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High is so nice. High is so beautiful. You float. Hi, high. Whoever invented this shit should be rewarded. Jesus Christ this shit is good. Look at the clouds; they're so soft and fluffy, bouncing off your head as you glide through the air. You can't help but dunk the ball from way up here in the sky.

You've been away from your moms for a week now. Everytime you think about going back and then checking out Yvette, you get cold feet. Then you get high and you feel too damn good to consider anything serious. Hell, everything's cool. You're just trying to get it together. It's nothing serious, you're just skin-popping, not going to the vein. Now *that* would be some rough shit. Romeo already reduced to stealing cars to keep up his habit. But you'll never get into it that far, no way. No way. This shit is just temporary—absolutely temporary. That shit ain't going into your veins. Your mother would pitch a bitch. You need your legs and arms for the court, baby. No mainlining for your ass.

You haven't been out, just laying dead in Romeo's pad and watching him parade back and forth with shit: radios, fur coats, televisions, typewriters. It's a wonder the dude don't get no hernia and shit. He had you helping him carry a damn stereo and television combination a couple of days ago. It was still in the box so it looked cool, plus it was in the daytime.

Look out the window. You think the weather's going to break soon. Spring. That's the best time to get your head together anyway. Friday. Romeo should get in any minute; it's close to five. Have a late dinner, get high again. You still got time to get your shit together. Maybe by Monday you'll be straight. Yeah. Tell Romeo you'll cut out on Monday. Then you'll have to leave and go back to your moms. Need some clothes anyway. Can't keep washing the same shit over and over.

At seven the rooms get dark. You walk around only half-high to pull down the shades and click on the lights. Sit in the big chair in the living room and listen to the radio. Just cool out. Doze. Wake up an hour later. Romeo's still not here. Go pour yourself some blackberry-flavored

brandy, try to keep the high. You know there's no more dope in the crib. Frankie Crocker is cooking tonight, playing all the best jams. You used to call in dedications to Cindy when you were in high school, then listen all night to hear the cut. The brandy puts a mellow glow around you. You listen to Otis Redding's "Try a Little Tenderness" with a dull, floating sensation. You don't want to move. God, the nigger can sing. Oh, you don't want to move. Doze some more. You should start dinner now that it's ... what?—almost nine-thirty? Where the hell is Romeo? You wonder if the nigger got busted. That shit never even occurred to you before. Now you're straightening out. If he is busted, they'll come here and get your ass with all this shit in here. And you laying up high and shit.

Stand up. Your heart races as you go to the window and look down, leaning on the window sill, to the Grand Concourse. You're afraid you might see a half dozen police cars, sirens and whistles and pigs in blue surrounding the building and blocking traffic. No, just the usual hunched backs hustling along the Concourse. Maybe you ought to get out of here. You have overstayed your welcome somewhat. Romeo ain't here. That's the main thing. You don't know what's up. Rush into the bedroom and get your jacket, put on your socks and shoes, go into the kitchen for some potato chips and Pepsi and hustle through the living room and out the front door.

Check your wallet as you walk along the Concourse to the subway. Four bucks. Everybody you know is out of town. Who you gonna borrow bread from? Your moms will give you too much static and you definitely can't go to Yvette now, not after being in town for a week without contacting her. Sit rocking on the subway as you think of what you must do this Friday night. Damn, things are so down and empty inside your stomach. You feel so sad. Think of Otis Redding's "Try a Little Tenderness." *Things may get weary, they often do get weary.* That's what you need, something to bring you out of this sad weariness. The lead in your chin forces you to nod. All these old people sitting on this car are so much happier.

You need it. That's what it's all about, Goat. You need it. It frightens you. You need it. Naw, not like Romeo, stealing cars, stereos and cameras. Waking up with cramps. Going out of his mind, sweating. You don't need it like that. But you are sweating. Your face is hot. You need something to lift you up. Oh, no. Oh, yes. You need it. You clench your fists, uncross your legs, try to breathe normally. You are scared now. Your life is scary. You need it. You're hooked. You know it. You have never had any sensations like this in your life. Who's watching? You've never wanted anything like you want it now. God, you feel so low, so damn low. Only it can lift you up, convince you that smiles and laughter

are possible. Oh shit. Oh please, you need it.

