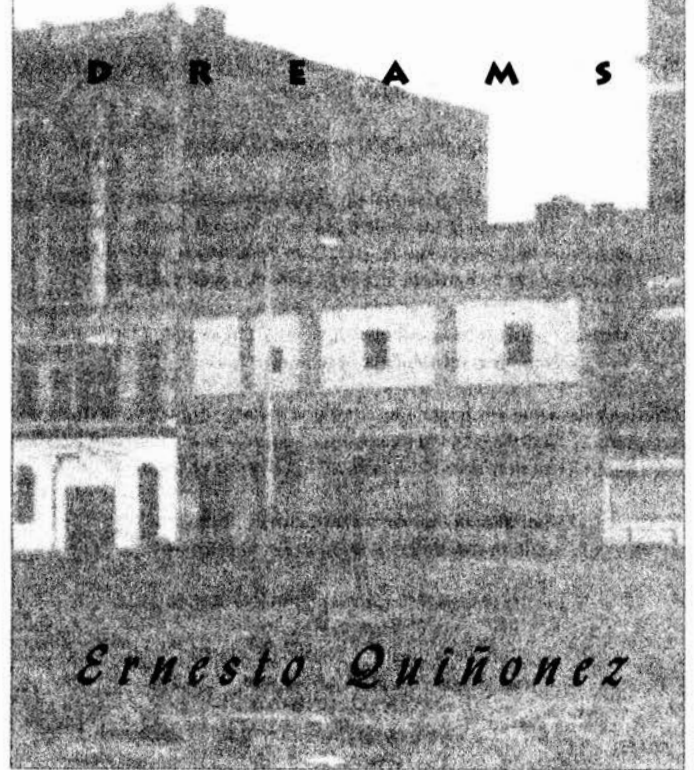


B O D E G A

D R E A M S



Ernesto Quiñonez

VINTAGE CONTEMPORARIES

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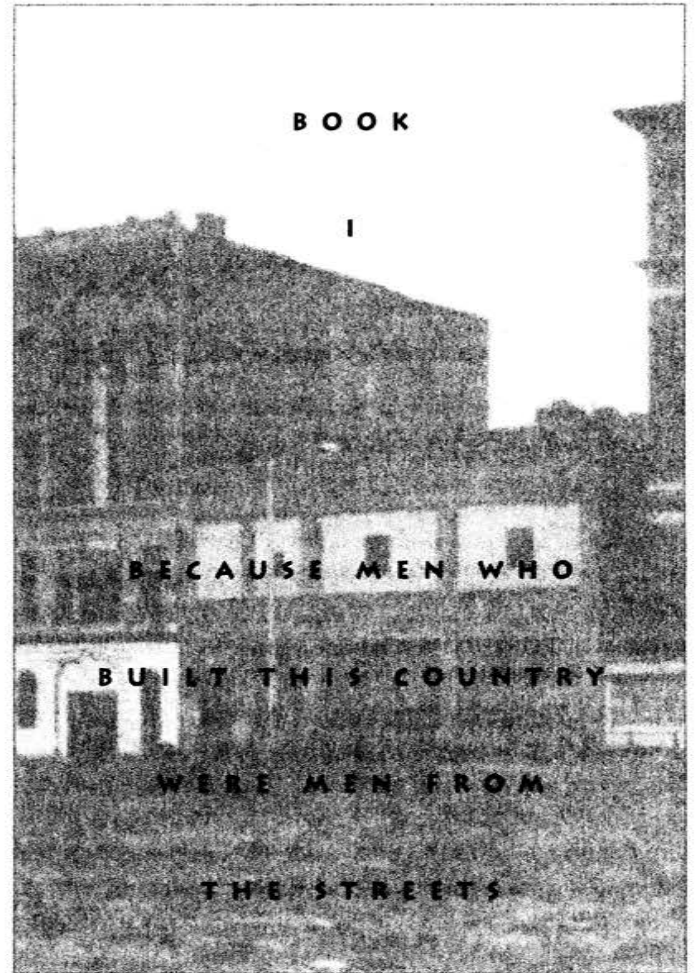
I

BECAUSE MEN WHO

BUILT THIS COUNTRY

WERE MEN FROM

THE STREETS



All died
hating the grocery stores
that sold them make-believe steak and bullet-proof rice
and beans
All died waiting dreaming and hating

PEDRO PIETRI
—“Puerto Rican Obituary”

ROUND 1

Spanish for “Toad”

SAPO was different.

Sapo was always Sapo, and no one messed with him because he had a reputation for biting. “When I’m in a fight,” Sapo would spit, “whass close to my mouth is mine by right and my teeth ain’t no fucken pawnshop.”

I loved Sapo. I loved Sapo because he loved himself. And I wanted to be able to do that, to rely on myself for my own happiness.

Sapo, he relied on himself. He’d been this way since we met back in the fourth grade when he threw a book at Lisa Rivera’s face because she had started to make fun of his looks by calling out, “ribbit, ribbit.” But in truth, Sapo did look like a toad. He was strong, squatty, with a huge mouth framed by fat lips, freaking *bembas* that could almost swallow you. His eyes bulged in their sockets and when he laughed there was no denying the resemblance. It was like one huge, happy toad laughing right in front of you.

As far back as I could remember Sapo had always been called Sapo and no one called him by his real name, Enrique. Usually Enriques are nicknamed Kiko or Kique. But Sapo didn’t look like an Enrique anyway, whatever an Enrique is supposed to look like. Sapo could only be Sapo. And that’s what everyone called him. It was rumored around the neighborhood that when Sapo came out, the nurses cleaned him

up and brought him over to his father. His father saw the baby and said, "Coño, he looks like a frog," and quickly handed the baby to the mother. "Here, you take him." I think this story is true. But Sapo never bitched, as if he had said, "Fuck that shit. I'll love myself." And that's how I wanted to be.

To have a name other than the one your parents had given you meant you had status in school, had status on your block. You were somebody. If anyone called you by your real name you were *un mamacao*, a useless, meaningless thing. It meant that you hadn't proved yourself, it was open season for anybody who wanted to kick your ass. It was Sapo who taught me that it didn't matter if you lost the fight, only that you never backed down. The more guys that saw you lose fights without ever backing down, the better. This didn't mean you were home free, it simply meant bigger guys would think twice before starting something with you.

Getting a name meant I had to fight. There was no way out of it. I got beat up a few times, but I never backed down. "You back down once," Sapo had told me, "and you'll be backin' down f' the res' of your life. It's a Timex world, everyone takes a lickin' but you got to keep on tickin'. Know what I'm sayin', *papi*?" Sapo was one of those guys who went around beating other kids up, but Sapo was different. Sapo loved himself. He didn't need teachers or anyone else telling him this. The meanest and ugliest kid on the block loved himself and not only that, he was my *pana*, my friend. This gave me hope, and getting a name seemed possible. So I decided that I no longer wanted to be called by the name my parents had given me, Julio. I wanted a name like Sapo had and so I looked for fights.

