

String

I.

“I felt an awesome responsibility, and I took the responsibility very seriously, of being a role model and opening another door to black Americans, but the important thing is not that I am black, but that I did a good job as a scientist and an astronaut. There will be black astronauts flying in later missions ... and they, too, will be people who excel, not simply who are black ... who can ably represent their people, their communities, their country,”

—Guion S. Bluford, Astronaut, *Challenger*

II.

Chicago in January was a hard man to love. A frozen, drunken husband—mean-spirited winds hitting the boys with quick, unexpected blows. Chicago’s South Side stretched around them in a patchwork of intersections: midnight on the corner of King Drive and 63rd. Two-story brick row houses lined both sides of King Drive unlit and eerie for the usual hustle of a Chicago Saturday night. The barbershop was a one-story lean-to directly underneath the elevated L Green Line station that shook every time a train passed overhead, every three minutes. Snow that was brown, snow bespeckled with soot and dirt and dead grass lined the curbs and sidewalks. My father, String, wore a mustache desperately wanting to be thicker and a new wool caramel coat he got for Christmas. He wore his hair in a thick tight afro edged on the sides that faded gracefully into the milk chocolate of him. Sput—his younger brother—wore a camouflaged down coat that shed the occasional goose feather. Sput and String were two faces of the same god—angry and just—and looked like clones of themselves with the sole flaw in their evolution being that Sput was an

entire head shorter than String. Holmes wore a sharp goatee, thick-rimmed glasses, and a Black Panthers leather jacket. His skin was the color of a ripe pecan: he was an exact replica of Malcolm X. Holmes stood outside the barbershop shivering, cupping his hands and breathing into them for warmth. He nodded to String. You ready?

We really doing this? String asked.

Holmes nodded, then Sput.

Let's roll, Holmes said and opened the swinging door to the barbershop and entered.

String, Holmes and Sput stood in the dimly lit barbershop, floor tiles patterned in a black and white chess set, air arid with the lingering of once-lit cigarette cloves, and they looked at Red—a massive bear of a man sitting in his barber's chair with a shotgun spread across his lap.

Red had two enormous front teeth with a Hoover dam of a gap nestled in between them and two prostitutes he pimped out and five children he saw on Christmas, sometimes Easter and wore a bright red shirt always, always. He was as big as a barn. The name Red stuck. He sat atop a massive barber's chair coated in a caramel leather in the middle of his dimly lit barbershop at midnight. A ruby the size of a chicken heart held fastened to a nugget of crude gold that rested on a chunky pinky finger.

I say, what in the entire fuck are you doing with that? Holmes said.

Holmes cocked a head to the Bushmaster Varminter rifle resting like a small dog across Red's lap.

Red cocked his head in reply.

For y'all, nigga. I made an appointment with you, Negro, you. I don't know these other dusty niggas—he made a sweeping motion with his right hand, as if parting a sea—from Cain.

String spoke up.

I look like a cop to you?

Nigga, was I speaking to you? I swear to God I wasn't.

God would be right as He tends to be. You weren't. But I'm speaking to you now, aren't I you fat motherfuckin—

Sput—String's brother, christened after the Russian satellite that launched the day of his birth—stepped in between String striding across the room, the echo of String's footsteps following the words “fat” and “motherfuckin,” and Red sitting in his massive barber's chair. He stood between them, two men who dwarfed him. He raised his left arm, palms out in a halt to String and String stopped. In that instant, the barbershop shook; a train passed overhead. My Uncle Sput can command gravity.

Holmes spoke.

Gentlemen. In the city of Chicago tonight, no, in cities across this country, can we not concede that there are a significant number of black men killing other black men? Let us not add to that number recklessly.

Holmes had a way of speaking like some old Confederate general. Elegant. Slow. With the weight of a thousand dead men on his every syllable. Holmes was a black orator. He was also a thief. He took what he wanted in life. String took to him. Sput, like the lineage of the siblings, followed.

You young niggas think y'all ain't touchable. Like we supposed to be scared of y'all young thugs.

Red spit again. Continued—

Y'all ain't grown enough to be afraid of.

Enlighten us then, Red, if it please you. Holmes said.

Holmes took a seat in an identical, but smaller barber's chair across the room. Crossed his long legs, pulled a pack of Kools from his right pocket, a lighter in his left. He held the lighter like a baby mouse in his hands, cupped around the shaft of the cigarette, and lit it. Holmes looked like a daddy long legs perched atop a chair. Waiting. Smoking. Patient. The floor began to shake with the arrival and departure of another electric car above their heads.

Let's get the juice and fucking bounce, man. I'm sick of this shit.

String stood in the same spot Sput glued him to with his sheer presence. He wore a caramel wool coat, long, military Lenin-like buttons running down the lapels.

