

## Flexing

The Very Vicious Smokeblowers stood amidst the throng outside Bush Middle School's southern entrance and watched the first bus depart. Behind them, a trio of seventh graders huddled on the concrete staircase, shouting at their Nintendo Switches. A few feet away, Lauren Bremmer and Rachel Sommers took a selfie together, then flicked through filters that gave them both glasses, or dog ears, or made their eyes impossibly big and their necks impossibly thin. Teachers waded through the shifting press of smaller bodies, their briefcases held aloft, their faces stretched with desperation.

"Last night," said Marco. A pair of cordless headphones hung from his neck. "Dude was just walking down 21<sup>st</sup>, and took three to the chest." Marco sliced a thumb across his Adam's apple. "I guess someone from Trey Six fronted him a zip, and homeboy never paid 'em back. Then he posts this shit." Marco dragged his index finger up Bobby's phone. "There. That's one of the ones who gassed him." Jamie and Devon leaned over to read the penultimate comment on the photo: *catch you on the block markass ho.*

Bobby scrolled back up to the image, of a shirtless adolescent with a Yankees starter cap pulled low over his eyes. The skinny teenager pressed a small stack of bills to his ear with one hand and held a bottle of Hennessy in the other. *Two stoves, eight pots, one on every burner, we the ones who do them murders*, read the caption. Bobby pocketed his phone, and the four boys started walking off campus, along 39<sup>th</sup> Street. Behind them, e-cigarette vapor and body spray hung like an oil slick over the crowd of middle schoolers.

"But so that makes three Oak Streeters popped this year," said Marco. The slashes razored into his right eyebrow had started to fill back in, making the lines look less intentional and more like old scars. "You see Aaron Chesterfield's last video got like 80,000 views? My brother said BrickTalk is thinking about signing him."

“For real?” asked Jamie. He had his hood slung halfway off his head and kept adjusting it to keep it from slipping the rest of the way down. “Our shit goes way harder than that weak-ass mumble rap.”

“No cap,” said Marco. “But nobody’s listening to our shit, ‘cause we ain’t got no clout.” He kicked a chunk of asphalt.

The boys dropped down into a concrete wash. Thistles forced their bony limbs through the cracked embankment. Plastic bags impaled on the thorns snapped in the hot breeze. “Whatchu tryna say, Marco?” asked Devon. The tallest of the four, Devon was Bush Middle School’s starting shooting guard. He walked with an exaggerated buoyancy, rolling up onto the balls of his feet with every step. “You down to catch a headshot to boost our numbers?”

“If it gets me out of Ms. Reynold’s test on Monday, light me up. On gang,” said Marco. The other boys laughed. Shafts of sunlight punched through the mottled sky, the angled rays spotlighting a KFC, a carwash, a Dollar Store. A billboard with *Before* and *After* photos of a butt enhancement surgery.

The Dunthank Tree was empty, but the stale air trapped beneath the fir’s low-hanging boughs still smelled like pot smoke. Marco pulled a baggie from his backpack. He began breaking up the weed with his fingers and sprinkling it into a Backwood, then tried to roll it shut. But as he cinched his thumbnail along the middle of the brown leaf, Marco tore a hole in the blunt. Carefully, he poured the weed into a second cigar wrap.

When Marco finally managed to get the malformed blunt lit, Devon filmed him taking a hit and passing it to Jamie. He captioned this video, *twistin one up wit da broskis #VVS #gangshit*, and posted it to his story. But when Jamie handed the blunt to him, the cherry fell out, and it took Devon several

attempts to get it relit. He inhaled a thin stream of smoke, only to have the tip snuff out again.

“Goddamn,” said Devon. “Bobby, you gotta buy a grinder.”

“What? Why me?” asked Bobby. He was crouching low to the ground and watching a glossy beetle trundle clumsily over the needle caste.

“You got that Ritalin paper, son,” said Jamie. “Share the wealth.”

“Oh shit, that reminds me,” said Bobby. “I promised Lauren I’d sell her a couple after school today. Y’all cool if she slides through?”

“Ask pretty boy, he’s the one who dogged her,” said Marco, elbowing Devon.

“Man, you know how these hoes be,” said Devon, trying to appear blasé. “She got over it.” The truth was, Devon had sent Lauren a series of groveling texts begging her forgiveness after pictures of him grinding on Clara Barts at a LINK dance started circulating on SnapChat. A week prior, Lauren finally accepted his apology, and they’d resumed messaging. The more they texted, the more Devon avoided Lauren at school, nervous that, without the buffer of premeditation, he might say something stupid. All of a sudden, Devon was grateful he hadn’t been able to get too stoned.

