

George Guida

Rome

By five o'clock the battalion had mustered at 116th Street and Broadway, the main university gate. Alfie looked down the line of blue uniforms, a few, like him, in helmet and riot gear. A hundred night sticks smacked palms like the sound of upstate heat bugs, growing louder as the sun sank. If only he could be there now, at his cousin Paulie's cabin, next to his father, scanning the tree line for game. Two weeks earlier the old man had gone to the emergency room, throwing up, splitting headache. Leukemia, the doctors had decided. Two months at the outside. At least he was getting to see Alfie's new son, as much as Alfie's wife would allow. He looked down the line again. The men had gone still as hounds with the first scent of rabbit in their noses. The lieutenant-in-charge was giving final instructions: They would enter through the tunnels, eject the occupiers, secure the buildings, be back at their precinct houses a couple of hours later, in bed by the time Johnny Carson ended.

The briefing room that afternoon had been all ears open, mouths shut. The brass wasn't happy about having to do this—the Department could only look bad tangling with a bunch of eggheads—but it was a detail more than a few beat cops had been looking forward to. Ever since King most of them had seen nothing but double shifts and violence from the ungrateful bastards whose neighborhoods they should've let burn. Alfie hadn't had a night at home with his kids in a week. Like a lot of his brethren, he was tired of the mulies and tired of all the unnecessary bleeding-heart shit from these spoiled brats.

"Bust their fuckin' college holes," was the way LoDato put it, lowering Monday's *Daily News*.

"Goddamn right," Alfie answered him. "A bunch of rich communists. Part of the Big Slide, LoDato. The Fall of Rome."

He'd seen a photo of Sanders, the ringleader. Typical: shaggy hair, thin, little face like a rat. Liked to hold up pictures of all the black leaders:

King and the other one they killed uptown. How could his father have been that close with Joe Jefferson back upstate? Nothing but big smiles, the old preacher. And his old man trusted him, on instinct. The same old man who was always telling his sons, "Don't trust the shirt on your back." Thinking of this, Alfie had to respect Sanders at least a little, in the way he respected his dying father for stepping out of line when he needed to, the way Alfie's mother had taught her children never to do. That past weekend Sanders had gone to a faculty meeting and told the professors that unless they backed the student strike a hundred and ten percent, everything else they did would be bullshit. The kid seemed really to believe in something, even if he was arrogant and more or less wrong. If you asked Alfie what he himself believed in, he would say maybe order, or his family.

Truth was Alfie had become one of the cops the Department sent out to put the fear of God into the blacks. He was six-foot three and solid muscle, from legs like a hurdler's to slim waist to weightlifter's chest and shoulders. He wore his hair military short, and had an angular, handsome, rugged face that could go from wide smile to hollow stare in the second it took him to catch a whiff of trouble. His jaw was sharp as a bent elbow. And he walked with a forward-leaning swagger that promised a beating to any fool who got in his way.

Alfie leaned over to his partner Sweeney, a few inches shorter than he, but just as solid, and grinning as if the lieutenant were up there telling stories about his latest broad.

"Their fuckin' college holes," Alfie whispered.

The smaller man's grin widened, reminding Alfie of the bastard who'd done the preacher in. Alfie always did what he had to do, but guys like Sweeney enjoyed the sound of bone on bone. Of course they were told officially hands off the students, but the warning came with a gleam in their sergeant's eye. Making an example or two usually broke up a party. If he asked, the commandants would say what his father would say: Just don't lose control. Nothing would happen until after the six o'clock news. And the reward for a job well done would be a step away from the street.

Alfie had done his homework and made a plan for him and Sweeney. They were assigned to lead the charge into Low Library. There the detail would cuff the kids and, after they went limp, what protestors usually did, drag them out onto the steps and down to paddy wagons waiting on the brick walk. The job would be all strength, like lifting a form into place on one of his grandfather's construction sites. No blows. That was the order. But Alfie knew that he and his partner and the few others in riot gear, recruited from all over the city, were sent to Low for a reason. Sanders and his two goons, Lundstrem and Wiesniewski, would be there. Sanders physically was a nothing. Lundstrem and Wiesniewski were former linebackers on the Columbia football team, who'd gone over to the other side. Over the last couple of weeks, whenever a disturbance had gotten a little hairy, these two had been able to get their captain out before any shit that could have landed Sanders in the Tombs hit his fan. Today would be different. Alfie had his sights set.

"Brooklyn, Six-Eight, Seven-Five, Seven-Three, line up," the lieutenant announced.

