

Thugs



Frederick Foote

On this cold December evening in 1962, we're in North Philly again on another dubious mission. Walter, Houston and me, Teofilo Jackson. Memories of our last SNAFU weigh heavy on me and Houston's minds—we got lost, our dates gave up on us, and someone lifted Houston's wallet. I'm beginning to doubt there's very much brotherly love in this city for us GIs. It's a quick bus ride from the McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey, some thirty miles outside of Philadelphia. And, once again, we find ourselves running late.

We're off to see three sisters: Anhinga, Tern and Teal. These names don't inspire much confidence at all. Who, in their right minds, would name their daughters like that? These are, according to Walter, "truly red hot foxes." The problem is Walter has strange taste in women. I mean, he dates one of the finest women I have ever seen, but he also dates some skanks, and just strange, odd, off-the-wall type women. We've never even seen a picture of these women. Walter met Anhinga on the bus coming from the City. On the basis of that slender contact, we're expending time and money to check this out. Houston and I don't have high hopes, but Walter's cool, and he has rolled on some crash and burn missions with us before. We owe him this one.

"Man, if we cut across there we can save about ten minutes," he says. The "there" Walter's talking about is the projects. Walter's good with maps so we rely on his navigation, but the projects are clear danger zones.

We all know better. These projects are gang turf. Intruders are not welcome. The men are not in uniform and projects gangs are leery of all outsiders. But the reward is worth the risk—even if Anhinga and her sisters are as ugly as homemade sin we need to redeem ourselves and make it there before they give up on us too. That shit could become habit forming.

We enter the enemy space, stepping quick, but not running, as we proceed across the no-man's land of high-rise concrete canyons. They let us get halfway through before they show themselves—a handful of gangsters block our path and surround us. Shit, they the most dangerous thugs of all, not the adult full grown gangsters or the fifteen to eighteen year-old apprentice gangsters, no these are the twelve to fourteen year-olds. Wild-ass kids out of control of parents, school and God. Even the older gangsters don't know what to make of the wild young ones. These little monsters probably kill and maim just to past the time of day. There are eight or nine of them. They look as happy to ambush us as regular kids do on Christmas morning. They herd us off the main path to a patch of bare ground invisible from the street.

“You lame ass niggers must be crazy. What you doing up in here?” The small, thin and very black, gang leader, with a head too big for his body, approaches us. He's not so impressive except for the open switch blade he tosses from hand to hand with ease and confidence.

“Faggot social workers come to take somebody's kids,” says a tall, skinny kid with a letter jacket, a do rag and tennis shoes so raggedy that his rusty feet show through.

“Jack, you fucking blind. These ain’t no damn social workers. They selling insurance or some shit,” says a short and stout thug with a big natural, and thick brutal bruised knuckled hands.

Houston tries to speak. “Look fellows we mean no harm. We—”

The boys dissolve into laughter, and mess with Houston for a while.

“Man you sound like you got a mouth full of shit.”

“That boy from way down yonder.”

“You talk too sloooooow Negro. You got dropsy or something.”

“Where you from dufus?” A good looking brown skin boy in a sweatshirt and leather jacket, turns and starts talking to me.

“California.” I say it offhand without any sense of pride.

A visible wave of disbelief passes over the boys.

“That nigger lying. He from Newark. Shit, I know his sister.”

“Shit, me too. She sucked my dick last night.”

“Who you trying to fool suckers? We’ll beat the black off you Jersey fools.”

“If he from California, I’m James Bonds”

“That nigger can’t spell California.”

“He ain’t got no surf board. Where your surf board, nigger?”

When the boys finally quiet down a bit, I continue. “I’m Teofilo –”

I have to wait for a new round of laughter to subside. “And this is Walter. He’s from California too. And this is Houston. He’s from Texas by way of Alabama. And, you right about me being from Jersey. We stationed at McGuire Air Force Base in Jersey, but my homes in California. I was born and raised there.”

The boys have a hundred questions about California, Hollywood, and my home town, "Oak Land." They demand proof that I'm from California. Walter and I show them our California driver's licenses. Each of them has to look at both licenses, twice.

The key questions Walter and I always get are: do we know any movie stars? Have we seen any movie stars? That kind of stuff.

"Sure, I know a movie star. I know Harry Belafonte," I say.

None of them believe me. Even Walter and Houston grimace when I say that. I banter with the boys for a while and finally I pull out my wallet again and remove a picture of me and my moms with Harry Belafonte. The gangsters are almost hysterical with glee. They keep passing the picture around, but they're very careful with it. They won't let one snotty nose boy touch the picture. They hold it out in front of him for inspection Shorty, the switch blade boy, says he going to hold onto my Belafonte picture until we come back. Shit, my moms has the negative of that picture. I think of Shorty's picture as paying a toll. But, I think I'll not be using his toll road again anytime soon. My uncle works as a set builder in Hollywood, and got us the picture with Mr. Belafonte. I also have a picture with me and Marilyn Monroe, which I keep at home. But I don't tell anyone about that picture. That's too special to share.

We soon arrive at a warm, comfortable row house full of good cooking. At last a place in Philly where GIs are welcomed and appreciated. Anhinga is a lovely, tall, coffee colored, twenty-year old woman with straight hair, a long face, huge eyes and sensuous lips. She's smart and claims to play a mean boogie woogie piano. Tern is

eighteen, a bit shorter with brown skin, curly, close-cropped hair and a face designed to laugh and smile. She plays flute and sax and believes that she's a better musician than her big sister. I claim her on sight. She don't object. I give Walter the thumbs up sign when the sisters aren't watching. Teal is seventeen, light skinned, with hair that's a blending of straight and curly. She's the shortest and stacked like a brick house. She's the family percussionist, but she plays just about any instrument. She's hot. They all share large eyes, a gracious manner and a southern Louisiana accent. We have hit the jackpot.

