

The Wanderers

Richard Price

The Wanderers

richard price



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Dedications

Roachman, Santos, Stieny, Lance,
and the others

Dion, The Four Seasons

Alice

Margo

Garry

Judi

I would like to thank the Mary Roberts
Rinehart Foundation for the grant
and the validation.

"I shall search my very soul ... for the Lion"

— Van Morrison

"Good Times

O children think about the good times"

— Lucille Clifton

1. The Warlord

THERE HE WAS in Big Playground. Richie Gennaro. Seventeen. High Warlord of the Wanderers. Surrounded by the Warlords of the Rays, Pharaohs, and the Executioners. Touchy allies. Tense convention. Issue at hand —

"We gotta stop them niggers."

"Do you think the Fordham Baldies would fight wit' us?"

"Man, if we get them Baldies it's all over."

"Yeah, but don't forget them Wongs. Them Chinks know judo."

"No Chink judo chop can stop this!"

"Hey, put that back! Jeez, you wanna get us busted!"

"Hey—how about them Lester Avenue guys?"

"Nah, they're fuckin' killers."

"They jus' as soon kill one a us as a nigger."

"I heard the Del-Bombers is comin' in wit' the Pips 'cause Clinton Stitch got a cousin in the Bombers."

"Ever notice how spades got two million cousins all over the country?"

"Del-Bombers ... shit ... that's bad."

"Now we *gotta* get the Baldies."

"Antone—you know Joey DiMassi, doncha?"

"Yeah."

"Whyncha go over to Fordham tonight with Gennaro an' see if you can get to talk wit' the Baldies."

"Awright."

Richie felt uneasy with Antone. The Wanderers and the Pharaohs often rumbled, and this emergency peace was only temporary. What if Antone, tonight, while they were waiting for the train pushed Richie on the el tracks? The Pharaohs knew that Richie was the vital spark, the cold logical mind behind the Wanderer war machine. Richie knew that if *he* was a Pharaoh and *he* had the chance he would surely push the Wanderer Warlord into the path of an oncoming train. Maybe they should take a cab.

The meeting was adjourned.

"So you wanna go wit' me to see DiMassi tonight?"

"Awright."

"I'll meet you here about ten, O.K.?"

"Sure, you wanna hop a cab?"

Antone shrugged, he eyed Richie suspiciously. "Ah look ... I dunno if I got the dough for a cab."

"Awright, we'll see."

"Later."

"Later."

After everyone had gone back to their candy stores, deserted lots, or playgrounds, Richie sat down on a bench and scribbled out a score sheet.

US

WANDERERS (GINNY) 27

PHARAOHS (GINNY) 28

RAYS (IRISH) 42

EXECUTIONERS (POLACK) 30

FORDHAM BALDIES (MIXED) 40

LESTER AVE. (VERY GINNY) 50

THEM

PIPS (NIGGER)

CAVALIERS (NIGGER) 30

DEL-BOMBERS (NIGGER) 36

MAU-MAU (NIGGER) 40

WONGS (CHINK) 27

50

Except for the Lester Avenue boys it was pretty even. Richie had to figure out how to get them involved without having them turn on the allies. They hated the niggers but they also hated everybody else. The Lester Avenue gang was older. Maybe twenty-one on the average. Comparing the other North Bronx gangs to the Lester Avenue boys was like comparing the Coast Guard to the marines. The other gangs had a few rumbles; every once in a while some guy would have his jaw busted or need a couple of stitches, but the guys on Lester Avenue were all ex-cons or Mob punks. Last year the heads of their gang, Louie and Jackie Palaya, were up on murder raps but had Mob lawyers fix a deal.

The only other gang worth being scared of was the Fordham Baldies, who were so fucking insane that they shaved their heads so their hair wouldn't get in their eyes in a fight. They were older too. About eighteen on the average. The toughest guy in the Baldies was Terror, a huge cross-eyed monster who even beat up on his own gang when they weren't fighting anyone else. But even *he* knew better than to fuck with the puniest guy on Lester Avenue. They'd come down like vigilantes and tear up the whole Fordham area, and they'd go down like that night after night until Terror gave himself up. They had a kangaroo court in some basement and even money Terror would be found in the trunk of a deserted car out in Hunt's Point the next week.

Richie thought about the opposition. Most of the time he couldn't figure niggers out. He once took a prejudice quiz in a comic book, and he had all the right answers except for the question, "Do Negroes smell different?" He checked yes, and the upside-down answer key said the answer was no. But that was bullshit because he knew they did. As long as he could remember his mother had warned him about coons and razors and knives and going into empty elevators with niggers because niggers would just as soon cut your balls off and pawn them for dope or booze as look at you. One fact that he knew was true was that if you go into a building where most of the tenants are niggers, either the hallway or the elevator is going to smell of piss. One time he went uptown to the Gun Hill Projects to get the homework from a kid in his class and the piss-stink in the elevator made him throw up before he got to the kid's floor.

He could understand them getting all the gangs together because essentially niggers were cowards unless there was a big gang of them. What he couldn't figure out was why the Wongs would team up with them. They were people from two different worlds. They never fought in school, but they never were chummy either. The Wongs were the insanest people of all. Not only were they all Chinese but they were all related. Twenty-seven guys with the last name Wong. Each guy had a dragon tattoo and rumor had it they all knew jujitsu and could kill someone with a judo chop.

Except for the Reds, Richie thought most Chinks were pretty harmless, and he liked Chinese food, but these characters were something else. He'd heard that their great-grandfather was a real Warlord—of the Tongs down in Chinatown around World War I—and who'd brought up his family to keep the Tong terror alive. From what Richie understood, the Tong still existed down there, although they were nowhere near as powerful as the Mob—but who really knew what the hell was going on down there, or who was coming off those boats from the Orient every day and slithering into Mott Street. In school, the Wong gang was inseparable. Silent, even among themselves, they walked through the halls like the Imperial Guard, giving off a glow of royalty, a unity that raised them above all other gangs.

"Hey."

"Hey." Richie looked up. C was peering over his shoulder at his notes. C was Richie's girl friend, fifteen, with hair teased into a beehive. She covered her pimples with what appeared to be flesh-colored mud. The C stood for comb—she always carried around a large pink comb and a crumpled Kleenex in her hand.

