

THE ZOO

IT was the end of the month and Freddy knew where they could find him. He'd go where the money was, to drift around the bars with art hanging on the walls, bars that would never let him drink inside, ever since he was nobody, another broken container spilling out into the sidewalk.

The cops called him Rocky because he was a white boy who could fight. Most of them had forgot his actual name unless they actually ran his prints. But most of them, most of the patrolmen who needed a petty bust, knew where to look. And the others, well, the others had been working a game since back before he ever took a charge.

He wasn't much to look at, once welter, now middle weight maybe. Sweat or road-salt had bleached his Carharts and he wore a hoodie up over his shoulders. Today, they found him up in Mount Vernon, hunched into himself, skulking around the park, eye-fucking people as they'd call it which wasn't necessarily a crime but, with Rocky, they could always do a quick frisk and find something, whether it be a rig, blade or boosted bracelet he needed to fence.

The wagon came northbound on Davis, lit him up and sat. It was Engel, who had shaved his moustache recently, driving. Engel greeted him with a smile, his skin rubbed raw with razor-burn, chapped white in the creases. Drink had dilated his pores and the amiability that once might have drawn people to him was now turned into a vulgar honesty that all of this might be frivolous and meaningless, but it needed doing anyway.

It was the usual. Suspicious activity. Anonymous call. Disturbance in the area. Fact was, this area didn't get too many calls and to find Rocky here was sort of a blessing for them, especially on a fine, clear spring day such as today.

The younger cop, Reynolds, on the name badge, didn't seem familiar. But, or cops like Engel, it was the street, the basicness and familiarity which kept him from seeking promotion like the other cops. He liked it because he knew mopes like Freddy. And he knew, that everyone needed something.

The wagon was like a steel barrel that never dried. Or it was just piss. Maybe it was cop's piss or some drunk degenerate they picked up bothering tourists at the Harbor. It was always wet, even on dry days, days when the sun blazed through the sooty snow heaps, dumpster runoff and shaded ice-packs until it was like all the watercolors of a palette are pushed together, melded to one, hard shapeless grey.

Freddy hadn't eaten in a while. More importantly than that, he hadn't gotten well. There hadn't been anything around in some time and maybe that was why he was up there where he shouldn't be, in Mount Vernon where all the homos and downtown lawyers walked their dogs and sat outside in cafes. Not that Freddy wanted any trouble with them. He just had his hood pulled over his head, walking through the park like anyone else searching for something.

It must have been that school field trip leaving the art museum that put in the call. Or that barkeep who eighty-sixed him once who was outside having a smoke up toward Penn Station. Or that ballerina bitch with the poodle. Anyone could have had it in for him. Which was what he knew. Even if no one called it in, a cruiser, hopefully, the right cruiser would scoop him up.

"We got to get you a good challenger today, Rocky?" Engel aid, patting him down.

"I'm sure you do. Knew you'd find me. Yeah, I knew it."

“He’s a quick one. A real vault-cracker,” Engel said to Reynolds.

“You do something we gotta put to you. Anything in the pockets?”

“Nah. I was just minding my own. Enjoying the sun like everyone else.”

“They know him up there,” Engel said to his partner once they were driving. “He knows he can catch a near-nothing charge cuz someone will call something in up there. He knows that’s my spot too and I always appreciate the business.

“Look at him,” Engel continued. “He looks like seven shades of shit and walks around with that hood pulled up. Not to mention most the bars around there got eyes on him so he don’t come in there to pry beers off the happy hour crowd.”

Reynolds said, “You a fag Rocky? I never heard of a golden gloves fag.”

“My name ain’t Rocky.” And then lower, “You go into one of those joints one night and shout that why don’t you.”

“What’s that?”

“My name ain’t Rocky.”

“Oh yeah? I heard you’re the champ. Yu used to line ‘em up and knock ‘em down.”

“Once upon a time. Ways back.” It hurt to bend his fingers but he still could. He could still take a hit, lean into one to get inside and do some body work.

“Rocky gets scooped up on purpose just like any other bum. Isn’t that right, Rock? Got to keep himself high and warm just like any other mope.”

