Garthwaite

Garthwaite carried no flash. His hood had no ornament. He did his back-to-school shopping at the Stonekill hardware store. He reveled in civic approval, shoveled snow gratis in front of the town library during salt shortages. He was a welcome sight in the grocery store parking lot. Summers he spent slinging Italian Ices at the Legion fields from an off-key ice cream truck. He was a constant, a solid, with cement fists and a face shaded with stubble. His uniform was rolled-up plaid, thick belt, faded denim with a tobacco ring in the back pocket, tightly-laced mustard boots.

When adults spoke of him he was always cast in an admiring light. They respected the legitimate hustles he took pains to maintain: the moving trucks, the cleaning company, all that community service. So after he put the Trenton interloper through a windshield in the boat launch parking lot, Ned's Glass replaced it free of charge and the DA dropped the case as soon as the kid woke up in his hospital bed and split back to Jersey against doctor's orders.

Outside Stewart's everyone leaned against their cars, blew smoke at the sky, poured pints of Old Raven into their milkshakes. They puffed their chests and turned down their radios when Garthwaite drove up. He cornered me by the air hose.

"What would you say is your biggest problem, Francis?" he asked.

They all seemed bad. Paul and my mother spent their nights chucking half-full beer mugs at each other across the kitchen table. The football team seemed to be doing fine without me, ever since I pissed dirty last season and got more or less permanently suspended. Any mention

of my father pushed me into a blind rage, but then so would pricking my finger while emptying the dishwasher. My dirt bike needed a new everything.

I knew what Garthwaite wanted. A recent skirmish over distribution had resulted in casualties. He'd been forced to retire some pretty legendary muscle. Meanwhile, my afternoons were free. A stranger might find me intimidating. "Guess I could use some money," I said.

When we were tykes the neighborhood toughs all drove candy-colored whips with pop-up headlights and modified mufflers, maybe a Jamaican flag glued to the bumper. They all got pinched, stripped of their juvenile status at trial and sent away with super-sized bids. Garthwaite drove a rusty Silverado with mismatched doors. The bench seat cackled when I climbed aboard. The interior smelled like spearmint spit.

"Where we going?" I asked.

"I need your help, big man," he said. I blushed, rubbed my hands together and felt the grime build in the wide grooves of my palms.

"How many sacks you get freshman year?"

"Not sure," I said.

"Enough for All-Conference," he said. He didn't seem to appreciate my modesty, as it withheld information.

"Weak year, that year," I said.

"Yeah," he said, "it was." When we crossed the bridge I could see the usual shopping carts spiked through the scabs of ice on the river, the spooky glow of the tags scrawled on the abandoned rail cars. No one went to East Kill unless they were cutting through to the outlet mall

or buying weight. “You know Finch and Stark?”

“Sure,” I said. “The last whites dudes in Little Somalia.”

Finch and Stark were two screwheads who dropped out, moved into a trailer along the river and dealt meth for some Syracuse bikers. A few weeks prior their lab had gone up in flames. Word was maybe Garthwaite torched it for their territory. Others figured they were cooking and fucked up their math.

“I just need you as lookout while I talk to them a minute,” he said.

Garthwaite pulled up outside Lady Fingers. This was the kind of hole where we used to find my father, dingy rooms with a healthy take-out business and a shotgun under the bar. Soon enough the marks stumbled out draped all over each other, brown bags in their fists. Garthwaite killed the engine, reached across my lap and pulled an ice scraper out of the glovebox.

Stark was in a jovial mood. “Mr. Garthwaite,” he said, smiling. His wallet chain and dead front tooth caught the light of a crooked street lamp. I figured if he was this comfortable maybe he hadn’t told the bikers about Garthwaite. He still thought he had somewhere to wiggle, something to trade. Meanwhile, Finch was just dumb muscle. I regarded him with a cool measure of professional courtesy.

