

Dope Sick



MY ARM WAS HURTING BAD. Real bad. The bone could have been broken. I couldn't tell. I just knew it was hurting and swollen. I felt like just taking the gun out and throwing it away and giving up so I could get the mess over with. I opened my mouth so I wouldn't make so much noise when I breathed. Down the street I saw the patrol car was still at the corner. He had his lights flashing. I didn't know if he'd seen which way I was running or not. I knew I was too tired to keep running much more.

I started to lift my arm to look at my watch and

the whole arm just lit up with pain. The bone had to be broken. I figured it was two or three o'clock in the morning. Skeeter had called me just past midnight and told me they got Rico. I knew Rico was going to punk out. In a way I was glad they got him, but I knew he was going to blame everything on me.

I was in the shadows in a shop doorway and I knew I couldn't stay there much longer. I had to lie down or sit down or something. Had to get my head together. There was an old building across the street, and it looked like the front door was open. Maybe some juiceheads was in there. I didn't know, but I couldn't stay on the street much more. My arm was hurting too bad, and if that cop had really seen it was me, there would be more cops coming soon.

I felt like crying, like just running down the street and letting them shoot me—anything and everything at the same time. I was messed up big-time and I knew it.

I saw two women walk over to the police car.

Probably hookers out doing their stroll. The cop in the car was talking to them and then he got out and went around the back of the car. I looked to see if he had his gun in his hand. From where I was in the doorway I couldn't see too clear. He might have. I could feel my heart beating fast and my right hand was shaking in my pocket. The cop and the two women walked a little way down the street, and he was up on his toes, trying to look into one of the building windows. I took a deep breath and moved from the doorway to behind a parked car. The street wasn't big and half the buildings didn't have nobody living in them, so it was dark except for the streetlight, and that wasn't working right. Nothing wasn't working right in my life.

I got across the street and into the doorway of the building I had been scoping. Looking down the street, I saw the cop and the two women were still together. The sound of another siren scared me. I couldn't tell where it was coming from. Keeping my eyes on the cop down the street, I pushed on the door behind me with my foot. It opened and I

eased into the house.

The smell was terrible. Like somebody had been using it as a piss hole. It was dark except for the light from the cracked-open door. I saw some steps and started thinking about the roof. If I got to the roof, I could come down in another building, maybe even on another block. My left arm was pretty stiff and I didn't want to move it too much. I let go of the Nine I had been carrying since I left my house and fished around in my pockets for some matches. When I found some, I was scared to light them. Maybe the cop had seen me come into the building. Maybe he was just waiting outside for some backup before he came busting in the door.

I put the matches in the pocket with the Nine and started up the steps, walking close to the wall so they wouldn't creak too much.

The smell wasn't no better, but it changed a little as I got near the second floor. It was just that musty smell that old buildings have sometimes. I smelled some vinegar too, so I thought there might have been some dopeheads shooting

up in one of the rooms.

I stopped and lit a match, holding the book in my left hand and striking the match with my right. There was garbage on the floor and some piles of old plaster. I seen where the next steps was and started for them. I was being quiet because I didn't want to run into no dopehead or crazy homeless dude.

When I got to the third floor, I heard a sound. It was people talking. I held my breath, trying to figure out if it was somebody who had come in after me or somebody already in the building. My heart was pumping big-time, a mile a minute, and I was feeling sick to my stomach as I leaned against the wall.

Maybe there was a way to figure out where the sound was coming from, but I didn't have that way in me. I was too scared to think good. I knew that if the sound was in the building, it wasn't no cops, so I started up the stairs again. Halfway up the next flight I saw a light coming from under one of the doors. Then I heard the sound again

and knew somebody had a television on.

If it was a homeless guy, it would be okay, unless he was crazy and had a knife or an axe or something. If I had to shoot him, the cops might hear it. If it was a dooper it would be better. A dooper might just be on a nod and might not even wake up.

When I got to the landing, I saw the open door and heard the sound from the television. Somebody talking about how to get some CDs for only \$9.99. I slipped past the door and up the last flight to the roof door. I lit another match and saw crack vials and empty Baggies on the landing. I tried to turn the knob on the door leading to the roof, but it didn't move. I got long legs, so I put my back against the door and my foot against the post and pushed hard. Nothing. It didn't move.

For a moment I went crazy inside. I was in the building and couldn't get out to the roof. If anything went down, I knew I'd be trapped.

