Johnson . . . Piri. And good-bye and good luck."

"Adiós, Gerald, take it smooth." I waved a hand and wasn't sure I meant it. But I found it hard to hate a guy that was hung up on the two sticks that were so much like mine. Brew just nodded his head and watched a self-chosen white man make it from a dark scene. "Ah guess he's goin' home," he said and downed his drink. "Le's go see what pussy's sellin' fo' by the pound."

I heard Lady Day singing from the jukebox. The broad was still there, still coming on. I thought, *pussy's the same in every color*, and made it over to the music.

19. LAS AGUAS

DEL SUR

Two days later I woke up all burned out. Brew was staggering around too. This was the shipping-out day that our forty *bolos* had bought us.

At breakfast our heads cleared a little and our memories began to focus through the haze of a thirty-six-hour hang-over. And it wasn't the *chicas* we remembered, but Mr. Gerald Andrew West, the blended wonder.

"Ah still hates his mudderfuckin' guts," Brew said, "but at least he got the heart to make a choice."

"Yeah," I said, without enthusiasm. My head still hummed, and besides, the memory of Gerald stirred funny thoughts. What he had said about choice had shattered my own ideas on the matter. I felt like maybe I had bought a ticket to the wrong technicolor movie. Brew must have sensed my hang-up 'cause he asked me:

"How 'bout you, Piri?"

I forced myself to think about it for a while, a long while. "Brew," I finally said, "I've been wanting it to be like there ain't no doubts at all, but . . ." Brew looked at me, his eyes trying to break up what I was saying. I went on. "I'm . . . still trying to find what's my kick. I'm still trying to find my own stick of living. Man, Brew, you gotta understand. I want to be wanted—not by them

motherfuckers but by me! But I ain't got rid of that fuckin' status that I got brought up on. I don't mean at home alone. I mean like I envied it on the streets, I dug it wherever it meant anything to be better than just a wrong color. I feel like shit. It ain't just that I don't wanna be what I'm supposed to be, it's just that I'm fightin' me and the whole goddamn world at the same time. Jesus, Brew, I don't know if I'm makin' any sense at all, but everybody knows paddies are prejudiced against Negroes—and Negroes want to be prejudiced right back."

"Yeah, but them paddies are nuttin' but fuckin' ignorant."

"Like you and me, eh?" I was trying to keep from getting excited. I didn't want to turn my ace-coon boon against me, but all my life I had wanted to be for real. I had wanted to be proud of feeling just the way I'm supposed to feel. "Am I going down wrong with you?" I asked Brew. "You wouldn't want me to bullshit you?"

"What yuh mean 'like you an' me'?" he said.

"You and me," I said. "You hate Gerald's guts because he don't wanna be a spook and you hate whites for the reason known to a whole certain race that you happen to be part of. And I feel the same because I'm hung up. I still can't help feeling both paddy and Negro. The weight feels even on both sides even if both sides wanna feel uneven. Goddammit, I wish I could be like one of those lizards that change colors. When I'd be with Negroes, I'd be a stone Negro, and with paddies, I'd be stone paddy. It ain't like with Gerald. He got used to his choice even before he had made it, so it's all over for him inside. It ain't like that with me. Mine is startin' for real an' I'm scared of this hate with one name that's chewing me up. So dig it, Brew, if I'm talking one way one time and another way another time, it's only 'cause I wanna know, 'cause I ain't been born but this one time. Understand?"

Brew picked up his napkin and, looking at it intently,

said, "Ah unnerstands, Piri. Yuh-all still sounds like yuh tryin' to walk a fence. Yuh can't do that, man. Yuh knows damn well yuh can't make it like a Caucasian due to your nappy hair—better'n mine, but still nappy. Your nose ain't the right shape; it ain't as flat as mine, but it's still flat, an' your color can't pass as a suntan even if yuh-all had a letter of recommendation from Sun Tan Oil Incorporated."

Brew put down his napkin and we made it out into the street. The sun was nice and warm. A trolley came along and I thought, *There's the trolley and it got some empty seats in the back.* We got in it and sat in our state-appointed seats. Fifteen minutes later we were standing in front of the forty-dollar window.

"Ain't any jobs opened yet; come back tomorrow," said our friend behind the window, without even looking up to see who was there.

"Remember us?" I said. "We're supposed to see you about a boat. We were here a couple of days ago an'—"

"Ah rememba, ah rememba," whispered the treasurer for the Seamen's Fund. "Go on an' set fo' ten or so minutes, then go on 'round the back an' Ah'll see you there."

Ten minutes later we were waiting at the back door. After a while Mr. Forty Bucks stuck his head out, took our trip cards, and handed them back with a piece of paper clipped to each one, "Heah you are, boys," he said, "the address is there on them slips. Ship's on Pier 4. It's a tanker an' yuh both signed on as mess boys. Have a nice trip."

The name of our ship was the *James Clifford*. We walked up the gangplank and at the top some cat asked us what we wanted.

"We're signed on this boat," I answered.

He looked at us and said patiently, "You must be new mickies 'cause you don't call a ship a boat. Le's see

your papers. Messmen. Go on back aft and see the steward. He'll take care of you."

"Er, where's aft?" I asked. Brew said, "Tha's inna back, Piri," and the sailor pointed patiently toward the back of the ship and let out a sigh.

"Thanks a lot, mate," I said, just to let him know I knew something about the sea jazz.

The steward was a paddy with a lotta white hair and just as much beard. We showed him our papers, and after staring at them for a while he said, "Okay, boys, follow me and I'll show you to your fo'c'sle. You fellers got any rain gear or work clothes?"

"We got some clothes," Brew said, "but none of that rain gear yuh-all talkin' 'bout."

"That's all right. You can get what you both need out of the slop chest later."

"Slop chest?" said Brew. "Sounds like a hawg pen."

