

Light-Skinned Niggas Can't Fight

By Marcus J. Guillory

Ice did it when he was sixteen. That was young in those days. Crenshaw and King, right by the Liquor Bank. It was a Rollin' Thirties O.G. His name use to be Loc Dru but now his name is Andrew Patrick Garp. Well, that's what they put on his tombstone and, of course, epitaphs don't lie. Born on a Monday morning, died on a Sunday night. At least he made it through the week. Ice got his stripes for that; automatic hood celebrity. Everybody looked at him differently after the drive-by. It made the news, police asked questions. Black Muslims, NAACP and other "leaders" gave speeches but none of that mattered. They were too far from the streets, too far to smell the weed smoke, too far to see spiders flying off of Dayton's, too far to feel the bass of Snoop and Dre, too far to hear the low but unmistakable sound of a bullet being loaded in a chamber. Just too far to really give a fuck or to know why.

That was fifteen years ago. Before rappers were gangsters. Ice saw the whole thing go down from the porch of his Big Momma's house. 2022 West 82nd Street, Los Angeles, California. That was the Pentagon for the homies. Around the clock security, press conferences, joint house committee meetings, intelligence reports and the nerve center of all other political, military and social business related to Ice's set. He inherited the post of Chief OG by default, Last Old Nigga Standing. But he was thirty-one now, things were different. He had three kids by two women and more often he was beginning to get that tingle in the back of his neck. *Let's play daddy*. He had to ignore that feeling. He didn't have time to pretend he was Heathcliff Huxtable or one of those 'got-it-all-together' fathers on the U-Pick-A-Nigga-Network. He had other responsibilities. He issued the orders and he kept the peace. Three kids? Shit. How about thirty-six young men? You see, he was their father. And their brother. He was the big homie.

So it wasn't a big thing when Lil' Roscoe brought a small, waif-thin kid to the porch one Tuesday afternoon. School was starting soon and all over the city, soon-to-be Ninth Graders would be approaching the Big Homies in every neighborhood with one request: "I want in." Didn't need commercials or a poster of some old, white dude wearing a big hat pointing at you. Come September, these young boys would step onto a high school campus and before they got to say the Pledge of Allegiance in homeroom, somebody would ask, "Where you from?" And that answer would be more important than any answer on any PSAT, SAT or other standardized inquisition. Their entire four years of high school would be determined by how they answered that one question and there wouldn't be a: *D) All of the above*.

His name was Terrence and he was fourteen. Ice remembered him when he was little. Just like the other kids in the neighborhood, trying desperately to be a kid while living in a war zone. And like the other kids, he gave the ceremonial nod and "What's up, cuz?" to the OG's in the neighborhood. It was a sign of admiration, respect and fear. But to kids like Terrence, Ice was a superhero. There had been others before him; men who'd perform superhuman feats. Like OG Skinny Loc. He once robbed a drug dealer, got into a shoot-out, chased by police on foot through three neighborhoods with a ghetto bird overhead shining daylight. Over fences and through alleys, he did what you might

not expect if you watch LAPD chases on the news – he escaped. Fuck Wolverine! Or this nigga named Bucket. He got shot twenty-two times and drove his damn self to the hospital. Superman who? These guys were real, living, breathing superheroes. The subject of conversations from Manchester to Crenshaw to Florence to Western.

“This the lil’ homey I told you about,” reported Lil’ Roscoe. Terrence was nervous; Ice eyed him like a Cadillac at a used car lot – suspect. Terrence’s extra huge white tee shirt draped his small frame and rippled with a passing breeze like the white flag of surrender. For Terrence was truly surrendering. He was giving in, joining up and checking out of adolescent obscurity.

“You tryin’ to fuck wit’ _____?” inquired Ice with authority.

Terrence nodded. And just as simply as that Ice treated him differently. Not unlike the coach of junior varsity basketball, Ice didn’t smile but eyed the boy with deep circumspection. Terrence was going to have to prove himself.

“Well, sit down, nigga. You blockin’ my view. A nigga try to roll on me, I can’t see wit’ yo’ ass standin’ in the way.”

“My bad.”

Terrence quickly found a seat on Big Momma’s front porch steps; seated on Ice’s right – the right hand of the Father. He found comfort on that porch; he belonged there. Broderick and Darren walked by, slowly, eyes glued to Terrence. They looked on with confusion. *Why was he sitting there with Ice? Maybe they’re related. But hold up, Terrence never mentioned that. Oh shit! Terrence is a banger. I betta not ask for my Madden.*

“Sup, Terrence?” both boys uttered. Terrence just nodded, not quite sure how to respond to civilians. But he watched, feeling the power and privilege of his newly acquired superiority. And high school would be the same thing, he knew it. When he stepped onto that campus, he wouldn’t just be Terrence Bunson but “Lil’ Tee” from _____. And that stood for something. It was bigger than him.