Calm down, man. Calm down. I tried to talk myself down. *Breathe slow. Breathe slow and get yourself together.* My mouth was dry, but I could feel

the cold sweat dripping down my side. My arm hurt real bad. What was the use of keeping on running? If I got infected and had to go to the hospital, they would have me. The bullet was still in my arm and they would just call the police. I imagined being handcuffed to a hospital bed and the cops bringing Rico in to identify me.

Yeah, that's him, I imagined Rico saying. *That's Lil J. He the one who shot the police officer.*

My eyes were closed and I opened them. Had to get out my head and get into the now. Had to think. Maybe there was a fire escape. If I could hit a fire escape, I could still make the roof.

I went down the stairs quick, but still near the banister so I wouldn't make too much noise. If there was a dooper in the apartment, he would know how to get out in a hurry. My hands were sweaty and I wiped them off on my pants leg. Had to look cool. Had to look confident.

I took a deep breath outside the door, then pushed it open quick.

It was a long room with a small television on a

table in the corner. There was a dim light on the wall with one of those little yellow lampshades. About six feet in front of the television there was a chair and I could see the back of a dude's head. He could have been on a nod, or just sleeping. He wasn't moving.

I looked around to see what he was about.

"Stay where you are!"

I stopped, realized the Nine was still in my jacket pocket, and took it out. I couldn't see any mirrors so I didn't know if he was seeing me or not. I knew I didn't want to have to shoot this sucker and get the cops pouring into the place, and with my left arm messed up I knew I just couldn't take him out if he had any heart.

"Who you, man?" I asked.

"Kelly," he said.

"Yo, I'm sorry I busted in on you," I said. "Some dudes said I did them wrong and they was chasing me. How I get to the roof?"

The guy didn't turn or nothing, just kept watching the television. I couldn't see his face, but his

voice was young. He could have been just a little older than me, maybe eighteen or nineteen.

“There’s a chair over there,” he said. “Why don’t you put your piece away and sit down.”

“Man, I ain’t got all day,” I said, trying to get some bone in my voice. “The fire escape go to the roof?”

“You want to see yourself on television?”

I looked at the windows. There were shades over them and I figured maybe nobody could see the light from outside. I went over and looked out. There was a fire escape. I put my Nine back in my jacket and tried to lift the window.

“It’s nailed shut,” the guy said. “People don’t be leaving their windows open in this neighborhood. You don’t know that?”

“Yo, man, what you say your name was?”

“Kelly.”

“Well, look, Kelly or Smelly or whatever your name is—I ain’t nobody to be playing with,” I said. “I’m the one with the Nine pointing at your head.”

“Yeah, and you the one stuck in this building

looking for a way out, ain't you?"

Kelly talked street, but I wasn't sure. Something about him wasn't from the 'hood. I wanted to go over to him and put the Nine against his neck, but for some reason I didn't think it was going to bother him. The sucker might have been crazy.

"You know a way out?" I asked.

"Why don't you cop a squat and check yourself out on the tube," Kelly said. He was looking at the television.

I looked at the television and saw the street below. It looked empty.

"You got the television hooked up to security cameras?" I asked.

"No."

"Then how come . . . ?" On the television there was a person moving across the street, wearing a dark jacket. He had one hand up by his side and the other in his jacket pocket. It was me.

"What is this, a movie or something?"

"Yeah. I guess it's a movie. What part you want to see next?"

“You ain’t got nothing better to do with your ass than take pictures of people in the street and watch them?” I asked.

“What’s your name?” Kelly asked.

“Roger,” I said. “Roger Jones.”

“Yeah, then why they calling you ‘Lil J’ on television?”

“That was on the news?”

“They said you popped a cap in a cop.”

“They said he died?”

Kelly pointed the remote toward the screen and clicked it twice. A white guy with blond hair came on.

In the news today: Yet another officer shot in the line of duty. Thirty-three-year-old Anthony Gaffione was shot on Harlem’s east side during an undercover drug bust in what police officials identify as “drug alley.” Gaffione, a seven-year veteran, is reported in critical condition at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital,

*where he spent three hours in surgery
this afternoon. One suspect, nineteen-
year-old Rico Brown, was captured
in the Bronx. The shooter, identified
as seventeen-year-old Jeremy Dance,
known as 'Lil J,' is still being sought.
In Basra, Iraq, yesterday . . .*

Kelly clicked the remote and the television was showing the street again.

“I didn’t do the shooting,” I said.

“What happened?” Kelly asked.

“What difference do it make?” I said. “If he dies and they get me, I am never getting out of jail. If he doesn’t die and they get me, I still am never getting out of jail. My life is just flushed, man.”

