

CROWN HEIST

BY ADAM MANSBACH

Crown Heights

Tap tap BOOM. Birds ain't even got their warble on, and my shit's shaking off the hinges. I didn't even bother with the peephole. It had to be Abraham Lazarus, the Jewish Rasta, playing that dub bassline on my door.

BOOM I swung it open and Laz barged in like he was expecting to find the answer to life itself inside. A gust of Egyptian Musk oil and Nature's Blessing dread-balm hit me two seconds after he flew by: Laz stayed haloed in that shit like it was some kind of armor. He did a U-turn around my couch, ran his palm across his forehead, wiped the sweat onto his jeans, and came back to the hall.

"I just got fuckin' robbed, bro."

Funny how a dude can cruise the road from neighbor to acquaintance to homeboy without ever coming to a full stop at any of the intersections. Me and Laz, our relationship was like one of those late-night cab rides where the driver hits his rhythm and the green lights stretch forever. He came upstairs and introduced himself the day I moved into his building two years ago: got to know who you live with when you're moving four, five pounds of Jamaican brown a week. He sized me up, decided I was cool, and told me his door was always open. I didn't really have too much going on then—just a half-time shit job in an office mailroom and a baby daughter Uptown who I never got to see—so before long I was com-ing by on the regular to smoke. If Laz wasn't already puffing one of those big-ass Bob Marley cone spliffs when I walked in, my entrance was always reason enough for him to sweep his locks over his shoulder, hunch down over his coffee table, and commence to building one.

I used to call his crib Little Kingston. All the old dreads from the block would be up in there every afternoon: watching soccer games

on cable, chanting down Babylon, talkin' 'bout how horse fat an' cow dead, whatever the fuck those bobo yardie motherfuckers do. I never said much to any of them, just passed the dutchie on the left hand side. Jafakin-ass Lazarus got much love from the bredren, but a domestically grown, unaffiliated nigga like me stayed on the outskirts. Whatever. Later for all that I-n-I bullshit anyway.

I flipped the top lock quick. "What happened?"

"Motherfucker walked straight into my crib, bro, ski-masked up. Put a fuckin' Glock 9 to my head while I was lying in bed. Ran me for all my herb." His hand shook as he lifted a thumb-and-finger pistol to his temple. Fear or rage; I couldn't tell.

"How many?" I asked. "Who?" In Laz's business, you don't get jacked by strangers. Strictly friends and well-wishers.

"Just one, and he knew where my shit was."

"Even the secret shit?"

"Not the secret shit. I still got that. But the other ten are gone—I just re-upped yesterday. Son of a bitch filled a trashbag, duct-taped me up, and bounced."

"Didn't do a very good job with the tape, did he?"

Laz shook his head. "He was too petro. That was the scariest part, T. He was shitting his pants more than I was. And that's when you get shot: when a cat doesn't know what the fuck he's doing."

"You want a drink?" I didn't know what else to say.

"You got a joint?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Hold on." I went to the bedroom and grabbed my sack. Laz was sitting on the edge of the couch when I got back, flipping an orange pack of Zig-Zags through his knuckles.

"This might be kinda beside the point right now," I said carefully, falling into the chair across from him, "but it's probably time to dead all that cosmic-karmic open-door no-gun shit, huh?"

The bottom line was that Lazarus was practically asking to be robbed. He never locked his door, and the only weapon in his crib was the chef's knife he used to chop up ganja for his customers. He had some kind of who-Jah-bless-let-no-man-curse theory about the whole thing, like somehow the diffusion of his positive vibrations into the universe would prevent anyone from schiesting him. That and the fact that all the small-timers who copped off him knew that Laz

was tight with the old Jamaicans who really ran the neighborhood. Plus, Laz was convinced that he looked crazy ill strutting around his apartment with that big blade gleaming in his hand: a wild-minded, six-two, skin-and-bones whiteboy with a spliff dangling from his mouth and hair ropes trailing down his back. Half Lee “Scratch” Perry, half Frank White.

It was an equation that left plenty out—the growling stomachs of damn near every young thug in the area, for starters. A year ago, all Laz’s customers were dime-bag-and-bike-peddling yardmen, and everything was peace. Then the hip hop kids found out about him. I told Laz he shouldn’t even fuck with them. *I know these niggas like I know myself*, I said. *They’re outa control. They trying to be who Jay-Z says he is on records, dude. You don’t need that in your life.*

He shrugged me off. *They’re babies. I man nah fear no likkle pickney.* Any time Laz started speaking yard, I just left his ass alone. But he should have listened. You could practically see these kids narrowing their eyes at my man every time he turned his back. It had gotten to the point where I’d started locking the door myself whenever I came over.

