Practice

The teenagers ran in cleats. They chased each other, sweat-slick and panting, around the blue rubber track, some of them sprinting in the straightaways, others merely enduring the turns of the oval, pushing themselves for another lap, fighting through the bright agony of shin splints and fiery lungs and whatever misery might have writhed that day out of the city and into their individual lives. Was it pain that aged them so quickly? In Hartford, as in so many cities like it, crumbling cities where men and women on assembly lines once manufactured money but where factories now made nothing, in such cities children were teenagers and teens were grownups and grownups, if they were smart and talented and capable, had too often moved elsewhere.

My home. The city of my birth. My parents had moved our family when I was a boy. A stranger to Hartford, now, at last, I was home.

The school year had yet to start, but the Inner City

Striders commanded the track at Hartford Public High. The club was open to anyone wanting to run, jump, or throw, though most practicing through the muggy August afternoon were black or Hispanic. On the field, the bustle looked scattered and casual, like a street fair; athletes gathered here and there in clumps, strolling and chatting, a girl flinging a discus, some boys seeking distraction through the girls. Harvey Kendall spent most of his time near the jumping pit, practicing the timing and technique that had already made him the best high school triple jumper in New England, and one of the best in the nation. All the other Striders knew him, and strolled by to visit, not so much because of what he had accomplished but because of how he carried himself. Harvey was mayor of this little town of teenagers in T-shirts and shorts. They knew he might entertain them with a dance. He might ask about their workout or tell a joke. Harvey smiled and laughed often, and his joy defied the sweat and the pain, countered sore feet and defeated postures with hope and possibility. The way he fooled around, his showmanship and marquee manner, would in college earn him the nickname "Hollywood," but because he also stretched when he was supposed to, ran drills as necessary, and always demanded of himself one more inch on his jumps, he gave the Striders much of their drive and spirit.

I was there that day in 1989 to interview him for the *Hartford Courant*, the city's daily, which had just hired me away from a newspaper in Tucson to cover sports. I'd arrived in Hartford frightened and excited and in love with the city without understanding why, tingling with the romantic's sense that fate or destiny or God or whatever it was made decisions for the world had sent me back where

I began. That sense of fate intensified when I learned that of nine young sports reporters hired to cover the state's high schools, my beat would be my hometown. The other new hires found apartments outside the city, but I ended up in a neighborhood south of the newspaper plant. Within a day or so, my editor made Harvey Kendall and the Inner City Striders my first assignment. The sky was overcast and mottled that day, and though the sun was still high, the light seemed nearer to dusk when I parked my Jeep with Arizona plates in the high school's lot.

Hartford itself seemed near to dusk. For more than four hundred years, people had used this city, and though Hartford had been reinvented over and over, it showed signs of age: rusted handrails and chipped concrete steps, copper statues gone aqua; even the air felt exhausted. I didn't mind. Fresh from Tucson's unrelentingly blue skies and sleek shopping-mall palaces, I was grateful for the overcast gloom and for this familiar, grit-encrusted place. Familiar, yes, because though I had never before visited Hartford Public, my grandfather had graduated from there. My family had lived in Hartford for four generations, and I was born in Hartford Hospital. But when my parents moved I was young; I hadn't lived in Connecticut since I was nine. Now twenty-five, I knew my way around a few parts of the city, especially the neighborhoods near where my grandparents still lived. But the Hartford I knew was their Hartford, glimpsed in photo albums, a place where young men still wore overcoats and ties on picnics and where women always wore hats. Looking for apartments, I'd driven into neighborhoods I'd never seen before, neighborhoods that might have been safe or might have been dangerous, but struck me as both because I couldn't yet tell the difference between poor and criminal. I drove until I got lost,

and stayed lost until I grew scared. And then I pointed myself back toward what I knew to be safe, and I drove, eyes wide and adrenaline-alert, until I recognized downtown and regained my bearings.

Harvey Kendall, who lived in one of those neighborhoods where I found myself lost, a neighborhood my grandparents likely hadn't visited since the 1950s (if even then), was to be my introduction to a city my grandparents knew only from headlines, and I knew not at all.

Though he was eighteen years old, Harvey already stood taller than my six feet two. His haircut was a low flattop; the tone of his voice disaffected, cool, quite different from the tone he used with his teammates. He looked west over my shoulder at nearby apartments called Clemens Place, named for Hartford's most famous resident, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, who wrote under the pen name Mark Twain.