Brooklyn. He used to feel at least a little proud of it. In the Army allegiance to the borough was their Confederate flag to wave back at the redneck southerners. Now even the name bothered Alfie. Most of these fellas around him had grown up there, and most of them, like him, were dying to get out. His old neighborhood was still safe, but you could see it was all changing. Every day the sight of the 61st Street train ditch made him a little sicker. The chain link fence that lined the ditch was rusted away in places. Years ago the street had been like an estate that the whole block owned: groomed, guarded. Now people drove up in cars and dumped garbage right through the holes, or just heaved it over the fence. The slope down the ditch had begun to look like an exploded landfill. Across the way the old 62nd Street guinea gardens were almost empty, most of the Italians too old to tend them. At the 65th Street station, the first ugly red graffiti had shown up a few months before. Probably the Puerto Ricans, who were taking over the far side of Borough Park, or the *mulies* down in Coney Island.

And the old house was no better. Even when they were kids, just

moved down from Rome, it was never what you would call spacious. Since he'd been forced to marry Barbara, the situation had gotten worse and worse. Three kids now in a one-bedroom, ground-floor apartment. With his mother, who wasn't crazy about the arrangement or about his wife, living upstairs. Most of the time he hated being there so much that the job came as a relief. But this last month, the outside world had become an even bigger headache. All he wanted most nights was to sit on the couch with his two older children, watch television and eat whatever piss-poor dinner Barbara put in front of him. After eight years she was still a hell of a lot better in the bedroom, enough that he still got the kids off to sleep in time to get her going the way that had gotten them both here in the first place. Otherwise his wife ran around the house like a nutty partridge, flying in one direction and squawking back over her shoulder at him or at the kids, who most often were quietly doing whatever they were doing. Thank God they'd taken after *him* that way. In a house out on Long Island, she might calm down, and he might have a little shop or studio, a little peace. Everything could be all right. Just to score some points with the honchos, get the detective's salary. That was the game.

His detail started their march through the black wrought iron gates, toward Low Library, between two rows of flowering cherry trees. The past-peak blossoms looked puke pink in the moonlight. Fallen petals carpeted the brick walk. Alfie remembered the story of Palm Sunday. When the troop halted, he picked up a few petals and sniffed them. They were rotten sweet. Up ahead he could see a lieutenant waving the men forward. He slipped the petals in his jacket pocket.

In the middle of campus they found themselves surrounded. Most of the crowd were students with their fists in the air and mouths open. On the lower plaza in front of the library, one group of well-dressed kids, most of them tall, good builds, tough-looking, stood inside police barricades, pointing fingers out from their pen, as though they were trying to stab the long-haired heads that stretched like a field of weeds to every corner of the quad. Alfie nudged Sweeney. The two of them scanned the crowd of smooth-skinned faces.

A little push from the family, different historical timing, he could've been among them. But where? Would he have been one of the athletes in the pen? One of these Army/Navy Store or sport-coat rebels? A spectator on the lawn? More than likely he would've been sitting in his dormitory room, practicing guitar, maybe rehearsing with a band in the student lounge, maybe looking out a window every now and then. If he hadn't gone the safe route, this might've been just a big show. But then his grandfather had the business, wanted him in. And he had his music. Eddie DiMaio and their group. All the time he spent listening to Django Reinhardt, Doc Watson, Chuck Berry. Then there were motorcycles. And girls. And the Army.

In the end it came down to picking a uniform, holding up one sign or another. The students in the pen held up a single banner: The Majority Coalition. Most of the protestors wore buttons. Alfie walked closer to the nearest barricade, to read them: Columbia SDS, STRIKE!, "I Have a Dream," If You're Not Part of the Solution, You're Part of the Problem, IWW, Feed the Hungry! Every button screaming something so you didn't have time to think about what to think. One had a picture of two blacks wearing berets, Panthers, with the caption "Political Prisoners of U. S. A. Fascism." Who were they kidding? LBJ was a prick, but he was no Mussolini. One he saw, he liked: An old, bearded man in a fur hat, staring off in the distance, no words. A few buttons were just little red circles. These were pinned to the chests of the plainclothes people. Some plainclothes, they'd heard, had even infiltrated the occupied buildings. He pointed out the red buttons to Sweeney, who nodded, grunted.

"Where's *my* button?" his partner joked. And that little smile.

Different smile but just as intense as the preacher's that morning up Delta Lake. He had to admit, Joe Jefferson had a smile that eased pain, erased worry. It was the preacher had talked his father into taking Alfie on his first hunting trip. They hadn't been an hour out when he had stopped and pointed to seven men standing on the crest of a wooded hill ahead of them. The sun still sat low behind the men, so they came at his father like dark giants.

"Bagliato!" the biggest of the bunch shouted, striding forward like a

cowboy from the movies.

