

WHAT CAN I GET STARTED FOR YA?

“Welcome to Starbucks,” she said, in that warm-civil way that customers, or most, anyhow, appreciate. A dark-skinned black, maybe about her age, twenty-two, who had been last in a six- or seven-person late-afternoon line, was coming up to the counter. She’d been studying him, in glances, from the start. He had this hard, thick-muscular power to him that his jacket, a seeming-expensive, black leather, three-quarter cut, didn’t hide. Also black-bandana-ed, un-smiling, he bore no innocent look of some school athlete—so possibly bulked and toned, she’d let herself think, in some weight room behind bars. How would he sound? You just couldn’t tell with these project blacks, her experience had proven: a powerful, intense-seeming presence like this one’s, intelligent-looking, beautiful-handsome, could open his mouth and out might come nothing—an ungrammatical and borderline-worthless ninth-grade education, sounding itself out in southern-rooted mumbles she’d need a cultural linguist to explain the reason for: did they just plain determine never in their lives to speak white, or were they just so cut off that they could

never really hear it—and so never spoke the language of the country they lived in? Yet in this one’s eyes—penetrating and...perhaps, if given his chance, charismatic—there was, she’d been feeling more and more as he approached, something possibly really different: he didn’t read easily as your common gangbangin’ thug, with his powerful man’s body, make him 6’2”, the dark-beautiful face, and those deep, dark-browed eyes—didn’t read as just one more empty *gold-toother* (which would be the heading that, in ever-growing contempt now, she’d been placing all the standard-thug types under).

She’d marked what she’d thought a representative sampling of these types in the six months she’d barrista’ed at what her old North Shore boyfriend, in a half-respectful nod to the venturesomeness of gentrifying pioneers, had called Fort Apache: the new Starbucks at Clybourn and Division. And there it was—this miracle, this brave, new, white-world outpost set right in the infamous dark shadows of Cabrini Green, nineteen-story shadows that were then, early spring of ’99, beginning to let in some light at last: for the City’s wrecking ball (though Richard M’s great Plan for Transformation was only in its invisible embryonic stages) had already swung hard into its work, taking down some of the darkest death-traps in “the Greens,” first “the Castle,” then “1157,” and now “Bank Roll” and “the Rock.” And with every single high-rise on both sides of Cabrini’s notorious two-sided battleground, both south of Division and north—every last Red, every last White—now deemed “non-viable”—everyone wondered when that wrecking ball would start adding to its history.

VL’s, Mickey Cobras, GD’s. In ways no white girl normally would, she (instructed by her co-workers Clarice and Ayisha, both such delightful girls, and her good friends) really did kind of know the differing homeboys now. Or she could in a surface way make out, at least, one gangsta tribe from another, maybe even call beforehand the direction one of this denomination, or of that, would take away from the shop, when out on Division—or the direction he wouldn’t take. Never had there been any violence, nor ever even any sign-flashing, not in the new, white coffee shop, guarded as it always was by one or more CPD patrol cars parked in front of its doors, often with a bulky-vested officer outside a car, on hard watch, radio ready (and she did love these cops for keeping their eyes on her, or for following her some in the car, when she got off work and walked back homeward into Old Town, up Clybourn and then east, on Goethe). And things like the war paint—

the tattoos—she really did know now, even to the point of not caring that much anymore to notice who wore what.

But somehow, now, *not*—not with this one at last now right before her, standing there close, maybe even too close, at the counter. Somehow, with this one—and she felt it now even with a slight loss of breath, or even with some palpable loss of all her life’s courage—there was nothing not to be noticed when her eye caught the X-crossed pitchforks cut across his throat. GD. God Damned. Gangster Disciple. A young white woman, she could immediately, in a flash, imagine this young black man, her age, standing so close before her now, under the tattoo needle and gun, thinking what Clarice said all the young gamers think: *Everybody’s gotta die sometime*. But this one wouldn’t be like the rest; for this one, she felt suddenly, deep inside her, would think of death with the last full measure of devotion to it. Nor would he back off from what it stood for—that indelible six-pronged symbol X’ed above the neckline of his dark blue t-shirt. Disarmed, she felt herself warming both beneath her breasts and in her face. She hoped she showed nothing; but how did she look and sound, as her own throat went tight, and she asked him what she’d been asking customers all day every day for six months straight: that Starbucks colloquial, comfortable, “What can I get started for ya?”