Harvey started our interview by asking the questions.

Nice to meet you, he said. You from Hartford?

I've been gone a while, I said. But I was born here. My grandparents still live here.

You live in the city now? he asked.

Yes, I told him. Near Barry Square. In the South End.

So you understand, he said.

Did I nod in agreement? Maybe. I can't remember. Maybe I just asked, "Okay, can you spell your name for me?" The truth was, I had no idea what Harvey was talking about. *Understand what*? Here I was, fresh out of Tucson's desert of Circle K convenience stores and gravel-packed yards, and this kid was talking to me as though I knew his life and his city. It was as if we had survived the same burning building, escaped the same plane crash. Harvey and I. We happy few.

After Harvey established to his satisfaction that I would understand him, he spoke freely, as if he trusted me. I didn't understand but I wanted to, and I recognized a gift when I saw one. Harvey's trust made me glad that I'd chosen to live in Hartford over any of its suburbs if it meant so much to somebody. It struck me on a personal level, even as I made use of his trust on a professional level. I did my job—asking questions, scribbling in my reporter's notebook—but I found myself wanting to know what had just happened that led Harvey to trust me. Was there something about Hartford, about living here, about claiming it as home, that really did connect us? These questions would stay with me long after that first interview.

Harvey was a talker. He listed for me Hartford's problems, the mantra that afflicts so many post-industrial American cities: racism and poverty, the sirens and the blood spilled by knives and guns. He bragged on his coach, Melvin "Butch" Braswell, the founder of the track club and the track coach at Hartford Public. Butch was an unassuming man whose trim beard followed his neck down to his T-shirt's collar. He wore a pair of gray pants and shabby Nike sneakers, and his T-shirt was so thin it was nearly transparent. "Most of the coaches at the school don't even know where we come from," Harvey told me. "Butch, he lives in the city. He always tells us, 'You can do this.' He picks us up. He teaches us more than about track—like, the way of life itself."

Braswell was more modest. "I don't even consider myself a good coach," he said, but something in his words rang falsely humble. He knew what he was doing mattered. He understood that young people trusted him, that in the midst of Hartford's bad actors—the dealers and the

gangbangers and the crackheads—he gave his athletes a different model of how to live. He knew that when Harvey talked to me, much of what Harvey said had first come out of Butch's mouth.

"Track can carry me on into college," Harvey told me that day. "If I get me some good grades, get me a good major, make me some good money, I can help my mom and the people I love."

People I loved, my grandparents, Walter and Helen Petry, were native to the city, the children of Polish immigrants, and had lived in the same house nearly fifty years. Hartford held them tight, where Walter had been raised in poverty by his widowed mother, where Helen had learned kitchen tips from Italian friends. They had raised their own three children—including my mother—in the city's South End and could imagine living nowhere else. It was my parents' generation that broke the ties that had bound my family so closely to Hartford.

When my parents moved out of the city, when I was three years old, they traded a narrow railroad apartment near Hartford's Royal Typewriter Factory for a Cape-style white house with black shutters in nearby rural Glastonbury on the east bank of the Connecticut River. The drive from Glastonbury would take a little less than a half hour, depending on traffic on the Putnam Bridge.

You're moving across the river? said my horrified grandparents. Why so far?

My parents eventually took us farther—from Glastonbury to Vermont, and then to Tucson, always seeking better work for my father, better opportunities for the family. It wasn't easy. My father had dropped out of high school, and the equivalency exam he'd passed and the few college credits he'd accumulated weren't enough to land him a profession. Instead he worked his way up through grease and car parts and sweat into management positions, but his jobs were vulnerable to downturns in the economy and to layoffs. The move to Arizona was meant to temper those. The economy there seemed always booming, and higher education was less expensive than in the northeast. Even if my father didn't return to college, he could more easily help his children pay tuition at one of the West's state universities. Indeed, in Arizona, I graduated high school, then college and started my journalism career. Over more than a decade in the Southwest, I learned not only a profession, but how to live through summer desert heat, how to pry cactus spines from my dog's paws, and how to eat spicy Mexican food. I suppose time and geography made me an Arizonan, and it is true I felt comfortable in Tucson's colonial, Catholic, Mexican, and Indian influenced culture. But to feel at ease is not the same thing as to feel connected. Tucson could not bind me. Some nights I dreamed that I hiked east over Tucson's Rincon mountains and there found another city, one with leafy deciduous trees and slender lanes and houses with peaked roofs. Hartford remained for me the home that should have been home, a place I knew hardly at all, a place made more mysterious, more necessary by its distance.

