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François



The ball. When is that fool gonna throw the football? Been standing here so long the streetlight flicked on. “Doug, I’m boning out!” Ignores me, waves me off like I’m his bitch. Shit, Rika’s the bitch. Too stuck up to say anything to anybody but Doug. Doug leans into the car and yells right in Rika’s face. Here it goes. He hauls off and kicks the car door, rocks that Jetta. His car too. Kicks a big-ass dent into it. But she’s still gonna talk head. Looking crazy, she pokes her head out of the window and says something. Gets him more pissed off. Yanks her halfway through the window and shakes the shit out of her. Doug turns away and throws the football but it sails way over my head. I run it down but it rolls under a car. Got to squat to tip it out then I hear it, two caps. Jerk around to see Doug falling. A little burst of white from the car, another one, Doug rolls away, flips on his back. Rika tears out, runs a stop sign and poofs. I get there before I know what I’m gonna do and see that shit. Fucked up for real. No way he’s gonna live. I don’t want to touch him. Side of his head looks caved in. Blood running crazy. Hole in his neck. Still alive, twitching and talking, saying silly shit . . . “No mama . . . I ain’t . . . fuck this . . .” Take off my shirt, ball it up and press it on the hole in his neck. Don’t want to touch his head. A crowd. Didn’t even hear them come up. Somebody screaming. I’m screaming, “Call the fucking ambulance!” Nobody’s listening. “My baby! Oh, my baby!” Doug’s mama. I hear her through all that noise. Somebody went down there and told her. Shoving to the front. “Look at my baby!” she says slapping herself. She’s so big, clears out people next to me. Squats and looks at him,

then springs right back up, screaming, “My baby, my baby!” Don’t even see me pressing on that hole trying to keep blood from running out all at once. No chance. Shirt is a big red sticky ball. I want to vomit. Homies come up, “Aw check that out! Who fucked him up?” I’m crying, crying. How long I’ve been out here? My hands are tired. Blue lights, red lights, police, ambulance rolling on the scene pushing people back. Knees and feet move around me. Policeman pulls me up and pushes me away and white suits cut Doug’s clothes off. Ain’t this the shit . . . walk away up the street to my porch, clothes soaked with blood. Is it drying? Can’t go in the house like this. Mama’d go nuts, get blood on everything. Turn on the hose and hose my hands wishing I had some soap. Look at my jeans in the dim porch light. Fucked-up stains. Can’t get that out. I sit back on the porch and try to cool out. Down the street the crowd looks like ants, circled around the yellow tape. Doug’s cold as a fish. Coroners load him up and get around to driving him away. No rush.

The police stay. Black one takes the walk over to me.

“You saw anything?”

I shake my head.

“You hurt?”

“No.”

Knows I’m not going to say anything.

“What’s your name?”

“François Williams.”

“You live here?”

“Yeah.”

He’s not going to sweat me.

“Thanks,” he says and returns to the crowd. Probably be back tomorrow with more questions nobody’s gonna answer. Sit there on the porch until it gets cold. Thought somebody would come up and ask me about it, some of the fellas, but nobody sees me like I’m a ghost. But I don’t want to talk no way. Might as well go in the house.

It got quiet about eleven. I should call Margot, let her know what happened before she hear about it from somebody else and think I

got shot too. But I don't want to talk. Mama's gonna be home soon and she'll know straight up that something happened. She'll know like that. News ain't saying a damn thing. Don't know why I got it on. Oh yeah. Here it comes. Stupid-ass reporter standing in front of a 7-Eleven. "Nine shootings tonight, two fatally wounded. Shooting earlier tonight took place behind me . . . gang-related shooting on Fifty-fourth Street. Doug Goines, a twenty-one-year-old college student, killed in a drive-by shooting . . ." That's it. That's all. Got took out and all you get is a five-second mention that's all fucked up. Doug a college boy? Joke. Wannabe high roller got gotted by his G. That's how Doug would say it. Turn the station, flip it around, more shooting but nothing about him. The door. Somebody knocking at what, eleven something. Everybody knows Moms be getting home and don't like people over. I cross over to the picture window and peek out. First I can't make him out, dressed to bang, baggy Pendleton cut off at the sleeves, baggy khaki pants, baseball cap to the side. Ain't nobody but Ollie. Open the door just wide enough to slip out. Don't want him to see what he don't have to see. From the dim orange of the streetlight Ollie's face looks harder than usual. Doug must have meant something to him after all. He waits there, hands in pockets, looking at me. His lips kind of twist up and he says, "Rika did it."

"Yeah?"

"She did it. Don't have to see it to know it's coming. Last time I saw them together she kept saying she was gonna shoot him and he took that. He told her to stop but she kept on saying it. I was going to slap her if he didn't. She kept right on saying it."