It was always easy to get into fights if you hated yourself. So what if you fought a guy bigger than you who would kick your ass? So what if you got stabbed with a 007 in the back and never walked again? So what if someone broke your nose in a fight? You were ugly anyway. Your life meant shit from the start. It was as if you had given up on the war and decided to charge the tanks with your bare fists. Nothing brave in it, you just didn't give a shit anymore. It was easy to be big and bad when you hated your life and felt meaningless. You lived in projects with pissed-up elevators, junkies on the stairs, posters of the rapist of

the month, and whores you never knew were whores until you saw men go in and out of their apartments like through revolving doors. You lived in a place where vacant lots grew like wild grass does in Kansas. Kansas? What does a kid from Spanish Harlem know about Kansas? All you knew was that one day a block would have people, the next day it would be erased by a fire. The burned-down buildings would then house junkies who made them into shooting galleries or become playgrounds for kids like me and Sapo to explore. After a few months, the City of New York would send a crane with a ball and chain to wreck the gutted tenements. A few weeks later a bulldozer would arrive and turn the block into a vacant lot. The vacant lot would now become a graveyard for stolen cars. Sapo and I played in those cars with no doors, tires, windows, or steering wheels, where mice had made their nests inside the slashed seats. Sapo loved killing the little mice in different ways. I liked to take a big piece of glass and tear open what was left of the seat. I always hoped to find something the car thieves had hidden inside but had forgotten to take when they ditched the car. But I never found anything except foam and sometimes more mice.

Fires, junkies dying, shootouts, holdups, babies falling out of windows were things you took as part of life. If you were a graffiti artist and people knew you were a good one, death meant an opportunity to make a few bucks. Someone close to the deceased, usually a woman, would knock on your door. "Mira, my cousin Freddy just passed away. Can you do him a R.I.P.?" You would bemoan Freddy's death whether you knew him or not, say you were sorry and ask what had happened, like you really cared. "Freddy? Freddy was shot by mistake. He wasn't stealin' not'en." You'd nod and then ask the person on what wall she wanted the R.I.P. and what to paint on it. "On the wall of P.S. 101's schoolyard. The back wall. The one that faces 111th Street. Freddy would hang there all night. I want it to say, 'Freddy the best of 109th Street, R.I.P.' And then I want the flag of Borinquen and a big conga with Freddy's face on it, can you paint that?" You would say, "Yeah, I can paint that" and never ask for the money up front, because then you wouldn't get tipped.

I painted dozens of R.I.P.s for guys in El Barrio who felt small and needed something violent to jump-start their lives and at the same time

end them. It was guys like these who on any given day were looking to beat someone up, so it was up to me to either become like them or get the shit kicked out of me.

Junior High School 99 (aka Jailhouse 99), on 100th Street and First Avenue, became the outlet I needed. It was violently perfect and in constant turmoil within itself. It was a school that was divided by two powers, the white teachers and the Hispanic teachers. The white teachers had most of the power because they had seniority. They had been teaching before the chancellor of the Board of Education finally realized that the school was located in Spanish Harlem and practically all of the students were Latinos, and so changed the school's name from Margaret Knox to Julia de Burgos.

To the white teachers we were all going to end up delinquents. "I get paid whether you learn or not," they would tell us. So we figured, hey, I ain't stealing food from your kid's mouth, why should I do my work? The whole time I was at Julia de Burgos, I had no idea the school was named after Puerto Rico's greatest poet, had no idea Julia de Burgos had emigrated to New York City and lived in poverty while she wrote beautiful verses. She lived in El Barrio and had died on the street. But we weren't taught about her or any other Latin American poets, for that matter. As for history, we knew more about Italy than our own Latin American countries. To Mr. Varatollo, the social studies teacher, everything was Italy this, Italy that, Italy, Italy, Italy. Didn't he know the history of the neighborhood? Hadn't he ever seen *West Side Story*? We hated Italians. At least that part of *West Side Story* was correct. Some Italians from the old days of the fifties and sixties were still around. They lived on Pleasant Avenue off 116th Street, and if you were caught around there at night you'd better have been a light-skinned Latino so you could pass yourself off as Italian.

So, since we were almost convinced that our race had no culture, no smart people, we behaved even worse. It made us fight and throw books at one another, sell loose joints on the stairways, talk back to teachers, and leave classrooms whenever we wanted to. We hated the white teachers because we knew they hated their jobs. The only white teacher who actually taught us something, actually went through the hassle of

making us respect her by never taking shit from us, was the math teacher, Ms. Boorstein. She once went toe-to-toe with Sapo. He was about to walk out of her classroom because he was bored, and she said to him, "Enrique, sit back down!" Sapo kept walking and she ran toward the door and blocked his path. She dared him to push her. She said to him, "I'll get your mother. I bet she hits harder." And Sapo had no choice but to go back to his seat. From that day on, no one messed with her. She might have been Jewish, but to us she was still white. Ms. Boorstein could yell like a Latin woman. To us she was always "that bitch." But we knew she cared, for the simple reason that she never called us names; she would yell but never call us names. She only wanted us to listen, and when we did well on her math tests she was all smiles.

The Hispanic teachers, on the other hand, saw themselves in our eyes and made us work hard. Most of them were young, the sons and daughters of the first wave of Puerto Ricans who immigrated to El Barrio in the late forties and the fifties. These teachers never took shit from us (especially Sapo), and they were not afraid to curse in class: "*Mira*, sit down or I'll kick your ass down." At times they spoke to us harshly, as if they were our parents. This somehow made us fear and listen to them. They were not Puerto Ricans who danced in empty streets, snapping their fingers and twirling their bodies. Nor were they violent, with switchblade tempers. None of them were named Maria, Bernardo, or Anita. These teachers simply taught us that our complexion was made up of many continents, Africa, Europe, and Asia. To them our self-respect was more important than passing some test, because you can't pass a test if you already feel defeated. But the Hispanic teachers had very little say in how things were run in that school. Most of them had just graduated from a city university and couldn't rock the boat. Any boat.

So we hated ourselves and fought every day. And finally, after a while, when I lost the fear of hitting someone else (not the fear of getting hit but of hitting someone else), I looked for fights. With Sapo watching my back, getting into fights was fun. During my three years at Julia de Burgos, I had more fights than Sapo. And since I was born with high, flat cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes, and straight black hair

(courtesy of my father's Ecuadorian side of the family), and because kung fu movies were very popular at the time, when I was in the eighth grade, I was tagged Chino.

I was happy with the name. Chino was a cool name, *qué chévere*. There were many guys named Chino in East Harlem but it wasn't a name that was just given to you. First, you had to look a bit Chinese, and second, you had to fight. It was an honor to be called Chino. But there were other honorable names in the neighborhood: Indio, if you had straight black hair, tan skin, and looked like a Taino; Batuka, if you liked Santana music and played the congas real good; Biscocho, if you were fat but told good jokes; and so on. Then there were names that were added to your name because of who you were, what you were known for, or what was said about you. Like a guy I knew named Junior, of 109th and Madison. Junior not only carried a knife, a *jiga*, in his back pocket, he had used it to cut someone's face. It was no big deal to carry a knife in your back pocket. Everyone did and everyone knew that 80 percent of it was just for show, *puro aguaje*. The other 20 percent you hoped would never come your way. But Junior was notorious for going straight for his *jiga* when he got into a fight. He didn't waste any time. It was Junior who introduced the phrase "Kool-Aid smile" when he cut a guy's face so bad, from ear to ear, that he was left looking like the chubby, smiling cartoon logo from Kool-Aid packets. Soon this term caught on and it became a street phrase: "Shut the fuck up or I'll give you a Kool-Aid smile." Junior was no longer just Junior, but sometimes Junior Jiga of 109th Street.

Then there were the names your parents had called you since you were a kid, bullshit names like Papito, Tato, Chave, Junito, Googie, Butchy, Tito. Those names meant shit around school, around the block, around the neighborhood. They carried no weight and it was usually guys stuck with those names that were always getting their asses kicked.

SAPO WAS the same around everybody, it didn't matter if it was the president of the United States or some junkie, Sapo was himself. He was that way around any girl, too. See, there were girls in the neighbor-

hood that you could curse around, act stupid, and all that, and then there were girls that you just didn't. Sapo couldn't care less.