"What's that?"

"Nothin'."

"If it's nothin' how come you're coverin' it up?"

"Because it ain't none of your business."

"You gonna rumble wit' the Pharaohs?"

"No."

C sat down next to him. Richie folded the score sheet and slipped it into his back pocket. He tensed his chest muscles under his sky blue muscle shirt to catch C's eye. C's jaws worked furiously, popping her Bazooka, which gave her sugar breath. She wore a hot pink rayon blouse, revealing the tiny puckers in her oversized bra. Richie knew she stuffed Kleenex, but always looked the other way when she sneaked the wads out before he felt her up.

Richie's garrison belt had RG & C in a heart followed by TRUE LOVE WILL NEVER DIE. C carved it in with a nail the night she gave him his first hand job in Big Playground. Richie had really wanted a blowjob because he'd heard some guys say that getting a blowjob was better than getting laid, but C had steadfastly refused. Finally after a few weeks of fighting and head pushing, C agreed to give him one the next night. The following day he took two showers, inspected every inch of his prick and bathed it in some strong cologne. That night when the big moment came, C tentatively gave it a preliminary lick and almost gagged on the cologne. They dropped the subject after that.

C put her leg over Richie's leg and winked. She had on black imitation leather pointy ankle boots. Richie wore roach killers—pointy as a dangerous weapon, curving high over his ankle and low over his heel.

"Whatcha doin' tonight?"

"I gotta go to Fordham."

"How come?"

"I gotta see somebody."

"Can I come?"

"No."

"You seein' a girl?" Her eyes promised violence.

"No, I ain't seein' a girl," he mimicked. "I gotta see this guy"

"About what?"

"About a job."

"Bullshit."

"Bullshit yourself, I ain't kiddin'."

"I need help wit' my homework."

"Whatcha got?"

"Math and social."

"I'll come over about eight."

"Seeya then." She ruffled his hair and walked off.

The sunlight turned to a neutral gray. Six-thirty. Dinnertime. Big Playground was deserted except for the parky in his olive uniform collecting basketballs and spongy red kickballs. Richie Gennaro walked through the housing project to his own building.

His father was already home—which meant Richie was late. He washed quickly and sat down. His mother sliced a cantaloupe in fours and sat down with them.

The dinner table—one bowl mashed potatoes, one bowl broccoli, one plate with four steaks, garlic bread wrapped in silver foil, one bottle Hammer lem'n'lime soda, one bottle Hammer mellow-cream soda, one salad bowl, one jar Seven Seas French Dressing, one unlit candle, one Richie Gennaro—seventeen, one Randy Gennaro—twelve, one Louis Gennaro—forty-one, one Millie Gennaro—forty-one. In the corner, one television, on channel nine—one Dick Van Dyke.

Richie's father produced a paperback—one *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. "Is this yours?"

"Yeah."

"I don't want this filth in my house."

"It's a great book."

"It's filth. Don't talk back."

"Did you read it?"

"I don't read filth."

"Then how do you know it's filth?"

"I worked my way up from nothing. There were times when your mother and I had to go through all the clothes in the closet just to find a quarter to buy milk."

"Hey look, Pop, it's a classic."

"Oh yeah? Read page two-sixty-seven, that's classic filth."

"I thought you didn't read it."

"Goddamn smartass. You break your back to send them onwards and upwards, so they could be another do and have things you never dreamed of, and they reward you like this." He slammed the book down on the table.

"Louis! Get that book off the table! We're eating!"

"You see? Now you've got your mother upset!"

The family ate in silence. No one laughed at Dick Van Dyke. Richie finished and excused himself, heading for the door.

"Sit down and have dessert."

"I don't want dessert."

"Just have some cooked fruit."

"No, seeya."

"Hey, Professor Filth, where you going?"

"Over to C's."

"You coming back this week?"

Richie slammed the door behind him and headed across the projects.

"You lazy sonovabitch I refuse to clean this shithouse anymore if you keep trackin' mud and godknowswhat on my new carpet every time you come in this house. THE NIGGER MAID AIN'T WORKIN' HERE ANYMORE, YOU UNNERSTAN'?"

"Stop your bitchin'. You don't get off your ass all day anyhow, an' don't call me a sonovabitch in front of my children. I GOTTA GET RESPEC' IN MY HOUSE. I AM ... THE ... BREADWINNER HERE."

Richie rang the doorbell. Utter silence.

From the living room. "Yeah?... whozzat?"

"It's me." He hated yelling through a closed door.

C's old man opened the door. He was fat and bald and mean and short. He was indifferent to Richie. C's parents resumed their argument.

Richie walked through the foyer to C's room. Her little brother Dougie was hiding in the kitchen eavesdropping on the fight. Richie kicked him in the ass, and he stumbled into the dining room. "Hey you stupid fuck," Dougie hissed. He scampered back to the kitchen before he was noticed. Richie continued down the hall. "The Wanderers are faggots, the Wanderers are faggots."

"Dougie, I'm gonna wash your mouth out wit' soap," warned his father.

"He kicked me ... he kicked ... oh, man ... I'm leavin' home."

"Don't forget your toothbrush."

Richie walked into C's room. She was hunched over a blue loose-leaf notebook: "C & RG" and

"True Love Will Never Die" on the cover in her fanciest handwriting.

He peered over her shoulder and saw

The Warlord 9

Denise Rizzo

9/12/62

Algebra 323

Mr. Lumish

$$2x = 10, x=?$$

$$10x = 100, x=?$$

$$5x = 65, x=?$$

C&RG = Mrs. CG

Denise Gennaro, Denise Rizzo Gennaro

DG, DRG DRG & RG = TRUE LOVE

Mrs DRG If X = RG and Y = C then X + Y = Love

She hadn't heard Richie come in because her record player was blasting the Shirelles off the walls. He poked her in the ribs. She screamed, wheeled around, and crumpled the paper into a ball. They plodded through her homework for an hour. Richie finally wrote out the whole assignment himself. She was probably the only student in the city who didn't know what office Mayor Wagner held in city government.

He left at nine-thirty and waited outside Big Playground for Antone. He showed up at ten.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"You wanna hop a cab?"

"Nah, I ain't got no dough."

"Well, I don't wanna take a train."

They wound up taking two buses over to Fordham.