The steward smiled and said, "It's like a store aboard ship. You can buy shoes, shirts, smokes, and so on; you know, toothpaste, brushes, blades, and so on. And incidentally, if you have no money, you can buy against your wages. Here we are. You're on the port side, mid-ship."

We looked blank, and the steward, showing his nice smile, said, "I know you're first trips, but don't worry, you'll get used to sea gab." We stepped into the fo'c'sle. It had two double-decker bunks, a little table, and four lockers and three little round windows. "You're bunking with the utility and the pantry man," the steward explained.

"Nice room," I said.

"Fo'c'sle," gently reminded the steward.

"Fo'c'sle," I gently repeated.

"I'll give you two a tip," said the steward. "Keep your portholes closed in rough weather or you'll have the whole damn ocean in here."

I cool-walked it over to one of the little round windows and opened it, just to let the steward know that I knew all the time them little round windows were portholes. I got no kind of victory outta that. All he said was:

"When you've finished stowing your gear, come over to the galley and I'll show you both your duties."

Half an hour later we were in the galley. "Brewster," the steward said, "you'll work in the crew's mess hall, and Thomas"—the steward already had given up on "Piri"—"you'll work in the officers' mess." He showed us where everything was and how to set a table. "When the ship sails," he concluded, "you get up at 6:30 a.m., set up your tables, get everything shipshape, and then stand by. Breakfast is at 7 o'clock. You clean up after breakfast and then knock off till about 10 o'clock. Then get started for lunch. After you clean up again, knock off till 3:30, set up again, stand by for supper, clean up again, and then you're off till next morning at 6:30. Got that? Oh, one more thing," he added to me. "Always serve them *hot* coffee. 'Specially the Old Man—the captain. You give these officers good service and when the trip is over they'll tip you pretty good."

I nodded up and down that I would serve my "massahs" well.

"Well, boys," the steward said, "just do your jobs right and you'll find that I'm not the kind of man to be breathing down your necks. Take care, and good sailing." He left and I turned to Brew and said:

"Ain't a bad old cat, huh?"

Brew didn't answer, but I was glad I could still feel good about a white man.

The next morning I was at my appointed station, dressed in a white jacket and serving my "massahs."

"Messman," called the captain.

I turned away from the toaster and walked over to his table. "Yes, sir," I said.

"Son, please bring me a cup of coffee and make it—"

"Yes, sir," I cut in, "black, hot and no sugar."

The captain man smiled and said, "Looks like the steward's been working on you."

I smiled back and nodded. I looked at the chief mate and asked, "Will you also have coffee, sir?"

"Yes, I will, er—thank you."

I let my eyes go over the rest of the officers to see if anyone else wanted my cool service. Nobody said nothing. I went out and brought back coffee. With a good feeling, I watched everybody finish dessert. Everything had gone well. I hadn't forgotten to serve from the right and take from the left. Then the chief mate fucked up my whole meal. He put up one finger and said, "Hey, boy, let me have another cup of coffee."

"Yes, sir." I didn't look at him. I just went to get it.

"Here you are, sir."

"Er, thank you . . . Say, this coffee is cold."

"Is it, sir? I'll get you another cup."

I came back. There was no "thank you" this time.

"Say, fella, this coffee's still cold."

"Can't understand it, sir! Don't worry, I'll get you another cup."

"Never mind."

"It's no bother, sir, I'll be glad to." *It'll still be cold*, I thought.

"Never mind." His lips looked kinda clenched.

"Yes, sir," I said meekly. *Any of you cats that call me "boy" is gonna get the same treatment.*

After everybody had left the dining room and I had cleaned up I went out on deck. I saw Brew and started to head for him when I heard somebody call me.

"Messman."

It was the chief mate.

"Yes, sir?"

"Look, fella, I got a feeling you brought me cold coffee both times on purpose. Why?"

"Ya really want to know, sir?"

"Yes, I want to know—really," he added sarcastically.

"Well, it's this way. When I was a little kid, my momma told me that someday I'd grow up to be a man, and if I was a good boy and ate a lot, I'd grow into a real *chevere* man. Well, I've done what Momma asked me and I've grown into a man. If Momma is right, and I believe she is, I ain't no longer a boy. You understand, sir?"

I got no answer; he just clenched his lips tight like before and showed me his back.

"Sir," I called, "I don't think your coffee will be cold from now on, unless you want it like that."

He didn't like that, but I guess he liked cold coffee less, because he stopped calling me "boy." Actually, he didn't call me at all unless he couldn't avoid it, and then he just ordered what he wanted without any preliminaries.

We hit Mobile, New Orleans, and Galveston on the trip. Mobile was Brew's home town. "You know this place pretty good, eh, Brew?" I said.

"Like a book, man, like a book," he said. He spoke low and wouldn't say much. I kept tryin' to force some kind of conversation out of him; I figured a guy oughtta be happy to talk about the place he was born in, no matter how bad it was. But Brew wouldn't string more than four or five words together about Mobile. Maybe he was scrapin' up old, long-ago memories. You can share good memories with an ace-boon coon, but not the bad ones.

We went ashore at Mobile and got stoned. On the way back to the ship I got hungry and walked into the first restaurant I saw. It was a white place. There wasn't a black head in there, just a neat row of *blancos* sitting on stools in front of a long counter. I perched on an empty stool at the end of the counter. Brew had warned me

about going in, and I could see him through the plate-glass window, standing outside, waiting, with no expression on his black face, the only black face around. I was the alonest.

I heard the walking of shoes and I looked in the direction of the noise. It was the counterman. He passed me right by. I waited until he came my way again and I said, "Two hamburgers an' a Coke." I timed it, I thought, just right.

Nobody said a word.