Look desperately back now to your boyhood and the sand roads of Charleston. Mommagran telling those big boys from across the tracks to leave you alone. She holding you around the shoulder as you both stand on the porch. This is what you want now—the warm comfort of something ... something to shake this jitteriness, this invisible monster trying to pull you away from Mommagran. Blank white faces are rocking blurs across from you. The subway train pulls your body, then pushes it back, then pulls it, and the white faces stare still. The subway pulls you, the faces stare, your stomach is hollow and you want to retain the vision of your Mommagran holding you.

No. No, she slips away from you like one of those fast players moving around a pick, his waist easing away from your hands. Only it is Mommagran's arm easing away and you are left facing the pain bubbling within you as the blank globes bounce on their necks across from you. You must come up with a solution and feel it, it is so close. Your hands are almost touching it, the magic words, the uplifting secret, the answer is ... is ...

Aunt Hattie. You ain't seen her in years. Aunt Hattie. Hell yes, Aunt Hattie. You can't sit still now, you're so anxious. Your toes twitch. Oh, you can already feel the clouds bouncing off your forehead. Stand, hold on to the turnstile, ready to go. Outside you're smiling as you walk up the avenue toward her apartment. You're only minutes from rescue. She'll save you. Aunt Hattie. Goddamn, ain't seen her in *years*, Goat.

Funniest thing how the building hasn't changed in years. You remember the evening you arrived in this town. Now again—and you've only visited her about twice since then—you enter the hallway. You stand shivering with anticipation. You glance over the grille of spaces and brass buttons on the wall, then find her name, then walk down the shiny tiles.

She asks who it is when you knock on the door. The door swings open and she's in her stocking cap and robe, big smile of shiny teeth. You collapse into the lumpy chair you used to sleep in.

You have to lie to her. Never in your life have you even conceived of lying to an aunt. All right, you're desperate. Your toes twitch. You hate every word of it, but you give her the story because now it's lie or something else, and you can only describe that something as too, too painful, something you can't bear. And if you can escape it by lying, you will lie.

So you're home for spring vacation but had to borrow the money from the school chaplain to pay for the ticket. In order to pay him back you have to get a job while you're here on vacation. The only way you

can get a job is to go to an employment agency. They require a registration fee. Could she please lend you the money so you can pay the fee and get a job in a restaurant so you can pay back the chaplain? Could she also help you in paying for the waiter's pants—they have to be a special wool—you'll need for the job? Also, your return trip...

She asks finally how much you need. You tell her. She frowns, says that you never visit her, she's been sick, nobody telephones her. Only when you want something. You ask her why she never wrote you back. She is stunned. You wrote her a letter? Of course you did. You wanted her to know you were on the honor roll—uh, dean's list. She smiles. Now you ask her about Earlene, the girl who used to baby-sit for you when you were a kid. She's really smiling now, astounded that you remember Earlene. You're getting a pain in your stomach. You're running off at the mouth. You have decided to study to become a doctor. You can't wait to get back to school. What does she think of Malcolm X—isn't he crazy? She gives you the money, going first to her closet, then taking the balled up stocking cap into the bathroom, then emerging. You hug her, tell her you love her, and get your hat. You fly down the steps and out the door.

You know where Romeo goes. You'll try the same place. You got the money to take a cab now. You doing good again. Shit, that was even funny. As you think of how damn good you're going to feel, you start smiling. What a performance. You ought to be shot, Goat. Lying to your aunt like that. You did a job. No shit. You're still grinning as you get out the cab, and almost ignoring the stabs in your chest now because you have the answer for them, the beautiful answer for these pains—walk down the avenue.

