

“You never did see the obvious, Davey. Always too smart for everyone. You think Danny wouldn’t talk? You think Ma was feeble-minded by your Prodigal Son returns act? You think no one but you knew the score? Too many books and not enough sense. You thought you kept things close to you, but you were like a bad movie. You always wanted the easy way out.”

“That was my money.”

“Never. Father, do you hear this?” The priest was silent, uncomfortable, a bit ashamed, I felt, to be witness to a sister selling out her brother, her only surviving brother just returned from years away, unseen, unloved. Father Farrell’s head tilted; the sound of sirens grew closer.

“In my own home. You betrayed me.”

“It was never your home, Davey. You said that yourself. You couldn’t wait to leave. Your home is far away now, and has been for a long while. You took us for fools. Now you can go and stew on it once again, and figure out where you went wrong.”

I shook my head at her. I would not let her win. The police arrived and I submitted to the handcuffs as if I were a Pentecostal penitent in the arms of rebirth. I looked away from Bella, and at the priest. Maybe I’d seen the light, or at least I could make do with what I had. “I will espouse you the right of justice,” I told him, keeping my eyes on his horrified face as the cops led me out to the car. “I open myself to a God who loves me.”

## NUMBERS UP

BY MILES MARSHALL LEWIS

*Baychester*

Kingston believed he wasn’t a regular at Golden Lady, seated at the bar sipping a plastic cup of whiskey. Silky served his Scotch and amaretto without asking only because she had a great memory like most bartenders, he thought. Kingston considered the cup in his hand and reminisced over the club that served bottles of beer and glasses of mixed drinks years back, before some brawls with smashed Coronas forced a policy change. He also recalled gonzo tricks Silky used to perform with Heinekens in her dancing days, way before her transition to barkeep. Kingston raised his Godfather to Lacey, onstage sliding down a silver pole at the center of her baby-oiled, spread-eagle legs, eyeing him from upside down. Lacey was just the thing to take Kingston’s mind off the hundreds he’d lost earlier at Yonkers Raceway, the robbery of his house days ago, and other recent troubles.

Disorienting strobes bathed Lacey and two other bodacious young women pacing the stage, gyrating hips and stripping under the synthesized pulse of Ciara’s “Oh.” Kingston didn’t consider himself a regular but Lacey’s partners knew from experience not to bother trying to entice money out of the black guy in the stingy-brim fedora. Lacey sauntered over to the head of the crowded bar, bent down, and flashed her fleshy ass just for Kingston, flexing the muscles of each cheek to the beat. Kingston shifted her garish yellow lace garter belt

with a finger to place one, two, three paper-cut-crisp twenty-dollar bills between her thigh and the elastic band. Lacey undulated her thick behind in ecstatic waves of motion.

Come 2 o'clock, Golden Lady's neon sign—a naked blonde lounging in a martini glass—quickly faded into the distance. Kingston and Lacey sat in his onyx Buick zooming up the Bruckner Expressway and out of Hunt's Point. Full-blast cool air circulated new-car smell throughout the ride. Kingston's radio, per usual, tuned in to CD101.9: "Moody's Mood for Love," King Pleasure. Plastic jewel cases of smooth jazz CDs cluttered the floor and butter-leather backseats. En route to Baychester Diner, Lacey peered into the illuminated sun visor applying foundation, lipstick, and eyeliner, bitching about the shady tactics Butterfly and Sunflower used to dominate lap dances all summer long. Kingston's characteristic silence was so typical that Lacey never considered that her sugar daddy might be disturbed.

The all-night Baychester Diner harbored the same two wisecracking women in kempt hairweaves found at the counter every weekend past midnight. Each sported something slightly outré signaling her street profession. One wore a bright Wonder Woman bodice with deep cleavage on display, the other scarlet, fishnets with a spiked leather dominatrix collar. Both brandished five-inch stilettos. At the far corner banquette a young couple argued in Creole patois.

"*Si ou pa vlé bébé-an, ale vous an,*" hissed the pregnant teen in the pink Von Dutch cap.

Kingston and Lacey found an isolated booth and ordered breakfast from a homely waitress. Rain broke the August humidity, slicking the asphalt of Boston Road, while Kingston explained all about the Hernández brothers pushing their numbers turf further down Washington Heights into Harlem,

their violent efforts to force him out, and his contingency flight plan to New Orleans.

"King. You gonna up and leave just like that?" Lacey asked. She craved a Newport.