Even though most of the stores were closed, thousands of shoppers were still walking through the massive shopping area. In the middle of the busiest intersection, on a large traffic island with both navy and army recruiting centers and a row of twenty public phones, lounged the Fordham Baldies, heads shaved and gleaming in the fluorescent overheads, black jackets showered with silver buckles, chains, and studs. They draped themselves over the phones, leaning back lazily, chewing gum or smoking cigarettes in slow motion, their studied poses out of pace with the hustle of the night shoppers.

Both Antone and Richie felt intimidated by the Baldies' sullen presence. Terror spotted them and sauntered over. Richie's stomach grew knuckles. He expected anything, was prepared for nothing. Antone's face was defiant but bloodless. Terror weighed three hundred pounds and stood six-four. His bald head revealed a thick roll of fat at the base of his neck. An asthmatic condition made every breath sound like it came from a steam Dress He was a high school dropout or kickout because he'd creased shop teacher's head with a file when he was fifteen. "Whada, you want here?"

"We wanna see Joey ... it's important."

Terror's cross-eyes were black pearls. He never blinked. Tommy Tatti once said that Terror's mother was Mexican. ~~No one would ever dare ask Terror about his mother. No one ever seriously~~ talked about anyone else's mother. Even 'How's your mother?' was no good because the guy would think "What should be wrong wit' my mother?" "Joey ain't here ... beat it."

"You know where we can find him?"

"He's screwin' your mother."

Richie and Antone walked away. Terror laughed and walked back to the Baldies.

"Stupid fuckhead," Antone muttered.

Richie was silent. He was scared of Terror—he couldn't even bring himself to talk behind his back.

They walked down Fordham Road past the blacked-out stores.

"Hey, there's Joey!" Richie spotted Joey's bald head bobbing up the hill toward his gang.

Antone stopped Joey. "Hey, Antone, what's shakin'? I haven't seen you guys aroun'." Joey DiMassi was tall and skinny. A scar slanting across his eyebrow gave his face a permanently dazed expression. He was the leader of the Baldies. He wasn't the toughest, and he wasn't the smartest in his gang, but he had a good logical head and a great sense of fairness and decency. He had respect.

Antone told Joey about the coming war. Joey smiled, asked some names of the opposition, and told Antone to relax, he'd take care of it. Everyone had implicit faith in Joey DiMassi. When he said he'd take care of it, it was as good as done. Tommy Tatti once said that Joey should run for mayor on the Fordham Baldie ticket.

The next day at lunch, word was out that the niggers had decided not to rumble. No one knew why, but Antone and Richie knew that Joey had a hand in it. The main reaction was a lot of curses and grumbling, palm-pounding and shadow-boxing.

"Ah, I woulda beat their fuckin' skulls in."

"Ah, I had it all planned. They wouldna knowed what hit 'em."

"Ah, them fuckin' coons is cowards."

That night Richie ate two steaks and had two portions of cooked fruit for dessert. After dinner he decided to drop in on the Wanderers' camp—a deserted lot down the block from his house bordered by trees and the backs of commercial garages. The Wanderers had cleared an area about twenty-five feet in circumference where they built campfires and sniffed glue. The surrounding garages were spray-painted with the gang's name and then individual names under that.

A block away Richie sensed something was wrong. He saw too many people standing around the camp. At first he thought they were cops who were always coming around when there was a good fire going, but it was too light yet for a fire. They weren't cops. He raced up to the clearing.

It was the Wongs.

The Wanderers were standing around not knowing what to do or say. Perry ran up to Richie whispering hysterically. "It's the fuckin' Wongs!"

"What's goin' on?"

"I don't know! They ain't sayin' anything!"

The Wongs stood there as if posing for a group photograph, faces expressionless, eyes slits. They didn't move a muscle. If one of them gave out with a judo shout the Wanderers would have cleared the place in ten seconds flat. Richie looked around. His troops were standing in little clusters, staring and nervously rubbing their arms. Finally Teddy Wong, the leader of the clan, decided that enough of the Wanderers had shown up and very softly said "We came up here to warn you guys about me niggers."

"We thought the fight was off!" Perry's voice cracked. Entranced, Richie stared at the dragon tattoo on Teddy's forearm.

"It is. They're just after one guy. Who's Gennaro?"

Richie swallowed his jaw. He ran up to Teddy. "How come? What I do? What I do?"

Teddy stared at him contemptuously. The other Wongs sneered at such a breakdown in composure.

"Come off it, man. I saw what you wrote on the sidewalk in front of school *and* by the bus stop."

"What! What! I didn't write nothin'!"

Teddy turned to leave. The others filed out after him. Richie wanted to run up and cry on Teddy's tattoo and beg forgiveness; he was more afraid of the Wongs than of Clinton Stitch and the niggers. The last Wong to leave turned to face Gennaro. "That was stupid, man ... really stupid." They walked in formation toward the train station.

Panic in the camp. Richie's shirt was soaked with sweat and his underwear stuck to his prick where a little pee had seeped out. Everyone crowded around him. He just kept repeating, "I didn't do nothin' I didn't do nothin'." His voice broke and the steak and cooked fruit started coming up. Suddenly he jerked around. The others danced away as he puked. Buddy Borsalino ran to get his father's car. The other guys helped Richie into the back seat, careful not to get too close—he smelled pretty bad. They drove to the school and saw in at least seven different sidewalk squares in white paint:

NIGERS STINK
RICHIE GENNARO

He had no idea who wrote it. He had no enemies to speak of. He hadn't had a fight in months. At the bus station the same story—this time on the walls. They went back to the camp.

"Hey, lissen, man, if you gotta fight then we're fightin' too."

"Yeah, we gotta stick together."

"I didn't *do* it, I didn't *do* it." His voice had settled into a tired whine. He wanted to go to sleep.

"Don't worry, man, we won't letcha down."

