Dead Cat Bounce

By Michael Fine

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The streets were filled with blind singers in those days. Blind singers, pretzel vendors, hot dog stands with yellow umbrellas, women wearing too tight dresses that made life on the street worth living, and lovers who kissed and more in the street in the shadows under the fire escapes. You sweated in the summer, and sweat was good. The big pretzel-salt crystals bit into your tongue at the same time as the sweet soft dough of the pretzel settled into your mouth, a come-hither feeling of delight, for ten cents or three for a quarter. There was music everywhere, the blind singers on street corners, old school salsa from cheap plastic radios you could buy on Canal Street -- Tito Puente, Hector Lavoe and Willie Colon -- tinny because of those crappy speakers but still hot with rhythm -- and sometimes 1970s soul – Marvin Gaye, Bobby Womack, Aretha Franklin, and Al Green -- blasted out of the boom boxes that skinny dudes in sneakers carried on their shoulders, the bass notes making the store windows vibrate as they walked by. Hell, you could even feel that bass in your tissues and bones as those guys walked by. You could feel your lungs, your heart, you ass and your gonads tremble, like someone else besides you was in charge and that meant you had no idea what might happen next.

Mohammed Williams slapped the shoulders of Tippy Garcia, one shoulder after the next, his palms pushing down on each shoulder and letting them sit there long enough fort Tippy to feel the heat of Mo’s hands, so it wasn’t just a slap on the back or a jostle, it was a command.

“You come with me,” Mo said. Then he put an arm around Tippy’s shoulders and guided him through the playground in front of 1165 East 167th Street, an old elementary school Mo’s people had converted into a job training center, through the gang of young men stripped down to their shorts or wearing tank tops, shooting hoops in the old school yard, the chains under each hoop ringing, rattling or hissing every time somebody made a shot. Those boys in the yard grunted as they shot or swerved. Their sneakers slapped the hot pavement and then quieted for a moment, the ball ringing while it was slowly dribbled, then those footfalls burst out again when one guy drove across court, when the defenders pursued him or ran to set themselves under the basket so he couldn’t get close, a crescendo of feet slapping the pavement like a drumroll.

It was early evening on a hot summer day in the city. The sky glowed orange as the sun set over High Bridge. The heat was still rising in waves off the pavement and the blacktop.

Tippy was about fourteen, a tall Brown boy with a man’s height but still slight and full of attitude, attitude that was mostly put on, him always trying to look tougher than he was to hide how little and scared he was inside. Mo knew his boys. He knew every boy around -- who each one was inside, what they could and could not do, what they were afraid of, and who hung with who. Tippy was an easy mark. Mo knew he’d come when Mo said come, even though he was trying to set himself up with people who ran the other way on the street.

Mo wasn’t big but he was square and strong, and he knew how to handle himself. Spent plenty of time playing ball on the street himself, in the school yards and playgrounds of Brooklyn and the Lower East Side. Spent some time in the Marines. Then social work school on the GI Bill, but he didn’t let on about the college and graduate school thing. Kept that to himself. The people on the block and in the neighborhood could tell he was a force to be reckoned with. No BS. No advertisement. What you saw was what you got. Quiet and deadly. Still waters run deep. Don’t you tread on me. Takes no prisoners. Until that evening.

Mo walked Tippy into his office, deep in the bowels of 1165, and sat him in a brown folding chair. Then he locked the door.

“You are not leaving here until I get my cameras back,” Mo said.

“Say what?” Tippy said.

“You are not leaving here until I get my cameras back,” Mo said again.

“What cameras?”

“The ten thousand dollars’ worth of video equipment production that walked out of here last night. That we use to produce training videos. So people like you can learn the trades.”

“Don’t know nothin about no video equipment,” Tippy said. “Don’t know nothin about no trades. Don’t know nothing about nothin.”

“Uh huh,” Mo said. “I’m patient, man. I can wait.”