Sunlight began to wane. Cobwebs of light dulled and the sounds of traffic grew heavier. They might have been driving in circles.

They had given Freddy a cheeseburger from some fast food place so he that had food in his stomach. Engel had stepped out to smoke while the other cop stayed inside. He had been talking about how he'd been transferred from another district but had heard things, quiet things. He had boxed too. He talked about himself as most people do before asking a question that Freddy ignored

The driver-side door opened. "Smoke bothers you 'eh Freddy? One fucking vice you never got wet on?" And then to the other. "We got one. Warrant-free so no need to take him in. Two-time loser just like Rocky back there. And..." He elevated his voice like the showman he might have aspired to be. "A bonafide badass."

"What'd he get picked up on?" Reynolds said.

"Normal dealing shit. Pedaling horse, Rock."

"Man, no one says that shit anymore," Freddy said.

"And here I was thinking I gave a fuck about the current slang."

Engel turned on the heat. "You cold back there, Rock? Gotta get you warm; loose. I heard this kid is a real fucking beast. Took on two armed stick-up boys up near Druid Hill Park last week was the word around the campfire. Sent one of 'em to the E.R at Sinai. You hear me back there, Rock?"

He half-heard. It was always some hard-ass neighborhood kid. It was always someone who could take a hit, who no one would report when they didn't go home. Those who noticed would figure he had

finally struck out and the door had shut for good. It was never a volunteer, never someone who approached and asked thinking it a shortcut to a reputation. It was always the same talk.

“What’s your record now, Rock?” Engel said. And when he didn’t get an answer. “Come on, how many bouts there been?”

“Eight,” Freddy said.

“So 8-0? You should be proud. I gotta be honest, I don’t even know if we got a guy who can take him. He’s that fucking good.”?

“You trying to get me to put down money?” Reynolds said. “Trying to stiffen the odds?”

“There’s good money on Blackie. He’s the bitch of the bunch apparently. Even money is what I’m hearing on my phone.”

Reynolds leaned over and said, “What if someone says something?”

“What’d you think *he* will? He hasn’t just lifted some old biddy’s watch. He’s done some real dirt. No one is going to care this way or around the corner about some junkie or dope dealer. This just breaks up the bullshit of all this catch-and-release-revolving-door nonsense we do every day. And their lives? Ask him. He wanted to get picked up for this. This will keep him in dope for the next couple weeks. He’d have to knock over fucking Pimlico for that kind of score.” He leaned back, satisfied with himself. “It’s good for us. Especially if we pick the fucking winner.”

It was dark and all there was for Freddy to do was stare through the grating on the back window and guess where they were going. It was West, sure, but possibly north too.

The cops were talking shop, who'd been promoted who wasn't cut out for the job, who they fucked a lifetime ago. In all the years Freddy had been dealing with them, very little seemed to have changed. Once in a while, he'd see one on television and they'd be talking the way they did in court, like they'd begrudgingly swallowed some college at some point and had the utmost respect for duty. But the way he'd known them was different. Hell, a couple of them grew up around the neighborhood, tough-shit boys who'd brawl out their differences in Patterson Park the same way he did.

The van stopped under a jaundiced streetlight. There must've been another cruiser nearby with the door open because Freddy could hear the radio going.

They must have been in or near a park because there wasn't any other, real-people voices asking what the fuck was going on. There wasn't the piglet-squeal of bicycle wheels or arthritic hinges giving way to rowhome doors cracking open. Nope, they were away from the civilians.

A moment later someone pulled open the door and the light poured in like bruised orange juice and there were a half-dozen or so other cops out there behind someone in cuffs facing the van. The cops stood in a semi-circle like they expected the fight to happen right here. But Freddy knew it wouldn't.

A couple uniforms pushed the handcuffed man inside the van where he tripped and fell onto the floor. One of them laughed but the body on the floor just muttered, "motherfucker," before two cops pulled him up slightly and then pushed him into the van again where he landed in a squat position and glared at up at Freddy.

The door behind them shut and all they could hear were voices volleying back and forth, shit-talking, conspiring.

He leaned his head back and studied Freddy's resolve. His features were ironed out; blank.

