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Manhunt

Like a surprise that keeps repeating itself, Cian remembers Dad won't be home for supper tonight and he won't be home ever -- *gone for good* -- and thinking of this gives him extra energy and a secret smile as he follows behind Ma up the steep hill and as they come closer to Shakespeare Avenue he sees Neal and Keef and other kids, tiny army men taking over his block. On the opposite stoops fat adults watch. Ladies with curlers in their hair shout across at each other. He can tell the boys are choosing up sides for manhunt in front of Keef's stoop, with Neal there in the middle of all of them arguing as if he's a manhunt expert. Ma switches the black bag onto her other shoulder and shakes her keys, as if the shaking makes the right key come out. "Are you going to jump into the little D-day they're planning?" She points the silver key in the direction of Keef's building where the cries are louder. Already someone who has seen him is calling his name, a voice he can't recognize, shouting, "There's *Robert*." It's Sean, Sean from the street where Peter's Deli is, his light, almost bluish skin and yellow hair. "That's Robert, he played hooky with his mother today. Hey we need you for manhunt against these fifth graders!"

"Tell the boy whoever he is that shopping isn't playing hooky."

There's four older boys over there he doesn't know and they stare at him like they already want to beat him. *Fifth graders*.

"Get Robert," Sean says to Keef, pointing over at him. "He's the fastest boy on this whole entire block."

“Hear that?” Ma asks, poking him in the elbow as she pushes the door opened. “You’re the cheetah of the pack, they need you,” she says, and it’s like she wants him to play more than he wants to play.

He wants to play but *win* because last time his team got caught so fast the manhunt was a joke, done so quick that the team from Plimpton Avenue laughed at them and went to another block to play some other team because they bragged that they still had energy left over.

“I swear to you Cian Robert you will not see the light of day for a month you go hiding in alleys or running into the street without looking. You’ve the streets and sidewalks, if that’s not plenty enough you can sit inside with your sister Kathleen and I. I’ll be watching.”

He says he hears.

“Don’t give me the quick *I hear*. Don’t let me see you bursting into the street without minding traffic.” She keeps the front door opened and reminds him that this suit has to be sized one more time and he has one hour is all because she doesn’t want to be doing the sewing into dawn.

He almost kisses her good-bye but if these fifth graders catch him kissing Ma they’ll give him a name like they did to Keef when Keef’s mother called him in early. Keefy Kindergarten Keef.

Ma steps inside, happy, he can tell, about how the whole day went, the long day off from school and the lunch that Ma said counted as supper grilled cheese and fat pickles and apple pie and hot chocolate in Woolworth’s where right now that African parrot named King Kong is sleeping, dreaming of the island where he’s from. Is Congo an island? There you don’t have to live in a building where fat men like these men on the stoops wear brown pants and white tee shirts and watch you as they point into the

street like idiots. He says bye to Ma and she closes the front door and waves through the glass and he feels super rich.

Sean pulls his arm, harder, laughing, and as they cross the street Sean tells him, "It's just us against four fifth graders but we get five guys and they only got four. But two of the fifth graders run faster than cars. But our team gets to go out first, I made sure, thank God."

The air here is cool, like a fan turned on somewhere in the sky, much cooler than it was outside the stores today where the heat made the air over the black streets melt. Here it's clear air -- blue and pink in the sky, the pink that's the sun somewhere fading to white and orange at the end of the sky, just over the round-hat tops of the buildings on the next block, buildings leading down so fast you can only see the small lights in their top windows, shining like stars inside.

The four older boys on the sidewalk argue with each other like dogs barking while Sean steps around them and climbs up onto the stoop where he sits down quiet as school. Sean bobs his head in Cian's direction as if to tell him he shouldn't stand there with the older boys, come up sit up here, but Cian doesn't because this isn't school so why should he take orders from Sean? Or anyone?

Neal with his bushy red eyebrows sits on the top step next to Sean as if this stoop isn't his house. But it is his house. It's his stoop but he sits with his hands tucked between his knees like a kindergarten girl afraid of these loud fifth grade boys. Someone says the small boy with black hair is Sean's cousin named Cosy. He remembers Cosy was friendly when they played red light green light. And Cosy lives with Sean sometimes because his parents are divorced. Keef, who's the tallest in third grade, stands next to the older boys as if he's friends with them. He says, "We should choose so we can mix up the sides and it won't be lopsided fifth grade on one team and

then just us." Others on the stoop shout no and barking starts again and the men on the stoops next door laugh at them, laughing as they eat pretzels.