Tippy sat hunched over on the chair, his elbows resting on his knees but his head up, his eyes looking around. He was sitting directly in front of an empty black steel rack on wheels, the rack that had once stored the missing equipment.

“What you do here anyhow?” Tippy said. “What’s your racket?”

“No racket,” Mo said. “What you see is what you get. We teach people on the block the trades. Plumbing. Electric. Painting and so forth. You should get on board. We got no racket. Now who’s got my shit?”

“I don’t know nothin about no shit,” Tippy said. “I bet you makin out tho. I bet you making all sorts of shit with them cameras. That’s why you want them back. Nobody makes out teaching people nothin.”

“Talk as much as you want. I got time,” Mo said.

“You can’t keep me here. Locked up against my will. This ain’t legal,” Tippy said.

“Uh-huh,” Mos said. “But here we is.”

“I’m gonna call a cop. This ain’t legal,” Tippy said.

“Uh-huh,” Mo said, and looked at the phone on his desk. “There’s the phone. Yeah, call a cop. Go ahead and make my day.”

“Cops ain’t shit,” Tippy said.

“Uh-huh.”

The phone rang and Mo answered it. “Uh-huh,” he said. “Right on time. Listen, stay in that window and call me again if anything changes. You hear the shooting start, you call the police.”

“Shootin? Who’s shootin?” Tippy said.

“Nobody’s shooting. Yet. Looks like your boys saw you walk in with me,” Mo said. “They have started to gather out in the school-yard. That’s what my man across the street is telling me.”

“See that? My boys got my back,” Tippy said.

“Ya’ll need to learn to behave. Nobody’s got anybody’s back. I got you in here. You boys know you is young. They they know they can’t trust you yet. They want you back before you tell me more shit. They think you is rattin them out.”

“No I ain’t!” Tippy said. “You know that.”

“I know what I know” Mo said. “And I know I don’t got my shit back yet. Your boys will think what they think. I can’t do nothin about that.”

It’s hard to remember what the Bronx was like then. Painful to remember. The Bronx was boarded up or burning. It had almost burned to the ground. Like Dresden after the war, they said. And they meant after World War II, when Dresden had been carpet bombed by the Allies and reduced to rubble and ash, back when we played to win and played for keeps, so we could defeat Fascism. When the War was World War II. Because Vietnam as just over then, and nobody wanted to talk about it. When it was still an open wound.

 The Bronx once housed the Irish, the Italians and the Jews. But then Robert Moses cut it in half. He sliced it open like he was going to gut a fish by building the Cross-Bronx Expressway, which was finished in 1955, and he put a nail in its coffin by building Co-Op City on a swamp in the far east and north Bronx, so the Irish, the Italians and the Jews who hadn’t already fled to Bergan County, New Jersey and Rockland and Westchester Counties in New York all moved in a wave to Co-op City, fifty thousand people who deserted their neighborhoods, sucked in by Co-Op city as it were a sponge.

Which left a zillion old brownstones and little six story apartment buildings, the old homes of the immigrant working poor and the middle class who lived in those neighborhoods together, left them vacant or cheaper than water. That was where Black folk from the South moved when they came north in the great migration, and where Puerto Ricans moved when they came north to find a better life, so they could work in the factories and sweat shops of the Lower East Side and the Garment district, when the Jews and Italians who worked there a generation before moved on to better jobs and places with trees and quarter acre lots.

Mo picked up the phone and hit three buttons.

“Come to my office,” he said, and he stood up.

“You are going to stay right here and cool your jets,” he said.

“No I ain’t. You got no say over me,” Tippy said and he started to stand as well.

A big man, 6’5, broad as a street and three hundred pounds, walked into the room.

“Tippy, this here is Moose,” Mo said. “Now sit your ass down.” But Tippy had flopped back into his chair already.

“Moose here is your babysitter,” Mo said. “Keep your ass in that chair and don’t get no ideas about nothin, or Moose will turn you into melted butter. Capish?”