“It was Jumpshot,” Laz said, as a calligraph of smoke twirled up from the three-paper cone he’d rolled. “It had to be.”

I leaned forward. “Why Jumpshot?” So-called because he liked to tell folks he was only in the game because genetics had failed to provide him with NBA height. Or WNBA height, for that matter.

“Two reasons.” Laz offered me the weed. I shook my head. He blew a white pillow at the ceiling. “Three, actually. One, he sells the most. He’s got the most ambition. Two, that shit last month, when he complained and I sonned him.”

“Hold up, hold up. You did what? You ain’ tell me this.”

Laz cocked his head at me. “Yes I did, bro. Didn’t I? He came by at night, picked up a QP. I was mad tired, plus mad zooted, and I gave him a shitty shake-bag by mistake. So the next morning he shows up with two of his boys, dudes I don’t even know, bitching. Little Ja Rule-lookin’ cocksucker. I was like, ‘Okay, cool.’ Sat him down, gave him a new bag, took the one he didn’t want, and threw it on the table. Then I brought out the chalice, like, ‘Now we’re gonna

see if y'all can really smoke.' Part challenge, part apology, you know. My bag and his bag, bowl for bowl. And you know I can smoke, bro."

He had told me this story. It was funny at the time, hearing how Laz had smoked Jump and his boys into oblivion, burned up half Jump's new herb sack before the kid even got out of the room. The way Laz told it, Jumpshot's crew had passed out, but Jump himself refused to go down; he'd sat there all glassy-eyed, slumped back, barely able to bring the chalice-pipe to his lips, while Laz talked at him for hours like he was the dude's uncle or something—regaled him with old smuggling stories from the island days, gave him advice on females, told him how to eat right, all types of shit. After a while, Laz said, he'd put this one song on repeat for hours, just to see if Jump would notice. "Herbman Trafficking" by Welton Irie, Laz's theme music: *Some a use heroin, some a snort up cocaine/but all I want for Christmas dat a two ganja plane/as one take off the other one land/we load the crop of sensimilla one by one/they tell me that it value is a quarter million/me sell it in the sun and a me sell it in the rain/ca' when me get the money me go buy gold chain/me eat caviar and me a drink champagne ...*

"So what's the third reason?" I asked.

"I recognized that motherfucker's kicks. He got the new Jordans last week." Lazarus stood up. "I gotta send a message. Right?"

I threw up my hands. "I'd say so. Yeah. I mean, you gotta do something."

"Come see Cornelius with me."

"Man, Cornelius doesn't know me."

"You're in there all the time."

"So? I'm just another dude who likes his vegi-fish and cornbread. Whatchu want me there for, anyway?"

"Cause I'ma go see Jumpshot after that. And I'd like some company, you know what I'm saying?"

"I know what you're saying, Laz, but I'm not tryna just run up on a armed motherfucker. What, you just gonna knock on his door? Say you're the Girl Scouts? Why would he even be home?"

"If he's not home, he's not home. If he is, I'll play it like I'm coming for help, like, 'You're the man on the street, find out who jacked me, I'll make it worth your while.'"

Laz looked sharper, more angular, than I'd ever seen him. Like he was coming into focus. "I guess if he wanted to shoot you, he woulda done it half an hour ago," I said.

"Exactly. Now he's gotta play business-as-usual. Besides, I'm known to be unarmed. Now you understand why: so when I do pick up a strap, it's some real out-of-character shit."

"I don't wanna be involved in no craziness, Laz." I said it mostly just to get it on the record. Once you put in a certain number of hours with a cat like Lazarus, you become affiliated. Obligated. It starts off easy-going: You come over, you chill, you smoke. *Ay T, you hungry? I'm 'bout to order up some food. Put away your money, dog. I got you.* Then it becomes, *Yo T, I gotta go out for a hot second. Do me a solid and mind the store, bro Or, Man, I'm mad tired. Can you bring Jamal this package for me? I'll break you off. Good lookin' out, T.*

I stood up and walked out of the room.

"Fuck you going?" Laz called after me. I could tell from his tone that he was standing with his arms spread wide, like Isaac Hayes as Black Moses.

I came back and shook my duffel bag at him. "Unless you wanna carry those ten bricks back home in your drawers."

"Good call."

* * *

We drove to the spot, and I waited in the car while Laz talked to Cornelius. Most innocent-looking store in Crown Heights: Healthy Living Vegetarian Café and Juice Bar. X-amount of fake-bodega herb-gates with, like, one dusty-ass can of soda in the window, but Healthy Living was a high-post operation. They sold major weight, and only to maybe two or three cats, total. You had to come highly recommended, had to be Jamaican or be Abraham Lazarus.