Cian looks back at his building across the street to see that no one is watching. Ma maybe won't really be watching to see if he runs out into the middle of the street. And even though Sister Ruth says God watches you God doesn't always, really. Or if he does watch, he lets you do things you want anyway. Like Bast who's a real god, his God. Those cat eyes watching him everywhere, especially in Piccolo's as he walked out of the store so scared, his book bag noisy with the Tootsie Rolls and Mary Janes, the candy that's now upstairs, in that window across the street, stuffed in his white sock, under his bed, next to the E Book. And no one inside the store saw. But someone saw, he felt eyes, for sure, watching, helping. Bast. Bast's big green eyes.

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It's quiet for a minute, as if the teams finally got figured out. One of the older boys points at Cian and asks, "Who's *he*?" It's a yellow haired boy, and he pushes past Neal. Keef and Sean on the stoop watch and don't say anything, as if they would get in trouble for answering the older boy's question.

"I'm King Kong," Cian says.

The boy's blue eyes stare back as if he didn't hear what he just said, so Cian repeats it, making his mouth round, "I'm King Kong from Congo." The boy looks mad. His blue shirt has a patch sewn on the pocket that says Con Edison. Behind the Con Edison boy is another yellow-haired boy who looks exactly like Con Edison, but this twin boy's shirt is plain blue and he has yellowish buckteeth. Buckteeth and Con

Edison.

“His name is Robert,” Sean says to Con Edison, “He’s on our team.”

“Why did you say you are King Kong?” Con Edison asks.

“He talks to weirdos all the time, that’s why,” Keef says. “But he could draw good.”

“Drawing is what kindergarten girls do,” Buckteeth says. Another older boy next to Buckteeth, who Cian hadn’t noticed, is short with big brown freckles and hands like baby Anna’s, soft hands with no knuckles, real baby hands. Cian stays put in front of Buckteeth whose chest is as big and blue as Con Edison’s chest. He remembers Con Edison from seeing the fifth graders once playing basketball in gym. But maybe it was Buckteeth in the gym. Who knows? People are faces and sometimes you forget who’s who.

Buckteeth steps in front of Con Edison and asks Cian, “Do you want to go back to playing with your mommy?”

“He wasn’t playing with his mommy,” Sean says. “They went shopping.”

“Shut up,” Con Edison says, pointing at the stoop as if he’s the principal. “Here are the rules.”

“Look at him,” another fifth grade boy says, pointing at Cian. It’s a skinny boy, skinny as a weed. “Look, you can tell, he’s still thinking about his mommy.”

“No I’m not,” Cian says, feeling Buckteeth and Con Edison watching. “I’m thinking about how we are going to beat you at manhunt. And the whole school will know.” Sean pats Cian’s shoulders and cheers. Keef laughs, nervous. Sean howls as he runs in circles out into the street dancing between the parked cars and shouting, “We go out first we go out first we go out first.” Con Edison screams at the boys in the street, shouting with his hands around his lips as if he’s Sister Bea in the schoolyard. “Stop

running like idiotic jerks. Here's the rules." As if he's in school Sean hurries back up onto the stoop as Con Edison and Buckteeth shout again and again for everyone to just shut the hell up. Watching them barking about the rules, Cian thinks about how everyone has a different name. Keef O'Neill and Sean Persico and Neal Riley. But no matter their names when they close their eyes at night everyone calls themselves "I." Sean calls himself "I." And Keef and Neal who kick at each other's legs as they sit on the last step of the stoop. They call themselves "I" too. Even Ma calls herself "I." And these older boys too Con Edison and Buckteeth and Babyhands and Skinny. Even the Pope calls himself "I." "I" is everyone's name. Even for Truman. And Tiny. And Allegrezza.

The smell of soup comes from the windows above the stoop. The men smoke cigars. Two ladies further down bring out folding chairs and a small table and cards. It's almost supper time but now since the sun stays out longer Ma says parents don't need to have every Tom Dick and Harry cooped up in the house all evening. "Here's the rules," Con Edison says. "You babies get to go out first because you're little babies and we'll catch you so fast you are going to need extra time to catch us," Con Edison says. "You can only hide on this street and that street down there. When you get caught you come back to this stoop. This stoop is jail. No feet allowed on the sidewalk. You could only free people in jail by touching every single hand, not just one hand. Last time you babies tried to cheat by the guy just touching one hand and then you said it automatically spread. It doesn't automatically spread. You have to touch every single hand of every person who's in the jail for them to go free. Okay babies?"