That night, Richie had a nightmare:

He was naked, getting the shit pounded out of him by gigantic muscular blacks wearing sunglasses his head slowly sinking into Big Playground concrete. Voodoo drums. He began choking in the pungence of elevator piss. He was being cooked in it—in a big black kettle, with a blazing fire underneath. Clinton Stitch, head of the Pips, stirred the pee around him with a huge ladle that had a skull on the end. Then he was stretched out on a rack getting judo-chopped by the Wongs. Teddy Wong was standing there dressed in an embroidered ceremonial gown and a black silk skull cap. He had a two-foot stringy black mustache and wore eyeliner. His hands were hidden, folded in the sleeve of his garment. Suddenly they appeared with two-inch fingernails painted black. He clapped twice and two bald fat Chinks appeared dragging C, nude, hands tied behind her back. She was yanked by the hair and forced to kneel in front of Teddy who parted his gown. His huge prick stood straight out with tremendous fire-breathing dragons tattooed on both sides. C was commanded to suck it, which she did greedily, stopping momentarily to gasp for breath and moan, "I love it, I love it!"

Richie awoke with the biggest hard-on of his life, which he promptly pounded into mother-of-pearl colored drops that flew around the room like scatter pellets.

The Wanderers arrived at school grim-faced. Richie cursed himself for not at least painting over his name last night. As Richie slaved over "who" and "whom" in the dread *Warriner's English Grammar and Composition*, a fat sophomore came into the English class with a call slip from Mr. Mulligan's office for Richie. He had forgotten about disciplinary action.

Mr. Mulligan, or "Biff," was a huge hurricane of a man. He was dean of discipline, football coach, and top ballbreaker of the school. Richie walked on rubber legs to the basement office.

"You Gennaro?" Richie noticed the two cops. Big and solemn with guns as huge as horsecocks. "Answer me!"

"Yes, sir."

"So you're the sick sonovabitch who did that!"

"I didn't do that, sir! I didn't!"

"You're lying."

"No I ain't, sir."

The cops looked bored, their thumbs tucked into their gun belts. Richie's disciplinary record lay in its beige folder on Biff's desk.

"You ... are ... one ... arrogant sonovabitch. Wipe that smirk off your face before I wipe it off with the back of my hand!" Richie wondered where Biff saw a smirk since he was almost in tears. "You're in big trouble, boy."

"I didn't do it!" His lower jaw started to tremble, a sign that he was going to cry. Biff saw this and eased up a bit.

"Can you prove you didn't do it?"

Richie thought. "For one thing ... I know nigger has two g's."

One of the cops cracked up but quickly regained composure. Even Biff started to smile.

"Another thing I know is that I'm gonna get killed this afternoon."

"Awright, get outta here, go back to your class. This isn't over yet, Gennaro."

As he closed the office door he heard one of the cops laughing and Biff saying, "Ah, the kid didn't do it. I'll get the custodian to tar it over."

In the cafeteria the Wanderers, feeling puny and defenseless, sat hunched over a corner table. Everyone knew about the vandalism now, and it seemed like the whole school was staring and snickering. Every few minutes a black kid would walk past the table with an evil grin. Richie threw his tuna sandwich in the garbage and buried his head in his arms.

At three o'clock the Wanderers met in front of the principal's office and left the building together. It seemed like every black kid in the school was waiting for them. They formed a large ring open at one end, the end the Wanderers walked into. Except for Richie the rest of the gang was hustled away and told not to come back or their ass was grass. Richie's gang was left across the street helplessly craning their necks to see what was happening over the woolly heads of the crowd.

Richie was alone. Clinton Stitch emerged from the crowd and faced him. "Hi, Clinton." He smiled nervously. There was laughter from the crowd. A chorus of "Hi, Clinton's" in falsetto. He felt like a faggot and angry at himself, some strength returning to his body and soul. Clinton was so muscular that his arms and chest looked like round stones were sewn under his skin. "I didn't do it!" More laughter. "I didn't do it." More laughter. He became furious. "Hey, fuck you guys, man. Hah? I didn't do it!"

Clinton spoke. "Don't worry, man, you ain't gonna have to fight everybody. Just me."

"I ain't fightin' *you*, man."

"Then I'm just gonna kill you standin' there ... man."

The kids in the crowd were gleefully giving each other taps and fighting for a front-row spot. Clinton started for Richie but was distracted by the sound of screeching brakes as five beat-up Buicks came to screaming halts in front of the school, and ten guys scrambled from each car shouting and yelling, swinging tire chains, aerials, and baseball bats, scattering the crowd. Clinton punched Richie in the gut. "I'll get *you later*, motherfucker!" and vanished. Richie was sitting, dazed, his hands folded over his stomach. Tutti Frutti, one of the Lester Avenue boys, grabbed Richie by the front of his shirt. "Lissen 'ere ... if any a those black cocksuckers ever lay a hand on you again you call us, awright? Awright?"

"Yes, sir." He felt like a little kid. The only faces Richie saw now were white. The Lester Avenue boys stood around laughing. Three or four of the slower black kids were getting the shit pounded out of them on the broad lawn. In the distance he saw a black kid chased toward the parkway by a crazy guinea who was whooping and hollering, swirling a baseball bat over his head.

"Where the hell were you? I was gonna call your father to go look for you."

"I had a meetin'." Richie pushed past his mother and went into the kitchen.

"Don't gimme none a that. I was gonna call the cops in ten minutes."

"Lay off, Ma."

"I thought maybe God forbid some a those niggers..."

"Will you lemme alone? Jesus Christ!" He opened the refrigerator, grabbed a bottle of orange soda and took a long swig.

"Animal! We all gotta drink from your lips now, hah?" She slapped him on the back of the head.

He stared at her balefully, belched, and walked out the door with the soda.

"Now where you goin'?" She followed him into the hallway.

"Over to C's."

"You ain't back by six you ain't got no dinner ... I don't care." She shrugged.

"Good."

"Oh, Richie!" C pulled him in from the foyer.

"Hey, what's happenin'?"

"I passed my math."

He offered her a shot of orange soda.

"I'll take some." Dougie came running in and snatched the bottle from his hand. Richie watched almost four inches of the stuff disappear in one gulp. Dougie's white shirt hung out of his pants, and his Holy Rosary School clip-on tie was hanging from one collar. His narrow, freckled imp face was covered with chocolate, and when he finished drinking, his thin lips glistened red. "Whadya starin' at?" Dougie said.

"When you gonna get braces?" Richie asked. Dougie had front teeth like Bugs Bunny.