Alfred Boudreaux. Or Ice. Ever since the late 80’s kids called him Ice, after the fair-complexioned, self-proclaimed gangster-turned-rapper, Ice T. No, he wasn’t a rapper but he sure as hell was a gangster. Alfred the Third to be exact, descendant from a long line of bad ass Boudreaux men. His father moved to LA in the 50’s, following the herd of job-seeking men from Louisiana who settled out West. Alfred the Second was a longshoreman, a stevedore; risking life and limb to make payments on his Seville and a cramped stucco house in South Central. Alfred the Third learned early on not to bother Daddy, especially after he went to his Crown Royal for companionship. Daddy was a lonesome man and despite the agreeable conditions in southern California – the blue skies, the palm trees, the pretty women – Daddy longed for the humid haze and jambalaya dreams of southwestern Louisiana. He missed the zydeco dances, the St. Martinville Mardi Gras, crawfish boils, hunting season, trail rides, Joe Pete’s tall tales, and, most of all, his mother Clarice. She understood him. She comforted him and calmed his volcanic temper. But she refused to go to a land that would shake beneath her feet. It just wasn’t natural, an unholy thing.

For a brief moment, Alfred the Third was the new kid on the block. He had a slight accent that neighboring girls quickly found charming, maybe too charming. He had more than a southern accent; he had the distinct southern Louisiana accent – a mix of Creolized French and broken English. And he never noticed it until he moved to California. But the girls loved it. And the guys, well, they would take more convincing. But Alfred the Third had a bigger problem that was tantamount to his very existence and immediate rectification would be required. He was light-skinned with long, curly hair and he lived in a black LA neighborhood. Now in Louisiana, this wouldn't have been a problem where guys like him were a dime a dozen. But in South Central, he was a threat.

A pretty boy.

A yella bone.

A red nigga.

Subject of mistrust amongst black men since the days of house niggers and field niggers; endowed with the blessed assumption of privilege and entitlement that's garnered envy and disdain amongst black folks for centuries.

Alfred the Third joined the other neighborhood teens in games of mischief, courage and ability, as any teen would. But he wasn't half-Mexican or half-white, just black. Yet it didn't matter. It started in 1986 when James, that kid around the corner, was playing the dozens on the basketball court at Inglewood High.

"Ahh, shut up Alfred, wit' yo' white ass."

Suddenly the boys broke out in a laughter they'd kept bottled up from the first time they met him. The laughter was unbearable because it was meant to hurt not jest. They laughed with a sense of relief like a man fresh out of jail. This somewhat surprised Alfred the Third. *Have they been thinking this all along?* James' grin of satisfaction further encouraged the guffaws. How comfortable he was with his accusation. How confident and redeemed he felt to make the statement. He was making his move, attempting to secure his position as chief dickhead to Alfred the Third. Without any more hesitation, Alfred the Third wound back and threw a semi-hard punch to James' chest.

"Fuck you, nigga."

Maybe he shouldn't have said "nigga" given the immediate state of race relations on that basketball court. He surely didn't want to encourage any further distinction between himself and his new playmates. But the offense was taken and the crowd quieted to a loud, dangerous silence. Black ass, purple black, James had been called 'nigga' by a yellow nigga from out of town. It might as well have been a white man calling James 'nigger'. James' grin quickly morphed into hatred and just like that... Alfred the Third got an ass-kicking to be remembered.

"You know them niggas?" Ice inquired. Terrence nodded. Lil' Roscoe added his two cents, "Say cuz, that one right there got a fine ass sister named Trina. That bitch fine, my nigga."

"Is that right?" Ice studied the two boys as they walked by. The last thing he needed was another woman to deal with. Latrice had keyed his Impala last month. Month before that, Necie won custody of little Alfred the Fourth. And he had just started

fucking crazy ass April again, knowing damn-well she had two felonies by her own doing. But still he loved it all. The screaming.

The moaning.

The crying.

The kissing.

The attention. It was half the heartbeat of his life – fucking. He really liked to do it and he hadn't minded the repercussions. Until now.

