

CHAPTER 1

I was going to stay out of Leo's way for the next few days.

When he was in the kitchen I'd be in the showroom, sweeping, cleaning glass, making change, whatever. When he was in the showroom I'd be in the kitchen, or the alley, or on the sidewalk. Anywhere he was not, that's where I was going to be.

He had this thing about us eating dinner together at the shop, though. Couldn't avoid him then. So I just showed up at the beaverboard dinner table when I was called that Friday evening, bad Friday, mashed up in my mouth the extra-spicy-flaming-hot meat patties he'd left on the plate for me, swallowed them without tasting them, put out the fire with some Cola Champagne, and kept my eyes on the table and my cooling mouth otherwise shut. Occupied myself listening to Martense's soul worry about Mo's whereabouts again.

Our dinner table was always quiet, except for the sounds of him tearing into his food; but this was something else. This was holdover silence from yesterday haunting me, threatening me. The guilty have no peace.

And they get really tired, too.

Sitting there in the empty showroom racing through *Manchild in the Promised Land* I noticed my breathing and heartbeat were revving even faster than my eyes, and I was feeling really tired and nauseous. Like

when you're way too scared to even move your feet in the face of danger.

Man, this guilt was really messing with me.

After lock-up they drove home in the Delta 88 and I walked. We didn't even have to make verbal arrangements for this, it was just understood that I'd be finding my own way home. And I needed the one mile walk to get myself together. Slow my heart rate. Get rid of the jackhammer working overtime in my skull. To catch my breath in the cool fall air.

When I got home no lights burned in the living room. Pops, our upstairs tenant, was sitting in the beach chair under the front awning talking on his cordless phone and taking in the night smog and distant sirens and shift workers trudging to and from their Friday night slave, and all that made New York what it is. And I was feeling worse.

Pops looked like an overripe plantain forgotten under the sink. Jet black and wrinkled with a little bit of yellow showing, a patch of white somewhere on top.

I know he was smiling because I was seeing some yellow, but I barely heard what he was saying. "Praise the Lord, Junior! What a beautiful night to be a part of God's creation."

"G'night, Pops," I said, reaching for the doorknob, mad that it was playing hide-and-seek on me now.

"Junior, you don't look so good." Phone stuck to his ear, hand over the mouthpiece. "You okay?" Sounding like he was miles away in Cuba still, talking underwater.

"I just need some sleep," I said, determined to snag that doorknob. And then everything went quiet and stiff for a second that seemed like an hour, or an hour that seemed like a second. Next thing I knew I was standing over myself watching Pops laying hands on my rigid body sprawled across the welcome mat, rebuking the Devil in the name of Jesus, telling Satan to get his filthy hands off me because I belonged to God.

Pops wasn't lying. I didn't look so good. My lips and nails, blue. My skin, pale. My eyes, vacant. What was this?

And where did those two big guys come from standing next to Pops like they were watching his back?

I felt myself backing up, away from Pops and my body lying there face up on our welcome mat. But every time Pops yelled at my body to come back in the name of Jesus it was like I was being sucked right back to the scene again.

I didn't see him call anybody on his cordless phone, but EMS showed up all bright and flashy and noisy. And I kept drifting away and getting sucked back by Pops' words while the folks in white worked me up and flipped me onto their stretcher.

All this commotion going on right outside our front door, life and death in a tug-of-war, and not a light went on in the living room, in the front of our house.

Hey, it's a New York neighborhood. A Queens neighborhood. An immigrant neighborhood. Strange noises are part of the tapestry, along with exotic smells and incongruent sights. To keep your sanity, to get any sleep, you learn to filter. Grab the useful stuff, later for the rest. Leo and Martense were good at that. Filtering ambient noise.

Ambient noise.

That's the last thing I remember before getting sucked back into that stiff quietness I was trapped in just before I saw my caricatured body sprawled across the welcome mat, and Pops slap his overripe-plantain-black hand on my forehead and rebuke the hell out of me in the name of Jesus. The last thing I remember before coming back to the void inside myself and suddenly knowing who I was, before having my life summed in an instant.

Ambient noise. That's what I was, who I was. Ambient noise. As far as Leo and Martense were concerned, my life was just some more ambient noise they'd learned to tune out.