

King

By Steve Pantazis

Ain't no stereotypes here. I'm straight up thug, ya feel me? I'm a businessman, a deal maker. You need something, you come to me. You bring the green, it's on.

"Whatcha think?" I ask T.

He waits a sec, then says, "Dunno. Don't smell right."

T's got a point. We're sitting in his Escalade, parked on 118th street across from this tore-the-hell-up playground with nothing but broken glass and missing swings. Too quiet for a Saturday. It's hot out, another ninety-something day in New York. I get twitchy when I'm like this. I find myself grabbing my piece, like I need to pull it out and shoot something. T's my main guy, my enforcer. When it's time to get dirty, he comes at ya like a nightmare. Everyone say he's crazy because his parents got shot in front of him when he was four. All I know is if I'm in deep with no way out, T will make a hole and get us out.

"King, when JD getting here?" T asks.

"It's twelve now," I say. "Probably ten, fifteen minutes. Any later and we outta here. We've got too much product to be sittin' like this."

I hear snoring coming from the back seat. "Tell Duane to wake up. This ain't a motel."

T reaches back and punches Duane in the leg. "Up, nigga!"

Duane comes to. He looks at T all pissed, then nods his head respectfully and sits up.

"Get the pump ready," I tell him.

Duane takes the sawed-off shotgun from the seat next to him and puts it on his lap. For a moment, he reminds me of my brother. Darren used to sit all neat like that anytime our mama would get pissed off. Damn, I miss that boy.

Darren died two years ago – just twelve. He was good in school; stayed out of trouble; wanted to be a teacher. I knew he was special. He always looked up to me, though my mama told him not to. "Where you going?" he'd ask when he was getting ready for bed and I was leaving. "Can I come?" I'd tell him no, because baby Gs stay put and out of trouble. But he kept asking. Then, one Friday, I said yes and took him down to the park where he could see his big brother making moves. I didn't know the situation was jacked; that they would be shootin' before we could say *what up*. But they did. I caught a bullet that went straight through my side. Darren – he just lay there, eyes open, blood everywhere. I didn't have time to call for help. We drove off. And then I had to tell my mama that her baby got hit. You ever seen the devil? Even Jesus would have known to back the hell away when my mama stopped crying and looked up.

The only person who didn't hate on me was my grandma. "I ain't saying I forgive you," she said, "but it was Darren's time. Only the Lord decides that, you understand? So fix your life, Curtis. There's a reason the Lord spared you. Don't waste it."

T looks at me. "King?"

I shake my head. "Nothing. Just thinking. See anything yet?"

“Nah. Shorty over there looking good, though.”

Some chick in cornrows and a wife-beat is posted up on the corner with three dudes. The corner boss yells at the kid sitting on the stoop: Get up – customers coming. I used be in his place. Dropped out of school to do it. They say you got to choose; work a real job or work the street. In my case, the street chose me.

A car drives slow down the block and stops. It’s JD and another guy. Shorty talks to JD, then points at us. A sec later, I get a text – *follow* – and we off.

T drives. I rhyme to Mobb Deep on the radio, but really I’m thinking. I can’t get my grandma’s voice out of my head. *Don’t waste it*, she said. But that’s exactly what I’ve been doing; getting arrested, dealing, watching guys like Ringtone and K-Poc getting gunned down over who said what to which punk. Every time I came home and walked past my grandma watching TV, she would look at me, say nothing, but tell me everything with that hard, I-know-where-you-been stare of hers.

“Hey, look who’s creeping,” Duane whispers.

A cop car pulls up next to us. I keep my eyes ahead, rapping and pretending like we out for a ride. I know he’s looking at us. All he has to do is turn his lights on. “Probable cause,” my lawyer said when I got busted two months ago for possession. T was there to pick me up when they let me out. In fact, he’s been there many times. How many guys would take a bullet for you? Let me rephrase that; How many guys would die for you? We were fifteen, out at night playing dice with the 126th street crew, getting our drink on. Older dude named Stub was pissed ‘cause I was up two Benjamins. I told him it was what it was. That’s when he pulled out his .38.

“We just playin’,” I told him. “No need to get up in my face.”

“You fronting like a Westside nigga,” he said. “We up in Harlem, bitch. Ain’t no room for Westside niggas here.”

“Stub, why don’t you chill?” T said. “How about we just pay you and call it even?”

“Nah,” Stub said, still aiming at me. “This lesson time for you young’uns, especially this one.” Stub cocked his gun.

I don’t know why T jumped him, but the gun went off and missed me. I remember T lying on the ground after that, holding his leg, cursing and crying. Everyone was gone, Stub too. “I’m right here,” I told T. “I got you.”

I watch the cop drive off. T eases back in his seat and shakes his head. “I hate them bitches,” he says. “They always playing games, like we guilty. Show me one who ain’t on the take. Punk-ass bitches!” He then turns to me. “Why you grinning?”

“Because you’re you,” I say. “Every time, anywhere, anyplace – same old T. Those cops need to stop and take notes.”

