

Mike shivered. In the darkness his mind ran over as many variations he could think of, how the weekend would go. Most weren't good. Too late to back out, he knew. Too much had been said and done to make this happen. And there was too much at stake. If only.

ooooo

Kenny stood at the top of Stoney Lonesome, hands on hips, chest heaving. The hike to the top was always invigorating. But with the October breeze pushing at his back, compounded by a building anxiety, it became a jog, then a run.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he scanned the dusk lit view. It was an uncomfortable quiet, the only sounds that reached him were from the rustling sugar maple branches buffeted by the gusting wind, and the sporadic warbling cries of the birds hidden in them. Their plaintive calls were shattering the

stillness with an unmerciful shrillness. In the distance, the river darkened black, curving serpent-like around the west point bank that jutted into its width reducing it by half. The waters foamed and frothed, fighting for space, before flaring out wide to the north towards the town of Poughkeepsie.

The appearance was a natural Rorschach inkblot rendering of a snake's head. In his mind's eye he saw a fer-de-lance, named for the venom spewing viper he'd encountered while training in the Panama jungle. He glanced down, noticed his hand was rubbing the bite scar above his wrist, and shook his head. The blurred coloring of campus lights glistened below. From a golden hew in the south facing windows of the cadet chapel, looking eastward over at the shimmering brightness of the Michie Stadium fixtures towering above the football field, and down to the shadowed grays of the stone walled barracks, Kenny silently scanned his domain, absorbing the menagerie of flickering images.

He'd miss this. The Sundays he'd spend singing in the chapel choir, the fall Saturdays standing and cheering for the football team under those lights, were numbered. Only three games left after today's loss to Holy Cross. Meals in the cadet mess hall, like his last lunch served with Go Army cake for dessert that he had two helpings of, would end soon. How many more parades would he march in on the plain outside Washington Hall, with only 7 months left? The Army beckoned, and with it,

flight school, if he had his wish. Time enough he hoped. He'd be leaving New York, home, for good. Friends, family, relationships, were all parts of unfinished business. Pieces of his life, his life in pieces. He'd have to find closure, some way. Real work this time, neither classwork nor homework, he saw this work manifested in having to make hard choices, to suffer self-inflicted sacrifices, and to consider some unfathomable yet inevitable compromises.

That work might begin tonight, Kenny thought as he turned toward the parking lot and headed over to his black Camaro z28. Stepping over its gold trimmed valance, Kenny bent his 6'3" frame into the cockpit as he keyed the ignition with a swiftness that belied his 220 lbs. Adjusting the mirror, Kenny tried to ignore the grotesque blemish behind his wrist and regarded his brown face, broad nose and full pale lips reflected back in a contorted frown. Forcing a smile, he stared back at his dark eyes, their resistance betraying a sadness not quite concealed below thick bushy brows.

The drive to Ossining took a half hour, more or less, uneventful. Listening to Springsteen's *Nebraska*, including his favorite song, *Highway Patrolman*, helped the time pass. But he quickly replaced Springsteen with the latest Peter Gabriel cassette and lowered the sound as he pulled up to the guard house. Seeming more interested in his car than his license, the guard asked him, "Is that new?"

"No. I wish. Try three years old. I couldn't afford it new."

Eyeing the windshield sticker, the guard, whose name badge read 'Smith', asked another question. "Are you in the Army?"

"I will be once I graduate in May."

"I served in Nam, myself. Two tours. Tet in '68 and the pullout in '73." Stretching out his arm for a handshake, he added, "Jed Smith, pleased to meet you."

"Likewise," Kenny replied as he matched the man's firm grip.

Lifting the ID from his clipboard, he handed it back.

"You visiting?"

"Picking up."

"Take the ramp down on the right."

"Thank you."

Kenny sat silently staring out the window at the sign on the wall under the security camera. The wording, in florescent red letters - WAIT IN YOUR VEHICLE - seemed to leave little doubt. Yet minutes passed with no indication that his obedience would prove fruitful.

"Hey!"

Kenny jumped. His heart racing, he froze at the sight of Mike standing inches from his window.

