

I.

“My hands feel hot, like they’ve been waiting on God.”

The block felt cold, no matter the temperature. Weather man said it’s a scorcher. He used one of them pictures that got like, a flame on it or somethin’, with a sun attached for illustrative purposes. Shit still felt cold, though. Because you could feel it. Air crazy thick with the heavy of some real shit. The type of shit you can’t predicate with a licked finger to the wind. Block shit. Where guys walk and exchange quick, subtle glances that parse the space and turn words into weapons. So everyone is on edge, looking to see if you need to be ready to pick up that book-bag and just run. That’s the code: you don’t ask why or for what or even where to, you just grab your shit and you go. Bullets are fast. You only hear the pop pop pop. And you’ll look down and see some red leaking out of you. Maybe a leg, maybe an arm...your chest piece. If you’re running fast enough, you can see them whizz by you. Heart-stopping in a flash. You may see someone fall. It may be your homie. He may have a durag on. He have just held his 2 year old and put her down and smiled at the thick chick standing in front of the bodega, before he passed little one off to her moms, who he’s still in love slash beefing slash sleeping with. And his little girl maybe smiled, and waved. And he maybe walked into it. Bullets don’t do names or dates or byes. They don’t do tangible. They just go, and hit. And when you hear feet shuffle, you gotta move.

Because you’ll wind up at the end of one. Or two, depending on who’s shooting. Depending on how bad the beef is. Depending on how much time he did up top before he borrowed the .22 from his man’s up the way. He got a battery in his back, folks around him hyping him up. Because old beef doesn’t die or expire. It just sits and waits for you to feed it. And that’s how blocks stay cold on summer days. And that’s why we’re so close to the front of the building, huddled around each other like we’re about to start rhyming or lighting up or pouring drank or something. Because you never know.

It’s this kind of edge Trevor lived for. He took a long pull from his Black & Mild, and puffed his chest out, letting the smoke sit in his chest. “Good day to be alive”, he said “it’s like God was like, fuck what you heard, the sun gonna shine today”. Roderick, still in disbelief that Trevor was still smoking Blacks after he told them just yesterday his moms read somewhere that Blacks will “turn your lungs into them ugly things you see in those smoking commercials.” He told them he would quit right after. “I need my lungs”, he started barking, “how I’m a play ball in the Garden and I’m out there chasing LeBron running half-dead? Nah b, I’m putting these shits down”.

Trevor never quit anything. Not the basketball team, even after coach suggested his 1.4 GPA wasn’t conducive (whatever that meant...ole’ dictionary ass coach) to his “future”. Not Cheryl, the one who got away but really didn’t because she still comes around after he dogged her out, and she dogged him out in return, so they still be dogging each other like some sort of hood ass mating ritual. He didn’t quit on his momma, his “loving but was never really home for a majority of his adolescent and teenage life because she was out doing grown woman shit he wasn’t able to understand at the time” momma. He didn’t understand it when the grown men, men way older than him with beards and tattoos and smirks would come over and act like his daddy and

eat all the food in the fridge and pat him on the head and bring him Super Soakers and Spalding basketballs, and would leave in the morning without a note or a goodbye. Nothing. Just musty and dingy boxers stranded near the bathtub or sink or couch.

So, on the fateful day that Trevor took the pack of newly purchased Blacks and flung 'em to the sidewalk like he was Chris Paul serving out half-court assists understand the shock and silence that fell amongst us. Double that with the following day, seeing Trevor unearth the brown and chocolate colored stick of smoke and grab the matches out of his Levis, one could rightfully assume that things were looking topsy turvy around our parts. This is the backdrop for this Sunday. A Sunday to trump all Sunday's before and after. Because this Sunday Trevor was going to die, and nobody knew it, except maybe Trevor.

II.