Neal says that's fair, that's real good, and Cian wishes he could slap his ears, slap Neal being so nice to Con Edison, who thinks he's the king.

"And no hiding inside houses."

Someone asks him what about alleys? He answers that alleys are okay but no hiding in houses.

Babyhands points his fat finger at the boys on the stoop, "If we catch you babies hiding in places where we said you're not allowed, don't worry, because we'll catch you later."

"He beat up a high school kid yesterday," Con Edison says, tapping Babyhands thick arm. "From Taft. So don't think we won't beat you up if you don't play by what I just said." Buckteeth nods his head. Keef stands from the stoop, pointing at Buckteeth. He asks, "Are you and that other boy with blond hair twins?"

Con Edison makes a mad face. "Didn't you even listen to the rules?"

Keef shakes his head Yes, like they're answering questions in school. "But are you?" Keef asks, "Twins?"

Buckteeth pushes Keef hard. "Shut up your stupid questions. Start hiding."

"Wait," Babyhands says. "We have to have the bet with them before they go out."

Cian asks them what's a bet?

"You're dumb," Babyhands says. "Raisin brain who doesn't know what a bet is."

"A bet's when you have to pay 'cause you lose so bad," Con Edison says. "The bet is that we can catch you all and put all five of you babies in this jail before it gets dark. Since you don't get an allowance yet, the bet is if we catch you, you are our slaves for a week. You have to carry our books home from school for us every day."

"I get an allowance," Neal says, looking nervous, like he's already lost.

Cian smiles. "We'll win don't worry."

Con Edison seeing Neal so nervous smiles and says, "You are going to lose,

Neal, you and your kindergarten friends.”

Neal’s says, “I wish I was on your team.”

“Well you’re not,” Buckteeth says. “Now go out. We already started counting.”

On the stoop, Babyhands has his head buried in his arm and is shouting Mississippi’s, “Ten Miss-iss-ip-pi, eleven Miss-iss-si-pi” and as he counts Sean and Neal run off together, passing in front of Cian’s building. Cian waits for Keef and Cosy to go out and he follows them up the block slowly, adults on the stoops watching, talking. The lady shuffles cards so hard its like guns exploding. Cian hears her ask, “Did you tell Gracie the story about the raccoon?”

Voices fade as he stares down at the bumps and cracks between the cobblestones. He thinks how he doesn’t want to hide with his team like last time when they got caught right away in that white cardboard box in Neal’s alley. As they hurry ahead of him Cian shouts, a whispering shout, telling them make sure you spread out.

Cosy ducks near a gigantic flower pot in front of the gray corner building where mostly old men live because it’s close to the bus stop. Nurses in white dresses go in and out of the building. An old man hugging his blue coat watches and winks as Cosy tries to wiggle himself hidden behind the flower pot .

On the opposite sidewalk, Keef checks back and forth and back again and when Cian peeks from behind a car Keef is already hidden somewhere. The air rings out with Babyhands’ faraway Mississippis.

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At the corner, Cian turns down Holly Avenue, to Ginsberg’s Candy Store that for some reason stays opened even during supper time. Inside the store it’s warm and dark. Mister Ginsberg who gives you a free Bazooka isn’t there. The tall lady behind the counter is old. Her hair is orange and gray. As Cian lets the door close the bells ring

overhead but she doesn't look up. Above the counter is a round hanging mirror that makes her look like a bent-forward midget. But she's not small. Standing like a bird with a long neck she slides nickels one by one into an island of nickels and one by one slides quarters into an island of quarters, the coins forming silver islands on the glossy counter. As he gets closer to the counter she doesn't say, "Welcome, and welcome to your life," which is what Mister Ginsberg always says, giving out a free piece of Bazooka. Cian stands facing the rows of colored candy bars. He hears a shout in the street that could be Cosy or Keef or someone else being chased by the older boys. The shouts on the street are like sounds from a dream that isn't his dream. Someone else's dream, out there. In here it's just this lady counting coins. The front windows of the store are dirty, almost green. Through clear spots he can see flashes of heads running in the street. Shouts fade, leaving just the sliding sound of the coins on the counter. The shelves are filled with rolls of toilet paper, boxes of blow-your-nose tissues, rubber-banded stacks of index cards, colored folders and the paper lined with squares, that Kathleen uses for her math, with the compass, the point end of the compass is a needle you press onto the page, letting the part that holds the tiny pencil draw a circle that makes you feel like God as you draw it such a perfect circle.