"It's me. Wake up little bro'."

Kenny exhaled as he opened the driver's door. But Mike pushed it back with such force he could only react with wide mouthed surprise.

"Not here," he said, "I mean it. Get it in gear. There'll be plenty of time and infinitely better places for a reunion."

Nodding, Kenny backed out of the driveway and up the ramp to the arm spread across the exit. The guard quickly waved them through with considerably less fanfare than he anticipated.

"It's great to see you little buddy," Mike said. He delivered a stinging jab to the shoulder as Kenny drove along Route 9 toward the city.

"You too." Kenny tried to clear his throat, but failed. The Mojave Desert had miraculously infiltrated his mouth. His words had come out two octaves higher than normal and he was desperate to find the correct pitch.

"Really? You don't look like it. Tell me you got the tickets."

Fearing speech, Kenny nodded again.

"Yo, yo, yo, that's what I'm talking about. Can you believe it? Our Mets, in the World Series, and we're witnessing it live in person. Wake me up, will ya?"

For the first time a genuine smile took hold of Kenny and he couldn't suppress it, didn't dare try. He flipped on the stereo to mask his awkward attempts at conversation. Mike leaned back, visibly drawn to the music as if it were a

fascinating discovery.

Kenny tried to use the pause to settle his mind. It sure sounded like the old Mike. Seemed a little too hyped, though. But could he rightly judge that? He certainly did look the same. The familiar face, small and round, with tan puffy cheeks, his angular dome shaved head, huge globelike hazel eyes under long curly lashes, and the brightest teeth bared wide with every grin. Rail thin, his small frame reminded Kenny that people mistook Mike to be the younger sibling though he was four years his senior.

Four years. It had been almost that long since they'd seen each other. How do you account for years of time in the 24 hours they would have together?

"What's on your mind?" Mike asked him.

"I have a study group Sunday night for an International Econ' class assignment."

The Saturday traffic was light. Kenny knew the route well. They would venture down the Major Deegan Expressway, passing through the Bronx, and travel along Grand Central Parkway all the way to Shea Stadium.

"I guess we have some catching up to do, huh? I am your captive audience, until game time, so let's hear it."

"That's cute. Later, okay?"

"Don't give up, Kenny," he crooned.

"Oh, so you like that song?"

"Maybe. Who is it?"

"That's Peter Gabriel."

Mike played drums on his hands and knees to the rhythm of the music.

"I talked to mom today."

"I know."

"You're psychic?"

"She told me about her going back to East New York, fixing up the garden, and how putting a little effort into the curb appeal helps to reel in the best offer on the house."

"That sounds like Miss Mary. I felt bad I couldn't be there to help her. She was saying like, 'not to worry, I got this, Kenny. You take care of school, I'll take care of the house.' But I wasn't even there for the move, you know?"

"I know."

Kenny gave him a puzzled look.

"You got less moody tunes, bro? I mean this is nice but I could use something a little more cheery."

"Here." Kenny tossed him the new Cameo cassette. "Put this in. It's called 'Word Up'. You were saying?"

"Oh yeah, that's more like it," he said bobbing to the beat. "Word Up! Mom told me she was worried about you, because of how you sweat every little damn thing, like always. She wanted me to, you know, help you chill out tonight. She thinks your grades will go down or something if you don't get your head

straight, so chill a'ight?"

"So you too spent all the time you had, talking about me?"

"What else? I'm kidding, okay? Loosen up will ya? She mostly wrote me. You should try it sometime, from what I hear. Anyway, she talked a lot about the move, selling the house, how the train to Manhattan is a lot worse from Queens. Shit like that."

"So she's upset that I don't write?"

"You're a knucklehead. I suppose we're sitting in the nosebleed seats, as usual?"

"You'll see. I brought your glove. It's in the trunk."

"What do I need that for, catching pigeons?" Kenny scoffed. "I guess we can toss the ball around, like old times yeah?"

Mike drifted off into his thoughts. Kenny felt relieved. The music filled the void. They'd be at the park soon. Things had to get better.

