



CHAPTER B: BLACK MEN & WHITE MICE

Duce climbed the steep concrete steps and quietly entered his small 2-bedroom 'shotgun' home in the Upper 9th Ward of New Orleans. His birth home insecurely rested on stilts, less than a block away from the Desire Housing Projects.

Duce's mother, Jackie, greeted him at the door, embraced him and exclaimed, "My first born finally made it home! My brotha told me 'bout all that trouble you got into in New York."

She was wearing an imitation Gucci leisure suit, and her braids were fresh from Candy, the young quasi-entrepreneur who ran a tax-free beauty joint in her kitchen.

Duce quietly spoke through a yawn, "I'm beat," while nestling securely in his mother's hefty hugs. But his sense of security evaporated when he noticed a stranger in the living area.

"Who dis!!!" Duce demanded.

"My boyfriend, Michael!" his mother gleamed.

Duce shook his head, shuddered, and started toward his bedroom grumbling, "Old bastard look like tha Hobbit or some shit."

"Be nice Duce!" His mom tried to introduce him to her new boyfriend, but Duce's only response was, "Ma, it's almost midnight, when he goin' home!!?"

The next day, Duce woke up to his 15-year-old brother, Ken, poking him in the shoulder with the broken antenna of an outmoded cordless phone.

“Telephone Duce,” Ken grumbled. He lazily dropped the phone on Duce’s face, rolled over, and shuffled his shabby bedspreads.

Duce was disoriented, lying on a twin bed only six inches away from his brother’s. “Damn ya breath kickin’ kid... What da fuck you got halitosis or some shit?” Duce ragged.

“What time is it?” Duce asked. He looked for a wall clock, but could only find a poster of Lil’ Kim sucking a lollipop.

The bedroom was musty and drab. The floorboards were rotting, shrinking, and squeaked every time Duce shifted his sluggish body on the bed. The drywalls were scuffed and stained from the water that dripped from the old window unit. Mousetraps baited with vanilla cotton, guarded the molded, bacteria-infested cracks in the corner of the room.

“When you gonna clean up dis nasty-azz room?” Duce henpecked.

“When you gonna get off my nutz and answer da phone?” Ken countered and covered his head with a threadbare pillow.

Duce aggressively wiped the crust of dried tears from the inner rim of his eyes. He slept for nearly 13 hours straight, and was still weary.

He woke up with a headache, feeling like he was recovering from unconsciousness, dormancy, hibernation, or even death. He peeled the phone off the side of his face like a scab and sluggishly answered, “Yea?”

“Damn, wake ya lazy azz up... It’s 2:00 in the afternoon!” The caller jived.

“Who dis?” Duce interrogated.

“It’s me! Simon!”

Duce paused for 10 seconds then bugged, “How da hell ya got this number!?!”

“Calm down nigga... we still got-cha personnel file. I’m just callin’ to letcha know that I got some of my boyz at State to take care of dat issue fa ya,” Simon boasted.

Duce was bitter and apathetic. He really just wanted to forget about “dat issue,” so the last thing he needed was a wakeup call from Simon. Duce tried to cut the conversation, “Yea, aight cool... listen, I’m ‘bout to...”

“Hol’ up,” Simon interrupted, “It’s something else I wanna talk to you ‘bout...”

“I remember you sayin’ you gonna be back for a while. You think you might wanna job? After Phase II, we gonna have 500 ‘juvies’ up in this piece, and I could use some help.”

Duce paused to consider and replied, “I gotta get back to you. I’m looking for a place to work that’s more about rehabilitation than punishment.”

Simon didn’t get the logic, “Whatcha mean?”

“Listen man, I’mma get back to you aight?” Duce said impatiently.

“Aight man,” Simon replied, “I’mma holla atcha later... Ya boy Jason gonna be callin’ soon, tell dat nigga to get at me, aight?”

Duce hung up the phone confused, “How da hell does Simon know Jason?”