"We're closed in five minutes," the lady says. He says okay. He wonders who we is. We is a fake name just like I. Make believe-names. Like when Sister Ruth says, "We are making Holy Communion." She's not making Holy Communion.

"What can I get you, youngster?" the lady asks.

"I'm not buying anything," Cian says. "I'm hiding from outside. We're playing manhunt."

"So why are you in here?" she asks. "If your game is outside?" Her fingers seem separate from her body, moving while she stares at Cian. Her long twiggy fingers move

the coins as if they are dead bugs. As she bends down to do something with a box on the floor he watches her turn into a midget in the round mirror. He backs up a few feet, reaching into the bowl of Mary Janes as he takes a handful, closing his fingers over the pieces, shoving his fist into his pocket, pushing as deep into his pocket as he can. He thinks, Bast sees us. Bast watches over us with loving care. Feathers in his stomach, a tickling up into his arms, like turning everything into a dream, a dream you make happen just by doing whatever you think of. Make the candy free. His tight pocket presses against his hips. On the lower shelf the bucket of red coins glows like a red fish bowl. Last Sunday he saw these red candy coins for the first time when Ma sent him down here to get onion paper because she was sending letters to Home. Ma likes to write letters on Sundays after supper even if the table still smells spongy-stinky. She said writing letters to people who have you in their hearts makes you feel less lonely, especially a nice long letter to Home. He could then maybe write to Paolo when Paolo goes. A letter's sweet, Ma says, it's company that pops out of an envelope. Ma's eyes come alive when she gets one from Home. She tears the blue, red and white envelope with her hand shaking like it's a present, handing him the colored stamp to keep, as she reads and whispers words while she walks up the stairs, like a reading monster, shuffling her feet and reading so careful that she forgets where she is.

The lady puts a tiny key on the counter next to a dirty sack.

"Are you rich from this store?" Cian asks the lady. With her fingers and thumb she slides dimes into their own island, a round copper island next to the island of nickels.

"We're comfortable," she says. "But then again I grew up in a shoebox." Her face is long, wrinkled. Her nose too is long and thin. Her dress is dark red, like cranberry sauce.

“Why do you ask me if I’m rich? Are you going to pull a stick-up?”

Cian makes a gun shape with his thumb and finger.

“My candy or my life? Is that it?” the lady asks. “Don’t you joke though, my poor dear brother drives a taxicab in Manhattan, I always tell him don’t go picking up the schwoogies, no good will come of that, right? But sure enough one of these animals holds him up at gunpoint.”

Cian asks her what’s schwoogies, what’s gunpoint?

“Blacks. And gunpoint is what it says, a gun pointed at his skull, that’s what gunpoint is.”

“Did he get shot?”

“No, but the animal got away with my brother’s cigar box of fares. His day’s pay,” the lady says. She holds the cloth sack opened at the edge of the counter, sliding the islands of coins to the edge and letting them fall, spilling into the bag, making gentle tapping like rain. She pulls up the string of the sack, closing it tight like she just finished something good.

“If they didn’t catch the robber where did he go?”

“The schwoogie? He’s out doing more hold-ups I would guess. That’s not a difficult question. People do what they are.”

“Where’s Mister Ginsberg?”

“Why? You want free gum?”

“Does he still work here?”

“He owns this place, my dear. We own it. Right now though he’s on the road with his old pals from college. Cross-country drive. He’ll be back, I tell you, when he tires.”

“What kind of car does he have? Is it fast?”

“Aaron doesn’t own a car, his well-off friends do. A convertible. He’s been gone three weeks already but he writes poems on the postcards. Well,” she says fingering the string of the cloth bag. “I guess I’m jealous. Because driving cross-country beats being holed up in a candy store.”

“I rather be here than in any convertible. This is all candy, it’s better.”

“Is that another one of your friend out there howling for you?” she asks, plopping the red bag of coins next to the cash register.

He tells her those other boys aren’t his friends, they’re the enemies, fifth graders, who think they’re king of the block. As he hears Keef squealing he knows in a way it is someone howling for him. “Your brother’s money, if it got robbed that means he didn’t give his money to bill collectors?”

“That’s right.”

“My mother says you have to get a job,” Cian says. “So when you get older just so you could give your money to bill collectors.”

“Money is what spins the earth around, right?” she asks.

As she writes, he backs up three steps and reaches into the bucket of red coins, scooping out so many they drop at his sides as he tries to put them into his pocket. He coughs as if to drown out the sound of the falling. But she must have heard. Or not.