Tippy slouched back, eyes downcast and simmering.

“Capish?” Mo said. “I don’t need no bull farts from you. No backtalk or no games. I’m going out to parley. Your momma wants you home in one piece, and I intend to send you home that way. In a little while. Not in little pieces. Not melted down like butter. After I get my shit back. Now, capish?”

“Capish,” Tippy murmured as he shook his head, and he squirmed in that chair as he looked up glowering from eyes that were pointed at the floor.

When the Jews, Italians and Irish moved out, the neighborhoods imploded. Redlining, they called it. The banks and the people who ran city government decided that people who didn’t look like them didn’t need decent places to live and decent neighborhoods to live in. So no more money for schools. Lousy garbage pickup. Police who didn’t understand these new people and hid in their squad cars instead of walking a beat. Landlords abandoned their buildings. They stopped supplying heat in winter, stopped painting apartments between tenants, and stopped fixing the toilets when they broke.

 People got depressed. Felt trapped. Couldn’t see a way out. Drugs hit, heroin and crack cocaine. The buildings burned – sometimes set afire by old electrical systems that hadn’t been maintained but often torched by their landlords for the insurance money. Friction fires, they called them. When the mortgage rubs up against the insurance. Other buildings, abandoned but not burned down yet but now owned by the City for delinquent taxes, were boarded up to prevent anyone from living there in unsafe conditions. Which they did anyway, as junkies and others broke in and just squatted in those old buildings, turning them into real hellholes. Whole blocks came down or were boarded up. You could walk down a street and see only broken brick, shattered glass, feral cats and wild dogs. In the United States of America. In 1977.

Mohammed walked out into the hissing yellow mercury arc lights, onto the playground, by himself.

 The boys had stopped shooting hoops. They were milling about, forty of fifty of them, the young men of from the neighborhood, some of whom lived in the buildings around 1165 and some of whom lived in the projects two blocks away up Washington Avenue.

The sun had finally set over the low hills and building on those hills to the west, but the sky in New York is never really dark, though it was dark in the streets around the school yard, real dark, so the light from those mercury arc lights made the old schoolyard appear to rise and hover over the neighborhood. It was dark but there was lots of sound from the city. Trucks and cars rumbled and honked as they humped up Third Avenue. People shouted to or at one another. Sirens came and went, some from the fire station and ambulances around the corner on Washington Avenue, and some from the cop cars that ran all over the streets then. The air smelled of sweat and diesel oil. Every few minutes an Amtrak or Conrail train ran by on the tracks two blocks further west, its thundering rush making it impossible to hear for a few moments, and jets from LaGuardia, not five miles away, whooshed as they took off or landed, low over the Bronx.

The young guys were a mix in the schoolyard, some who were standing in their tank tops or just standing there shirtless, dribbling slowly, waiting for something to happen, and others, the gangbangers, bebopping and jiving around, trying out their karate moves in midair, dressed in muscle shirts and designer jeans, some wearing vests without a shirt underneath, most wearing sneakers and work boots that were part of the uniform before Nikes and Adidas became a thing. They were pushing, pulling and high-fiving one another, and they made a pretty good racket, all those young men, all that nervous energy, talking or yelling to one another at once. No one knew what was going to come down or what was going to happen next. All they knew was that Mo had one of their boys, and they had come to get him loose. They were ready to spill blood or bleed or see someone else bleed if that was what it was going to take to prove they were the men they said they were, and to prove that they ran things on the block, not nobody else.

Everything got quiet when Mo walked into the school yard alone.

Mo stood under one of the hissing orange mercury arc lamps. You had to squint to see him because of the brightness of those lamps. He could see every young man on the block, milling about. He knew them all.

He stood and waited.

 Fast Eddie Gomez jostled his way out of the crowd. He stepped into the light.

“Yo,” Fast Eddie said, squinting.

Mo nodded.

