

HW

Write a paragraph or two explaining IN YOUR OWN WORDS the difference between a crime and a caper as described by the authors in this selection. You may also want to include in your discussion how the difference between crime and caper relates to the differences between social and personal issues of legitimacy as we discussed in class.

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yesterday and he's out here tonight, and come tomorrow, he'll be at Monroe and Fayette, watching the same scenes play.

No point in talking about changing, or stopping, or even slowing down. In his soldier's heart, Curt knows that everyone talks that shit and no one believes it a minute after they say it. Like Blue—running and gunning tonight, but telling himself he's going to quit come tomorrow. A resolution, says Blue. Naw, Curt tells himself, the shit is forever.

"Yo Curt."

"Hey, hey."

"Wassup, Mr. Curt?"

Curt smiles sadly, then growls out simple truth: "Oh, man, ain't nuthin' here but some of the same foolishness."

He touts for another hour at Fayette and Monroe, then drags himself back to Blue's for his last blast of the night, the syringe finding a way through one of the fat man's swollen limbs. When he leaves the shooting gallery, he's fortified with a good cap and carrying a small eighth of cheap rye in his hand—a rare liquid concession to this evening's traditions.

Cane-to-foot-to-cane he struggles up Monroe Street, heading nowhere in particular, wandering a bit beyond the usual boundaries of his shrunken world. Penrose Street. Saratoga. Curt limps on, nipping at the bottle and caning his way down the pavement until this short, spontaneous excursion toward the expressway overpass becomes a modest declaration of free will. Tonight in West Baltimore, for no reason whatever, Fat Curt is no longer on post. At last report, he's left the corner traveling due north. He's walking; goddamn if the fat man isn't taking a walk.

At Mulberry Street, a passing Western radio car slows at the sight. Maybe the cop is pausing to consider invoking the city liquor laws, which in this neighborhood would be a little like handing out littering citations in a hurricane. More likely, a veteran roller, familiar with Fayette and Monroe, is stunned to see one of that corner's fixtures several blocks north of where he should be. Either way, Curt senses the attention and tries to palm the bottle in his bloated hand. It's enough of a gesture to imply submission. The cop gives a little nod, then rolls away.

Walking on, Curt almost manages to smile.

Happy New Year.

Gary McCullough waits in front of the Korean joint, just off the Mount Street corner, shifting his weight from one foot to the other in the morning cold. One hand plays at a rubber band loose against the other wrist. He hums a Curtis Mayfield tune, the notes coming soft and barely discernible beneath the din of the nearby touts and slingers. Gary is in the background, just barely scenery. He is here, yet not here. He is good at waiting. Tony Boice comes around the corner from Mount Street, back from

the marketplace, smiling knowingly at Gary. Warmed to his soul, Gary grins beatifically at his running buddy. Hooked up: got that good thing from Family Affair. Yes, oh yes. The two men turn together, pushing back up Fayette, heads bowed into a rush of frigid January wind. Gary cups a hand to his mouth and coughs deeply.

"Dag."

"What?" says Tony Boice, looking around.

"Cold," says Gary.

"Oh yeah," agrees Tony. "Motherfuckin' hawk is out."

Gary looks furtively down Fayette, then across the street at the Death Row crew—all of them busy with business and paying no mind. They pass the trash of the vacant lot, back to where the New York Boy was lying dead a week earlier, the top of his head oozing away beneath a White Sox cap, a nine with a full clip useless in the waist of his sweats.

Gary edges past the spot and glances over despite himself; his eye finding the dull rust-red oval that still stains the weeds and dirt. Dag.

They move past the vacant lot and draw even with a redbrick row-house. Plywood greets them at the door of 1717 West Fayette, a street address that never fails to pull Gary back into his past.

"In here," he decides, bounding up the steps.

"Around back," says Tony, furtive.

"No, this'll work," Gary insists, suddenly impatient. He steps to the front door of the derelict house, glances once again down Fayette, then presses his weight against the plywood barrier, bending it enough to slide through. Tony follows and Gary shoves the plywood back into place. The two listen in the darkness for an extra moment, assuring themselves that the place is empty, though the piss-stench in the front hallway says it isn't always so.

"He was okay with that?" asks Gary.

Tony Boice grunts affirmatively. Negotiations went well enough: The corner boy gave him two Death Row bags for eighteen, which was all Tony carried. Short the two bills, Tony offered lamely to have a little more on the next go-round, and the younger dealer gave it up for the cash on hand, knowing anything else was money he would never see.

By fixed memory, Gary leads the way back through the darkened corridor, turning and reaching out for the rounded rail of the center stair. He holds it a moment, remembering the beautiful curve of the thing.

"Victorian," he says, savoring the word. "This is a Victorian design."

Tony says nothing.

"Look at that trim. That was original."

Tony stays silent as they climb the stairs.

"Know what that means, Mo?" Gary stops at the second-floor landing.

"Money. There's big money in a house like this."

Two steps below him, Tony stares at some lead-painted piece of shit-

brown wood, no doubt wondering how there can be a dollar left anywhere inside this rowhouse. They've been through the place two dozen times, liberating every last bit of copper pipe and aluminum window guard, cannibalizing the vessel of Gary McCullough's earlier life in their daily pursuit of the perfect blast. Whatever obvious money there was in this house had already been dragged ten blocks south to the scales of the United Iron and Metal Company, weighed up, paid out, and melted down. But Gary climbs to the third floor, his frozen breath clouding in front of him as he talks, rambling on about period restorations and licensed subcontractors and real estate values.

"... I'm serious as a heart attack, Mo. There's money to be made if you know how to go. You just don't know..."

Tony grunts his way up the stairs.