"They tell you anything?" Freddy broke the silence after some time.

“What the fuck they gonna tell me?” He seemed as though he might spit but then only tongued at something in his mouth.

“Why you’re here.”

“I don’t know Baltimore for shit. These motherfuckers busted my ass twice in a week. Like they was looking for me.”

“Where you from?”

“D.C as if it’s any of your fucking business. Got people up here though. Five-oh sweatin’ my dick down there so I come up here and same shit. Motherfuckers get a show made about ‘em and they think they’re Remington Steel or some shit.”

Freddy laughed. “Remington Steel? Shit, that’s from when I was a kid. I’ve never met a brother—”

“An uncle did a piece someplace where they watched that shit like as regular as shit-loaf dinner. Made me watch it with him when I was a young-un so I stayed outside. Lotta good that shit did. Figured all old white boys would know that shit.”

“I never seen it. Where your uncle do time?”

“Don’t know. Hagerstown maybe. I done Jessup and it wasn’t that.”

The doors opened and slammed shut in front. Engel turned around. “You two acquainted and all that back there. Don’t get all kissy-kissy just yet. Rocky meet Baldwin.”

“What the fuck’s he talking about?” The man said.

Freddy shook his head.

“You too ever been to the zoo?” Reynolds shouted.

“They going to feed us to the lions or some shit?” Baldwin said.

Freddy sat back, curled his toes. One of his toenails, throbbed, sung with a nauseous pain that bleated and spread into the whole foot. It had been happening for some time but didn’t in the long run, really matter all that much. “That wouldn’t be enough fun.”

Baldwin, sighed. “So why the fuck they taking us there?”

“No one will bother them there.” Freddy tapped his foot, tried to feel something else aside from pain. “Law’s supposed to be what separates us, isn’t it? When someone asks what separates us from animals, people say something like, rule of law.”

“Yeah, and what the fuck is that anyhow, if it’s put against a man all the damn time?”

“It can be put against anybody. Don’t matter who he is, as long as he ain’t shit to them.”

Baldwin clicked his tongue. “You seem like you know some shit I don’t.”

“Most people don’t talk this much.”

“Most people? What’s all that mean?” Baldwin pushed his weight forward.

“Most people they put in the meat locker back here. They know the drill. They don’t say shit ‘cuz there ain’t shit to be don. A man shows his cards when he opens his mouth.”

“Motherfucker, you don’t know shit about me. I could talk all day, call you my homie, sugar you up and all that and then slit your fuckin throat after dinner. You can make a hustle easier than Kool-Aid.”

“We just crossed the Jones Falls. I can hear the Freeway.”

“And where the fuck is the zoo?”

“Closer to where we were. They’re killing time, I’m guessing.” He paused. “You scared?”

“I’ve caught a beating or two from the police. Nothing new to me.”

“You usually give out the beatings though.”

“You get some, you learn to give back. Isn’t there a name for that?”

“Yeah,” Freddy said. “Survival. What the fuck else is there?”

The door up front slid open. Reynolds was drinking from a wax cup through a straw. “You lovebirds getting to know each other.”

“How good you feel Baldwin?” Engel said. “You got this huh?”

Baldwin didn’t say anything. He let them talk at him.

“You could whoop a broke-down junkie like this right? He ain’t got no dance left in his walk. It’s all been beat out of him. You got king of the corner status out there when we drop you off whole.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about officer. I don’t know nothing.”

“You throw our boy Rock there a beating tonight, you clean his clock, then we let you go. How’s that sound? We let you go with the shit we took off you. Not only that, but you get rep off that. You know who that is back there?”

It was quiet until Baldwin repeated that he didn’t know anything.

“He’s all you got between yourself and freedom.”

Freddy straightened his smile. What they were saying was true. There was always truth in what they said. But, he also knew, there was no way Engel had his money on Baldwin. This was the banter, the normalcy they had created. It was a way to juke the odds, a simple mindfuck.

“Not much huh? Nothing at all really. Hell, I could take apart Rock here. He used to be hard, sure. But rocks crumble too right?” Quite pleased with his own wit, Engel shut the trap again and the voices up front became animated, televised voices from two doors down.