I repeated my order. Still silence. I raised my fist and smashed it on the counter with all my Puerto Rican black man's strength. I felt a sense of somebody coming up behind me. Thinking it was Brew, I started to say, "Whatta ya want to eat, *panín*—" when a voice full of Alabama candy cut me off.

"Boy—er—ah—we don' serve nigras heah . . ."

A hand touched a little part of my shoulder. I looked around and a skinny white face said, "Y'all don' want no trouble, do you, boy?" Nobody else said a word.

I jumped off the stool and spilled a lot of bad words, mostly in Spanish. All the eating, smiling, and talking stopped and a mean-sounding murmur rose from all those *blancos* sitting on stools. Brew, who had been watching from outside, came in and gently led me out with looks to the *blancos* that said, "He's a stranger here . . ."

"Brew," I said, but I didn't have to finish. He dug what I was thinking.

"Ah tol' yuh, man. Ah tol' yuh. Why don' yuh unnerstan' that you ain't nuttin' but one mudderfuckin' part of all this hurtin' shit?"

I couldn't answer. I just stood outside that greasy grittin' place that served two kinda menus and tried to keep nutty things that were running all over me from fuckin' my mind up. I wanted to go back into that place and jump on that counter and run down its holy length

and kick white plates and cups of coffee into all those paddy laps. The bombs blowing up inside of me made some room for Brew.

"That ain't the way, man, it ain't the way," he said. "If y'all goes back inta that place, it's like stickin' your ass in the hosse's mouth." Brew sounded like he didn't really expect me to believe him. I listened to the noises coming from out of me. They sounded like death, like hollowed-out words which one can only hear in a room with no goddamn way out.

New Orleans was our next stop. I was getting pretty fed up with this two-tone South. Brew, too, seemed to have lost something, maybe in Mobile. We downed a bottle and picked up a couple of octoroon snatch that reminded us of Gerald Andrew West. That was our only laugh in New Orleans. The snatch had separate pads, so we split, and agreed to meet on the ship. Brew never made it. I don't know what happened. Maybe he was gonna pick peas on a prison farm or maybe he went back to Mobile for something he forgot the first time. I waited by the gangplank until they pulled it up and the ship began to slide away from its pier; I searched the darkness for my black brother, my ace-boon coon. But he didn't show. I never saw him again. When I got back to New York, Alayce had disappeared, too. Maybe they went back home together.

A couple of days later the *James Clifford* pulled into Galveston and I went ashore by myself. All that I knew about Texas was what I had seen in cowboy movies. I just walked through town and when I stopped walking I was in the middle of a carnival. I drifted over to a tent where some cats were pitching pennies into a circle for prizes. I threw a few pennies and one of them went into the circle without hitting a line. "*Bueno, hombre, bueno!*" said a cat next to me. He was a Mexican, and we traded names and wandered together through the

carnival. We went to a *cantina* and had some drinks—he, tequila, and me, to be true to all *puertorriqueños*, rum. We got on a high and I asked my newfound *amigo* if he knew a cathouse, a white cathouse. I wanted to break out against this two-tone South; I wanted to fuck a white woman in Texas.

"*Sí*, I know one," he said. There was a slight hesitation in his voice and I knew why immediately. He was olive-skinned and his hair was like silk and his nose was straight and fine; then there was me. I looked at him and he said, "Do you know how it is down here? *Qué es tu nacionalidad?*"

"*Puertorriqueño*," I said. "I know that my hair ain't good and my nose is too flat and my skin is too dark." And very quietly I told him what I wanted to do.

He looked at me and said, "Okay, if that's what you want. If you do not speak a word of English, you may pass for Puerto Rican."

I smiled at that crack. Maybe inside he dug me for a home boy.

We walked down the street and into a nice white hotel. The man at the desk said to my friend, "What do you want?"

"We would like a room and a couple of girls," he replied in a soft Texas drawl.

The clerk said, "What does this boy here want?" He just looked at me. "What's your name?" he asked.

I looked blank. Then, playing my role to perfection, I looked at my Mexican friend and said in Spanish, "What did he say?"

"You don't understand English?" the clerk said. "Where you from? *Dónde tu eres?*"

I lit up my face like I had just come off a banana boat. "Puerto Rico," I said, smiling.

The clerk sidled over to my Mexican friend and whispered to him, "He ain't a nigger, is he?"

My friend assured him that I wasn't. I looked blank. The clerk told my friend, "Well, you know, we got all kinds of people coming in, all kinds of foreigners, and Spanish people who come from Argentina and Colombia and Peru and Cuba, and that's all right, but we got to keep these damn niggers down."

So we each got a room, and with it a broad, and I fucked my white woman. It cost me \$10 (and \$5 for my Mexican friend) and the broad thought she was taking me because probably nobody had paid her \$10 in the last six months. But the money didn't mean anything to me; I wanted to prove something.

After I had blown my insides into her, I got dressed and told my friend in the next room in Spanish to make it. He asked me why. "Don't ask," I said in Spanish, "just go if you don't want to get killed," and I went back to my room.

A few seconds later my friend popped in. He didn't know what I was going to do, but whatever it was, he knew it was insane. "*Cuidado*," he said. "Take care."

"All right," I said, and heard his feet running down the stairs. Then I stepped in front of the mirror and put my jacket on. The broad was still on the bed, wondering if I was going to make her again. When I walked to the door, she smiled and said in broken Texas Spanish, did I like it and did I want more? I opened the door and said, "Baby, I just want you to know"—and I watched her smile fall off and a look of horror fill the empty space it left—"I just want you to know," I repeated, "that you got fucked by a nigger, *by a black man!*" And I didn't wait to hear her gasp or to watch her jump up out of that bed. I ran, I disappeared, because I learned a long time ago to hit and run right back to your turf, and my turf was that goddamned ship.