There was a palpable air surrounding Shea Stadium. He saw it in the wide eyes of the little boys, heard it in the chattering of nervous laughter from groups of fans huddled together, and smelled it in the undercurrent. It was that old familiar sent of disbelief. These were New Yorkers, his people, Met fans, legendary losers. Would this, could this, be the year? They could only wonder.

Mike knew, just as Kenny did, that it was sacrilege to even think that way. Such thinking only lead to the inevitable, another failure. It would evince in self destruction, perhaps a bases loaded walk, or a balk with a runner on third base. It would surface in the form of a rally killing base-running blunder. Like a pitcher who falls asleep on first base and gets picked off, or a missed hit and run signal that turns into a strikeout throw-out of a slow footed catcher trying to steal second on the busted play.

Kenny had seen it all in the years before. Most all of them had, he was sure. They were the diehard Mets faithful. But this year, on their way to the best record in the league, these Mets had shown they were a different breed, and that gave him hope. He'd witnessed it often enough this season, driving down from the academy with his freshly minted senior privileges, he spent weekends here whenever he could. Other classmates, J.T. from Company A-1, Donna, a 3rd Regiment Battalion Commander, and his best friend Dudley in E-4, had all accompanied him a time or two. They'd seen it. At first cautious, they were often doubtful about what was taking place in front of them. Gradually though the fever took hold, and their frenzied cheering for this new version of Mets, a never before seen assemblage of precise execution and teamwork, clutch hitting and spectacular fielding, was rewarded time and again with each unbelievable victory.

He was about to share the experience with the man who taught him the sport and made him love it just as much, though he hadn't himself been to a game since 1982. He stared over at Mike, shaken by how canny his resemblance was to the photo of their father, taken in full dress uniform. It had become locked in a childhood memory - perched high up on the mantle of the old house. It was the last picture taken of him, before he left for Viet Nam, left for good.

Jed Smith told Kenny that he'd fought during the Tet Offensive in 1968. It was the same battle that Michael James Caldwell Sr. was killed in. Mike remembered their father. Kenny had been far too young. Growing up, Mike, ever the story teller, brought a man Kenny didn't really know to life, perhaps an exaggerated version of him anyhow. No doubt more of a creation from his imagination than the real thing, Kenny sometimes guessed. In the end, he didn't care. He wanted to believe Mike, expressing a thirst in every detailed description his brother shared.

Like how Mike Sr. was the best shortstop mom had ever seen. The way she bragged about his promotion to the double A Mets minor league club. How he became the neighborhood celebrity, with a block party and a picnic in his honor, capped off with a pickup game that became fabled with each retelling.

The part that he remembered most about the story was how it ended. The realization didn't actually sink in until many

years later, when Kenny was old enough to understand why his dad never did play for that team. The draft had made certain of it.

"Front me the cash and I'll cop some programs," Mike said.

"Here. Take your ticket too, case we get separated."

Mike studied it, and roared back at him, "First base line behind the home dugout! Who'd you kill to get these?" Mike gave him a hard jovial slap on the head. "My brother."

"Enough already. Just go."

Funneling his way through the crowded concourse, Kenny was glad that Mike had left him. He had never felt so uncomfortable around his brother, and it was troubling him. Had so much happened to them that they'd never be like they used to? That feeling was growing into a panic he hated facing. Not here. Not now. Just let this be a good thing between them. No, a great thing. That's what it's supposed to be. Forced to keep walking to expend his nervous energy, Kenny did laps around the ballpark, straining to quench his trembling limbs.

The desperation of trying to survive deadly venom coursing through his veins was a not too distant memory. This fresh source of helplessness was born out of an emotional threat, and it felt just as dangerous.

Somehow, he'd eventually found his way to his seat, only to discover it was already taken. Really? Only a New Yorker

would try that during a World Series game. Must be an honest mistake. Right.

"Excuse me. You're in my seat."

The guy looked up at him and stood quickly. "Sorry."

The one next to him in Mike's seat hadn't moved. Kenny glared at the man, waiting for a reaction. Without the other ticket, he wouldn't want to call for an usher. But he didn't think it would have to come to that.

"Something wrong?" The beefy man wearing the Carter jersey asked.