It was a hot day, an Indian summer. Santa Ana winds pushed hellfire breezes through the City of Lost Angels. Imagine that. Ghetto birds limped through the sky in an endless Pomp and Circumstance; hovering over the governed, the indicted and the rotten with peacock pompousness. But all of that was a subtle hum in the back of Ice's head. It became the echo to his thoughts – the background music of his life. And he had grown fond of it.

“Say lil' homie, go on and run and get the big homie a Black 'N Mild,” ordered Ice and tossed Terrence a \$20. Terrence was thrilled with his first big mission – procure tobacco. He imagined himself at the camp in the western frontier, given orders of the utmost importance by the fearless Chief. Indian warriors had to be ready and had to deliver.

“A'ight,” saluted Terrence, accepting the bill and quickly walking off into the vast Indian territory in search of tobacco. Nothing would stop him. Not bandits nor white soldiers. He was committed. And he felt strong. A new kind of strength. The strength of numbers, of belonging. He was a warrior or was he?

Damn. I didn't get jumped in yet.

He hadn't given his initiation any consideration. Demands would be made for the sake of the set. History. Tradition. Ritual. An ass-kicking. How could he forget. And how would he explain the bruises to his mother. With all of the excitement he hadn't once thought about his mother's reaction to his newfound status. She would be outraged and she would worry. He didn't want her to worry. He'd want to hold her and tell her not to fear – he'd never get beaten at school – never again.

“Them fools off of _____ busted on Trey and 'dem last night,” reported Lil' Roscoe. Ice didn't say anything, almost like he hadn't heard. But he knew because Trey had called him right after it happened. Trey was angry and scared; oil and water. Trey demanded satisfaction from the offense. Ice knew Trey was still civilian stupid, not hip to the ways of prison or the foresight of an ex-con. He only saw in the immediate and not the long-term or collateral sight that's inherent in seasoned veterans and parolees. But Trey did have a point. Retaliation was requisite; an automatic thing like washing your hands after you took a piss. Not responding was not an option.

Ice sucked on a Newport while Lil' Roscoe waited for orders. Why now? Ice had other things to worry about like his interview with his PO in a week, that burning sensation when he urinated, and paying Big Momma's medical bills. He inherited that task back when he was Alfred the Third; the only thing Daddy left him after he died in that plant accident. Now was just not the right time for a killing and the subsequent police investigation followed by three months of intense 'no-tolerance' harassment by LAPD. But oft times Generals don't have the luxury of choosing time or place of a battle. They simply must respond. With force and intention.

“Who’s tryin’ to roll?” asked Ice.

“You know I’m down,” blurted Lil’ Roscoe, then posed the \$64,000 question – “Sup wit’ that lil’ light-skinned nigga?” Ice didn’t respond, he didn’t even know Terrence. He was just a kid that walked up to the porch with a request. He didn’t give a damn about being a gang banger. He was seeking sanctuary not privilege. Definitely not the person to assist in a drive-by. Lil’ Roscoe detected Ice’s reluctance in assigning Terrence to the task. A subtle, condescending crack hung on Lil’ Roscoe’s blunt-stained lips and this troubled Ice. Matter of fact, it down right pissed him off. He studied Lil’ Roscoe’s waiting bloodshot eyes then sucked in the fiberglassed Newport smoke.

Seizing the moment, Lil’ Roscoe went for the kidney punch. “Nawh, that’s cool. He probably too bitch to get down.”

“Then why you bring him around?” Ice countered but he understood the slight. Lil’ Roscoe was inferring that Terrence wouldn’t commit violence; not because of physical limitations, moral disposition, penal status nor emotional stability. He meant that *Light-skinned niggas can’t fight*.

Won’t fight.

Ain’t trying to fight.

Can’t depend on them to fight.

Not interested in fighting.

And deep down inside, just plain scared. A natural bitch. Ice tensed a bit. His knuckles ached. He’d spent fifteen years trying to debunk the myth. Hell, Joe Louis was light-skinned but nobody remembered him. And Muhammed Ali. Even Rick Fox would throw fist after a flagrant foul. But the myth continued to linger in history, deeply rooted in the legacy of black people with heightened senses of self-awareness. Nothing would change that image even if Lenny Kravitz knocked out Wesley Snipes’ teeth or if Colin Powell bitch slapped Dick Gregory. Nothing would change the order of things. This profound truth had been the bane of Ice’s existence and he was personally committed to dispelling the notion at every possible opportunity, rational or not. Hell or high water.

“He’ll do it. Watch.”

Ice leaned back with comfort. Lil’ Roscoe didn’t believe him. But fuck Lil’ Roscoe. Ice was prepared to sell the idea to Terrence at all costs. All the AI B. Sures of the world would be proud and Terrence would never have to prove his worth to his darker brethren again.