"They ain't runnin' me out," he bluffed. "I done made plenty these past fifteen years. I don't mind it. Business ain't like it used to be nohow. Playin' the numbers is old school, kiddo. More white folks is movin' into Harlem now and they don't know nothin' about me. They play Lotto."

Lacey laughed.

"You never talked about retiring to New Orleans before." *Not to me*, she thought.

"I done told you 'bout the house. We ain't never been together, but it's down there. Since 2000. My cousin look after it, she over in Baton Rouge."

"When are you talking about going?"

"I ain't right decided yet. Could be two weeks."

"Two weeks? That's enough time for you to wrap up everything?"

"We gon' see."

Kingston held the door for Lacey and a trucker hand-in-hand with the collared mistress from the counter. Outside all four smelled a faint aroma of barbecue sauce wafting from the local KFC. The illicit couple commiserated on the corner and crossed Baychester Avenue, stilettos clicking on concrete, to a motel with three-hour rates.

Kingston pulled his sedan out of the lot and down Boston Road blaring "This Masquerade." By the song's end he'd parked again, less than a mile away at Boston Secor Houses. Lacey grabbed his humidor from the glove compartment.

On the red leather sofa Kingston silently flipped stations searching for baseball scores and fiddled with his cigar while

Lacey showered. His sky-blue fedora rested on the adjacent pillow, revealing the receding hairline of his freshly cut Caesar specked with gray. He clicked off her TV and leaned over to untie his Stacy Adams, tightening abdominal muscles buried underneath a stout stomach. His growing belly caused him to chuckle at his own jealousy, wondering what sort of younger man her own age a sexy girl like Lacey would attract once he was gone. Lacey would adapt easily, Kingston imagined. She was all of twenty-two. Life adjustments would come harder to Kingston. Comfortably set in his ways, he never vacationed away from his St. Martin time-share, never ate anything outside of the standard ten dishes he either bought from take-out restaurants or Gussy cooked for him, never deviated from his usual Yankees game, jazz concert, or horse race for recreation. Deciding to uproot his life from 1839 Bruner Avenue to the bayou sprang as much from Kingston's recent unidentified angst as the threats from Héctor and Eddie Hernández. Kingston finally took a lighter to his cigar.

"One of us has too much clothes on," Lacey said.

She left her cream silk robe untied at the waist, smoking her own tobacco of choice. Tracey Lott bore only fraternal-twin resemblance to her onstage character, always fragrantly oiled, primed, oversexed. Nearly naked again for the second time tonight—clean, shea-butter-exfoliate-scrubbed, and nail-polished in her own apartment now—Tracey looked softer, younger.

Kingston called her Tracey at times, Lacey most often, but it didn't bother her. The last time they saw one another Lacey had dropped X before his unexpected arrival at Golden Lady and rambled all sorts of private personal information afterwards, about her Jehovah's Witness upbringing, her strict mother (the neighborhood crossing guard), her young cous-

in's molestation, her absent dad, and her first fuck at fourteen. Maybe too much for Kingston, she thought.

Lacey flicked cigarette ash into a seashell and sat in Kingston's lap. The leather sofa farted. As she unbuttoned his shirt both their thoughts clouded with notions of tonight maybe being their last tête-à-tête.

Kingston and Lacey were both more passive than active participants in their own lives, mirrors of each other in that sense. Kingston had inherited the mantle of running numbers from his late father, working under his wing after a brief enlistment in the Gulf War. His life's work was more due to his own passivity than the passion for the numbers game that his father had held close. Kingston loved Gussy in his way but their union was mainly convenient. She was his Girl Friday on the job. Their relationship saved Kingston the trouble of seeking a woman attracted to his limited social graces who could also be trusted and accepting of his illegal trade. Money only goes so far. Despite over half a million squared away from almost two decades of business, Lacey, an exotic dancer from the projects, was the most ideal mistress he found himself able to draw.

Lacey, too, let her life dictate its own direction, leading from a bust-up with her mother at seventeen to accepting dubious advice from her stalker ex-bf Tré-Sean to sell nude photos to websites and dance at Hunt's Point holes like Al's Mr. Wedge and Golden Lady. The night a zooted pair of homeboys roughly snatched off her thong and dashed out the club with their booty nine months ago, she was comforted by Kingston, a familiar, benevolent customer, and their affair began.

Stripping his shirt, standing and leading him to her bedroom, she felt powerless to trip up the chain of events sweeping Kingston out of her life. Lacey thought sex might solve the problem, her familiar recourse. Their cigarette and cigar sat

burning away in an Orchard Beach conch, plumes of smoke dancing an acrobatic tango.