“Maybe Simon smokes crack,” Ken snickered and erupted into laughter when he noted the dazzled look on Duce’s face, “HAHAHAHA... Maybe yo azz need to come back to da hood mo’ often, so you don’t be spazzin’ out over bullshit.

“Hahahaha, welcome home college boy, welcome back to da hood nigga... HAHAHAHAHA!!!!”

Duce showered, dressed and joined his little brother in the living room.

“Whea Ma?” Duce asked Ken, who barely acknowledged his presence.

“Umm No,” Ken shrugged with his eyes glued to the television set.

“AHHH HA, HA!!!” Ken laughed hysterically as he watched the antics of the cartoon, Pinky and the Brain.

“What’s this?” Duce asked.

Ken stuffed his cheeks with fat-filled generic brand potato chips and replied, “Bout dese two lab mice, tryin-na take ova’ the world.”

Duce creased his forehead, lifted his eyebrow, and scoffed, “You on some ill shit... Won’tcha read a book or something... Ol’ azz still watching cartoons!?”

“Won’tcha get off my nutsack Duce!” Ken retaliated, with his eyes glued to the TV.

[SNAP!!!] Duce leaped out of his skin when the mousetrap seized a small mouse only three inches from his foot.

“AHHH HA, HA!!! What da fuck you jumpin’ fa? Damn!” Ken ragged, “Scured of a lil’ bitty mouse?”

“Ha Ha, I see you got jokes,” Duce sarcastically remarked. He picked up the mousetrap and playfully aimed it at his brother. Ken scuttled away, fretting, “Stop playin’!”

“See,” Duce snickered, “I knew you wuz a lil’ chicken shit... I’mma take this to the dumpsta’.”

“Niggaz in da hood don’t say *chicken shit*... Keep using dat white trash vernacular, and I’mma revoke ya ghetto pass,” Ken countered.

Duce froze and cracked-up, “Damn! So niggaz in da hood sayin’ ‘vernacular’ now!!! Whatch’all gotta thesaurus ‘round dis mutha fucka?”

Duce pushed open the old screen door and walked the narrow confines of his hood. It was hotter than Algeria and more humid than a

rainforest. He inspected the mouse in the rusty trap, holding on to its last breath. Its fur was shedding down to the flesh and it was so skinny that its ribs were exposed.

“Damn, this is the ugliest mouse I ever seen!” Duce surmised, “It probably walked into the trap on purpose.”

Duce looked around at all of the living organisms in his proximity. Nature’s hands carelessly scattered debris about the asphalt, as if she was jaded from human synthetics. The road was coarse and convoluted. Little girls tipped over syringes that invaded the borders of their hopscotch lines. Boys carved handles off of abandoned cars to replicate guns, running and screaming, “BANG, POW, NAH NIGGA WHAT!?!” They were young soldiers and martyrs in a struggle with insanity.

Duce was amazed at how feeble and decrepit everything looked around him. Compared to the plush lawns and meticulously manicured nature trails of Happy Valley, his neighborhood looked like it was on the brink of death. Cracking concrete slabs overwhelmed the landscape. Three-legged mutts sniffed discarded, dirty diapers in search of a snack. Stray cats used dirty makeshift smoking urns, filled with soggy cigarette butts, for litter boxes.

“Why haven’t I ever seen a *white* stray cat?” Duce wondered, “I mean there’re plenty of white domestic pet cats, so why ain’t I seen a white cat risking his life to dash across the road, or fish a fishbone from a garbage pile?”

“Better yet, why are all pest mice brown, yet every lab mouse is white? As if, a white mouse has too much privilege to have his head smashed in a mousetrap, and a brown mouse is too dumb to spin a wheel at the Neuroscience Convention.

“Damn, we live in a twisted society!”

Duce continued to study his environment. The hood looked like a wasteland, while the medical school at the corner shone like emperor’s throne over a peasant’s slew. Children jeered, “NIGGA FUCK U, I SHOT YOU FIRST,” as the overseers massaged their beards and raised their brows – a child’s severe dysfunction is a hefty Carnegie grant.