She mumbles numbers to herself as she writes. He kicks the red candy coins on the floor, dragging two of them up against the bottom of the counter where she won’t see them until maybe when she sweeps.

Mister Ginsberg in the convertible car must be eating oranges and wearing short pants going to the beach with older girls like Kathleen’s friends. And waiting for Paolo’s mother to move there with Paolo, maybe. To grow grapes. If you’re married you live in the same house with the person forever until you die but if Mister Ginsberg is in

California and Misses Ginsberg is here that's mixed up. He asks her where are those three girls who live upstairs from here? "The snobs?"

"The snobs? Who says my daughters are snobs?"

"Snobs is good. I told my mother I don't want to get an idiotic job when I get older. I think you should be a snob or a savage."

"Well my daughters are a lot of things but snobs, no, not yet. They're upstairs, plugging away at trigonometry."

He asks what are their names? She slams her little book shut, throwing it up onto a messy shelf like she never really cared about it anyway. She laughs. "Ask my husband when he gets back. He'll tell you their names are Yale, Columbia and Harvard. That's what he calls them."

"Their hair is long," Cian says. "Like Rupunzel's."

"Or Lady Godiva's."

"Who's she?"

"Ran through the town naked on a horse," she says. "I think it was a dare. Who's that in the window?" She steps around the counter, walking over to the dirty window. She shouts back to Cian does he know a kid in a blue shirt?

He tells her, "That's one of the fifth graders. He's after me."

"What do you mean 'he's after me'? This boy's asking me something through this glass." She goes over to the door, the bell ringing so clear he can hear it in his stomach, down into his legs. He hears Babyhands, angry, asking, "Is a boy hiding in your store?"

"Who might I say is asking?" she says.

"He's cheating if he is, we said no in houses."

Cian can picture Babyhands and Con Edison, with maybe Skinny behind him.

Sneaking slowly along the counter as Misses Ginsberg argues with Babyhands, he taps her on the back. As she turns around Babyhands sees Cian and he points into the store and shouts, "We found him we found him."

Cian points to the stoop across the street. He says, "Oh my god, look! There's a German shepherd. He looks like he has rabies!" Both of the boys turn around quick enough for him to laugh, squeezing past Misses Ginsberg, bursting out free into the cold air as she laughs and yells at the older boys, "Don't believe everything you hear." He hears her cheering behind him as he runs harder up the steep hill, his feet burning as he takes long almost flying steps to get away from their shouts that sound so close he might be caught in a second even as he whips around the corner where Buckteeth reaches out to grab him so he spins, jumping into the curb between two cars. Buckteeth shouts, bragging that he almost got one. "That King Kong kid, the fast kid, he's hiding near here, somewhere. I practically got him."

Down the block more adults are out now than before, in front of nearly every house, waiting for action. On the stoop, in the jail, Sean and Keef and Neal sit there with sad faces, already caught. Cian thinks then that Cosy must still be free.

The jail guard is Con Edison. Older boys pass in the street shouting down to Con Edison, "They lose, the King Kong kid cheated, he was in a store, we said no inside houses." Buckteeth repeats that, over and over, and he doesn't see as Cian hurries down these three steps of the corner alley, hurrying to the end, lifting a black tent and bending down under, pulling the tent over his head like a permanent hood.

His knees press against the hard wheel of a motorcycle. Feeling the candy pressing in his pockets he thinks maybe he made a mistake, that maybe Misses Ginsberg saw what he stole but that she didn't say nothing. But she didn't see. She

liked how he tricked them about the German shepherd.

Eating the candy coins, he tries to hear the older boys hunting. He wonders where Cosy who doesn't really know this block could be hiding? In a chimney or inside an igloo? Wherever he is he'll get caught soon, Cian can feel that, heavy and hot around him, like this tent.

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At the top of the hill Babyhands lifts up a garbage can lid. Brown bags of garbage explode up into his face as Babyhands stumbles, wiping soggy papers from his face. As the can tips forward, Cosy tumbles out, short and wild, his arms swinging as he pulls himself up, Babyhands still wiping garbage off his face. Catching his balance like it is the first time he ever stood on his own feet, Cosy turns around and leaps across to the curb. Turning the corner, Cosy vanishes. The block is darker. White shirts of men out talking on the stoops glow like lights at the bottom of the building. It feels like a long time since he was here, before, as if his block is a new place. The sky is dark but clouds still show, white and gray. The moon is there, in between a slit of clouds. Down near Neal's stoop older boys move like shadows back and forth across the street. His team is caught and they sit close to each other on the stoop--in jail-- dark heads and dark shapes of knees on the stoop.