I got a ball, so we fittin' to hoop. Nothing dramatic. The temperature calls for it. Summer's around here have a menu: gorgeous Dominican women carrying babies as backsides, fire hydrants pumping cold ass water that we'll need for an emergency, but won't have because we were using it to make Downey Park happen in the hood, and basketball courts filled with upstarts looking to redeem themselves from their favorite NBA team's playoff loss with remarks like "Yo', Carmelo's problem is he doesn't see the court fully when he iso's on the perimeter". Regular ass Chuck Daly's on the concrete. School's out, the block is baking, I just got my new gym shorts from Foot Locker on the free because Laila down there been showing a brother a lotta love since I got the part going with the fade cut. Now, I'll be the first to admit, my handle with the rock isn't quite up to snub, but what I lack in hand-eye dexterity I make up for with a mean ass "if you close your eyes you thought I mighta coulda been Jordan" fade away, an ill vertical leap, and crazy hustle. I definitely dove headfirst into the empty bleachers on the outside courts for a loose ball in a game where we were down by 15. It's the West-Indian crazy streak in me. Normally in a five-on-five scenario, Trevor would run point. Now, with all the Blacks Trevor smoked, it still amazed us that he had the endurance of a Spanish Bullfighter (I'm not even sure if they have endurance like that. It just sounded good). I'd run the three because I was lanky, could jump, and because I damn sure wasn't guarding the biggest dude on the court, that was Tariq's job. Tariq could play the four or five position, mainly because he could eat a box of Twinkies between a full episode of Martin without batting an eye. Our man Dexter would run the four because he was strong as fuck. Dude barely said three words besides "what's good" and "man, ya'll crazy". But, his hands were as soft as velvet and the day after we saw him manhandle this kid around the way for trying to call his little sister something other than her name, all with one arm because the other was in a cast? Yeah. We figured it was mandatory that whenever we gonna run a full-court game in the park to give him a buzz. Scoop would play the two because his jump shot was always money. I mean, you could almost always bank on Scoop's jimmy to be nothing but net and water if he was alone with no hand in his face. We thought it was because secretly he would go home and meditate and pray to some ninja Buddha he copped from the yard sale by Miss Rhonda's place a few years ago, but ain't nobody wanna ask him cause he did it mad secretive like, and didn't think we saw him.

We get to the court and there's a couple of cats running a game, some old timers who are one untied shoelace away from a medic and Life Alert membership. We do our complimentary head nods and make our way to the benches where folks go to chit-chat, shoot the shit, catch up on the latest hood stories: who got knocked, who's up top doing another bid, who got who pregnant, the usual. Trevor is more antsy than usual. We attribute it to him not knocking back as many smokes as he normally would. Had to give him credit, the boy ain't quit cold turkey, but a valiant effort he was making indeed. Come to think of it, Trevor had been pretty quiet since we decided we were gonna ball that day. Trevor didn't mention money in the all-Black grilling us from all the way across the park. Trevor didn't mention that the dude was Box. We called him "Box" because a) no one knew his actual name b) folklore had it he did 5 years in the box upstate for stabbing the shit out of a C.O. during count time for calling him "boy" and/or c) he was nice with the hands, like "Golden Gloves but didn't make it because he was busy running the streets shooting shit" nice. Trevor also didn't tell us Box had two other Crip dudes with him that didn't look like they came to play ball. Trevor failed to mention what went down the night before...