Terrence returned with a newfound swagger. Lil’ Roscoe laughed, saying he was already walking like a killer. Terrence approached with familiarity and handed Ice the candy-coated, mini cigars. Ice unwrapped the plastic and cradled a plastic-filtered cigar in his mouth. He handed one to Lil’ Roscoe then Terrence.

The war council had gathered that afternoon to discuss and settle the matter regarding recent hostilities in the territory. And although the newly-commissioned U.S. fort hosted five thousand war-hardened cavalrymen at the ready, this dispute involved a neighbor – a fellow native. The Great Chief lit the pipe with calm and drew heavy from the burning briar. He held the smoke then reverently passed the aged pipe to another elder while exhaling the grey cloud. The other elder followed suit and nodded to the Chief with knowing then passed the pipe to the young warrior who sought the comfort and camaraderie of the war council. Uncertainty caused his reluctance; he’d never

smoked before. Yet the elders gazed upon him with hope. Hope for the future. Their future. The tribe's future. The young warrior felt their optimism and their need for posterity. Traditions must not only be maintained but passed on to the next generation for the sake of the tribe. The young warrior placed his fresh, untainted lips on the pipe then...

Aarrghh! Cough. COUGH.

Lil' Roscoe's stinging laugh heated Ice's blood. Terrence quickly composed himself and took another small, cautious pull. He held the warm smoke in his mouth without puffing his cheeks. He could do this and maybe, just maybe, he'd try to blow it out of his nose like a dragon. One slight push like blowing out snot. So he pushed the aromatic Cavendish through his nostrils. Ice grinned approvingly but unrest soon settled over his brow. Ice stood defensively and sized up Terrence.

"Dig this, homey. If you tryin' to fuck wit' us, you got some work to put in."

A slight glimmer shone in Terrence's watery eyes.

Darkness fell onto the streets like dice – shaky then solid. Terrence had snuck out of the house thirty minutes ago and waited on the corner, smoking a Black-N-Mild. Ice said he would pick him up at ten. Ice said not to tell anyone where he was going or with whom. Ice told him to wear all black. Ice told him not to eat anything before. Ice told him to call his girlfriend and tell her "you love her" but he didn't have a girlfriend. Ice told him to do some push-ups – eighty-three. Ice told him that he'd be right there with him. Ice told him that everybody did it. Ice told him not to be a bitch. Ice told him that he'd be down with the set after tonight. Ice told him that his new name would be "Smoke Tee". Ice told him that he chose the name. Ice told him that bitches would go crazy over him. Ice told him, "Fuck them niggas, keep that Madden". Ice told him he had to do it. Ice told him he had to kill.

Somebody.

Tonight.

A gold Toyota Camry pulled up to the corner. Lil' Roscoe was grinning ear to ear behind the wheel. Ice rode shotgun and stoic while some burly muthafucka leaned out of the backseat window.

"Hurry up, lil' homey."

Terrence jetted to the glass-littered backseat and they drove off.

Alfred Boudreaux the Third did not want to go back to school. Everybody heard how James the Purple whipped his ass on the basketball court. It happened during fifth period gym and had reached the entire school by the middle of sixth period. Now, Alfred the Third was that red 'Bama that got his ass kicked. He wasn't cute anymore. He wasn't exotic or intriguing. He was now officially a bitch; bestowed such honor by James the Purple. And actually, that wasn't so bad. It was the ass whipping that awaited Alfred the Third at home that was the true horror.

Alfred the Second beat his son's ass something awful. Maybe it was the Crown Royal or maybe the fact that Alfred the Second had just lost his job to a Mexican. Or maybe both. But either way, no son of Alfred Boudreaux the Second was going to get his ass kicked. Alfred the Second kicked him out of the house after the thrashing and told

him not to return until he returned the favor to James. Alfred the Third slept in the payload of his father's pick-up that night. Underneath the stars and the flight path that ushered 747's into LAX like alien invaders. And there, that night, amongst the stars, airplanes, palm trees and their resident rodents, Alfred the Third promised all willing ears an act of violence to be remembered. He determined that he couldn't beat James mano-a-mano so the nature of the violence would be the crucial factor. A unique act so shocking that no one would dare interrupt. He rested his head against a pile of two-by-fours and drifted into vengeful slumber.