“If you could do it all over again, and change something, what would it be?” Kelly asked.

“Shut up with that bullshit!” I said.

He shut up and neither of us spoke for a while. On the television the picture of me standing in the doorway, looking down the street, played over and

over again. I didn't know how Kelly had taken it, but it was depressing to see. I looked scared and I was holding my left arm folded up high by my side. I hadn't realized I was doing that. You could see it was hurt and something was wrong with the way I was looking around. Maybe that was why the cop in the patrol car had pulled me over. Maybe he hadn't recognized me.

I went over and looked out the window. There was nothing right down front, but there were at least two police cars near the corner and some more flashing lights from other cars parked around the corner reflected off the windows of the buildings across the street. It was October and getting kind of cold, and the cops had their hands in their pockets. I pulled down the shade. Every cop in New York was going to be looking for me. They would have their guns out too.

“Hey, Kelly, you live here?” I asked.

“Sometimes.”

“Look, you seem like you okay,” I said. “I didn't shoot that cop. Rico shot him. Square business.”

You know a way out of this building?”

“Ain’t no use running,” Kelly came back. “Where you going to go?”

“I’ll take my chances if I can get to the roof,” I said. “See what happens from there.”

“You want to see what happens?” Kelly reached for the remote again. He pointed it at the television, and now the picture showed the street again, but this time the street was full of police cars.

I ran to the window and looked down. Nothing.

“It’s on fast forward,” Kelly said. “It’s what’s going to happen.”

“Yo, what kind of spooky crap is this?”

“You want to see what’s going to happen?” Kelly asked. “It don’t make me no never mind. You don’t want to see, it’s okay.”

I didn’t say nothing, just nodded toward the television. The chair that Kelly had told me to sit in was wood, and one of the legs was a little wobbly. I rubbed my left arm as the image of the street below, full of cops and police cars, played over the set.

Some of the police had on SWAT suits, complete

with helmets and rifles. Then I came on the screen. Somehow I had made it to the roof. I saw me looking over the side. Then there was an image of a SWAT team coming up the stairs. Then there was me again. I was sitting against the low brick wall at the edge of the roof. Then the SWAT team had reached the roof landing. And then I was lifting the Nine, but my eyes were closed, there were tears running down my face, and I was holding the Nine against my own head.

“Stop it!”

Kelly clicked it off quick. “You okay, man?” he asked.

“No.” I was shaking.

“So if you could take back one thing you did,” Kelly asked, “what would it be?”

“Take back the day that cop was shot,” I said. “Just that one day.”

Kelly turned and shot a quick glance in my direction. Then he clicked the remote again.



THE DUDE CLICKED THE REMOTE, and all of a sudden I was seeing myself on the screen. It was like I was in my own head again, looking out of my own eyes at the world. It was weird, but like I couldn't turn away because it was me all over again, me outside of me digging on what was going on in my head. I seen the door to my room at home and my moms looking in and talking to me.

“Lil J, you 'wake?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you go down to the clinic for me?”

“What time is it?”

“When it opens.”

“What time is it?”

“I don’t know.”

I turned and looked at the small red alarm clock on the dresser. Seven o’clock. I swung my legs over the side of the pull-out bed and sat up. I put my elbows on my knees and rested my head in my hands.

“Lil J, can you go for me?” Mama’s voice was flat, raspy.

“Yeah, Ma.” My mouth felt as if it was lined with dirty cotton. It was Wednesday, and I was supposed to go downtown with Maurice to look for a job.

I heard water running in the kitchen and hoped Mama had put on her housecoat. She was getting careless about things like that and I didn’t like it. It was worrisome. What I wanted to do was to get some money together and send her down to Grandma Lois in Curry, North Carolina. The last time she had been down there, she came back looking good and feeling good for the first time.

Grandma Lois didn't allow any drinking, and Curry was such a two-stick town, you couldn't get anything else.

I got up and went out to the bathroom. Mama had her housecoat on. She had already put the water on and was shaking coffee from the can into the percolator. She looked at me as I went through the kitchen.

"What you doing today?" she asked.

"Maurice heard about jobs coming up at Home Depot," I said. "We going down there and check it out."

Mama grunted in reply.

I sat on the toilet. I liked to see my black thighs against the white porcelain. It was the one thing that Mama did that was cool, was to keep the bathroom clean. Other than that she was always too sick, or too drunk, to take care of any kind of business. When I was small and we were living on 147th Street, she used to tell me how her main chore as a kid was keeping the bathroom clean.