It was Bob Bronson, his red and black hunting cap pulled low, his face hard to make out in the dim light. Alfie recognized the voice, and knew too well who he was and why he was there.

The man pointed to Jefferson. “Who’s that you got there witcha?”

A few paces to his right, Alfie’s father had stopped and was standing with his arms resting on the barrel of his upright shotgun. He spat tobacco juice in front of him.

“Friend of mine,” he answered. “Business is it a yours?”

In a minute the other men had surrounded their party of three. Before Alfie could move, one of them ran over, grabbed him by the arms and pulled him to the side. Instead of gunfire—He’d always known his father would never shoot a man—he heard the old man’s sixteen-gauge fall in dry leaves, and turned to see his father charging at the big man’s chest. Barely five-foot eight, but solid as copper, the old man, only around forty then, hit Bronson so hard he knocked him backwards three feet.

“Sonofabitch,” his father yelled, hammering punches into Bronson’s face.

Then hell started raining fists. When he looked his father’s way, he could see only burly arms flying up, tangles of legs and torsos, the orange, black, red, brown of the hunting clothes all the men of Rome wore this time of year. When he looked the preacher’s way, he saw a different sight. One of the men Alfie knew, Lou Cinqueciocchi, a bartender at Bronson’s bar, the Paradise, the competition for his uncle’s place, the Romahawk. Lou was maybe seven, eight years older than Alfie, and had a reputation for fighting at every bar in the Italian section. This cidrul’, as he’d heard his father call him, and a man Alfie didn’t know were pulling the preacher’s arms back around a big maple tree, tying a rope around his wrists, binding him to the trunk. Once they had him strung, Lou took out a pair of brass knuckles, pounding them into his palm, measuring his prey. Like flashlights the preacher’s eyes lit up, full of fear. Although he’d seen that look a few times since, for Alfie that particular flash of bloodshot white was, he understood now, prelude to the Big Slide. A split second later he heard a crack and saw actual blood as it exploded from the bridge of the

preacher's nose. Then another crack. Fragments of the preacher's teeth, crushed and launched by the second blow, peppered Alfie's jacket like sleet. A third shot, an uppercut to the jaw, put him out.

The man holding Alfie's fourteen-year-old arms pushed him down to his knees.

"This whatcha wanted to see, son? Take a look. Here's what happens to niggers think they're white men."

Another roundhouse from Lou tore a hole in Jefferson's cheek. At least he was unconscious by then, Alfie recalled, marching now in single file along a narrow barricaded path, past a gauntlet of protestors. Their clothes and their songs said they didn't want violence, but their faces said something else. Snarling, like animals. They didn't know what it was to feel a club bust your gut, a gun butt smash your cheek, to bleed like you'd never stop.

Leaving most of the crowd behind, the detail jogged up a side staircase, toward Lewisohn Hall, first cutting a wide berth around the spillover, then advancing to Earl Hall, an unoccupied building that served as a social club for religious groups and that had an entrance to the system of tunnels connecting most of the buildings on campus. The one from Lewisohn to Low was the shortest, and if they were lucky, would take them right to Sanders.

Years of secret lovers' footsteps had worn depressions in the marble stairs leading down. As the tunnel lights popped on, the place began to feel almost familiar. The walls were nothing but thick concrete painted battleship gray. The whole thing looked like the basement of any big New York apartment building. It was a smell that struck Alfie peculiar. The sour smell of dirt from deep in the ground. He knew it from days playing along the Erie Canal, from excavation sites, from the Brooklyn cellar where he and his buddies had rehearsed. In those days it was mostly rock and roll, a little Elvis and Buddy Holly, what they thought people would want to hear, but always ending the night with deeper tunes, with loneliness he felt in his father's New York City exile: Hank Williams, the Stanley Brothers, Leadbelly— "Goodnight, Irene." Every time his group played it, he imagined Irene, what could have happened to her, how this

singer's world could have fallen apart so fast. When they finished, he knew that everything beyond the C-D-G chords, the simple strum, was a crock of shit.

He walked on, in rhythm with the strum, Sweeney right behind him. In the distance a red light marked the entrance to Low. The protestors had thought far enough ahead to lock it, but one pick gun and the detail was in, on tiptoes now. As they crept up the first flight, Alfie made out tinny voices and music, the echoes of a family party heard from a child's bedroom. He had tried marijuana enough to know the scent, and expected to smell it any second now. It would explain the lack of a lookout at the basement door.

