

Robert Lipsyte

THE CONTENDER



HE WAITED ON THE STOOP until twilight, pretending to watch the sun melt into the dirty gray Harlem sky. Up and down the street transistor radios clicked on and hummed into the sour air. Men dragged out card tables, laughing. Cars cruised through the garbage and broken glass, older guys showing off their Friday night girls. Another five minutes, he thought. I'll give James another five minutes.

"You still here, Alfred?" Aunt Pearl came out on the stoop, her round face damp from the kitchen.

He tried to sound casual. "You know James. He better hurry or we'll miss the first picture."

"He's never been this late, Alfred. Why don't you go upstairs and call his house? Maybe he's sick."

"James ain't sick." Alfred stood up.

"How you know that?" Her eyes narrowed. "You know where he's at?"

"Maybe."

"He's hangin' out with those worthless punks, ain't he, Alfred? Maybe you just better . . . Alfred!"

But he was already off the stoop and moving fast, his sneakers slapping on the sidewalk. Packs of little kids, raggedy and skinny, raced past him along the gutter's edge, kicking empty beer cans ahead of them. Used to do that, too, when we were little, he thought. One thing I could always do better than James. I was always faster. Big deal. He slowed down.

He stopped at the mouth of the alley, and took a deep breath. What am I, James' shadow or something? I don't need him. But he marched to the basement steps, and plunged down into the clubroom.

Hollis and Sonny were sprawled on the long, sagging couch, snapping their fingers to a scratchy record. Major was flexing his arm muscles at the cracked mirror over the mop sink. Only James, trying to read a magazine in the dim light of the naked bulb, looked up.

"Hey, man, what's happening?"

"Nothing much," said Alfred. "Ready to go to the movies?"

"Not unless it's free night," said James.

"I got some money," said Alfred.

Major turned slowly and let his muscles relax. "How much you got, Alfred?"

Sonny and Hollis stopped snapping.

"I said, 'How much you got, Alfred?'"

"Nothing," mumbled Alfred, staring down at the tips of his sneakers.

"You the only one workin', and you got paid today," said Major. "What you got?"

"Gave it to my aunt," said Alfred.

"Gave it to my aunt," mimicked Major. "You such a good sweet boy. Old Uncle Alfred."

Sonny giggled, and Hollis grinned, buck-toothed. James looked away.

"Don't you know this club has got dues?" Major folded his arms across his bulging T-shirt.

Hollis leaned back in the couch. "Go collect the dues, Sonny. Turn Alfred upside down and make the dues fall out his pockets."

"Turn Alfred upside down," echoed Sonny, blankly. He stood up, taller than any of them and almost as heavily muscled as Major. "Upside down."

"Hold on," said James. "Alfred's my guest. I

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