He said nothing. Expressionless, in a strange, fraught pause, suggesting to her that he’d sensed the white girl’s uneasiness and that he enjoyed the scent of it, he ran his eyes over her, warm. And uncivilized? as if he wasn’t any different after all?—as if out on the street he’d just come up and lift her skirt and take a look inside, the way one of them had once? He turned his mouth down. Then, in a firm, quiet voice, toneless but now surely hard-aggressive—even of a same spirit with the war paint on his neck: “Y’all got it started good now already, I believe.” She played dumb, tilted her head as if to describe a question mark. “Y’all”—“it”—“started good now already”—what did he mean? But she knew what he meant—here on this intense frontier, where every white and every black knew every minute of every hour that that large change of worlds, black to white, Soul Coast to Gold Coast, had gotten started, and good.

Yet what really did he want? Playing her like this? Throwing his aggressive mysterious-yet-in-fact-transparent stuff at her like this? What would he really like?—to follow me out of here and slit my throat? or to come with me to my place and fuck me good and sweet? Her mind

went that fast to the eternal borderland question—that double question—kill me? or make love to me?—which right there, at that Starbucks, she thought had maybe the single answer *yes*. But she pinched up her face, as if still puzzled, and asked, “Sorry?” He ignored hard, however, this second act of her polite masquerade, and, as a customer who knew this place well enough already, he said, “Black coffee, make it grande.” And in cooler return now—fuck him—she just nodded, unfitting a green-logo’ed paper cup from the grande stack, and a white plastic Solo sipping cap; but when at the spout she was doing the hot pour, she turned, stopping before finishing, and asked, over her shoulder, “Leave room for mixing in cream?” And she did—she actually did then imagine—as she smiled at him over her shoulder, a cloud of thick white cream floating, and breaking, in hot black coffee—and then its being wholly suffused, white with black, when stirred by the stick—and she kind of lurched, restrainedly, cup still in hand, with a half-suppressed laugh. But fuck him again, for he could read her body language, she was sure. He knew why she’d laughed. Yet he just said to any idea of a happy, transcendent, borderless white-black integration: now and forever *no*. Just a cold uncivil, “No, keep it black.” So fuck him. She finished the pour, took his pay, then made change. Then she firmed the Solo cap on the grande cup and sleeved it. But as she handed him his coffee, and before she turned to take the order of her next in line, she said with an aggressive-soft smile to his dark GD self, “Don’t blame me.”

Don’t blame nobody but you, nigga! Got damn gangsta motherfuckers! Killin’ peoples. Killin’ ya own. Killin’ black children. You see them white peoples ridin’ they curly-handled bicycles down this side now a Orleans. Down Division to get they coffee and they movies at Blockbuster. They comin’, motherfucker. And we gone. And don’t you blame nobody but you. His grandmother—hollerin’ bitch calls herself an activist—for her *community*—where she’s lived all but twelve of her sixty-one years of life—comin’ down on him just an hour ago, blamin’ him ’cause she won’t get qualified herself for the mixed housing that’s goin’ up. Got her own sheet. Got her own bad credit. So she’s gon’ be moved the fuck out when they bring this place all the fuck down and she won’t know where the fuck she’ll be goin’. All her bitchin’ about them needin’ to screen people before they let ’em in the Greens. Select and eject. That’s what she’s said long’s he can remember. And it bein’ the downfall a this place ’cause they haven’t screened since the time

after they shot King dead and all the crazy niggas tore up the West Side—and then with no screenin’ they brought a million crazy West Side niggas over here, all of ’em gangbangin’ fools—like your fucked-up daddy she says. And now she’s bein’ screened outa here her black-ass self with them rebuildin’ for mixed peoples. And that’s all his fault. Shiiit. And now this sassy-jittery white bitch. Pretty white cream. Leave room for it, boy. Got somethin’ for you, little girl, upside my belt, you want it. And fuck her scaredy white ass anyhow, sassin’ me.

Sitting now at a table, waiting for his homeboy Tumbler, comin’ over this way up Orleans past Camp Ball in the Reds (he came himself from Tha Jube, in the Whites, 3-5-4, my brotha, right down Division like always, representin’ nation), he blew into the sip-cup top to cool his coffee and looked again at the sweet-fleshed white thing at the counter, with her purplish lipstick and dyed-dark hair, with purple in it too, and the metal in her tongue (for ticklin’ other white things’ pussy?), and those sweet titties showin’ under her apron whenever she turns sideways. Her and her comin’ at him all mysterious with her *I know you want this white pussy* whisper and her “Don’t blame me” bullshit. All those white words in her pretty head, he knew, but he could tell she didn’t know the word *hustle*. Never looked at that white cream in the mirror and said I gotta hustle this thing. Like some white ladies he knew. *Don’t blame me*.