"Fuck you!" Dougie screamed. "If I had a dog with a face like yours I'd shave its ass and teach it to walk backwards!" Dougie was so pissed he had spit on his chin. Richie was serene. "If you had braces you wouldn't spray spit on people."

"Richie!" C admonished.

Dougie rushed at Richie, trying to kick him in the balls, but Richie caught his foot and waltzed him around the room in a mad hopping dance. Dougie could only scream in impotent anger. Richie let go, and Dougie fell on his back. "I hope the niggers kicked your ass!" Dougie hissed.

"What!" Richie grabbed his sticklike arm. "What'd you say?"

Dougie got scared and clammed up.

"Richie, let go! You're hurting him." C tried to pull him away, but Richie ignored her.

"How'd you know about the niggers? I'll break your fuckin' arm, Dougie!"

Dougie struggled to get loose. Richie saw the white paint on Dougie's fingers. He smiled and twisted Dougie's arm behind his back, whispering in his ear, "Whadya do it for, Dougie?"

"Leggoleggoleggo, oooh, Denise!"

"Come across and I'll let you go."

"Duh-neese!"

"Richie, stop!"

"Who else did it, Dougie?"

"Duh-neese!"

Richie jerked Dougie's twisted arm another two inches.

"IdiditwithScottie, leggoleggoleggo, puh-leeze!"

Richie let go. "Scottie Hite?" Dougie got up, rubbing his arm. "Scottie Hite!" Richie repeated.

Dougie made a motion for Richie, thought better of it, punched his sister in the tit, and ran into the bathroom locking the door.

After dinner, the Wanderers met in Big Playground.

"How you feelin', man?"

"O.K." Richie rubbed his stomach. "Lissen, I found out who did it."

"Antone?"

"Nah."

"Terror?"

"Nah, you'll never guess ... Dougie Rizzo."

"Dougie?"

"Yeah, an' his friend that kid Scottie."

"Scottie Hite?"

"Yeah."

"Jeez, they're like ... ten!"

"You wanna kick their asses?"

"Nah ... I got a better idea."

That night Richie and Perry walked through Bronx Park to the cave near French Charlie's field. Six bicycles were strewn in front in a daisy pattern. Painted on the outside of the cave were a skull and crossbones with the legend:

WARNING! WHOEVER ENTERS THIS CAVE WILL DIE A DEATH AT THE HANDS OF THE ZORROS

RANDY

CARY

STEVE

GLEN

GENIE

PHIL

Richie stuck his head into the darkness. "Hey, Randy!" his voice echoed off the walls. Randy Gennaro emerged. He had his brother's sleepy bug-eyes and pouting lips, but instead of Richie's curly waterfall hairdo he sported a six-inch-high pompadour.

"Hey, Richie!"

"Hey, babe, what's goin' on?"

"We're havin' a meetin'."

"Lissen, we gotta job for the Zorros."

"Hey!" Randy shouted back into the cave. "C'mere, guys." The other five Zorros came out. They all sat powwow style in the damp evening grass. The Zorros were a bunch of sixth graders from Holy Rosary School. They rode their bikes like a motorcycle gang around Bronx Park and Big Playground.

"Lissen up ... we gotta job for the Zorros," said Perry.

"What kinda job?"

"Revenge," said Richie, sending a white pearl of spit arching between his front teeth.

"We want you guys to rub out an enemy," said Perry, cleaning the dirt from his thumbnail with a pocketknife.

"A big guy?" asked Phil, a fat blond kid.

"Nah ... a little guy."

"Two little guys."

"What grade?"

"Fifth."

The Zorros laughed easy.

"We'll give you a slice of pizza and a pack of butts."

"Each?"

"A slice each and a pack for the whole gang," said Richie.

"Two packs," offered Perry.

Richie gave him a dirty look. "O.K. Two packs."

"Done."

The next day, six Zorros wearing Lone Ranger masks and riding English Racers swooped down on Dougie and Scottie in Big Playground and whisked them off to Bronx Park. Outside the cave the two kids were blindfolded, their hands tied behind their backs.

"C'mon, Randy, I know it's you," said Dougie. Scottie, a skinny little kid like Dougie, with a blond almost white crew cut, was weeping.

"Silence!" Cary slapped Dougie on the back of his head.

"C'mon, lemme go, man!" Dougie whined.

At a signal from Randy, they were shoved inside the cave and made to sit with their backs against wall. The six Zorros sat facing them. The blindfolds and the ropes were removed.

"I know all you guys," said Dougie. "I'm tellin'."

The Zorros were silent. Randy produced a big fat earthworm. He held it on a stick in front of Dougie's face. "If you open your mouth one more time this goes in it."

Dougie clammed up.

"Now!" Randy took a piece of loose-leaf paper from his pocket. "Dougie Rizzo and Scottie Hite, you are formally charged with high treason. How do you plead?"

Before Dougie could open his mouth, Randy picked up the earthworm stick and waved it in his face again.

"Nothing to say? Ah ... contempt of court. Very good." He waved the stick in front of Scottie. "How 'bout you?"

Scottie puked in his own lap.

"Hmm, spitting at the judge."

Randy turned to the Zorros. "How do you find the defendants?"

"Guilty!"

"Kill 'em!"

"String 'em up!"

"Plan C!"

"No, Plan A!"

"Plan B!"

"Kill 'em!"

Rubbing his hands, Randy faced the defendants. "You have been found guilty on all accounts ... do you have any last words?" He made a motion for the stick but didn't have to pick it up. "Hey, someone clean that guy up." One of the Zorros took off Scottie's shirt and wiped his face and chin. "Now, as judge I decree that you can pick your punishment from three options. A." He counted on his fingers. "We tie you up naked on the cave floor, and in the morning we pick up what the worms and spiders didn't eat." He put the earthworm on Dougie's shoulder. Dougie screamed. "No ... I guess you wouldn't want that. Well, anyway, Plan B." He flicked open a pocketknife and rested it on Scottie's cheekbone.

"We scoop your eyeballs out." Scottie screwed up his face like he was going to bawl again. "I guess that leaves us with Plan C."

"Plan C!" everyone shouted.

They were marched out of the cave and taken to a bridge that crossed over a dried-up stream. When they reached the center of the bridge Randy ordered their pants and underwear removed. One of the Zorros produced two lengths of twine. He tied one length around Dougie's little prick. Then he tossed the other piece to another Zorro who did the same thing to Scottie. The ends of the twine lay in curled piles at their feet.