A Panasonic boom box cushioned by a towel blasted Mantronix's *Fresh Is The Word* against the hardwood floors and cinderblock walls. The gym coach was still in an emergency faculty assembly to discuss school violence, so the big gay choir director, Mr. Clark, was chaperoning fifth period gym - although he had huddled with a group of girls on the bleachers to ogle photos in Tiger Beat. Most of the class was gathered in a circle as James the Purple displayed recently mastered breakdance moves. And he was talented. He could do the windmill really fast. Then he'd spin on his knee while holding his hand over his eyes like a sailor. The girls loved him, the boys admired him.

James the Purple. He could kick ass and dance. That nigga was awesome. A few girls started arguing about who he liked and Shawna Brown had already scribbled a little note reading: "Will You Go With Me?"

That black bastard was a star. Then the crowd hushed as James went into his signature move, his *pièce de résistance* - the head spin. Perfect like a gyroscope. The girls screamed and the boys yelped. Even Mr. Clark's manicured ass ran over to witness the feat. James opened his legs then quickly brought them together, increasing his speed to death-defying velocity. The crowd was dumbfounded. So nobody noticed when the bruised and battered Alfred the Third calmly entered the gym. He walked steadily towards the crowd. He was carrying a two by four. He walked through the crowd virtually ignored. He entered the circle then WHAM! He swung the wood at the spinning black head which suddenly turned pure red. And he swung again and again and again. Nobody stopped him, they just stood in awe. Awe is consistent, whether it be in delight or fear. Awe is cement without reason or rationale, simply the response of unresponsiveness. The action of inaction in a moment where inertia or instinct requires movement. Deep horror can cause shock, the big brother of awe; the big brother to whom Alfred the Third swore allegiance that night before. James the Red was unconscious and a bloody mess. Alfred the Third stopped and walked over to the sacred Panasonic boom box and smashed it. The crowd rushed to James the Red's aid. Alfred the Third dropped the wood then calmly exited the gym, rapping:

Six in the morning police at my door/Fresh Addidas squeak across the bathroom floor...

From that moment on, he was called "Ice". And Ice never returned to Inglewood High.

Out the back window, I make my escape/Didn't even get a chance to grab my old school tape/Mad with no music but happy I'm free/Cause the streets to a player is the place to be...

“Man turn that shit up, that’s my shit,” said the nameless big, burly muthafucka in the backseat.

“Shut up, nigga. We ain’t goin’ to the club,” spouted Ice. Ice didn’t believe in rebel rousing before putting in work. No drinking, no drugs and no loud music. He looked straight ahead, scanning the streets for the police and the victim. But the streets were clear. Terrence mimicked the older men with silence. He kept both hands on the heavy steel resting in his lap. The safety was off. A bullet waited in the chamber with metal mates lined up in the clip waiting on their turn to prove themselves. Terrence smirked at the similarity – the bullets and he.

“You see this nigga laughing? Boy, you a cold piece of work.”

They stopped at the corner of Crenshaw and King, normally a busy corner regardless of the time. But not a soul in sight. Not even at the 24-hour Krispy Kreme. No cars. No homeless people. No nothing. Terrence wondered how long it would take for his chaperones to comment on this oddity. He looked at the gas station. Surely the Middle Eastern attendant would be there, trapped behind his plexi-glass perch selling loosies. But no attendant. Was tonight a holiday? Had the government issued martial law?

Terrence had become anxious, fattened by the prospect of dealing a death blow to the unsuspecting. His stomach was beginning to knot up, panging for the sight of first blood. Clearly Fate had decided to rob him of his gangster inheritance. He felt his moment of knighthood slipping away. Once again, he felt alone.

Ice eyed the corner with deep reverence. This was the site of his homicide initiation. This was where he earned his status. He quietly grinned with pride. Look how far that drive-by took him. At that moment Ice realized that he had reached the apex of gangsterism. He would go no further because there was no further to go. Now his duty was to pass that light-skinned legacy to the next generation, indoctrinate a new gangster in the ways of killing. It had to be this way. Murder meant everything. When they knew you can kill, all unpleasantries and questions subsided. It’s proof. Proof that you mean business. Proof that you’re not to be fucked with. Nobody fucked with Ice and Ice felt pride in knowing that after tonight nobody would fuck with Terrence. That’s why he grinned. Another win for the red bones. Fuck Lil’ Roscoe. And fuck James the Dead.

Back on the streets after five and a deuce/Seven years later I still had the juice...

”I don’t know what’s crackin’, lil homey, but you gonna have to bust on somebody tonight, ya’ feel me?”

Ice turned around to face his initiate only to be facing the barrel of the gun.

BAM!

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