The Very Vicious Smokeblowers walked out from underneath the tree and over to the bleachers beside the soccer field. In the parking lot across the grass, a chubby man in black leggings and a sleeveless hoodie got out of a red Dodge Charger. The man knee-hugged his way to the start of the Dunthank Trail, then began trotting east, toward the river. Devon, Jamie, and Marco watched him disappear around a bend. Bobby worked a screw loose from the bleacher’s railing with his thumbnail.

After a moment, Marco said, “Yo. Am I tripping, or did that fool just leave his car unlocked?” Bobby looked up.

“I was finna say the same thing, fam,” said Jamie. He turned to his older brother. “Lemme get a couple pictures of you in that thing.”

“What? Hell no,” said Devon. “Marco was the one who said he was tryna get shot, not me.”

“Come on, dude,” said Marco. “It’d be perfect for the *Drive-By* visuals.” Marco mimed cranking a steering wheel to the right. “*Skurt up in that Hellcat, dumpin’ smoke, let ‘em smell that, VVS where them shells at,*” Marco rapped. “What’s the deal? You bitch-made, or what?” Devon shook his head, grinning.

“One picture. Keep a lookout,” said Devon. The four boys walked across the soccer field, their gaits suddenly tense with exaggerated nonchalance. The Challenger was the only car in the lot, the candy-paint body sitting on matte-black rims. Devon opened the driver door like he was scared it was wired to blow. When nothing happened, he climbed into the front and sat on the edge of the seat, perfectly rigid. But after Jamie took a few photos, Devon loosened up, moving his face through a series of sneers and twisting his fingers into various shapes. Bobby traced the tread of the back-left tire. Marco started playing *Drive-By* on his phone, and Devon lip-synced along to his own amateurishly autotuned voice: “*Got bop from bitches you might see on the gram, drop-top with switches, I might be in the Lam, rock Glocks that itchin’, we might squeeze on your man—*”

“Hey! What the fuck!” Devon turned to see the Challenger’s owner running toward them, his florid face looking as though it might pop. The four boys took off, sprinting back across the soccer field and into the Dunthank neighborhood. They cut up the alley behind Ibrahim’s Halal Chicken, dodged across the pre-rush-hour traffic on MLK, then finally slowed down in front of Ivyhurst Park, sucking in deep, shuddering breaths.

Finally, Devon turned to Marco and punched his skinny shoulder. “I *told* you,” Devon gasped.

“He was a lot bigger up close, huh?” said Marco, rubbing his arm. “Guess it makes sense, why he needs that wide-body.”

Bobby's phone chimed twice. He pulled it from his pocket and held it close to his face, then tapped out a message. "I'm gonna tell the girls to meet us here, okay?" he mumbled, his voice slurred with distraction.

"Word," said Devon. He wrapped his arm around Jamie. "Aight, well, since they almost got us killed, let's see these pictures."

The boys were sitting at one of the picnic tables and debating how to film the rest of the *Drive-By* music video when Lauren and Rachel appeared at the top of Ivyhurst's staircase. Devon, still rinsed with adrenaline, didn't feel the normal throat-clutch of nerves at the sight of Lauren. "Hey," he said as the pair of girls walked over. He stood up and raised an arm. "So. Why are *you* copping ritties?"

Lauren rolled her eyes and slid into Devon's side-hug. "I haven't even opened Ms. Reynold's study guide yet." She glanced at Rachel. "But also, me and Rach might just take a couple and spend the whole weekend playing *Fortnite* instead." Lauren had a Twitch profile with over 23,000 followers, where she live-streamed herself gaming. Unbeknownst to anyone but Rachel, she also regularly sold photos of her feet to a few select members of her audience.

After everyone had exchanged hellos, Rachel looked at Jamie, sitting on the other side of Devon. "What's your name? You're not in our class, right?"

"Jamie. I'm the better-looking Graham brother," said Jamie. Devon snorted. Rachel glanced from one brother to the other.

"Damn," said Rachel, making a seal with her lips, then popping it. "Y'all *do* look alike." Streaks of venous blue stood out from her blonde hair. She sat down beside Bobby, who picked at a chip of paint on the picnic table.

"Yo, y'all peep what's going down on the Pickle?" asked Marco, thumbing his phone screen.

"Nah, what?" asked Devon. He pulled out his own phone and opened Facebook.

