Identity, 1974

Lisette cradled the baby in one arm, standing in what the landlord had referred to as the living room, but how do you, seriously, call it a living room?

“Well then what then?” she said.

José sat on the hand-me-down couch given to them by Lisette's mother, the couch covered in plastic sticking to José's legs and back. Heat infiltrated the space and not even summer yet. Everything smelled of baby. He wanted to watch TV, but she stood there.

For her fashion, Lisette had settled into a post-partum pair of sweatpants. Whereas the baby looked good. This was a thing, despite it all, to make sure the baby looked cute, it was not the baby's fault so don’t put it on her.

With her free hand she presented an envelope.

“You see the red part, what I’m showing you?”

He moved to distract her, separating himself from the couch, skin peeling from plastic. She trailed him into what was called with great nerve the bedroom.

“When the red one comes,” she said. “José, do you hear me?”

Some would say they had no business with a baby. José, twenty-two, Lisette, twenty-two, Linda, fourteen (weeks). Playing house. Please.

“Monday,” she said, “remember, what I gave you?" She sounded choppy. Funny she judged him about getting high, what about that coffee she drank? Straining the Bustello through the sock, getting ready for her big speech.

How did this happen? he wondered. A carefree spirit lit up from the inside out, skipping rope, tightass short-shorts, sending folded little love notes to him.

“I cannot keep asking my mother for help,” she said. “I don’t know how many other ways to put it to you.” Her flip-flops, her distressed pedicure, her stained tank-top, the entire look attempting (and failing) to undermine her sensuousness.

“Going to take care of it—where’s my belt?”

“Monday.” she said. “Gave you forty-one dollars.”

“Paid it.“

“And you’re very full of shit, too.” Her teeth exposed themselves with a special disgust. "And here now any second they want more deposit just to cut the motherfucker back on, watch. Putting cash in your hand, my first mistake.”

"Lisette—"

“Ask Carlos, see if his father needs help. Talk to Papo at the shop. Check with every single person you bump into when you do whatever it is you do all day long.”

On his way down the staircase she kept at him from the landing.

“Tell them your wife had a baby, tell them you’re serious, you really in your heart want to work, you’re a responsible person who cares. *Lie your ass off*.”

Everybody listened to this, people on the street, leaning on the fins of parked cars, sitting on stoops. When the bottle of her fury uncapped itself, Lisette committed to being

heard. Swiftly she moved to a window: “Let them know the phone's disconnected, and the landlord wants the rent for this piece of shit apartment.”

The baby wide awake, gazing serenely into her mother's face. “I don’t want to live this life and see if I do live it. Think I’m playing with you, keep coming home with no money and see what happens, see what happens *Tony*.”

She knew him as a younger person when he wanted to pass for Italian, desperate not to be Puerto Rican, not to be a José. A running joke in the neighborhood, how José a/k/a Tony was more Italian than that clique of kids on Pleasant Avenue.

“Puerto Rican, Irish, Italian, Tony, Jerry, I don’t give a fuck, not anymore, just make some money for once in your life and see how it feels.”

He pretended he couldn’t hear her, that he was another person altogether, not a Tony, or a José, but someone whose name even he did not know. A case of amnesia would feel good right about now, as her words rained down.

The sadness between them textured, their two minds burdened by keen insights of truth. Yes they were broke, yes José had a burgeoning drug habit, not to mention Lisette's simmering current of regret that she had blown her life. And for what? To flirt with guys, smoke weed, drink beer in a park?

Lisette, an eighth-grader at JHS 117, got in trouble with Miss Silverstein—not unusual. Tough Jewish lady teacher. Tough but fair. The kids knew which teachers were racists, which ones weren’t. The classroom environment revealed you lickety-split.

Nobody liked Miss Silverstein, she was a bitch, but not a white milk bigot bitch. She did not put up with nonsense. If you walked by Miss Silverstein’s class you would

see what learning looked like. Other teachers kept their doors shut, embarrassed. Kids throwing stuff, cursing you out to your face.

One day there was drama concerning a notorious pack of chewing gum. Miss Silverstein marched to Lisette's desk, started to search through it, coming upon a folder.

"Who did these?"

A dozen graphite drawings on loose leaf paper, quite advanced, quite nuanced, such shadow and perspective, the medium a batch of No. 2 Ticonderogas whose points Lisette alternately kept super sharp and intentionally dull.

"Are they?" Miss Silverstein studied them. "Where did you?"

"Buildings on my block," Lisette said. "Across the way." The tenements, the johnny pumps, the garbage cans, the fire escapes, the wrought iron gates and banisters. And she had intuition for what to leave out, she understood the power of absence.

"Lisette, did you make these drawings?"

"Yes, Miss."

