

COME TO ME
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On the afternoon of March 6th, 1988, Marcus Adams ate dirt. Rather, momentum, gravity, and mortal fear conspired to scoop a handful of soil into his startled mouth, open due to breathing heavily while he sprinted away from his pursuer. Marcus was flung to the ground near the corner of Louisa and Urquhart streets because of making the elemental but youthful mistake of looking back. Curiously however, the resulting contortion ended up saving his head, as a bullet zipped above him, ricocheting off of the cemetery wall to his immediate right. The longer lasting second crack was that of thunder, its piercing rip lifted and sent him jack-knifed and stumbling around the corner toward the cemetery gate in the middle of the block. He was soon still, after initially trembling and attempting to clear his mouth and throat while desperately catching his breath in what his 8th grade music teacher would officiously define as a meter of 4/8 time with a tempo of 80 beats per minute. Marcus was still. His only movement was that of craning to check the multiple lines of vision, confirming that the two bricks he had initially seen behind the tomb were at his feet, and instinctively glancing at

the dark enveloping sky steadily releasing cold sheets of rain without having introduced a few preliminary lightly spaced drops to serve as notice. It was not a day for notice, there was certainly no tip-off that two gunmen were going to shoot at him and his brother only minutes earlier.

Marcus felt persistent tapping on his head, and he shivered from his already damp clothes beginning to grab and cling, defining his body with a second skin before abruptly denying it by releasing and sagging, weighting and hanging to subordinate his former frame. He took off his shirt and tied it around his forehead in a conscious attempt to keep his eyes better cleared and also as a last-ditch effort to reject the encroaching change brought by the showers. As he did he smelled the rain mixed with his own sweat but otherwise detected no other scents in the air, not yet the gunman with his own sweat, not food, for there were no restaurants or corner markets near, not asphalt like in certain other neighborhoods, for these roads rarely tended to be resurfaced, their potholes left to worsen, not coffee, for though there were manufacturing plants roasting around the city, the factories in the close vicinity of the cemetery were mostly abandoned, and not a strange acrid smell, for the marsh fires typically limited their scent of dead vegetation alchemy merely to surrounding New Orleans East, particularly those like Marcus' girlfriend who lived near Michoud Boulevard.

“This from Kristina,” was the only phrase Marcus heard and retained among the torrent spat at them after a car stopped and two barely older kids rushed to the sidewalk, led by the symbols thrust in front of them like profane prophets unyieldingly guided to their mission. Marcus initially froze when he heard it, “This from Kristina,” but Jamal was unencumbered by Marcus’ split-second emotional register span of being stunned, dismayed, angry and terrified. Jamal’s darting movement cleared Marcus’ head, and even though neither he nor his older brother were into street life and had not so much as touched a gun before, they both knew what everyone knows, that it makes little difference what anyone says to you when they are walking tall and pointing steel at your eyes. Jamal continued downriver, so Marcus headed the other direction, which caught the gunmen by surprise, sending the first shots fired errant of the targets. Hiding in St. Vincent De Paul #1 might seem a foolish idea. Why not zig zag up the street, making the assumption that the youthful pursuer’s shooting prowess was limited, or instead quickly hop behind the parked cars to proceed up the opposite side of the block, but Marcus wanted to stop and collect himself, so the cemetery was his waiting place. Although there was another gate at Piety Street across the main alley, direct passage to it would leave him exposed as if on the streets. Also, there were ten foot surrounding walls, which Marcus could likely scale from the inside by using the shelves of the wall vaults as steps, but which would also limit and trap him.