"Your grandma Lois used to say, 'Girl, that

bathroom so clean, I need to ask your permission to use it! ””

Grandma Lois had her thing together. It was a church kind of thing, but she had a lot of pride, and it hurt her to see Mom, her only daughter, get knocked around. When Grandma Lois had the chance to go down to Curry, she thought hard and long about leaving Arlena, but in the end she knew she wasn't doing her any good in Harlem, so she left, hoping to build up something down in North Carolina that would make Mom want to join her.

I washed up and thought about what I would tell the people down at Home Depot. First thing I would have to do is lie about my age. I would say I was nineteen so they wouldn't ask me nothing about why I wasn't in school. I had my fake GED in a plastic sleeve along with my Social Security card. I thought about saying that I'd taken some time off after high school because I was thinking about joining the army, but then I thought that probably wouldn't work.

Home Depot was the joint. I knew if I could

cop a job with them, I could get my thing together. Maybe I would find another place for me and Mama or even convince her to go down to North Carolina. I knew she didn't want to go down with nothing in her pockets.

"I don't want nobody feeling sorry for me," she said. "They can think what they want, but I don't want to be explaining nothing to nobody."

I could dig that. If you had some money in your pocket, you could walk on your own side of the street and let people walk on they side. If it went down correct, I could send her some money every week and then she wouldn't have to ask for nothing. That's what life was about, being able to take care of your own business.

"The clinic opens at eight thirty," Mama said. She was sitting at the table, making a circle with her fingers around the flowered coffee cup. She had nice fingers, long and slender. If she had had her nails done, they would've looked good.

"You got pains in your stomach again?"

"It's just nervous," she said. "You look like you

going to a funeral in that white shirt. Is that new?"

"Yeah," I answered. "Told you I got a job interview."

"Well, you should get it, as fine as you looking today," Mama said. She had a smear of something white on her cheek.

"You coughing again?"

"You a doctor now?" she answered, smiling.

"Doctor Dance," I answered. "Yo, that's hip."

The coffee she made was way too weak. I needed something strong in the morning.

"Where your prescription?" I asked.

"It's on the refrigerator, in the bowl," she said. "When you coming home?"

"Depends on how long the interview takes," I said. "They ain't in a hurry, 'cause they got their job already."

Mama said she really needed the medicine because she had run out, and I said I would be home as soon as I could.

The prescription was for painkillers. I went into the bathroom and looked through Mama's

little lineup of plastic containers. I thought I had seen some of the pills she was looking for and found them. I opened the childproof container and dumped the pile out in my hand. There were eight pills left. I put four in my pocket and took the others out to Mama.

“Where were these?” she asked.

“On the second shelf,” I said.

I watched her take two pills with coffee and put two back in the container for later.

I was supposed to meet Maurice on 125th Street and St. Nicholas. We were thinking on going over to the Home Depot interview together. I wanted both of us to get jobs, but I still hoped that Maurice didn't look too much better than me.

I was glad I had spent the money for a new shirt even though it had left me with less than three dollars.

Maurice was five nine, two inches shorter than me, but broad. We had talked about going into the army together and maybe going to Iraq.

“You don't hear nothing much about guys going

to Iraq unless they get killed,” Maurice said. “You ever notice that? You hear about guys being on trial or guys being blown up, but you don’t hear anything about guys fighting their way out of a trap or taking a hill or anything like that.”

“It ain’t that kind of war,” I had said.

In the end we had both decided not to join up. I didn’t mention nothing about how maybe the army wouldn’t take me because of what had happened down in Texas. I didn’t want Maurice to know about that.

We had checked each other out and said we was looking good, and then we had walked over to where they were having the interviews.

“Man, please don’t tell me that’s the line for the job interviews,” Maurice said, looking down the block. “Just don’t tell me that.”

It was the line. It stretched a full half block down from the store, and more people were coming every moment.

“How many jobs they got?” I asked.

“They said in the paper they had six openings.”

Maurice said. “My mother said they probably had about ten or twelve, but this is stupid. Look, that dude even got his dog with him.”

I felt sick. I had really been hoping for the job. I looked over the line and knew it wasn’t going to happen. There were young men, old men, women, Spanish, whites—everybody was out looking for some kind of work.

“I can’t cut this,” I said to Maurice. “I’ll come back later.”

“I’m gonna hang.” Maurice shrugged. “I don’t have nothing better to do.”