Thanks to the educator's discount, the teacher held memberships to the Met, the Whitney, MoMA.

"They are *stunning*. Just stunning. You need to know that."

Lisette blushed from the lady's intensity. "No, they're not."

"Oh, my love, they are, they are." Then, beside the point, Miss Silverstein, in a confidential register, said, "And what did I tell you about wearing that kind of top?"

After numerous final bells the teacher helped Lisette prepare an application to the High School of Music and Art. She got in. Not just anybody went to Music and Art. Your portfolio had to show genuine promise. Two weeks into her first semester, Lisette quit.

Quietly. Insidiously. Morning after morning, she silenced the alarm clock and rolled over on her future.

José went to the cooler in the back for his Yoohoo. Approaching the counter he called out, “Let’s go, let’s go, take care of your customers."

Carlos appeared, moving slow. “Just that?” he said, wiping his hands on a towel.

“So what just that.”

“Next time leave the thirty-five cents you're in a rush.”

“What, you don’t like to talk no more?”

And the way he said it.

“What happened?” Carlos said.

José had bullied Carlos, or he did once. "All I find all I keep?" José said, rummaging through Carlos's pockets with a brazen grin.

Next time they went at it, a crowd gathered, watched them crash and explode off the schoolyard fencing. They fought hard for people any age, taking blows to the mouth and nose. Carlos hit José with a shot to the gut and he doubled over, almost threw up, his eye catching a piece of direct sun in the East Harlem sky. José thought, *Why doesn’t anybody break this shit up?* Where's one of those *monitors* when you need one?

José was a better fighter, but Carlos would not back down, making crazy noises like he didn’t care, not anymore, that’s the last time you go through my pockets.

José pushed Carlos away, and he could feel the crowd wanted to see him get his ass kicked badly. Why wouldn’t they, he stole half the student population's lunch money. If José got the slightest inkling, pow, he jumped you.

They looked at each other, the crowd waited. Carlos had blood at his face, his shirt was ripped. They had fought a solid sixty seconds, a long time in street-fight world.

Carlos said, “Come on, let’s go some more.”

José’s voice caught when he said, “Can’t be bothered with you,” and turned away.

The crowd got on José like only a crowd can, making a rising shame sound that said, *Ah, you punked out, José. All this time, now look at you.*

The kids gathered round Carlos. “He’s not so tough. Fake Italian.”

And of course they became, if not friends, then something like it.

José downed half his Yoohoo in one gulp and asked for a loosey. Carlos shook out a Winston from the open pack by the register. “How’s the baby?”

“Baby's good," José exhaled, "baby's beautiful, and I should never—”

“True,” Carlos said. “But that was then and this is now, and what you have to do, get a job and quit playing with those drugs.” It was easier to hear it from Carlos.

“Your father. . . does he need any help here, in the store?”

"I’ll ask him. You ask him, too. He likes you, my father. For some reason.”

He took sanctuary in the park, with summer rolling up and here came the green all over. Throughout the course of his life he had investigated the uptown nooks and crannies. White people, they were scared of the park uptown.

José had for a time pretended to be Italian. Not from a particular prejudice against his own people; he just wanted to be someone other than himself.

After reading the class a story at 117, Mr. Johnson, a bow-tie teacher who didn't like to be touched, said, “These textbooks always want to know about theme. Theme,

theme, theme. Listen up, here's a secret. There's only one theme. Identity. Who are we? For each and every story you come across. Identity."

Stop getting high, get a job, and take it from there. Simple. Yet the thought of it seemed so un-José-like. Stop being you.

He didn't enjoy robbing people, though he admitted to the thrill of burglaries. On the premises of a closed store, lights out, creepie-crawlie. Or to kick back on somebody's velvet sofa when they were not at home, smoking a joint, watching the lights flicker on a fancy stereo system, relaxing to easy jazz.

José didn't consider himself a thief in the constitutional sense. He believed he stole from a place of necessity, robbing, for him, a default position. When he did rob someone, he preferred it to be a white male, not out of a formal philosophy of race or gender, but percentages favored a white guy holding cash and valuables.

Next, after a white male came a white female, but if he had to rob a lady he preferred to rob two ladies at once. To rob a lady alone hinted at a lowlife thing to do. Using conjured images as a barometer, he saw himself paraded out of a precinct house, noting what his posture would look like based on the quality of crime committed. He realized the victim's profile made the difference.

