



# Manchild in the Promised Land

By Claude Brown

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Now with an introduction by Nathan McCall, here is the story about the one who "made it," the boy who kept landing on his feet and became a man.

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## Manchild in the Promised Land By Claude Brown Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Review

"A tremendous achievement." --James Baldwin, author

"*Manchild in the Promised Land* is Claude Brown's unforgettable epic of growing up as a boy on the streets of Harlem. His Zola-esque gift for slices of life is made all the more striking by his brilliant insights into character and social pressures." --Tom Wolfe, author

"The first thing I ever read which gave me an idea of what it would be like day by day if I'd grown up in Harlem." --Norman Mailer, author

"It is written with brutal and unvarnished honesty in the plain talk of the people, in language that is fierce, uproarious, obscene, and tender." --Romulus Linney, *New York Times Book Review*

"Sometimes a unique voice speaks out so clearly and with so much passion that it comes to speak for an era, a generation, a people . . . and we have to listen." --*Los Angeles Times*

"Incredible! No Negro writer ever told the whole street thing in Harlem: Claude Brown is the first." --*New York Herald Tribune*

"He writes about his life - and Harlem - with frank, brutal, and beautiful power. Mr. Brown's graphic narrative will make you laugh, cry, think, and possibly understand." --*Atlanta Journal*

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### About the Author

CLAUDE BROWN (1937-2002) was born in New York City and grew up in Harlem. At age seventeen, after several terms in reform school, he left Harlem for Greenwich Village. He went on to receive a bachelor's degree from Howard University and attended law school. He also wrote a book called *The Children of Ham* in 1976. His book *Manchild in the Promised Land* evolved from an article he published in *Dissent* magazine during his first year at college.

(Nathan McCall, author of *Them* and *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, has worked as a journalist for the *Washington Post*. Currently he teaches African-American studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.)

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### Chapter 1

"Run!"

Where?

Oh, hell! Let's get out of here!

"Turk! Turk! I'm shot?"

I could hear Turk's voice calling from a far distance, telling me not to go into the fish-and-chips joint. I heard, but I didn't understand. The only thing I knew was that I was going to die.

I ran. There was a bullet in me trying to take my life, all thirteen years of it.

I climbed up on the bar yelling, "Walsh, I'm shot. I'm shot." I could feel the blood running down my leg. Walsh, the fellow who operated the fish-and-chips joint, pushed me off-the bar and onto the floor. I couldn't move now, but I was still completely conscious.

Walsh was saying, "Git outta here, kid. I ain't got no time to play."

A woman was screaming, mumbling something about the Lord, and saying, "Somebody done shot that poor child."

Mama ran in. She jumped up and down, screaming like a crazy woman. I began to think about dying. The worst part of dying was thinking about the things and the people that I'd never see again. As I lay there trying to imagine what being dead was like, the policeman who had been trying to control Mama gave up and bent over me. He asked who had shot me. Before I could answer, he was asking me if I could hear him. I told him that I didn't know who had shot me and would he please tell Mama to stop jumping up and down. Every time Mama came down on that shabby floor, the bullet lodged in my stomach felt like a hot poker.

Another policeman had come in and was struggling to keep the crowd outside. I could see Turk in the front of the crowd. Before the cops came, he asked me if I was going to tell them that he was with me. I never answered. I looked at him and wondered if he saw who shot me. Then his question began to ring in my head: "Sonny, you gonna tell 'em I was with you?" I was bleeding on a dirty floor in a fish-and-chips joint, and Turk was standing there in the doorway hoping that I would die before I could tell the cops that he was with me. Not once did Turk ask me how I felt.

Hell, yeah, I thought, I'm gonna tell 'em.

It seemed like hours had passed before the ambulance finally arrived. Mama wanted to go to the hospital with me, but the ambulance attendant said she was too excited. On the way to Harlem Hospital, the cop who was riding with us asked Dad what he had to say. His answer was typical: "I told him about hanging out with those bad-ass boys." The cop was a little surprised. This must be a rookie, I thought.

The next day, Mama was at my bedside telling me that she had prayed and the Lord had told her that I was going to live. Mama said that many of my friends wanted to donate some blood for me, but the hospital would not accept it from narcotics users.

This was one of the worst situations I had ever been in. There was a tube in my nose that went all the way to the pit of my stomach. I was being fed intravenously, and there was a drain in my side. Everybody came to visit me, mainly out of curiosity. The girls were all anxious to know where I had gotten shot. They had heard all kinds of tales about where the bullet struck. The bolder ones wouldn't even bother to ask: they just

snatched the cover off me and looked for themselves. In a few days, the word got around that I was in one piece.

On my fourth day in the hospital, I was awakened by a male nurse at about 3 A.M. When he said hello in a very ladyish voice, I thought that he had come to the wrong bed by mistake. After identifying himself, he told me that he had helped Dr. Freeman save my life. The next thing he said, which I didn't understand, had something to do with the hours he had put in working that day. He went on mumbling something about how tired he was and ended up asking me to rub his back. I had already told him that I was grateful to him for helping the doctor save my life. While I rubbed his back above the beltline, he kept pushing my hand down and saying, "Lower, like you are really grateful to me." I told him that I was sleepy from the needle a nurse had given me. He asked me to pat his behind. After I had done this, he left.

The next day when the fellows came to visit me, I told them about my early-morning visitor. Dunny said he would like to meet him. Tito joked about being able to get a dose of clap in the hospital. The guy with the tired back never showed up again, so the fellows never got a chance to meet him. Some of them were disappointed.

After I had been in the hospital for about a week, I was visited by another character. I had noticed a woman visiting one of the patients on the far side of the ward. She was around fifty-five years old, short and fat, and she was wearing old-lady shoes. While I wondered who this woman was, she started across the room in my direction. After she had introduced herself, she told me that she was visiting her son. Her son had been stabbed in the chest with an ice pick by his wife. She said that his left lung had been punctured, but he was doing fine now, and that Jesus was so-o-o good.

Her name was Mrs. Ganey, and she lived on 145th Street. She said my getting shot when I did "was the work of the Lord." My gang had been stealing sheets and bedspreads off clotheslines for months before I had gotten shot. I asked this godly woman why she thought it was the work of the Lord or Jesus or whoever. She began in a sermonlike tone, saying, "Son, people was gitting tired-a y'all stealing all dey sheets and spreads." She said that on the night that I had gotten shot, she baited her clothesline with two brand-new bedspreads, turned out all the lights in the apartment, and sat at the kitchen window waiting for us to show.

She waited with a double-barreled shotgun.

The godly woman said that most of our victims thought that we were winos or dope fiends and that most of them had vowed to kill us. At the end of the sermon, the godly woman said, "Thank the Lord I didn't shoot nobody's child." When the godly woman had finally departed, I thought, Thank the Lord for taking her away from my bed.

Later on that night, I was feeling a lot of pain and couldn't get to sleep. A nurse who had heard me moaning and groaning came over and gave me a shot of morphine. Less than twenty minutes later, I was deep into a nightmare.

I was back in the fish-and-chips joint, lying on the floor dying. Only, now I was in more pain than before, and there were dozens of Mamas around me jumping up and screaming. I could feel myself dying in a rising pool of blood. The higher the blood rose the more I died.

I dreamt about the boy who Rock and big Stoop had thrown off that roof on 149th Street. None of us had stayed around to see him hit the ground, but I just knew that he died in a pool of blood too. I wished that he would stop screaming, and I wished that Mama would stop screaming. I wished they would let me die

quietly.

As the screams began to die out -- Mama's and the boy's -- I began to think about the dilapidated old tenement building that I lived in, the one that still had the words "pussy" and "fuck you" on the walls where I had scribbled them years ago. The one where the super, Mr. Lawson, caught my little brother writing some more. Dad said he was going to kill Pimp for writing on that wall, and the way he was beating Pimp with that ironing cord, I thought he would. Mama was crying, I was crying, and Pimp had been crying for a long time. Mama said that he was too young to be beaten like that. She ran out of the house and came back with a cop, who stopped Dad from beating Pimp.

I told Pimp not to cry any more, just to wait until I got big: I was going to kill Dad, and he could help me if he wanted to.

This was the building where Mr. Lawson had killed a man for peeing in the hall. I remembered being afraid to go downstairs the morning after Mr. Lawson had busted that man's head open with a baseball bat. I could still see blood all over the hall. This was the building where somebody was always shooting out the windows in the hall. They were usually shooting at Johnny D., and they usually missed. This was the building that I loved more than anyplace else in the world. The thought that I would never see this building again scared the hell out of me.