Drugs were everywhere. In the old neighborhood, the criminals sold them at night in front of the closed-up side-street five-and-dimes. Here, with the money these brats had, the nooks and crannies, all the deviants and rabble-rousers at the gates, the dealers probably walked the campus like they owned it. If these kids were smoking, they might be using something harder. One of them on acid might come flying down the stairs any time. The lieutenant had told them the occupiers were unarmed, but what if they had rifles from the Black Panthers? Was he supposed to get shot so some Ivy League delinquents could make a political statement? News was the protestors had taken over the President's office, smashed the furniture, burned files, torn up the Rembrandt painting over the boss's desk. Alfie had seen a few Rembrandts and liked them. Little fucks. If anybody was going down, better them than him.

The sound from above was cover. They picked up the pace. Sweeney flew past him, two steps at a time. Alfie could hear individual guitar chords now, distorted, rough. And laughter over the music. Occasional bull-horned messages:

"You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows. Yeee-hah!"

"Down with capitalism."

"No class rank lists!"

"Fight for our brothers and sisters in the ghetto."

"Don't trust anyone over fifty."

After each exclamation, Alfie heard a muffled cheer from the crowd on the ground.

Then one voice and line they all knew:

“Up against the wall, motherfucker!”

Alfie caught up with Sweeney and grabbed his shoulder.

“Sanders,” he said, Sweeney nodding.

They flew up the stairs together like comic book superheroes, Alfie thought, their legs blue blurs, body armor heavy, nightsticks, blackjacks, walkies, and cuffs jangling against each other, sounding like castanets and wood blocks, their own music competing with the crunch of guitar chords louder and louder, the wails of solos, a black man’s raspy voice. At the bottom of the last flight they surprised a kid in dungarees and polo shirt, sitting there, smoking a cigarette. He tried to turn and run up the stairs, but as Alfie got close enough to hear him wheeze, he saw the dark flash of Sweeney’s billy club and heard the thud on the kid’s skull. Like a scarecrow he dropped straight down, rolled a few steps to the landing below, out. Sweeney was right. It was important to maintain the element of surprise.

Sweeney’s baton rose in the air as they approached the door of the President’s office. Two lines of protestors, most of them dressed for a night of drinking, locked arms across the threshold. Alfie nailed one in the belly with the butt of his nightstick, blackjacked another on the shoulder, and only had to hear the loud snap to know that Sweeney had swung right for one of their arms. That kind of pain was indescribable. A motorcycle accident had split Alfie’s forearm and smashed his wrist. Out on Staten Island. He had been at least an hour on the ground before the ambulance got there. A guitar solo blared from behind the door. Alfie thought about how his grandmother had later told him with the sound of the old Italian fate, “You’ll never be the same.” And he wasn’t, not his playing, not his hope.

Sweeney’s target was thrashing around on the marble floor, holding his shattered arm. You hated to hurt a dumb kid, but in a case like this you had to take out the weak link. Anyway, it was Sanders and his bunch had brought this on. Alfie wanted nothing more than to grab the asshole

and personally drag him to the wagon, he hoped in front of at least two or three of the commandants. As the detail put the rest of the student guards on the ground, Alfie felt a hand on his foot. The injured kid, his face twisted like a raisin, head raised.

“Fucking hired thug,” he spat between coughs.

Thug. The word his father had used after the attack in the woods. The old man lay in a hospital bed, recuperating from two broken ribs and a ruptured spleen.

“Bronson’s thugs,” he said. “*Vigliacchi*, cowards, every one of ’em. Fair fight, I’d a broken Bronson in half.”

Fair fight. God bless his father. What was fair?

“He got off easy. He grabs my son, I grab an eye.”

Alfie had underestimated the old man’s toughness. Al Senior had gotten clear of their attackers long enough to see what Cinquecicchi had done to the preacher. When they came at him again, his father dodged and went straight for Bronson, pinning him against a tree. He smashed the big man’s head against the trunk, and while Bronson tried to push him off, Al Senior reached up and plunged two fingers into his eye socket.

“Eye’s useless now. Woulda ripped it out if they hadn’t a pulled me off.”

The preacher wasn’t so lucky. By the time the thugs fled and Alfie was able to crawl over to the big maple tree, Jefferson’s face was red pulp. Only his rolling white eyes said he was still on earth. And whose fault was it? Was the old man so high and mighty he thought he could just break the rules of Rome without paying a price? Alfie was never sure he had anything to confess, and anyway it looked now like he would never have the chance.

He could feel the kid’s fingers at the top of his boot. Blood surged through his legs. To stay grounded took all his strength. His chest was screaming for action, anything. His foot shook. As the kid tightened his grip, Alfie felt his teeth grind, neck burn. All around were voices shouting so that words were twigs snapping in the woods, gunshots in the air. The kid at his feet was, what, maybe nineteen, twenty? At that age

Alfie had been a troublemaker too, always defending the neighborhood turf, trying to find a use for the muscles he'd built in his basement like a science project. His instinct now was to raise his leg and stomp the kid's hand, crush his fingers. Instead, he reached down and grabbed him by his broken arm. The kid screamed like a sick baby. Sweeney glanced over, giving him the thumbs up. Alfie threw the boy's good arm around his shoulder and dragged him to the closest wall, where he crumpled.