"Whadya gonna do?" blubbered Dougie.

"We're gonna make you inta girls." A Zorro marched up to the bridge with two large rocks—one resting on each shoulder. He dropped them with a loud thud. Randy tied the loose ends of the twine around the rocks. Dougie and Scottie were pushed to the edge of the bridge, the dry riverbed twenty feet below. Randy and Cary each picked up a rock, checked the tightness of the knots on both ends, and held the rocks over the edge.

"Do you have any last words to say to your pricks?" Scottie peed all over his legs. Randy tugged slightly on the twine and watched Dougie's prick jump like a marionette. "Look a' that! It'll probably rip right off before the rock hits the ground!" He laughed.

"Hey! I wanna hear you guys say goodbye to your pricks. Say ... goodbye, prick ... nice a you to hang around so long. Say it."

Dougie said, "Goodbye ... nice a you ... c'mon, Randy, I'm sorry."

"Scottie ... now you."

"Goodbye ... so long ... I—I—"

"One ... two..."

Dougie and Scottie screamed at the top of their lungs.

"Three!" The rocks flew over the side, landing with a dry thud on the cracked mud. Dougie and Scottie stood paralyzed but intact. If the drop was twenty feet the ropes must have been thirty feet long.

Randy peered over the side. "Hmm, I guess the ropes were too long. There's only one thing to do." He took out his pocketknife, walking slowly toward Dougie. Dougie trembled, making high-pitched squeals. With one swipe Randy cut the rope off Dougie's prick. Then he cut Scottie's rope. "Well ... I guess well have to find shorter ropes." He tucked the two pairs of pants under his arm, and the Zorros marched off, leaving Dougie and Scottie bare-assed and shivering on the bridge.

2. The Party

EUGENE CAPUTO was having a party. The Wanderers met on Burke Avenue.

"Awright, Perry, you goin' in again?"

"How come I always gotta go in?"

"Cause you look like a fuckin' forty-year-old degenerate."

"So does your mother."

"You ain't got one."

"Your's got a mattress on 'er back for curbside service. Hey! Get it while it's hot."

"Hey, c'mon, Perry, you gotta go in, you look the oldest."

"Awright, awright, what's it now? Two Tangos, a bottle of Seven..."

"An' some vodka."

"Ugh!"

"Well fuck it, I ain't drinkin' any a that orange piss."

"Awright, awright, get a pint a vodka."

"Lessee, that's two, three, four, four-fifty."

"O.K., there's five of us so that's ... ah ... ah, hey somebody gimme a pencil."

"Ninety cents each, asshole."

"Awright, get it up."

"Shit ... all I got's a fifty-dollar bill."

"Yeah right, you can't even count that high."

"Oh yeah? It's more money than your old man sees in a week."

"Oh yeah? Your mother gets that for spreadin' her legs."

"Oh yeah? Your mother gets that for closin' 'em."

"C'mon, c'mon, we ain't got all night."

Once the booze was bought they split to pick up their girl friends. Richie walked back to the projects to get C.

"Yeah? Whozzat?"

"Richie."

C's father opened the door, stared at Richie through leather eyelids, grunted. Richie walked past him through the foyer of the narrow apartment into C's room. C was standing in front of her mirror picking at her hair with a teasing comb. He stood in the doorway watching her.

The party was in Eugene's wood-paneled basement C and Richie came early. Only Eugene's date Terry, his cousin Ralph from Queens, and Ralph's girl friend Anne were there.

"Hey."

"Hey, Richie, this is Ralph."

"Howarya."

"Howarya."

"An' this is C."

They all nodded. Eugene pulled Richie over to the record player. "Check this out." He handed Richie a stack of 45s. He looked them over: "Soldier Boy," "Ten Commandments of Love," "Sealed With a Kiss," "Patches," "Tell Laura I Love Her," "Tears on My Pillow," and ten more of the slowest songs imaginable. Eugene nudged him. "This is gonna be a *grindin'* night!"

"Hey, you know what C said to me? She said she was so horny she might go all the way!"

Eugene slapped his forehead. "You shittin' me?"

"Would I shit you? You're my favorite turd."

"Hey, up yours."

"Be nice to me and I'll let you smell my finger."

"Hey, watch this." Eugene flicked off the master switch and all the lights went out except a small red bulb in a corner. "Atmosphere."

"Hey, cut it out!" Anne yelled.

Eugene turned the lights on. "We'll save it for later, when they're all horny."

"Hey, ah, lissen ... if, ah, things get goin' between me an' C, you know, can I use yer room?"

Eugene frowned. "You really think you might go all the way?"

"Maybe even farther."

"Well, O.K., but don't use it unless you really have to."

"Don' worry." Richie slapped Eugene on the shoulder.

The front-door chimes rang. Eugene took the rickety basement stairs four at a time. The stairs rattled again a minute later as five guys and four girls came down yelling and shouting. Each guy had a bottle conspicuously hidden under his coat. Everyone gave their booze to Turkey. He went to work making quart shakers of Seven, screwdriver, and rum and Coke.

"Hey, Turkey, put in that Spanish fly I gave you, heh-heh." Joey laughed and squeezed his date's shoulder.

While waiting for the drinks, everyone grabbed at potato chips, M&Ms, pretzels, and Fritos.

"Hey, man, me an' Margo saw *West Side Story* at the Valentine last night, you see that yet?" Buddy asked.

"Yeah, that was boss."

"Yeah, I dug the Jets."

"Yeah, but the coolest dude was Bernardo."

"Yeah, he's cute."

"Ah; my ass is cute."

"You see those shirts and jackets them P.R.s was wearin'?"

"I just got me a jacket in Alexanders like Chico's."

"I liked Tony. He was cool."

"Yeah, he was boss."

"Yeah, but howdja like them bazooms on that P.R. chick?"

"Perry, you're such a pig."

"Who you mean, Natalie Wood?"

"No, man, the other one."

"Natalie Wood, a carpenter's dream."

"Flat as a board an' easy to screw."

"I thought Richard Beymer was cute," said Margo.

"Hah! You shoulda seen Margo bawl at the end," said Buddy.

"I didn't know Margo balled," Joey said.