"Did you check your ticket? Can't be this seat."

"Shit."

"No problem, buddy."

As the two wandered off, Kenny wondered where they'd try next. In a sold out playoff game what could their strategy possibly be?

Thirty minutes later he was still sitting there wondering what had happened to Mike. Standing for the National Anthem, a wave of emotion spread through him as he heard thousands of voices singing in unison. He realized he was angrier than anything else. He'd forgotten how frustrating his brother could be. With clenched fists he watched as Mike descended the stairs, not feeling relieved by the sight of him.

"Here we go," Mike said.

"Where were you?"

"Where do you think? I've been gone a long time. I just had to re-experience everything, get re-acquainted with my surroundings. I checked out the souvenir shop. You see the stuff they got in there? I gotta get me a bat. You wanna go later?"

"I didn't bring money for that. Where are the programs?"

"Huh? Oh. I forgot."

"I haven't seen you in like an hour and you didn't get the programs? Mike, come on, what were you doing?"

"Don't hassle me man. What'd we come here for, a game or a fight?"

"Damn it."

"It's cool. I'm cool. You be cool now. I'll get the programs and be right back."

"Don't you move." Kenny locked eyes with Mike and held his gaze. Finally Mike relented.

The game had started, and Mike quickly turned his attention to the action on the field. After a first pitch strike, Wade Boggs hit the next pitch from Ron Darling, with the ball bouncing sharply to Mets third baseman Ray Knight, who threw it to Keith Hernandez at first base for the out.

Just as Mike mouthed the words 'no hitter' Marty Barrett stroked a sharp ground ball up the middle, landing him safe on first.

Kenny laughed, "You're crazy man."

"Okay laughing boy, let's make it interesting. I'll bet you ten dollars that Buckner hits into a double play."

"Knowing your luck, sure."

"That's more like it. Before long I'll have you owing me enough to get my bat and a helmet too."

Five pitches later Buckner hit a two hopper to second baseman Tim Teufel. He flipped the ball to the shortstop Rafael Santana who reached second base before Barrett slid in. Santana then made the throw to first to double up Buckner.

"Whoa!" Mike yelled, jumping out of his seat. He gave high fives to a couple in the next row and smiled down at Kenny. "Are we having fun yet?"

Kenny couldn't help being caught up with his infectious energy, fueled by the fans around them. Seeing the joy in Mike's expression confirmed to him that this game was one mission accomplished. Whatever Mike had lived through, however he'd been effected by it, Kenny had brought him solace for now, and that's what mattered.

Although the final score was 1 to 0, and their Mets had lost, that did not put a damper on the evening. The pace of the game and the breaks between each inning gave them ample time to talk. Mike even managed to make friends with a few of the fans in their section. He had that kind of charisma, you just couldn't resist him. Even when you knew him.

It dawned on him that their mother wasn't as alone as he

had first imagined. That Mike had somehow managed support her more than he had. As a school teacher in uptown Manhattan she loved her work, her children there meant so much to her. But coming home to be alone in a house without a husband, or sons, was so hard on her.

Kenny hoped that the move to Queens would help her leave the loneliness behind, along with the unwanted memories that came with the Shepherd Avenue house, in that oh so very tough side of the town of Brooklyn.

It was slow moving getting out of the stadium. At the top of the stairs, Mike turned around suddenly. "I've got to hit the head," he said as he pushed past Kenny.

Kenny started to follow before a commotion below caught his eye. People were pointing out at the parking lot and Kenny noticed a phalanx of NYPD cars with their blue lights flashing. From that distance you could tell it was serious. Several men appeared to be in handcuffs, others were being searched. There was a line of officers standing between fans and their cars - and right in the center - sat his Camaro.

Kenny's heart pounded. He ran to the men's room only to find a long line to get in. When Mike finally reappeared Kenny grabbed him.

"Did you see the cops down there? Is that why you came back inside? You were stalling."

"Get off me man. Don't accuse me! I don't know what

you're talking about."

"What are we supposed to do now? My car is surrounded."

"Wait."

"Wait?"

"We wait here."