I made the trip back to Norfolk and caught a ship to

the West Indies, signing on this time as a coal fireman on a black gang. Damm-sam, I never knew what a slave was until I began to shovel that black crap. I worked four hours and was off eight, around the clock. But during those four hours I was in hell, and after a few shifts I figured I better do something quick to get outta this coolie labor. I reported sick to the purser, who doubled as the ship's doctor. I told him that I was physically fit but that I couldn't stand heat and could probably die from it. I thought I had signed on as an *oil* fireman. The purser talked it over with the captain and the chief engineer. "Don't worry about nothing, kiddo," the chief told me. "How would you like to work as a coal *sup-plier?*"

"What's that?" I asked.

"You just supply the coal to the chute that the firemen get their coal from," he said.

I said okay, and someone gave me a shovel that looked like a hoe and led me to an open hatch. I peered in and saw nothing but blackness. The chief gave me a pat on the back and a lamp that burned a wicked smell and a bright light, and down I climbed into a mountain of coal. For the rest of the trip I breathed coal dust, ate coal dust, and sweated coal dust.

About halfway out I got into an argument with one of the firemen, a big Swede. He complained that I wasn't supplying him coal fast enough down his chute. "And you break up the fucking coal"—some chunks weighed fifty pounds—"before you send it down," he added. "You hear?"

A West Indian messman—Isaac was his name—had told me never to take shit from anybody on board or I'd become a flunky. So I shouted down to the Swede that the only thing I would break up and send down the chute in little pieces would be his faggot ass. That did it.

He cursed me out good, ending with, "I'll see you on deck, you lousy basturr. By jiminy, I break you just once in half."

"Shove it out," I yelled back, and I felt like I was back on my block.

"Watch out for him, boy," Isaac later warned me. "He may want to out the light for you."

I sized up the Swede. He was a tall man, pretty good build, not young, maybe fifty or fifty-five. But I didn't count too much on his age; these old cats fool you sometimes. I thought it might come when we were off duty, smoking or lounging on deck. But it happened as I was carrying my mess tray from the galley to the mess hall. The Swede had left his food in the mess hall. When I came into view, he met me and knocked my tray out of my hands and all my grit mixed with the fish oil on deck. He hit me upside of my head. I dug the message and copped a handful of throat and punched with my right and wrestled. I dug I was stronger than he was and I decided to strangle him a little. I wrestled him to the deck and wrapped my legs around his waist and got a choke hold around his neck and squeezed. Some spittle began to gurgle out of his mouth. I got shook. *Suppose I kill this pendejo*, I thought. I looked around. If I continued to squeeze, I'd kill him; if I let him go, he'd probably kill me. I saw Isaac, one of the onlookers.

"*Caramba*, Isaac," I said. "I don't want to kill this cat." Isaac nodded to a couple of seamen and they broke it up.

The old Swede had had it and I was feeling flush, like after a rumble when you win. Isaac took me aside. "Piri, I think you are yellow," he said softly.

I felt cold all over. "What do you mean, yellow, you little bastard? Didn't I waste that chump?"

Isaac said just as softly as before, "I think you're yellow not because you didn't kill him but because you didn't *want* to kill him. You'll learn, boy, this is a hard

life for a black or brown man. I'm black, you're brown. Unless you're willing to kill at the exact moment you have to, you'll be a pussy bumper for the rest of your life. You got to have the heart not only to spare life but to take it. You can only spare it now, but maybe you'll learn. I don't mean you're yellow in heart, just in instinct."

I said, "If the time comes an' I gotta cool somebody for good, I'll do it, but it gotta be a good reason. I've learned everything I know and if I gotta be a killer to dig myself, I can learn that, too."

I learned more and more on my trips. Wherever I went—France, Italy, South America, England—it was the same. It was like Brew said: any language you talk, if you're black, you're black. My hate grew within me. *Dear God, dear God*, I thought, *I'm going to kill, I'm going to kill somebody. If I don't kill, I'm going to hurt one of these paddies*. I was scared of the whole fucking world. *Brew, baby, you were right!* I cried. *Where the fuck are you, baby? Damn, man, you're my ace, you're my one brother; Jesus, man, I hope you ain't dead. You ain't, are you, Brew?*

HARLEM

*Jesus, I thought, I finally shot some Mr. Charlies.
I shot 'em in my mind often enough.*

20. HOME, SWEET HARLEM

I came back to New York with a big hate for anything white.

The first place I went to was *El Barrio*. I had been away for seven months and I wanted to dig the inside of my long block. But I was so fucked-up inside of myself I changed my mind about making it to the block and went instead to see my aunt on 110th Street. She told me that my momma was very sick and in the hospital.

I went to the hospital and found a momma wasted by some killing germs. "Ay, Piri," she said to me, "I prayed to God for He to send you before I die." She was very weak and the doctors wouldn't let me stay long. So I sat at her bedside on a white chair and she held my hand and I read her Bible to her, and she made me promise to go home to Babylon with Poppa and the kids. When I left the hospital, I did a lotta walking around. I got back to my aunt's after midnight and lay across the bed in the extra room thinking about my momma, the little fat Moms I used to know.

A knock at the door about 3 a.m. brought back the realness of that hospital scene. "*Quién es?*" I heard my aunt ask. "Telegram," a voice answered. A few minutes

later my aunt walked quietly into my room holding a piece of yellow paper. I sat up and put on the light.

"Hijo," she said, and I actually heard her tears fall, "*tu madre se ha muerto.*"

"Yeah, I know, Momma died," I said flatly. Hurt can make a cat scream out or cool him into a *cara-palo* stick.

At the burial I hung back after everybody had made it to their cars. I wanted to say something so last and special to Momma, but all I could say was "*Bendito, Momma, I'm sorry.*"

I stood there staring down into that uncovered hole in the ground. In my mind the past words of the preacher turning out some fast words of "ashes to ashes and dust to dust." I looked deep into the hole in the ground and hurt-like stared at the individual flowers dropped on Momma's coffin-box by all who loved her. I couldn't remember Poppa's having dropped one too.