"This is where you stay, you hear me?"

With a slow movement of his head, the kid signaled Alfie to come closer. Inches away from Alfie's ear, he groaned, "No matter what, we're taking the University down."

Alfie took the kid's head in both hands, slapped his cheek, and spoke slowly.

"And then what, jerk-off?"

The boy closed his eyes and swooned.

The battle was all about proving who had the biggest balls, and Alfie wasn't about to lose his now. Feeling another rush, he left the kid behind, more determined than ever to accomplish his mission. Butterflies in his stomach lifted him through the office door and inside. Bodies were flying all around. Some flying toward the oak-paneled walls, some flying at them, like angry hawks. He stood back to back with Sweeney, weapons up, the way his father had taught him and his little brother to do whenever wild dogs came sniffing around them in the woods. The other cops did the same, taking swings, connecting with the protestors who came at them in dungarees, turtle-neck sweaters, monkey dress shirts, tennis shoes. Blood streaked the floor and splattered the walls. The smell of it drove Alfie on. He stood shoulder to shoulder with Sweeney.

"Anything you see, hit."

They swung like a single four-armed monster, cracking arms, pounding backs, bashing skulls, whatever body parts had the bad luck of getting in the way. To anyone with a camera, the scene would've looked brutal, just what the bosses didn't want. But Alfie had method.

"The back," he yelled to Sweeney. "Let's go."

They were almost to the door behind the President's desk, next to

the Rembrandt that somehow was still in one piece, when Alfie spotted Sanders' unmistakable head. The rebel's hair was curly, and he wore a green fatigue jacket. He was motioning to someone in the adjoining room, until he spotted their vanguard, Sweeney almost at the door. Turning, Sanders skipped through a thunderstorm of bodies, away.

A shoulder drove Alfie into the wall. He got to his feet. Then another shot, this one banging his head into a chair rail. He came back up swinging.

"Ahhhh, fuck."

Then Sweeney.

"C'mon, no time for that shit, Bagliato."

The room was jumping now, tilting from side to side, but Alfie clubbed his way ahead, steadying himself against the wall or a chair, or propelling himself off one of the pukers. Through the door he spotted Sweeney again, baton up, a mob whirling around him.

"Out of my way, you spoiled piece of shit."

Baton. Blackjack. Baton. Elbow. For a moment Alfie wished he'd brought brass knuckles.

The only thing brass in the room was the handle of a stand-up ashtray near a big brown leather chair. A student with a head wound sat in the chair, glasses off, rubbing the bridge of his nose. Above the chair Alfie saw a framed diploma, the President's: University of Wisconsin, and some Latin, ...*scientia civilis*...MDCCCXXX. Numbers always looked neater that way, stronger, like counting meant something. Next to the chair was a side table with a book on it. Erasmus. *The Praise of Folly*. All of sudden Alfie felt as though he could sleep. He could sit right down here in the middle of all this shit, and read and doze off. Al Senior, a man he'd never seen read a book in his life, had told him once, walking past an encyclopedia in his Uncle Peppino's library, "Anything you wanna learn, you can find in one of these." And the world let kids like Sanders just sit in libraries and take it all in. No idea what it was to work in the dark. Sweeney should be right on his ass by now. Time to go.

The back door of the office led to another stairwell and a hallway. A few at a time, the students were finding their way down, trying to keep

ahead of the riot squaders and blue coats.

“Bagliato, c’mon,” Sweeney’s voice called from down the hall. Alfie pushed his way through the mini-exodus. Different sets of footfalls on the marble floor echoed from around a corner. Alfie jogged the best he could toward the sound, like faint bongo drums. When he made the turn, he caught sight of Sweeney, way down, in a loping jog himself, turning around to wave him on.

Alfie’s head felt full of spiders. He shook it as clear as he could, and took off running down the hall. They’d get this fuck, and that would be that.

Then Sweeney again. “Where you going, asshole?”

A group of students appeared at the next corner, running toward Alfie. They’d been holed up in another office. Did they think they were the cavalry? Sweeney was giving them all the hell he could, which slowed him enough for Alfie to make up ground. As he reached Sweeney’s side, they jostled with the last few students, doling out parting whacks as the dopes pushed past. Sweeney’s uniform was torn at the shoulder, his face full of marks but still grinning.

“He’s right up there. Time he gets through the doors, we’ll nail him.”