You're on Eighth and One Twenty-Sixth. The faces in the doorways move under the moonlight. Down the avenue. A voice whispers something about the black, red, Methadone, Jolly Jamaica, good smoke, hash, big red. People dart all around, through alleys, to cars, from cars, down steps, out of buildings. Elbows and knees are signals. Hand signs and nods are symbols. Shoulders bump into yours, big hats twirl. You stop in a doorway. Small talk, nods. You go into your pocket. He goes into his. Subway roars overhead. Another dude on the sidewalk paces—wide black hat, cupped palms around the flame, mustached smile, the look upward from the cupped flame. Dash into Cadillac, into kitty kat, headlamps on, smoking exhaust pipe. You now stumbling in some hallway. They got the tie around your arm. Bulging vein is purple now and you're smiling your ass off, you're so happy to be this close to the pillows of clouds bouncing off your forehead. Ah...the needle punctures, loosens all muscles. You are free again. Now you go to glide, float

upward, haha, giggly giggly looka Earl, mama, looka Earl, haha upsa daisy, upsa daisy ... high again. The clouds bounce against you. You're doing good again. Real good. High. Beautiful.

You are high so much you lose count of the days. You heard some of them talk about stupefication, some of the dudes who been on it for awhile, and you think you have some idea of what they mean. Finally you had to take it in the vein, in the main line, that night Romeo didn't show. Come to find out the nigger got arrested for grand larceny ("Nigger had about three pianos in his apartment," is how the story goes by one claiming he lived in the crib next door) and is serving two-to-ten and be out on probation in the summer. But just in your arms, not your legs, where your jumping ability is. You won't get to the point that some of them have—popping their jugular veins and penises.

All the chicks and dudes you discover on heroin are mostly all the people you knew in school who didn't want to do shit. Now they paying for it, you think, just as you are. Don't do shit, won't be shit, somebody used to say. Free schools and dumb niggers.

Pay a few bucks to use somebody's shooting gallery and you see them all down there. You got your own needle now from Harlem Hospital—a nurse who worked there on the night shift copped—for three bucks. So all you have to do is rent the rest of the works. You don't just want any old needle going into your arm, unnh.

It's always in the basement unless you dealing with some real high prices. Always around the furnace where the heat is. You go every morning now, before nine, as if you're going to a gig. Sit on wooden crates or molded mattresses. Go over to the faucet to get the water. Bodies—not faces or individuals or people with working constitutions, but bodies—male and female, line the walls, propped like Raggedy Ann dolls. You have to bend under the heating pipes when you move around. Cobwebs in the corners. About a half-dozen. Sometimes as many as thirty. Teenagers on their way to school. Old ladies with scars on their cheeks. One old hag who couldn't find her vein, she's been doing it for so long. She begs somebody to beat on her arm to make the vein come up. "Kick it if you have to." There's a dude whose leg is swollen with abscesses. They all come to the gallery every day like club members. In the dimly lighted celler, veins pop from necks, arms, legs, dicks. Needles flash. Sighs and moans compose a dull chorus. Snores from some who nod.

The conversations are always out the side of the mouth so as not to lose any energy. Low-keyed. So-and-so has the best shit around this week. Sold four bundles Thursday on Morningside—that's getting to be a hot spot. That nigger in the Riverton with the two stereos ... that candy

store on the corner of ... that old man who lives ... they can be taken off by a smart, desperate thief. Get out by noon or you could be in serious trouble. People are desperate. They look at you and at each other with dripping tongues and half-closed eyes. They'll kill you if you tell them you got fifty bucks on your ass. Old dudes who left the gallery to be followed and beaten and robbed by the folks who were sitting next to them. You've seen coats, watches, rings, socks taken off of those who made the mistake of nodding. To wake up and discover you're chilly because someone has stolen your pants is no big thing. The shit is so serious though, nobody laughs at the dude cursing with just his underwear on.

The world has stopped for you as you sit on a squeaking, stained mattress with your head down looking at the dirt floor and these bodies in gray clothes and scarred, drawn faces move around you as if you're in the middle of a merry-go-round. They're there, but it's really only you in the world. Nothing else counts as you float so peacefully through the world which has stopped for you. Fantastic pink clouds tickle your neck. You're doing what you have to do, Goat. You'll get it together sooner or later, but right now ...