The plot was steeped in corruption. Mad scientists had an esoteric language of their own – *Structural equation modeling will be used to test the theory that children with crack addicted mothers have higher incidents of mortality* – Bull shit! Translation – *Dear Uncle Sam, I need a cool \$1.5 million to get a Birdseye view of these crazy niggas killing each other.*

The absurdity turned Duce’s stomach and soiled his thoughts – Mad scientists making a killing from killings, leaving the community in poverty’s pit.

The mortality of Duce’s reality began to exhume his soul. He was a test-tube baby, raised in an incubator infested with disease, dysfunction, despair and death. His natural life was spent in a human lab, and the

conditions were pervasive. Nationwide, medical schools post up in the backyard of bedlam. From Hopkins in Baltimore, Washington in St. Louis and Penn in West Philly, Uncle Sam gives medical schools millions of dollars to 'study' problems but won't give the community 2 cents to solve them.

In Duce's hometown of New Orleans, the state's most prestigious medical schools flocked to the projects to procure millions of grant dollars to study random slum diseases, without touching the root disease – poverty. Scientists get richer, winning noble prizes for ignoble research – studying 10,000 diseases of the slum, while da hood gets sicker and poorer.

Duce thought about the time Dr. Young told him, "Last year, Hopkins collected more grant money than all Black colleges combined, yet Baltimore is still #1 in STDs and 56% of all black men age 15-23 in Baltimore are under criminal justice control."

Duce's mind sniped, "Maybe the Billionaire Boys of Hopkins should take a bullhorn to Murphy Homes and announce, 'Thank you niggaz for letting me stick a syringe up your ass... Because of my white mice and black men, I have tenure, a raise, a plush office, and my own computer lab... Unfortunately, you niggaz still ain't got shit.'"

Ironically, Duce unknowingly spent most of his life as a lab rat himself. He and his little brother personified Pinky and the Brain, with spoofs that often resembled a minstrel-style sideshow. Their actions and motives were random reactions to a human lab called "da hood." For all practical purposes, da hood is a governmentally endorsed repository for crime, cancer, diabetes, SIDS, AIDS, ADHD, slow learners, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, low self-esteem, complacency, violence, and at least 10,000 other diseases and undesirable human conditions.

Life in the lab was hard knock and unpredictable. You might become a Brain, hyper-vigilantly and fruitlessly trying to take over the world, or a Pinky, mindlessly submitting to your cage. But the most elusive aspect of the human labs is the investigators – the mad scientist who accumulate fortunes from pharmaceuticals, biomedical research, scientific journals, law enforcement, the prison industry, government grants, and boundless other mechanisms to capitalize from human suffering.

Duce dodged many demons in his community, but he knew one was sitting at the seat of his conscious screaming the immortal words, "Fuck the world."

His hatred of happiness was a by-product of his misery, but ironically, his refuge and redemption had landed him in Happy Valley for more than a year.

Luckily, however not by design, the labs have some positive side effects such as resiliency, character, culture, humor, and valor. Ms. Mary, for example, had the most beautiful yard on the block. Her flower-filled garden

was adorned with colorful daffodils and daisies. It was such a beautiful spectacle, that it attracted hummingbirds from the meadows to *da hood* to nest. However, Ms. Mary would spend her entire day guarding the flowerbed. While rural farmers built scarecrows and called it a day, Ms. Mary would have to literally chase kids down the street to keep Baby Jordan prints out of her fertile soil. Her garden was her obsession. Ghetto kids wouldn't dare trample on her bed, if they valued their lives. Ms. Mary had the kind of vigilance that made "roses grow out of the concrete," as Tupac once suggested.

Ms. Mary was from the same vein as Duce's mother, who often told him, "If you go out in the streets and get shot, I'll kill you!"

Duce remembered when he was 14 years old and he came home at 10:00 p.m. smelling like marijuana. His mother pounded his chest with her fist and cried, "Duce! I can't believe you'd be so stupid!" It was a beatin' and tongue-lashing that would have made DHS call its first brigade, but from that point forth, Duce knew better than to break curfew or smell of drugs. Sometimes protecting and raising a child in the hood required unconventional parenting styles – a little obsession and a lot of desperation.