I dreamt about waking up in the middle of the night seven years before and thinking that the Germans or the Japs had come and that the loud noises I heard were bombs falling. Running into Mama's room, I squeezed in between her and Dad at the front window. Thinking that we were watching an air raid, I asked Dad where the sirens were and why the street lights were on. He said, "This ain't no air raid -- just a whole lotta niggers gone fool. And git the hell back in that bed!" I went back to bed, but I couldn't go to sleep. The loud screams in the street and the crashing sound of falling plate-glass windows kept me awake for hours. While I listened to the noise, I imagined bombs falling and people running through the streets screaming. I could see mothers running with babies in their arms, grown men running over women and children to save their own lives, and the Japs stabbing babies with bayonets, just like in the movies. I thought, Boy, I sure wish I was out there. I bet the Stinky brothers are out there. Danny and Butch are probably out there having all the fun in the world.

The next day, as I was running out of the house without underwear or socks on, I could hear Mama yelling, "Boy, come back here and put a hat or something on your head!" When I reached the stoop, I was knocked back into the hall by a big man carrying a ham under his coat. While I looked up at him, wondering what was going on, he reached down with one hand and snatched me up, still holding the ham under his coat with his other hand. He stood me up against a wall and ran into the hall with his ham. Before I had a chance to move, other men came running through the hall carrying cases of whiskey, sacks of flour, and cartons of cigarettes. Just as I unglued myself from the wall and started out the door for the second time, I was bowled over again. This time by a cop with a gun in his hand. He never stopped, but after he had gone a couple of yards into the hall, I heard him say, "Look out, kid." On the third try, I got out of the building. But I wasn't sure that this was my street. None of the stores had any windows left, and glass was everywhere. It seemed that all the cops in the world were on 145th Street and Eighth Avenue that day. The cops were telling everybody to move on, and everybody was talking about the riot. I went over to a cop and asked him what a riot was. He told me to go on home. The next cop I asked told me that a riot was what had happened the night before. Putting two and two together I decided that a riot was "a whole lotta niggers gone fool."

I went around the corner to Butch's house. After I convinced him that I was alone, he opened the door. He said that Kid and Danny were in the kitchen. I saw Kid sitting on the floor with his hand stuck way down in a gallon jar of pickled pigs' ears. Danny was cooking some bacon at the stove, and Butch was busy hiding

stuff. It looked as though these guys had stolen a whole grocery store. While I joined the feast, they took turns telling me about the riot. Danny and Kid hadn't gone home the night before; they were out following the crowds and looting.

My only regret was that I had missed the excitement. I said, "Why don't we have another riot tonight? Then Butch and me can get in it."

Danny said that there were too many cops around to have a riot now. Butch said that they had eaten up all the bread and that he was going to steal some more. I asked if I could come along with him, and he said that I could if I promised to do nothing but watch. I promised, but we both knew that I was lying.

When we got to the street, Butch said he wanted to go across the street and look at the pawnshop. I tagged along. Like many of the stores where the rioters had been, the pawnshop had been set afire. The firemen had torn down a sidewall getting at the fire. So Butch and I just walked in where the wall used to be. Everything I picked up was broken or burned or both. My feet kept sinking into the wet furs that had been burned and drenched. The whole place smelled of smoke and was as dirty as a Harlem gutter on a rainy day. The cop out front yelled to us to get out of there. He only had to say it once.

After stopping by the seafood joint and stealing some shrimp and oysters, we went to what was left of Mr. Gordon's grocery store. Butch just walked in, picked up a loaf of bread, and walked out. He told me to come on, but I ignored him and went into the grocery store instead. I picked up two loaves of bread and walked out. When I got outside, a cop looked at me, and I ran into a building and through the backyard to Butch's house. Running through the backyard, I lost all the oysters that I had; when I reached Butch's house, I had only two loaves of bread and two shrimp in my pocket.

Danny, who was doing most of the cooking, went into the street to steal something to drink. Danny, Butch, and Kid were ten years old, four years older than I. Butch was busy making sandwiches on the floor, and Kid was trying to slice up a loaf of bologna. I had never eaten shrimp, but nobody seemed to care, because they refused to cook it for me. I told Butch that I was going to cook it myself. He said that there was no more lard in the house and that I would need some grease.

I looked around the house until I came up with some Vaseline hair pomade. I put the shrimp in the frying pan with the hair grease, waited until they had gotten black and were smoking, then took them out and made a sandwich. A few years later, I found out that shrimp were supposed to be shelled before cooking. I ate half of the sandwich and hated shrimp for years afterward.

The soft hand tapping on my face to wake me up was Jackie's. She and Della had been to a New Year's Eve party. Jackie wanted to come by the hospital and kiss me at midnight. This was the only time in my life that I ever admitted being glad to see Jackie. I asked them about the party, hoping that they would stay and talk to me for a while. I was afraid that if I went back to sleep, I would have another bad dream.

The next thing I knew, a nurse was waking me up for breakfast. I didn't recall saying good night to Jackie and Della, so I must have fallen asleep while they were talking to me. I thought about Sugar, how nice she was, and how she was a real friend. I knew she wanted to be my girl friend, and I liked her a lot. But what would everybody say if I had a buck-toothed girl friend. I remembered Knoxie asking me how I kissed her. That question led to the first fight I'd had with Knoxie in years. No, I couldn't let Sugar be my girl. It was hard enough having her as a friend.

The next day, I asked the nurse why she hadn't changed my bed linen, and she said because they were

evicting me. I had been in the hospital for eleven days, but I wasn't ready to go home. I left the hospital on January 2 and went to a convalescent home in Valhalla, New York. After I had been there for three weeks, the activity director took me aside and told me that I was going to New York City to see a judge and that I might be coming back. The following morning, I left to see that judge, but I never got back to Valhalla.

I stood there before Judge Pankin looking solemn and lying like a professional. I thought that he looked too nice to be a judge. A half hour after I had walked into the courtroom, Judge Pankin was telling me that he was sending me to the New York State Training School for Boys. The judge said that he thought I was a chronic liar and that he hoped I would be a better boy when I came out. I asked him if he wanted me to thank him. Mama stopped crying just long enough to say, "Hush your mouth, boy."

Mama tried to change the judge's mind by telling him that I had already been to Wiltwyck School for Boys for two and a half years. And before that, I had been ordered out of the state for at least one year. She said that I had been away from my family too much; that was why I was always getting into trouble.

The judge told Mama that he knew what he was doing and that one day she would be grateful to him for doing it.

I had been sent away before, but this was the first time I was ever afraid to go. When Mama came up to the detention room in Children's Court, I tried to act as though I wasn't afraid. After I told her that Warwick and where I was going were one and the same, Mama began to cry, and so did I.

Most of the guys I knew had been to Warwick and were too old to go back. I knew that there were many guys up there I had mistreated. The Stinky brothers were up there. They thought that I was one of the guys who had pulled a train on their sister in the park the summer before. Bumpy from 144th Street was up there. I had shot him in the leg with a zip gun in a rumble only a few months earlier. There were many guys up there I used to bully on the streets and at Wiltwyck, guys I had sold tea leaves to as pot. There were rival gang members up there who just hated my name. All of these guys were waiting for me to show, The word was out that I couldn't fight any more -- that I had slowed down since I was shot and that a good punch to the stomach would put my name in the undertaker's book.

When I got to the Youth House, I tried to find out who was up at Warwick that I might know. Nobody knew any of the names I asked about. I knew that if I went up to Warwick in my condition, I'd never live to get out. I had a reputation for being a rugged little guy. This meant that I would have at least a half-dozen fights in the first week of my stay up there.

It seemed the best thing for me to do was to cop out on the nut. For the next two nights, I woke up screaming and banging on the walls. On the third day, I was sent to Bellevue for observation. This meant that I wouldn't be going to Warwick for at least twenty-eight days.

While I was in Bellevue, the fellows would come down and pass notes to me through the doors. Tito and Turk said they would get bagged and sent to Warwick by the time I got there; They were both bagged a week later for smoking pot in front of the police station. They were both sent to Bellevue. Two weeks after they showed, I went home. The judge still wanted to send me to Warwick, but Warwick had a full house, so he sent me home for two weeks.

The day before I went back to court, I ran into Turk, who had just gotten out of Bellevue. Tito had been sent to Warwick, but Turk had gotten a walk because his sheet wasn't too bad. I told him I would probably be sent to Warwick the next day. Turk said he had run into Bucky in Bellevue. He told me that he and Tito had voted



Bucky out of the clique. I told him that I wasn't going for it because Bucky was my man from short-pants days. Turk said he liked him too, but what else could he do after Bucky had let a white boy beat him in the nutbox? When I heard this, there was nothing I could do but agree with Turk. Bucky had to go. That kind of news spread fast, and who wanted to be in a clique with a stud who let a paddy boy beat him?

The next day, I went to the Youth House to wait for Friday and the trip to Warwick. As I lay in bed that night trying to think of a way out, I began to feel sorry for myself. I began to blame Danny, Butch, and Kid for my present fate. I told myself that I wouldn't be going to Warwick if they hadn't taught me how to steal, play hookey, make homemades, and stuff like that. But then I thought, aw, hell, it wasn't their fault -- as a matter of fact, it was a whole lotta fun.