Trevor and Cheryl had a baby together. Glo was the chubbiest, prettiest little thing ever. She calls me "Unc". Anyway, them two had this love/I'ma key ya' car type thing going on for years. In the midst of all that, Cheryl one day decided she had enough and cut for Trevor off. In the interim, her home girl hooked her with a dude who needed a pen pal. What started out as causal letters here and there turned into pictures and visits, money in commissary, all that stuff. Trevor caught wind and wasn't having it. Mind you, Trevor was still kicking it to basically every female with legs around the way. But, his fuse was short. I remember ole' boy at Kennedy Fried Chicken got his order wrong and left out a wing. We had to drive all the way back and thank God they had bulletproof glass keeping him from pulling a WWE move on homie at the register. Trevor was mad, but the heat ain't really build until he found out Cheryl was bringing Glo out to visits. Needless to say, Trevor stopped by the crib and him and Cheryl had what we'll call a very loud disagreement, and the police came to quiet them down. Well, word spreads around here like wildfire, and word got to homeboy that there was some lil' young reckless cat giving lip service to his future wife in arms. So now, dude is really ready to give Trevor the business when he gets home. What he doesn't know is that Trevor and Cheryl been kicking it since Lego's. That Trevor knows that Spaghetti O's are the only things Cheryl wants when she has her period; that Cheryl still has nightmares about her father, and when she does, she has to sleep on the couch near the radiator because the feeling of the metal against her skin makes her feel like it'll all be alright in the end. What he also doesn't know is that since the argument, Cheryl and Trevor have been shacking up like Archie and Edith and looking like a big ole' happy family for the first time ever. Homeboy doesn't know any of this because Cheryl is declining his phone calls, and hasn't written him back in 3 months.

So, imagine Trevor's surprise when on late Saturday night, his doorbell rings and a dude in some state boots and khaki colored pants that looks like he's seen Rambo way too much barks at him, "Where's CeCe"? Now, NOBODY calls Cheryl "CeCe", 'cept her moms, and Trevor. Now, another thing about Trevor: in '08, Trevor was robbed for his gold rope chain outside of the projects on Story Ave. Ever since then, he carried around a piece. Nothing major, just something light

enough that he could toss if he got bagged by the blue and white's, but a decent enough size that he could let off a couple of shots to scare any wanna be OK Corral type's. So, Box, off GP alone, feels threatened, because hood niggas know when another hood nigga is flexing on him. It's like this unspoken code. Trevor is fast, Box ain't as fast as he used to be. Trevor sees him pull back and reaches for his piece, proceeds to brutally lay harm on this dude and ends with a celebratory "don't drop the soap, fuckboy" before sending him bloodily on his way.

III.

Debts accrue. No one forgets a slight. Reps get tested every day over the most ludicrous sets of circumstances. Money, drugs, women, a glance here, a word there...it all sticks. There are rivalries, tensions so thick the fog could stuff up 20 high school gymnasiums. And the beef's stick. They stay long after the families and friends of the families and affiliates of the friends of the families have left, died, and moved on. Like, on some Montague and Capulet real life type shit. No one forgets anything. It just stays, lingering, waiting for the next bystander to come and pick up where the trail previously left off. The anger needs a place to live, right? Because anger lives on in the egos of the men who live by His laws: feed me, at all costs. Anger won't die unless you let it, unless you give it a reason to. I've seen brothers die on corners over gaze's misdirected. Funerals always looks the same: youngin's in disheveled slacks with the pleats in 'em they got off the rack at Porta Bella. First time they've worn a full suit. Shoes too big or too small for their bodies. The socks were 2 for 1 and are always black, and came with the shoes. The tie might be a clip-on. Some folks wear the Stacy Adams shoes they wear when they go dancing on Friday nights in those clubs named Shadow and Alley Cat and The Boogie in honor of a time when the dimness of the lights told you the degrees in which you'd party. And everyone cries. Everyone. Even the hardcore Blood dudes who are flagging with their bandanas on their foreheads or back pockets with their baggy jeans and LV belts and v-neck sweaters. And everybody has a story that they think exemplifies their experience with the person in the casket, who's lifeless body can neither confirm or deny the views expressed from the cordless microphone exchanging hands as each takes a turn to stand and offer their own form of verbal libation. But almost no one talks about the "how". Or the "why". We'll use empty rhetoric like "we have to better by our young people" or "we have to stop killing each other" or "why does this keep happening to us" and "God will surely find a way" or the comical "heaven needed him/her more than you/we/I/us did".