The funny thing was that Cornelius could cook his ass off. You'd never know his spare ribs were made of gluten—that's my word. Tastier than a motherfucker, and I ain't even vegetarian. All Cornelius's daughters worked in there, too, and every one of them was fine as hell. Different mothers, different shades of lovely. I stopped flirting after Lazarus told me where he copped his shit.

Started noticing all the scars Cornelius had on his neck and forearms, too. He was from Trenchtown, Laz said. Marley's neighborhood. You didn't get out of there without a fight.

The metal gate was still down when we got there, but Cornelius was inside sweeping up. He raised it just enough to let Laz limbo underneath. I watched them exchange a few words: watched the face of the barrel-chested, teak-skinned man in the white chef's apron darken as the pale, lanky dread bent to whisper in his ear. Then Cornelius laid his broom against a chair and beckoned Laz into the back room.

It wasn't even a minute later when Laz ducked back outside and jumped into the ride. He didn't say anything, just fisted the wheel and swung the car around. His face was blank, like an actor getting into character inside his head. I'd always thought his eyes were blue, but now they looked gray, the color of sidewalk cement.

"So what he say?" I figured he'd probably ignore the question, but I had to ask.

"He said, 'Abraham, there are those that hang and those who do the cutting.' And he gave me what I asked for." Laz opened the left side of his jacket and I saw the handle of a pistol. Looked like a .38. Used to have one of those myself.

"I was hoping Cornelius would tell you he'd take care of it," I said.

Laz shook his head about a millimeter. "Not how it works, T." He made a right onto Jumpshot's block, found a space, and backed in—cut the wheel too early and fucked it up and had to start over. "Bumbaclot," he mumbled. There was another car-length of space behind him, but Laz missed on the second try, too. I guess his mind was elsewhere. He nailed it on the third, flicked the key, and turned to me. Surprising how still it suddenly felt in there, with the engine off. How close.

"It's cool if you want to wait in the car, T." Laz said it staring straight ahead.

I ground my teeth together, felt my jaw flare. Mostly just so Laz would feel the weight of the favor. "I'm good."

"You good?"

"I'm good."

"Let's do this."

It was a pretty street. Row houses on either side, and an elementary school with a playground in the middle of the block. I used to live on a school block back Uptown. It'd be crazy loud every day from about noon to 3—different classes going to recess, fifty or sixty juiced-up kids zooming all over the place. Basketball, tag, double-dutch. Couldn't be too mad at it, though. It was nice noise.

A thought occurred to me and I turned to Laz, who was trudging along with his hands pocketed and his head buried in his shoulders like a bloodshot, dreadlocked James Dean. "It's too early for a tournament, right?"

That was Jumpshot's other hustle. Dude had eight or ten TVs set up in his two-room basement crib, each one equipped with a PlayStation. For five or ten bills, shorties from the neighborhood could sign up and play NBA Live or Madden Football or whatever, winner take all. Even the older kids, the young thug set, would be up in Jump's crib, balling and smoking and betting. Jumpshot handled all the bookie action, in addition to selling the players beer and weed—at a mark-up, no less, like the place was a bar or some shit. It was kind of brilliant, really.

"Way too early," said Laz.

We stopped in front of Jumpshot's door. "Play it cool," I reminded him.

"We'll see," said Laz, and a little bit of that Brooklyn-Jew accent, that soft, self-assured intonation, surfaced for a second. It occurred to me that maybe this wasn't the first time he'd done something like this. Maybe he didn't own a gun because he didn't trust himself with one. I don't know if the thought made me feel better or worse.

"He's got a loose ceiling tile in the bathroom," said Laz. "Right above the toilet." And he pressed the buzzer, hard, for about three seconds.

Static crackled from the intercom and then a grainy voice demanded, *Who dat?* A bad connection to ten feet away.

Laz bent to the speaker, hands on his knees, and over-pronounced his words: "Jumpshot, it's Abraham. I've got to talk to you. It's very important."

A pause, two heartbeats long, and then, "A'ight, man, hold on."

I tried to catch Laz's eye, wanting to read his thoughts from his face. But his stare was frozen on the door. This much I was sure of: The longer Jumpshot took to open up, the worse for him.

But Jump's face appeared in the crack between door and jamb a second later, bisected by the chain-lock. He flicked his eyes at both of us, then closed the door, slid off the chain, and opened up. He was rocking black basketball shorts, a white wife-beater, and some dirty-ass sweatsocks. If he hadn't been asleep, he sure looked it.

"Fuck time is it?" He rubbed a palm up and down the right side of his face as he followed us inside.