“Whatch you want?” Fast Eddie said. Fast Eddie had slicked back hair and arms that were covered with tattoos, which was a different kind of thing in 1977 when only gangbangers and Hell’s Angels were tattooed. He wore a tank top and a jean jacket with the sleeves cut off, with lots of metal star rivets and rhinestones grommeted into the fabric, his colors painted on the back.

“Nothin,” Mo said.

Three or four of Eddie’s boys edged to the front of the pack. Lumps on their belts, under their hoodies. Probably more in the small of their backs. The artillery. Grade school shit they learned from cop shows and off the VCR. They were armed but nowhere near ready. They didn’t know how sorry they were. They had never seen what real action looks like.

“I got people where they need to be,” Mo said, and gestured at the second story windows and the roofs across the street. I don’t want you stumbling into no ambush.”

“You ain’t shit,” Fast Eddie said. Two or three of the karate boys started twirling around, karate chopping the air again.

Mo smiled, a nice slow smile.

“Where’s LeRoy?” Mo said.

“You know where I is,” said a voice from back in the crowd. It was a deep base voice. A thin dark man with glistening eyes and a black goatee, wearing a black beret with a bunch of metal on it came out of the crowd and stood alone in the hissing orange light, squinting to see Mohammed.

“I know where you *are*,” Mo said. “And you know what I can do. So lets trade off what we need to trade, and let everybody go on home.”

“I ain’t saying nothing about nothing,” Leroy said.

“Didn’t expect you to,” Mo said.

“You know what a dead cat bounce is?” Leroy said.

“What’s a dead cat bounce?” Mo said.

“You throw a dead cat off a roof and that motherfucker bounces,” Leroy said. “Once. But it don’t get up and run away. Dead is dead. You take my meaning?”

“I am hearing you loud and clear, brother. Goes both ways. That that goes around comes around. You get *my* meaning?” Mo said.

“Whatever,” LeRoy said.

“Some shit walked out of my building in the middle of the night,” Mo said. “Camera shit. That nobody else’s got a use for.”

“We got some shit that somebody musta lost,” LeRoy said, a few moments later.

“Good. Thanks for finding it,” Mo said.

LeRoy nodded. Then he turned and nodded to some of his boys.

Three of them boys with bulges at their waists pulled back and went to a white van that was parked on the street. They opened the van. Each took two large cases out of the van and walked them into the school yard.

“I reckon Tippy will be home to his momma in about ten minutes. After we get that shit inside.” Mo said.

“Didn’t know that shit was anybody’s. Thought we’d liberate it to serve the people. And so forth. No offense intended,” LeRoy said.

“None taken,” Mo said. “Serve the people. Yessir. And remember. We got school and jobs for your boys as soon as they are ready.”

“Won’t be soon,” Leroy said.

‘I am a patient man,” Mo said.

“Me too,” LeRoy said.

“Good,” Mo said. “We understand each other. Brothers from another mother. I’m here now. This is my building. My program. Capish?”

“Capish,” LeRoy said, and he smiled a great big smile, his one gold front tooth shining in that orange mercury arc light, the diamond in one of them sparkling.

 “We’re both here,” Mo said. “Both got us a job to do. Just remember that. See you on the street.”

LeRoy nodded and backed off into the crowd. Then he turned and walked away. Twenty or thirty of the fifty young men in the school yard slipped into the darkness with him, vanishing as quickly as they had come.

Soon the ball players were shooting hoops again, grunting and groaning when one of them took a shot, the stampede of feet back again whenever someone broke though and drove down court.

The Bronx is now a middle-class place. Again. Back from the dead. Working people live there. Black and Brown people, mostly. There are chain fast food restaurants, muffler places, bank branches, and gasoline stations lining Third Avenue.

Mo and LeRoy are both long gone. They worked it out.

The Bronx bounced. Now, almost fifty years later, we get to find out if the rest of us bounced with it. We get to find out if we can learn to do what they did. And work it out before some idiot shoots up the neighborhood.

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