"Drinks are ready," said Turkey from the other side of the room. The guys charged up to the portable bar.

"Hey, you know, they shoulda asked the Wanderers to be the white gang for that movie."

"Yeah, Perry woulda been A-Rab, Joey coulda been Action, Richie coulda been Riff, Turkey coulda been Baby John."

"No! Turkey could be Anybody's." Everyone laughed except Turkey.

"I coulda been Tony," said Buddy.

"Yeah sure, my ass would be a better Tony," said Richie.

"I'd a like to be Bernardo," said Joey.

"What for? He was a P.R."

"He ain't a real P.R. That George Chakiris, he's Italian."

"No he ain't, he's Jewish," said Perry.

"Bullshit, he's too good-lookin' for a Hebe."

"Maybe he got a nose job," countered Perry.

"Maybe he got a handjob," said Joey.

"Maybe he got a blowjob," said Richie.

"There's no job like a blowjob, there's no job that I know," the three sang.

"An' now ladies an' gennelmun, will you please rise for the national anthem," Eugene announced, standing at attention by the record player. A static riddled piano brought on Dion's gutty voice.

Oh, I'm the type of guy who will never settle down,
Where a pretty girls are, a well you know that I'm aroun'
I a kiss 'em an I love 'em Cause to me they're all the same
I a squeeze 'em and I hug 'em, they don't even know my name
They call me the Wanderer, yeah the Wanderer
I roam aroun' aroun' aroun'

After their theme song, Eugene put on a stack of 45s, mixing the slows to fasts in a two to one ratio. The party was on. The first record was the Marcells' "Blue Moon." None of the guys wanted to dance yet, so C and Pat, Perry's date, started doing the Slop. Then Margo, Buddy Borsalino's date, and Barbara, Joey Capra's date, started dancing. The guys were getting high, especially Perry, chugging Sevens as fast as he could. The next Record was slow.

C and Richie were alone on the floor. Perry started throwing M&Ms at Richie's head.

"Cut it out, asshole."

Perry laughed and went back to drinking. Half an horn-later almost everyone was dancing. Most of the guys were high except Turkey, who never drank. Eugene sat in a corner of the couch with Terry on his lap, making out. Turkey flicked off the master switch, and the room glowed a soft red. Some of the girls yelled in mock protest, but no one told Turkey to put the lights on. Joey and Barbara took the other corner of the couch. Buddy and Margo sat down on a big chair. Ralph and Anne settled for the stairs. C and Richie were the only ones left dancing. Someone turned off the red light and the room was as dark as a closet.

C and Richie started to tongue. He pushed his knee between her legs, and she responded with a nice rotating grind.

"You wanna go up to Eugene's room?" he whispered in her ear.

"What's up there?" she asked.

"You ever see his rock collection?"

"Yeah." He tried to usher her to the stairs. She resisted. "Hey, we can make out down here."

"There's no room." He stuck his tongue in her ear. "C'mon." He took her hand. She held back.

"You sure he won't mind?"

"Nah, he said it was O.K."

They groped their way through the darkness. Climbing the stairs unsteadily they fell over Ralph and Anne. They sorted who belonged to whom, and Richie and C continued upstairs.

In the kitchen, Turkey made himself a sandwich. Perry was throwing up in the bathroom. Richie and C found Eugene's room and locked the door. The lights were out. They sat on the bed and started

necking. Richie eased C down and climbed on top. They began to grind in a slow, mechanical motion. Richie stuck his tongue in her ear again and put his hand on her small breast. Groaning, she grabbed him around the neck. He unbuttoned her blouse and ran his fingers along the contours of her bra. He tried slipping a finger inside her bra, but it was as tight as a steel trap. She sat up and unhooked it. Richie went to work flicking and sucking just like the guys in the French films. He threw in some more heavy grinding before putting his hand up her skirt, feeling the wetness of her underwear. She reached between his legs and rubbed his cock. He frantically unzipped his fly and whipped it out. She stroked his balls. He pushed her skirt above her waist and slipped his hand inside her panties. Running his fingers lightly through her tight curls he suddenly plunged his middle finger into the fleshy wetness. She moaned and squirmed like a fish on a hook. He moved his finger around trying to find the clit. Tommy Tatti said it felt like a marble covered with oil, but Richie would be goddamned if he could find anything like a marble down there. He could tell when he was close because she would gasp and squeeze his balls. This hurt, but was a good indicator. He tried to take off her panties but couldn't get them past her knees. He took her hand off his cock and tried to put himself in. She froze. He felt her tenseness and tried to put his fingers back in to see if she was still wet.

"Don't." She twisted her legs.

"Oh Christ! C'mon, I won't come in you."

"Not yet."

"Whadya mean not yet? You mean inna half-hour? Or do you mean in five years? I don't know whatcha mean by not yet."

"Just not yet."

He sat up, looked at his hard-on, and plopped down again. "Jesus Christ, I'm gonna die!" He tried to lick her ear. She turned her head away.

"Ill do it with my hand."

"Great! *I* can do it with my hand. I don't even *need* you for that."

She started to cry. He lost his hard-on in degrees like a descending car jack.

Suddenly they heard shouts and screams. Richie zipped his fly and ran out of the room leaving C sitting on the bed, her clothes on in all the wrong places. In the basement the lights were on. The girls were crying hysterically, Perry was sprawled on the couch, one side of his face covered with blood. The Wanderers were shouting out the window; other guys outside shouted back. Rocks thudded against the side of the house.

"The Pharaohs," Joey Capra said, looking up at Richie.

"So let's get 'em!" Richie started for the door. Turkey stopped him. "They got chains. Perry went out awready."

Eugene came downstairs with two baseball bats and a souvenir bullwhip.

"What're you crazy! There's eight of 'em out there!" said Joey.

Eugene threw his arsenal on the floor. "Great! So what the fuck are we gonna do, let 'em tear down the house?"

"C-call the cops," Anne said between sobs.

"No!" Richie was livid. "We ain't callin' no cops for the fuckin' Pharaohs!" He flung the door open. "Antone! I'm gonna kick your fuckin' ass!"

"C'mon out, Gennaro! C'mon out!" A rock smashed into the door over his head. Eugene dragged him back in.

Perry started moaning, "I'm gonna kill 'em, I'm gonna kill 'em."