They waited. By the time the last of the employees were leaving the building, the Caldwell brothers were among them. When they saw Kenny's car it was an island in a sea of concrete. Not another soul was in sight. Kenny began to feel relieved, albeit highly suspicious of Mike.

While opening the car Kenny noticed a card wedged in the window above the driver's door. It was an NYPD business card.

As he drove away Kenny questioned his brother. "Do you want to tell me what the police were doing here? Don't lie because I know you know."

"There is nothing that I can tell you, and that's the truth. Besides, I don't think you have anything to worry about. It can't possibly involve you."

"This isn't about me. I'm talking about you. You're in prison. You stabbed a man."

"We don't need to go over this now."

"I think we do. If you are out here on a furlough doing something you shouldn't be doing--"

"Going to a baseball game with my brother?"

"While you were hiding in the toilet, I saw those men get

arrested. They were wearing baseball caps."

"So?"

"They may have been blue, but they weren't Mets hats. The letters were 'S' 'B'. Sutter Avenue Boys."

"You already know why I have nothing to do with them anymore."

"Just because you stabbed one of them doesn't mean that at all. Keith was your best friend."

"Was. They knew I wasn't stealing, knew to keep dope away from me. You want to know why? He was coming for you. They were going after you that night. I was afraid you would go with them, and end up caught with drugs, shot up, or worse. I stopped them."

"I'm not buying it. Not when I have a calling card from NYPD. They want to talk to me. There has to be a reason and that reason has to be you."

"I don't believe your attitude. Wait. Where are we going?"

"Not to Queens. Not to moms. Not like this. I'm taking you back to Sing Sing."

"You can stop right here. I'm not due back until Sunday night. You would do me like that? Stop the car."

"Kenny you can't run from this. I can't be a part of you being a fugitive."

"Who said anything about running? Drop me at the train."

I'll go home. Mary will help me get back if you won't take me."

When they reached the station, Mike jumped out and walked around the car. He leaned into the window and spoke in a whisper. "Kenny. My kid brother. All grown up now. I'm so proud of you. All I wanted was for you to be proud of me. I never wanted it to be like this. Don't let it."

"Mike, I need time to think. Tell ma I'll call her."

Kenny sat in the car listening to the stereo until Mike road away on the train. He slowly drove out of the lot to the sound of Phil Collins singing *Tonight, Tonight, Tonight*.

Kenny sat in the lobby of the Hotel Stanford, brooding. It was his first time there, but he liked the location. Situated on 32nd Street just south of the Empire State Building, the hotel was just walking distance from two of his favorite places, Madison Square Garden and PS 17 Elementary. He'd booked the room with the idea that a trip down memory lane would be good for Mike. Walking around the school Mary taught at, and reminiscing about the times they tagged along with her, while entertaining themselves with fun and games or playing in the schoolyard, had all been part of the plan. It was an ideal backdrop he thought, a safe haven for them to talk and get reacquainted Sunday, before they had to go back to their separate lives.

He headed out of the hotel toward 7th Avenue, with the

school as his destination, but there was more on his mind. He had a decision to make. Overwhelming guilt was clouding his judgment. His years at the academy had been constantly weighed down by the burden he carried for Mike. Deep down inside him was the understanding that Mike had always played the role of big brother, protector, and surrogate father. And believing Mike had paid the price that freed him to get into West Point, Kenny had been afraid of letting him down.

But now that the hardest years were behind him, and he finally believed he would actually get his degree, it seemed as though Mike had jeopardized Kenny's chances at finishing school, with whatever crazy stunt he'd drawn them into.

Turning south Kenny noticed 'Happy Birthday Chuck' signs along the route. One couple was carrying an image of the blues singer Chuck Berry and it clicked. "What's that about?" he asked as they waited together to cross at the light.

"We just left a concert at the Garden celebrating Chuck Berry's 60th birthday. It was Awesome!"

Kenny smiled back at them and slowed his pace as they went on their way. He couldn't help envying their merry mood and had to get distance so as not to sour it.