Kingston returned to 1839 Bruner Avenue in the early morning to discover the SUV stolen.

Gussy would find the charred BMW of their steady bettor Wallace parked outside Fordham Hill Apartments on her nighttime jog to the Harlem River, stripped and torched to black cinders save for the pristine license plate: *CRM-114*.

Like aging hippies cooking organic groceries in a kitchen full of all-Hendrix-all-the-time, Gussy and Kingston were throw-back '70s soul babies. This wasn't immediately obvious but there were telltale signs: Gussy's leonine Afro and multitudinous silver bracelets, Kingston's allegiance to jazz musicians like George Benson and Grover Washington, Jr., who were on the rise when he first started buying vinyl.

The couple met in Kuwait and were instantly simpatico. For Kingston the army was brief, another way to synchronize his life with that of his father, who served in WWII. Buckshot shrapnel lodged near his heart resulted in a quick honorable discharge. For Gussy the army was a career move lasting five years longer than the Persian Gulf strike. With her discharge nine years behind her, former Private Augusta Wilson still hit the shooting range a few times a year and took weekly power runs through Fordham with Parliament on her headphones.

On Monday, Kingston and Gussy put in a normal day at the spot. The sparse bodega Kingston rented on Amsterdam was locally understood as a storefront for his operation. Starting shortly after 12 o'clock, Harlemites stopped by with their three-digit numbers on betting slips, handing them off (with their cash) to Hillside at the front counter. Some old-timers sat for a spell with the *Daily News*, picking out items to talk

shit about: the Maori-inspired tattoo covering Mike Tyson's face; Michael Jackson's expatriation to Bahrain. Both Kingston and Gussy fielded calls in the large back office, jotting down more phoned-in numbers. (Lacey played Kingston's *DAV-485* license plate in a box combination: 485, 548, 854, etc.) All day Kingston's two runners—Pookie and Elliott—returned from the backs of bars, bodegas, barbershops, beauty parlors, billiard halls, and street corners throughout the Bronx and Harlem, dropping off their books of bets. Gussy tallied the incoming cash on an old adding machine till her index finger was sore, at which point she'd use the end of her pencil. From noon to 6 each of the three numbers would post based on the last dollar digits of the total handle from Yonkers Raceway's daily win, place, and show bets.

By 5 o'clock, Monday's number was four-two. Hillside left for the Bronx, picking up Chinese takeout from the Orient. Kingston and Gussy, alone, still spoke in code, agreeing to hold off talk of the Hernándezes until after work: City Island, Sammy's Fish Box. Finally a zero came in. Not one person had hit the number. The three totaled all the final slips, over five hundred dollars gross profit.

Hillside walked to nearby Hamilton Terrace to score from his coke dealer. Kingston and Gussy drove onto the Macombs Dam Bridge out of Manhattan just after 7 o'clock. CD101.9 started a David Sanborn marathon as they sped up the Major Deegan Expressway.

Kingston felt like a ghost, but in a good way. Ever since deciding to give up his patch of Harlem to the Dominicans, Kingston was more conscious of his interactions with the people he'd leave behind, more aware of places he probably wouldn't see for a long time. He thought of getting skied with Hillside for old times' sake, or fucking Joie, the former girl-

on-the-side stripper over at Sin City who preceded Lacey in his life. Stress was at the root of his recent ulcers and so this new feeling of liberation was welcome. Kingston felt relieved, like knowing the exact date of his approaching death (and rebirth) and appreciating his last moments on earth.

“I know you been scheming. Them motherfuckers got it coming. What’s the plan?”

Kingston was getting distracted by the general lilt of a nearby conversation, two overweight brothers seated behind Gussy eating whole Maine lobsters and linguini. The larger man continually mispronounced Nikes to rhyme with Mikes. They waited on their own platter to arrive.

“Gus . . .” Kingston laughed. “You sound like Foxy Brown. Ease up, Sheba baby.” He took hold of the thick white napkin underneath his flatware, spreading it in his lap over navy velour sweatpants.