Garthwaite backhanded Stark, who fell back into the brick wall and cracked his head. Garthwaite grabbed him by the neck and rooted through the greasy hair until he found the break in the skin, then scalped him with the ice scraper. I kept one eye on Finch, but he kept still, his hands in his pockets, his bagged bottle between his wet feet. When Garthwaite was done he dropped the bloody pelt on the sidewalk and headed back to the car. Stark was slumped against a mound of dirty snow, steam rising off the gash in his skull. When I opened the door,

Garthwaite was fiddling with the radio dials, the scraper between his clenched teeth, a slick tuft of hair stuck to its edge.

"Good work," he said. "Wanna come over after school tomorrow?"

"Sure," I said.

In the afternoon stink of the locker room everyone was talking about Garthwaite and Stark. I kept my mouth shut. "Scalped the punk," said Heywood, standing naked in the center of the room. Heywood and I used to play on the line together. "Sure, those kids are trash, but what happens when their biker friends catch word? Not sure I want to be Garthwaite on that particular day."

"Nice to have some white-on-white crime in the neighborhood," said Amiir. "Raises property values."

Amiir's family moved from Mogadishu to East Kill for millwork. Then the mill got busted clogging the river with poison, shuttered production and moved to Georgia. Amiir pretty much made Stonekill High safe for the refugee kids. He strangled a dude in the cafeteria with a window blind after he found a Swastika carved into his French book. Soon he was dating this redhead Mandy with a downtown eye doctor dad.

"What happened to Finch?" said Heywood.

"Word is he's hiding out in the Falls with his sister," said Amiir.

I strapped on my gloves. I liked to pump iron until my arms floated upwards on their own accord.

"You guys catch Stevens today?" asked Heywood.

Nicole Stevens. She was in our grade until middle school, when her dad jacked her from the bus stop one morning after a custody fight. Two years later she was back, angry and curvy. She wore metallic eye make-up and lost nails in hallway fights. Garthwaite turned her out halfway through freshman year. Summertime you'd see her in the ice cream truck down at the ball fields, her painted toes hanging out the window. If you could scrape together $75 she'd take you down to the handicap bathroom. Most guys wouldn't admit to paying, though they all took the free shots at the nurse's office when someone got sores in their mouth.

When we got out to the weight room Coach Babson was in the corner, talking to one of the trainers. He stopped by the bench, swatted Heywood on the ass and complimented Amiir on his calf definition. He wouldn't even look at me. My face was red in the mirror even before I started my first rep.

Mrs. Garthwaite's arms were puffy with gauze and tubes and tape. She offered us stale soda bread and margarine. Garthwaite settled her back down, pulled a Genesee can from the kitchen trash and led me down the thin hallway to his room. We sat in two old chairs he must've found in a dumpster behind a gutted Caroline Street dive. His brother's medals shined on the wall. Scales lifted from the school Bio lab beeped on a crowded bureau. The mouth of the can caved in under the point of Garthwaite's elbow. He stuck in a pinch and wiped his lips.

"So listen," he said. "Last night was the easy part."

I started rubbing a bit of mildew with my thumb. My chair was crawling with it.

"Those bikers are cheesed at Stark, but they might still show." He picked a fleck of tobacco off his wide, otherwise spotless tongue. "Who knows what they'll want to do about it."

"What do you think they're going to do?" I asked.

"Do you like it when someone takes your money?"

"I don't have any money," I said.

"I don't know if they'll want to come all the way down here." He spat neatly into the can. "Just in case, I'd like to get up with those goblins in capital city."

"Oh yeah?" My cousin's crew. Mostly a joke. Their showpiece heavy was just a lug, some Samoan, and everyone else had spray-painted hair and safety pins through every lobe, brow and nostril.

"Offer them east Kill."

"Where's the weight coming from?" I asked, mainly to see if he'd tell me.

"The reservation," he said.

"What about Chief?" Chief was this wild man that rode with Stark's biker connect, had a jacket full of feathers and metal. You'd catch him during race season swilling Mad Dog in the parking lot off Caroline, starting shit with the loudmouths and horse people from the city.

"Chief's no Indian," said Garthwaite. "He's Italian. His last name's Trombino."

That was hard for me to picture. "I'll call Albany," I said.