There was the obligatory moment of silence that Freddy knew better than to break. Eventually though, curiosity or something else would get the better of Baldwin. “So,” he eventually said. “You really think officer Big Mac up there could take you apart?”

Freddy laughed. He laughed and shook his head. “Do I look like two slabs of meat and special sauce, man?”

“You look like you need a fucking shower.”

“Yeah. I’m up around the bend with that thing, you know?”

Baldwin nodded and leaned his head back. “Don’t we all. You ain’t got the bug do you?”

“Aw, fuck man,” Freddy said.

“Well they said you out there sucking dick and shit too.”

“Nah man, I ain’t got the bug. I bleed the same as you. Last time I checked at least.”

Baldwin was looking at Freddy’s feet that he had managed to secure. “You know how to throw down, huh? I don’t see it.”

“Most don’t. I boxed for a minute.”

“For money?”

“For what else man? Shit. Yeah. Furthest I got was A.C. Some shithole casino up there. I remember all the cigarette smoke and the mat smelling like beer, like pissed-out beer.”

“He laid you out huh?”

“I think all the Demerol in me laid me out more than anything. I couldn’t even say the man’s name who beat me that time. It doesn’t matter anyway does it?”

“Just a name, I suppose.” Baldwin stared patiently out the back window for a moment before he said. “So you any good still? Skills like that don’t just go to bed.”

“Nah. It lays down though.”

“So what you get if you beat me?”

“Same thing as you. Keep hanging in for a little while until they collect me again. Man, we both just pay them to be on the street. Everybody figures, ‘why shouldn’t it be me’. They feel put out. They feel like they gotta keep a lid on a box full of blowing dynamite and we all owe something. Especially us. We’re all just shit on their shoe.”

The cold was coming in like it did at night. Freddy could get used to the cold, to the dry, dry knife-edge carving cold that came at night and the knowing yowl of a beaten dog. In the end, this was another night, a deck of cards of nights that never seemed to add up to anything but non-sequential unsuited nothingness. To get well, to feel something again, that was better than another night down by Penn Station trying to hustle up fares for the Nigerian cabbies who’d kick him back a couple bucks, or the occasional bouncing job to some unsuspecting, desperate bar owner.

The van was in some sort of tunnel. Baldwin might have been breathing but, in that moment, he was gone, gone from here and anywhere else. Freddy couldn’t see his own hands, feel his own feet. For a minute there might have been some sort of quiet, some sort of peace, but they emerged and descended a hill and music, some sort of vaguely familiar music was playing from the front seat.

“You got your nerves steady kid?” Engel said. “I know you ain’t got nerves left Freddy. Nerves die off like anything else if you make a practice out of killing them.”

The van humped over a curb and moved slowly.

“We do patrols through here,” Engel said.

“No one thinks a bunch of cops gathering in here is a bit fucked up?” Reynolds said.

“They can think what they want. I know I’d be thinking we found a body up here. Wouldn’t be the first time.” Engel turned down the music, some sort of classical music, Wagner, he had said. This was normal, for him. No other type of music exuded control. “Faust,” he had said. His father had listened to this. It was music that gods would listen to if they walked amongst us. He might have seemed lost in it, immersed, as if they weren’t inside a zoo in East Baltimore but in another place, another time that Freddy could only imagine. “No quite the ghetto-blaster jungle music huh?” He said, turning, so proud of his own discerning taste.

Baldwin stretched his arms out and then pulled them into his chest. He had his focus fixed on something, on a bolt pounded into the corrugated rim of the door, a single knuckle like anything else. “Gotta do what we gotta do, right?” He said to someone.

It was dark with only the interruption of a streetlight here or there and the smell, of damp and hay and dung, reminded Freddy of his senses, that they might still be a part of him.

“How you feeling champ? Feel like your old self? Goddamn you used to be something. Almost made a boy proud of the town he’s from.” The van stopped. Beyond it, there were lanterns, electric lanterns like a suburban backyard and an entrenched, stained fecal smell.