I told Maurice I was going to get Mama’s prescription filled and would be back later to see how the line looked. I remembered that Rico had called me last night and asked me if I wanted to run some work. I had said no, putting all my hopes on the Home Depot gig, but that looked like a bust. I hoped I had some minutes on my cell, and called Rico.

“Yo, man, that thing still going?” I asked when Rico answered.

“Yeah, it’s still on,” Rico said. “Where you at?”

“A Hundred and Twenty-fifth and St. Nicholas, outside the church.”

“Okay, I’ll be there in ten minutes. Hang loose.”

I knew that Rico was a stone viper, but sometimes he came up with some crazy money. He was steady dealing weed, Girl, or anything else he could get his hands on. He also had a hundred-dollar-a-day jones he had to support.

I went down the street to a little candy store and bought a bottle of soda. I took two of the pain killers I had brought along and tried to think what Rico sounded like on the phone. If Rico was right, far enough away from his first hit of the day to have his head straight but not pushing so close to the next hit that he would be dope sick, everything would be cool. I had seen Rico dope sick a bunch of times, licking his lips, acting all jumpy, his eyes darting around as if he was a wolf looking for some sick animal to jump on.

Rico wasn’t somebody you could rely on and he had messed me up before. But just the way Rico

got dope sick, the way he turned into something that wasn't good to see, I was getting broke sick. I was tired of walking the streets with nothing in my pockets, and nothing coming down the way. When Mama got her check, she gave me what she could and sometimes I got some pickup work, but that hardly paid enough to eat on. I could work a full day and come home with less than forty dollars. If I couldn't find no pickup job and Mama didn't have no money, then there wasn't anything to do except stand on the corner wishing I was somewhere else or home staring at the stupid crap on television.

Rico's ten minutes stretched into a half hour. I was about to call him again when I saw him coming up out the subway.

"Yo, man, what's happening?" Me and Rico bumped fists.

"Nothing, man," I said. "What you got?"

"I got a run for Dusty Phillips," Rico said. "Three loads. That's a hundred for each load."

"Where we got to take it?"

“Across from Marcus Garvey Park,” Rico said.
“No problem.”

Yeah. No problem. I knew there was always a problem. Dusty wouldn't be sending out runners and spreading his money if there wasn't any room for some fuckery. We went up the street to Dusty's place and I started talking about the Yankees. Rico was always tripping, and I needed to see how far gone he was already. He seemed sharp enough, so I started to chill a little.

If everything went down right and I copped a full Benjamin and a half, I would split over to the Home Depot line. I'm good with some cash in my pocket, so I could go into the interview feeling righteous and looking confident. I could look the Man in the eye and say I wanted the job and could handle anything. And that was the truth when my life was on the money. I wouldn't be just another broke-sick fool begging for a slave.

I let my mind go free, even as I was talking to Rico about the Yankees. Rico was getting on the Yankee infielders for not hitting more home runs.

“If you making big bucks, you need to be getting big hits,” Rico was saying.

Yeah, all that was good. But I didn’t dream about making big money. I just dreamed about getting a decent crib for me and Mama, a steady job, and, most of all, not being broke sick.

Dusty Phillips had some hard-ass people working for him, some ugly mothers who look like they went to their first communion in them orange jumpsuits prisoners be wearing. He operated from the back of a ninety-nine-cent store. They hardly had anything in the store, and everybody in the neighborhood knew not to go in there. Once in a while they got a legitimate customer and were nasty enough and scary enough to discourage him from coming back.

Dusty used to be called Blinky when he was a kid growing up on 116th Street because he had a nervous twitch and his eyes looked a little off. It was like he was trying to look at you, but his eyes kept moving away from where you were. When he got older and fought his way big-time into the

game, he told people to call him Dusty, and after he shot a guy who called him Blinky, everybody else got the picture.

We got to his joint and Dusty looked me over like I was something that stunk bad. He asked Rico if I was all right, and Rico said I was.

“Y’all meet this white boy at two o’clock. Give him the dope and make damn sure the money you get from him is correct. Then you get that money to me by three this afternoon.” Dusty’s voice was high and he talked fast. “If my money don’t come back correct, everybody is going to be sorry. Anything I’m saying is confusing you?”

“No, man,” Rico said. “I’m hip.”

We got the dope from Dusty, all wrapped up in a plastic sandwich Baggie, and took it to Rico’s pad on 135th Street across from the House of Prayer for All People. As soon as we were inside and had locked the doors, Rico took out the bags of heroin and counted the glassine envelopes in each one. Then he opened a bag, sniffed it, and passed it to me.

“We can tap this nice,” Rico said.