String. Holmes said.

Yea.

I got this.

Is that so? Cause it look like, to me, from here—String pointed down at the black and white tiled floor—that you sittin across from a nigga big as a barn holding a fucking shotgun like we in some western.

Holmes raised his hands like a priest delivering the Eucharistic prayer.

Isn't that exactly what we're in, gentlemen? If the South Side of Chicago is not the Wild West, I don't know what is.

Why you want extra this time? Red said.

Excuse my insolence, but I believe a man has the power to buy as much of a product as he so wishes in this capitalistic country we stake our citizenry in, provided he has the funds to do so.

And I have the funds.

Holmes took a drag off the Kool. Keeping the cigarette perched on the pillow of his bottom lip, he held up his hands again, palms up to show he was not reaching for a weapon, and slowly

reached into the lining of his leather jacket to expose a white envelope, thick as a brick. He threw it on the floor and it slid like a baseman into first by Red's feet.

Here's how I figure—Holmes took another drag off his cigarette, blew the smoke above him in a halo—you can take that right there and we can continue our mutually-beneficial agent-procurer relationship, or I can release him—he pointed a right index finger at String—that storm of a man upon your black ass and your black establishment. Trust me when I tell you it would be wise to choose the former.

Red said nothing. He sat. Shotgun lain across his lap. He stroked it. Affectionately. Like a cat.

Red spit on the floor again.

Why you want extra this time? Red said.

Holmes sighed.

You make this difficult.

Life is, nigga.

Not when it shouldn't be. This is one of those times.

It's my fucking product. I get to know who, who *else*, the fuck you think you goin to sell it to.

Holmes swiped at his knee quick, like there was a mosquito there, stinging him.

You see that?

What you on?

That was a lie you just told and I just caught. Because you, Red, do not get to know what I do or what I sell or who I sell to or on which blocks or even who the fuck I am or who the fuck they are—he pointed at String, then at Sput. That is all information you will never be privy to. In fact, we were never here, were we my comrades? Let me tell you a story, Red, if you'll allow. The

Wanika tribe of East Africa eat their king when the old man dies. Take his bones and boil them in a broth they all sip for days, lamenting with hands and cries and drums. Red, which one of us niggas here—the cigarette sandwiched between Holmes’s thumb and forefinger cast a ring of smoke around Sput and String that hung in the air like frankincense at mass—you think will suck on your bones, old man, before this night is through?

III.

“Einstein’s general theory of relativity, which is our understanding of how gravity works in the universe, says that any presence of mass or energy will warp the fabric of space and time. So imagine warping space and time in such a way that you can cut a portal from your location in space and emerge in another location in space. These wormholes, which we can describe on paper, we don’t really know how to make them.”

—Neil Degrasse Tyson, Astrophysicist

IV.

My Uncle Sput knew. From the corner of the room, half-shrouded in darkness, he pulled the pistol from the inside lining of his thick down puffer jacket and with the quickness only captured in nature—a brown recluse with its legs folded in lying in wait, a tightly spun rattlesnake tail raised and quivering with movement—he shot Red twice in the heart just as Red was lifting a meaty hand to stroke and perhaps use his shotgun. Pop. Pop. Sput put the pistol back in its grave, in his jacket lining all in the eon of an instant.

Red burst open. His heart became a dark crimson flower sprouting there pumping and spewing blood.

My God, String said. Sput.

Nigga, you sure know how to make an exclamation point, don't you? Holmes laughed. Holding his belly. As if, that too, would gush on the floor. Slapped his knee.

Sput, String repeated.

Sput was prying off the ruby ring from Red's thick finger. Red was slouched now in his barber's chair. He made small, wet, gurgling noises. His eyes wide, set in shock and unblinking.

Nigga, check his jacket for the smack, Holmes said.

After Sput had twisted and turned the ruby off Red's fat pinky finger, he used the nozzle, the black snout of the pistol to fold back the left side of Red's jacket dark red with blood and revealed a glimmer of plastic sticking out like a sign. He lifted it. Threw the Ziploc bag to Holmes over his shoulder, without looking. Holmes caught it. Then Sput carefully took the shotgun slightly askew in Red's sagging lap and threw it in one swift swoop all with his left hand, the pistol still lodged in his right, to String who caught it like a hot plate in his hands.

Sput—since they entered the barbershop and all the minutes and activity and death held within—hadn't said a word.

V.

Sput was in the passenger seat with the pistol lying in his lap, slick with blood not his. String was driving. They had a black mustang. Of all things two Negro brothers could own. Their daddy did what he had to do. Meaning there was always food and their daddy—my grandfather— roped up in suspenders and a thick grey wool coat would hand out turkeys to weeping women and brown hands and silent, dark Italian men would come by on Friday nights collecting thick envelopes with *a bene molto bene va bene* and his was the first house on the block with a colored television set so the black Mustang came easy like everything had in my father's life up until that moment.