"Early." Next to Jumpshot, Laz looked like a gaunt, ancient giant. "But I been up for hours."

"Yeah?" Jump said, sitting heavily on his unmade bed and bending to pull a pair of sneakers from underneath the frame. "Why's that?"

Lazarus reached into his jacket and pulled out the .38, held it at waist height so that the barrel was pointing right at Jumpshot's grill. "I think you know the answer to that," he said calmly.

Jump looked up and froze. Just froze. Didn't move, didn't say shit. I gathered he'd never stared into that little black hole before.

Lazarus smiled. "Where's my shit, Jumpshot?" he asked conversationally. I gulped it back fast, but for a sec I thought I might puke. It wasn't the piece, or the fact that Jump suddenly looked like the seventeen-year-old kid he was. It wasn't even the weird fucking sensation of another dude's life passing before my eyes the way Jump's did just then. What turned my stomach was that Lazarus looked more content than I had ever seen him. Like he would do this shit every day if he could.

Jump opened his mouth, made a noise like *nhh*, and shook his head. I was beginning to feel sorry for him. I'd expected more of the dude. Some stupid Tony Montana bravado, at least: *Fuck you, Lazarus. You gonna hafta kill me, nigga.*

"T."

"Yeah, man."

"Go take a look around, huh? I'ma have a little chat with my man here."

"Sure." I headed for the bathroom.

“What are you looking at him for?” I heard behind me. That rabbi voice again. “Look at me. That’s better. Now listen carefully, Jumpshot. You listening? Okay. Here’s the deal. You give me everything back, right now, no bullshit, and you get a pass. You get to pack your shit up and roll out of Dodge.” There was a pause, and I could almost see Laz shrugging. “Who knows, maybe a broken leg for good measure. To remind you that stealing is wrong.”

Finally, Jumpshot found his voice. It was raspy, clogged, but it cut through the stale air like a dart. “I didn’t steal nothing.” Like if he spoke deliberately enough there was no way Lazarus could not believe him. “I ... have ... no ... idea ... what you’re talking about.”

I walked back into the room right on cue, and threw two bricks onto the bed. Jump started like I’d tossed a snake at him. “That was all I could find,” I said. Jumpshot’s face was a death mask now, so twisted that any lingering trace of sympathy I might have had for him straight vanished.

“Oh, and this.” I handed Laz the gun. Jump raised up so fast I thought he might salute.

“I never seen that shit before in my life!” The veins in his neck strained; I could see the blood pumping.

“What, that?” Lazarus pointed at the bricks and raised his eyebrows. “That’s weed, Jumpshot. Collie. Ishen. Ganja. Sensi. Goat shit. People smoke it. Gets them high. Or did you mean this?” Lazarus held up the Glock, and as soon as Jumpshot looked at it, *bam*: Lazarus swung the gun at him and hit Jump square in the face, the orbit of the eye. Knocked him back onto the bed, bloody. Jump let out a clipped yelp and grabbed his face, and Lazarus leaned over him, gun in the air, ready to pistol-whip the kid again.

“At least this shit is loaded,” Laz said, eyes flashing. “At least you robbed me with a loaded gun, Jump. Next time, change your fuckin’ shoes.” *Bam* Lazarus slammed the gun down again—hit Jump on the hand shielding his face. Probably shattered a finger, at least. Jump screamed and twitched, curled like a millipede, this way and that. Nowhere to go, really.

Lazarus straightened, a gun in each hand, and swiped a forearm across his brow. “Ten minus two leaves eight,” he said. “So where’s the rest, Jump?”

“Fuck you.” Jump said it loud and strong, as if the words came from deep inside him.

“No, Jump,” Lazarus said. “Fuck *you*.” He turned and pulled the biggest television off its stand, whirled and heaved it toward Jumpshot. Missed. Thing must have been heavy; Lazarus barely threw it two feet. It landed upright. The screen didn’t even break.

Lazarus glanced over at me, a little embarrassed. “Fuck this,” he said. “Sit up, nigger. I’m through fucking with you. Sit up!”

Jumpshot did as he was told. Blood was smeared across his face, clotting over one eye. “Laz—”

“Shut up. Believe me, Jumpshot, I could fuck around and torture you for hours. Trust me, I know how. I even brought my knife. But I don’t have time for all that. So I’m going to wait five seconds, and if you don’t tell me where the rest of my shit is, I’m going to shoot you in the fucking chest, you understand? Go.”

“I don’t fucking know, man. You gotta believe me, Abraham, I swear to God I never seen that shit be—”

“Four.”

