

## **Mack and Mount Elliott.**

Salvation is right across the street.

Northwest: Grandy's Coney Island. Open never, open always, occasionally 24 hours a day. Never before 5am, never after 3am. But the light will be on and the cook keeps a .32 and knows enough english to fry them wing dings extra hard. Sit down in there if you want to be asked a question. Sit if you're feeling generous; someone is going to need you to pay for their corned beef. Sit if you want to know who to know because you just got back in the game and the block ain't quite what it was before you went down for a minute. Just sit back and wait, someone is coming in or pulling up and they got the answers. If they're open. If they're closed, cross the street.

Southeast: Sammy learned that if you call it something, you can charge more. So he sold his sign rights over to Citgo for 15% of every pump and spent an afternoon replacing the sign above the door and smaller ones for the four pumps with bright, orange, red and white lettering. Lying. Talmbout, this good gas now. Sammy swept the lot himself, turning down Big Baby and Ms. Kim who both offered and assumed it was their job to have, for a loosie, a couple dollars and a place to spend the afternoon. Big Baby and Ms. Kim watched Sammy's fervor. He swept hard, kicking up months of their shoddy work—botts, bottles, foil cigar packages, lighters with no silver heads, baggies, chips, juice bottles half finished, napkins pinched into balls, he swept, looked at his little kingdom and dumped his dustpan in the back, by the house next door. There was a rumor that the house was coming down. He had chased dogs from in there—he let the people alone. Big Baby and Ms. Kim passed a small bottle of vodka between them and

scoffed at the cleared ground. Too much change isn't good, Big Baby thought. Ms. Kim scoured the ground for pennies but Sammy had swept those up too. They stood under the awning. The drive thru at Grandy's was narrower than a needle and had a line of cars waiting. People were always more generous when they were locked in. Big Baby knew that from his last go round at Mound. Kim knew that from right there. Sammy was back outside with his extended ladder. He laid it on the sign above them and slowly climbed rung by rung until he reached the gas price on his bright, new-name, old gas sign. He reached into the letter frame, slid out the '2' and replaced it with '4'. He climbed down proudly and looked up. Big Baby and Ms. Kim didn't move. A car pulled in. "You got it," Ms. Kim whispered to him. She stepped off the curb and into the street. The drive thru at Grandy's was crawling; at least 5 more cars curled around Mt. Elliott. She went over, started from the back, leaned into the driver's side, waved and smiled her single tooth smile, "GOD BLESS YOU! DO YOU HAVE ANY CHANGE? GOD BLESS YOU. OKAY, THANK YOU." To the next car, "GOD BLESS YOU. CHANGE?" When she said "change" her eyes would soften and her hands would fall open like a saint. "GOD BLESS YOU, CHANGE?"

A Nissan lost patience and inched out of the line, made a u-turn and hit the curb pulling into the gas station. Big Baby was waiting for them. "Pump your gas?" Big Baby was tired. His body was warm from vodka. After this he thought of making the short walk to his grandmother's house on Helen. The woman in the Nissan was in maroon scrubs and looked tired too. Big Baby had a sweet face and it barely moved when he was talking. The woman looked at him and shook her head no. She didn't need gas. But she didn't move. She held a twenty dollar bill loosely in her lap and darted her eyes around.

It would've been breakfast and she would've gone on but the line was too long and her longing too great. She looked at Big Baby. "I don't need gas." Big Baby looked at her uniform—maybe she worked at one of the homes on the boulevard. He knew. He leaned into her window and said, "I'll cross the street for you if you can spare a couple dollars." She nodded.

Ms. Kim watched from the parking lot as Big Baby jogged over to Queen Afua's castle.

The Nissan waited.

Southwest: Queen Afua's castle was an enormous church-turned-school-turned memory that had been stripped so thoroughly and expertly that driving by one can see even the blades of the ceiling fans had been removed. Big Baby avoided the grand entrance on Mt. Elliott, with its three stone arched doorways leading to a makeshift open air market. Instead he used the back entrance—a cracked piece of plywood loosely covering back windows. The back avoided the cameras across the street, avoided the Jesus people out front offering free clothes and phones and made it so that, if he wanted to, and he hadn't decided yet, he could walk around the long way and just disappear. He bent over and ducked inside. Permanent rain dripped in the hallway, its echo bouncing around the high ceilings. The floors mostly stayed put. A sign on the wall with a faded portrait of Queen Afua commanded that all inside "Be true to your history, be kind to your future." He remembered seeing the Queen Afua Academy as a teenager. The kids lined up at the front doors every morning he would ride by on his way up to MLK. Then, one day, there were no more children. Lime and granite slabs were missing every few feet and he danced toward the corner room where his friends