Holmes was in the backseat. Hollering.

That nigga never saw it coming. Never. He knows now. He knows now.

Sput let out a whistle that was more like a howl.

Man, fuck. Let's go out, nigga. I feel alive, Sput said.

String drove fast.

Slow down, son, Holmes said.

Sput agreed. Man, you going to make us look suspicious.

String let up on the gas, clutched it down into third.

Did we kill him? String asked.

Nah, man, said Sput.

Did we though?

Nigga, shut up and drive with your inquisitive ass.

Holmes leaned his two lean arms on the back of String's headrest.

This nigga fierce, said Holmes.

Fire. Sput said. We celebrating tonight.

We are, said Holmes. Drive to Al's. Stony and 47th I believe. I want blues tonight.

Man, fuck you with your old chitlins nigga blues jazz Louis Armstrong shit not nobody wants to hear. Fuck your Sinatra Sammie Davis Jr. lookin ass. We going to Jezebel's—Sput was adamant.

Get lit, said String.

Exactly, my nigga. Here—Sput passed String a Kool he tenderly lit for him so Holmes wouldn't see his shaking hands—take this, my nigga. It will cool you the fuck down. Steady you. Go on.

String took the cigarette with his left and clutched into second with his right, then first at a red light on the corner of 67th and Stony Island.

It was 1979. My father lived with two brothers and two sisters in a red brick two-story multi-family house with a porch and a small garden of potatoes and collard greens and kale and carrots in the back. His mother was a nurse. His father did what he had to do. They had good, black lives. I know that is rare to write. To read. But it is true: black lives are the sap, the butter of life. They knew this.

They had just taken one.

My fellow Negroes, this right here—Holmes removed a Ziploc bag filled with heroin from his leather jacket—is how we will drink life to the lees tonight, gentlemen.

VI.

If Red had ever reached down to gather the envelope Holmes threw at his feet, he would've found a thick coupon book for groceries String and Sput had lifted from my grandmother's kitchen counter that morning.

VII.

The heroin den was an abandoned cathedral on the corner of Dobson and 78th that shone like bone in the winter night. String cut the engine. The men climbed out of the low, warm Mustang and walked out into cold Chicago night, the cathedral looming above them like a mountain. A light was on in a tall steeple, where a bell once hung.

This won't take long, gentlemen. Holmes said, clasping the brothers' backs in comradery.

A massive arched doorway graced the entrance of the church. Holmes knocked. Then shivered. He wasn't wearing gloves. He cradled his knuckles into his palms, blew into his hands for warmth.

Chicago is no decent place to live, gentlemen, he said.

The door creaked open into darkness. The men were silent, waiting. And then, the red flash of a cigarette being inhaled.

You're late.

We had an issue earlier, Holmes said.

What kind of issue?

The red flashed then it was gone. Blackness. A ghostly white shadow passed briefly in the opening of the door. Sugar was a big woman. Built like Cleopatra must have looked sitting atop a gilded chariot crossing the Nile; she was six feet tall and the color of butter pecan. She stood blocking the entrance in a white slip smoking a Marlboro.

I don't want no trouble up in my house.

I thought this was the Lord's house. String said.

You got a smart mouth. And a smart mouth on a black man? You just asking to be strung up from a tree, ain't you? Sugar said.

Sugar took another drag off her cigarette. Shifted all two hundred pounds of her weight so that her right hip jutted out like the sail of a ship. She opened the door wider to let the men in muttering under her breath that she stopped having faith in black men twenty years ago.

Holmes entered first and he kissed a turned hot cheek of Sugar's when he crossed the threshold. String raised an eyebrow to Sput. Sput said nothing. Walked in. String hung his head and followed.

The nave of the cathedral was all mahogany and elm and pine that extended one hundred and fifty feet above their mortal heads and mounted to an invisible point somewhere in the darkness. The ceiling shun with gold. Every buttress and arch and stained glass setting was painted in gold fleck. The gold paint had been chipped away towards the ground level: addicts had stood on pews and altars excavating the gold, bits of fingernail lodged in the wood. There were fires in the holy water. The urns that had once held the promise of redemption were now makeshift hearths filled with red fire and further, moving in the halo of the burning red glow, bodies huddled for warmth. There were bodies everywhere. Bodies strewn across pews showing still faces of half-orgasm, the settled look of the high. Humans huddled around the holy water fires warming brown bandaged hands. Pallets on the floor stained yellow and brown holding unmoving bodies. It was Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel in reverse: skinny black bodies crawling, clambering on the ground searching this hard earth for a savior and coming up short. It stank of piss.