I remembered sitting on the stoop with Danny, years before, when a girl came up and started yelling at him. She said that her mother didn't want her brother to hang out with Danny any more, because Danny had taught her brother how to play hookey. When the girl had gone down the street, I asked Danny what hookey was. He said it was a game he would teach me as soon as I started going to school.

Danny was a man of his word. He was my next-door neighbor, and he rang my doorbell about 7:30 A.M. on the second day of school. Mama thanked him for volunteering to take me to school. Danny said he would have taught me to play hookey the day before, but he knew that Mama would have to take me to school on the first day. As we headed toward the backyard to hide our books, Danny began to explain the great game of hookey. It sounded like lots of fun to me. Instead of going to school, we would go all over the city stealing, sneak into a movie, or go up on a roof and throw bottles down into the street. Danny suggested that we start the day off by waiting for Mr. Gordon to put out his vegetables; we could steal some sweet potatoes and cook them in the backyard. I was sorry I hadn't started school sooner, because hookey sure was a lot of fun.

Before I began going to school, I was always in the streets with Danny, Kid, and Butch. Sometimes, without saying a word, they would all start to run like hell, and a white man was always chasing them. One morning as I entered the backyard where all the hookey players went to draw up an activity schedule for the day, Butch told me that Danny and Kid had been caught by Mr. Sands the day before. He went on to warn me about Mr. Sands, saying Mr. Sands was that white man who was always chasing somebody and that I should try to remember what he looked like and always be on the lookout for him. He also warned me not to try to outrun Mr. Sands, "because that cat is fast." Butch said, "When you see him, head for a backyard or a roof. He won't follow you there."

During the next three months, I stayed out of school twenty-one days. Dad was beating the hell out of me for playing hookey, and it was no fun being in the street in the winter, so I started going to school regularly. But when spring rolled around, hookey became my favorite game again. Mr. Sands was known to many parents in the neighborhood as the truant officer. He never caught me in the street, but he came by my house many mornings to escort me to class. This was one way of getting me to school, but he never found a way to keep me there. The moment my teacher took her eyes off me, I was back on the street. Every time Dad got a card from Mr. Sands, I got bruises and welts from Dad. The beatings had only a temporary effect on me. Each time, the beatings got worse; and each time, I promised never to play hookey again. One time I kept that promise for three whole weeks

The older guys had been doing something called "catting" for years. That catting was staying away from home all night was all I knew about the term. Every time I asked one of the fellows to teach me how to cat, I was told I wasn't old enough. As time went on, I learned that guys catted when they were afraid to go home and that they slept everywhere but in comfortable places. The usual places for catting were subway trains, cellars, unlocked cars, under a friend's bed, and in vacant newsstands.

One afternoon when I was eight years old, I came home after a busy day of running from the police, truant officer, and storekeepers. The first thing I did was to look in the mailbox. This had become a habit with me even though I couldn't read. I was looking for a card, a yellow card. That yellow card meant that I would walk into the house and Dad would be waiting for me with his razor strop. He would usually be eating and would pause just long enough to say to me, "Nigger, you got a ass whippin' comin'." My sisters, Carole and Margie, would cry almost as much as I would while Dad was beating me, but this never stopped him. After each beating I got, Carole, who was two years older than I, would beg me to stop playing hookey. There were a few times when I thought I would stop just to keep her and Margie, my younger sister, from crying so much. I decided to threaten Carole and Margie instead, but this didn't help. I continued to play hookey, and they continued to cry on the days that the yellow card got home before I did.

Generally, I would break open the mailbox, take out the card, and throw it away. Whenever I did this, I'd have to break open two or three other mailboxes and throw away the contents, just to make it look good.

This particular afternoon, I saw a yellow card, but I couldn't find anything to break into the box with. Having some matches in my pockets, I decided to burn the card in the box and not bother to break the box open. After I had used all the matches, the card was not completely burned. I stood there getting more frightened by the moment. In a little while, Dad would be coming home; and when he looked in the mailbox, anywhere would be safer than home for me.

This was going to be my first try at catting out. I went looking for somebody to cat with me. My crime partner, Buddy, whom I had played hookey with that day, was busily engaged in a friendly rock fight when I found him in Colonial Park. When I suggested that we go up on the hill and steal some newspapers, Buddy lost interest in the rock fight.

We stole papers from newsstands and sold them on the subway trains until nearly 1 A.M. That was when the third cop woke us and put us off the train with the usual threat. They would always promise to beat us over the head with a billy and lock us up. Looking back, I think the cops took their own threats more seriously than we did. The third cop put us off the Independent Subway at Fifty-ninth Street and Columbus Circle. I wasn't afraid of the cops, but I didn't go back into the subway -- the next cop might have taken me home.

In 1945, there was an Automat where we came out of the subway. About five slices of pie later, Buddy and I left the Automat in search of a place to stay the night. In the center of the Circle, there were some old lifeboats that the Navy had put on display.

Buddy and I slept in the boat for two nights. On the third day, Buddy was caught ringing a cash register in a five-and-dime store. He was sent to Children's Center, and I spent the third night in the boat alone. On the fourth night, I met a duty-conscious cop, who took me home. That ended my first catting adventure.

Dad beat me for three consecutive days for telling what he called "that dumb damn lie about sleeping in a boat on Fifty-ninth Street." On the fourth day, I think he went to check my story out for himself. Anyhow, the beatings-stopped for a while, and he never mentioned the boat again.

Before long, I was catting regularly, staying away from home for weeks at a time. Sometimes the cops would pick me up and take me to a Children's Center. The Centers were located ail over the city. At some time in my childhood, I must have spent at least one night in all of them except the one on Staten Island.

The procedure was that a policeman would take me to the Center in the borough Where he had picked me up. The Center would assign someone to see that I got a bath and was put to bed. The following day, my parents

would be notified as to where I was and asked to come and claim me. Dad was always in favor of leaving me where I was and saying good riddance. But Mama always made the trip. Although Mama never failed to come for me, she seldom found me there when she arrived. I had no trouble getting out of Children's Centers, so I seldom stayed for more than a couple of days.

When I was finally brought home -- sometimes after weeks of catting -- Mama would hide my clothes or my shoes. This would mean that I couldn't get out of the house if I should take a notion to do so. Anyway, that's how Mama had it figured. The truth of the matter is that these measures only made getting out of the house more difficult for me. I would have to wait until one of the fellows came around to see me. After hearing my plight, he would go out and round up some of the gang, and they would steal some clothes and shoes for me. When they had the clothes and shoes, one of them would come to the house and let me know. About ten minutes later, I would put on my sister's dress, climb down the back fire escape, and meet the gang with the clothes.

If something was too small or too large, I would go and steal the right size. This could only be done if the item that didn't fit was not the shoes. If the shoes were too small or large, I would have trouble running in them and probably get caught. So I would wait around in the backyard while someone stole me a pair.

Mama soon realized that hiding my clothes would not keep me in the house. The next thing she tried was threatening to send me away until I was twenty-one. This was only frightening to me at the moment of hearing it. Ever so often, either Dad or Mama would sit down and have a heart-to-heart talk with me. These talks were very moving. I always promised to mend my bad ways. I was always sincere and usually kept the promise for about a week. During these weeks, I went to school every day and kept my stealing at a minimum. By the beginning of the second week, I had reverted back to my wicked ways, and Mama would have to start praying all over again.

The neighborhood prophets began making prophecies about my life-span. They all had me dead, buried, and forgotten before my twenty-first birthday. These predictions were based on false tales of policemen shooting at me, on truthful tales of my falling off a trolley car into the midst of oncoming automobile traffic while hitching a ride, and also on my uncontrollable urge to steal. There was much justification for these prophecies. By the time I was nine years old, I had been hit by a bus, thrown into the Harlem River (intentionally), hit by a car, severely beaten with a chain. And I had set the house afire.

While Dad was still trying to beat me into a permanent conversion, Mama was certain that somebody had worked roots on me. She was writing to all her relatives in the South for solutions, but they were only able to say, "that boy musta been born with the devil in him." Some of them advised Mama to send me down there, because New York was no place to raise a child. Dad thought this was a good idea, and he tried to sell it to Mama. But Mama wasn't about to split up her family. She said I would stay in New York, devil or no devil. So I stayed in New York, enjoying every crazy minute.

Mama's favorite question was, "Boy, why you so bad?" I tried many times to explain to Mama that I wasn't "so bad." I tried to make her understand that it was trying to be good that generally got me into trouble. I remember telling her that I played hookey to avoid getting into trouble in school. It seemed that whenever I went to school, I got into a fight with the teacher. The teacher would take me to the principal's office. After I had fought with the principal, I would be sent home and not allowed back in school without one of my parents. So to avoid all that trouble, I just didn't go to school. When I stole things, it was only to save the family money and avoid arguments or scoldings whenever I asked for money.