"Piri, are you coming?" It was *Tía's* voice.

I raised my hand in a "wait a minute" sign.

I heard Mom's voice . . . almost.

It said, "Your father has another woman."

"Naw, Moms, it ain't so. Man! Pops is only for you."

"Piri, *vente.*" It was *Tía's* voice.

I said good-bye with my eyes to the hole in the ground.

I stayed at home for a couple of months. I tried to make everything like the same as it was before. Except I had a burning, yearning desire to see what Poppa's other woman looked like.

I broke into Poppa's things. I remember the woman's name. I found her picture. I heard a warning from a brother or sister that I shouldn't go into Poppa's things. I didn't hear them. I just stared at the picture and her name was written there. I wondered if she knew Momma was dead. Her eyes seemed to say, "I am very sorry to hear of your mother's death." *You fucking pig*, I thought, but I just nodded and stared at her picture. She had light-

brown hair and green eyes, a thin nose, and a very white skin.

I walked out the house, the picture of Poppa's other woman held almost gently in my shirt pocket.

"Where are you going, Piri?" Sis's voice was somewhere behind me.

I walked down the road without answering. The night was swinging; a three-quarter moon lit up everything. I stopped and took out her picture and stared at it for a while. "She's pretty, all right, but she's shit compared to Momma," I said aloud. I tore up the picture in little shitty bits and flung them up and watched the shitty bits of her make it every which way.

I got home and climbed into bed, feeling glad that I had met her. Now, knowing what she looked like, I could hate her more clearly. I fell asleep on the good-o thought of little shitty bits of her falling to the sidewalk.

Suddenly, in my sleep-blurred mind, I heard cursing and I felt someone hitting me. I was being dragged out of bed. "Okay, where is it?" Poppa's voice came in clear.

"Where is what?" I asked. My hands were partly up. The light bulb on the ceiling went on.

"The picture! You know what I mean. Where's your wallet?" Poppa's face was mean-looking. He picked up my pants and pulled out my wallet. I made a grab for it.

"Hey, Pops, gimme my wallet," I said. "You ain't got no right to be going into my wallet."

I got a slap in the mouth, and wondered who had squealed on me.

"*Qué está pasando?*" said a girl's voice. It was my sister, Miriam. José and James were mumbling something from the next room. I jumped out of bed. "Pops, I ain't kidding, gimme my wallet." Blap, I got another shot in the mouth. I wondered how it'd feel to punch Poppa in the mouth.

He didn't find nothing in my wallet. He picked up my

pants and looked through them and still found nothing. "Where's that picture?" he said.

"I ain't got no picture." I smiled. "Besides, I don't know whose picture you're—"

"You little bastard, you know whose picture."

"What the fuck would I want that old bag's picture for?"

Splat, I got another shot in the mouth. I really hated that bitch now and, Pops or no Pops, I was gonna hit him. I lifted closed fists.

Sis saw it and jumped in, crying, "Please, stop, Poppy! Piri! Please . . ."

I saw right there in Sis's good-o-moms, and I relaxed my fists. "Sure, Sis," I said, "I ain't gonna—"

"Where's that picture?" Poppa said again. He sure was lost on that kick.

"Goddamnit," I exploded, "I ain't got no picture! If you don't believe me, kill me. Dammit, I wouldn't touch that fuckin' paddy bitch with a ten-foot dick."

Poppa looked at me and just stood there, his fists clenching. I felt higher and higher. "Please, *por Dios*," my sister pleaded.

"If he lays a hand on me again, I'm gonna off him," I said to my fists, and all of a sudden he was gone, just like that. I was shaking all over and Sis was crying. I couldn't. Tears are only for when you feel something. I felt dead. "Go to bed, Sis," I told her, "nuttin's gonna happen. I'm leavin' this fuckin' house and he can shove her up his ass. Come on honey, go to bed."

I didn't sleep that night, and in the morning a hard silence hung over the house. I wanted to get back at Poppa somehow. I found my chance. James was talking about walking me to the railroad station and I answered him in a southern drawl, "Why, sho' man, if'n yuh sho' 'nuff willin', you can sho' 'nuff go wif me all."

"Stop that goddamn way of talking," Poppa shouted.

"Why sho', Pops," I said, "if y'all doan' like the way Ah's speakin', I reckon Ah could cut it out."

That did it. The next second Pops was on me. He grabbed me with both his arms and lifted me off my feet. "Damn you, I'll teach you," he yelled. "I'm throwing you out of this house and you come back no more. Talking like you came from some goddamned cotton field."

"Is that where you came from, Pops?" I teased him. "Ain't that what bugs you? Ain't that what bugs the hell out of you, Mistuh Blanco in natural black-face? Let me go, Pops, or I'll put my knee in your phony white balls."

Pops dropped me and swung out. I felt his hard fist on my face and the cutting edge of his ring. My head rocked. I felt my face and the blood on it, and everything got red with hate. I ran to the kitchen 'cause I didn't want to hit Pops; I wanted to kill him. "Where's a knife? Dammit. Where's a knife?" I screamed.

Sis was hysterical, José was stone-quiet and James was standing there white with fright. I grabbed a kitchen knife and met Pops running into the kitchen with a baseball bat, and measured.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Sis screamed, and jumped in between us. Her voice was way out. "Stop it, do you hear? I'm going crazy and you're the cause of it. Oh God! Mommie, what's gonna happen to us?"

I watched the tears roll down my sister's face and Pops looked at his shaken princess. It took the fight out of us; only the "never forgetting" remained. I just packed my stuff and said good-bye to Sis and James and José. I didn't even look at Pops because he wasn't there for me. I just said a low, "Bye, Poppa." It was the most I could do.