My old Ross ten-speed had racing handlebars and a frame painted black. I'd bought it when I was in high school with money from my grandparents. In Hartford, after I moved back in 1989 to work for the *Courant*, it became my anti-nostalgia machine. With it, I could combat that romantic perception of my hometown that grew out of

childhood memories of Christmas lights arrayed at downtown's Constitution Plaza, of tobogganing with my grandfather down Goodwin Park's one big hill. In a car, that nostalgia was easier to maintain. Through the raised windows of a car, Hartford could become for me a music video, providing visuals to whatever played on the radio, to whatever memory I chose to relive.

But it was my job to cover Hartford's high school sports teams, to tell the stories of the city's children, of Harvey Kendall and hundreds of others. I could not do that honestly while harboring a sentimental fiction, or a truth that was only a fraction of Hartford's particulars. Hartford was more than my family photo albums, more than the church where my parents married, the restaurant where they met, the factory where my great-grandfather had worked. When I rode my bicycle, the city forced on me its present realities: pork kebabs and rice, the sourness of trash dumpsters, homeboys in white T-shirts driving Toyota Corollas with dashboards decorated by air fresheners made to look like gold crowns, and men pushing shopping carts full of soda cans. Hartford was more complicated, more ruthless, and kinder than I knew.

Take, as proof, the hallway marred with graffiti and perpetual dusk and the smell of piss outside an apartment where a coach lived. Or the high school girls who cradled a teammate's infant daughter and cooed while Mama ran her heat in the 100 meters. Or the young man, so in need of soccer he used a Ginsu knife to saw the cast off his leg before his doctor could say, "the bone isn't healed." The same young man, spit on during a game, spitting back. The shooting guard, coached by his father, who helped the basketball team at his Catholic high school win a state championship just before the diocese closed the school

and put his father out of work. The soccer-playing twins from Puerto Rico who took special education classes and who taught a team of Laotians and Jamaicans and Poles to shout "*Mira! Look!*" whenever an opponent sprinted toward the goal posts. The teenager with dreadlocks whose name meant Prince of Peace.

Neighborhood centers. Gymnasiums. North End, South End. Clay Hill, Keney Park, South Green, Flatbush Avenue, Barry Square. Kids cried and snarled and loved each other as I watched and learned to love them. Bulkeley High School's Bulldogs. Weaver's Beavers. South Catholic's Rebels. Prince Tech's Falcons. Hartford Public's Owls. I came to know the teachers and the security guards and the fans. But it was always the kids. So many stories.

I made mistakes. There was the time I printed the bragging of a Bulkeley quarterback who guaranteed a victory over Weaver only to lose a few days later, his team scoreless, humiliated. Weaver players repeated his boast as a taunt throughout the game, and then his fellow students at Bulkeley kept the words alive, too, so that "guarantee" echoed in the halls, punctuated by laughter. His coach was angry with me. These are kids, he said. You've got a responsibility. You've got to be careful with what they tell you.

And behind his words, this message: they may act tough, but so many of them, they're frail. Beautiful, precious.

I was reminded of that—and heartened—when I pedaled through the crowded, littered streets of Hartford.

Early one morning in June, I chained my bicycle in front of Harvey Kendall's house on Oakland Terrace, a street in Hartford's North End. It was midweek, and early enough

that traffic was light. Despite the street garbage and houses with shattered windows and graffiti, the just-waking city seemed washed clean, full of potential.

Harvey had enjoyed a spectacular senior year, and the *Courant* planned to feature him on the cover of its high school All-State section. While my first story about Harvey was as much about the Inner City Striders, this one would profile him alone. Harvey had agreed to let me spend the day with him at Hartford Public.

Inside the Kendall house, while Harvey finished getting ready, I met his mother: a towering woman with a face shaped by the hard years of Southern childhood, by raising eleven children, and by the death—not yet five years past—of her husband. Jessie Kendall spoke in a rural Georgia accent, lush and tangled to my ears, and I strained to make out her words. She opened a clear plastic bag full of track and field medals and let them spill onto the kitchen table as she shook her head, marveling at all this treasure, wanting to share her honest delight that God could grant her such a blessing as this child, Harvey. She showed me a trophy case and how she'd arranged his plaques and awards, dozens of miniature athletes running, throwing, hurdling, each one labeled so the Kendalls would remember how Harvey won it.