By the time he reached the school it was obvious what he had to do. He was sure that Mike knew those Sutter Avenue gangsters. He might not know anything else, but he'd have to tell what he knew to the police tomorrow before he went back

to school. Whatever Mike had done he'd answer for it. The only way Kenny could really help him would be to tell the truth, and hope it wasn't too late for his brother.

Kenny turned back towards the hotel and slowly made his way east. He looked up at the Empire State Building. Its dominate presence provided a foreboding visual of the ominous future ahead of him.

Sunday morning was a blur. Kenny had tossed all through a sleepless night, dreading the encounter with NYPD. By the time he called the number on the card, the detective revealed he wouldn't be free until lunchtime. He agreed to a meeting at the grill beside Bryant Park. Kenny appreciated the convenient proximity of the rendezvous but hoped the officer didn't have a hidden motive for choosing the spot.

Feeling like he was engaged in a death march, Kenny shuffled up the Avenue of Americas from 32nd Street. It was a brisk 40 degrees, bright and sunny. There didn't seem to be many locals out and about and the traffic was Sunday morning light. However, by the cardboard signs and paper flyers he passed along the way, Kenny deduced that some kind of street festival was kicking off in a few hours. Honking taxicabs were the only sounds he paid attention to, and those only so as to survive the walk over.

It only took 15 minutes to get there, and a man waiting

at the entrance waved him over. "You must be Ken. I'm Detective Strohmayer."

"Hello."

"I've got us a table in the corner where we can talk. Follow me."

Kenny sat quietly across the table until the waiter had finished taking their orders and brought drinks. He didn't know anything about police work but thought it an odd way to conduct an interrogation, or any official police business for that matter. The park was filling up, and he tried to people watch hoping it would relax him and distract him from the purpose of the meeting. Strohmayer was watching him, he could sense it.

"You see those over there?" Strohmayer asked, pointing out large abstract looking objects in the park. "They're classic examples of kinetic sculpture. George Rickey designed them. I like to come here myself. But those in particular make it worth the trip. I appreciate his work. How about you, Ken?"

"Believe or not, I consider this a second home. The public library behind us is where I studied all through high school. Did you ask me here to talk about my brother?"

"Why? What did he tell you?"

"So you admit that you know who he is. Then it's no coincidence that you left your card in the Shea Stadium lot last night. He didn't tell me anything, not that you'd believe me."

"As a matter of fact, I do believe you. You see I told him not to tell you anything."

"I don't understand. You've already spoken to him? Did you arrest him?"

"Yes and no. Let me explain. I told him not to tell anyone anything, for their safety and his. Yes I've spoken to Mike many times, and no I did not arrest him."

"Are you going to tell me what this is all about then?"

"I work with an elite squad that conducts special investigations into high profile and violent criminal conspiracies, including extortion. One of our investigations led us to a suspect who happens to be a prison cellmate of your brother. So we approached him with the hope that he would be willing to help us."

"Mike is working for you?"

"Mike has been working with us for several months. Last night culminated a case regarding a scheme to kidnap several wives and girlfriends of the Mets ballplayers in order to coerce them into losing in the series."

"I'm guessing the Sutter Avenue Boys were part of it."

"They were the muscle. Others were in on the gambling angle. Hence the value of having Mike on our side. The men were directed to meet at your car where we had a surprise waiting for them. What's the matter?"

"When I saw the arrests I confronted Mike and he kept

silent. We argued. I feel like a fool."

"Don't. I'm sure Mike understands. I hope you can see now the reason for meeting with you here, away from police headquarters. Undercover operations are delicate and can be dangerous to those involved. I have to say your brother has a knack for it though. He is quite an impressive young man. When his sentence is over, I think his future partnership with us will continue."

"That's hard to believe with his record."

"He doesn't need a badge and a gun to work for us, Ken. It isn't unusual by any stretch of the imagination."

"You said that you approached him, it wasn't the other way around. But being an informant - I'm sorry - that still doesn't sound like Mike. What did you offer him?"

"Well. He said he wanted to be out in time for your graduation in May. A petition has been made to commute his sentence in order to make that happen."

The waiter arrived with their food. "Shall we eat? I'm starved."

With a big smile Kenny said, "Happy to."