Gussy smiled, holding her head in her hands. Bangles slid to her elbows, jangling. “Héctor and Eddie were safer than they knew till they burnt up Wallace’s Beemer. They gotta pay for that shit if anything.” The BMW was in Kingston’s possession as a marker, till one of his regulars finished paying off a big debt. Now Wallace’s X5 was ashes. “Who the fuck are they threatening?” she asked heatedly. “They think they’re just gonna keep upping the ante until we get the fuck outta Dodge? Is a goddamn car bomb next?” Gussy lowered her voice. “I was thinking, maybe we could pay off somebody over at the racetrack to report what we tell ’em, like a fixed hit. If we had one of our own hit the number with Héctor and Eddie for some gigantic amount, then we could bankrupt the sons of bitches. Or . . . I don’t know who they pay off at the NYPD but we could find out, make a deal, and get ’em locked up for a while.”

“That’s good thinkin’. But really, kiddo, the way to do this is to leave in peace,” Kingston replied wearily. “We’ll send word back by their baby sister. Elizabeth was the one rollin’ up on Hillside last month from the get. She doin’ her brothers’ biddin’, we’ll let it ride like that. Once they know we fixin’ to leave, that’s the end a that.”

Gussy sighed, just as their bald, husky waiter returned delivering shellfish on a Formica tray. (Kingston, as always, ordered the lobster, king crab legs, and Spanish yellow rice for two.) She tied the plastic bib around her neck thinking back to when she first suggested Kingston invest in property. The Creole cottage he bought five years ago in the French Quarter had become the getaway home he’d never have brainstormed on his own. Though Kingston wasn’t much for vacations, running numbers six days a week, Gussy planned ahead for whatever retirement might come with forethought he consistently lacked. A condo in North Carolina, near an old childhood friend of Kingston’s, was Gussy’s first choice. But Kingston overruled, choosing New Orleans instead, for its jazz history.

Gussy reconnected with Kingston after leaving the service as a tie to the civilian world and to continue what they had started during their twenties in the Middle Eastern desert. She considered love to be an active decision, a conscious choice. She gave her heart to Kingston because, from her viewpoint, he needed the direction it was her nature to provide, and becoming the main woman in his life gave her access to his ample savings. Marriage might never be on the horizon but Gussy always appreciated the cushy situation she long ago stepped into as his assistant and lover.

The attached row house at 1839 Bruner—passed down from Kingston’s parents—must be put on the market, Gussy thought, cracking a lobster leg. She’d be breaching her own

lease at Fordham Hill. Their collective furniture would need to be packed and shipped south, sold, or given away. (The cottage was sparsely furnished and completely undecorated.) They'd require two tickets to Louisiana sooner than later. Hillside, Pookie, and Elliott would have to be informed fast—Gussy was sure they wouldn't have seen this coming—and the Amsterdam lease would also be broken. This was all irreversible stuff. She hoped Kingston had measured everything carefully.

"Is it worth it?" she asked softly.

"It's time for a change," Kingston replied, his mouth full. He finished chewing, measuring his words. "Seem like ain't nobody wanna end up like they parents nowadays, and I gotta count myself in that too. Daddy always promised my mother he'd give all this up and retire down to Florida someplace and never got the chance to do it before she passed. I worked right up beside him till the end and it was clear to me . . ." He paused. "I just know he'd a done things different if he coulda. Fuck Héctor and Eddie, it ain't about them. The house been robbed before. I just don't wanna do this no more."

Kingston's initiative took Gussy a bit by surprise. "Well, I'll handle the details, just let me know what you intend on doing yourself and I can take care of everything else. I can leave enough for Hillside and the fellas to take care of themselves till next year." She smiled. "I can't believe we're really going! I do love it down there."

"It's a new day, Gus. I done made ample money off a this, God bless Daddy. There got to be more to life than Baychester and Amsterdam Avenue. Y'know, New Orleans is a big jazz town."

"Really?" Gussy knew this already.

"Hell yeah, the Marsalis family hails from down there and . . ."

Kingston Lee never wore an earring. Back when he was a teenager at Evander Childs High, putting a hole through your right ear branded you a fag. But the year his boys all pierced their lefties together at a jewelry store on White Plains Road, Kingston just couldn't do it. He failed to understand why everybody now seemed to get tattooed at the drop of a hat. He'd always had an aversion to anything that could make him substantially different than he was when his personality gelled as a youngster. Gussy learned this about him early on, deciding it was how Kingston had reached forty-two without any children. Moving from New York City, leaving the only real profession he'd ever known, felt to Kingston like bungee jumping with an unreliable cord.