Harvey and I walked to school, taking a long route out of our way so Harvey could pick up a friend. Eric Shorter and his mother had recently moved from a ramshackle apartment near Harvey's house to newer condos a few blocks east. I knew Eric a little. He was the quarterback of the football team, a smart, good-looking kid with the remnants of a childhood hearing problem that caused him sometimes to slur soft consonants or to overpronounce words.

At Hartford Public I sat through classes with Harvey-Harv (classmates called him that), listening to unremarkable teachers say unremarkable things. I sat with him at lunch, when he ad-libbed songs to make students laugh. He laughed, too. He laughed all the time, easily, as if laughter were his normal state and anything else was an act.

After school on the steps outside, we met Eric and three others, and here Harvey's hallway make-believe ended. His demeanor changed, his star status vanished. He relaxed. Clearly these were his peers. When we came upon them, they were trading the dates—August 16, September 16, August 26—that they'd leave for college. Harvey introduced me to his friends, all seniors looking forward to graduation, each serious under the afternoon sun, backpacks full, blue jeans baggy, a couple of them paging through the new yearbooks. All around us students slipped toward school buses or gathered in cliques for the walk home.

This was the moment Harvey chose to tell me about the promise he and his four friends had made, a pledge to each other and to their city, not just to give something back, but to give everything back, and then to give more. Hartford needed them: not just the money they'd someday earn, not a part-time commitment, but an effort that would last all day, every day. "I'm not the smartest guy," Harvey said, "but in August I'm going to college. I'm going to do the best I can and come back and help this community." The others nodded—yes, yes, all of us, we'll all come home.

As they talked, as I wrote what they said, I became struck with the possibility that Harvey had opened up to me that first day we met because he thought I would understand this pledge. Because I'd been born in Hartford, because now I lived there. Because I'd gone away and

come back. We were a team after all—the sons of a city that needed us.

Harvey recalled the trophy case from that morning, the plastic bag of medals. "All the awards don't mean nothing," he told me, "until our mission is accomplished."

There are assurances, and there are promises, and there are oaths. Harvey spoke with a zealot's belief, a belief strong enough to reverse reality, to make two plus two equal five, to change the color of the sky. He and his friends could even change Hartford, make it right. But he was nineteen then. In ten years he would be changed, as would his friends, as would Hartford. In many ways, the city would be worse. Hartford would demand more of Harvey and his friends—and yes, of me—than any of us expected on that afternoon in June. Who knew whether they would return, whether I would stay, whether we could make lives to keep faith with this place and its people?

This, then, is how those five young men began to teach me about the city of my birth and what we owed it. Their lessons would be compounded by those of other Hartford teenagers. But those five in particular—and their stories and their pledge—would stay with me, posing a challenge and raising questions. Over the next decade and beyond—when my grandparents, old and in failing health, needed family the way old, failing Hartford needed people like Harvey and his friends—those five and I would work to understand the answers. What do we owe the people and places who made us? And how much must we sacrifice to pay that debt?

Then, times would come when each of us would choose: to stand by Hartford or abandon it.

one

I want to go back East away from the new,

where the sky is small, domestic as a tablecloth

smoothed pretty by God's unbearable lucent hands,

to go to the old city where I was young,

and the Atlantic wind pinched my cheeks . . .

ALIKI BARNSTONE

"Back East Out West with Roger Williams"

1

Busted for drugs?

Naw, man. Beefin', and he got shot.

I heard it was a knife, yo.

The freshmen traded rumors. Something from Hartford's streets had crept into football practice and snatched away a teammate. The players let the news drag their attention from blocking drills and wind sprints, so the coaches blew their whistles to end the workout and call the freshmen for a speech. Derrick Walker, fifteen years old, unsnapped his chin strap and lifted off his helmet, then bent to rest one knee on the dirt. Most of the freshmen took a knee, and they made a three-deep circle around Coach Ferguson.

They called their coach Homer. When he wasn't coaching Hartford Public's freshman team, he was an assistant with the varsity, and when he wasn't doing either of those things, he was a security guard at the school. He liked to laugh with students in the halls, teasing them with good-

natured insults as they bumped and dawdled in the sally between classes. He joked so often that when he wanted them to take him seriously he had to say, "All jokes aside" or "In all seriousness." They thought of him as a chubby kind of Cool Daddy, with his slicked-back hair and dark skin. He rode a chopper.