“Yeah,” Engel said. “I saw you fight. Saw you throw down on some black kid out of Reisterstown. Damn near knocked the jaw out the side of his face. Hell of a thing. What was it though? Couldn’t take

the pain? In your head or your hands? Jesus Christ, what a fucking waste. You might have been something. Now," he nodded toward Baldwin, "this piece of shit never had a shot of being anything at all I'm sure. He's doomed just like his daddy and seventeen cousins but you, you always had a shot and you fucked it off. Damn sad thing.

Engel removed himself from the front, made salutations to the men who were waiting for him. Freddy could smell the Tullamore Dew and Miller from where he sat.

It was Reynolds who opened the back. His mouth was parted slightly where a gasp of worry was fluttering up in him. This wasn't in the rulebook. But he managed to lock himself up when Engel joined him, snapping open a can of High Life, tilting the can in the light and smiling as if he were actually a promoter and not just a man in a zoo with two prisoners.

The music escalated. A younger voice made a joke but a senior voice shot him down, told him that this sort of thing was timeless, was good for everyone.

Engel turned to appreciate the moment before he stepped away and two other square-shouldered cops appeared to escort Baldwin down, out of the box and into the light where he seemed smaller, packed into himself until he stood, swiveled his head back and hardened his bottom jaw. And now, Engel wagged a key at Freddy and motioned for him to turn around. "Now you know I got faith in you champ," he was saying amongst other things.

Freddy turned, lowered his hands enough so Engel could get him uncuffed. As Engel leaned into him, he whispered. "I got so much faith, I got five large on you tonight. You win and I got a down payment on a boat down the shore. You got this you dirty fucking bitch."

And Freddy might have. He really might have. He could feel his arms again as the cuffs came off. All the electric static gathered in his limbs slipped away. He hunched his shoulders and breathed in a

good mouthful of air. Engel was behind him, the can at his lips, and, before Freddy could think otherwise, he turned and threw a hook, quick as any he dealt a decade earlier, right into the can that crushed in Engels teeth and made a sound like a nail in a steel barrel.

A ribbon of blood unfurled. Engel doubled over and spit, white spit-foam and blood and warbled curses. He stamped his foot, spit again. He sucked in bottom lip. A couple of the cops on the periphery snickered but most were steadfast eye-fucking Freddy like he just pissed in their collective drinks.

Another cop, one Freddy recognized too put his arm around Engel. "After the fight, Martin," he said. "We put him down now, he don't stand a chance in hell of winning. We need the pool. You need the pool, Martin."

Engel straightened himself and turned to Freddy. "You bite the hand," he said. "You fucking animal. You fucking--"

"He might have turned eventually. Even the best trained primate will do that," the other said.

"You like breathing air?" Engel said. "You like the taste as much as that dope? You win tonight. You win tonight or you might not taste either again you fucking garbage." He staggered before he began to regain himself, straighten and breathe steady. He wanted to hit back. He wanted it so much that Freddy could see him tremble as if being wired into an electric surge. A cooler was presented to him. He drew out a beer, snapped it open and made some remark that only the semi-circle around him could hear. He rolled some of the beer around in his mouth and spurted, which, which from the distance that Freddy could see, was like some cherubic fountain out in the county somewhere. For a brief sliver of a moment there was grace in that man's gait, something that he would forget in the moment after when he turned to yell, "get them in the fucking pit," to some subordinate, some patrolmen even further down the chain of command than he was.

There were stairs down the side, and the police, the uniformed police formed short a phalanx, split Freddy and Baldwin apart and led them each down. The heavy smell of shit, of shit tonnage inhaled by the concrete quickly became a burden for some of the cops who covered their mouths with their sleeves. But Freddy, he lived under bridges, in men's shelters that smelled like rusted out cans of beef barley soup and seat-spatter diarrhea so this, this was nothing. This was how the coliseum might've smelled after the lions and bodies had been dragged away, Freddy thought and took his place in the center, breathed deep and stretched himself. From here, he could see Engel, his face dangling there over the side of the bowl and he smiled.