As Cian crouches close to the cars and walks slowly he can see Cosy crying on the sidewalk as Con Edison and Babyhands help him stand up. Cosy's pants are ripped at his knees and from the way his face twists as he cries Cian can tell that Cosy just wants to go home and get band aids. But there's no way the fifth graders would let him leave until it's all finished.

He hurries closer, touching the sides of the cars. He peeks again to see them walk Cosy to the stoop where the others don't seem to care that he is cut so bad and

crying, wiping his eyes as he sits down on the last step. Sean pushes Babyhands' shoulder. "Get off him, you made him fall on purpose."

"Tough luck," Con Edison says to Sean.

"I told you, that fast kid cheated," Babyhands says. "We win automatically. He was in the candy store." Babyhands says.

"Find him," Con Edison says. "I want to catch him even if we stay searching till the middle of the night I don't care."

The way Con Edison bosses them is so scary that Cian sidesteps in between the bumpers, squatting, the candy in his pocket pulling his pants tight as he tries to balance himself to listen. He can see his own face reflected in the silver bumper. He thinks what a perfect place that would be, to hide, in there, far away inside this mirror.

From across the street, older boys' voices sound closer to him than they are. He listens careful to tell if they are really getting closer or is it just so quiet in the dark air of the street that you can't hear anything?

A black mouse sneaks out from under the car and moves, a shivery black mound of fur rushing toward the manhole, slipping in so fast. And what happens to the mouse then? Did he fall all the way down? Do mice land on their feet like cats? If Pepi was out here he would have chased the mouse and won.

Babyhands and Buckteeth argue like dogs barking. "No one's going home until we catch that last baby."

"Let's go check the candy store block again," one of them says.

Skinny takes his place as jail guard in front of the stoop, leaning against the hydrant while Neal asks Cosy how did he fall? Sean says, "That fatso pushed him." Keef is telling the others about how Cosy got garbage on the fatso's face. Someone tells Cosy he still smells like garbage and being able to see his team so close without them

seeing him makes Cian nervous. Keef's face looks worried.

He thinks, Don't ever get caught. You want to brag. The girls' school might even find out they won. And he'll free them, he knows it, as if everything from now on in the rest of his life is going to be whatever he wants it to be. *Bast watches over me with loving care.*

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Buckteeth and Con Edison pass by, Buckteeth saying the candy store is closed.

"But why didn't you catch him?"

"He shoved into us. And then he ran we don't know where."

"You're idiots. If we don't win the bet, you're dead."

"They lose automatically because he went inside the candy store," Babyhands says, passing so close to the car that the streetlight shines in the tips of his brown shoes. Their feet clomp like horses, horses clomping toward the end of the block and turning, they disappear.

Cian breathes in hard, as if he might die. Ducking, he crosses the street in a hurry that almost makes him trip. Crouching so low his ankles hurt, he feels for a car's handle without looking. The click sound sends a rush through his face, a tingling into his stomach. Slowly he opens up the car door, feeling like someone somewhere must be seeing him do this as he slides in and up, onto the red backseat.

Peeking up through the windshield, he can see them there, close, on the stoop, sad-faced, like ghosts come back to life. Under the stooplight Keef's hair shines red like red leaves in the fall. A lady in the third floor window is smoking and pointing to the boys on the stoop and laughing. Men on the stoop near the jail tell his team, "I think your last man is probably home in bed by now."

The inside of the car smells like church. He wonders whose car this is? As he

looks out the opposite window, Skinny guards the stoop, pacing back and forth in the middle of the sidewalk as if he's looking for a lost nickel.

Being in here makes it feel like his car. The steering wheel is red like the seats. The green numbers behind the wheel tell you how fast you're going and how fast you could go. You can go faster than a cheetah. "Cross-country," like Misses Ginsberg said. Where there's black winding roads and cactus and deserts and hills, hills of cliffs, like bridges, and you drive away from schools and stores and people with such annoying voices like the men on the stoop three doors down barking at each other.

On the black floor, just under the seat, is a blue ball. It's heavier than a brick. A purse. Seashell shapes and arrows shine on the blue purse. The snap top is gold. He presses the snap opened. Inside are pennies. Keys. A key chain with a picture of a red cross. Beneath the keys are heavy buttons and a tiny black box which he opens to see there's nothing inside. The little box is heavy. Closing the purse, he peeks out the car window at Skinny who sits on the hydrant. With that garbage can two doors down he knows just what to do that will scare Skinny away from the stoop.

