

A friend of mine called this morning," Al said, as we cooled down from our run. "He's home from the joint and wants us to get together with him and his swan." The guy was black, slight in stature, articulate, polite; his lady was a bright, attractive young white woman. She met him in prison where she was a social worker. We started with drinks at Westbeth and walked to the eastside for dinner. They seemed well suited, each slight in stature, soft-spoken, and respectful of one another.

Around midnight, we were on a side street in the East Village. Al said he was thirsty and went into a coffee shop for some water. While we waited down the block, three drunken white guys closed in on us. "Hey, nigger, what do you think you're doing with two white women?" one slurred. I told myself not to panic, just get Al. The minute they saw him, they'd run.

I moved quickly back to the coffee shop and banged on the plate glass window, hollering for Al to come out. I spit out the situation, as Al marched towards them. "I hear there's a problem," he said, closing in with a deliberate pace. His body swelled with rage as he leaned into the guys who seemed to shrink before my eyes. Al lowered his voice. "Listen, you punk motherfuckers, do you know what I do to trash like you who fuck with my lady?"

"Shit, man. We didn't know they were with you. We don't want any trouble. Sorry, man, sorry," they slurred in syncopation, weaving as they stepped back. The four of us walked toward the far corner where a streetlight glared down on the cracked sidewalk. I glanced over my shoulder to make sure the guys weren't coming back to attack us, but they were already at the other end of the block.

My body began to uncoil with relief. Then I saw Al look to his right. There was a police car parked down the block.

"Damn! The cops!" Al jerked me back into the shadows.

"What's wrong?" He seemed unable to breathe, sweat seeping out of his forehead.

"You don't understand." His voice a frantic whisper. "In my head I had already done them in. I was getting ready to turn around and finish them off. If I hadn't seen that cop car, they would have caught me."

"But you seemed so calm, and they backed off." I stammered.

"I was calm because I knew they were about to die. No punk disrespects me and my family like that and lives to tell about it."

They didn't deserve to die. And if he had killed them, what was I supposed to do? Just watch? Not tell? Hide like he had taught me? In an altercation, get out the way. I won't see you, I'll

just see white flesh, and I strike to destroy anything white at moments like that. Would he have reduced me to “just white flesh?”

My heart raced, my dress instantly soaked with sweat. If the cop car hadn't been there, would I be covered in blood, running for my life?

“Let's enjoy the rest of the evening,” Al said with a lilt as he walked back to the couple still wide-eyed under the glare of the streetlight.

“Now?” I stumbled towards him. I'd grabbed onto the tail of a hurricane. It never occurred to me to let go.