“What’s the Pickle?” asked Lauren. She kept moving her hand in front of her mouth in the manner of the newly-braced, trying to hide the glinting metal fastened to her teeth.

Bobby turned to Rachel and said, “Your hair looks cool like that.” Rachel smiled without looking back at him.

“It’s this group where guys talk shit,” said Marco. The full title of the page was: *I bet this pickle can get more likes than oak street middle school*, created two years prior by Rodney Weatherspoon, at the time a Bush student. The page quickly became an archive of various beefs, where students from the two schools threatened each other in the comment sections of memes.

The most recent upload, by Aaron Chesterfield, read: *RIP Ray one in the chamber #oakstreet #payback #greenlight*. It was the same photo Marco showed them after school, of the skinny boy brandishing cash and cognac, now overlaid with a blue filter. The photo had 34 comments and 512 likes. The first comment, from someone named Nick Hobbocken, read: *bout time someone put his ass in the dirt*. Below that, Aaron Chesterfield had replied: *green light on this faggot too*. Devon scrolled down, reading the threats various Oak Street boys had posted to other commenters. He recognized a few Trey Six accounts, making fun of Ray’s picture.

“That’s the Oak Street kid that got shot?” asked Lauren, sounding impressed. She leaned into Devon, looking at his phone.

“Yeah,” said Devon, glancing at her. Lauren’s face was very close to his. Devon thought for a moment. Then he typed: *rot in pieces*, and tapped, *Post*.

“Devon!” said Lauren. She shoved his head lightly.

“What? Oak Street pussies,” said Devon, laughing.

“They ain’t finna like that, D,” said Marco. He cocked his trisected eyebrow.

“Man, whatever,” said Bobby, his voice deeper than it had been all afternoon. He glanced at Rachel, who was watching a TikTok skincare tutorial beside him. “Let ‘em try something, feel me? Anyway. How many ritties y’all need?”

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Devon woke to the sound of Jamie tapping his thumbs against his phone very fast. Above his little brother’s bed, a corner of the 21 Savage poster had come untaped and was curling over itself. “Come on, bro,” Devon groaned. “Can’t you play in the living room?”

“My b,” mumbled Jamie, tilting his phone to the right and tapping even faster. Then he cursed and tossed the phone onto the covers. Outside, their neighbor was stripping bolts on something in his junkyard, the loud whirrs repeatedly edging to a screech.

Devon swung out of bed and walked to the kitchen. Last night’s pizza box still sat on the table. Devon poured a bowl of cereal, sat down, and unlocked his phone.

The Instagram post Devon had uploaded the night before, of him reclining in the Charger, had 58 likes. The bubble of anticipation in his chest burst, replaced by disappointment. Devon began scrolling through the list of likers. Most of the profiles didn’t belong to anyone he actually knew. Aspiring YouTube rappers he followed and who followed him back. A girl from another school he’d never met but with whom he sometimes messaged, making plans to meet that always fell through. A couple bots. Devon scrolled through the comments. Marco had written: *thuggin*. Lauren had posted seven heart-eyed emojis. At the bottom, Aaron Chesterfield had commented: *lol you finna learn not to play wit real ones its on sight wit u*. Devon read Aaron’s comment three times. He wished he hadn’t written anything in the Pickle. The chatter of a drill bit skipping filled the kitchen.

Without looking at the photo of himself, Devon thumbed over to TikTok. The last video he’d posted, a compilation of him shooting three-pointers in the Bush gym, only had 47 likes. His

disappointment quickened to a fluttery anxiety. What was going on? Were people angry with him? His mom walked into the kitchen, wearing grey sweatpants and a ratty t-shirt. She'd pulled doubles for a week straight, 14 hours a day serving cocktails to the Keno zombies at the casino down the road, and her face was bruised with exhaustion. "We gotta get ready to leave soon," she announced, scooping heaps of Folgers into the ancient coffee machine. "I told Gina we'd meet her at grandma's around 11. Wear your button-downs, okay? We're gonna try and look nice."

"They're too small," called Jamie from their bedroom. "I can barely breathe in mine."

"Just for today, okay? I'll buy you new ones, but for today, just wear them to make grandma happy." At the tortured shriek of an air saw, their mom looked murderously toward the window. "Every fucking morning. I swear, your dad better get out early, because they're gonna be locking me up too one of these days."