Unfortunately, the protective mechanisms that kept Duce safe in the hood reduced his capacity to show compassion. Duce had become a ghetto child, with mental and emotional gruffness looming in his subconscious. He was the maverick in Happy Valley, mean-mugging townies for smiling too much. In his absurd and unorthodox reaction to compassion, he'd insult his brother because he loved him. He was like a porcupine trying to show affection through spikes that made his touch offensive. But every time Duce removed his spikes, he'd feel naked and vulnerable.

Duce's best friend from high school, Jason, pulled up along side of him as he basked in the beauty of Ms. Mary's flowerbed. Jason was ecstatic to see Duce and greeted, "Whao! The prodigal son of the projects!"

Jason loved Duce like a brother, but ironically, he hoped he'd never see Duce at home again. Unlike many in the hood, Jason wanted Duce to leave and never return. Jason often thought, As long as he's not here, he must be alright. In addition, Jason had not yet reached a level of maturity that allowed him to deal with his teenage trauma. Seeing Duce could only expose the ghost that haunted their friendship for years.

Jason unlocked his passenger door and urged, "Hop in and tell me 'bout all that shit you got into up in NYC."

Duce sank deep down in the camelhair seats of Jason's candy-red Caddy, inhaling the sweet aroma of vanilla car freshener. The air conditioner was chillin', like a brisk tropical breeze against the gulf coast humidity. Duce aimed the vents directly at his face and leaned his heavy mind back against the headrest, as he low rode to the hypnotics of Maze's *Happy Feelings*.

“So that’s the story of my fucked up life,” Duce lethargically concluded. “I was on my way to the top, and dese niggaz from Brooklyn just stripped it all away.”

“Damn kid, you done been through some shit!” Jason consoled. “I know we only talked a couple of times since you went to college, but you always gonna be my brotha. You were there for me during the worst time of my life... And just like you helped me, I’m gonna do whatever I can to help you.”

The words, *worst time of my life*, burned in Duce’s dome like a flask of acid. It was the first time in more than five years that Jason made such a reference.

I wanted to forget that ever happened! Duce thought and mulled over the experience that permanently connected them spiritually, yet separated them physically.

As Jason and Duce drove through the blighted subdivision, they vividly remembered midway through their senior year of high school, when Jason called Duce crying, “I just killed Broxton... I shot ‘em... I didn’t mean to! I just lost control!”

“Shit man what happen?” Duce asked.

“I came home from school and saw him standing over my moms. She was out cold with this big knot on her head. I thought she was dead and I just lost it! I ran to the closet, grabbed the gun and shot Broxton in his head. But my moms started moving after she heard the gunshot. I just called 911. My mom is so out of it now, I don’t even think she realized what I did.

“They gonna take me to jail Duce, my life’s over man!” Jason stressed.

Duce’s mind and heart raced. “I’m coming over!” Duce asserted.

As Duce ran frantically to Jason’s home, he grunted, “I can’t let my boy go to jail!!!” At the time, Duce and Jason trusted the police about as much as they trusted Satan. After two police officers falsely accused them of shoplifting, and then roughed them up for asserting their innocence, they vowed never to deal with cops again.

Duce arrived at Jason’s home only 5 minutes before the paramedics and police department responded. Jason held a bag of frozen broccoli on his mother’s head, while Duce put on plastic kitchen gloves and wiped Jason’s fingerprints from the .45mm pistol. He then held his breath and positioned the gun in Broxton’s lifeless hand. When the emergency response teams arrived, Duce and Jason gave the same story: “It looked like an attempted murder and suicide.”

There was not much of an investigation into the incident. No one except for Jason’s mother really cared about Broxton’s death, and she

wouldn't dare press the investigation, knowing that the most likely assassin was her son.