Now Homer was about to give a speech to his freshmen. Something bad had happened; they'd lost someone.

All jokes aside. He began.

You are lucky to be part of this team! Look around you. Years from now, some of you won't be here. You'll be incarcerated. You'll be dead. You'll be on a sidewalk strung out. So what you've got now is special. And I'm not talking about football. Football is football. No big thing. But life is life. You've got friends here. Teammates. You have to enjoy this, start making the right decisions. Make football a tool. Use it. Build on it. The things you learn here can carry over and make you a better person in life.

All around him was the staleness of adolescent sweat soaked into shoulder pads and jerseys. A few guys flicked dirt off their cleats; others watched rush-hour traffic thicken on Farmington Avenue. Some didn't pay Homer any mind. City kids, they couldn't step off a sidewalk without somebody giving a speech, wanting to save a life.

But Derrick Walker heard Homer and listened hard. Here was a coach sounding like a parent, caring about something more than how to read a play or break a tackle. The speech made sense to Derrick, the same way the counter-trap made sense. That was Derrick's play. When it worked, Derrick ran with the ball ten or fifteen yards into the other team's territory. But if a blocker failed to spring the trap, some moose from a suburban school might drop Derrick on his rear before he gained a foot. After a busted

play like that, some fellas would come back to the huddle full of red-eyed fury. Mother this and mother that . . . ! But that wasn't Derrick's way. He'd get down on himself for his own failures, but clap and cheer for any other guy who needed a lift, who'd messed up, blown a play. Derrick would give him a hand, help him up, even if it was Derrick's butt that had been ground into the turf when this guy missed his block.

That's what Homer meant. Forgive each other. Rely on one another. Don't go it alone. Set a common goal and work for it. Derrick knew a little bit about teamwork, and was only now beginning to understand what a strange miracle it was, all those separate brains and separate bodies somehow meshing the way a thousand-thousand blades of grass come together to turn a field green. For it to work, each player had to be aware of what he could do and what he couldn't. Running backs ran. Linemen blocked. Quarterbacks passed. Quarterbacks didn't block. Linemen didn't pass. You used whatever part of you helped the team, and you put aside everything else (even that anger at another broken play). In that sliver of time between referees' whistles, you attended to your own work, acted as an individual, and yet something more happened. You pushed a man out of the way, and the team scored a touchdown.

That was how Derrick heard Homer's message: *together, you change the game.*

Homer ended his speech; the players jogged back to their basement locker room, and, surrounded by his team, Derrick felt comforted and grateful. He was young. He didn't yet know how Homer's message would guide his life; maybe it was only that Homer put words to the way Derrick already knew he wanted to live. It was 1986, Der-

rick was a freshman, and soon, steered by the truths he'd known and Homer had named, Derrick would join with friends to make a different sort of team, a different sort of street gang.

They numbered five.

Eric Shorter played quarterback and hated to lose. When the Owls were down, Eric chewed his lip and squinted. Sometimes he cursed out his teammates. He was Derrick's best friend and had been since middle school, and to see one without the other was like seeing Batman without Robin. Neither had a father at home. Derrick's had left when he was young. Eric lost his to prison when his father killed a man.

Harvey Kendall joined them, too; Harvey who even in helmets and bulky padding could move with frightening grace and speed. Striding downfield, catching passes no one else could, it was as if he had skipped adolescence, pulled a man's body on with his uniform. He was the tallest on the team, and the best athlete, splitting time between the freshman squad and the varsity.

And there was Hiram Harrington, a punishing running back who made the most of the play they called "The Gut." He'd run straight into a crush of tacklers, and though he ran nearly upright, anyone who tried to stop him was offering himself as a sacrifice. Off the field Hiram seemed lethargic, slow-moving, observant. A comedian, too, always bantering, snickering about somebody's bad hair or new sneakers, anything to mess with your mind.

Come basketball season, they would be joined by Joshua Hall, a baby-faced, serious kid who played without the street fury other Hartford teenagers brought to the court. In fact, he stood out at Hartford Public because he wasn't street. Joshua had grown up——and still lived—in one of

Hartford's gentlest and most picturesque neighborhoods. His childhood was one of block parties and yards without fences, in a place that had been a model of integration in the 1970s until more and more white families hammered "For Sale" signs into their lawns.