“They need to do more than that.” T turns a corner. “Where the hell JD driving? I thought the deal was in Tremont.”

“We in Morris Heights now,” Duane says. “My aunt used to live in those apartments over there.”

All I know is that we’re meeting with JD and a Dominican called Smalls, who’s high up in DDP. I laughed when JD first told me his name. But we all have G-names. I was born on Martin Luther’s birthday, so mine came easy. I don’t know how Smalls got his, and I don’t care. I want his business. The plan is simple: I supply, JD distributes

and Smalls controls the market. If this goes through, we get South Bronx and Washington Heights. That's big time.

I point at the ghetto building where JD parked. "Here we go." Looks like someone dropped a bomb and left a tower of bricks. There's an empty field with a broken fence around it. A place someone once called home.

JD calls with directions: park, bring the shit, second floor.

T says to me all quiet, "You sure about this? I mean, doing business here in the middle of the day?"

"Sure as I can be. Why?"

T makes a face, but doesn't say anything.

"Relax. I ain't stupid," I say. "Duane, hand me a baggie, then park behind those boards. I'll call you on the burner with instructions. If I say it's 'all good', it ain't, you follow?"

Duane nods and passes me a baggie. I pocket it, and T and I head inside. A Latino with shades makes us wait while he checks us out. He's wearing his beads: red, white and blue; but he ain't patriotic. It's the colors of Dominicans Don't Play, New York's up-and-coming gang. I never liked dealing with the Trinitarios or Latin Kings, but the DDP are okay; they hate the Bloods, just like we do.

"Yo, tell your friend here to hold still," the guy says.

T pulls out his pistol. "No one feeling me up, understand? We here to do business. You don't like it, I pop you right now."

"T, chill out," I say. "The man's just doing his job."

T doesn't back down. The dude finally says, "*Baminos*," and we go up.

Before we hit the top, I pull T aside. "You need to keep it under control," I say. "Why you all crazy? If they wanna plug us, you know they gonna do it."

T stares at me all dumb.

"A'ight?"

He nods. I don't know what's gotten into him, but I need to focus. If this meeting goes bad, and Smalls doesn't want my stuff, who knows when I'm gonna get a second chance? Which gets me thinking about what I'm doing, and about to do. I stay still for a second. Part of me wants to walk back down and say screw it. I've got forty G's put away; enough to rethink my options; maybe do something legit. But then I realize that if I don't go through with this, someone else will.

I greet JD first. If you don't know him, you'd think he's crazy. He always got that Katt Williams grin that says "I'm a pimp and a gangsta, but if you mess with me, I'll take your bitch-ass out."

"What up, Juice!" I say, clapping him on the back.

"Hey, I want to introduce you," he says.

We're in a hallway, graffiti on the walls, sunlight coming through broken windows. There's a desk in the middle with one guy sitting behind it and five on the sides – young, packing machine guns, a couple with machetes. A few of JD's guys are here too. I shake hands with Smalls. He's my age, big, Hispanic dude with braided hair. We sit and B.S. for a minute, then get down to business.

"All the schools," Smalls says. "And we're looking to expand into Spanish Harlem."

"My crew's ready to roll," JD says. "King's too."

One of Smalls' men finishes testing the sample I brought and gives his boss a thumbs up.

"Where's the rest?" Smalls asks.

"Close by," I say. "What about the *dinero*?"

Smalls snaps his fingers and a duffel bag is dropped on the desk. I motion to T to count the money.

"A hundred large," T says.

I call Duane and tell him JD's peeps are coming to help carry the goods. Minutes later, Duane is with us and so is the delivery.

"Gentlemen," Smalls says. "This is one fine day for DDP and the Crips. Let's make this city ours."

We shake on it. This is my moment, the one I've dreamed about since I became a soldier. After today, we go into production and keep the train moving. No more playing.

I turn to T. I want him to know this is his moment too. But he gives me that 187 look, like my brother Darren is dying all over again.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

He shakes his head. I'm confused. Then I hear it: sirens. Lots and lots, like all the cops in the borough. Everyone starts running. One look outside tells me the empire is about to fall. Squad cars, SWAT, a damn chopper too – everything but the National Guard. Smalls got nowhere to run; JD neither. We in a castle with no way out.

I don't want to turn around. I feel a hole growing inside.

"They got to me, King," T says. "I had to."

He's tugging on his shirt. Wearing a wire, no doubt. My best friend; my traitor. I pull my piece out and aim. It's only the two of us now. My hand is shaking. T just looks at me, waiting for me to pull the trigger. I want to squeeze it; blow his brains against the wall. Soon there will be a shootout; then thugs dropping; and arrests, followed by convictions. I see myself on trial, then in the slam with twenty-to-life. Makes no sense to add murder to the charge. Guess this is what they mean by clarity.

So I drop my arm. And walk away.

Steve Pantazis's short story, "Wasabi Joe" received Honorable Mention in Writer's Digest magazine for their 2009 Popular Fiction Awards. "Tim", another short story, will be published (First North American Rights) in an upcoming issue of Withersin magazine. Aside from these, he's completed three novels and forty short stories.