"... like with the market. Some of those technology stocks, like computer companies and all, man, I'm telling you. You can turn ten thousand dollars into ten times that inside of six months if you know what you're doing."

"Aw yeah," says Tony.

"No, really," says Gary, insistent.

"Yeah, no," says Tony blankly. "You right."

"Man, you just don't know."

And Gary McCullough, perhaps the only living person in a twenty-block radius who knows the difference between a price-earnings ratio and a short-term capital gain, shakes his head in sad frustration. The past is past, and Gary can't reconcile any part of it with the likes of Tony Boice, who is laboring only in this moment.

"You just don't know," he says again.

It wasn't so long ago that Gary had everything figured. He was a workaholic with two full-time jobs and his own home development company on the side. He held the deed on several properties on Vine Street. He drove a new Mercedes-Benz. Every workday, he scoped the inside columns of the *Daily Investor* for stock tips, parlaying a Charles Schwab brokerage account into \$150,000 cash money. And Gary had a plan, too, for this three-story rowhouse, which had been purchased not merely as another investment, but as a centerpiece to the fine, righteous life he was busy constructing. He would renovate this place, make it beautiful again, make it his castle.

Tony slides past him on the landing, intent on nothing beyond the business at hand.

"Where at?" he asks.

"In back," says Gary, nodding to the rear bedroom.

Gary finds two bottle caps on the windowsill, but his partner takes care of everything else. Tony is a whirlwind of efficiency as the glassine bags are opened and the powdered heroin meted out. Water from the

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syringes, flame from a match, then the slow draw of liquid up into the plastic cylinders. Thirty on the hype, cocked and ready. No coke to go on top, but this is enough to get them out of the gate.

Tony pokes softly at the back of his arm, a red droplet collecting there to mark the landing zone. Gary uses his left forearm, choosing a midway point on a darker brown stretch of oft-used roadway. Tony slams everything home, indifferent to the notion of an overdose. Gary sees a puff of pink in the bottom of his spike, fires, then stops short at the halfway point, gauging the rush, waiting cautiously. A few moments more with the syringe resting gently between thumb and forefinger, and then the sprint to the finish.

"It's something," mutters Tony, vaguely disappointed, "but not like yesterday was."

"Yesterday was a bomb," Gary agrees.

Tony steps back into the sunlight, which is pouring through the rear window panes, measuring a patch of crosshatched warmth on the bedroom's stained carpet. Oblivious to the cold, Gary sits in the shade by the far wall, watching a universe of suspended dust float across the room in rays of light.

Tony nods.

"Better than you thought, Mo," laughs Gary.

"Gettin' there."

For a while they simply sit, letting the chemistry happen, warming themselves in the rush. Both of them at perfect ease, feeling nothing more of the freezing cold. Soon they are laughing together about the caper that got them here.

Caper. That is Gary's word for it, and it is Gary's mind-set, too. For him as for any dope fiend, the raw adventure of the thing always has to be acknowledged and on some level, enjoyed. In West Baltimore, you can be proud of a good caper; hell, a working, viable caper is to be celebrated. And though it might be lost to any prosecutor reading the Maryland Annotated Code, everyone living off a corner understands and accepts the distinction between a caper and a crime. Stick a gun in a man's face and take his wallet; that's a crime and, hey, you're a criminal. But steal the copper plumbing from a rowhouse under construction and sell it for scrap; that's a caper. Shoot a corner dealer in the knee and take his stash; you're a stickup boy and fair game for either the slingers or police. Watch the same dealer sling vials for two hours until he turns his back, and then sneak off with his ground stash; a caper, plain and simple. Breaking into a house where honest-to-God taxpayers are sleeping is definitely a crime. Breaking into parked cars and liberating cassette tape players is nothing more than caper. In Gary's mind, it isn't only the severity of the act that qualifies a crime, but the likelihood that any human being other than yourself might get hurt. In the life of Gary McCullough, this point is essential.

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He will shoot dope, to be sure. And if there is no paycheck on the horizon, he will steal a bit to get the money for that dope. And then, if he has to—if there is no other sensible alternative—he will tell a lie or two about his stealing and his doping, though in actual practice, Gary is too honest a soul to carry a deceit past anyone in this neighborhood. But it ends with this: no crime, no cruelty, nothing beyond the simple caper. The sad and beautiful truth about Gary McCullough—a man born and raised in as brutal and unforgiving a ghetto as America ever managed to create—is that he can't bring himself to hurt anyone.

Like this morning, when the caper almost went bad in the basement of that rowhouse on Fairmount. Gary and Tony were down there in the dark, groping for the cold water cutoff even as a half-dozen crackheads were arguing over cocaine a floor above them. He and Tony were stumbling around, bumping into things until Gary found the valve and shut off the water. They cut out that good No. 1 copper as quietly as they could, while above them the voices rose and fell in profane cadence.

"My turn."

"Fuck it is. This mine."

"Man, that's my time. That ain't right."

"Bitch, everything I say, you hear backwards."

Tony began squeezing air through his lips, trying to suppress laughter. Gary struggled with it, too, until they couldn't so much as look at each other without losing control. Side by side in the dark, they were holding it together as best they could, wincing inside with each soft squeak as the pipe cutter did its work. Then, from above them, a loud, shrewish wail—a woman's voice.

"MAW-REECE . . . MAW-REECE!"

"What?"

Gary and Tony froze, scared and still at the woman's shout. Gary guessed that Tony was willing to fight if it came to it, but in his own heart, he was down for capers only. Gary would take all of an ass-whipping if Maurice brought his coked-up self downstairs.

Tony recovered first, giving the cutter another go, until one last stretch of copper came away from the plumbing with a dull thump.

"MAW-REECE!"

"What?"

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