Nancy Saldivia was the second type. First, she was a Pentecostal girl. More important, she was fine. All the guys from the neighborhood liked Nancy Saldivia. Her face could envelop you, almost convert you. She had light tan skin, hazel eyes, and a beautiful mane of semibrown, semiblonde hair. Nancy exuded a purity rarely found among the church girls. She was as genuine as a statue of a saint you want to light candles to, steal flowers for, or pray in front of. When she'd say, "*Gloria a Dios!*" she meant it. She was intelligent, polite, and friendly, and since she never cursed everyone called her Blanca.

Blanca wasn't allowed to wear jeans but she made up for it by wearing tight, short skirts. She always carried a Bible with her and never talked bad about anybody and at school she only hung around with her Pentecostal friend, Lucy. Lucy was a hairy girl who never shaved her legs because it was against her religion. Blanca had hairy legs as well, but Lucy's legs were so hairy that everyone called her Chewbacca. As if that wasn't enough, Lucy also had huge breasts. Because of them she was at times tagged Chewbacca *la vaca*. When the cruelty toward Lucy became too much for Blanca, she'd punish the boys by being the coldest, most serious person in school. Only Blanca could get away with this because she had an angelic face that almost made you want to sing Alleluia. Made you want to pick up a tambourine and join her one night in her church. Make a joyful noise to the Lord so she would begin to jump up and down to all that religious salsa. And maybe you'd be lucky enough to cop a cheap feel as the Holy Ghost took over her body.

All the guys felt this need to be nice to Blanca, to protect her in any way they could, even though she was a church girl and all they'd ever get would be a peck on the cheek. All the guys, I mean, except Sapo.

"Shit, man, she ain't gold. She ain't the fucken Virgin Mary."

"Blanca's Pentecostal, bro. Not Catholic."

"Whatevah the fuck she is. All the guys really want is to fuck her, so why do they keep her in some fucken glass case?"

"Yo, respect that shit, Sapo."

"Wha' for? She ain't no angel. Yo, my aunt was Pentecostal and she, bro, she has fucked half the men in her congregation. *Esa ha cojido mas huevos que una sartén.*"

"Respect, Sapo. Blanca believes in that shit, so—" Sapo would cut me off.

"So you like her, thass all. Because it's really bullshit. But you like her so you riding that shit, bro. But you know it's all bullshit. Yo, check this out, my moms prays to her saint, Santa Clara, every day at Saint Cecilia's. She lights all these fucken candles so the Virgin will give her the numbers. When that bitch saint tells my moms the Lotto numbers, then I'll believe. Yo, I'll believe. Yo, I'll believe so bad I'll buy Santa Clara a fucken wax museum."

MY MOTHER hated Sapo. "I don't want to see you hanging around with that *demonio*," she'd say to me. But I never listened, because Sapo meant adventure. Sapo meant we could steal beer and drink it together. He meant flying kites on the roof of a tenement building, both high on his weed. We loved flying kites but it wasn't the pot that made the flying adventurous, it was the Gillette blades. We would buy one pack of those thin blades and glue razors onto the edges of our kites. Now we had flying weapons, kites able to cut the strings of other people's kites in midair. It was aerial warfare. We would look up at the sky and see a kite and then maneuver our kites toward it. Sapo was brilliant at this. He didn't really have to get that close or as high, all he had to do was get his kite with its blade edges to brush up against the string of the other kite. Then, without that person knowing it, his string would go limp and he'd think that it had just snapped, but no, Sapo had cut it. Then I would run downstairs and track the kite, which would soon come crashing to the ground or on some rooftop or somewhere. I would collect our spoils of war, which we would sell to some kid and split the money.

My father understood where we were living. He knew, and when I would come home with bruises or a black eye he never lost his cool. I liked my father, and my father liked Sapo. He knew the importance of having someone there to watch your back. It was important to have a *pana*, a *broqui*. But my mother didn't get it. And like my mother, that's

what Blanca could never understand. Sapo was important to me. Sapo had arrived at a time when I needed someone there, next to me, so I could feel valuable. My childhood and adolescent life had been made up of times with him, as I later wanted my adult life to be made up of times with Blanca. It was hard to split the two.

"You know, Sapo," I said to him one day as we were preparing to fly kites on the roof of a project, "if we could ride on top of these things, we could get out of here. You know?"

"Why would you wanna fucken leave this place?" he said with his Sapo smile, showing all his teeth as he glued some razors to his kite. "This neighborhood is beautiful, bro."

"Yeah, you're right, *pana*," I said to him, but knew I didn't mean it. I gave my kite to the wind, which took it with a hiss, and I thought of Blanca and let out more string.

R O U N D 2

Willie Bodega

IN the eighth grade I applied to the High School of Art and Design on Fifty-seventh Street and Second Avenue. When I was accepted a lot of things seemed possible. I now left East Harlem every day and without my quite knowing it, the world became new.

Little by little the neighborhood's petty street politics became less important. I started to hang out less with Sapo, who had already dropped out. When we did meet on the street it was like we were long-lost brothers who hadn't seen each other in years. Regardless of the distance created, I did know that he was still my *pana*, my main-mellow-man. I knew that if I went to Sapo and said some guys wanted to jump me, he'd round up a crew for me, a clique from 112th and Lex or from another block. Sapo knew a lot of blocks. He knew just about all the guys that lived in the neighborhood. Most of them owed Sapo one thing or another, or were just scared of him and would do as he said, no questions asked.

In my senior year at Art and Design, I learned about the Futurists. I wanted to do something like they had done. The Futurists had been a malcontent group of artists at the beginning of the century who loved speed and thought war was good, the "hygiene of humanity." To them it was important to begin again. Culture was dead and it was time for something new. Burn all the museums! Burn all the libraries! Let's

begin from scratch! were some of their battle cries, and although most of them were, like their leader, Marinetti, from upper-middle-class backgrounds and not from the slums like myself, I liked them because I could relate to their anger. I realized that by reinventing culture, they were reinventing themselves. I wanted to reinvent myself too. I no longer wanted the world to be just my neighborhood anymore. Blanca thought the same, and when we started going out we would talk about this all the time.

"Julio, don't you hate it when people from the neighborhood who somehow manage to leave change their names? Instead of Juan, they want to be called John."

"I see your point. But what's in a name, anyway? A Rivera from Spanish Harlem by any other name would still be from Spanish Harlem."

Blanca laughed and called me stupid. Then she said, "I have an aunt named Veronica. When she married this rich guy from Miami, she changed her name to Vera."

"That's wack," I said.

"I'm not going to do that. I'm going to keep my name, Nancy Saldivia, and my friends can always call me Blanca. The only time I'll change my name is when I get married."

I could have married Blanca right then and there. Instead we enrolled at Hunter College, because we knew we needed school if we were ever going to change ourselves. We got married the following year. Those were the days when all conversations seemed as important as a cabinet crisis. We'd always talk about graduating and saving up to buy a house. About children who looked like me and slept like her. With Blanca next to me, El Barrio seemed less dirty, life less hard, God less unjust. Those were the good days, when Blanca and I worked hard to invent new people. It was important to have someone help you as you grew and changed.