The five became friends gradually: after football practice; in the loud cinder block hallways of Hartford Public; during classes; at a city park, lounging on the hood of an '87 Chevrolet Celebrity, watching girls in tight pants and high heels, girls who bared their shoulders and wore earrings loud as Christmas tree ornaments. Mostly their friendship found its cement on treks home after school. Walking together shortened the distances. They joked, and they complained about homework and argued about sports, and by traveling in numbers they were less likely to draw the attention of gang members who were always preying on youngsters, taunting them, demanding allegiance none of the five friends wanted to give.

They talked about that, too, and about what else was wrong with Hartford. They knew who was hungry in their neighborhoods, knew what hunger meant, because some of them—like Harvey—had come home to the bald white light of an empty refrigerator. They recognized racism because some of them—like Joshua—hated how they frightened white people just by being young, male, and black. They heard gunshots echo off abandoned buildings, and they watched friends turn—as Homer, the coach, had warned—into gangsters, into addicts, into prisoners, sometimes into corpses. So many kids gone wrong, the list so long, they'd remember the faces but forget the names, ask each other, "Who was he, that guy Homer gave the speech about?" Shake their heads. Breathe deep. Nope. Nope.

The five talked, but their repeated stories and com-

plaints circled round and round, frustration underlining what they already knew, anger putting fresh exclamation points on the ends of old sentences.

In 1986 Hartford was badly broken, small and hard and well past its Golden Age. It was a city of broken street lamps and blaring car alarms and people shouting at each other from tenement windows. Sirens. Sirens at any time of day. In any neighborhood. That fall of 1986, on Laurel Street and on Kensington and even in the governor's mansion, people were talking about this new drug—crack—making its way up from New York City, and how it would change everything, make all the rape and robbery and violence worse. Already in Hartford too many people lived in crumbling fortress-apartments behind brick walls and steel doors marked with spray paint.

Long a home to immigrants, such as my Polish great-grandparents and my Irish great-great-grandparents, Connecticut's capital city had become a city of emigrants, too, a place where people came to live until they could leave for someplace better. When neighbors arrived, they came from everywhere: the American South, the Caribbean, Europe, Asia. Together they made a city rich in all the signs of sidewalk culture—a Turkish restaurant near a Greek social club, reggae music and salsa, calzones, kielbasa, do-rags, and tricked-out sedans. When neighbors left, it was often because they could now afford to live in a town that had less need for deadbolts and door chains and first-floor window bars. What Hartford's people had in common was addresses in a city that was to be survived and endured, then—oftentimes—abandoned.

The exodus repeated itself on a small scale every day at rush hour, and the five friends noticed and were troubled by it. After school, after practice, they often caught a city bus on the E line, riding it over pothole-filled roads with oiled seams and broken curbs and littered with bags from Dunkin' Donuts or McDonald's. They rode the bus east into downtown, past Marshall Street where it seemed crack had visited every door and turned the buildings hollow. The bus bumped and shook past the national headquarters of Ætna Insurance and then past the spot where a grander, Gilded Age version of Hartford Public High School once stood, an elegant building that had been torn down and was replaced now by a patch of weeds and an interstate highway.

Downtown at the turn of the twenty-first century was not so much different from the downtown the five friends knew more than a decade earlier. When I visited the city center in May 2000, I walked along streets that cut deep canyons between office towers, many of the skyscrapers built on the strength of the city's insurance industry: Phoenix Mutual Life Insurance, Hartford Steam Boiler Inspection and Insurance, Traveler's, and Ætna, and dozens of others. There was little sun. The skyscrapers stood too high, the streets ran too skinny to allow direct light except for the few midday minutes when the sun reached overhead. The lack of light washed downtown in a perpetual gloom. At the workday's end, people crowded the sidewalks. Suburbanites—mostly white—walked grim-faced to parking garages, quick and determined, as if nothing, not man nor God, could prevent their escape from the city. Darker-skinned people—mostly Hispanic and black—waited at the main transfer site for buses that would carry them a dozen or more blocks. Some would ride home to small houses with yards and cyclone fences that kept garbage from blowing off the streets into their neatly tended

rose beds. Others ended the day in apartments with dark hallways where light bulbs that weren't smashed were burned out, or at Nelton Court or Stowe Village or Dutch Point Colony or some other treeless public housing project where outside at basketball courts kids bounced off broken box springs to dunk on netless hoops.