He rolls the window down.

None of his team on the stoop sees him. Leaning forward on the car seat, he feels like a ghost of himself. Through the opened car window he can hear Cosy sniffing and someone repeating, "I'm so starving, I'm so starving."

Closing his eyes he kneels harder into the cushy seat. He tightens his hands around the heavy purse, picturing the garbage can, and when he opens his eyes he sees the garbage can right there, the can begging him to knock it over.

He hopes the can's not full. Or else it won't tip over. It's close enough that he can reach it with a good strong throw.

Half standing out of the window he pulls the heavy purse back, high, holding

his own hand high like a slingshot over the car roof. One of the men further down asks, "Hey, what's that kid think he's doing inside the Firestone's car? What's that he's got in his hand?" Cian pretends they're just voices in a dream, and even this is a dream, and he bites down hard, closing his eyes, reaching overhand and letting the purse go so hard his shoulder stings as a dull punch bangs the top of the can, knocking the lid off in a clanging ring as coins and keys and buttons scatter, spraying rain-like across the sidewalk. The men holler. "Get out of that car, kid." The garbage can rolls forward, tips, falling in a rolling rumble but nothing falls out of it, an empty can, rolling as Skinny hurries over to it and shouts, "He's here." Skinny jumps and shouts and waves to the others down the street, "He was hiding in the garbage, he just jumped out, he's around here!," Skinny screaming over and over as he runs right past the opened car window.

He ducks back inside and pulls on the door handle, opening the door gently with his hand shaking so wild he wonders how could this be happening, happening even as it is happening? And he stands right next to the stoop as Skinny down there stares into the garbage can.

On the stoop his team hollers and cheers and even Cosy with his torn pants is standing shouting "Touch my hand Robert touch my hand Robert touch my hand, free me."

"Hey!" Cian shouts, touching Cosy's hand first as he tries to stand closer to the light of the stoop so that Skinny down by the empty garbage can see. "Look what I'm about to do," Cian says. "My team's *freed*, you stupid slaves!"

Skinny kicks the empty garbage can, as men bend down to pick up the coins of the sidewalk. One of the men points at Cian as he sweeps the buttons and coins on the sidewalk. Cian slaps everyone's hands twice, Keef and Neal and Cosy and Sean, each

of them hopping off the stairs, hollering and cheering. The ladies who were playing cards clap. Someone across the street shouts "They won!" from a window. "The little guys won!"

Con Edison and Buckteeth and Babyhands appear on the far corner shouting questions to Skinny as the others run in circles in the center of the street. Cosy jumps so high he looks like he's trying to grab the drooping telephone lines overhead. Sean and Keef are holding hands as they jump behind Cosy, who shouts to Neal, "We beat them so bad. We beat them."

Up in his window, Cian sees his sister Kathleen hugging a bowl under her arm as she watches and waves. His sister smiles at him like she saw it happen.

"Did you hide in that candy store?" Con Edison asks Cian, and suddenly the street goes quiet.

"None of your business."

"We said no houses," Skinny says.

"A candy store isn't a *house*."

"He was hiding under a car," Skinny says, bending his skinny legs, pointing out to Buckteeth the space beneath the cars.

"No," Cosy says, "Robert was *inside* the car," sticking his tongue out at the older boys and turning, running, running off so fast you can tell he's not going to stop. Sean chases Cosy, cheering.

"You hid in the candy store," Con Edison says. "So your team lost automatically." "Nope," Cian says, "We won. So now you are our *slaves*."

"That wasn't the bet," Buckteeth says. "The bet was if we caught you before it got dark you would be *our* slaves."

"That's true Robert," Neal says, "They're not our slaves."

"But we won," Cian says.

Neal shakes his head. "They're not our slaves."

Keef says he has to go in. His mother at the top of the stoop, her hair in blue curlers, shouts for them all to scam. "And you, Robert," she says pointing to where the men are still sweeping up the coins, some of them still pointing at Cian and whispering. "You made this mess, you should be picking this up."

Hurrying on to the sidewalk, Neal bends down with the men to help pick up the coins and buttons.

"You're dead," Con Edison says, pointing at Cian.

"For what?"

"For cheating."

"Which one threw this purse at the garbage can?" one of the men asks Neal's mother as she hurries up the stoop saying "My son didn't do it, I can tell you that."

Cian crosses the street to get away from the questions. But Buckteeth and Con Edison watch, their green eyes bright even in the dark here. It's so dark out he can hardly believe he's still outside.