None of this crossed my mind on the sidelines. We were giving Dexter the business cause he was wearing these dusty-ass kicks on his feet that looked like he bought them at a WWII convention. It's crazy because, when you hear shots, they sound like they're everywhere. And while you're running, you're trying to locate the sound too. Trying to pinpoint the location so you don't run into the bullets. Looking back though, Trev didn't run. I don't even remember him moving. There's this rule where we're from, it's in the Ghetto America handbook: when one person runs, everybody runs; no questions asked. I feel like maybe I wanted to call for him, but I think I didn't know how. I replay that day, frame by frame, every single day, like clockwork. I could have grabbed him, pushed him, called for him, something. But, who am I to stop a man who wants to die? Come to find out Trevor had just gotten fired from his job and his moms was kicking him out. Him and Cheryl had just broken up and she was taking him to court for child

support and was seeing some new dude from around the way who we used to rag on back in the day because he was corny as shit and his breathe always smelled like tartar sauce. Shit was just crumbling. And none of us knew it. And none of us saw it. Maybe none of us would've cared. You're taught, as man of color, to be immune and cold, dismissive to that kind of shit; ya' homie's real life plight. He had lost a little weight but we attributed it to him running full-courts so much and sexing Cheryl on that noisy and difficult as hell to maneuver mattress he had since damn near the 7th grade. We would be in mid-convo about anything, like what we were going to once school was out, and he'd get crazy morbid and ask if we've ever thought about dying, or what it feels like to die.

I saw him fall, though. I caught that. White tee bloodied. I heard at least 25 shots. Automatic, for sure. He wasn't breathing. The last time I cried was when I lost the role of Peter Pan to Jennifer McKenzie because Ms. Roberson wanted to make the play more "diverse". But, I boo hoo'd. Hard. And I did what any sane, rational man would do. I stood there next to his body and talked to him until the medics and the police and the yellow tape and the white sheets and the coroner with the black body bag and his mama and Cheryl and Ms. Wilkins from the building around the corner who used to give us candy for a penny every time we walked by and Papa Joe who loved to tell us stories about Harlem before Columbia University and Bill Clinton bought it... I waited until they all came. And I sobbed and cried and wept for him like those were the last tears I'd ever have. Like I had been storing them joints for ages, because I knew one day I'd really need them. I called all the homies up and let them know Trev wasn't Trev no more. He'd be a tombstone and somebody's ashes on a mantel somewhere that folks would look at it in passing on holidays. I wanted a piece of him. I took his watch. I needed that. If I couldn't see the signs that something was amiss, I could at least make sure I kept a piece of me with him so I didn't miss it for somebody else again. A remainder that shit is real fragile.

Because that's what homies do. We ignore the obvious, or overstate and dramatize the minute minutiae because life is more bearable that way. It keeps the circle on their toes. When you grow up in a neighborhood where a majority of ya' mentors are hood stars by the time they're 18 and tombstones by 25, you tend to overlook things. The older I've gotten, the more I've realized that it's all a defense mechanism for us; a way to cope without having to really deal with the darkness sitting over us. People talk about dark clouds and curses like the Kennedy's, but the hood been under a cloud since the 80's. Everything good dies here. Nothing here lasts. Fruit, dairy products, meat, Black folks; they all have expiration dates. Expiration dates that come way too early for the times listed. I see these White kids who come out the womb with promise, ya' know? Like whatever cards may be stacked, they're never NOT in their favor. Like things are set up for them to succeed. We be on the train sometimes and you see all these ads for food stamps and it's always some doofy nigga that look like me. Like, why would I want that for myself? That's why we would chide each other, rag on each other and whatnot. We laughed because if we didn't we'd cry. Because everyday could literally be your last. One day, you're chilling on the steps reflecting on life or school, or the fly girlie that passed that just broke up with her man, then just like that, gone. That dude Michael Brown got shot and the officer on paid leave, they hiding him, he still getting paid. Michael Brown in the dirt. Dirt, man. You don't come back from that. Ever. Ain't no re-runs in life. No laugh tracks like on these TV shows. You

die, you dying for real. That's why we clown each other. To mask all that anger from dying. I die a little bit every day now. We all die. Just a little bit. Waiting for someone to come see if we're moving; to see if our existence matters at all. Hoping somebody will take a piece of with them too when we leave. So they don't forget us either.