“You don’t be tapping Dusty’s stuff,” I said. “You ain’t stupid. If the white boy don’t buy it, what we going to do, take it back to Dusty all tapped out?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Rico said. “But we can tap a buzz, right?”

I thought that Dusty knew that Rico would tap the loads, taking just a little bit from each bag for himself. But if the dope was as good as everybody said Dusty’s stuff was, it would probably be all right. What I didn’t want was Rico getting high and blowing the whole deal. And what I definitely didn’t want was to mess up completely and get Dusty on our case.

I watched while Rico tapped a few bags from each load, enough to make a half bag for himself. We had an hour to go before the drop, and I figured that a half bag wouldn’t mess with Rico’s head too much, seeing that it was a long way from his regular eight-to-ten-bag jones.

“You need a hit?” Rico asked as he cooked up the dope.

“Nah,” I said. “I’m good.”

What I didn’t say was that I wasn’t into no dealing. The Man catch you with a taste and you get a slap on the wrist. You get caught with enough to deal and you catching calendars. I’d rather die than face fifteen to twenty years in jail.

Still, I copped a bag when Rico started his nod, figuring I could bring it up if I needed to.



I'M SITTING THERE WATCHING the whole thing on television, watching my life like it was happening outside my body. The whole thing was fascinating and scary at the same time. I could even feel my body moving when I saw myself on the screen. It was like I was in two places at the same time, being two people, with one of them looking inside the other, checking out his own mind.

“Then what happened?” Kelly had a way of kind of hunching his shoulders when he talked, like he was pushing the words up.

“You think people in the street can see the

lights from the television?” I asked.

Kelly clicked the remote and we were looking at the street again. There were three police cars, and some of the officers were looking up at a building, but it wasn't the one we were in.

“Then what happened?” Kelly asked again.

“We waited around for a while and Rico tapped the lid again. He got another half bag, cooked that up, and hit the line. That kind of freaked me out, because I figured he might just go on tapping and cooking up the stuff until he blew the whole gig.”

“Then he wouldn't be able to go with the sale?”

“Yeah. So I called him on it,” I said. “If the deal didn't go down, we could say the white boy didn't show correct or we saw some wrong-looking dudes hanging around. But if the dope was light when we took it back to Dusty, we were going to have to take the heat, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah. You scared of Dusty.”

“So then it was time to go do the thing and Rico had said we should carry a piece in case somebody tried to rip us off,” I said. “I didn't think no white

boy trying to cop in the middle of Harlem was looking to rip nobody off, so it wasn't a big thing. Rico was feeling nice, but he wasn't really high yet, so it looked like a bet."

"You wasn't using nothing?" Kelly asked.

"No, I ain't stupid, man. I just needed to get paid. Drugs and business don't go together."

"I always wondered why they put those candles on the sidewalk," Kelly said.

"What candles?"

"You know, where they find the body," he came back. "They put candles on the street and write stuff on the wall like 'June Bug, we love you,' and 'RIP.'"

"That's a memorial to whoever it was got killed," I said. "You didn't know that? Where you live? If you from around here, you should know that."

"Yeah, I know that, but why candles and flowers after the killing when half the time they didn't even know the dude before he got killed? Or some girl got killed or some baby got killed," Kelly said. "Don't make no sense to me."

“So you ain’t the smartest sucker in the world,” I said. “Nothing wrong with that. But those candles and the flowers and the good-byes written on the wall is like a sign of respect and love.”

“Why you showing love to somebody you don’t know?”

“Later for all this mouth running.” I was getting tired. “How I’m going to get out of here?”

“You think the police are creeping up on you?”

The truth was that Kelly was creeping up on me. He was making me jumpy. He looked like street and he talked like street, but something was telling me different.

“All I want to do is get some distance from here,” I said. “That’s straight up. You got some ideas how I can do that?”

“By changing something you did,” Kelly said, “making it all different. Look to me like you’ve been making garbage for a while and dragging it with you. Now you need to get out of here, and that garbage is weighing you down.”

Somebody had their radio going, and I heard

it playing a drum-and-bass jam. It was pounding like my heart was pounding, but it had more rhythm.

“I’m going to make something different with that television and your remote?” I asked. “You got to come up with a stronger line than that, man.”

“You got a better idea?” Kelly asked. “You standing here shaking and sweating and wondering if you gonna make it through the night. You ain’t got nothing going on, so you might as well keep watching the tube and working your brain to figure out where you need to be making some changes.”

“Did I tell you that you’re a spooky-ass chump?”