"Good night *slaves*," Cian says. He turns away and walks up his stoop and he's glad to be inside. Babyhands is shouting, loud, so he hurries, hurries up, skipping steps to get up to where he can finally stop hearing the shouts.

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Ma pours boiling water out of a pot as Kathleen pours milk. "We have a reward for you, Cian," Ma says. He likes the sound of that, *reward*. Reward is like *present*.

He climbs onto the couch to look out the window. Con Edison and Babyhands

and Neal are still down there on the street. Neal stands close to Babyhands, as if he were on their team. And it looks like Neal is on that team now. There's a word for that, when you switch sides, a word Dad used once, to talk about Uncle Gerard and what Uncle Gerard did at Home, switching teams, a word that made Dad so mad he threw Uncle Gerard out of the house. Traitor. That's the word.

He opens the window and Kathleen hops on the couch. She kneels close, whispering, "I won't tell that you threw that lady's purse. It was so awesome how you did that. I don't even think your friends on the stoop saw you throw it. Their faces looked like they saw a ghost when that garbage can fell over. And then when they saw you, they started screaming like raving lunatics. That's when Ma came over and watched too."

"Ma saw me?"

"Not only did she see you, she was jumping up and down cheering for you."

He smiles and Kathleen rubs his shoulder, like it didn't matter anymore that he ever stole her curlers or used her special pens once to draw. She goes back to the cooking. It smells like turnips. His face feels warm again. Down on the sidewalk shouting starts. Neal stares up, pointing. "Robert, we didn't win, you cheated."

Behind Neal, Con Edison stares up, stares at the side of the building as if he could figure a way to climb up the bricks and get in here and start a fight, start a fight even with Ma here. He won't. But his eyes look like he wants to. Con Edison shouts, "You're dead, whatever your name is," and he hears Neal tell Con Edison, "His name's Robert Corley."

"You have to go to school, you have to walk to school right? So don't worry, when you come out, I'll get you. You're dead."

Cian sticks his head out and shouts, "We won, fair. So good night, you slaves."

Good night, traitor-boy *Neal*." He shuts the window, their shouting fading, faraway, mumbles. He can picture them pushing at the front door, maybe with a long log like bad knights trying to break into a castle. Or them finding that green window in the alley that pops opened even if you barely touch it and lets you into the cellar.

You're dead. He can hear it still, You're dead. If you got hit by a car and died you could still be dead and just thinking that you're still alive. Who could ever tell you? Maybe this is what being dead is, just like this, that you think you're alive except no one tells you. It's confusing. Con Edison is big. The fifth graders play basketball like they want to fight with each other. Once all of the fifth grade wasn't allowed to have gym because Sister Ruth said a fracas broke out. A fracas is a fight with a lot of people. And Con Edison might get him. After school. Tomorrow.

Ma says, "Come over here stand up on this chair, cheetah."

"I didn't *cheat*."

"She said cheetah, as in the cat, dummy."

He goes over to the table. As Kathleen watches, she tells him close his eyes and he does, feeling like it's his birthday. A papery noise brushes his ears. "There," Ma says. He opens his eyes to see a yellow ribbon around his neck with a green paper circle that says Manhunt Shakespeare Avenue April 12, 1948, Winner, 1st Place.

Ma rubs the ribbon. "That's for being the king of hide and seek."

"Ma I told you it was manhunt, not hide and seek," Kathleen says. "Take a bow, brother man."

But he doesn't feel like bowing. They clap. Kathleen pretends to play an invisible horn, making a hard tearing sound through her lips.

He tells Ma he's hungry and she stops mid-clapping. "Well, Jessie Owens, stand down, we'll eat. But don't you think for second I'm going to let the gold medal

athlete take his ribbon off.”

He says it’s okay, he can wear it while he eats. It feels like a costume, like his white jacket today. A better costume though. Sitting, he feels the pulling pinch of the candy in his pockets, and remembering how free he felt today with Ma he thinks too about Misses Ginsberg, who helped him. And it’s true, he did win, first place, he won, his team won too and they should brag, to everyone, even Sister Ruth, at school, tomorrow. Tell the girls’ school too. Tell the whole world. And if Con Edison wants to beat him up so bad, then that’s going to happen. Because lots of things have to happen no matter what you want. You can’t help it.

As Kathleen says grace, winning feels to him like being another person. Yourself, but better. And he knows, no matter what, no matter who plays manhunt next, he’ll make the rules.