Alfie followed Sweeney in a near sprint to the next stairwell. They could hear Sanders’ voice, deep chipmunk, cackling, taunting.

“Up against the wall, motherfucker!”

A few seconds behind the head puke, the partners burst into the lobby. One of the goons was pushing Sanders through a side window. Alfie thought of drawing his sidearm, then thought better. Fifteen years it took him to get up the nerve to shoot a deer; it would take at least another ten for him to blast a rich kid. The goon hopped through, before Sweeney could catch hold of his leg. His terrier of a partner practically dove through, after their quarry. Alfie crouched down and tried not to hit his already pounding head on the sash. He emerged on the side of the library near the campus chapel, and hit the pavement running. Sweeney flashed in front of the chapel, chasing through the twilight. From one direction came a chant: “Kirk must go! Kirk must go!” The President. Sonofabitch had a living room in his office, but still, it was disrespectful.

He wasn't a Hitler, this guy. Hell, he probably liked students. From another direction someone yelled, "Free Huey!" Newton, a chief Black Panther. He wouldn't mind collaring a Panther either. That would be a successful hunting trip. Good publicity. Feed the family.

By the time Alfie reached the Thinker statue, Sweeney was gone. Alfie sat down on the statue's base, to gather himself. Out in front of him, on the library steps, the crowd was pushing against barricades, as the protestors in the office, some hanging out the windows, called down to them.

"Pigs go home!"

"No police state!"

Even the blacks treated cops with more respect.

The last straw was a banner a group of students were draping over the big statue in front of Low, the woman with open arms: "Alma Mater, Raped by Cops." Alfie turned away from the action. It was a cool night, but inside his uniform was a furnace. He took off his helmet and wiped the sweat from his forehead. In front of him rose Philosophy Hall. He looked up to see the expression on The Thinker's face. Depressed. Maybe like he didn't care or couldn't really do anything about anything. Alfie wished he had stayed in school. Up in Rome he'd loved it. Especially history, all the empires. Who was Octavian? Was he the crazy one? And where did Genghis Khan come from? What made him such a bastard? They'd have stayed in Rome if it weren't for him. Or, he could say, if it weren't for his father. But was that fair? He remembered the day Johnny Bronson called him a dago, told him his father was no better than a nigger, and that's why he went around with one. He'd gone back to his father and told him.

"Why do you go around with a nigger, Pop?"

"Who's a nigger? I don't know what that word means." He turned to his wife. "Pen, you know what that means?"

Alfie's mother looked daggers at her husband, had it in for him all the time, but she just shook her head and dropped her eyes.

"Tell your friends to mind their own fathers' problems...and keep their minds on something other than you. Books, maybe. Girls."

But back at school Bronson and the others wouldn't let up.

"My father says your father needs to be taught a lesson, sitting with a nigger in public."

"My father says there's no such thing as a nigger."

"Maybe your father's a nigger, then."

Bronson touched Alfie's hair: curly, dark.

"You a nigger?"

Alfie shoved Bronson into a wall. They were standing outside the lunchroom, under close watch, or he would have cold-cocked the shithead.

That afternoon, Alfie left school furious. On the way home, he picked up a tree branch from the woods and bashed a mailbox on the American side of town. Back at the house, he found his father underneath their old black Chevrolet.

"Pop?"

The old man groaned, sliding himself out from under the boat of a car.

"What's the story, Son?"

"Kids in school today asked me was I a nigger"

His father sighed and wiped his hands on a rag.

"Why do you gotta take Joe Jefferson out in public? Can't you just be hunting friends?"

His father got to his feet, a full inch shorter than his lanky eldest.

"Alfie, I don't like to repeat myself," he said, "and I told you I don't even know what that word means. But I'll say this now and that's it...I love you, and I wish I could save you from the stupid people that's in the world, but, boy, sometimes you gotta pick a side and do what you know is right. Matter of fact, I'm going hunting with Joe next weekend. Up Delta Lake. And you're invited."

He patted Alfie's shoulder, and knelt down next to the sideboard of the car.

"Go tell the rascals at school if they got a problem with that, they can come out and see me in the woods."

The old man disappeared under the car again.

Alfie dropped his books on the front lawn, and walked away, head down, toward Dominick Street. His life would be hell from hereon out. Johnny Bronson was always jealous of him. He wouldn't let up. And enough kids felt about blacks just the way Johnny did. Alfie hated his father sometimes. Stubborn, and then some nights he'd stay out so late, next day his mother would be nasty as a witch. Maybe his father needed a lesson. A few blocks down Alfie found himself in front of the Paradise. Inside Bob Bronson stood behind the bar, pounding the keys of the cash register. Like all Rome bars, this one had a line painted on the floor near the front. Minors could go only that far. Alfie stepped to it, ready to give Mr. Bronson all the information he had and then some.