Mama seemed silly to me. She was bothered because most of the parents in the neighborhood didn't allow

their children to play with me. What she didn't know was that I never wanted to play with them. My friends were all daring like me, tough like me, dirty like me, ragged like me, cursed like me, and had a great love for trouble like me. We took pride in being able to hitch rides on trolleys, buses, taxicabs and in knowing how to steal and fight. We knew that we were the only kids in the neighborhood who usually had more than ten dollars in their pockets. There were other people who knew this too, and that was often a problem for us. Somebody was always trying to shake us down or rob us. This was usually done by the older hustlers in the neighborhood or by storekeepers or cops. At other times, older fellows would shake us down, con us, or Murphy us out of our loot. We accepted this as the ways of life. Everybody was stealing from everybody else. And sometimes we would shake down newsboys and shoeshine boys. So we really had no complaints coming. Although none of my sidekicks was over twelve years of age, we didn't think of ourselves as kids. The other kids my age were thought of as kids by me. I felt that since I knew more about life than they did, I had the right to regard them as kids.

In the fall of 1945, I was expelled from school for the first time. By the time February rolled around, I had been expelled from three other schools in Harlem. In February, Mama sent me downtown to live with Grandpapa on Eldridge street. Papa enrolled me in a public school on Forsythe and Stanton Streets. It was cold that winter, and I usually went to school to be warm.

For weeks, everybody thought things were going along fine. The first day I didn't come home from school, Papa ignored it, thinking that I had gone uptown. But the next day, Mama received a card from Bellevue Hospital's psychiatric division informing her that I was undergoing psychiatric observation and that she was allowed to visit me on Wednesdays and Sundays. My grandfather knew nothing about any of this, so when Mama (his oldest daughter) came to him wanting to know what her son was doing in Bellevue, Papa asked, "How did he get there?" They both came over to Bellevue believing I had gone crazy. Dad didn't bother to come, because, as he put it, "That's where he shoulda been years ago." I was glad Dad didn't come, because he might not have believed that I was falsely accused of trying to push a boy in school out of a five-story window. Mama had already heard my teacher's version of the window incident, and now I was trying to explain my side of the story. My teacher had told her that I persuaded a boy to look out of the window to see an accident that hadn't taken place. Because of the window's wide ledge, I was holding his legs while he leaned out of the window. The boy started screaming and calling for help. When he got down out of the window, the boy said that I had been trying to push him out of the window. Just because we had fought the day before and I was the only one who saw the accident, I ended up in the nutbox.

I don't think my story completely convinced Mama or Papa, but they gave me the benefit of the doubt. Mama told me that I would have to stay in the hospital for a few weeks. Her eyes were filled with tears when she said goo-bye, and I tried to look sad too, but I was actually happy. I thought about how nice it was going to be away from Dad. Also, there were a few of my friends there, and we were sure to find something to get into. I had already had a couple of fights and won, so this was going to be a real ball.

I had lots of fun in the nutbox and learned a lot of new tricks, just as I thought. I didn't know it at the time, but many of the boys I met in Bellevue would also be with me at Wiltwyck and Warwick years later. Some of those I had bullied in the nutbox would try to turn the tables later on in life. Some would succeed.

There were a few things around to steal. There were plenty of guys to fight with and lots of adults to annoy. The one drawback that the nutbox had was school and teachers. But I found the nutbox to be such a nice place that I was sad when Mama came to take me home.

When I returned home, I was told that my former school had refused to readmit me. This was the best news I had heard since I started going to school. I thought that I had finally gotten out of going to school. But two

weeks later, I was enrolled in another school in Harlem.

Within two months from the time I had left Bellevue, I found myself in Manhattan's Children Court for the first time. The reason was that I had been thrown out of two more schools, and there weren't any more in Manhattan that would accept me. The judge told Mama that if I was still in New York State when the fall semester began, he would send me someplace where I would be made to go to school. After Mama had promised the judge that I would not be in New York when September rolled around, we went home.

This was the first time that Mama had been in court, and she was pretty angry about the whole thing. All the way uptown on the bus, Mama kept telling me that I should be ashamed of myself for making her come down to that court and face those white people. Every ten or twelve blocks, Mama would stop preaching just long enough to look at me and say, "Child, maybe that head doctor was right about you," or, "Boy, why you so damn bad?" She didn't understand what the psychiatrist was talking about when he was telling her about my emotional problems. Since she couldn't understand the terms he was using, Mama thought he was trying to tell her in a nice way that I was crazy. Of course, she didn't believe him. "That ole big-nose, thick-eyeglasses white man, he looked kinda crazy his own self," she said. No, she didn't believe him, whatever it was that he had said -- but sometimes she wondered if that man might have been right.

When we got back uptown, Mrs. Rogers, who lived next door to us, came over to find out how things had gone in court. Mrs. Rogers, Danny's mother, had made many trips to Manhattan's Children Court. Now she had come to sympathize with Mama. Mrs. Rogers -- who was also a jackleg preacher (she did not have a church) -- called everybody "child," "brother," or "sister." What a person was called by Mrs. Rogers depended on whether or not he was "saved." To be saved meant to live for the Lord. Mrs. Rogers was saved, and so was her husband; she couldn't understand why all her children had not yet been "hit by spirit."

Mrs. Rogers, a big, burly woman about fifteen years older than Mama, always called Mama "child." I can remember her saying to Mama when we came home from court that day, "Child, ain't that Lexington Avenue bus the slowest thing in this whole city?" I always found Mrs. Rogers' visits hard to take. She was a very nice meddlesome old woman, but too godly to have around constantly. Poor Danny, he had to live with it. Mrs. Rogers had told Mama that Danny was so bad because his behavior was the Lord's way of testing her faith. Dad called Mrs. Rogers the "preacher woman." He believed that Mrs. Rogers was going against the Lord's Word and that this was the reason for her son's behavior. He had often said that "the Lord never told no woman to go out and preach the Gospel to nobody." Dad said that if the Lord had wanted a woman to preach, he would have chosen a woman to be one of his apostles.

On this day, Mrs. Rogers' advice was no different from the other times. After Mama had told Mrs. Rogers about what had happened in court, Mrs. Rogers began her usual sermon, saying, "Child, you just gotta pray, you just gotta pray and trust in the Lord." I always left the house at this point, because our house would be used as a practice pulpit for the next two or three hours.

As I ran down the stairs, I tried to imagine what was going on in the house. In a little while, Mrs. Rogers would be patting her foot real fast, and she would start talking real loud, clapping her hands, shaking her head, and every other word would be "Jesus" or "Lord." I wondered why Mrs. Rogers never got tired of talking about the Lord. Before Mrs. Rogers finished her private sermon, she would have Mama talking about the Lord and patting her feet. By the time Mrs. Rogers was ready to leave, she would have Mama promising to come to a church where she was preaching next Sunday. Mama would promise, and Mrs. Rogers would start telling her how good it is to be saved, to walk with Jesus, and to let God into your soul. Even though Mama knew Dad wasn't going to let her go to a sanctified church with that "jackleg preacher woman," she still promised to go. Dad always said, "All those sanctified people is just a bunch of old hypocrites, and none

of 'em ain't a bit more saved than nobody else."

Mrs. Rogers never talked about saving Dad. She said, "That man got the devil in him," and I believed it. As a matter of fact, I had suspected something like that long before Mrs. Rogers did.

We had all been to Mrs. Rogers' Sunday sermon once. All of us except Dad. She was preaching that time in what looked like a church; apartment to me and a church-store to Carole. I think most of the people there were relatives of Mrs. Rogers. All of her family was there except for Danny; he had escaped on the way to church. June, one of Mrs. Rogers' daughters, was playing an old, out-of-tune upright piano. Another one of Danny's sisters was banging two cymbals together and mumbling something about Jesus. She seemed to be in a trance. Mr. Rogers was shaking a tambourine and singing about Jesus with a faraway look in his eyes. Mrs. Rogers, who was dressed in a white robe, got up and started preaching. After Mrs. Rogers had been preaching for about fifteen minutes, an old lady got up and started screaming and shouting, "Help me, Lord Jesus!" She was still throwing her arms up and shouting for Jesus to help her when a younger woman jumped up and hollered, "Precious Lord Jesus, save me!" Mrs. Rogers' voice was getting louder all the time.

For two hours, she preached -- and for two hours, people were getting up, shouting, jumping up and down, calling to Jesus for help and salvation, and falling out exhausted. Some of these "Holy Rollers," as Dad called them, would fall to the floor and start trembling rapidly; some of them even began to slobber on themselves. When I asked Mama what was wrong with those people and what they were doing on the floor, she told me that the "spirit" had hit them. When Carole heard this, she began to cry and wanted to get out of there before the spirit hit us. Mrs. Rogers had gone over to a man who was rolling on the floor, slobbering on himself, and babbling as if he were talking to the Lord. She held the man's hand very tight and told him repeatedly to walk with the Lord and not to fear Jesus. She was saying to the man, "Brother, say, 'Yes, Jesus; yes, Jesus.'" After a while, the man calmed down, and Mrs. Rogers said he had been saved.