“Please, man, I swear on my mother’s—”

Lazarus snatched a pillow off the floor and fired through it. Didn’t muffle shit. Whole building probably heard the sound. Jump fell back flat. Lazarus wiped off the Glock and tossed it on the bed. Crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at Jumpshot. The blood was spreading beneath him, saturating the blankets. “What could this fool have done with eight pounds of weed in two hours?”

“Maybe we should talk about it someplace else,” I suggested.

“Mmm,” said Lazarus. “That’s probably a good idea.” But we stood rooted to our spots, like we were observing a moment of silence. I watched Laz’s eyes bounce from spot to spot and knew he was wondering if there was anything in the apartment worth taking. Watching him was easier than watching Jumpshot.

“All right.” The moment ended and Laz spun on his heel. We stepped outside. After the dimness of the apartment, the block seemed almost unbearably bright.

We drove back to the crib and ordered breakfast from the Dominican place. Laz had steak and eggs. “Aren’t you supposed to be a vegetarian?” I asked.

“Usually,” he said with his mouth full, swiping a piece of toast through his yolk. He shook his head. “Eight fuckin’ pounds.”

“Only thing I can come up with is that he took it straight to one of the herb gates on Bedford,” I said. “On some pump-and-dump shit.”

Lazarus nodded. “That’s the only thing that makes sense. Anybody else would ask questions.” He slid his knife and fork together neatly, as if a waiter was going to come and clear our plates. “I’ll never see that weight again, basically.”

“At least it was paid for, right?”

“Half up front, half on the re-up. That’s how Cornelius does business.” He steeped his hands and tapped his fingertips against his chin. “I’m gonna have to leave town, T. Take what I’ve got left, go down south, and bubble it.” He lowered his head, toyed with a lock. “I swore I’d never do the Greyhound thing again. But it’s still the safest way to travel.”

“How long you talking about?” I asked.

Laz shrugged. “A month or so. I’ll go see my bredren in North Kack, bubble what I need to bubble, let shit blow over. You can mind the shop, right? Keep the business up and running so the Rastas don’t start looking for a new connect?”

“If Cornelius will fuck with me, I can.”

“He will. I’ll set that up before I go.”

“When you gonna bounce?”

Lazarus reached over and grabbed the duffel with the bricks in it. He walked over to his closet and dumped an armload of clothes inside, then bent down and pulled a floor-board loose. Inside the hollow was a roll of dough and one more brick. He tossed those in, too. I neglected to mention that it was my bag he was packing.

“I’m ready now,” he said.

Laz took a shower, made a few phone calls. I went up to my crib and did the same, then came back down and rolled us one last spliff. We smoked in silence. Always the best way. When it was over Laz stubbed the roach, pushed off palms-to-knees, and stood. “Everything is set,” he said, and tossed me his car keys. “You might as well get used to driving it.”

We were quiet all the way to Times Square. I kept wait-ing for Laz to start peppering me with instructions, but he just leaned back in the

passenger seat, rubbing his eyes. Occasionally, he'd sing a little snippet of a Marley song to himself: *Don't let them fool ya/or even try to school ya*. Maybe it was stuck in his head and he just had to let it out, or maybe the song made him feel better. He had a good voice, actually.

I parked the car, walked him up to the ticketing desk, and then down to the terminal. The bus was already boarding. I offered Laz my hand; he clasped it, then pulled me into a shoulder-bang embrace. "Hey, listen," he said. "That shit with Jumpshot. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to call him a nigger. I was heated. You know I didn't mean anything by it, right?"

"I know," I said.

He leaned in for another soulshake. "Hold it down for me, bro."

"No doubt," I said.

"I'll see you in a month. And I'll call before then."

"Do that."

"All right, bro. One love."

"Be safe," I said.

"No doubt."

"Peace."

"Peace." He glanced over his shoulder, hefted the duffel bag, and disappeared up the steps.

I walked to the far side of the terminal and checked my watch. Laz's bus was due to depart at 1:15. It was 1:13 when the two DTs I'd tipped off cut the line, flashed their badges at the driver, and boarded. I didn't wait to see them haul Laz off, just got on the escalator, made my way back to the car, and rolled back to Brooklyn. Climbed the stairs to my apartment, triple-locked the door, and rolled myself another joint. Slipped on my brand new Jordans, stacked my eight bricks into a pyramid, and just stared out the window, taking in my new domain. *So long, Lazarus*, I thought. *I never liked your fake ass anyway. Just another punk whiteboy beneath it all. Damn near shit yourself when I put that nine to your dome. Probably serve your whole sentence and never figure out what happened. Probably call me every week from the joint, talking about, "What's going on, bro?" Probably expect cats to remember who you are when you get out.*