Right now you're laying dead, getting yourself together. And it's the pain in the morning that sends you back. Soon's you get rid of these fucking pains, you'll straighten up. But see, you wake up in some friend's pad, some friend who's hooked on the shit, with burning stomach cramps. You got to get out and take care of these cramps. Your arms and legs ache. You can't breathe right. Stabs of pain zig-zag through your chest and down to your stomach. You got to get out and make it to the gallery.

Before you know it, it's April, warm. Seems like just yesterday you came in from Charlotte. The colors of spring are in little girl's clothes. Convertibles line the avenue. You can smell the trees. Heads are filled with smiles. You ain't been home in months. Goat, what's it mean? You sit scratching your neck one day on a stop and hear one kid in sneakers tell another that you're on the shit. You raise your head (it hurts). Who's that punk talking about? You? You're just getting your shit together—what's he mean, hooked? What's he mean? You stand on the stoop, your arm pointed at him, trying to get his attention so you can straighten his ass out, but you lose your footing and stumble to the sidewalk as you grab on to a parking sign pole. You turn. Heads look out windows, bodies stand in doorways. They're not smiling. They're looking at you. The thought bangs against your head, but you try to ignore what it's saying. Admit it. They know. You ought to know too and stop jiving yourself, nigger. You're hooked. Oh, no. Sit down on the stoop again.

Scratch. Think—try to think of what you’ve been doing these last days, weeks. Events won’t stay in your mind. Names and places mean nothing. Oh God, Goat, you’re hooked. You know it. Yes, the bitch has gotten your ass. Horse. Big H. Put your face in your hands now. You can feel the tears rolling down your fingers into your palms. Your cheeks twitch. You’re hooked, damnit. You’re hooked. Okay, straighten up and walk tall. After all, you’re the Goat. You don’t even have the strength to... who’s this?

You squint your eyes, jerk back your neck. The figure, the walk, the hair look too familiar. You remember your face isn’t washed. She’s not looking in your direction. You ease down the steps with your back to her and start trotting. Goddamn, you don’t want her to see you. Just jog easily, as if you’re enjoying the nice spring day.

“Earl?”

Just keep jogging. “Earl ... Earl...”

Dash across the street now without looking. You might even want to get hit by a car before you let her see you. Reaching the sidewalk, you turn your head sideways slightly to see where she is. She’s in the middle of the street, cars fanning by her, and her face looks wild and confused, her arms are in the air as if she’s losing her balance. For an instant you worry about her being hit but bury the thought and keep going.

But she’s still running after you down the street and her high heels are clacking against the sidewalk. You’re losing your breath. Her heels are getting closer. She’s not going to give up. You run faster. The heels are still pounding against the cement and she’s still calling your name. Aw fuck it. You slow down, turn to face her. You have this sudden urge to smack her smart ass right there in the street.

Yvette comes tumbling out of breath into your arms, her chest heaving against yours. Her make-up is streaking down her face. She’s holding you tight, pressing her cheeks against yours, crying, asking you what the matter is, where have you been, why do you look so bad, are you sick, she loves you, she loves you, please tell her what the matter is, please, and why did you run from her, why, why, why, why?

Now you’re leaning against a store window and holding her around the waist. You hold the back of her head and try to shout at her, but your voice is too weak, and besides you’re out of breath. Her eyes are wide and unbelieving.

Vaguely you are aware that a few people have stopped to watch this, that their faces are somewhere out there behind hers. You tell her that you’re a dope addict. “I’m hooked on heroin,” you tell her and are startled yourself at the huskiness in your voice. “I’m no good for you, you hear me? No good. Let me get myself straight and I’ll be back.” She

doesn't believe you, she says, but you know she can tell. You push her away from you and watch her short, dark-skinned frame stand a few feet away with her hands up to her face as if she's hypnotized. She pulls on your jacket lapels. You push her away. She asks you why you did this to yourself. "They did it to me," you answer, but are lost when she asks you who they are. "Get your hands off me." You're whispering in snarls now. "I'll knock you out if you don't get your fuckin' hands off me." She bends over, crumpled, then grasps for an invisible pole. Her knees go to the sidewalk. Her neck is down so you can't see her face, only her shaking back and forth. "Don't follow me, damnit," you say, pointing at her bent head and crumpled frame on the sidewalk, and you run off into the safety of nowhere.