“I don’t know about the chump part, but I like being spooky,” Kelly said. “You know, like you meet up with somebody in the dark and they see you spooky, they start paying attention. Like you paying attention.”

“Whatever. Anyway, I’m still working on that day. If that day was different.”

“You mean getting up in the morning?” Kelly

asked. “You want to stay in bed?”

“That might have helped, but I’m really talking about what happened with the cop,” I said. “Yo, you got any aspirins up in here?”

“Your arm hurting?”

“Why you think I need the aspirins? You know my arm is hurt.”

“Okay, so let’s get back to yesterday and the cop.” Kelly ignored my arm hurting. “Rico was tasting Dusty’s stuff, but you wasn’t using nothing?”

“How many times I got to tell you?” I said.

“Three’s a good number,” Kelly said. “But it don’t make no never mind to me. You the one looking for a change. I don’t need to change.”

“You sitting up here by yourself watching television in this stink hole is what you want to be doing?” I asked. “You look like you need a change to me.”

“Check it out, Lil J,” Kelly said. “You got the Nine and all I got is the remote and the television looking out on the world. But I can walk on out of here and go crosstown and cop a burger and

some fries if I want. If I want, I can smile all the way like I'm crazy or ask people for spare change or just stand on the corner and watch the world go by. You can't do none of that without maybe getting gunned down, so why you still up in my face running game?"

"So what you want to know?"

"Like I said before"—Kelly's head turned a little, but I still didn't see his full face—"Rico was tasting Dusty's stuff, but you wasn't using nothing?"

"I don't hit the line, but sometimes I skin-pop," I said. "Just a little under the skin when I'm down. I used to party all the time, but I know . . ."

"You know what you know, right?"

"Yeah."

"You scared of hitting the line?" Kelly asked.

"I heard a lot of bad things happening when dudes be shooting dope right in their veins," I said. "Infections. You get some bad dope and put it right in your vein—you can be dead before you know it. I'm a little scared of needles anyway. I figured I wouldn't get hep C or AIDS or nothing

if I just skin-popped.”

“You got to work hard to be that ignorant, but if you going to dope it up, you might as well be ignorant, because it’s all going the same way,” Kelly said.

“You don’t know that.”

“I know you got to lie about even using,” Kelly said.

“I use, but I’m not really into a trick bag,” I said. “You know what I mean?”

“So, tell me what happened with the cop.”

I sat down on the armrest of a stuffed chair. It smelled a little pissy, but I didn’t care. I was really getting tired. “Me and Rico got the stuff together and wrapped it in that plastic Baggie you put food in when it got to go in the freezer,” I said. “We put a little tape around it, so in case the white boy got nervous, he wouldn’t want to take the time to unwrap it. Maybe he would just want to give up the cash and return to wherever he came from.

“Rico was down from his nod and was grinning and bopping the way he do when he’s high. I was

mellow, but I was okay. You know, I wasn't nervous or anything. That's the way dope does me. I still got the same things going on in my head, but it's like I don't care that much anymore. We got down where we was supposed to meet the guy with the cash—he was supposed to be wearing a jacket and a green-and-yellow sweater that said FUTBOL. I spot the dude and Rico goes over to him and says something while I hold on to the drugs. Then we go into the building.

“I'm checking the dude out and he's jumpy, like he's anxious to get the stuff. I figure him to be a dude using big-time and needing to get right. I check his hands, and he's got tracks on the back of his left hand—you know, maybe he's right-handed and running out of road—and he's been hitting the veins there too hard. But I was getting nervous, too. I'm sensing the set ain't correct.”

“Your high wearing off?” Kelly asked.

“No, the white boy is getting me nervous,” I said. “He's all jumpy and everything, but he's chubby, too. You know, if he's that heavy into

horse, running up to Harlem to buy it from strangers, how he spending so much money on food he staying chubby?

“I looked the guy right in the eye and said, ‘Rico, this fool ain’t right.’ Meanwhile, Rico got the money and the guy was scoping the dope and trying to pull out a bag from a hole he punched in the plastic with his finger. He looked up at me and then at Rico, and Rico pulled his piece, put it upside the guy’s neck, and told him not to move. Rico felt around his waist and didn’t feel no piece and said he was all right. But I knew if he was a cop he might have his piece on his ankle and I told Rico to check his ankle. Then everything broke out.

“The cop hit Rico with his shoulder and tried to push him back, but Rico got the gun up again and told the cop to chill or he would blow his ass away. Then the cop said for us to chill and everything would be okay. He was calm too. I went down to his ankle and found his gun.