21. HUNG DOWN

I made it back to Harlem after that, back to hallways, rooftops, and *amigos'* pads—and real back to drugs.

Heroin does a lot for one—and it's all bad. It becomes your whole life once you allow it to sink its white teeth in your blood stream. I never figured on getting hooked all the way. I was only gonna play it for a Pepsi-Cola kick. Only was gonna use it like every seven days, that is until the day I woke up and dug that I was using it seven times a day instead. I had jumped from being a careful snorter, content to take my kicks of sniffing through my nose, to a not-so-careful skin-popper, and now was full-grown careless mainliner.

At first it was like all right, because I had some bread going for me, but them few hundred bucks melted real fast and all I had was a growing habit. I still had some clothes and a wrist watch but they went the same way the money went. I got a job for a while, but forty bucks or so weren't enough and the more I used, the more I needed.

Yet there is something about dogie—heroin—it's a super-duper tranquilizer. All your troubles become a bunch of bleary blurred memories when you're in a nod of your own special dimension. And it was only when my messed-up system became a screaming want for the

next fix did I really know just how short an escape from reality it really brought. The shivering, nose-running, crawling damp, ice-cold skin it produced were just the next worst step of—like my guts were gonna blow up and muscles in my body becoming so tight I could almost hear them snapping.

I could make a choice of stealing or pushing to support my new love. I picked pushing. I walked up and down the streets looking for a guy named Turkey. He'd earned his name from having kicked the habit cold-turkey a few times running in the Tombs City Prison. I finally ran into him in the poolroom on 106th Street. I made a sign for him to come outside. He eased out onto the sidewalk and with his eyes asked me, "How much stuff ya want?"

"I wanna push stuff," I whispered.

"Ya mean ya wanna buy a piece and push it for yourself?"

I shook my head no. "I can't, Turkey, I ain't got the bread. Let me push for you and give me my cut in stuff."

Turkey rubbed his nose like giving me a lot of thought. "Wait for me in front of the school on 105th Street," he finally said. I walked away from him feeling saved or something.

About a half hour later, Turkey walked up to me and in the darkness of the schoolyard pushed a packet gently into my hand. "There's twenty-five bags of good stuff here. For every five bags you push at three bucks apiece, you cop one bag for yourself. You can get rid of twenty bags by *mañana*. Bring me sixty bucks back and you can pick up some more. If you get a hold of some cat that is strung out and you can hook him for more on a bag, the difference is yours." I shook my head up in yes-time.

"If you don't blow your profit, you can put enough bread away to get a piece for yourself and then make enough for money and your veins."

I started to walk and he put a hand on my elbow and

said in a real friendly voice, "I'm trusting you, baby; if you blow this stuff on yourself, you're in trouble. Play it cool and I'll trust you much more."

I was back to the next *mañana* with Turkey's sixty bucks and he trusted me much more.

In the months that followed, I was selling nice. I was supporting a habit that ran to about fifteen bucks a day. I shot up every day and I was pleased in a funny way that my arm wasn't tracked up like a trolley-car run. I had cultivated a crater and always shot through the same hole. It sure looked awful, though. The word that I had good stuff went around and I had cats looking for me. A lot of my sales weren't for cash. I took clothes, jewelry, radios, or you name it. I'd buy their things for about a tenth of what it was worth and sell it to a fence up Jackson Avenue in the Bronx for a nice profit. He always paid off in cash and always said the same greedy words, "I'll take all you can bring." You had to be a lot harder to be a pusher; you couldn't have a soft heart, like "no dough, no glow."

Everything was going as good as could be expected. I had a little furnished apartment, and some of us would shoot up and dig red-cloud sounds of whatever our favorite music happened to be. Or we'd make it to a flick, and have a ball looking at whatever was showing or just nodding through the whole scene.

Everything was going as good as could be expected, till the panic hit. There was a short go of heroin on account of some big wheeler-dealer with millions of dollars' worth of the stuff had gotten himself busted and this caused a bad shortage. All the little pushers like myself were either saving the stuff we had for ourselves or were selling it for four times the selling price in the hope that the panic would soon be over and we'd be far ahead with a big profit. What happened was that the panic hung around for weeks and them that had sold for a big profit and

users were now paying double the profit they had made. That is, if they could get. Everybody was buying and nobody was selling except the gyps, and they were mixing milk sugar with quinine and selling this ca-ca for the real thing. But not too many got away with this shit kick. They got fixed up one way or the other. And it wasn't a nice way. Some got free O.D.'s, others just got away with a broken arm or leg. Like it ain't nice to take advantage of people's suffering.

By the time the panic was over, I was in as bad shape as before pushing. I think I was in a worse-off mess. I was broke, had no stuff, and the oodles I had used up didn't belong to me. Turkey wasn't gonna trust me no longer. I let him know where I was at. He didn't say much; he just smiled and said, "Like bring me my money in so many days or *adiós amigo*." I felt sick and walked away thinking maybe I could find somebody to give me a *cura*.

I walked down the streets and looked in through the window of the automatic laundry on Madison Avenue between 103th and 104th streets. Trina was washing some clothes in the machines. I walked in and sat there waiting for her, and my God, I was sick, sick—so goddamned sick. My back was twisted up with pain and I couldn't keep the water out of my eyes and nose.

"What's wrong, Piri?"

"I don't feel so good. I think I got *la monga*."

"Bueno, we'll get some medicine from the *botica*."

Jesus, I thought, what I need is a fix, and Trina doesn't know this, or does she? How many times can you hustle money from your girl and she doesn't get an idea of what's happening? Maybe she doesn't want to know.

"Look, Trina, I'll see you later."

"But aren't you going to wait for me?"

"I can't. I'd better go see a doctor." *I'd better go see my connection.*

"I'll see you."