THAT'S WHAT it was always about. Shedding your past. Creating yourself from nothing. Now I realize that that's what attracted me to Willie Bodega. Willie Bodega didn't just change me and Blanca's life, but the entire landscape of the neighborhood. Bodega would go down as a representation of all the ugliness in Spanish Harlem and also all

the good it was capable of being. Bodega placed a mirror in front of the neighborhood and in front of himself. He was street nobility incarnated in someone who still believed in dreams. And for a small while, those dreams seemed as palpable as that dagger Macbeth tried to grab. From his younger days as a Young Lord to his later days as Bodega, his life had been triggered by a romantic ideal found only in those poor bastards who really wanted to be poets but got drafted and sent to the front lines. During that time Bodega would create a green light of hope. And when that short-lived light went supernova, it would leave a blueprint of achievement and desire for anyone in the neighborhood searching for new possibilities.

It was always about Bodega and nobody else but Bodega and the only reason I began with Sapo was because to get to Bodega, you first had to go through Sapo.

Anyway, it was Sapo who introduced me. Sapo would knock at my door at crazy hours of the night.

"Yo, Chino, man, whass up? You know yo'r my *pana*, right? And like, you know yo'r the only guy I can trust, right? I mean, we go way back." He'd rattle out credentials as if I might deny him the favor. Then after recapping our friendship from the fourth grade to the adult present he would say, "So, *mira*, I have this package here and bein' that yo'r the only guy I can trust, you know, can I leave it here wi'choo, Chino?" Of course I knew what was in the paper bag. Blanca did too, and she had fits.

"You know he's bad news. Always has been. I don't want you around Enrique."

"What are you, my mother?"

"He's a drug dealer, Julio."

"Man, you're brilliant, Blanca. What could have possibly given him away?" The honeymoon had been over for months.

"What is your problem? You know, Julio, I married you because I thought you had brains. I thought you had more brains than most of the f-f-fucks in this neighborhood." When Blanca cursed, I knew she was mad. Even when she was angry I could detect some hesitation, a stutter before the curse. Blanca measured her curses very carefully. She didn't waste too many.

"Just look at Enrique," she continued. "He has all these women who sleep with him hoping to rip him off when he falls asleep. So he brings his dope here so you, my idiot husband, can guard it while he has a great time!"

"So what's wrong with that? It's not like we have to change it and make a bottle for it."

"*Dios mío!* Enrique might have some money and drive a BMW but he still lives in the same roach-infested buildings that we do. He can't leave because his money is only good here. You don't see him living on Eighty-sixth Street with the *blanquitos*, do you?"

"Did you figure all this out by yourself, Blanca?" I acted more interested in looking for the remote, so I could switch on the television.

"Did it ever occur to you," I said after finding it under the sofa cushions, "that maybe Sapo likes it here? Maybe, like a pig, Sapo likes the mud. Not everybody wants to go to college, Blanca." I switched on the TV and began to surf. "Not everyone wants to save up. Buy a little house in the Bronx. Raise some brats. You think everyone wants what you want?"

"What we want, Julio, what *we* want." She pointed at the two of us.

"Blanca, I hate that supermarket job and I've no classes tonight so don't ask me right now what I want. Right now just let me watch *Jeopardy*, okay?" She went over to switch the television off. She stood in between the remote and the television so that I couldn't turn it back on from the sofa.

"I don't like that receptionist desk, either." Blanca stepped forward and snatched the remote from my hand. "But unlike you, I'm almost finished at Hunter. Maybe if you would stop hanging around with Sapo, you could finish up before the baby arrives. We're going to need real money, real jobs."

"Ahh, Blanca, this is all reruns. It's all been said before. Come on. You may know what to do when you get that degree; me, I don't care. I'm getting it because I like books and all that stuff. Give me the remote." Blanca sat down on the edge of the sofa next to me. She was calm, staring straight ahead, avoiding any possibility of eye contact. When she did this, I knew a little speech was coming.

"Julio, I know how you feel about your studies. I do. But I'm only thinking about the baby. I would have preferred to have waited a year or two after we graduated, but it didn't work out that way."

"Oh, so it's my fault, right?"

"It's no one's fault. Look, I don't intend to keep badgering you about finishing school. And who knows what you'll do when you finish. I wish you'd talk to me about it." Her tone changed, a bit more angry. "But if you're up to something, something stupid with Sapo that's going to get you in some trouble, I want to hear about it. I want to hear it from you." Blanca faced me. Her hazel eyes stared fiercely into mine. I blinked. She didn't. She poked a finger in my chest. "I want to hear it, understand? From you and not from someone else's mouth. From you. So I can decide if I'm going to stay with you or not. I want to know. At least give me that. One hundred percent of that. If you are up to something illegal, you tell me. Let me decide for myself if I want to stay with you, if I'm going to be one of those wives whose husbands are in jail. I'm willing to put up with a lot, but I want to be told. If you keep me in the dark it's like insulting me. And you know Enrique is trouble."

"Blanca, I'm here with you, right? Have I ever been in any trouble? I'm here, right?"

"But what if one day Enrique doesn't tell you where he is taking you and actually takes you somewhere bad? What if the police bust him and since you were with him you get in trouble too? That happens a lot, you know."

"Sapo would never do that to me."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know."

"Julio, when we were teenagers at Julia de Burgos, I knew guys had to play this macho game and I knew you didn't really want to play but you had to. Even though you were this kid who just wanted to paint. I liked you even back then."

"I liked you too—"

"No, let me say this, okay?"

"Okay."

"I remember when they would call you on the loudspeaker to go down to the office and paint this for Mrs. So-and-So, or paint a mural

for an assembly. It happened a lot. Sometimes you would miss all eight periods because you were painting something for some teacher. I remember how cool you thought it was that you were singled out and had this special privilege. But I knew you were being ruined by those terrible teachers. You were just a kid. You should have been in a classroom and they didn't care about you, they only wanted you to make their assemblies look good."

"So what are you getting at, Blanca?"

"Listen, I know this neighborhood, Julio. Just because I go to church doesn't mean I don't know this neighborhood. Here it only matters what they can break, take, or steal from you. I know that Sapo is your friend. I know that. But his friends are not your friends. His friends don't have friends." I saw her point. It was a good one. But I just played it off as if she was wrong and told her to go to sleep. Without saying another word Blanca handed the remote back and slowly walked into the bedroom. I guess she'd had her say and was leaving it up to me.

BUT THE fights with Blanca over Sapo only got worse. Finally, during her second trimester, Blanca didn't even bother, more out of preoccupation with the baby than out of hopelessness. When she knew I was going to hang with Sapo, she would throw her hands up in disgust and ask the Lord for forgiveness. To forgive me, that is, never her. Always me. This also meant I couldn't touch her. I was impure and her body, round as the moon, was still the temple.

I can't say I blamed her. When I asked her to marry me, her pastor, Miguel Vasquez, had warned her that if she married me—a worldly person, a mundane—she'd lose the privilege of playing the tambourine in front of the congregation. That meant a lot to Blanca. At times she'd beg me to convert so she could be in good grace again. Besides, she hated going to church by herself. Now I know about wanting some sort of recognition, of wanting to have some sort of status, but when I think about yelling things like *Cristo salva!* I get the heebie-jeebies. You don't know what it's like inside a Pentecostal church full of Latinos. They really get down to some serious worshiping, with tambourines here, tambourines there, some guy beginning to wiggle on the floor because he has the Holy Ghost in him. The pastor gives his speech, yelling

about Christ coming, every week Christ is coming. *Christo viene pronto! Arrepíentete! Arrepíentete!* Then an entire band goes to the platform and begins to jam on some of that religious salsa. It's like a circus for Christians. But the one thing you could never make fun of about Pentecostals was their girls. They had the prettiest church girls in the neighborhood. You knew their beauty was real because they didn't wear any makeup and still looked good. And I had married one of the the prettiest. Like with Sapo while I was growing up, I needed Blanca with me so I could feel valuable. No, I didn't want to mess that up.