His father had started the business in the '60s, from a nearly bare stationery store on 233rd Street. Waiting for Jiffy Lube to service his ride that humid, overcast Sunday—he intended to leave it to Wallace and call things even—Kingston walked from Boston Road and up Baychester to 233rd, taking rolls of mental photographs. Passing Spellman High's football field he remembered fingering a cheerleader before a game underneath the bleachers; he was a mean running back, she favored actress Jayne Kennedy and knew it. Up the hill he passed the Carvel stand his mother crashed into when he was ten. ("Fasten your seat belt," she had said dead calmly, realizing the Oldsmobile's brakes were failing.) Comics & Comics was long gone, another memory now. And the Big Three Barbershop.

Zack Abel, Jr. cut hair at the Big Three Barbershop with his father Big Zack from the time he and Kingston attended

Evander together. Big Zack and his wife were staunchly religious; the Big Three of the shop's namesake were naturally the Son, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, though the secular folks coming in for their fades had no clue. Muhammad Ali had his Afro trimmed there once sometime after the Thrilla in Manila, and a yellowed photo of Ali sitting in Big Zack's high-chair stayed taped to a mirror till the shop closed. Kingston and Zack's fathers both died in 2000. Big Zack's death seemed to mature his son. He summarily sold his father's shop, moved to North Carolina for a Cablevision job, fell in love, and had a son two years ago. Kingston missed Zack, the only friend he felt he really had outside of Gussy. Zack's move left Kingston a bit ill at ease ever since, as if his life was a jumped-the-shark TV show the network refused to cancel.

Kingston reached the address where his father's operation first started, now an insurance office. He stood there and removed his Kangol as if out of respect, wiping sweat from his brow with the white cap. He recollected his aunts, uncles, and his own mother dreaming up the number when he was a child, searching through slim stapled pamphlets by Madame Zora and Rajah Rabo listing corresponding numbers for different dream themes: love, sex, death. He got spanked for losing his great-grandmother's tattered *Aunt Sally's Policy Players Dream Book* once. His parents let him play occasionally; he recalled hitting for the first time at nine: a whole twenty dollars, all spent at the Good Humor ice cream truck that crept down Bruner playing Sammy Davis, Jr.'s "The Candy Man." His neighbor Miss Lois once scored a combination hit on the very day she needed to pay her back rent to avoid eviction; she threw a lavish block party and bought herself Jordache jeans for every day of the week. And how many misadventures had young Kingston

heard about Chink Low, one of his dad's first runners, the brother with folded eyelids who never wrote down a number that police could confiscate, memorizing them all without fault? Or Chink's running partner Clarence, who ended up as a regular on *The Mod Squad*?

The memories were cathartic. Just one month away, September 2005, Kingston would turn forty-three—with not much more to show for his life than what was left him by his father. He tried to pinpoint the source of his recent melancholy attitude; he knew it had started before the Hernándezes. Was it the birthday of little Zack the third, Gussy pressuring him for a baby? Kingston refused to believe his near depression had anything to do with a midlife crisis; he had a curvaceous kept woman on the side and hundreds of thousands of out-of-circulation Ben Franklins hidden in a safe at the spot on Amsterdam. He tried to envision what he wanted that he didn't yet have, and it came down to this: He wanted to be his own man.

All his life, Kingston had been following his father's path to uphold a perceived legacy, yet he couldn't feel the same obligation on his shoulders anymore. Time and circumstance had moved on, and now, so would Kingston. His father had migrated from Georgia to lay his own path to personal freedom on the streets of the Bronx. Now Kingston would reverse-migrate back, attempting to find his very own life purpose in Louisiana. This one-sided turf war was the perfect excuse. *Let 'em play Lotto*, he thought, liberated.

The phone in his pants vibrated.

It was a message. His battery must have been low, he imagined, having missed the call. Lacey's voice. They hadn't spoken since she rang in her number a week ago. She'd reconciled things with Tré-Sean. She wished him well in New

Orleans. She asked him to not drop by Golden Lady or the Secor projects before leaving. She hung up the phone.

How intriguing, Lacey thought, that she found herself magnetized by two of the older black community's archetypes, the numbers man and the pimp.

Tré-Sean Niles ostensibly sold crack from his apartment on Webster Avenue, but persuasive game was his true *métier*, and Lacey knew it. Never mind how he convinced her to try their relationship again after scary antics like sitting in his beat-up Benz near Boston Secor obsessively monitoring her subsequent men and one-night stands or surreptitiously checking her answering machine until getting caught. Forget how he convinced Lacey to work out her exhibitionist tendencies by posing naked and selling the images to the likes of PlumpRumps.com (splitting the profits) or sharing her shake-dancing take. Days ago, Lacey dog-eared *Confessions of a Video Vixen* on a night of weakness brought on by Kingston's leaving, called Tré-Sean, and navigated the following conversation.