The Corolla gnashed the first few times their mom turned the key, but finally caught and started. Devon sat in the front, Jamie in the back, following a brief, well-worn argument. After the brothers exchanged their customary insults and accusations, their mom had intervened and declared that Devon would ride shotgun on the way there, Jamie on the way home. Jamie stared sullenly out the back window. Devon informed him that he was being a baby. Islands of heat quivered in small depressions along the road.

Their grandma lived alone, above a laundromat on MLK and 115<sup>th</sup>. After their mom parked in front of the Taco Bell across the street, she told Devon and Jamie to sit in silence for ten seconds. On the way over, Jamie had tried to tell his mom about a boy in his class who'd seen Young Thug at the East Ridge Mall the previous weekend, while Devon had scoffed repeatedly and rolled his eyes.

"I dunno why you're such a retard. He's obviously lying," said Devon, breaking the silence before two seconds elapsed. He thumbed the top of his Instagram feed, hoping for a notification to



appear. “Why would Young Thug be at the mall? Was he hitting up Panda Express or something?”

Devon forced a mean laugh. Their mom sat with her eyes closed.

“Fuck you, Devon,” said Jamie, his voice tight with tearful pressure. “Why do you have to shit on everything I say?”

“Jamie, watch the language!” snapped their mom. “And Devon, stop being such a dick. I asked for ten seconds.” She opened her eyes and looked at Devon, then back at Jamie, her young face spiderwebbed with premature creases. “Can’t you guys at least pretend to be nice? Just for a few hours? Jesus.” She pulled the keys from the ignition, grabbed the coleslaw from the trunk, and walked towards Sudz’n’Budz on the other side of the street.

“Nice going,” said Devon, and slid out of the car before Jamie could retort. At the door, their Aunt Gina greeted each of them with a kiss. She had long, spangly earrings and a dreamy smile.

“Hey, guys,” she said. “Mom is in the living room with Reggie. Sally, you look amazing! You gotta give me your secret.”

“No problem,” said their mom. “It’s called the too-broke-to-buy-food diet. I’m thinking about trademarking it.” She handed Aunt Gina the bowl of coleslaw and shrugged off her coat. “God, I’ve missed you. Are you done with Tulsa yet?”

Devon and Jamie slipped their shoes off and walked to the living room. Reggie sat on a couch with Gramma Gloria, who had a photo album open in her lap. “There’s my boys,” she said. “Come sit. I’m showing Reggie pictures of our first family vacation to Beachport.”

Devon and Jamie leaned over the couch and kissed Gramma Gloria on the cheek. “Happy birthday,” they mumbled in unison. Her skin smelled like rosemary. They obediently looked at the album.

In the picture on the left, Gramma Gloria wore a sundress and a wide-brimmed hat, standing behind Aunt Gina, Uncle Malcolm, Uncle Lawrence, and their dad. Devon examined the impossibly young version of his father. A small potbelly stretched the waistband of his pale blue swimsuit, and he had his eyes clenched against the sun. “He was such a good boy,” said Grandma Gloria, touching their father’s image. With a sigh, she closed the album and set it on the coffee table. “I’ll leave you boys to catch up.” Gramma Gloria stood and walked to the kitchen, where Aunt Gina and their mom spoke in low, serious tones.

“What’s good, fam?” asked Reggie. He dapped up Devon, then Jamie. Reggie, at 17, was their oldest cousin. Tall, with light eyes and a lethal crossover, he’d been the undisputed king of his class at Bush. Kids still asked Devon about Reggie, even though he’d moved to Oklahoma two years ago. Lately, they asked about him even more, ever since Reggie posted a link to Lil Scamma’s new single on Spotify. Reggie had produced the looping visual that accompanied the song, of a cartoon toddler wearing a Cuban link and Yeezys shoving through a swarm of cartoon paparazzi. For the past year, Reggie’s Instagram had been filled with clips promoting small concerts or block parties or poetry readings. Retro fonts and muted pastels, layered with splashy animation. Reggie had over 100,000 followers now, the most of anybody Devon knew in real life.

“Chilling,” said Devon. He hopped over the back of the couch and sat beside Reggie, spreading his legs so there would be no room for Jamie. “How’re things out west?”

“Fresh. Way more cracking than around here, that’s for sure. You should slide through this summer,” said Reggie. Jamie sat in the armchair next to the couch.

“That’d be dope,” said Devon. “You got an extra couch for me?”

“Got a couch for Jamie,” said Reggie. He winked at his younger cousin. “Your dusty ass can sleep on the floor.”