THEN ONE day when I came home from work and was getting my books to go and meet Blanca at Hunter, I got a call from Sapo.

"Yo, Chino, whass up?"

"Whass up, man."

"So like, can you do me a solid? Like, you my *pana*, right? You know, like the day Mario DePuma jumped yo' ass at school? Who was there to save you from that fucken Italian horse? I mean, I know you didn't back down and shit but, like, he was fuckin' you up pretty bad."

"Sapo, I'm in a rush. Are you gettin' somewhere or just swimmin' laps?"

"Yo, I hear that. All right, you know that taped-up paper bag I left wi'choo lass night?"

"Yeah, but if you picking that up you gonna have to wait, bro. Because I have to go to class and meet Blanca."

"Oh, I'm touched, Jane and Joe Night School. How sweet."

"Whatever, bro. Look, I have to get off."

"*Pero, bro, no corra*, I call to ask ya if, like, could you drop it off for me?"

"What the fuck! Sapo, you think I was fucken born yesterday? Yo, I'm not going to do your dirty work, what the fuck. Me letting you keep that shit in my place is one thing, taking it around is another—"

"Hold your *caballos*, bro, like I wouldn't be askin' ya unless I knew it was somethin' easy and not out of your way."

"Yeah, well it's way out of my way. I have to go to class, man, I'll see you around." I was ready to hang up.

"Nah, wait! Bro, that's the beauty of it. You'd be droppin' those fucks

right at Hunta. Yo, I swera-ma-mahthah. There's a guy in the library. You know where the library at Hunta is, don'cha?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, just put the bag in a backpack and he'll take it. It's no big deal. You'll lose the backpack but it's a cheap fucken bag anyway. My bro, you even know the dude. Tweety, remember him? Tweety from Julia de Burgos? Later on everyone started calling him Sylvester b'cause when he talked he gave you the weather. Remember him?"

"Ho, shit, that guy still alive?"

"Alive and spitting. Yeah, so Chino, come on. Some rich white nigga on Sixty-eighth Street ordered all this shit for a party in one of those penthouses by Park."

"I don't know, Sapo." I was afraid. Not of the cops but of Blanca.

"Yo, come on, man, one last favor for your *pana*, Sapo. You be just taking the sack to Tweety, bro. He's the one who's gonna be doing the real thing."

"So why don't you take it to Tweety? Look, I'll wait for you here to come pick—"

"I'm in the Bronx, Chino! You think I would've called you if I coulda come by? Fuck, man, you go to school or what?"

So, without telling Blanca, I did as Sapo had asked.

THE NEXT night Sapo knocked at my door and handed me fifty dollars, just for taking something to where I was already headed.

"Compliments of Willie Bodega, my man. For your backpack." Sapo slapped the crisp bill in my hand.

And that's when I heard the name Willie Bodega for the first time.

"Willie wha'?" I thought it was a funny name.

"Willie Bodega? You nevah heard of him? He's like the big Taino in this neighborhood, you know? Although only a few have seen his face."

It's important for me to remember that night, because once I heard that name it was never about Blanca or Sapo. As important as they were to me, it was always about Bodega. We were all insignificant, dwarfed by what his dream meant to Spanish Harlem. And in obtaining it, he took shortcuts and broke some laws, leaving crumbs along the way in hopes of one day turning around and finding his way back to dignity.

R O U N D 3

*Willie Bodega Don't Sell Rocks.
Willie Bodega Sells Dreams.*

IT was a night like any other. Blanca was laboring at the computer writing a paper for one of her classes and I wasn't. I was reading a book that had nothing to do with any of the classes I was taking. I knew that Blanca would soon get up from the computer and ask me why I wasn't writing my paper. I was ready.

"We only have one computer."

"I'm finished for tonight."

"So fast?" I thought I had it covered.

"Fast? I been at this paper for over a week. When are you going to start your work?"

"I'm researching even as we speak, see?" I showed her my book.

Blanca squinted at the title. She had her suspicions but let it go. Then someone knocked at our door. I went to answer it. It was Sapo.

"Yo, Chino, Bodega wants ta speak with ya." As always Sapo was Sapo and he said this not caring that Blanca could hear him. She strode to the door and stared at me, waiting to see what I was going to say.

"What does he want?"

"Bro, are you coming or not?" Sapo asked impatiently as if I was taking up his valuable time. He didn't look at Blanca and Blanca didn't look at Sapo.

Blanca pulled me away from the door. "Julio, who is this Bodega guy?" she asked, letting the door slam. Sapo waited in the hallway. He hated Blanca and he knew Blanca hated him right back.

"A friend."

"A friend of Enrique's, you mean?"

"A friend of Sapo is a friend of mine," I said, and Blanca shot me an evil look, then pointedly clasped her rounded belly.

"Blanca, please, I'll only be gone an hour or two. It's not like you're going to give birth any minute, you got months to go."

"Julio, we've gone through this already. When you leave with him," she loudly whispered, "I get these feelings, *Dios me salve*."

"Blanca, no Christ right now, all right?" This upset her.

"What about your work?" Her voice got louder. "Weren't you studying or something?"

"I just finished." I don't know why I said those things to Blanca sometimes when I knew she could see right through me.

"You mean you want to hang with Sapo." She sighed and waved her hand dismissively. "Forget it. *Vete*. Act like a single man." She stormed into the bedroom to get on the phone with her sister, Deborah. Blanca called her sister only when she wanted to hear gossip or to complain about me. Deborah was the complete opposite of Blanca. She wasn't as pretty, wasn't Pentecostal, she cursed, drank Budweiser from the can, and got into fights. She was so much the opposite of her kid sister that from the time Blanca was ten and Deborah twelve, everyone called her *Negra*.

After the skirmish with Blanca I grabbed my denim jacket and headed out the door. When I came out, I saw Sapo waiting impatiently in the hallway. When he saw me he smiled, his big lips uncovering all his teeth. He was happy, as if he had won some duel.

"Let me tell you, bro, I always knew you were gonna marry that girl. And that's all right cuz she's fine, but you got to admit she's a bitch sometimes." His hand landed on my shoulder and he said, "Bodega is nice, man. You'll like the guy."

"What does he want with me?" I asked again.

"He didn't say. He just wants ta speak with you, thass all." We headed toward the stairs and Sapo squeezed my shoulder and then

stopped. He took his hand off me, turned, and looked in my eyes to make sure I was listening.

"Bodega wants something from you, man. That shit don't happen often. Know what I'm sayin'?"

I nodded, and we walked down the stairs.

"Where does Bodega live?"

"Bodega? Bodega lives in a lotta places. He has apartments all over the neighborhood. You got to have many places and juggle your place of dwellin' in order to create confusion. Only your closest of *panas* can know your exact whereabouts. All I know is he said he wanted to speak with ya and that he was goin' to be at his place on top of Casablanca. You know where Casablanca is, don' cha? That fucken meat market."

"Yeah, I know," I said, and we walked out to the street.

From my place in the Schomburg projects on 111th and Fifth to Casablanca the *carnicería* on 110th between Lexington and Park is only four blocks. Regardless, Sapo led me to his parked BMW and we drove the short distance.