Carole and Margie were frightened by these strange goings-on. I had been fascinated until now. But now this spirit thing had Mama jumping up and shouting. I joined Carole and Margie in a crying chorus, and the three of us started pulling on Mama. After Mama had jumped, clapped her hands, and had her say about Jesus, she fell back in her chair, tired and sweating. One of Mrs. Rogers' blood sisters had started fanning Mama. Carole, Margie, and I had stopped crying, but we were still scared, because we didn't know if Mama was all right or not.

In the makeshift pulpit, Mrs. Rogers was looking real pleased with herself, probably thinking that she had saved a lot of people. I think Mrs. Rogers judged her sermon by the number of people who were hit by the spirit and fell down during her sermon. She cautioned the people who were saved about "backslidin'" and told them about how happy they were going to be with Jesus in their lives. She also asked some of the old saved souls to "testify." After three or four saved souls had told about what a good friend Jesus had been to them, Mrs. Rogers began her third request for money. The ushers, who were also relatives of Mrs. Rogers, passed a china bowl down each row. Carole and Margie dropped the nickel that Mama had given to each of them in the bowl, then they turned and looked at me. Although that was the first time we had ever been to church together, they would have been surprised if I had put my nickel in the bowl. I didn't surprise them that day.

While Carole and Margie were busy telling Mama about me not putting my nickel in the bowl, I was pulling a chair from the aisle behind us. All the chairs in the place were kitchen chairs, and they weren't all the same size. Before I could get the chair into our aisle, a big fat shiny dark-skinned woman with a man's voice said, "Boy, leave dar chair 'lone." I was frightened by the heavy, commanding voice, but not as much as I was after I looked up and saw that great big old woman giving me the evil eye. My first thought was that she was

a witch or a hag, whatever that was. I knew she couldn't be the boogeyman; not in church. But the longer I looked, the more I doubted her being anything other than the boogeyman. About thirty seconds later, when I had gotten my voice back, I meekly said, "Dat ain't your chair." The next thing I heard was the sound of Mama's hand falling heavily across my mouth. As I started crying, I heard Mama say, "What I tole you about sassin' ole people?" While I went on crying, Mama was telling me about the dangers of talking back to old people. I remember her saying, "If one of these ole people put the bad mouth on you, maybe you'll be satisfied."

For years afterward, the mention of church always reminded me of the day that we went to hear Mrs. Rogers preach. To me, a church was a church-apartment where somebody lined up a lot of kitchen chairs in a few rows, a preacher did a lot of shouting about the Lord, people jumped up and down until they got knocked down by the spirit, and Mrs. Rogers put bowls of money on a kitchen table and kept pointing to it and asking for more. It was a place where I had to stand up until I couldn't stand any more and then had to sit down on hard wooden chairs. The one good thing I got out of going to hear Mrs. Rogers preach was a new threat to use on Carole and Margie. Whenever Carole and Margie would threaten to tell on me, I told them that if they did, the spirit would hit them the way it hit those people in Mrs. Rogers' church-apartment.

Maybe Dad was right when he said Mrs. Rogers was just robbing people in the name of the Lord. Anyway, I felt pretty good about her not getting my nickel.

Even though Dad didn't care for preachers and churches, he had a lot of religion in his own way. Most of the time, his religion didn't show. But on Saturday night, those who didn't see it beam it. Sometimes Dad would get religious on Friday nights too. But Saturday night was a must. Because it always took liquor to start Dad to singing spirituals and talking about the Lord, I thought for years that this lordly feeling was something in a bottle of whiskey. To me, it was like caster oil or black draught. You drink it and the next thing you know, you're doing things.

I was introduced to religion on Saturday night. I don't recall just when, but as far back as I can remember, Saturday night was the Lord's night in our house. Whenever Dad was able to make it home on his own two feet, he would bring a recording of a spiritual, a plate of pigs' feet and potato salad from the corner delicatessen or a plate of fish-and-chips from the wine joint around the corner, and whatever was left of his last bottle of religion. He usually got home about three o'clock in the morning, and the moment he hit the block I could hear him singing (or yelling) the record he had. By the time he got upstairs, everybody in the building knew the song and hated it. Before Dad was in the house, I could hear him calling me.

By the time he finished unlocking and relocking the door at least six times, kicking on it, cursing out the lock and the neighbors who had tried to quiet him down, I was up and had already turned on the phonograph. On her way to the door, Mama would say, "Boy, turn that thing off and git back in that bed." While Mama told Dad how disgusting he was, I would be busily picking out the pigs' feet or fish-and-chips with the least amount of hot sauce on them. When Mama had gotten tired of competing with Dad's singing, she went back to bed. As Dad gave me the record -- usually by Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the Dixie Hummingbirds, or the Four Blind Boys -- he would tell me how somebody I had never heard of sang it in the cotton fields or at somebody's wedding or funeral "down home." After listening to the record at least a dozen times, Dad would turn the phonograph off, and we would sing the song a few times. Before dawn started sneaking through the windows, Dad and I had gone through his entire repertoire of spirituals. By daybreak, we were both drunk and had fallen on the floor, and we stayed there until we awoke later in the day.

When Dad awoke on Sunday, it was usually around eleven or twelve o'clock. If he had half a bottle of religion around, we would continue our Sunday singing. If there was less than half a bottle around, Dad

would just ignore Mama's protests and take me with him to a King Kong joint. I recall one of their Sunday morning arguments.

Mama said, "Ain't no six-year-old child got no business drinking that King Kong."

Dad said, "I was drinking it when I was five, and I'm still here working hard and steady five and six days a week."

The King Kong joint was usually in a basement apartment and operated by a friend of Dad's or a relative. Dad knew where most of the joints in the neighborhood were, and many times we had to go from one to another for what seemed like hours. Sometimes the cops would get there before we did, and at other times the stuff hadn't finished cooking. But eventually, we would find a bottle and enough drunks to make a quartet and would sing some spirituals.

Saturdays and Sundays were the only days that Dad mentioned the words "God" and "Lord." But on these days, he made up for the rest of the week. He was very serious about the spirituals and the Lord on weekends. To his way of thinking, this was a private kind of religion all his own. Nobody understood except him and the Lord, but that was enough understanding for him. It had to be right, because his daddy had lived that way.

Grandpa had made the "best goddamn corn liquor" in Sumter County, according to Dad. Dad promised me, every time he got drunk, that he would teach me how to make good corn liquor. He often said that he was making corn liquor long before he even knew how to plow, and he couldn't remember not knowing how to plow. Dad claimed that there were no baby-nursing bottles in the South when he was coming up. He said that when a baby cut his first tooth, "his papa would take him off the titty and put him on the corn-liquor jug." I never learned how to make good corn liquor, but I learn quite a few good lies about drinking and making it.

Whiskey was one of my best friends. I talked to whiskey bottles all the time. That is, all the time I was by myself or with Toto, Bucky, or Bulldog. These were the times when I knew I wouldn't have to explain anything to anybody. These guys knew what I was saying to the whiskey bottle and what it meant to me even though I never told them. We would fight almost every day and call each other dumb, but to me they were some real smart guys; The smartest thing about them was that you never had to explain anything to them for them to know it. They just knew it anyway. I had whiskey, and they probably had a good friend like that too, a friend who could tell you if it was okay to go home. The only time I could go home after being away for a few days would be on a Friday or Saturday night. On these nights, Dad would have a bottle of whiskey and wouldn't be so mad, so he wouldn't beat me too badly. Some Friday and Saturday nights he didn't have any whiskey, and I got a real bad beating. Whenever that happened, I would curse those whiskey bottles that had told me it was okay to go home. The next chance I got, I would break every whiskey bottle I could find. Most of the time, the whiskey bottles were on my side, and I wouldn't go home. That round brown bottle had more than religion in it. It must have had the Lord in it. I never saw him in it, but I know he was there.

When I reached the street that day after my first time in court, school wasn't out yet. I knew the guys wouldn't be in the backyard at that time of day. They were probably on the hill or downtown stealing. I thought: I bet I missed a whole day of fun. I ain't goin' back to no damn court no more. They make you wait ail day on those hard benches, and you gotta ride all day to get there and ride all day to get back. No, I'm just not goin' to that fuckin' court no more.

I was anxious to find somebody to tell about my day in court. I went up to the park, but there was no one there. So I jumped on the back of a trolley car and hitched it up to 161st Street and Amsterdam Avenue.



There was a five-and-dime store up there that was a favorite spot of ours for ringing cash registers. I stopped in there, rang the cash register, and decided to go to a movie. Even though I had forty dollars now, I was going to sneak in. All I had was four tens, and I knew better than to take any one of them out in Harlem. Somebody would try to shortchange me or shake me down. Sneaking in the Roosevelt Theatre was the only thing to do.

I wouldn't have taken all tens, but to ring the cash register without anybody seeing me, I had to stoop down below the counter and reach up to the cash register. I would push down real slow on one key and hold the drawer with my other hand, letting it come out as quiet as I could. When I got the drawer out far enough to get my hand in it, I would let the key up real slowly, grab a handful of bills from three slots, and push the drawer back in. Not having anyone to lay chickie for me, I had to do it quicker than most of the time. So I just took the first bills I got my hands on.