If you robbed a lady you'd have to duck and hang your head. If you robbed two ladies at the same time, it was disgraceful, but less so—you wouldn't have to duck, just look away a little. If you robbed a man there was no shame in that. You could hold your head high, an honorable act of thievery. If you robbed an old person that was the worse possible crime you could perpetrate. You would have to beg those pigs to take you out the back. To snatch the purse of an old lady, even José would feel compelled to make the

bust. He'd done it himself when he was young, twelve, thirteen, fourteen tops, before his sense of morality had developed. Old people made easy targets and, yes, on that level it made sense to rob an old person. They're weak and cannot scream very loud or chase you. For a grown man to rob a senior citizen, be that senior citizen a man or woman, was a hideous crime to commit. You'd have to contort yourself every which way to avoid the flash. Look, New York, at the animal that harms the elderly.

Stick-ups held no inherent appeal. The possibility of somebody getting hurt for real didn't do a thing for him, his ambivalence, on occasion, discernible.

"Are you *serious*?" a man said over the tortoiseshell glasses resting low on his nose. José had to strike him with the butt of the gun before the man offered his watch and wallet. He knew they shouldn't have to ask.

Last year he got stuck for forty-seven days on Rikers Island. Possession of a loaded weapon which later turned out to be clean and the case got tossed, but he learned from those forty-seven days of dormitory-style Rikers Island living he was not well-suited for jail. He didn't like crowds, for one thing, and they kept that joint packed tight.

People at Rikers could not wait to get sentenced. Which says something. Who yearns for their sentence date? Traditionally, it's something to put off indefinitely, yet a few nights under Rikers' roof and you had inmates on payphones begging lawyers to plea out and find them a spot in some maximum security prison upstate.

At Rikers he had witnessed dramatic power shifts, tough-guys off the streets of East Harlem and Black Harlem and the South Bronx who, once inside, could not maintain their alpha pose and now deferred to guys who previously had the reputation of punks on

the street, but who had since done more time and had blown a psychological gasket through their fear.

A week inside Rikers felt like a year of walking-around, back-in-the-neighborhood time. Soon after his release the trauma of the experience collapsed over him, his adrenals shot through with a primal terror. Of being stabbed to death in an instant, off a funny look, trapped by the tornado winds of savagery which infused Rikers' roaming gangs. The fear such a gang-storm might touch down on him (like they did that skinny blond kid two bunks over). The horrible vague unknowing of when he'd be set free. Shortly after his release he had gone to his favorite spot in the park, a boulder he bushwhacked to off a trail, sat there and sobbed. He heard many people in the dormitory crying into the night, but something would not allow his tears to come inside.

The .45 he kept buried in a tripled-up Glad sandwich bag, along with a clean set of works. It wasn't a bad time for criminality. But if they found a loaded burner on you, even if not previously used in the commission of a crime, the cops shrugged, gave you that no-choice look, and you could get caught up in the system for forty-seven days.

Now again he arrived at what he considered his secret spot in the park. There had been some rain, everything lush and moist. He sat there, let himself breathe, in concert with the woods. He listened a moment to ensure he had not been followed, then produced a small bag of dope, and with a nascent junkie's pride got set to fix it.

The boy traveled north on the park’s East Drive, the reservoir to his left. He reached down to the levers on the frame’s diagonal crossbar, riding slow and easy, experimenting with the gears, watching the chain climb and drop, sprocket to sprocket, the derailleur

doing its thing. The bike felt tight and rode smooth. He hit an incline in the road and almost came to a standstill, before he went to switch gears again, when he saw a guy stumbling toward him and the boy stopped.

José stood there. And the boy knew. It had never happened before.

“Almost ran me over,” José said with a smile, pinpricks for pupils.

“No I didn’t,” the boy said, and José laughed.

“You’re right, you’re right. Still, should watch more careful where you’re going.”

José’s eyes darted to the right, and here came a ball of runners, a plume of the reservoir's dirt path rising in their wake.

“What’s this you got?” José said. “How you say it?”

“Bianchi,” the boy said.

“Bianchi," José repeated. "Nice. Italian?”

“Uh huh.”

“I’m Italian,” José said, and a short laugh escaped the boy.

“You’re not Italian.”

“I’m not Italian.” José said. “What am I?”

“Puerto Rican?”

“Again—that’s twice you’re right."

Their proximity was close. José stood with the front tire between his legs. The boy straddled the frame. Of the handlebars Jose said, "I like this tape."

To rob a kid. To take a kid off his bike in the park, be that kid a girl or boy, black, white or Puerto Rican. What is he, twelve?

“How old are you?”

“Thirteen,” the boy said. “How old are you?"

“How old I look?”

“Twenty-two?”

"How you do that!"

The boy smiled, and for a moment they forgot what was happening, the conversation not a charade, not a prelude to a crime.

A flock of cyclists zipped by on the drive, and the looks exchanged with a few of them were mostly curious and non-suspicious, a blessing for José, given that, in his mind, chances were that in *their* minds he was one more brown skin person of whom to beware.

“This right here brand new?” José said.

“Yeah,” the boy said.