And so who *is* gon’ take responsibility? his nasty-ass grandmamma says. They comin’. And we gone. Now these whites, this pretty-assed white bitch, gon’ take his hustle. Take his work. Sell her coffee where he’s been sellin’ since he worked “S” along Big-D’s sidewalks, one bad-ass shorty motherfucker. No yella-ass buster even a day of his life. Not afraid to pull that trigger and blow off the smoke. And the OG’s knew it, so they give him real work, age ten, when they said he’s now a ward of Tha Jube, his sorry-ass hypin’ fucked-up ho mama found dead on the floor, by him, her throat all slit—by somebody. He found her there, all cut and dead in her blood. Same room he was born in, when the ambulance never came to help her when he’s bein’ born out of her. Never forget seein’ her dead like that. Come at him when he’s walkin’ just about anywhere. Just about not a night, neither, when he doesn’t retaliate on somebody in his dreams. His grandmother, she says she wants him after that, but he never believed her—so he never came to her.

He took a touch of hot coffee now on his tongue and put down the

cup. When he leaned forward, he could feel the Glock 19 press hard against his abdomen. He sat up then, but as he did, he tapped, and then squeezed with his palm the right pocket in his leather coat. One full-up thirty-plus mag—all nine inches, good and stiff. No bullshit goin' down tonight. He wrapped his hand round the hot sleeved cup, then let it go. Then he started studyin' again on his mama's mama—and what she said when he warned her and told her he made up, this time, on her tax with the Folks, not payin' her percents on that hairstylin' thing she's doin'. Made it up, he told her, out of his own work money.

Work, she said—ol' sharp-tongued bitch—like spittin' it right out of her mouth at his face. I know what y'all mean by work, alright. Ya mean dope. Sellin' dope. Killin' y'all selves. Killin' children. Givin' white peoples what they want, bringin' this place down so's it cain't never be fix. I tell you what—them white peoples got a plan—always had they big plan. 'Cause we sittin' on a gold mine here, boy, right next the Gold Coast, and they wants it back. So now you don't—do ya?—see no meedy a comin' in here reportin' for white folks' enjoyment just the bad shit. Cabrini Green. Cabrini Green. Nineteen stories a shit piled up them elevator shafts and dead peoples everywhere. Crazy niggas ain't human. Ain't never been equal 'cause they just animals, livin' in them cages, which wasn't there 'til they started throwin' other niggas over the rails, up them high ramps, and shootin' down, killin' them two po-lices with rifles, and Dantrell jus' goin' t' school with his mama, eight years old, and rapin' little Girl X so turrible. Way the news always was for years, even though there been so many good peoples in this community and not just y'all ignorant gangbangin' fools and black-nosed dope fiends and sassy-mouthed babies havin' they babies, more'n Jesus could count. But now it's all good shit the meedy a be sayin' 'cause they don't want to scare no white peoples off now. 'Cause they comin'. And it's over. Just a matter a time. And ain't nothin' we can do about it—though I hear enough ignorant black folk says they got *squatter's rights* here. Ain't got no rights. Not 'til you owns what you's standin' on. And we ain't ownin' nothin' a this. Never a day.

So, he thought now, who's she?—who the fuck is she, sayin' he's got to turn things around and take responsibility for his life and control it and make it good when she says she can't control a thing? When she says *THEY* tell her she can't stay here no more, and *THEY* gon' tell her where she goes, and when she goes, and ain't nothin' she can do about it, and better grab her her Section-8 and go on off now, 'cause *THEY*

gon' renege that too, quick enough. Then she changes up and bows her head down and starts cryin' all hard. Cryin', shakin' her head and sayin' she can't control nothin' in her life. And then she looks up at him with all the tears all over her face, and she says why he cain't do nothin'? Handsome, beautiful boy, she says, cryin' so hard. Most beautiful strong man. Smartest she's ever seen, words, numbers, even though he ain't been to no school but goddamn Division St. since the day his mama pass. Cain't he help her some way, 'sides with them strong-armin', thievin' gangsta thugs and they so-called taxes, just 'cause she help some girls look pretty sometimes? Cain't he help her some better way'n that? Some good way at las'?