Butch had taught me how to ring cash registers. He must have told it to me a hundred million times and had me tell it back to him just as many times before I tried it. The first cash register I ever rang was in a drugstore on Broadway. There was one man at a long counter. Butch had picked this spot out for me because it was so easy and I hadn't done it before. Butch told me to wait until he did something to make the man come down to the far end of the counter. I watched Butch from inside the telephone booth. He walked up the aisle until he got to the candy display, then he stumbled forward, knocking over the candy and chewing gum display. The man came running out from behind the counter. As he came out, I came out of the telephone booth, went behind the counter, and within a matter of seconds was at the other end of the aisle helping Butch and the counterman pick up the stuff. Butch would pick it up and drop it again until he saw me coming. After we had picked up everything, the man thanked us and went back to his duties, and I walked out with his money.

Butch had warned me many times to never ring a cash register when there was nobody around to keep the person on the counter busy. But sometimes when I needed some money and there was no one around, I would go and do it alone. When I told Butch what I had done, he would tell me that I was dumb and would probably end up in jail before I was ten. His putting me down didn't stop me from ringing cash registers alone. It just stopped me from telling him about it.

Butch was pretty serious about stealing. That's probably why he was so good at it. I had a lot of respect for him and his ability to steal. I once had hopes of getting to be as good a thief as Butch, but every time I got good at something, he would teach me something else. After a while, I realized that I could never get to be as good as Butch -- he knew too much. But I would still be the second-best thief in the neighborhood.

The first thing I did when I got into the show that day was to yell out, "Forty thieves!" to see if any of my friends in the gang were there. That afternoon I got a loud "Yo!" from one of the front rows. It was Bucky. He hadn't been to school that day and had sneaked into the show about one o'clock. He had already seen the movie, but it was good, so he was seeing it over. "Goldie was in here a little while ago, but he hadn't been home for the past few nights, so he had to go and steal something to eat," he said. Bucky told me that he hadn't seen any of the other fellows all day. They must have been downtown stealing.

Bucky was about my age, had curly hair, was always dirty, like most of us, and had buck teeth. Of all the dirty kids on the block, Bucky was the dirtiest. He had just moved to our neighborhood around the first of the year.

Bucky had lots of sisters and brothers, and his mother was still having more sisters and brothers for him. He also had some sisters and brothers who, he said, lived with their aunts. These I had never seen. Bucky didn't have a father, and his mother was on relief. All the kids in Bucky's family knew when the relief check came.

On that day, they would all follow Miss Jamie around until she cashed it: Then they would beg her to buy some food before she started drinking up the money. Every month when check day rolled around, Bucky and his brothers and sisters would always be arguing with their mother. Miss Jamie was forever telling them to wait someplace until she cashed the check, that she would come back and buy some food. But they all knew that if they ever let her out of their sight with that check, they wouldn't see her for days. When she did show up, she would tell them how she got robbed or how her pocket was picked or how she lost the money. So she would spend half of the day trying to duck the kids, and they would stick with her. If there was only one kid around, or even two, she could easily get away. She would usually go into a bar, where she knew the kids couldn't follow her, and she would leave the bar by another exit. When the kids got wise to this, one of them would start looking for the other exit as soon as she entered the bar. But even then, she could get away if there was only one at the exit she used. She would give him fifty cents as a bribe and jump into a cab.

Bucky was the only guy I knew who could stay out all night and not be missed. Sometimes he would go out and stay for days and still get home before his mother. Sometimes Bucky would go home and there would be nobody there. The lady next door always had the lowdown. The usual reason for the house being empty was that the welfare investigator had come by and had taken all the kids to the Children's Shelter. Whenever this happened while Bucky was away from home, he would go to the police station and tell them what had happened. After the policemen had gotten to know Bucky and were familiar with his home situation, he only had to walk in and they would send him to the Shelter without asking him anything. The Shelter was a second home to Bucky. He liked it more than his first home. At the Shelter, he always got three meals a day, and three meals beats none any way you look at it. Whenever I missed Bucky from around the block, I had a pretty good idea where he was, but he would always say that he was staying with his aunt in Brooklyn. That aunt was the great mystery in Bucky's life.

When Bucky moved into the neighborhood, I sort of adopted him. He had his first fight in the neighborhood with me, and since he was pretty good with his hands, we became friends after three fights. I used to take him home with me and feed him. After a while Bucky got to know what time we usually ate supper, and if he didn't see me on the street, he would come to my house looking for me. If I wasn't in, he would ask if he could come in and wait for me. He knew that somebody would offer him something to eat if he was there at suppertime. Dad started complaining about Bucky coming up to the house for supper every night. So Mama would tell Bucky to go downstairs and look for me if I wasn't there when he came by. When I brought him home with me, sometimes the family would slip into the kitchen one at a time to eat without his knowing it, or they would try to wait until he left. Bucky would never leave as long as he thought that we had not eaten supper. When Bucky was finally gone, Dad would start telling me how stupid I was and threatening to give my supper to Bucky the next time I brought him home with me. Dad said that Bucky had a roguish look about him and that he didn't trust him. Some of the fellows didn't like him either. They said he looked too pitiful.

That day after we saw the show, I went up to Bucky's house to show him a homemade that I had found a week before. I didn't have any bullets for it yet, but that wasn't important -- I knew somebody I could steal them from. As I walked through the door -- which was always open because the lock had been broken and Miss Jamie never bothered to have it fixed -- I saw Bucky on the floor with his arm around his little sister's throat. He was choking her. Meanwhile, his big sister was bopping him on the head with a broom handle and they were all screaming. After I had watched the three-way fight for a minute or less, I started toward Dixie to grab the broom. Before I could get close enough to grab the broom handle, everything stopped. For a whole second, everything was real quiet. Dixie threw down the broom and started crying. Debbie was already crying, but I couldn't hear her because Bucky was still choking her. He let her go and started cursing. When Debbie got up, I saw what she and Dixie were crying over and what Bucky was cursing about. The three of them had been fighting over one egg, and the egg was broken in the scuffle.

Bucky had run out of the house cursing, and I was standing where he had left me. Dixie and Debbie were facing me on the other side of the room. They were staring at the broken egg on the floor, and their crying was getting louder all the time. I was staring at them and wondering why they were making so much fuss over one broken egg. They sure looked funny standing there with their mouths wide open and tears rolling down their dirty faces and into their mouths. I began to laugh and mimic them. Dixie threw the broom at me and missed. Knowing what they were going to do as soon as I left, I decided to get even with Dixie for throwing the broom at me. Before either of them realized what I was doing, I had stepped on the egg and was smearing it all over the floor. Debbie began to cry louder, and Dixie was all over me, scratching, biting, and hitting me with what seemed like ten hands. Without thinking, I started swinging. I didn't stop swinging until I heard Dixie crying again. She went over to what was left of that old ragged couch they had in the living room, threw herself down on it, and went on crying into the cushions. I went over and touched her on the shoulder and told her I was sorry. She only raised her head enough to scream as loud as she could and tell me to let her alone. I told her to wait there while I went to steal her some eggs. She yelled that she didn't want any eggs and that when her older brother got out of jail, she was going to get him to kick my ass.

Less than ten minutes after I had left Dixie crying on the couch, I walked in the house with a dozen eggs and a loaf of bread. Dixie was sitting up on the couch now. Her eyes were red, but she wasn't crying; her face still had tearstains on it, and her mouth was stuck out as if she were mad at somebody. Not saying anything I walked over to her and offered her the eggs and the loaf of bread. I was standing in front of her holding out the eggs and bread. She just sat there staring at me as if she didn't believe it or as if she wondered how I had come by these things. Seeing that she needed a little encouragement, I pushed the eggs and bread against her chest saying, "Here, take it." She took them and started walking slowly toward the kitchen. It seemed as though she still didn't believe it was really happening, that if she should make a fast or sudden move, the eggs and bread would be gone. She carried the food to the kitchen like somebody carrying a large basin of water that was filled to the brim. When I heard Dixie moving about in the kitchen, I went in, feeling that everything was all right now and that she knew I hadn't played a joke on her.

Dixie was running some water into a small pot. She asked me if I wanted a boiled egg. I told her that I liked my eggs scrambled. She said the only grease in the house was some fish grease and if she scrambled the eggs in it, they would taste like fish. After she had put six eggs on the stove to boil, Dixie said she was sorry for scratching me and didn't mean what she had said about telling her brother to beat me up when he came home. I told her that I was sorry for laughing at her and that I hadn't meant to hit her so hard. I asked her if she wanted to make friends, and she said all right. We shook hands and started talking about the things we disliked in each other. She said I just thought I was too bad and was always messing with somebody. I told her that she was all right, but she should stop licking the snot off her lip when her nose was running. Also, I thought she looked crazy always pulling her bloomers up through her skirt.