"There's this retard at the door yo'r going to meet. He's Bodega's cousin. Thass the only reason why Bodega has him around, b'cause you can't fire your own family. But the nigga is stupid, bro. So when we get there he is going to open the door and that nigga, bro, that nigga talks in songs. Like, he fucken grew up on radio. *Ese tipo está craquiado.*"

When we arrived Sapo parked the car right next to a fire hydrant. Outside the walkup some men had set up a table and were sitting on milk crates, drinking Budweisers in paper bags and playing dominoes. They had a small radio at their feet tuned to an old love song, "*Mujer, si puedes tu con Dios hablar preguntale si yo alguna vez te he dejado de adorar.*" Across the street, on the entrance wall of a project building, was an altar, meaning someone had just died. There were flowers, a forty-ounce Miller, pictures of saints, and pictures of the deceased, with six large candles burning in the form of a cross. Sapo led me inside the old tenement where the storefront butcher shop Casablanca had been serving up meat to the neighborhood for years. We walked up three flights. Inside the tenement the walls were torn up, the

stairs creaked, the smell was of old and decay; the only thing worse than the smell of a tenement is a pissed-up elevator in a project. If you look at the floors of an old tenement, you'll see layers upon layers of linoleum from different years. All in different colors. Sapo stopped at a steel door that looked like it was imported from Rikers Island.

A tall, big man with a baby's face and the shoulders of a bear opened the door. He was Bodega's cousin. He was slow, but only in intelligence. Later on I would find out that he was actually light on his feet, like a feeding grizzly. I guessed he was in his forties and was stronger than he knew. I mean, this guy could hug you and not know he was killing you. He was a child of AM radio's Top Forty heyday. Word had it he started to talk in song years ago, when AM radio broke his heart by going all talk. I figured Bodega kept him as someone to watch his back or at least to watch the door.

"*Oye, como va. Bueno pa gozar,*" Nene said to Sapo, who then introduced me.

"This is my main-mellow-man Chino. Yo'r cus asked for him."

"Chino, yeah, bro." Nene looked at me and extended his hand. I met it. "Hey, it's cool, bro. You a businessman, I take?" Nene asked me. I just shrugged. "You cool, Chino, because *any businessman can come and drink my wine. Come and dig my earth.*" And he let us inside. Sapo just shook his head and muttered curses under his breath every time Nene used a piece of a song. It was something Sapo had to tolerate, a clause he had to accept if he was going to work for Bodega.

Inside was nothing. Just bare rooms. I had never gone to Sapo's place, but I'd heard it was the same way. It had to do with not owning too many things because you never knew when you had to disappear for a while. You had to travel light and easy. Nene led us into a room with a desk, two chairs, and an old, dirty sofa with a *Playboy* magazine stuck in between the cushions. Standing behind the desk was a man in his forties with a goatee and the droopy eyes of an ex-heroin addict. His hair was curly and he was about five feet ten. He was talking on a cellular phone and when he saw Sapo and me he quickly smiled, cut off the conversation, hung up the phone, and motioned to me to take the seat in front of him. Sapo sat on the dirty sofa and pulled out the *Playboy*.

"Sapito, this is your friend?" Bodega asked.

"Yeah, this is my main-mellow-man, Chino. He's smart, Willie, yo he's smart. I useta copy off him when we were in school. Till I got tired of that shit." Sapo was excited. He was happy that I was there, as if he wanted me to be part of some crew. I saw Bodega scope me out and shake his head, as if he was disappointed. As if he had expected someone else.

"You a friend of Sapo, right?" He asked, knowing full well that I was.

"Yeah," I said, not really knowing how to answer.

"So check it out, Sapito tells me you go to college. That true?"

"What kinda question is that?" I said laughing, playing it off because I was a little nervous. I would have been scared, but Sapo was there with me and I knew nothing would happen to me.

"Yeah, man, I go to a public college, nothing big and fancy—"

"Yo, college is college and thass all that maras." Bodega then eyed me again up and down, then nodded his head, snapped his fingers, and pointed at me all in the same motion.

"You all right," he said, as if he finally approved. "So, check it out, Chino, right? It was Chino?"

"Yeah."

"So, check it out, Chino, you evah heard of Edwin Nazario?"

"Edwin Nazario? Is he related to the boxer who was going to fight Rosario, el Chapo?"

"Nah, same last name, no relation."

"Don't know him. Who is he?"

"He's a lawyer."

"I don't like lawyers, they're prostitutes in suits," I said, trying to be cool.

"Not my man Nazario. He's my brothuh, we share the same vision." Bodega pointed at his eyes as if he could see whatever it was he was going to tell me. As if it were there in front of him.

"I hear you," I said. I always say "I hear you" when I don't understand things or have nothing to add.

"Nazario, he's amazin'. Chino, he knows the law inside out, like a reversible coat. And thass just the beginnin'. With Nazario I intend to

own this neighborhood and turn El Barrio into my sandbox." His cellular phone rang and he picked it up.

"I can't talk right now," he hissed, his droopy eyes flashing. "I'm in the middle of somethin', yeah . . . yeah, no no, at the botanica, *que pendejos son*, yeah . . . yeah . . . at the botanica." He put the phone down on the desk and looked at me.

"Like I was tellin' you, Chino, check it out, Nazario and I know that we are livin' in the most privileged of times since the nineteen-twenties, since Prohibition." I saw that Bodega was in no rush to get to where he was going. That night when I met him I didn't like him. It wasn't because he was some drug lord. Nah, to me that was no different than some Wall Street executive who makes a million dollars by destroying some part of the world. I didn't like him because he was a loudmouth who couldn't cut to the chase. Bodega was the type of guy who, if he was going to show you how to make paper airplanes, would first tell you how trees had to be cut down in order to make paper.

"B'cause men that made this country, men that built this country were men from the street. Men like me, men like you, men like Sapito there." He pointed at Sapo, who had his nose in the *Playboy*. "Men that used whatever moneymakin' scheme they could, and made enough money to clean their names by sending their kids to Harvard. Did you see that special on the Kennedys, on channel thirteen, Chino?"

"You watch channel thirteen?" I was surprised.

"Yeah, I watch channel thirteen. What you think, only kids and white people watch public television?"

"Nah, I ain't saying that. It's just that *eso está* heavy duty, thass all."

"Not only do I watch it but I'm even a member. So did you see that special on the Kennedys, Chino?"

"Nah, must have missed it."

"Yeah, well, that shit told the truth. Yo, *ese tipo era un raquetero*. Joe Kennedy was no different from me. He already had enough money in the twenties but he still became a rumrunner. Alcohol is a drug, right? Kennedy sold enough booze to kill a herd of rhinos. Made enough money from that to launch other, legal schemes. Years later he fucken

bought his kids the White House. Bought it. Yeah, he broke the law. Like I'm breaking the law, but I get no recognition because I am no Joe Kennedy."

I wanted to ask Bodega what he was talking about but I just nodded my head and let him talk.

"Because, Chino, this country is ours as much as it is theirs. Puerto Rican limbs were lost in the sands of Iwo Jima, in Korea, in Nam. You go to D.C. and you read that wall and you'll also see our names: Rivera, Ortega, Martinez, Castillo. Those are our names there along with Jones and Johnson and Smith. But when you go fill out a job application you get no respect. You see a box for Afro-American, Italian-American, Irish-American but you don't see Puerto Rican-American, you just see one box, Hispanic. Now, you don't want to consider me an American, I got no beef with that. You want to keep me a bastard child, I got no beef with that, either. But when the spoils of the father are being divided, I better get some or I'll have to take the booty by force. East Harlem, East L.A., South Bronx, South Central, South Chicago, Overtown down in Miami, they're all the same bastard ghetto."

He paused for about a second and looked at me. For the first time I saw his eyes were a strange shade of pale brown, as if they had been dulled by some deep sadness that the years had turned into anger.