"Yeah," I say keeping pace.

"She moved. Me and the homies were gonna do her but some meskins live there. Doug tell you where she moved?"

"Naw, he didn't," I say and Ollie spits between his feet and turns and stares out toward the street. He looks sort of silly. Skinny and short sporting Popeye arms from curling. "Okay, homey. We'll find that bitch. Later." I watch him walk off without bending his knees with his shoulders back trying to fill out those baggy-assed clothes.

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Must have passed out on the couch. Mama's standing in front of me, looking shocked.

"Why do you have blood on your pants?"

"Doug got shot out front."

"Douglas." Her voice sharpened like it does when she's mad. "Is he all right?"

"Naw. He's dead."

She looks upset but she didn't like Doug. Said he was nothing but a gangster.

"Who shot him?"

"I don't know."

"Was it drugs?"

She sits on the couch next to me looking pretty even if she is tired. Her white nurse's outfit looks clean and just ironed after ten hours at Killa King.

"Drugs," she says shaking her head, answering her own question. "Did Mary see it?"

"Naw. You let her stay over at Keisha's."

"Thank God for that. We got to move. Can't stay around here."

Mama gets up and goes into the kitchen. Gonna get a drink. I shouldn't have told her. Now she gonna be thinking about it all the time until the next thing happens, thinking that I'm gonna get blown away. Can't worry about that. That ain't something I can think about. I look at my hands . . . Got to get this shit off. I stand up and head for the bathroom, switch on the light, and look in the mirror. Gotta get the do edged up again. A knock. Door opens and Mama's standing there with a drink in her hand. Smell it, sweet gin.

"Yeah?"

"Did you see it?"

What's to say? What I don't want to say. Maybe if I don't say anything she'll go. No. She's gonna out-wait me.

"No. I just saw a car drive away."

"That's it?"

"Yeah. It happened too fast."

Finally she gets tired of looking at me and walks away like a old woman too tired to make it into the bedroom.

Should have got a edge last week. Take out a razor and start touching up around the temples but my hand's shaking and shit. Put the razor down. Don't know what to do.

In the bedroom, headphones on, lights out listening to what, what's this, night beat, love themes . . . not in the mood. Maybe I ought to go by Doug's house. Gotta go sooner or later and listen to his mama cry. Listen to Ollie talk payback. People coming over all night. Somebody'll start cooking and then everybody'll eat. After a while somebody'll turn on the TV. The kids'll watch till they fall asleep then the adults'll pass out. Only Doug's mama'll be up all night on the phone, talking about it. Waiting on the funeral.

Can't sleep. Keep thinking about Rika. I know where she lives. They moved to the jungle. Why didn't I tell Ollie? Should have. If she didn't want to be with him she should have left him. Not shoot him in the face, shoot him down in the street. Forget it. I can't sleep. Up and out the door, out of the living room, outside onto the porch. I see it again. Doug down the street yelling to Rika, slapping her. The caps, the flashes and Doug falling. Walk out there into the street, where the yellow tape is still on the ground. Bloodstained latex gloves lying where he got shot. By the curb blood's jelling, rolling slowly to the drain. Mr. Andrews'll hose it down in the morning with bleach and soap and a push broom and clean it off before anyone's out the house. Two people coming down the street. One's tall and walks with a limp like he's trying to pimp. The other is fat. Rock and Jelly. Don't want to talk to no baseheads.

“What's up, F?” Jelly asks.

“Who got popped tonight?” Rock says.

I hate it when these fools try to make me talk.

“Who?” I said.

“You don't know? Your homey Doug. Bet those Main Street niggahs shot him.”

Stand there, nodding to whatever they say.

“You know,” Rock says.

I don't say nothing. They weren't getting what they were looking for, shock value.

“What you got for the head?” Jelly asked.

“I ain’t got nothing for your head.”

Jelly frowns.

“Why you talking to me like that? We go way back.”

“Yeah, we go way back. Yeah, we *went* way back. I remember when you had a job.”

“Why you fronting?” Rock says limping toward me.

“Who’s fronting?” Turn back to face him head up. He backs down, beat with a look.

“Why you be acting like you too good to talk to somebody?”

“You don’t want to talk to me. I ain’t got what you need.”

His face goes blank. These brothers are bugs, fading in and out looking for that flame.

“Loan me a dollar.”

“Naw. I ain’t got it.”

“You a high roller.”

“I don’t roll. I go to school.”

“Oh okay. That’s how it’s gonna be.”

Shrug and head for the porch and they walk off looking for it. Inside, the house’s dark. Click on the light and turn and there’s Mama by the picture window. She must’ve been spying on me.