But then she stopped. She put her face down once more in her hands and all quiet-like into her hands she said, "Watt." Then nothin', just silence, a long time. Then all hella hard she wiped her face and she looked up, hard. "I know why they call you *Watt*, motherfucker," she said. "Call you that so long don't nobody know your real name. Call you that 'cause when you don't come to me and you livin' in crack rooms and sleepin' in piss-pool stairwells with dopin' hos and they scruffy-ass drunk pimps, night after night, you wake up mornin' after mornin', when you's a kid, and, just like them thugs tell you to, you take your broomstick and you bust out light after light, all up and down everywhere, so don't nobody have no peace, and don't never no po-lices come, or the outside worl'. *Watt*, be short for Hundred Watt, I know all 'bout that—'cause you done bust more light bulbs than any a them ignorant fools who be makin' the life a good peoples here hell on earth. And truth, truth, truth, motherfucker: all that you is, is darkness."

WE DO

Tumbler, steering clear of the VL's 364, headed toward what was now a safe route out on Orleans—'cause with the Cobras' Rock all demo'ed down, Orleans was GD-safe. He had just passed under old St. Dominic's, the huge, long-ago boarded-up Italian church, which still stood in the middle of the Greens—the big empty place, now mostly a bat house, that his mama said got left behind when the Italians moved out 'cause too many blacks had moved up from the South. Mother Cabrini was a nun who worked here with the Italians, tryin' to help make peace when they called this place “Little Hell” and, right where Dantrell got shot, it was called “Death Corner”, 'cause more Italians killed Italians than blacks are now killin' blacks. Turf fightin'. And then retaliations. Street justice, then and now, white same as black.

They called him Tumbler because, for the four years he was with 'em, he was the number-one best of the famed Jesse White Tumblers. Wasn't anything he couldn't do. The real showpiece boy, flyin' sky high everywhere they went. And he'd been a lotta places with Mr. Jesse, not like most Cabrini boys, who some of 'em had never even been

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downtown in Chicago, though they lived a mile and a half from it all their lives. All over the country he went for the NBA, NFL, and college games—and one time to Tokyo, Japan—because Mr. Jesse got that done, too, believin' it would make his young men think big all their lives, fillin' their hearts with dreams. And now Mr. White's become Secretary of State, even though he grew up with nothin', just like the rest of them, right down here on Division St. His mama told him to mark that down, so he would always know what was possible. But it had been three years now since he tumbled with Mr. Jesse's team, and his horizons had been shrinkin' for a long time—so he'd gone Folks now, and lately he'd smoked a little rock and had sold some too, to get himself a little more, out front of Camp Ball—not down the Rows, where his mama's place was.

Camp Ball's where he met Watt, who fixed him up, and then got him up with a sweet, sweet lady too, one of the gentleman's club girls from over at V.I.P.'s who work for Watt. Not soon to be forgotten, that evening with Sara Lee! Not soon at all. And some other evenings, too, my brotha. And for other reasons besides, he and Watt now were gone deep with their thing. Watt got him, too, to cut out all that crack smokin', 'fore he ever really got started, 'cause he was gonna be needin' his brains, for all the big things ahead. Got us a future, my brotha Tumbler, Watt said; build us a kingdom 'fore we die! Mr. Jesse always made sure his tumblers stayed in school and kept up their grades. So there he was, just about the last of the boys to stick it out at school, graduating from Wells—doin' that for his mama. Education, she said every day he could recall, is the only way out. Hadn't gotten him out, though, or proved much use. But now he was gonna use that education, all right—just not for things his mama needed to know.

Not tall or heavy, rather lithe, athletic, and light as a dancer in his Air-J's, baggy pants hanging low, Tumbler came out onto busy Orleans, his black White Sox cap turned backward and the collar of his silver and royal-blue Wells track-team jacket turned up just right—the left wing of the W on its breast an eagle's wing. He turned north up Orleans toward Division, heading toward the sidewalk shadow of Camp Ball as it fell over St. Luke's Church of God in Christ.

These boys have *good* minds, *good* hearts, *good* souls, he could hear Mr. Jesse say—but they need to know it—they need examples to show it. Their mothers they might see, but not their fathers. So I want to be there—to show them. Because what these black boys do see is hopeless

black men and defeated, black men gone wrong, or just gone. Gone so they can't ever be seen—to prison, or death, or drugs, or to just plain nowhere (that just plain nowhere, Tumbler thought, that his own father disappeared to so long back he couldn't picture the man). And just as gone is *respect*. It's not enough to show a boy an example, to let him see what he can be. He's got to respect what he sees. Look at is one thing. Look up to is another.