And I walked out of that laundry like if death was there. I walked down toward 104th Street and Lexington Avenue and I saw Waneko.

"Hey Waneko, hey man, wait up."

Waneko waited and I crossed the street. He saw me like I was and said, "What's happening?"

"I'm sick, man."

"Yeah, you've been looking like real shit warmed over for a couple of days."

"Yeah, that *tecatá's* got to me. Jesus Christ, man, I'm hooked and I've been trying to get off but I can't, like if I'm in love with this bitch."

I sniffed and thought how I wasn't gonna get hooked. How I was gonna control it. Why the hell did I have to start playing with stuff? Who wants to be a man at that rate? Hell! All for the feeling of belonging, for the price of being called "one of us." Isn't there a better way to make the scene and be accepted on the street without having to go through hell?

I wiped my nose. The water kept oozing out and my eyes were blurred. My guts were getting wilder all the damn time.

"Man, Waneko, I gotta quit. I just gotta quit."

"Look, man, don't be a jerk and try to kick the habit all at once."

My mind went back and his voice blended into the background of my thoughts. I thought of all the hustling I had gone through for the sake of getting drugs, selling pot, pushing stuff, beating my girl for money. Man, I was sick all over, inside and outside.

"Like all you gotta do is get off the habit a little at the time. Get a piece of stuff and break it up. Each time take less and less and bang, you've kicked, cause trying to kick it cold-turkey is a bitch. Do it this way and—"

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"I'm gonna try it, but I gotta get some bread so I can cop some stuff. You got anything?"

"Yeah."

"How about it?" I was trying to act cool. I wanted the stuff bad, but no matter how hard I fought it, everything in me was crying out for that shit's personal attention.

Waneko's hand went into his pocket and I dug the stuff in his hand. I felt my throat blend in and out with the yen. The taste that takes place even before you get the junk into your system. All of a sudden, I felt like nothing mattered, like if all the promises in the world didn't mean a damn, like all that mattered was that the stuff is there, the needle is there, the yen is there, and your veins have always been there.

I went up to the roof of number 109, running up those stairs like God was on that roof, like everything would be lost if I didn't get up there on time. I felt the night air and my eyes made out the shadows of others like me. Cats I knew and yet never really seen before. Their forms made word noises.

"Got any shit, Piri?"

"Yeah, but I need it all, man. I've been fighting a fever. I'd really like to split with you all, but I'm really strung out like I'm swingin' between hell and the street."

"Yeah, baby, we understand, it's okay."

But I knew they didn't really understand. But it's got to be okay; if it was them, it would be the same.

A little later I felt well, like normal, I was looking at the Triborough Bridge and all its lights and thinking about when I was a little kid and how I used to stand up there on the roof and make believe and there I was, almost twenty years old, and I was still going to that roof and still making believe.

I looked toward Madison Avenue and thought of how close it was to Christmas. I thought about shipping out as soon as I could.

"Funny," I said half aloud, "it's like I've been kinda hanging around waiting for Brew to show up. Hope that Negro's okay."

I felt good about something else—me and Trina was making a steady scene; we really dug each other. My eyes crossed Park Avenue and got nearer Trina's house. I thought about being hung up on *tecata* and Trina kind of noticing that I was acting way out. *Coño*, like the time at the flick. I was goofing so bad, I couldn't hold my head up and just kept going into my nod.

"*Qué te pasa, Piri?*" she asked.

"Nothing, girl, just sleepy—tha's all."

I saw Trina come out and stand on the stoop. I felt mad at me for not being satisfied to just snort or a "just once in a while skin-pop." Naw, I hadda be hitting the main vein.

Man, a thought jumped into my mind, *mainline is the best time*. I pushed that thought outta my mind, except for the part of the way out feeling when that good-o smack was making it with you, that nothing in the whole *mundo* world made no difference, nothing—neither pad-dies nor Poppa and strange other people.

My mind fell back on my pushing stuff to keep my veins happy, and how I was on a certain cat's shit list for taking some stuff from him to sell, and instead, I shot up for as long as it lasted. I mean, like down people know a cat can't help it when *embalao*, like strung out every which way when you need it—that's it, you just need it. But that's a bad bit, cause them people that give you the stuff to push gotta have some kind of trust in you. Even a junkie gotta have some kind of dependable, he gotta have some kinda word.

I sat down on the edge of the roof ledge. My mind re-

fused to get off its kick of reminiscing. Man, like how many times some cat's come up to me with his old man's watch or sister's coat and swap for a three-cent bag. Heh, a three-cent bag—like a grain of rice crushed to powder, that's how much it is for a cost of three dollars, and you couldn't beat down that hell-like look as the begging took place in exchange for that super-tranquilizing ca-ca powder. I sniffed back a tear that came out of my nose. And how about the time I plowed through that falling snow with no pride at all in my Buster Brown shoes—like brown on top and busted on the bottoms—knowing without a doubt in the world that the only thing that would get me warm again so I could care about being cold was the connecting—the blending of my vein's blood and dogie drug.

Shit, man, how far can pride go down? I knew that all the help in the world could get that stuff out of my system, but only some kind of god would be able to get it out of my swinging soul and mind. What a sick mudder scene! If you didn't get gyped outta your stuff, you'd get beat on some weak, cut-down shit. If you didn't get dead on an overdose, you'd get deader on a long strung-out kick. Everything in the world depended on heroin. You'd go to bed thinking about stuff and wake up in the morning thinking about it. Love and life took second place to it and nothing mattered except where, and how soon. It was like my whole puking system had copped a mind bigger than the one in my head.

I walked toward the roof landing. I was thinking. I was gonna kick for good. "I can do it. I swear ta God and the Virgin. Gonna get me li'l shit and cut down good. *I ain't no fuckin' junkie.*"

I went looking for Waneko. I found him in *El Viejo's* candy store. I put my want to him in fast words.