Baldwin didn't blink. He wouldn't blink if someone flicked shit in his eyes. He kept his stare straight ahead. They might have been leading him down the final hallway for the way he seemed intent on not allowing them to get the better of them. He would not allow himself to smell the shit or heed the taunts of the cops up above. They were calling him Apollo. Someone called out a summon for bets on Apollo. He was Apollo to Freddy's Rocky.

The music was distant as a pair of headlights shared more light. The police who had ushered Baldwin down, turned and filed back up the stairs.

It was just the two of them. Baldwin eyed Freddy but knew better than to make a move. They would wait to be told what to do.

The music lowered. There must have been a few dozen, all encircling the Hippo pit. He was talking inaudibly from the bottom, calling out statistics and rules. Of course there couldn't be open discussion of this anywhere. If they were better showmen there might have been more, might have been a more decorous preamble, but, instead a handkerchief of some kind was produced, a white one and it was understood that once it landed on the concrete floor, they would proceed to maim one another in any way they saw fit.

It caught a gust of wind and sailed in an arc before catching the weight of something and falling. It lay there for a moment and Freddy allowed himself to study its crumpled body while he knew that Baldwin was clocking him, his feet poised off heels and spread apart for balance, a loose sort of guard braced by his hips, ready to raise up if and when Freddy gathered himself.

Freddy couldn't see Baldwin whole. He was simply a shape from here, until Freddy stepped forward to where there was enough light. He almost said something but didn't. He squared up and waited.

Baldwin didn't know how to box. Not really. He was a street fighter. Freddy could tell that he thought about thrusting his weight toward him, making a sort of all-or-nothing football tackle. If Freddy hit the floor, it was over. Baldwin had thirty pounds of muscle on him easily. But that move was risky. If Freddy slipped away he could lock in a couple of easy combinations and the decision of the match would largely be over. And so he waited.

As did Freddy. His foot was numb. The toe, that toe was the whole foot, weighing as much as a cinderblock and just as cumbersome. He kept his orbit small. He usually struck first. The bigger the opponent, the better his odds were if he struck first. It was essential for him to keep standing.

Baldwin might have been nervous. Or something else. But he hesitated and kept his sphere a dozen yards away. Freddy could see the outline of tattoos on his bare arms and the glint of a ring on one of his folded fingers. He was young but old-young, knowing young, young that someone might say, he had his whole life ahead of him if anyone actually believed that to be true. And how old was Freddy? Somewhere in his late thirties or forties. Amazing how one could detach themselves from the most simple detail of themselves if they truly wanted to but survival, survival in its most bare-knuckled naked baseness never really dulled, at least not up until now.

Freddy found himself leading in as he might usually. He launched a jab that even a zombie on the nod could sidestep. This was all Baldwin needed. He threw a hook that landed solid. Freddy could hear his inner machinery, his framework and chimney rattle and then a cross and another hook in the jaw. Something cracked, something like a hollowed-out tooth that crumbled like hard candy.

Freddy reared back. He still had his balance. He could still could still recover, still move forward in the match. But, instead, he just locked himself into position and threw another wanton jab that grazed Baldwin's cheek.

They were yelling back over the lip of the pool. Out there somewhere was Engel, that dream of his boat down the shore, going up with each blow that Freddy took. He went down on a knee and a rope of blood hung from his mouth plugged into a socket in his gum.

Baldwin stopped as if this was an actual boxing match. He backed away perhaps believing that this man, his opponent in some way was defeated. But it was nothing like that. They were yelling at him to go on with it. This was the punishment they would not exact themselves.

This was what it felt like. It wasn't as though Freddy couldn't remember the nausea, the sightline that drifted, swam and finally settled into a shadow. And his mouth, like a vacuum hose had been plunged down his throat and sucked everything out. Blood, like sucking on copper wiring puddled in the back of his throat.

He watched Baldwin stand there, ready to accept whatever there was to accept. He might have expected applause or, at least, something other than Engel and whoever else calling him a mope, shit-dick ghetto trash that had the fight handed to him like a welfare check. "Go on," they were yelling. "You got empathy now? What for?"