Jamie grinned gloatingly. Devon wanted to whip a coaster at his face. “Yeah, whatever,” said Devon. The meaty smell of jackfruit and barbecue sauce wafted from the kitchen. Devon decided to broach the conversation he’d been contemplating for the last couple weeks. “So what’s up with you and Scamma? Y’all tight?”

“Not really,” said Reggie. “My homie Kenny knows a producer he works with. They got to talking, and Kenny showed him my page. I never even met Scamma, we just messaged a couple times.” Reggie licked his finger and wiped a smudge from one of his suede Dunks. “But it’s been popping off since he used my shit. I’ve had hella people hitting me up.” Reggie glanced toward the kitchen. “Mom doesn’t like it. But why should I sweat college when people out here talking racks for a couple doodles?”

“Word,” said Devon. He tried to think of how to nudge the conversation along without being obvious.

“Maybe you could pass Scamma some of our shit,” said Jamie, looking at Devon hopefully. “Maybe he would wanna hop on a track or something.” Devon gritted his teeth and glared at his little brother. Reggie’s phone dinged on the coffee table.

“Maybe. Like I said, I don’t really know him.” Reggie read the message, then stood up. “Let’s go shoot some hoops.”

The three boys walked out into the afternoon heat. Jamie dribbled the ancient ball they’d found in Gramma Gloria’s closet and told Reggie about a kid in his class who’d been arrested for trying to steal a car idling outside a Chevron. It turned out the boy didn’t know how to drive stick. “I saw that video,” said Reggie. “Where he drops it into third and crashes into the pole? Dude was in your *class*?” Devon trailed behind, kicking along an empty can of malt liquor. A man in ripped cargo shorts pushed a shopping cart past him.

Although he would never admit it out loud, Devon took his dream of stardom very seriously. Whether basketball or rap, whenever he thought about the future, Devon always imagined himself through a camera lens. In the shower, he practiced telling Jalen Rose about the ten thousand hours he spent working on his midrange jumper. He wrote BET acceptance speeches during math class. After he saw Reggie's post, Devon gradually convinced himself that this connection would lead to a feature on Lil Scamma's next album, which would lead to a record deal of his own. Since his mom mentioned Gloria's visit a month ago, Devon had rehearsed dozens of conversations that ended with Reggie messaging Lil Scamma a link to *Drive-By*. And then, a day later, a FaceTime from Scamma, asking Devon to send him a verse.

But now it was ruined, because of Jamie's fat mouth. No subtlety, no hinting, just a bald-faced request. Sometimes it frightened Devon, the depth of anger he could feel toward his little brother. For small stuff, too. Like when Jamie chewed with his mouth open in their bedroom. Or when he brayed at some stupid YouTube video. Devon's mind would short-circuit, and he'd say the nastiest thing he could think of. Before he knew it, they'd be locked together, wrenching on whatever limb they managed to grab. Trying to hurt each other as much as possible. Afterwards, Devon always felt drained and embarrassed, unsure about what had even caused the snap.

The three boys crossed the street to an asphalt court. It overlooked the river, which was bright and opaque beneath the sun. Devon walked up the embankment behind the hoop and opened Instagram, trying not to look at the red number dotting the bottom of his screen. He panned from Reggie shagging a rebound, out over the river, to the apartments on the opposite shore. Everything trembled in the heat. Devon flicked through filters until he found one that superimposed the words *Oak Heights* over the clip, and posted it to his story. Then he undid a few buttons on his shirt, sat beneath a tree, and began scrolling through his feed. Four new likes on his photo in the Charger, for a total of 62.

Devon examined an image of Tekashi 6ix 9ine, sporting rainbow hair and a wicked grin. Then he flicked. He read a long caption beneath a photo of an awful watercolor that Ashley Tite, a sixth grader at Bush, had posted, where she rambled about her depression. He flicked. A video of Tyler Herro dancing. Flick. A Kanye West meme. Flick. A clip from CNN, of a hurricane in Puerto Rico. Flick. Devon watched Lauren's story, a video of Rachel playing HyperRoll Mode on *Teamfight Tactics*. He tried to ignore the small sinkhole of nausea in his belly. Even in the shade, the air felt feverish.

Devon was reading a listicle on BuzzFeed titled *If You Were Born After 2007, This List Is Your Childhood* when he heard shouts. He looked up, because someone was yelling his name. "Yo, Devon! Devon Graham!" Jamie and Reggie looked at a grey Impala idling by the curb. A vaguely familiar face was framed by the passenger window. "You on the wrong side of the block, Blood!" the kid in the car yelled. Jamie looked up at Devon, his eyes wide. "Punk bitch," the kid shouted, and then, impossibly, he was pointing a pistol at Jamie. Three deafening shots, and Jamie toppled over backward. The car peeled away. Reggie crouched beside Jamie, then ran after the car, then ran back to Jamie. Something dark was spreading from Jamie's head. There was a long span of silence.