While Dixie and I were testing out our new friendship, Debbie had come in and sat down. She just sat quietly and kept watching the pot. When Dixie got up and went over to the stove to turn the fire off beneath the pot, Debbie's eyes followed her. Dixie started cutting up eggs to make sandwiches, but I told her to just give me an egg and some salt. She made two sandwiches, one for herself and one for Debbie.

After the second round of eggs, Dixie sent Debbie downstairs to play. When Debbie had gone into the street, Dixie asked me if I wanted to play house, and I said okay. We got up from the milk crates that we had been sitting on in the kitchen. There were no chairs there. In fact, the only chair in the house was the one in the front room by the window. There had to be a chair in that spot. When Miss Jamie had money, she played numbers and waited all day long to hear what the first figure was. Mr. Bob, the number man, would come by and signal up to the window to let her know what each figure was as it came out. When he gave the signal, Miss Jamie would either say something about the Lord and send one of the kids down for her money or say,

"Oh-h-h, shit!" and send somebody down with some money to put on another figure...if she had any more money.

By the time Dixie and I reached the front room, we were old friends. She took off her bloomers without giving it a thought. She didn't want to lie down on the bed because it was wet from her little brothers sleeping there the night before. It didn't even bother her that her drawers were dirty and ragged. They looked as if she had been wearing them for months, but still she didn't ask me to turn around or close my eyes while she took them off. This meant we were real good friends now.

As I was leaving, I told Dixie that I would bring her something nice when I came back. She tried to get me to say what it was, and when she had failed at this, she said she didn't believe me anyway. But I knew she did and that she would be waiting for me to come back.

After she had finished telling me what a liar I was, I slapped her playfully and ran down the stairs. When I reached the street, I looked up and down the avenue for Bucky, but he wasn't around. So, I decided to wait in front of his house and let him find me.

Mr. Mitchell, the man who owned the fruit store next to Bucky's house, was afraid to go to the back of the store after seeing me sitting on the running board of a car in front of his store. Mr. Mitchell was a West Indian, and I didn't like him. I didn't like any West Indians. They couldn't talk, they were stingy, and most of them were as mean as could be. I like Butch, but I didn't believe that he was really a West Indian.

Mr. Mitchell was looking at me as if he thought I would jump up at any time and run away with his whole store. But I just sat there and looked right back at him. I thought about Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Lawson. Mr. Mitchell didn't seem to be a West Indian all the time, and he wasn't mean like Mr. Lawson. Mr. Lawson, who was the super of our house, was the meanest man on the Avenue. He was said to have killed half a dozen men. Dad had killed a man too, but that was for saying something nasty to Mama. I would have killed that bastard too. I think anybody would have killed him. Killing all those people wasn't what made Mr. Lawson mean. He was mean because he was a West Indian.

As I was sitting there on the running board of that car, I heard a voice that had always been pleasing to my ear as long as I could remember. It was little Pimp saying, "Sonny, Mama want you." Pimp was my favorite person in the whole family. Maybe that was because he was my only brother. Or maybe it was just because. Whenever I stayed away from home for days I missed him, and sometimes I would even go to the house of the lady who kept him, Margie, and Carole while Mama was working. I missed Margie and Carole too, but not as much as I missed Pimp. He was my brother, and that was different. I would always bring him something that I had stolen, like a cap gun or a water pistol. I was waiting for Pimp to grow up; then we could have a lot of fun together. Right now, all I could do was tell him about all the fun I was having outrunning the police, stealing everything I wanted, and sleeping in a different place every night. Man, I couldn't wait to teach him these things. That little nigger sure was lucky to have me for a brother. I threw my arm around Pimp and started choking him playfully as we started toward the house to see what Mama wanted me for.

When we got to the door, I stopped and told Pimp to be quiet. It was a habit of mine by now to listen at the door before going in. Whenever I heard a strange voice, I usually made a detour. But this day I was going in in spite of the strange voice. I knew it was safe even though it was strange, because it was a lady's voice. That meant that it couldn't be the cops or a truant officer, and I hadn't stolen anything from a lady that day, so it had to be just a visitor.

Mama was sitting in the living room on the studio cot drinking beer, and a light-skinned pretty lady was sitting in the big chair across from Mama, drinking beer too. I walked into the middle of the living room and stopped, staring at the lady who shouted out, "Is this Sonny Boy?"

When Mama answered, "Yeah, that's Sonny Boy," this woman just reached up and grabbed me with both hands, saying, "Boy, come here and kiss your aunt."

Before I could defend myself, she was smothering me to death between two gigantic breasts. I was let up for some air, but before I had taken two breaths, the lady was washing my face with sloppy kisses that stank from beer. I was getting mad and thinking that maybe I'd better tell her I didn't go for all that baby shit and that I didn't mean to have any more of it, aunt or no aunt. But when my long-lost aunt regained her senses and let me out of her bear hug, I wasn't mad any more. I had realized that this was just another one of those old crazy-acting, funny-dressing, no-talking people from down South. As I stood on the other side of the room looking at her, I was wondering if all the people down South were crazy like that. I knew one thing -- I had never seen anybody from down there who looked or acted as if they had some sense. Damn, that was one place I never wanted to go to. It was probably eating corn bread and biscuits all the time that made those people act like that.

Mama started telling Aunt Bea how Pimp got his name, because Aunt Bea had said, "That sho don't sound like nothin' to be callin' no child." When Mama started getting labor pains while she was carrying Pimp, there was nobody around to get an ambulance but Minnie, the neighborhood prostitute. Minnie called an ambulance, but was a long time coming, and Mama's pains were getting worse. Minnie got scared and ran out and got a cab and took Mama to the hospital.

All the way to the hospital, Minnie kept saying, "It better be a girl, 'cause I'm spending my last dollar on this cab, and I never gave a man no money in my life." Minnie was real proud to tell people that she had never had a pimp and would never give a nigger a dime. Well, when Mama came out of the operating room, Minnie was still out there with her fingers crossed and praying for it to be a girl. Minnie left the hospital cursing, but not before she had become a godmother and had named her godson Pimp. Mama told Minnie that she was sorry but that it must have been the Lord's will.

Minnie said, "That's all right, 'cause the cab fare was only seventy cents. And, anyway, he's such a cute little nigger, maybe he was born to be a pimp, and maybe it was in the cards for me to be the first one to spend some money on him." Minnie began teasing Mama about Pimp's complexion, saying, "Girl, you know you ain't got no business with no baby that light; it looks like it's a white baby....I know one thing -- that baby better start looking colored before your husband see him." Mama said all her children were born looking almost white. And that Carole was even lighter than that when she was born, but, that by the time she was five years old, she was the cutest little plump, dimple-cheeked black gal on Eighth Avenue. This was probably because my grandfather is more white than he is colored.

After Mama finished telling Aunt Bea how Pimp got his name, she started telling me and Pimp that Aunt Bea had a real nice farm down South. When she had told us all there was to tell about that real nice farm, Mama asked us if we wanted to go home with Aunt Bea when she left in a couple of weeks. Pimp said no because he knew that was what Mama wanted to hear. I said I wanted to go right away, because I had just heard about all those watermelon patches down South.

"In a couple of weeks, all you chillun goin' home with your Aunt Bea for the rest of the summer," Mama said.

I asked if I could have the beer bottle that was nearly empty. After I turned it up to my mouth and finished emptying it, I asked Pimp if he wanted to go to the show. We went into the kitchen to collect some more bottles to cash them in for show fare.

We could hear Mama and Aunt Bea talking in the living room. Mama was telling Aunt Bea how bad I was and that sometimes she thought I had the devil in me. Aunt Bea said that was probably true "'cause his granddaddy and his great-granddaddy on his daddy's side both had it." Next Aunt Bea was telling Mama how my great-grandfather, Perry Brown, had tied his wife to a tree and beat her with a branch until his arm got tired. Then she told Mama about what my grandfather, Mr. Son Brown, did to a jackleg preacher from Silver when he caught him stealing liquor from his still down in the Black Swamp. She said Grandpa circled around that old jackleg preacher and started shooting over his head with a shotgun and made the preacher run smack into a bear trap that he had set for whoever was stealing his liquor. After that the jackleg preacher only had one foot, and everybody said Mr. Son Brown shouldn't have done that to the preacher just for taking a little bit of whiskey.

I thought, Yeah, I guess there is a whole lotta devil in the Brown family and especially in Dad, 'cause he sure is mean.

Then I heard Aunt Bea ask Mama a familiar-sounding question: "Do you think somebody done work some roots on the po child?"

Mama said, "Lord, I sho hope nobody ain't work no roots on my child." Mama was quiet for a while, then she said, "They got some West Indian people around here who is evil enough to do anything to anybody, and they always 'fixing' somebody. I always tell that boy to stop playin' and fightin' with those West Indian chillun, but he just won't listen. Who knows? Maybe he done did sumpin to one-a those kids and they people found out about it and worked some root on him. Anything might happen to that little nigger, cause he so damn bad. Lord, I ain't never seen a child in my life that bad. I know one thing -- if I don't git that boy outta New York soon, my hair gonna be gray before I get thirty years old. Sumpin gotta be wrong with the boy, 'cause nobody in my family steal and lie the way he do, and none-a his daddy people ain't never been no rogues and liars like he is. I don't know who he could a took all that roguishness at.