were always waiting. Peeks of sunlight pushed through the empty windows. Wind moved through, making an orchestra of loose wires, flapping plastic and glass shards still sitting in their frames. The room where his friends could always be found had accumulated some things. Couches, a chair, two shopping carts. A hotel lamp. The whole building smelled like piss and smoke but every few rooms waves of old frankincense would flare up and dissipate. In the room, he was not the first but among the earliest visitors of the morning. Everyone's mood was up. He wondered if his grandmother was making breakfast. Two for 10. That's what he asked for. He took his ten dollar bill and tucked it into his coat pocket. If the store was open he'da got a bottle. But it wasn't and wouldn't be—they packed up when Team Mental Health did that crazy shit and opened a rehab right. Across. The. street. He went back down the hallway, away from his friends. He went back outside, fingering the baggies in his pocket, next to the bill. The Nissan was still sitting there, burning gas. Smoke trailed out of the window. Big Baby walked back over. He didn't feel like running away, his feet hurt.

“This what they got.” He leaned down into the Nissan's front window and startled the driver. She jumped and dropped her cigarette by her feet.

“Shit.” She opened the car door, bent down, found it carefully, took a final pull and handed it to him. He took it and put it between his lips.

He handed her the two tiny bags, dropping them in her lap. “I kept the 5 back from it.” She looked at her lap and tried to start her car, forgetting it was on. The screech of the engine scared them both.

Sammy opened the door to the store. “Okay? You okay?” Big Baby nodded. The woman turned off her car, turned it back on and sped away. Big Baby stood and finished

smoking. A few minutes later, the Nissan came back down Mack and he watched as she turned her car into the gated Team Mental Health parking lot.

Northeast: Team Mental Health was a bully. The regulars of Mack and Mt. Elliott couldn't stand them. First, construction, day and night. Cars, delivery trucks, materials—just a whole hullabaloo that made Queen Afua less of a refuge. Then the liquor store on the corner just up and shut. Middle of the week. They all suspected the new place had a hand in it. Competing customers. Last summer, Ms. Kim had just come out of Team (as she called it)—she had done her mandatory 10-days to show the court and to show her sister so she could go on and see her kids for a weekend. She walked out and straight to the store where she thought she would go for just a little taste of something but it was all gone. Grate down. The two brothers who owned it left the country, she heard. Back to Syria, or that's what they said at Grandy's while she waited for the bus. She waited and watched as a church turned the lot into a space for a revival. Team would let anyone in there attend, nevermind that it was right next to Queen Afua. Nevermind that if you wanted to, that'd be the time to disappear. She had gone to one while she was there the time before last, when she took herself. "Salvation," the pastor said that time, "is right across the street." She sat and let all that music and preaching just go up in the air and come down in her lap. She had one more day, that last time. One more day but all that hooping, all that hollering, all that Jesus sent her up out of her seat and away. She waited for a bus to pass and ducked behind the gas station to the house. She sat on the sagging back steps and waited until the revival was over then asked Sammy to use the phone. She called her sister to complain. "They just too loud over there, I just—

can't relax in there, they got police strolling around. I can't do it in there, I ain't asking you for shit. Just tell them I'ma come see about them tomorrow." Big Baby appeared, as he did, early in the day. They both stood out in front of Sammy's.

"Heard you was in Team." Big Baby had on a new coat and kept adjusting it proudly.

"They too much over there. I can't do it, fake jail shit. Nah."

"Mmm," he said.

"I just want to be good."

"Mmhmm," he said.

"You hungry?"

Big Baby nodded.

"Aight, lemme go on and see over there." Ms. Kim looked at the Grandy's lot, no cars were lined up but two sat parked in the front, one running. She tapped on the passenger window. From under the awning he watched security lifting Team's gate up, three cars drove out. One was a Nissan, one was a pickup truck and the third was the police.

"They out here looking for you!" Big Baby yelled out to Ms. Kim, laughing. She slipped into Grandy's and that was the last time he saw her for a few months. She came back to Sammy's—the same. As if no time at all had passed and asked about Big Baby's grandmother.

"She good," he lied. He didn't know. He had been gone too.

"Good," Ms. Kim said. "Everybody good."