“Talking to drug addicts?”

“No. I wasn’t talking to them.”

“I saw you talking to them.”

“They were asking me about Doug.”

Trembling, arms wrapped around herself, she looks like a girl ready to cry.

“What’s wrong?” I said putting my hand on her shoulder. I don’t want to touch her.

“I don’t want you going outside. Why do you have to go out there?”

“I wanted to see.”

“What!” she said, her voice rising. “What is there to see, where that boy got himself shot? Is that anything to see?”

Nothing to do. Too late to calm her down, nothing to do but listen.

“You know how many times a night I think about you. Think you might be out there on the ground bleeding to death. When they wheel bodies in and I got to admit them, young men like you, blown up, cut up like meat on a rack. I say to myself that could be François.”

“Mama, nothing’s gonna to happen to me.”

“Oh, yeah. Nothing’s going to happen to you! How do you know what’s going to happen to you?” she says and heads for her bedroom. That’s it. She’s not coming out again. Gin’ll kick in and she be knocked out. But I don’t want to chance going out the front door. Go into my room and slam the door loud enough for her to hear, turn the TV up so she could hear that too, grab a jacket, open the bedroom window and slide outside. I walk fast cause it’s kind of chilly. I got to tell him. He’s got to deal with it, not me. From half a block away, I see the house. Lights are on, curtains are open. All kinds of people are over. Somebody’s on the steps. Some other people pull up. A old man and a younger woman carrying a big pot. Bringing food over already. They say something to the guy on the steps. It’s Ollie.

“What’s up?”

He looks up at me. I can see from the porch light that his eyes are red.

“Gonna find that bitch.”

“Yeah.”

I want to say something but I don’t. I stand there nodding. I form the words in my head, I can hear myself saying them. Yeah, she staying on Hillcrest over in the jungle. But I can’t. Ollie stares at me like he expects me to come across with something, then after a minute of me saying nothing, he gets to slurring and mumbling but I understand most of what he says.

“Doug was sprung over that high yella stuck-up bitch. Couldn’t tell him shit. Bitch was dipping into his proceeds. Stupid letting her get away with all that. Reason she had the Jetta is he finally got smart enough to take the Benz from her.”

Funny listening to Ollie talk. Acting like he and Doug were close. Couple of months ago Doug kicked his ass cause he saw him

slinging. He said to me if Ollie wanted to be a punk-assed gangster that was his business but he wasn't fucking up Doug's operation doing nickel-and-dime shit.

"How your mama's doing?" I say because I don't want him asking me anything about Rika.

"She's doing all right. Crying since she heard about it. Hey, where's your car?"

"I left it at the house. Don't want Moms to know I'm gone."

"Can you give me a ride?"

"Where you going?"

"I wanna go over Doug's."

Damn. Straight out I want to say no.

"Why you need to go over there?"

"I gotta take care of business. Do that for me," he said, talking like I ought to be impressed. Ollie looks up and down the street as if he was expecting to see somebody.

"All right. Let's go," I said. Guess I oughta give his ass a ride. I owe Doug that. He stands and stretches like he must have been sitting there on those hard cold steps a long time. We start walking, Ollie gangster-strolling, lagging behind me. We don't say nothing. I don't have anything to talk about because I didn't want to slip and bring up Rika. Ollie got his own reasons.

We get to my car and I beep off the alarm. Loud-ass bug. Got to get the muffler fixed.

"Ollie. Let's push this up. Moms hears it every time I start it." Ollie nods and I take it out of gear. I push and steer and get it going but Ollie's dogging it in the back. Either he's too weak to push or he ain't trying. He's got his head down pushing like those little guys in B football. Weak.

"All right. That's it," I say. He gets in puffing. "Where we going?" I never got around to seeing Doug's situation. From what everybody said he was high-rollin.

"On Overland in Culver City."

Going to the Westside. We take the freeway and get there in twenty minutes. Ollie's looking out of the window, is he sad? For some reason I feel bad about having to ask for more directions.

“Where to now?”

“Left on Overland. Pull over. It’s the big apartment complex on the corner.”

I see it coming up. I roll to the curb and stop. The radio ain’t on. First time I can remember driving without the radio on. Ollie opens the car door and turns to me.

“You coming.”

Ain’t a question. Feel like telling him to cut that shit out, talking to me like I’m his boy but I play it off.

“Why you want me to go?”

Ollie shakes his head.

“Just come on.”