"Seem like nobody can't make him understand. I talk to him, I yell at him, I whip his ass, but it don't do no good. His daddy preach to him, he yell at him, he beat him so bad sometimes, I gotta run in the kitchen and git that big knife at him to stop him from killin' that boy. You think that might break him outta those devilish ways he got? Child, that scamp'll look Jesus dead in the eye when he standin' on a mountain of Bibles and swear to God in heaven he ain't gon do it no more. The next day, or even the next minute, that little lyin' Negro done gone and did it again -- and got a mouthful-a lies when he git caught.

"And talk about sumpin mannish! I had to go to school with him one mornin' to see his teacher. I got the postcard on a Friday, and all that weekend I was askin' him what the teacher wanted to see me about, and all that weekend he was swearin' to some Gods and Jesuses I ain't never heard of before that he didn't know why in the world his teacher wanted to see me, unless somebody was tellin' lies on him again. And I told him, I said, 'Mind, now, my little slick nigger, you know I know you, and a lotta those lies people was tellin' on you was as true as what Christ told his disciples. Now, don't you let me go to that school and find out these lies they tellin' on you now got as much Gospel in 'em as those other lies had. 'Cause if I do, so help me, boy, I'm gonna take down your pants right there in that classroom and beat your ass until the Lord stop me.' He still kept sayin' he didn't do nothin' and had the nerve to poke out his lips and git mad at me for always blamin' him for sumpin he ain't did. You know that little Scamp had me huggin' and kissin' him and apologizin' for what I said to him?

"So, Monday mornin' rolled around, and I went to school with him. I had to watch him close, had hold his hand from the minute he got up that mornin', 'cause I could tell by the look in his eye that if I took my eye offa him, that would be the last time I'd see him for the whole week. When I got to the school and talked to the teacher, I came to find out this Negro done took some little high-yaller girl in the closet one day when the teacher went outta the room. After he done gone and got mannish with this little yaller girl, he's gonna go and throw the little girls drawers out the window. I almost killed that nigger in that classroom. As hard as people gotta work to get they kids clothes, he gon take somebody's drawers and throw 'em out the window. I bet you a fat man he never throwed nobody else clothes out no window. Ain't nothin' I kin do 'bout that high-yaller-woman weakness he got, 'cause he take that at his daddy. But I sho am glad they ain't got no little white girls in these schools in Harlem, 'cause my poor child woulda done been lynched, right up here in New York.

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"They had him down there in one of those crazy wards in Bellevue Hospital, but they let him come home, so I guess it ain't nothin' wrong with his head. I think one-a dem doctors did think Sonny Boy was a little crazy though, 'cause he kept talkin' to me with all those big words, like he didn' want me to know what he was tellin' me. I don' know, maybe he didn' say Sonny Boy was crazy. It mighta been that he just don' know how to talk to regular people. You know, mosta those white doctors don, know how to talk to colored people anyway.

"Some of his teachers even said he was smart in doing his school-work and when he wasn't botherin' nobody. The trouble is that he's always botherin' somebody. He had one teacher, a little Jew-lady teacher, she was just as sweet as she could be. And she liked Sonny Boy and was always tryin' to be nice to him. She use to buy his lunch for him when he went lyin' to her about bein' hungry, after hi done spend his lunch money on some ole foolishness. Well, one day she caught him lookin' up her dress, and she smacked him. Do you know that crazy boy hit her back? Yeah, I mean punch her dead in her face and made the poor lady cry. When I heard about it, I beat him for what seem like days, and I was scared to tell his daddy 'bout it, 'cause I know Cecil woulda killed him for doin' sumpin as crazy as that. And when I finished beating him, I told that nigger if I ever heard of him hitting or even talkin' back to that nice little Jew-lady again, I was gonna break his natural-born ass. Well, they throwed him outta that school right after that, so I guess he didn't git a chance to do that again.

"Yeah, sumpin is sho wrong with that boy, but I don' think he's crazy or nothin' like that, 'cause he got a whole lotta sense when it comes to gittin' in trouble. And when I stop to think about it, I don't believe nobody worked no roots on him, 'cause he got too much devil in him to be tricked by them root workers. But what coulda happen is that he went someplace and sassed some old person, and that old person put the bad mouth on him. Yeah, more'n likely that's what happened to him, 'cause he always sassin' old people. I beat him and keep tellin' him not to talk back to people with gray hair, but that little devilish nigger got a head on him like rock. Lord, I don' know what to do with that boy. I just hope Pimp don't never git that bad."

When I got tired of hearing how bad I was and about the roots and the bad mouth, I took Pimp to the show. On the way to the show, Pimp asked me to tell him about roots. I didn't want to tell him that I didn't know, because he thought I knew everything, almost as much as God. So I started telling him things about roots and root workers based on the tales I had heard Mama tell about somebody working roots on somebody else "down home." I said, "Only people down South work roots, because you can't git roots around here." Pimp wanted to know what was wrong with the roots in the park. "Those ain't the right kinda roots," I said. "You have to git roots that grow down South. All kinda roots grow down there -- money roots, love roots, good-luck roots, bad-luck roots, killin' roots, sick-makin' roots, and lotta other kinda roots."

"Sonny, do you know how to work roots?"

"Yeah, man, I can work some kinda roots, but some roots I'm not so sure about."

"Sonny, who teached you how to work roots?"

"Nobody. I just know 'cause I heard so much about it."

"Sonny, did you ever work any roots on anybody?"

"No, man, not yet."

"When you gonna work some on somebody?"

"When somebody who I can't beat make me real mad, that's when I'm gonna work some roots on somebody."

"You gonna work some roots on Daddy, Sonny?"

"No, man, he's too evil; you can't work roots on real evil people."

"Carole said God gon strike Daddy dead if he don't stop being so mean to us."

"Uh-uh, Pimp, I don't think God gon mess with Dad. 'Cause he woulda did it when Dad cut Miss Bertha husband throat that time or one-a those times when he beat me wit that ironing cord or that time when he cussed out the preacher. Not man, I don't think God gon mess wit Dad."

"Sonny, you think God is scared-a Daddy?"

"Man, I don't know. I know one thing -- all the stuff he been doin' ain't nobody but the police been botherin' him."

"Maybe God gonna put the police on Daddy, huh, Sonny?"

"Yeah, man, maybe."

"Sonny, Margie said they got snakes down South and they bite people and the people die when the snakes bite 'em. Is that true, Sonny?"

"Yeah, it's true, but they don't bite everybody. They didn't bite Dad, and they didn't bite Mama, and I know a whole lotta people they didn't bite."

"Sonny, is the boogeyman down South too?"

"Man, how many times I done told you it ain't no boogeyman?"

"But Margie keep on sayin' it is,"

"The next time she say it, punch huh in huh mout' real hard and she won't say it no more."



"Mama said the boogeyman comes around at night wit a big burlap sack and gits all bad kids and put in that burlap sack and nobody don't see 'em no more."

"Man, Mama's just try'n'-a scare you. You know it ain't no boogeyman, 'cause I told you so. You 'member all those times Mama and everybody use to say the boogeyman was gonna git me if I didn't stop bein' so bad? Well, I didn't git no gooder; I even got badder than I was then. Ain't no boogeyman got me yet. That's 'cause it ain't no boogeyman. Every place anybody even told me the boogeyman was, I went there and looked for him, but he ain't never been in none-a dem places. The next time somebody tell you the boogeyman is someplace, git you a big stick and go see him. If I'm around, come and get me and I'll show you it ain't no boogeyman."

"You ever been down South, Sonny?"

"Uh-uh not yet, but I know it ain't no boogeyman down there."

"They got crackers down there, ain't they, Sonny?"

"Yeah, Mama said they got crackers down South."

"Sonny, what is crackers? They ain't the kinda crackers you buy in the candy store, is they?"

"No, the crackers down South is white people, real mean white people."

"Is Mr. Goldman a cracker, Sonny?"

"No, he's a Jew."

"But he's white and look real mean."

"I know that, but some white people is crackers and some-a dem is Jews, and Mr. Goldman is a Jew. You see, Pimp, white people is all mean and stingy. If one-a dem is more stingy than he is mean, he's a Jew; and if he is more mean than he is stingy, then he's a cracker."

"But, Sonny, how kin you tell 'em?"

"That's easy. Just ask me. I'll tell you what they is."

"Sonny, I ain't goin' down South."

"Why ain'tcha?"

"'Cause they got snakes down dere, they got roots down dere, and they got crackers too. Uh-uh, I ain't goin' down dere. You goin, Sonny?"

"Yeah, I'm goin'."

"Why?"

"'Cause that judge said I better go."

Two weeks later, I was on my way down South for a summer vacation that lasted a year.

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