Jason and Duce didn't speak much after the incident. Aside from the fact that they felt like conspirers, Jason's family experienced disarray. Within two months after the assault, she totaled the family's only car while driving drunk, and was evicted from her home for not paying rent. She and her five children ended up living in a homeless shelter. Subsequently, her youngest son was arrested for bringing a pocketknife to school.

After the arrest, the Department of Human Services arranged for her and her family to have a psychological evaluation. The psychologist's report indicated that Jason's mother was bipolar and functioning within the mild range of mental retardation – possibly due to head trauma. Jason's brother, of course, was diagnosed with ADHD. The report also recommended that her five children be placed in state custody until she secured a home and completed parent training. The three girls went to a foster home, the brother went to boot camp and Jason went to a group home.

Duce suffered emotionally after the incident. He vexed, I covered up the murder to avoid losing Jason to the state, and I *still* ended up losing him to the state!

Duce had to investigate to find Jason's group home in New Orleans East, only to find out that Jason had been transferred to a boot camp in Houma for fighting the day before.

Every night Duce laid in bed restless, wondering if his best friend was all right. One day he saw Jason's mother walking down the street wearing house shoes and a t-shirt that was so threadbare that you could see clear through to her braless nipples. "When ya kids coming home Ms. Murphy?" Duce asked.

"Dey can come home w'eva dey wont to... Dey just won't stop fightin' in da fosta-homes and shit," she apathetically replied. Ms. Murphy was too dim to realize that her children's violent patterns stemmed from watching her in abusive relationships and too aloof to admit that she never finished parent training.

Every time Duce passed the eerie New Orleans cemeteries, he could see Broxton's name chiseled into the aboveground graves. He never realized that he'd fear Broxton more dead than alive. I gotta leave New Orleans, Duce thought.

He called his father, Leroy, who he barely knew in Baton Rouge and said, "I'm 'bout to graduate from high school, and I wanna go to Southern, but I don't have enough money to stay on campus."

Surprisingly, Duce's father welcomed him into his home with open arms. Duce's father was a good and simple man who always wanted to have a relationship with his sons, but never had enough money to pay child support.

“If you can’t pay support, you can’t see your kids,” Duce’s mother would assert – later regretting depriving her children of their dad. Duce went on to build a friendship with his dad, but he never truly had a father.

Meanwhile, Jason left the group home on his eighteenth birthday and went to live with his mother and her new boyfriend, Louis. Jason liked Louis because he never hit his mom; he *only* cheated on her. Plus, Louis was a ‘high roller’ who bought Jason expensive clothes and jewelry.

“I like you,” Louis often said. “I always wanted a boy... Can you believe I got six lil’ girls and no boys? You like the son I never had.” Only 12 years older than Jason, Louis was far from a father figure, but Jason was so needy, that he’d accept fatherhood from any asshole that didn’t physically abuse his mother.

“You know Jason,” Louis said in a crass, pseudo-intellectual way, “A wise man once told me, give a man a joint, he’ll smoke for a day, but teach a man how to sell drugs and he’ll smoke for life.”

Jason laughed, “What da fuck you talkin’ bout Louis?”

“I mean, I’mma stop buying you shit and teach you how to run dese streets fa ya-self, ya dig?”

Jason squared his shoulders and humbled his eyes as if he had just been tapped to join a secret society. “Aight man,” Jason agreed, “Just lemme know what I gotta do.”

Louis grabbed Jason’s right hand, massaged his palm and placed a chrome plated .9mm pistol in his hand. “They gotta snitch dat I need-cha to dust off... he copped a plea by rattin’ out one of my boyz, served 5 years, now he back on the block tryin’ to slang rock on my turf. Dat could be a bad situation for me... We need to snuff dat shit befo’ it starts. Ya feel me?”

“You already know Big Rob and Pooh from my poker parties. Meet ‘em at da Sound Station at 9:00 p.m. They gonna go with-cha to da spot whea dat snitch hang at. Pooh got the steering wheel, you got the trigger, and Big Rob got backup just in case you bitch out.”