The MB Union, his mama's church (and his, too, though he'd had to repaint in his mind the face of Jesus), was just past the Church of God in Christ; and the MB Union too, along with St. Matthew's United Methodist, the third church of three in a row here—all these three churches standing together on Orleans, Locust to just north of Oak—fell now under that wide late-afternoon shadow of towering Camp Ball. And now, as Tumbler came up Orleans toward Oak, at the same time, coming out from “the Camp,” ’tween the MB and St. Matthew's, were some ten gangin' shorties, half of 'em sportin' the dark blue bandana. Most crazy-dangerous, war-startin' motherfuckers on God's earth; but he knew all these young Folkin' homeboys now, and they knew him. So if there was the fork thrown up from two or three, as they nodded at him in silence, it was just S'up Tumbler, Hey yo, S'ahright, yeah, S'ahright, Tumbler—comin' from the rest—and S'ahright, my young brothas, comin' back at them all from the nodding Tumbler—as he continued north, crossing Oak, and they then all turned as one and swung south. *Respect*. True and deep. Kneel-down-and-bow-your-head deep. He thought how all these young ruthless motherfuckers showed it to Watt, like religion all right—and the respect of these dangerous-ass Disciple foot soldiers was deeper than any he'd known as a Jesse White Tumbler, no matter how far away it was from Cabrini Green to Tokyo, Japan.

His mama told him who the nun Cabrini was. She said to him, you learn the names. You learn who Mr. Jenner was, who they named the school after, 'cause he cured diseases kill more peoples than guns do, small pox, so bad, which this city had back in the day. And Mr. Schiller, they name the other school and the street after, he's a poet who wrote things for the human soul. Mr. Seward and Mr. Stanton, they name the parks down here after, worked for Mr. Abraham Lincoln. These streets are livin' with all that hist'ry, so important to black peoples, mens fightin' and dyin' for freedom and equality, black mens in the fight too, instead of mens killin' each other, like nowadays, for the

blood money and the drugs. You learn Mr. Byrd he flew over the North Pole—and whenever you walk down here you fly up in your mind, 'cause those names make you think it. Don't you walk these streets a blind man. You learn sister Sojourner Truth, who they name that other school after, out by Stanton Park. Sister *Truth*, she's a slave up north, 'fore abolition, 'cause they had slaves up north s'well as south, and maybe still do, I'd say. And she fought for freedom and for rights of womens, too—'cause she's a black slave woman and she knows what it means to have no rights a'tall in this tearful world. Fought capital punishment, too, and *all* killin'. She said she hated white peoples 'til she found her master in the white man Jesus, which changed Sister Truth and set her walking in the Lord, like Dr. King, who couldn't of been what he was if he thought there's just this world.

And don't you ever walk past St. Matthew's, Marcus Sabbs, out t'Orleans, without thinkin' how your mama stood right there when Dr. King came and twenty-five thousand peoples stood there and then went with him to Soldiers Field, when he talked about fair housin' and the right to live where anyone else had a right to live, no borderlines anywhere—but about how the CHA's build up the high-rises 'cause they don't want black peoples movin' outwards, into the white territories. So they put all the black peoples up the sky 'til it all would come crashin' down like Babel Tower, which we see here every day. Dr. King—even with bad mens' guns pointed on his heart *all* the time—he preached non-violence—so good a man, a true man of Jesus, with the courage and the faith, and the love for his enemies—and forgiveness; and he got more done than anyone ever did who carried a gun and has no forgiveness. Worse thing they ever did when they killed that man. But you stop every time, Marcus, and you think of him when you pass by St. Matthew's. You stop on those streets there, and you give that place Dr. King's name, every time you pass. And you hear him in your mind, and you listen to him with your soul. And then you know the way. Not like the ones who got so *bad*, bad as the man who killed him, that Earl Ray, and out of retaliation they just tore this place up after Dr. King died and brought on the National Guards and the tanks, with mens firing guns down on those army mens right out the high-rise buildings. And then all the stores leaving. Del Farms. Pioneers. And all the hope leaving. And they're thinkin' then black peoples' just animals, fit for cages. Been crazy down here ever since, and gunfire still comin' down out these buildings. Even with so many peoples gone