“Rico said we was taking the dope and the money, which was the right thing to do. Then we

asked him if he had some handcuffs, and he did. We handcuffed the fool to the banister. We knew he had some backup outside, but we had another way of getting out the hallway. We told the cop if he hollered we were going to come and shoot him. We started down the hall and Rico, thinking with his dope instead of his head, said he was going to check to see if the cop had a wallet. I told him we needed to get up out of there, but he went back. I heard the guy saying ‘Don’t shoot me, don’t shoot me!’ Then . . . *Pop! Pop! Pop!*”

“Rico just wasted the dude?” Kelly asked.

“Yeah. Yeah. Then he run by me toward the door. We come running out through a yard. There was a cop in the yard in plainclothes. He had on a uniform like the ones the guys who climb poles to fix telephone lines wear. We surprised him and Rico took a shot at him. I jumped the fence and started running, and Rico must have jumped after me. I felt something hit my arm. I didn’t even know I had been shot. You know, the adrenaline was pumping.”

“You were scared.”

“Yeah. Yeah. I was so scared, I couldn’t even catch my breath. I was like huffing and trying to suck in some air. I ran down the street, cut through an alley, and then wound up back on the street. I was down on 122nd Street, across from where that warehouse used to be. There was nothing happening on the street except a whole crowd of brothers hanging out, as usual. I slowed down to a walk and headed downtown. I wanted to run, but I was trying to keep cool at the same time.”

“Why you keep the cop’s gun?”

“How you know . . . ? I was scared to have it on me and scared to throw it away. I was in, like, a panic. You know what I mean? I knew if the cop was dead, it was going to be all over if they got us. You can’t kill a cop and look for mercy. We could have got away clean if Rico hadn’t gone back for the cop’s wallet. He probably didn’t even have no wallet on him.

“I circled around and went uptown to Harlem

Hospital and got some coffee in that little restaurant right off the lobby. The guy had the news on, but there wasn't nothing about the deal, and for a while I thought maybe the guy wasn't a cop and maybe Rico hadn't really shot him anyway."

"You believed that?"

"Naw, but I wanted to believe it. I really didn't know what to believe. All the time I was thinking about what had happened and steady hoping for the best. At home I told my mother that they had run out of her medicine and I would get it in the morning. She asked me if I had got the job and I said no. I had the Baggie from Dusty's loads, and I cooked that in the bathroom and popped it so I could relax."

"Why you say you weren't using?" Kelly asked.

"It ain't really your business," I said.

"What? What you say?"

"Nothing, man. I know I was using. I ain't happy with it or nothing like that," I said. "You don't be getting off scraping the streets looking for no dope and you don't be getting off being half sick all the time."

“You nodded out?”

“No, I was too uptight. I lay across my bed in the dark feeling bad. Rico called me and said he had taken the money over to Dusty and he had some cash and a taste for me. I wanted to ask him if he had killed the cop, but I guess I didn’t want to know. He sounded like nothing had went down, like it was some cowboy movie and we could just move on. Then Skeeter called me, real late, and told me that the cops had picked up Rico. He asked me if I knew what Rico had done. I said no.”

“So what you did you want to change?” Kelly asked.

“I want to change going with Rico in the first place,” I said.

“Just get you out this mess and you be straight?”

“Not really,” I said. “But I won’t be facing no cop-shooting charge. They got Rico, and I know he’s going to rat me out. Then I got twenty-five years to life if the cop lives. If he don’t live I’m going to be facing . . . you know. . . .”

“The rest of your life in jail?”

“Yeah.”

“So you want to be back looking at the line at Home Depot and thinking how you so lucky you ain’t in jail?” Kelly asked. “What you call it—broke sick? That’s where you want to be?”

“I’m not saying that’s what I want altogether,” I said. “But what I’m saying is, if I could get out this mess, maybe I could do something good with my life.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know *like what!*”

“Okay, like how?”

“Look, Kelly, you might be okay, or you might be some kind of nut,” I said. “I don’t know. I know I’m tired of talking to your ass. I know I’m tired of thinking about what I should have done yesterday. I know I’m just tired. If I knew what to do with my life, how to fix it up, I would have done it a long time ago. You can’t dig that? You think I want to live like I’m somebody’s throwaway? I want the same thing as you want—no, not like you want, because I don’t

want to live in no abandoned building watching television and being spooky. You know what I would like to be doing?”

“What?”

“I’d like to be living in a regular house doing something with Lauryn. She’s my son’s mama.”

“You got a son?”