A rock sailed through the window sending a shower of glass into the room. Richie grabbed a quart bottle of booze and threw it at the window. In his fury he missed, smashing the bottle against the wall.

"That's a great help," said Ralph.

"Hey, wait!" Turkey picked up a bottle half-filled with rum and Coke. "Yeah." He looked around at the other guys. "Grab a bottle and come upstairs."

"What?"

"Just do it." They each grabbed a bottle and ran upstairs after him. He emerged from the bathroom with a roll of toilet paper. "Grab off some and stuff it into the mouth of the bottle like this." He unrolled a foot and a half, shoving it into the bottle, leaving some hanging over the top. They copied him.

"C'mon." He ran to Eugene's bedroom. "Fuck! The door's locked!"

C opened the door. She was dressed now, and her eyes were red. They barged past her. Richie stopped. They looked at each other for a moment, then she ran downstairs. The window overlooked the front of the house; they were directly above the Pharaohs. Turkey eased up the window about halfway and motioned everyone to stand back. He took a lighter from his pocket and lit the toilet paper in his bottle. Standing flush against the wall, he lobbed the bottle grenade-style out the window. It crashed against the pavement, exploding into a sheet of flame. The Pharaohs screamed. Antone's pants caught fire, and he ran in circles in front of his horror-stricken gang until he had the presence of mind to take his pants off. Turkey, still against the wall, held his lighter out. Richie raised his bottle to the flame and whipped it out the window, sailing it over their heads. This time the Pharaohs took off. Lights went on all over the block.

The Wanderers filed downstairs. Eugene and Richie stood outside, waiting for the police. Buddy Borsalino took Perry to the hospital. When the cops arrived, Eugene said they were having a party when some drunk guys came around and tried to crash. He showed them the broken window. He had no explanations for the fire. He didn't know who those guys were. Richie added that they had Puerto Rican accents, maybe Simpson Street dudes.

When the cops left, Eugene and Richie went back inside. C was gone. Anne said Turkey took her home. Richie said, "Fuck'er."

Turkey was a real turkey. He was in all the honor classes at school, but the other smart kids would have nothing to do with him because he was such a creep. He had a face like the French Angel and a thick, hunko body. His skin was yellow like bad teeth and he dressed in dirty-gray clothes. The Wanderers thought he was a creep too, but they weren't used to his intelligence. He knew about things like astronomy and war stories. He collected Nazi paraphernalia (even though he was Jewish) and could speak German. He could draw. Once he did a pencil portrait of C on loose-leaf paper that they swore looked good enough to hang in a museum. He could sing. He sang "Some Enchanted Evening" like Robert Goulet and wasn't ashamed to sing in front of people. So occasionally he hung with the Wanderers. Everyone knew his mother and father were flippy. That his sister was a royal skank who fucked for a dime. That his house was covered with tissues and dirty magazines.

That night, he walked slowly and silently under the streetlights painfully aware of C at his side. When she left the party, he impulsively ran after her. She was crying. He offered to walk her home. "The Pharaohs might still be around," he said. She said nothing. After a few blocks she stopped crying. Once in a while she would sniff. She didn't look up at him, didn't raise her head. Turkey wracked his brain for something to say. They reached Big Playground.

"Did you have a good time tonight?" he asked.

She started up again, her sobs ripping into him. She plopped down on a bench. He sat next to her—not too close. "I'm sorry, C. I was only tryin' to make conversation."

She looked up at him with watery eyes, wiping her nose, smiling bravely. "You're sweet, Turkey. Thank you for walking me home." He placed his arm on the top of the bench behind her shoulders. "I'm gonna go up now."

"I'll walk you upstairs." He stood up.

~~"No, it's O.K., I can go myself. Thanks for walking me home. I mean it, you're really sweet."~~ She smiled at him and walked toward her building.

He sat on the bench watching her shaded bedroom window until the light went out.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For Saturday."

C examined her nails. "Sataday?"

"You know."

"Know what?"

"Goddamnit, don't be a cunt!" Richie said it louder than he planned, and a few little kids stopped their basketball game to watch the show on the bench. Richie knew C would be bitchy when he apologized, so he'd rehearsed that line for half an hour, and now he'd said it too loud, and too uncool, and he blew it.

"Why not, Richie, what else would a prick go out with?"

Richie was impressed. That was even a better line than his. "That hurts, C, that really hurts." He looked hurt. The kids went back to their basketball game.

"Aww," she pouted, "Richie's hurt."

Richie stood up and surveyed Big Playground. C remained on the bench, crossed her legs, and continued to study her nails. "I can't talk to you," he said to no one in particular as he scanned the basketball court. "I never could."

"You're talkin' now," she said in a singsong voice.

He sat back down. "Look, I said I was sorry an' I ain't gonna say it again. You don't like it you can gimme back my fuckin' ankle bracelet."

"That's the way you apologize, Richie? You call me a cunt an' say if I don't like it I can give you back your fuckin' ankle bracelet?" She finally looked up and he saw she had tears on her cheeks. Something in Richie folded like a flower.

Friday night.

"C'mon, C."

"No!" She rolled onto her stomach. Richie had to be satisfied with stroking her back and grabbing her ass.

"Look," he compromised, "I'll only stick it in ... this much." He narrowed the space between his fingers. She lay motionless like a corpse.

"O.K., forget it." He started getting dressed, but she didn't move. He put on his socks and shoes. Then he put on his T-shirt. But she wasn't budging until she heard the metallic zip of his fly being closed.

She turned over and Richie in his socks, shoes, and T-shirt dove between her legs like a sea gull swooping down for a clam in the ocean. His pants were on the floor, the zipper zipped. As he worked between her thighs with a maniac determination, there was a tremendous explosion and the room filled with smoke. C screamed. Richie jumped to his feet, his heart going crazy, his erection shrinking like a speeded-up film of a blooming flower shot in reverse. An acrid thickness filled the air. C clutched the blanket to her in wild-eyed horse terror. Richie saw the shreds of a firecracker by the door. On the other side of the door Dougie and Scottie made sounds of idiot glee. Richie's anger kicked the film forward, and he had a blooming-rage hard-on. C grabbed him by the T-shirt before he could fling open the door and drown them in the bathtub like two kittens.

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