Their mother's a school teacher, the family piano instructor, and lead vocalist. Their father's a postal worker and a big thumping bass player. We eat gumbo, rice, baked country ham, greens, cornbread, sweet tea, apple and peach cobbler and pecan pie. After stuffing ourselves, we move back the living room furniture, roll back the rug and they get their instruments. The family plays up a storm and shake the rafters. We dance, talk, joke around, laugh and laugh and eat some more. I can't remember the last time I had such a good time without liquor or weed. By the time we have to go, I'm in love with the whole damn Durant family. What I don't understand, is how the local brothers cannot be all up on these girls. In my neighborhood there would be a line of guys stretching down the block to talk to these music making, booty-shaking women. We ain't had nothing stronger than tea to drink, but the three of us are high as we can be as we leave our new favorite place.

We barely clear the stoop when they come at us—five young black men dressed in dark dress pants and heavy dark coats with spit-shined Stacy Adams on their big ass feet. They're about our age but

look to be ten years of prison hard knocks tougher. They try to surround us but we keep the stoop at our back.

“You gentleman lost? You don’t look like you from around here.” The speaker has his coat open. He has on a sharp, pin striped dark blue suit, a black shirt and a maroon tie. He smiles like a shark looking at a tuna fish.

Walter looks at each of the gangsters in turn before responding. “Deacons, brothers, you didn’t have to come out here on a cold night like this just to welcome us to the neighborhood. We thank you for--”

A heavy set gangster cuts Walter off. “We ain’t no deacons chump. We here to put you poachers in check, send your punk asses to the emergency room or the morgue.”

Walter smiles at the interrupter and points at him. “Baptist, I was just telling my friends you guys don’t dress good enough to be Methodist or Episcopalian you got to be Baptist.”

A tall, skinny yellow Negro with gap teeth spits out a response. “Shit, who you talking about you Salvation Army-dressing Negro?”

Houston answers him immediately. “Brother I’m gonna pray for you, for God to heal your color blind ass, mixing that garbage green shirt with that piss colored tie.”

“Hold on, hold on now, where you niggers from? Tell me now because I want to know where to send the bodies of you trash talking fools,” says Pinstripe Suit, holding out his hand to quiet his boys and take control.

It’s my turn to get in on this. “Whoa, whoa, yourself Reverend, that’s classified information. We can’t tell you that, right?” I look to Houston and Walter for conformation.

Walter shakes his head and responds. "It's OK. I think it'll be OK. They's men of the cloth and he old enough to know."

I shrug OK. "Well, last night I was with your mama."

Houston quickly adds, "I was with your girlfriend. She told me tell you, goodbye and so long."

Walter dashes in with the last word. "Shit, I was with your sister. And it was OK once I got that sack over her head."

We have lit the fuses and we all explode into action. Pinstripe moves in, swinging at Walter. Walter ducks, twist to the side and kicks pin stripe in the gut. It don't even slow Pinstripe down. I see Houston land a quick combination on the heavysset Negro before the tall yellow Negro catches me with a solid right hand on the left side of my head. Somebody kicks me in the side on the way down. I hit the sidewalk hard. I kick up and catch one of them in the balls. He grunts, grimaces and slides away from the action. I know we're going to lose. There's too many and they're seasoned street fighters, but we got no choice here. I'm covering up as fist and feet are coming at me from every direction.

There is a click, a little sharp click that freezes all us sweating fools in the cold night air. A second click and we turn toward the sound of the double-barreled shotgun being cocked. Mr. Durant's on his stoop with his shotgun at his shoulder.

"Chester, I'm losing my patience with you boy," he says to Pinstripe Suit. "We can end this here and now or you can walk away from here and never bother my family again, your choice boy."

Chester starts to say something, but Durant cuts him off. "Time for talking's over. Walk or pull that little pistol of yours," he says.

Chester looks at Mr. Durant like he's thinking about his chances. Finally, Chester shakes his head. He and his boys resentfully move on off down the street, throwing evil looks at us and muttering under their breath.

The angels of mercy rescue us from the stoop and help us into their house. We got our bumps and lumps, but there're no broken bones. And the nurses, my God, I would take an ass whipping any day to have Tern hold my head in her lap and nurse me with loving hands and tender kisses. Mr. Durant drives us to the EL. We don't wait for our train. We take the first thing smoking. As the train's pulling off Houston points out the window at the platform. Them same damn Baptist gangsters are boiling up on the platform. Man, I'm sure glad to see these Philly boys are at least fighting for something worth fighting for.

Oh, just to let you know, we never do get back to the Durants. A few days after the Battle of Durant Stoop, Walter gets a letter from Anhinga apologizing to us. She says that she's trying to make things work out for her and Chester before somebody gets killed. Her whole family's now against her and that her sisters were not even speaking to her anymore.

And you know what that damn Walter did? He wrote her back and told her to stick to her guns and do what she needed to do. He told her that her family loves her and that they would come around. Houston and I were furious with Walter for a day or two. Houston still hasn't forgiven him, but he will, and next week we'll be on the road again after payday.