He did not enter the cemetery for these flawed means of escape, as far as he was concerned, exit was limited to the 150 year old iron gate by which he entered. Instinct, of both the moment and of a tactic, drove him not only directly into the cemetery but specifically to wait behind one particular tomb off to the left, barely inside Alley 2 from the outer perimeter. In this way, Marcus would appear to be trapped but could instead shift the balance to reverse roles. As he peered at the back of one of the tombs that flanked him, the spectrum of black, white, and grey patterns of weathered stucco an outer covering still thick enough so that no outline of bricks peeked through, Marcus thought about the duelist who owned these cemeteries over a century ago, the one who lived in the house overlooking this particular cemetery, the two-story shotgun with the overgrown lot which was becoming increasingly covered with vines ever since elderly Miss Lucy went away, Marcus thought about the stories he had heard for years about a duelist, a Spanish duelist in fact, who was unmatched in knives, swords, and firearms, how in those days over a century ago, there was a code, only then the rich men lived by the code of honor that said you did not back down, there was no excuse, and if you showed yourself a coward, you may as well promptly leave town. Little had changed other than that the code was now solely in and of the language of the streets, no longer in houses that had chandeliers and servants, but in the streets where the servants

lived. As he looked at the brick in each hand, Marcus laughed a laugh like his momma often did, one that rarely included a smile, used the nose more than the mouth, sounding like a snort rather than a chuckle, and showed eyes that sagely reflected, not amusingly twinkled. Though Marcus laughed this laugh, his eyes stung in the way hers never had, at least in front of him.

As his mind continued to graze, Marcus saw none of the stray cats that often slept in the shade of the tombs, or sun-bathed and played, occasionally knocking over the vases until the caretaker Charles drove them off, there was also no sign of Charles, maybe he had gone into the maintenance building to step out of the rain, was taking a nap, or would soon arrive with a shotgun kept tucked away, any of these were possibilities, especially the latter, but Marcus understood that the immediate situation involved two people and would most likely be resolved by only two people. This was neither his usual role nor was it his choice, but as it chose him, he had no alternative but to accept. What would the duelist have done if he was attacked outside his house and had no way of getting back inside to defend himself, would he not have also run to the cemetery to collect, prepare, and wait to respond? Marcus' momma regularly said, "The holy one rose again so that we can gird ourselves for the day of return." Marcus was

girded in his way, he was not exempt from the cycle of the city's perpetual girding, and he welcomed the duelist's form to slowly become his over the past fifteen years, all of this was not about resurrection but the other thing, the thing which was inevitable.

Marcus knew the tomb he was standing behind as if his ancestors were *The Family of Manuel Suarez*, a few of the three rows and three columns of rectangular inscription tablets especially worn, the ones Charles said were made of sugar marble, and most importantly, the name carved into the tablet on the lower right side, Joseph Llulla Sr.. Marcus grew up and lived a few streets away from the three cemeteries, each of them on an adjacent block to form a capital letter L like in Llulla, and for years he occasionally retreated from housework and homework to walk the brick paths, take in the tombs, the stones, the cats, the names, some of which read like his classmates' names, while others seemed to come from another world, a time in which they must have spoken differently but yet still died, the same as we all do. The caretaker, though initially wary, came to understand the child's appreciation and did not hassle him so long as he only visited when the white folks were not around to pay respects to their people. "Some of them, they see one face, think it's all faces," Charles said, with a learned *that-is-how-it-is* tone. Marcus understood but was still disappointed

whenever the caretaker, forty years his senior, broke off a story, wiped his brow, sent the boy off, and attended to those mostly of other parishes who were concerned for their safety. Marcus delighted in the stories, some brief, most longer, all of them delivered in Charles' steady manner, the caretaker occasionally accenting the conclusion with, "I may not be able to feather my nest, me, but I've got stories. Most everybody comes here wants to tell a man about the family story, even a black man."

Marcus thought there was a slight chance that word would get around and chain its way back to Kristina, but he did not expect the story about him and her sister to make it back to her so quickly. The streets have ears and they talk, so he should have known. Kristina was prone to furious behavior. Would she go this far, though? What could he redo to undo what was done? "This from Kristina," is what he heard, it was what was said. She would have to answer for this, but now he needed to take care of the situation at hand. First the one pursuing him and next the one chasing Jamal. "Come to me, both of you," Marcus said to the sky and the stones, balancing both bricks in his left hand, jabbing his right pointer finger across the blood still running from his scuffed knuckles, then scraping across the mix of mud and brick dust, before spreading it along his chest with a vertical swipe downward and a shorter horizontal line leading to his left. That the rain would quickly wash it away was of no matter.