"I hear you," I said again. I was ready to excuse myself. At the first opportunity I was going to tell Bodega that I had to go home to Blanca because she was pregnant. That I hoped he would understand. That I would love to hang with him but I couldn't. But right that minute, Bodega slid open a drawer and pulled out a Ziploc bag the size of a Bible and said the magic words that kept me there that night.

"Yo, smoke with me, Chino."

I settled myself down and looked at the weed. That shit must be real good, I thought. When he opened the plastic bag, the aroma was like coffee and the seeds were as big as *quenepas*. Bodega then zipped the bag back up and flung it to Sapo.

"Sapito, roll us some."

Sapo smiled his huge smile and brought out his own *bambú*. He opened the bag, grabbed a handful of pot, and spilled it all over the

Playboy on his lap. He closed the bag and began to unseed the handful he had spilled on the magazine. "Ho, shit, I just realized," Sapo said, laughing, "I spilled all this pot on Bo Derek's face. Man, that bitch is still fine, she like forty and shit."

"Nah, she's wack. She was hot once, not anymore," I said, happy that the conversation with Bodega was stalled. As I watched Sapo, I hoped that Bodega would get down to the point. I wanted Bodega to just tell me what this had to do with me. But right then, it didn't matter as much because a nice joint was coming my way and since the day I had married Blanca, I hadn't had a good smoke.

"Nah, Bo Derek is still usable," Sapo said.

"Not like when she had those little *trensitás*. You know, when she had those little braids like Stevie Wonder. Back then she was fine. That shit should come back. White girls look fine with their hair like that," I said.

Sapo continued to smile. "You know, Iris Chacón in huh prime never posed for *Playboy*. Thass a fucken shame," he said.

"Now that," I agreed, "would have been worth paying for." Iris Chacón was my wet dream, as she was for many. When she danced, she prostituted your blood, masturbated your soul. She was a gift from the mother island to remind us of the women that were left behind, the girls that were not brought over to Nueva York and were left waving goodbye near *las olas del mar, en mi viejo San Juan*.

"But I don't care," Sapo said. "Iris Chacón or not, *yo las cojo a to'a'*. I take 'em all, from eight to eighty. Blind, crippled, and crazy." I laughed with him. Sapo hammed it up. "If they know how to crawl, they're in the right position."

I laughed. "Nigga, you're crazy."

"If they can play with Fisher-Price" — Sapo was on a roll, grabbed his crotch — "they can play with this device."

"Dude, shut up, get help," I said, laughing.

Just when Sapo was about to crack another snap — "If they watch *Sesame Street* they can" — Bodega came back to life. "So, Chino, like I was telling you . . ."

Sapo quieted down and I let out a deep sigh because I wanted to

talk about something else. Even hearing Sapo's mad crazy snaps would have been a welcome relief. Bodega picked up on my boredom, smiled, and went right to the point.

"Nazario needs help. It would be good if he had you. You know, a smart guy, like an assistant, Chino."

"Hey, man, it's cool but I'm not interested in this business."

"Did I say anything about pushing rocks?" Bodega looked insulted. His voice sailed a notch. "I told you Nazario is a lawyer."

"Look man, I know you gotta do what you gotta do," I said. "I got nothin' against you or what you're doin'. I don't believe in this 'Just say no' shit because there ain't too many things to say 'Yes' to in this fucken place. But I can't."

"Nah, hear me out, Chino. Hear me out, don't interrupt me. Check it out. You know those three buildings on 111th between Lexington and Park, right in back of us and right in front of P.S. 101, you know, those newly renovated tenements?"

"Yeah, so wha'?"

"Those shits are mine."

"Yours?" I didn't believe him and looked at Sapo for confirmation. Sapo nodded.

"Those shits were condemned but look at them now," Sapo said. "It's like the fat girl no one wanted until someone took a chance on the bitch and put her on a diet, and now everybody's sweatin' her."

"But thass not all, Chino," Bodega continued. "I got a line of them that are being renovated on 119th and Lexington. And Nazario is working with his contacts in City Hall on getting me more. Housing. Housing, Chino. Thass how I'm going to do it. Thass the vision." The phone rang. He cursed at the air and answered it.

"Yeah . . . What botanica? You mean you fucks don't know what botanica? San Lázaro y las Siete Vueltas, what other botanica do you think? Now go!" Bodega hung up, shook his head. "Like children," he whispered to himself, "like fucken children."

Sapo kept rolling. Sapo could roll real good. A joint from him looked like it came out of a pack of Camels. I looked back at Bodega, who was still shaking his head. He muttered something to God or maybe to himself and continued.

"Like I was telling you, Chino, when Nazario acquired the first buildin', the cops would drive by and see Puerto Ricans workin' on tryin' to renovate a building. The cops would laugh. They said we had no ingenuity because we were Puerto Ricans. They would say things like, you guys ain't Incas, you have no Machu Picchus in San Juan; you guys aren't Aztecs, there ain't no pyramids in Mayaguez. You guys are Tainos, dumb mothafuckas. There ain't no ancient ruins on that island of yours cuz you guys can't build shit."

Bodega stopped, and held his index finger in front of his eyes. "But Nazario, he saw. He knew. He knew better." He moved his finger to his temple. "He's a lawyer, but he hustled. He can still hustle because he never forgot he is street. He hustled like all of us who started stealin' a hubcap here and a radio there until we owned the car. Nazario was hustlin'." Bodega cupped his hands around his mouth as if he was going to shout.

"Yo! Anybody knows someone who's an electrician? A plasterer? A plumber?" He dropped his hands and continued. "Nazario was in the street hustlin'. In Loisaida and in East Harlem. 'Yo! I'm tryin' to renovate a buildin' here! You know anybody who would do it for the love of his brother or at least for cheap?' And soon, the community answered him. 'Yeah, my brother is an electrician, he'll help out; yeah, my sister is a plumber; my cousin does roofin'.' And then, Chino, a blue plastic chute dropped down the side of the buildin'. Bricks began to fall. Pipes were cut. The roof was stripped. The buildin' was gutted. Like a fucken fish, it was gutted. And the cops stopped laughin'. And then Nazario was hustlin' again. Only this time it was with the fire marshal at City Hall. 'We haven't broken any fire codes. This building is safe. You can come see for yourselves.' And they came and they checked. And they declared the buildin' safe. And the fire department backed off. And you know what I did?"

"Wha'?"

"I placed fourteen families in the buildin', cheap rent, too. You know what that means, Chino?"

"You a sweetheart?" I said, smiling.

"Yeah, that too. But what it means is fourteen families that would riot for Bodega. Fourteen families that would take a bullet for Bodega.

Yeah, they ain't stupid, they know where the money is comin' from. They know who their real landlord is. They know what he does. But they're getting a slice, right? See, Chino, I see it as a grant. Just like IBM issues grants, like Mobil issues grants. Do those places really want to give money away? I don't think so. But it helps their image, it's tax deductible, and the government backs off some. In order for me to keep my slice, I also got to issue grants. But I take care of the community and the community will take care of me. They must, because their shelter depends on me." Bodega banged a fist on the table, then pointed a finger at the wall as if he were pointing at the people outside. As if he were pointing at the neighborhood.