Baldwin seemed to float out there. The concrete might have elevated but he actually seemed lifted somehow, hands hanging at his sides as if they carried the weight of actual gloves. He turned, faced Freddy who was on his knees. His foot, felt like what he imagined a cannonball might. But he could get up. He could always gather himself enough to rise to his feet. Sometimes, this was all a man could do.

Baldwin gave him space. He hovered outside of a ring, a vague ring around them. He nodded to Freddy who was getting to his feet. He made a show of raising his hands, doing an exaggerated stretch and then raising his fists to his hips and finally his chest.

The foot stayed planted. That much couldn't change. Still, Freddy managed to shift left and even duck so to didge Baldwin's advances that could be deemed halfhearted at best. There was no glory in downing a beaten man, especially at the behest of one's captors. Still, he came because there wasn't anything else he could do. There wasn't any path forward up, or away. The only way out was forward and forward was through Freddy who sidestepped a jab and hook, which was sloppy, even a cop could see that and Freddy then threw his own jab, a light, just a rabbit jab which caught Baldwin on the chin. He stepped back, his adrenalin back and his expression shifted. There they were, back in a fight.

It wasn't so much pain as it was the idea of pain. Freddy knew that the blows, the fists, and then, after being browbeaten further, kicks, were destroying his enfeebled gridwork of muscles, bones and organs but it didn't matter. He was used up, spent. And really, he didn't want to win anymore.

Something might have broken in Baldwin. Either that or the people up above were goading him with something beyond mere suggestion. A beating was always similar to drowning. It was never clear how it might end, or if there would be another breath to breathe at all.

But, as quickly as the beating had started, it stopped and silence like the plainest quilt anyone ever bothered to embroider, fell in a light soaked in moisture. Maybe his eye had given out. Sometimes,

when the eye, like anything else, just gives out and becomes fluid. There might have been nothing else to see anyway.

It was over. At first Freddy lay there for a moment, in a damp soreness, a living stain.

They were yelling to Baldwin, something about not leaving him down there. Surely, he was strong enough to carry the beaten white boy back up into the world. Which he came to do.

But Freddy found himself standing. His skin might have been leaking off his bones and his foot had atomized into the pool itself but he could bring himself to his feet. Always, to his feet.

Baldwin took Freddy's weight around his shoulder. "Shit, I'm sorry, man." He was saying. "It's just...I don't think there was any other way. They got us down here and one of us got to get done."

"I was done some time ago," Freddy said. "I didn't need to fuck around with hanging on to anything else." He coughed, tried to straighten himself but found he couldn't. Whatever had been holding him together these past years had finally given out. "Don't let them find you again."

Baldwin didn't say anything. He might have known.

"They'll offer you things. Incentives or whatnot. But they'll keep coming back until you're beaten. Until you're over like me. There's no fucking winning."

"Don't I know that shit already." Baldwin helped him, one stair at a time. "What happens to you?"

"Someone finds me tomorrow someplace they'd stepped over me anyway."

"No hospitals?"

"In the back of a cruiser? Or worse, a wagon? How'd that look?"

"Look more like some equal opportunity brutality."

Freddy almost laughed but his chest seized and he nearly keeled over and spit another string of blood. "Take what you need and disappear. We won't know each other again."

The police had been exchanging monies owed. Cans of beer crinkled in their fists. They had been arguing over whether the fight was fair. But now, they had come to some sort of agreement.

One of them emerged. Freddy could tell it was Engel only by his voice. "So, you took a fall? Can't help thinking it was to spite me." He made motion like he was going to lift Freddy's chin. Baldwin had been led away and now two other cops held him upright. "He really fucked you up. Going to lose that eye for damn sure. Maybe I should be flattered you took that beating to spite me. Can't believe you just gone that soft. I had faith in you white boy."

"Yeah, well." Freddy began to say and nearly choked.

"What's that?"

"That's where you fucked up. You can't have faith in no one. Not anymore."

After the first blow, Freddy reached to touch his face but it was nothing but a flat slab. As the weight of what of what was coming against him pulled away, Freddy realized he could no longer see. A grey static settled into darkness where dull pain seized upon him and he could sense the others around him, some of them feeling something possibly but stepping away for their own good as he knelt, dripping and making noise from somewhere he never knew existed.