Today was a Wednesday, and there was a silence to the rush-hour bustle. If someone laughed, others turned to stare, to accuse. An ambulance honked its way through tight traffic. In the distance, a man played a trumpet: "From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli" was the only phrase he knew, and he played it over and over. A boy walked alongside the high wrought iron fence that surrounds the Old State House, Connecticut's first capitol building. He ripped a sheet of paper into bits and let them drift with the wind, littering the littered sidewalk. People ignored him. He acted as alone in the crowd as if the streets stood empty.

A bus stopped at the curb, and the crowd shifted forward, swaying side to side as each person took child-steps toward the bus doors. Among them was a teenage boy wearing a backpack, its strap marked in glittering paint: "RIP Quanny." It was a reference to a fourteen-year-old boy who, after a night of joyriding and troublemaking, was shot to death while fleeing Hartford police. Quanny was black, the officer white.

Not long after, the rush was over. City buses had filled and driven away. Cars in a line heading for the suburbs had fought their way to either of the two interstates that join near Hartford's center amidst a series of on- and off-ramps that look from above like the ribbon on a concrete gift. Now the downtown traffic was so light a stray cat

crossed the street with no sense of urgency. Of the few people left on the sidewalks, some looked as if they might sleep in doorways.

Eric and Derrick, Harvey, Hiram and Joshua saw this retreat from the city over and over again: white people rushing to their cars, fleeing to the suburbs, trying not to be the last to escape. Most of those white faces belonged to strangers, but what particularly hurt was how many of them belonged to teachers and coaches. Or bosses at the office supply store where Eric and Derrick worked. Or people who did business with Hiram's father. Or police officers. Or firefighters.

Each of the five friends caught a different bus home. When Harvey stepped off in his neighborhood and walked past a corner where drunks gathered around a telephone pole, he wondered what it would be like to have neighbors who were teachers or police officers or bosses at a supply store.

He wanted to be that neighbor.

"Harvey was always the one who always talked about coming back," Joshua told me years later. "He always talked about coaching or starting a rec center. He always felt it was his obligation to do something like that. I think we all just took that on."

"We all had a vision," said Eric, "and we talked about that vision."

They felt blessed. Not all of them enjoyed easy lives; the electricity might be shut off for a month, now and then a neighbor threatened violence. But unlike so many of their schoolmates, they each had parents who loved them, and they each knew adults—like Butch Braswell—who recognized their young talents and encouraged them. The five friends felt obligated to share what grace had come to

them, and so, while still in high school, Eric and Derrick, Harvey, Hiram and Joshua pledged their lives to their city.

They made their pledge with the naiveté of youth and the wisdom of the street, and they made it because they loved justice and their neighbors. The promise emerged not in one moment with a secret handshake, fingers cut and blood mingled, but instead out of those hours spent together and out of their complaints, which they could make only so long until a solution revealed itself.

They would leave home for college, but the pledge required that they come back with their degrees, live within Hartford's limits, wrestle with its wrongs, love the city and make things right. It was a serious promise, and they made it not only to Hartford but to each other.

"We felt it was our duty to come back here and clean some of this nonsense up," Harvey said, nearly a decade after he and the others began their mission. "Take any inner-city kid. Our life expectancy is short. We're supposed to be a statistic. We're supposed to be in jail or working a low-paying job. Ten different children by ten different mothers. We're supposed to either be not doing anything in our lives or not making a difference in nobody's lives."

The five friends wanted to defy the statistics. Or maybe they wanted to be a different kind of statistic, the kind nobody counts.

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Q: Now, had you seen your husband walking towards the door?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you see the gun in his hand?

Deposition of Linda Shorter, recorded by Cowan, Cheryl B., court reporter, Circuit Court for Pinellas County, Florida, November 15, 1973.

August along Florida's Suncoast usually means sunny mornings and muggy afternoons until the building thunderstorm breaks, dropping the temperature and raising the humidity so that the stickiness index is always about the same. Saturday, August 4, 1973, was different. It was well past thunder-shower hour when Robert Shorter arrived home from a sweaty day of work, and there hadn't been a drop of rain. All day long he'd worked wires and fuses as an electrician, with help from his cousin and best friend, James Cooper, the two of them hustling all over Pi-