Louis gave an evil grimace and remarked, “But I know you got the heart to kill. *I can see it in your eyes.* Just do what Big Rob tells you and you gonna be straight.”

Louis pulled out a wad of cash and flipped 10 crisp 100 dollar bills, “Here’s a G now. I’ll give ya another when you finish.”

He looked Jason squarely into his eyes and said, “Jason, all soldiers gotta start off on the frontline... Trust me, I got some big shit in store for ya later, but right now, I need to see if you a man or a mouse.”

That evening, Jason gazed into his own eyes in the bathroom mirror, searching for that *heart to kill* that Louis identified earlier. He pushed on the mirror crying, “Are you a fuckin’ man or mouse!?!” He rolled a joint and

took a few hits off the ganja to clear his mind. “Yeeeaah daddy, I’mma man not a mouse... I’mma black man!”

He got high and thought about what it meant to be black, and dangerous – or dangerously black. “Am I fuckin’ Platonic or Socratic,” he puffed and snickered, “Dat’s some deeeeep shit... I’m fuckin’ Darwinistic ‘round dis mutha fucka tonight... survival of Da fittest mutha fuckin’ black Machiavelli!!! Sun Tzu! Art of War!!!! Black Gotti, Killuminati!!!! *And every other great white prophet that taught niggaz how to kill niggaz... DIE NIGGA DIE!!!! HAHAHaHahaha!!!!*”

Jason stifled his laughter and took one last deep puff from the blunt. As he exhaled, his eyes started to contort the room like a pinwheel, and his mind projected a cinema in the speculum. He nodded boastfully and chanted, “Yeeaaaah nigga, I see the *will...*” The sun dialed down, and the bathroom darkened, exposing a glint of Broxton’s soul through the haze of Jason’s delusions. For the first time since he shot Broxton, he was able to admire the glare of death, instead of fear it. He blew a dark cloud of herbals into the damp air and hummed, “I’mma fuckin’ black man, not a lil’ white mouse!”

Unbeknown to Jason, in a world of experiments, theories and conspiracies, black men and white mice are interchangeable.

As Jason and Duce low-rode through the hood, Jason continued to clue Duce in on his life after death, “Yea man, I’ve been pretty much the top gun ‘round hea, ever since Louis and his crew got busted. When they got 30 years in federal prison for conspiracy possession with intent to distribute, Louis left behind ‘bout 10 kilos of cocaine, \$150,000 worth, that the feds didn’t seize.

“I hadn’t even graduated to slangin’ when they shipped ‘em to Leavenworth.

“At first, I didn’t wanna touch the caine. I had it in my mind to leave the hood and join you at Southern. I even wrote you a letter that I never mailed.

“But then my moms got to trippin’ again. She was ‘bout to loose the house again, and my sisters and brother was ‘bout to go back to the state. And after my 10 year old sister got molested in foster care, there wasn’t no way I was letting that happen.

“So I started slangin’. Louis would give me these encrypted instructions from the joint and I quickly learn how to, not only slang, but also tie my money up in real estate so I wouldn’t go down like Louis.

“Within a few months, I was able to not only pay the rent, but I also bought the lease from our slumlord. When I fixed up the house and bought new furniture, you shoulda seen Social Services kissin’ my mom’s ass, ‘Oh my Ms. Murphy, you certainly have gotten your life together.’ Those fools were

so blinded by the money; they couldn't see that she was the same alcoholic cluck that lost the car, the house and us a few years ago.

"Anyway, me and your moms got really close. She would tell me everything 'bout your college days. I always wished I had a moms like yours. If I did, I probably woulda gone to college too. I wouldn't have to worry 'bout leaving my sisters and brother at home alone with their own mama. I don't wanna have to survive like this, but in a way, I sacrifice myself so maybe my sisters and brothers could do what you did.

"I also found out your moms landlord was fuckin' over her too, so I bought ya'll lease. Your moms is in the process of buying the lease from me now – without interest on her own terms. I told her, 'You're too brilliant of a woman not to be a homeowner.'