The crackle of his walkie brought Alfie back to a chorus of 10-13s, all over the place officers in need of assistance. There were 1-4-5s, even a likely 1-8-7. Everything with the operation was going to shit. Guitar chords were blaring out here too. This time he knew the work: Jimi Hendrix. Wild, but he had a gift. When Alfie stood up, his head felt as though *The Thinker* was sitting on it. He lurched ahead, putting into his walk all the authority he could, straightening his shoulders and clenching his fists.

At Kent Hall the music hit him like a train. Something in three-four time, crashing symbols, bass that shook the classroom windows, the switchblade guitar. He searched the walk for Sweeney. He could see here and there an NYPD uniform, but not much action. The crowd was stagnant, watching the show. Then from the direction of Hamilton Hall, over the music he heard someone yell: "Hey, Pig. Hey, white boy, whatchu lookin' for?"

Where the fuck was Sweeney?

Again, to him.

"Yo, you lose somebody, officer?"

Standing under one of the Hamilton Hall windows were two Black Panthers. The caps, the uniforms, everything but the rifles, though Alfie was sure if he frisked them he'd find pistols in their pants. He drew his revolver.

"Stay where you are, hands in the air."

The pair obliged.

After a moment of this freeze-frame, Alfie realized this was no time for an arrest—And on what grounds? He re-holstered the weapon.

The taller of the two stepped close to him and spoke.

“We was just tryin’ to help you out, Brotherman.”

He took another step forward and put an arm on Alfie’s shoulder.

More of his father’s words: “One day a hand on the arm, the next day they’re slappin’ your face.”

Alfie smacked the Panther’s hand off. The man immediately shoved him.

“We stand our ground, Pig.”

His friend drew up behind him.

“That’s right. We ain’t afraid o’ yo’ cracker ass.”

Then, quick, to his side, Sweeney, tearing for the entrance of Hamilton.

His revolver again. Almost out of the holster before a hand smacked it away. The gun behind him on the ground.

Hendrix again, slicing.

Where?

The Panthers bolted.

There, by the kids with their arms in the air. Answers to every call from the pukes up front. Alfie squatted. Ankles, feet, out of the fuckin’ way.

“...KNOW WHAT I WANT, BUT I JUST DON’T KNOW...HOW TO GO ABOUT GETTIN’ IT.”

Got it. Get up. He hated this helmet, this uniform. The kids would cry if they didn’t hear him come home. Even his wife would worry. Fuckin’ holster. Alfie finally tucked the revolver in its bed again, took off his helmet, ran fingers through his matted, curly hair.

When he looked up, there, in his face, Wiesniewski. The stringy shag of his overgrown head. Then knuckles hissing through the air. Nose, suddenly feeling it, off-kilter, numb, wet. Falling back into a body. Thick legs coming toward him. Another shot to the temple. The pavement. Head. Blood in his hair, on his cheek. Alfie’s father lying on the ground.

Dry leaves blood-stuck to his forehead. Eyes purple, swollen shut. “Joe,” said his father, pointing to the tree. The sound of men yelling, car doors slamming, an engine, a screech of wheels. Sirens: cruisers, wagons, fire trucks. A herd’s worth of footsteps, one ear, the other. His father pushing him off a path when the cows came through. Pop in the leaves, blood, ooze on his sleeve, arm extended. “Joe.” Sky, pink. Cuffs, denim. Sandals. Gravel. Stink of dirt, feet. Roll. Roll over, cover up.

“...MAKE LOVE, YOU BREAK LOVE, IT’S ALL THE SAME...
WHEN IT’S OH-VER.”

A boot in his ribs. Motherfucker. Not dying here, for this. The baton. Fence. Take a hold. Half-punch on his neck. Up. Shouldn’t a missed, punk. Baton. Swing.

Wiesniewski, staggering. Around him too many kids, like this was some outdoor dance, shoulders bouncing up and down. Red lights flashing. Riot squad on its way. Their whistles. Wiesniewski, back at him.

“Up against the wall, Pig.”

“Only wall I see is right behind you, asshole.”

Alfie swung the club with all he had into the ex-jock’s side. He groaned, doubled over. The only cop in the Bagliato family brought the baton down again, double-fisted, on the middle of the kid’s back, heard the breath leave him. Wiesniewski tried to turn and run, still bent, stumbling, half-sideways, another berserk dance. What difference did it make? The whole world was going berserk. Alfie slammed another shot into the back of his right knee, and Wiesniewski went down against the side of Hamilton. Would’ve happened to him anyway. Some game nobody’d remember, and he’d be a gimp for life. At least he could tell his grandchildren it was for a cause. The kid got to his feet, a painful, slow climb, leaned back against the wall, looking up. Staring at the sky, a baby. Then, like fire, he leapt at Alfie, a roundhouse blocked with the baton.