“Where you get it?”

“Eighty-fifth and Columbus,” the boy said. They both adjusted their bodies, shifting weight.

“All right, all right, I know that store, I know that store,” José said. “How much you pay?”

“One-forty.”

“Hundred forty dollars?"

The boy nodded, and looked at José with an almost comical expression that said, *Are you going to mug me, or what?*

“Check it out,” José said. "Can I get a ride?”

“Can’t.“

“Two seconds, real quick.”

“I’m late.”

“What, don’t trust me?”

“Late.”

“Two seconds, that tree right up there?”

The boy took a look at the indicated tree, then started to shake his head, when José softly rapped the back of the boy's hands with his knuckles.

“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go,” José said, and now he grabbed the handlebars with some aggression, shook and rattled the bike, bouncing the front tire up and down off the ground, letting the frame threaten the boy's crotch.

The boy sighed with defeat, unhooked his leg over the bike. He reached for his tennis racket in its casing bungeed to the bike's backrack but José grabbed him by the wrist, saying, “Hold up, leave it there, leave it there."

Now José straddled the bike and the boy stood there, not knowing what to do with his hands. “Frame’s a little bit small.” Then, as an afterthought, “Come here one second.” José pulled the boy to him by the waist of his pants and went through all four of his pockets with practiced efficiency. “Nothing on you?” he said. “No bus pass, nothing?”

“Don’t take the bus.”

“Damn. All right. Let me see now,” José said. “Little tricky.” His foot found a pedal and pushed away. “What gear’s this?” José asked, friend to friend, still pretending it wasn’t a robbery, that he’d go up to the tree, make a U-turn, come back, hop off and thank the boy, telling him what a wonderful bike it was.

The boy watched him ride away, José messing with the levers, trying to arrive at a higher gear, pedaling like a silent movie villain.

He rode against traffic, even though they said it was more dangerous. Head-on collisions were the ones that killed you. If you get hit by somebody heading the same way you got a higher survival chance because you're sharing momentum. That's like me and Lisette. We got problems, but not a head-on collision. We share momentum.

After he took somebody off in the park, he superstitiously thought if he made it north of a Hundred and east of Madison he'd be all right. Those streets, for no specific reason, the point he crossed into safety. He wondered what he'd get. How he said it. *Bianchi*. Maybe fifty from Aaron on Sixteenth. Kid's family could buy him another one without a blink. Could tell from the braces in his mouth.

Feeling the eyes of the block on him, he hoisted the bike onto his shoulder, gave the bottom of his building's door a sharp kick, and started climbing. He entered the apartment as Lisette came out of the kitchen, a dishtowel over her shoulder.

"Oh, good," she said, "you're home."

"I'm home."

"What you got there?" she said with a grin.

"Bianchi. Smells good in here."

"Stew," she said, and this talk romantic preamble. It was time, they both felt it, and it was sweet how they got nervous, anxious over each other's attraction.

"Where's the baby?"

"Crib," she said, approaching. "Chuckling to herself all afternoon."

She put her hand on the seat. He traced the faint black hair of her forearm. They deep-kissed over the bike. She pulled away, went to the bathroom, closed the door.

“Hurry the fuck up,” he said, and heard her laugh. “Ho snap.”

“What?” she called.

“Kickstand.”

“That, and the thing.“

“Backrack.”

“Adds it all up.”

He de-bungeed the tennis racket, tossed it on the couch.

She appeared naked and his dick jumped. He burst toward her, sliding on his knees over tarnished linoleum, his mouth finding her swollen button. Making contact like she taught him with tender lips and tongue. She gripped the doorframe with one hand, touched his head with the other, and came where she stood. He carried her to the bed, past the baby sleeping under a mobile of crescent moon and stars. They made love briefly, rested close and quiet, falling into slumber, their dreams containing one another.

Ninety minutes later José set down his bowl of stew and got up to answer soft knocks at the front door, anticipating his mother-in-law.

A 1974 Central Park mugging would not typically merit a home visit from NYPD (or, for that matter, the use of a reliable neighborhood snitch), but the boy whose bicycle José had stolen was a scion of a famous political clan, and the press got quick hold of it.

Two men stood there, a salt and pepper team, adorned by matching brooches of gold shield.

"We tried calling," the salty one said. "The number's not in service."

José found their calm demeanor contagious. His mind at once scooped out, wiped clean of all quarrel and fight, his senses gaining fierce clarity: the Bianchi's cobalt frame so much bluer to his eyes, and to his ears the faint blasts of a tugboat chopping beneath the Triborough marked with gentle irony the moment of his arrest.

Searched and handcuffed, he kissed the baby goodbye, surprised by his own words of assurance to Lisette, and the trip to Central Booking proceeded in great peace.