Isn't it fascinating how certain women create whole careers from men wanting to have sex with them? Tré-Sean asked. As a kid he had questioned his horny older brother on why he was so transfixed by *Elvira's Movie Macabre* when he knew the pasty, buxom Goth girl would never actually show her breasts. For Tré-Sean this was the same disappointing tease performed at stripclubs with all the incredible-looking naked women (like Lacey) who one could never really fuck. Madonna in *Penthouse* made an impression on his young mind, but when he saw Pamela Anderson blowing her husband on a homemade tape, his philosophy all came together.

Tré-Sean told Lacey that Paris Hilton giving head, having sex for all the world to see on the web, and then becoming

even more popular, made perfect sense. The only reason Paris and Pam Anderson had celebrity in the first place was because men fantasized about how they'd be sexually. Tré-Sean recently met a friend of a friend of a friend in the adult film industry who rationalized that the relation between seductive music videos and hardcore pornography was identical to the relation between a funny joke and an explanation of what's funny about the joke. Lacey thought she understood.

Tré-Sean finally laid out his scheme. He was given tickets to the Adult Video News Film Awards from this same new acquaintance. He proposed they go to Las Vegas for the ceremony and network. So much more money could be made in porn for so much less work than dancing, Tré-Sean reasoned, and they'd already made some private sex tapes of their own. Celebrity in this field might lead to celebrity in another, he said. (And if not, it's the same thing underneath it all anyway, he thought privately). His contact guaranteed him a meeting with a producer, Max Hardcore.

Lacey held the line silently. Kingston's decision bothered Lacey up until the point she accepted that she didn't mean enough to him for an extended invitation to the bayou. That Monday Lacey lost the number, but the numbers man also lost Lacey; she had called her ex the same night.

"So whassup?" Tré-Sean asked.

In the service, another grunt who'd been a bartender in New Orleans taught Kingston and Gussy how to mix a Tom Collins: gin, tonic, lemon juice, sugar, and a maraschino cherry. In his friend's honor, Kingston entered their spacious backyard carrying glasses of the poison from the cottage's indoor bar. Sweltering Southern sunrays beamed through his loose T-shirt and bright Bermuda shorts. Gussy reclined on the powder-blue

deck chair by their concrete pool dressed in a gold one-piece swimsuit and Onassis-style shades, rubbing sunblock over her toned legs. Kingston seated himself and passed her the drink; he sipped his own and fired up a cigar.

The two celebrated the impulse purchase of a quicksilver Cadillac that morning, Gussy's choice. Kingston drove it straight out of the dealership. Like the sensation of a phantom limb, they both considered playing the new GNU-556 license plate for that Friday and had to stop themselves from phoning it in to Hillside. BellSouth had just connected their phone service the day before. Cousin Dot left a message from Baton Rouge about an issued hurricane watch for a nearby tropical storm, Katrina. The tempest had just touched Florida, with a seventeen-percent possibility of hitting New Orleans. Kingston, puffing a Havana, couldn't imagine it being worse than the storm he'd just weathered.

## THE BIG FIVE

BY JOSEPH WALLACE

*Bronx Zoo*

**I**t was like the punch line to a stupid joke.

*Q: How cold is it?*

*A: So cold that the dogs are sticking to the fire hydrants.*

Only, in this case:

*Q: How cold is it?*

*A: So cold that even the polar bears are shivering.*

And it *was* that cold, eight degrees above zero and headed down. So frigid that clots of ice bobbed and clattered down the stripped-bare Bronx River, that the bison he'd passed on the way in, their shaggy humps edged with frost, breathed out huge goutts of steam like irritable snow-capped volcanoes.

But Akeley didn't mind. In fact, the plummeting temperatures made what he'd come here to do easier.

Though not too easy. No point if it was too easy.

He stood beside the ice-skimmed pool, between the concrete wall and the jumble of manmade rocks that were supposed to remind visitors of the Arctic. If there was anyone there to be reminded on this gray, deep-winter day, when the zoo was open but no one came, when this patch of the Bronx was the least populated two hundred-plus acres in the city.

The only place, the only time of year, when you didn't feel like an ant, one among eight million scurrying along predetermined pathways, carrying food back to the giant rectangular mound you called home.