“Ahhh.”

A return straight right to the kid’s chops, blood from his mouth as he slumped again against the wall, like a beaten boxer.

The body, the mind can take just so much.

“Joe,” his father had moaned, “Cut him down.”

Alfie shuffled over to the big maple. The preacher’s face was ruined, but the real horror was his body, curved and bent almost at ninety degrees to his hips, ankle snapped under one leg. Alfie got out his pocketknife and sawed at the ropes until first one arm, then the other came free and shot forward. Jefferson fell to the ground with a cry you could barely hear even in the quiet of the woods. Alfie dragged him out in time to save his life, his father able only to help move the preacher’s limbs into some kind of proper place for the haul. He was weeks in the hospital before a relative, a brother or cousin, came to take him away, for good.

A few hours later Alfie was back at the house, shaken, a few cuts on him, but okay, curled under his mother’s protective wing. Sitting there, patting her boy’s head, she must have seemed to the old man the picture of satisfaction, like she’d won a battle.

“Soon as your father’s out of the hospital,” she told Alfie, “we leave for Brooklyn. Grandma and Grandpa have the rooms all made up. Your father will meet us there.”

Brooklyn. New York City. Everything and nothing. Here was this kid, probably some businessman’s or shop-owner’s son, crippled and on his way to jail, and for what? Was he freeing the blacks? Was he stopping the war? Alfie understood now what his father knew, why he spent so much time in bars, or out hunting, always changing jobs. Nobody was free. Whoever built these buildings would still run things. You could work for them or against them. You could stay in the city or you could leave. Where were you gonna find peace? Wiesniewski would have kids, and then he’d be right next to Alfie, maybe with a little bigger house, in a neighborhood or town with not so many skulls. Maybe the only difference was how far you traveled to reach the woods.

He grabbed Wiesniewski’s arms and twisted them around his back, snapped on the cuffs. The kids around them noticed, and turned on Alfie.

“Fascists!”

“Police brutality!”

“Cop thugs, go home!”

Where the fuck was Sweeney?

Suddenly water was dripping on Alfie's head. He pulled Wiesniewski a step away from the wall and looked up. He spotted Sanders and Lundstrem leaning out of a second-story window, mid-spit. Down the building a little ways, in the next window, he spotted Sweeney.

"Can't get at 'em down there. Door's blocked," his partner yelled. "You all right?"

He raised an open palm to say everything was all right.

In the meantime, Alfie saw Lundstrem climbing out on the ledge. The mob below cheered as he got to his feet.

"Your baton," Sweeney called, pointing to a spot in front of where Alfie stood, "you're gonna need it."

Carefully, carefully, Alfie moved forward again. One hand still on Wiesniewski, he bent over to pick the weapon up.

"Yeeee-haaah!" someone yelled, the sound Dopplering.

Then he felt the weight of a hundred trees fall on his back, his legs shoot out from under him, his face slam against the concrete. For a minute, black swirls and distant chords behind his eyelids, then red, then almost light, then a body next to his: Lundstrem, his limbs dancing in pain, hands grabbing at the bone protruding from his leg. Alfie tried reaching for him, but couldn't move. Not an arm, not a muscle.

All around was chaos. A swarm of blue uniforms yanked students from the scene, clubbing the ones who didn't move fast enough. They formed a circle around Alfie and the kamikaze jumper. One of the cops lay down on the ground, looking him in the eye.

"Don't try to move. Ambulance is almost here."

The old man's first day in the hospital was like this, the IV fresh in his veins.

"They want you to stay still, Pop, get your strength back."

His father nodded pathetically. At sixty, he was still a specimen, arm all muscle around the needle and tube. Some days he lay there like stone. Some days you'd never know he was dying. Every day they talked: about work, about the baby, about his mother, the weather, football, but never about Rome.

The prone cop tried consoling Alfie.

“The boys are breaking down the door right now. Gonna ream those pieces of shit a new one. And don’t worry, this collar has your name on it.”

Alfie blinked, then closed his eyes, listening to the strange quiet, the shouting and fighting fading far away as the horizon. Even the cops had gone quiet, standing vigil. Minutes. He remembered the petals in his pocket, spring on the block or back in Rome, then tried to picture his kids. Their features escaped him, lost as the preacher’s. The best he could do was imagine a house with faceless children standing in front of it, waving, and then himself, at a distance he couldn’t cover, sighting them through the old binoculars his father used for the hunt.