"And your brother be beggin' me to put him in the game, but I always refuse. On the real, your brotha's a genius... hardheaded, but a genius. I told 'em, 'you don't gotta worry 'bout slangin,' 'cause I'mma cover you.' I told 'em I'll pay for whatever college he wanna go to. I keep tellin' him that these streets ain't shit, but maybe he needs to hear it from you.

"Well, that's basically all that's goin' on 'round hea. The hood is still fucked up, but as long as I'm runnin' the streets your family's taken care of... You just need to do what you gotta do to get yo azz back in school."

Duce's emotions were in a blender. He didn't know whether Jason was a success or a failure, an asset or a hazard, a helper or a destroyer. Plus, he was troubled by the fact that Jason seemed to know his family better than he did.

I can't buy my mama's lease or send my little brotha to college, or tell 'em not to sell drugs, he thought. At the moment, Jason seemed omnipotent, and Duce felt powerless.

He griped, "I want to get back to school, but right now shit not lookin' too good. I only had liability insurance so I ain't got a car. My computer's gone and the ones at the public library gotta 15 minute limit. I maxed out my credit cards on a fuckin' rental and I owe Big State \$5,000.

"I don't know man, I already got one degree... maybe I should just start working somewhere so I can start making money."

Jason shook his head, "FUCK THAT! What da fuck you gonna do, some ol' crooked bullshit like Simon? Or join the pussy-ass police force... You betta than that Duce! I talk to ya moms almost every day, and she told me that you wanna counsel the kids. She even told me 'bout your mentor, Dr. Young – that's the real shit. If you stop your dreams just to make some money, you ain't no betta than me."

At the time, Duce didn't feel that being like Jason was necessarily a bad thing. Oddly, not only did Jason know Duce's family better than Duce did, but he also knew Duce better than Duce knew himself.

Jason could sense that Duce was compromising with defeat. “How can I help him without hurting him?” he pondered. He placed his hand on Duce’s shoulder and said, “Now you know if I had enough money to clean everything up for you, I’d drop it with no strings, but it sounds like you need a lot of cheese—more than I can just pull outta my ass.

“But I do have a proposition for you. It’s safe, but lucrative. I understand you got some folks in Jersey. Well, I met some dealers from Jersey in an internet chatroom who wanna get a supply from me. We get our caine much cheaper from the Gulf than they do from the Atlantic. Plus they sell keys for more than we sell ‘em for down South. They said they’d give me a lotta loot, if I found a way to transport some narcotics to Jersey.

“This is how it’ll work; I’ll buy you a new computer now and an SUV in your name within a month or so. When you finish you’re business here, you can deliver the narcotics to Jersey on your way back to Big State. After that’s done, I’ll give you another \$8,000 to get you started back in grad school.

“Now understand, I can get any flunky to take a trip to Jersey for a lot less, but I really wanna see you finish what you started up there. I want this money to go to a good cause; not some knucklehead that’s gonna use it for bullshit. Second, if you decide to do this, I don’t wanna ever see you ‘round this shit again; I’m trying to help you outta a tough spot, not convert you into a dealer. Third, if you decide not to do it, I still love and respect you like a brotha. Here’s \$2000 for you to get a new computer... I can do that much for you without you doing shit for me. If I could buy you a car with no return, I would, but financially I just can’t.”

Jason pulled up to Duce’s home, gave him a hug and said, “Go home and marinate on this shit my nig. I’mma get up witcha later, aight.”

“Aight man, I’ll letcha know the deal soon. Thanks man,” Duce responded.

Jason believed in Duce more than Duce believed in himself. Coming from a family with the scars of alcoholism, abuse, neglect and basic apathy, Jason could appreciate many aspects of Duce’s life that Duce took for granted.

It was hard for Duce to find hope and resiliency after loosing so much of what he worked so hard to get. Jason’s words, “you betta’ than that,” and “you wanna counsel kids,” was once Duce’s reality, but now, merely a distant dream – Lost somewhere between Dr. Young’s tombstone and an East coast chop shop.