I chewed the stale wafers as I walked home. Someone was burning leaves. My feet were cold. The late-afternoon moon was a thumbprint in the sky. I trusted Garthwaite. At the beginning of the school year he slipped a bag of crank through the slits of Adam Levine's locker, made an anonymous tip to school security. After they busted Levine and started pestering him for his supplier, Garthwaite made another call and the cops found a raw kilo in Mr. Knudsen's basement. Word was Levine had gotten rough with Nicole one too many times

and Knudsen had been grading Garthwaite's in-class essays unfairly.

The official Albany crew name was something too ridiculous to dignify, so Garthwaite just called them goblins. They were skinny street punks who rolled drunks and tagged municipal buildings. On the night I met with them Garthwaite was busy accepting the Frank Boscoe Citizenship Award from the Elks Club for spearheading a recycling drive at the Stonekill Nursing Home.

We sat in the corner of La Kookaracha, the Mexican joint on the service road with the dim jalapeño lights. My cousin's hair was like gleaming steel. His denim jacket was stained and tattered, loosely stitched together with angry patches and badges. I sucked a Dr. Pepper through a straw. My cousin had a beer foam mustache clinging to his peach fuzz. He was hesitant to absorb East Kill into his territory.

"We're friendly with the refugee kids," I said.

"So why don't you handle the trade?" he asked. "Why get us involved?"

"And here I was, thinking I was doing you a favor."

He emptied the pitcher into his glass. Some flunky rushed to get a new one. The last time I'd seen him, at another cousin's baptism, he spent the whole afternoon tied up on our aunt's kitchen phone, answering pages from lieutenants.

"You've done well," I said.

"A few guys went upstate," he said.

"Locked up or college?"

"Some of each." He shrugged. "There was a vacuum."

I leaned into his shiny, tortured ear. “This money’s real, sport.”

He sighed. “I’ll have the accountant run the numbers.”

I knew their accountant, a Math Club whiz kid who kept the books for his father’s vending machines. He’d be fair. “Thank you,” I said. I moved to touch the spikes on his head in affection. The flunkies held me by the wrists until he waved them off.

On the bus ride home my mother called, asked me to pick up milk. When I got to the store Nicole was in the toothpaste aisle, a basket on her arm. An employee walked by, his eye on her. I cocked a fist and he scurried away.

“The attention would be flattering,” she said, straightening her skirt, “but I know why he’s looking. I used to lift certain items. Now they keep the good stuff behind the counter. Tell me something, Franny: Why don’t you ever come see me?”

I blushed and changed the subject. “I think my dad knows your dad.”

“So what?” she said. “Good for him. A lot of people’s dads are locked up in there.”

“I know,” I said.

“What, yours is special?”

“No,” I said.

Pops sat in solitary, got his food through a hole in the wall. He was no big wig inside. His crime had been foolish, brutal. He swore he couldn’t remember it.

“So what do you say?” She sharpened her cheeks. “Want me to make you feel good?”

“Nah.” I kicked at a banana sticker stuck to the floor. “I mean, no thanks.”

“Then scram,” she said, dropping her shoulders. “I’ve gotta buy girlie stuff.”

I went to the diary aisle, bought skim even though I knew my mother wanted two

percent. When I got home dinner was already burnt and cold, the milk forgotten. In my room I wrote a letter to my father, told him all about Nicole. I didn't mention her last name, her father, the handicap bathroom. I swabbed up and stuck a dart just below my hip before falling into bed and curling into a ball. I was still awake and sweating when Garthwaite rapped on my window.

We drove past the horse track and over the highway. "The bikers are here," he said. "Stark must've hobbled back or sent word. There's a stack of twenty bikes outside the Pinewood Lodge. They've been riding around the lake all night. I'm hungry."

We pulled into a gas station. "Hello, Rudy," said the clerk. Man, I hadn't heard anyone call Garthwaite that for so long I'd forgotten it was his Christian name. He sent me to get paper towels and lighter fluid while he chose a hot dog from the rollers. When we met at the counter he handed one to me, wet with relish. "Please," said the clerk, showing his palms when Garthwaite tried to pay. "It's on the house."