"So if Doña Ramonita can't pay her rent, I take care of it. The community center needs a new pool table, I take care of it. Casita Maria's Peewee League needs new uniforms, I take care of it, bro. They all come to Bodega. The word is out. It's out all over El Barrio. Baby needs a new pair of shoes, go speak ta Willie Bodega. My daughter is getting married, and I need a big cake from Valencia, go see Bodega. My *fritura* stand in La Marqueta burned down, go see Willie Bodega, he'll help ya. Any shit like that. What I ask for is their loyalty. If something happens to me, people will take to the streets. Bro, there will be Latinos from 125th Street to 96th Street with congas and timbales twenty-four hours a day stopping traffic, overturning cars, setting fires, yelling, 'Free William Irizarry! Free that brother, that sweet, sweet brother! Free Willie Irizarry and lock up some fucken stockbroker!' I'm talkin' major riots here. Do you see what I'm talking about?"

As he asked me this I looked at Sapó again. He had finished rolling two joints. They were lovely: long, thin, white, like the fingers of a model. It seemed a shame to light them, but Sapó lit one up anyway. Toked it. Got up from the dirty sofa and handed it to me. I followed.

"One problem, Bodega," I said, holding the smoke in my lungs.

"Yeah?"

"Yo'r sellin' that stuff" — releasing the smoke — "to your own people."

"Fuck that!" He banged a fist on the desk again, only this time it was hard. I just ignored it and passed the joint to him.

"Nah, enjoy." He waved the joint away. "*To'a' pa' ti,*" he said, so I knew he couldn't be too mad.

"See, Chino, any Puerto Rican or any of my Latin brothers and sisters who are stupid enough to buy that shit . . ." He motioned with his fingers for me to come closer as if he was going to tell me a secret. I leaned toward him. Then he whispered, repeating, "Any Puerto Rican or any of my Latin brothers who are stupid enough to buy that shit, don't belong in my Great Society."

I wanted to laugh. Who did he think he was, Lyndon Johnson?

Back then, that night, to me he was a joke. I was surprised he had come this far. But I knew it couldn't have been pure luck. No one gets this far on luck. I was to discover that I was living in a rare moment when a personality becomes so interlocked with the era that it can't be spoken of in different sentences. Bodega was a lost relic from a time when all things seemed possible. When young people cared about social change. He had somehow brought that hope to my time. It was hard to define it at first because I thought no one could possibly believe any of that, not anymore. But Bodega didn't just believe it, he was actually practicing it. He had learned from the past and knew change couldn't just come from free love, peace, and brotherhood. Extreme measures would have to be taken, and all you could hope for was that the good would outweigh the bad.

"Great Society?" I repeated after him, shaking my head. "I don't know, Willie, that sounds like something out of the sixties, know what I'm sayin'? Something about declaring war on poverty and Spanish Harlem being a prisoner of war. Now, I don't know when that war ended, all I know is they never came looking to free us." I toked the joint again, laughing. I was about to get up and pass it to Sapó but I saw Sapó had lit his own joint. So I guessed this one was all mine. I smiled.

"Yeah, well I'm a throwback, m'man." Bodega returned my smile. "I'm glad you picked up on that, Chino." He was beaming. "You were just a puppy, Sapó was just a tadpole when the neighborhood was a joy. It was a joy because there was pride and anger and identity. The Black Panthers in Harlem were yellin', 'Power to the People!' Us here in El Barrio saw what they were doing up in Harlem. We began to ask ourselves, why can't we do some shit like that here? Somethin' had to be done, otherwise we were goin' to kill one another. So then came Cha Cha Jimenez, a cat from Chicago. He started speakin' about Puerto

Rican nationalism and soon formed the Young Lords. Us here in East Harlem took that movement and ran with it." Bodega began to pace the room with excitement. "The Young Lords were beautiful, Chino. El Barrio was full of hope and revolution was in the air. We wanted jobs, real jobs. We wanted education, real education, for our little brothers and sisters, b'cause it was too late for us. We wanted lead paint out of our buildings, window guards so our babies wouldn't go flying after pigeons, we wanted to be heard. But first we knew we had to get the community on our side. So what did we Young Lords do?"

"Wha'?"

"We cleaned the streets. Everybody, Chino, went home and got a broom, bought bags, rakes, Comet and Ajax for the graffiti walls, trash cans, and soon the community was for us. Soon they were cleaning the streets with us. No one feared us. They all loved us. Later we said to ourselves, hey, we didn't start the Lords to fuckin' clean the street. So one day we all put on our Sunday best and ambushed Gracie Mansion. To talk with Mayor Lindsay about jobs, education, housing, training programs. When we arrived at the gates of Gracie, Lindsay's aide said to us, 'Any complaints must be filed at City Hall.' We said, 'We're not here to complain, we're here to talk.' But Lindsay wouldn't see us. He could not believe that there were hoods in suits out by the gates who were not stabbing each other. Who weren't there to rob his house. Who had organized to make their neighborhood better. He couldn't understand that East Harlem, only a mile away from where he lived, had the capacity to see itself in the mirror and say, 'We need a change. Let's go and see the man.' Eventually, Chino, we all went home and did what Lindsay's aide had said. The next day we went to City Hall and filed our demands. And you know what happened the next month, Chino?"

"Nah, tell me," I said, knowing he was going to anyway.

"The next month, they hiked the subway fare from twenty-five cents to thirty-five cents." He shrugged. "So we waited, and we waited, and we filed and we filed. Finally, when we knew our demands weren't going to be met, when we knew Lindsay wouldn't get back to us, the sanitation department wouldn't even lend us brooms to clean our

streets, we had no choice but to take over the streets of East Harlem." Bodega's cool was betrayed by excitement. "Those were the East Harlem garbage riots of sixty-nine. We used garbage cans and thrown-out furniture to blockade 116th Street from Fifth Avenue to First. And Mayor Lindsay, the biggest fraud this fucken city has ever known, but with enough charisma to charm Hitler, sent his fucken city officials and his police goons after us. So we started stackin' guns inside a church we took over by 111th Street and Lex. Thass right, inside a fucken church. And we began preaching *Que Pasa Power*." Bodega kept pacing around the room with the energy of a shadow boxer. "All over the neighborhood, *Que Pasa Power!* Even old ladies started to smuggle things for us, b'cause Mayor Lindsay's dogs would never think of frisking them. Old ladies, Chino. Old ladies would do this for us b'cause they knew, they knew where we were comin' from. Yo, it was remarkable. *Que Pasa Power* was what was happenin'. *Pa'lante* was our horse, a newspaper we pushed our ideas with." Bodega stopped pacing and returned to his dirty desk. He sat down, facing me. "But just like now, there was the eternal hustle." He looked at me quietly for a second. The sadness had returned, mixed with anger. "The eternal hustle, Chino. The decision to either be a pimp or a whore, thass all you can be in this world. You work for someone else or you work for yourself. And when the Young Lords got too high and mighty they began to bicker among themselves. Later they even changed their agenda and became somethin' else. I was broken. Chino, bro, I left and knew that the only way for me was to hustle. So I hustled enough heroin to knock out all the elephants in Africa. And then I met ma man Nazario. He was just gettin' out of Brooklyn Law School back then. And from those days on, Nazario and me—" I saw some light in his eyes as if hope had returned. He then joined his two fingers as if they were glued together. "—Nazario and me, brothers. *Panas*. And now we've got bigger things in mind. You see," he continued, "you either make money with me or you make money for me. Thass what I tell my boys. Either way I win."

Bodega pointed at his eyes again. Then he laughed a little laugh. "It's all a matter of where yo'r standing, where you comin' from. Willie Bodega don't sell rocks. Willie Bodega sells dreams."

At that moment Sapo got up. He stuffed the *Playboy* in his back pocket, dropped the joint he had been smoking, carefully killed it with his sneaker, picked it up, and put the roach in his wallet.

"Yo, I'm going down to the bodega to get some beer," he said. "Anybody wan' anythin'?"