What the fuck. I get out the car thinking I should have stayed at the crib. I follow him to the entrance. They got it lit up like daytime. Got a video camera pointing at us and a security gate that looks like it goes twenty feet up. Ollie pulls out a key and opens it. Soon as we get inside we see a guard, must have been checking us out. Ollie walks by him without paying him any mind. I follow, glancing back to see if the guy’s still watching. Yeah, and now he’s got his radio out, talking to somebody. I’m getting nervous, picturing it, a bunch of nervous security guards with guns waiting to rush us.

“Where we going?”

Ollie keeps walking, not saying a thing, then points to a building about half a block up. This place is like something you see in a science fiction movie. Five-story apartment buildings on both sides and in the center where we’re walking, hot tubs and pools and brick ponds, cool and blue in front of each building. Ahead I see tennis courts. It’s like Disneyland. We pass two white people soaking in a hot tub, their conversation dies as we get close. Must scare them like hell. Pay all that money to live behind twenty-foot walls and they still got to see us. Ollie heads for a building, on the awning it says Sans Souci. He unlocks the glass door and we go in. On the inside it looks more like an hotel than an apartment building. Half-way down the hall he gets to a room, waves me back and puts his ear to the door. I see him pull out a nine and holding it awkwardly, stretching away, he unlocks the door. I’m backstepping, inching

toward the exit. Fuck this. Ollie goes in and I don't hear nothing. After a couple minutes I creep up to the open door, poke my head in and see Ollie sitting on a big white couch, gun hanging down in his hand.

“Bitch ain't here.”

“That's what you doing? You think you gonna find her waiting here for you?”

“She gotta get her clothes and shit.”

“What you gonna do, shoot her in the apartment? Police be on you straight out.”

“Fuck the police.”

“Aw yeah. You must think this is a joke. That rent-a-cop saw us come on in. We're on that video camera. If the bitch walk in here and you pop her you gonna get popped.”

Ollie sits there fingering the nine and I get a chill. He'd put her head out and worry about it later. Yeah, I'm standing here like a duck and if she walks through that door I'm going down with Ollie.

“All right. You ready to get on?”

“I ain't going nowhere. I'm hanging till she come home.”

“I'll check,” I say not trying to hide it that I'm pissed off. I turn my back to him and that gun and I'm at the door and almost out. He calls me.

“Thanks for the ride. Close the door,” he says. I nod and get out.

Some silly shit. What the fuck is wrong with me. I start the bug and pull out, rushing it, looking for the freeway. Get on and crank the radio and floor this little pootbutt car to the limit, not even seventy. Can think now. Before I was too mad to think about anything other than smacking Ollie's silly ass. Got played like a joke. Ollie used me as backup and I saw it coming and still went along. It's about Doug. I owe him, cause not that long ago he watched my back, was down for me, wouldn't let me do stupid shit. Yeah, he did the stupid shit. Even though we stopped hanging out, I had to be there to see it.

Get off at the Imperial exit and go west. Too late to see Margot. Daddy's got the gate locked and even if he didn't he'd slam the door

in my face and talk shit for a week. Have to settle for seeing if her lights are on. Maybe she'll hear the bug. Roll down the block doing fifty. Don't like some of the niggahs in her hood. It's about Margot. She don't talk to them more than hi and bye so if she's talking to me I must think I'm hot shit. Couple of them are sitting under a streetlight, drinking eightball, looking to sling. Low-rent niggahs. Don't have money, don't know money. In front of her house I gun the engine and coast to a stop. Yeah, her light's on. Hope she heard me cause getting to her door is like breaking into jail. Her daddy's got a five-foot-high brick wall around the front yard with glass and nails at the top. He did it so it's hard to see like he wants to trick some basehead into going over and cutting his hands up. I gun the bug again. If she's up she'll hear that, muffler so bad sounds like a shotgun. One good thing about her daddy is he sleeps hard. I walk over to the gate, he's got it padlocked as usual. Can't hop the gate, he files down the spikes. Fuck it. She must be dead asleep. I turn to leave but the front door and the security door open and Tyson and Ali come racing out of the house barking crazy like they're gonna kill something. Tyson flings himself against the gate but Ali recognizes me and sits down. Ali's got sense but I don't know about Tyson.

"Hey, hey, what's up, boy . . ." I said trying to calm his stupid ass then I see Margot backlit in the doorway. She's got on an ugly robe and her hair's wrapped up in a scarf. Then she turns on the floodlights and I'm straight out blinded. I hear her slippers slapping the sidewalk as she runs to the gate.

"What the fuck is wrong with you. You can't call somebody? I've been waiting around for you to call. Everybody's calling me saying shit, 'Oh yeah, F got shot. Doug's dead but F got shot in the leg.' "

"I wanted to call you."

"Yeah, but you didn't."

"Too much shit was happening."

Man, she's mad. I'm standing here, blinded by the light, blinking like a basehead and she's in my face popping gum, pissed off.