We sat with our backs against the side of Garthwaite's car, rolling up the towels and soaking them in fluid. The fumes went to my head. The sky was a sheet of black ice. What little light remained reflected weakly off the motorcycle chrome. I thought there was a chance that the bikers were here for something else, maybe for no reason at all. But Garthwaite knew better. He relied too heavily on the illusion of coincidence to be tricked by it himself. He soaked the sheets and I twisted their ends into points.

Once they were all laid out on the pavement he went to his trunk, pulled out an empty Slice bottle, a tin of turpentine and some chain. He sprayed what was left of the lighter fluid into

the bottle until it wheezed. “Gimme your shirt,” he said. He ripped off a sleeve. I stood there shivering for a moment, hoping he would notice the bicep he’d bared. Instead, he poured the turpentine over the cloth and plugged the bottle with it.

We started on opposite ends, unscrewing the hogs’ fuel tanks and feeding the towels down into the spigots. When we met in the middle Garthwaite fished a Zippo out of his pocket and handed it to me. We hurried to the car and the pile of chain on the ground. They clinked and rattled as Garthwaite wrapped them around his fists.

“Okay,” he said. “Here’s how this works.”

The first few flicks of the Zippo went dry before the flame caught. I protected it with the cup of my hand, lit the fuses and stood way back, my feet wet in the muck at the edge of the lake, the cocktail in my hand. That first blast pulled them out the front door in a rush. They stood dazed in the courtyard, shielding their faces from the heat. By the time they saw Garthwaite he was already on them. For me, that’s Garthwaite, boiled down to a single memory: A dark figure running through a crowd of doped up bikers, swinging a rusty chain from each side, a parking lot on fire behind him. These guys were spitting blood and teeth onto the ruined grass when I got the signal and launched the bottle. Then they flailed like dolls made of flames. They rolled on the ground or ran to the water. On the way to school the next morning we could still see smoke from The Pinewood rising over the lake.

“Cops got Coach Babson cold on a statutory beef,” said Heywood a few days later as we groaned over iron. “He’s stepping down, effective immediately.”

My weights clanged on the floor. “With who?”

"Who you think? They're already talking about shaking some money out of the boosters for a Steel Valley replacement. Maybe the new guy will give you another shot, Franny."

I found Garthwaite in the hallway on his way to Statistics. "Thank you," I said.

"No problem," he said.

"Won't she have to testify?"

"I don't think it'll get to that," he said.

The bell rang and the hallway drained.

Nobody saw Nicole for a long time. Garthwaite said she was getting her GED through Stonekill Community. Then, in the fall, she came to a Friday night game. I was clean, Player of the Week two weeks running. I caught her silvery eye in the stands and held it. She ate pinches of cotton candy. Behind her, scouts in fedoras wrote on notepads. I lowered my helmet, dug my fingers into the cold grass and swore to myself I'd be strong enough to forget. I knew men who'd fallen into the trap of considering a woman's past nothing but a series of long-planned slights. My father was one of those men. When any of it crossed my mind I closed my eyes and took it out on the guy across the line. Once he was down, it was just me and the doomed motherfucker holding the ball.

Garthwaite recognized something that the rest of us may have innately understood but never resisted. He hacked away at the world. That's why this upstate kid spent three years dismantling satellite crews of big city gangs with something close to righteousness. That's why he sent guys up to block the Northway with overturned semis when the Feds started beating on the reservation. That's why he shook down the horse crowd every summer. That's why he

volunteered at the nursing home, slipping back in at night to raid the nurses' station. That's why he operated a cleaning service specializing in medical offices. That's why he kept a freezer in that ice cream truck full of crystal and cheap menthols, a sixteen-year-old whore perched on top for good measure.

That he got put down was inevitable. I was luckier, scored what I still consider a break: three years of college for state-sponsored ball. Without that, I probably wouldn't have my gimp knee or these sore feet in my work boots. But sometimes I drive over that dead river into East Kill on the way to the outlet mall or step out of an ice fishing hut and spot the rubble of the Pinewood and I'm saddened when I realize that, these days, I know very few people like him.