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Devon watched Doctor Shaan rearrange the blocks on the table in front of Jamie. Doctor Shaan was a fat man, with a thin mustache and watery brown eyes. "Okay, Jamie," the therapist said, over-enunciating. "Which one is the triangle?"

The slack flesh of Jamie's face twitched. His tongue pushed out between his lips and he released a small, wet honk. His arm lifted, bent at the elbow, then spasmed out so his curled hand flopped on the cube. "Now, Jamie," said Doctor Shaan. "That's a square. Let's try again."

Jamie's face twisted, and twin plugs of mucus shot from his nose. Devon stood up. Two nurses hurried in as Jamie thrashed on the bed. "Give him another round of diazepam," said Doctor Shaan. He

sounded disappointed. Devon walked down a hallway, to the lounge. Beeps of various length and pitch perforated the air. Devon sat in one of the chairs, pulled out his phone, and slipped his earbuds in.

It had been just over a month. Out of the three shots, only one hit Jamie. The bullet had clipped the side of his head, shattering half his skull and causing a massive hematoma. He'd spent nine days in a medically induced coma. The doctors couldn't say what to expect in terms of recovery. Most people didn't survive that kind of brain injury. In fact, Jamie had become something of a marvel in the world of neuroscience. At the moment, their mom was downstairs in the cafeteria talking on the phone with a brain surgeon from Chicago about some new, highly experimental procedure.

Aaron Chesterfield had been caught less than an hour after the shooting, because another boy in the car had live-streamed the whole thing. Aaron was being tried as an adult, and faced a mandatory minimum of 15 years. YouTube had taken down the video of the shooting, but it kept popping back up on different websites. Devon watched it compulsively, over and over, as he sat beside Jamie's hospital bed. He pulled it up again, here in the waiting room. It wasn't long, a little over three minutes, and began with Aaron showing Devon's Instagram story to the camera.

"Dumbass is just up the block," Aaron cackles. "Should we fuck with him? Scare him a little?" Aaron's defense rested on this line in the video.

Aaron laughs and jokes with the other boys in the car. The driver says, "There they are," and Aaron rolls his window down. A hand with a pistol comes into the frame, and Aaron takes it. Jamie is dribbling at the foul line, while Reggie stands beneath the basket. "Yo, Devon! Devon Graham!" Aaron shouts. Jamie's face opens with confusion. Then the camera is blocked by Aaron's body as he leans out the window. Muffled shouts, and the crack of gunfire. The car speeds away. The video shows Aaron as he pulls back into the car. The laughter is gone from his face. "Fuck. I think I hit him," Aaron whispers. No one else in the car says anything. "Oh, fuck."

Devon dragged the circle at the bottom of the screen to the left and watched the video again. He paused the moment Aaron slid back into the car. Devon's body felt too small to contain whatever this emotion was. Like a drop of water trying to hold the tide. He hadn't said a word since the shooting. His mom cried endlessly, and pleaded with Devon to talk to her. She slept in Jamie's bed every night. Devon didn't sleep. He sat up late, reading new posts on Jamie's Facebook from people who'd never met him. Devon's SoundCloud had gone viral in the aftermath of the shooting. *Drive-By* had 1.2 million streams. Blue-check-marked rappers messaged him, asking if he wanted to collaborate. Sometimes Devon imagined interviews where he talked about Jamie's shooting as the moment he got serious about music. Sometimes Devon imagined jumping off a highway overpass.

Devon got up and walked back to Jamie's room. Doctor Shaan was leaving, and said, "He's pretty tired." Devon nodded. Jamie's eyelids fluttered against cutting-edge sedatives. With his face relaxed, he looked like his old self, except for the bandages wrapped around his head. A heatwave had been causing power outages all over the city, as AC units siphoned electricity into wealthy neighborhoods. The hospital had been running on a generator for a week. Devon sat in the chair next to his brother's bed. Jamie's breathing was labored, and he moaned a little with each exhalation. Devon closed his eyes, too. After a while, Jamie's moans began to take a shape in Devon's mind. It sounded like a muttered refrain. *I know*, Jamie seemed to be whispering. *I know. I know.*