Sput let out a long whistle.

We've entered Hell, he said in a whisper to String.

Sugar led the men down the aisle to what once was the altar and now was a burning obelisk. Holmes said behind him to String and Sput.

Gentlemen, wait here—he pointed to a front pew—this won't take long.

Holmes stroked his goatee and followed Sugar's ghostly shape behind a heavy crimson curtain that hid a long line of confessional boxes.

String and Sput sat next to each other on a long pew the color of clotted blood and waited.

VIII.

“Soon after injection, heroin crosses the blood-brain barrier. In the brain, heroin is converted to morphine and binds rapidly to opioid receptors. Abusers typically report feeling a surge of pleasurable sensation, a ‘rush.’ With heroin, the rush is usually accompanied by a warm flushing of the skin.... breathing is also severely slowed, sometimes to the point of death. Heroin overdose is a particular risk on the street, where the amount and purity of the drug cannot be accurately known.”

—National Institute on Drug Abuse, NIH Publication Number 00-4165, Reprinted 2000.

IX.

String slept. He awoke shocked that he had fallen asleep in a heroin house. His head hurt. His mouth was dry. Adrenaline is a hell of a drug. The night before had exhausted every nerve and neuron in his twenty-year-old body. He whipped his head in a panic searching for Sput. Sput lay slouched next to him in the front pew, head deep in the crevices of his camouflaged puffer coat. Relief filled my father’s gut. He swiveled his head around the cathedral that looked completely different in the morning. Morning light hit the ten-foot-tall stained glass windows washing the floor in a rainbow of colors. The fires had ebbed into low flames. It was freezing inside. He shivered. String stretched his neck, his back and gently pushed his brother Sput off of him. He stood. The bodies were still there; heaps of humans forming small armies of warmth, huddled together and sleeping. String scanned the bodies for Holmes—the texture of his leather jacket, the flash reflecting off his Malcolm X glasses, until he found him.

No, String said aloud.

Holmes sat upright in a pew, but something about the angle of his body didn't sit right with String. Holmes's head was cocked all the way back and resting on the top of the pew, as if he had thrown eyes to heavens and asked God directly what it was that He wanted. String approached cautiously, stepping over filth and other bodies, footsteps echoing in the great hall until he reached Holmes. His eyes and mouth were open in a wide "O." His face was gray ash. A trail of white sea foam streamed from his open mouth to his cheek, then farther to his ear. His glasses—String remembered Holmes trying them on at the Marshall Fields counter proclaiming loudly that Malcolm X was a weak nigga, he wouldn't end up dead by his own people—sat in his lap crooked and unused.

String took shaking hands and loosened the leather belt that was still tied and twisted around Holmes's left bicep, all the while talking to him in lovely, choked cooing whispers in the same tone of encouragement kind adults bestow on children lost in a store: *it's gonna be ok. It's gonna be just fine. We gon get this off of you now. Yea, like that. Just like that. Easy now. Holmes. Holmes. Wake up now. We gotta go. We damn done left the Mustang parked out front all night. Please. Oh my God, please. Oh, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, Holmes. Wake up. My nigga. My nigga wake up, man. Please, Holmes. Please. Oh my God. Holmes. Holmes. Holmes.*

X.

My father doesn't remember much of what happened after he discovered Holmes's body. He figures Sput dragged him out of that hell screaming and crying snot everywhere kicking at the air itself and cursing God. He vaguely remembers a month later holding the gas can as Sput shot his pistol into the dome of the cathedral thrice exclaiming that if these niggas wanted to see another day they would all file out and they did, filed out into the snow like the hollow men they were,

tweaking and scratching their faces. My father, to this day, claims that a wretched church aflame and then crusted over in frost and icicles from the fire station hoses, this house of God morphed into an igloo of death, was the most beautiful thing he ever saw.

I'm not entirely certain what led to his decision that would change the course of his life and make mine. Perhaps, like any refugee, he fled a violent home in a world aflame, fled the public floggings of black bodies in dissent, fled the scarlet letter of niggerdom, marked forever as a black male hustling on Chicago's South Side only to end up dead in a year, maybe two, bleeding out onto uncaring and cold streets, perhaps because he simply wanted to live like a man and not an animal, my father enlisted.

Pulled the black Mustang into a lonely USMC depot attached to a Salvation Army off Interstate 90 one day driving aimlessly, trying not to think of Holmes and failing.

Is it any wonder this man born and bred in a steady eddy of violence, became exactly what this world expected of him?

Twenty years ago, I spoon fed bone broth to my mother for a week. Her jaw: swollen, purple as a melon.



[Pictured: String]

— *Chicago, Christmas Day 1978*