"Help me kick, man?" It was a question. Waneko knew

how it was. Even though he was pushing now, he wasn't using, but he'd been through that kicking road *mucho* times. Waneko nodded, "Sure, *panín*—sure I will." We walked into Waneko's place. He explained to his moms what was shaking. She smiled nice-like and said everything was gonna be all right. Waneko followed that assurance up with, "Moms helps most of the cats that want to kick and even some of the chicks. She should be some kind of church worker or something." He laughed. I tried a weak smile.

They put me in a room that just had a bed and chair and a window that had a metal gate across it to keep the crooks out and kicking junkies in. I laid down, and after a while Waneko brought in a small radio so I could dig some music, to take my mind off what was coming. Both he and I knew that the li'l taste of stuff I had shot up on the roof a while ago was gonna wear off and then World War III was gonna break out inside of me. Billie was wailing some sad song. I wailed along with her in a soft hum. Then some kinda time started to go by and my system was better than a clock. And then Judgment Day set in . . .

Man, talk about wantin' to die—everything started off as it should. First like always, the uncomfortable feeling as you knew your system wanted its baby bottle. And nose running ever so gently at first and the slow kind of pain building up not so gently. I tried hard to listen to some wailin' on the radio, but all I could hear was my own. I got up and went to the door. It was locked from the outside. "Hey, Waneko, open the door," I yelled.

"*Qué es?*"

"I feel real bad, like in bad, man."

"Man, lay down, you ain't been in there long enough to work up any kind of sweat. I'll tell you when, and only then I'll give you a li'l taste to ease you off. So cool it, *panín*."

I don't know how many hours ran crawling by. I just knew I couldn't make it. *But I hadda. I just hadda.*

"Lemme out, Waneko—lemme out, you mother-fucker." I swam to the door and hit at it.

"Waneko is not home right now." It was Waneko's mom.

"Let me out, *señora*. I kicked already."

"He said not to let you come out until he comes back, *hijo*."

"Did he leave something for me?" My voice sounded like tears. I went back to the bed and just rolled and moaned all alone.

I don't know how many hours ran crawling by. It was a lot of them. At one time I heard the lock being taken off the door and heard it fall from some one's hand. I felt Waneko's mom's voice—I felt her cool hand on my face and felt her wipe my cold sweating face. I heard sounds of comfort coming from her.

"*No te apures, hijo*, you weel soon be fine."

I tried to get up and make it, but she was faster. I felt the iron gates on the window. I shook them. I turned and flopped back on the bed. I was shaking. I was in bad pain. I was cold and I couldn't stop my snots from flowing. I was all in cramps and my guts wouldn't obey me. My eyes were overflowing real fast.

"Lemme out, Waneko—lemme out, you mother-fucker." Shit, I was like screaming out of veins.

Nobody answered and I just lay there and moaned and groaned all alone and turned that mattress into one big soaking mopful of my sweat.

I don't know how many hours went crawling by. Millions maybe. And then a real scared thought hit me. Waneko wasn't coming back. He was gonna let me make it—cold-turkey—*a la canona*. I kept trembling and my whole swinging soul full of pain would make my body lurch up and tie itself up into one big knot and then ease

itself almost straight and then retie itself. I felt like a puke coming afar. I thought, didn't I puke before? I felt it come out of my mouth like a green river of yellow-blue bile. I couldn't control nothing, and all the strength I had was enough just to turn my head away. I think I made some soft ca-ca on myself. I think I made some hard ones too.

Sometimes I think I heard Waneko telling me, "It's almost over, baby, it's almost over—we got it beat." But I couldn't answer. I'd just hold myself together with my arms holding me tight and rockaby baby myself to some kind of vague comfort. In a dream, I'd eat mountains and mountains of sweet, sweet candy. I opened my eyes and Waneko had me sitting in a chair and I saw Moms cleaning the toilet I had made out of the room—and then I was back in the bed. I still had all the pain, all the cramps. I still had the whole bad bit, but I knew I was gonna make it. I rocked myself to and fro.

I don't know how many hours ran crawling by. Jillions maybe. At last the pain cut itself down. I felt all dried out. Waneko came into the room and rubbed my body down, like trying to work all the knots to straighten out. Waneko and his moms kept me with them for a week or so putting me into shape with hot pigeon soup, liquids, and later heavier stuff like I mean, rice and beans. They were great, Waneko and Moms. My body was kicked free from H—gone was dogie. They said it takes seventy or so hours to kick a habit. I think it seemed like seventy years. Now all I had to do was kick it outta my mind.

I left Waneko's house after really thanking them from way down. I hit the street thinking, "Wow, dying is easier than this has been. Never—never—*nunca más*."

22. REAL

JESSE JAMESES

I was standing in front of the *cuchifrito* restaurant on 103rd Street, a couple of months later. I had gotten a job there peeling grease off dirty dishes, pots, and pans. Pay was small, but I was paying my rent and eating up a storm. I was really feeling good, feeling clean. I was clean. There was nothing left of the habit, except the temptation, and I was fighting the hell outta that. I dug Li'l Louie coming in through the side door of the *cuchifrito* joint and I waved to him. He walked toward me like he was afraid I was gonna hit on him for some coin for a fix. I nodded and laughed:

"Naw, babee, I'm clean, like nothing for the last two months."

"Damn, Piri, like I'm glad, baby, like you don't need that shit to move on. *Chevere*." Louie's face got hung up on a big grin.

"Buying some *cuchifritos*?"

"Naw, just some straights." He walked over to the cigarette machine and got some smokes. He offered me one and while we smoked he said:

"Come on over to my pad when you get off from work."

"How'd you know I worked here? I ain't seen you for a while, least not since I got this job."