

**Esi Edugyan** is a graduate of the University of Victoria and Johns Hopkins University. Her debut novel, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*, was published internationally. *Half Blood Blues* won Canada's prestigious Giller Prize 2011 and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2011 as well as for the Governor General's Literary Awards 2011. Her third novel, *Washington Black*, was published in 2018. She lives in Canada.

### **Praise for *Half Blood Blues***

'Edugyan really can write... redemptive' *Guardian*

'Simply stunning, one of the freshest pieces of fiction I've read. A story I'd never heard before, told in a way I'd never seen before. I felt the whole time I was reading it like I was being let in on something, the story of a legend deconstructed. It's a world of characters so realized that I found myself at one point looking up Hieronymus Falk on Wikipedia, disbelieving he was the product of one woman's imagination' Attica Locke

'Superbly atmospheric... a brilliant, fast-moving novel' Kate Saunders, *The Times*

'Assured, vivid and persuasive... Impressively evocative of period and place, and an effortlessly involving and dramatically unusual second novel' *Time Out*

'Ingenious...' Anthony Cummins, *Daily Telegraph*

'A mature, moving second novel... *Half Blood Blues* shines with knowledge, emotional insight, and historical revisionism, yet it never becomes over-burdened by its research.

The novel is truly extraordinary in its evocation of time and place, its shimmering jazz vernacular, its pitch-perfect male banter and its period slang. Edugyan never stumbles with her storytelling, not over one sentence' *Independent*

'This is a wonderful, vibrant, tense novel about war and its aftermath. Its author has brought both the wartime past of a devastated city and its confident reinvention of itself in a new era to life with extraordinary assurance' Susan Hill, Man Booker Prize judge

'Sid's voice... is a triumph of vernacular writing and captures the mood of the late jazz age in Europe... punchy and atmospheric' *Sunday Times*

'A great and original novel... tense, richly humorous and enjoyable' Sue Gaisford, *Independent on Sunday*

'Ingenious – and the hip period slang is pitch-perfect' Sue Arnold, *Guardian*

'The novel is held together by Edugyan's masterly wielding of the narrative voice – a voice so constant and commanding in its articulation, so firm and assured in its rhythms, that the splintered story takes on its own enchanting rhythm... entralling... a captivating novel of music, memory and storytelling' Charlotte Ryland, *TLS*

'A densely researched tale musing on timeless themes of jealousy and betrayal' *Daily Mail*

'Edugyan's ventriloquism is compelling, personal and authentic, her story deeply researched' *Observer*

# HALF BLOOD BLUES

ESI EDUGYAN



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from the British Library on request

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First published in this edition in 2018 by Serpent's Tail

First published in 2011 by Serpent's Tail,

an imprint of Profile Books Ltd

3 Holford Yard

Bevin Way

London WC1X 9HD

[www.serpentstail.com](http://www.serpentstail.com)

ISBN 978 1 78816 177 0

eISBN 978 1 84765 656 8

Designed and typeset by [sue@lambledesign.demon.co.uk](mailto:sue@lambledesign.demon.co.uk)

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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PART ONE



***Paris 1940***

**C**hip told us not to go out. Said, don't you boys tempt the devil. But it been one brawl of a night, I tell you, all of us still reeling from the rot – rot was cheap, see, the drink of French peasants, but it stayed like nails in you gut. Didn't even look right, all mossy and black in the bottle. Like drinking swamp water.

See, we lay exhausted in the flat, sheets nailed over the windows. The sunrise so fierce it seeped through the gaps, dropped like cloth on our skin. Couple hours before, we was playing in some back-alley studio, trying to cut a record. A grim little room, more like a closet of ghosts than any joint for music, the cracked heaters lispin' steam, empty bottles rolling all over the warped floor. Our cigarettes glowed like small holes in the dark, and that's how I know we wasn't buzzing, Hiero's smoke not moving or nothing. The cig just sitting there in his mouth like he couldn't hear his way clear. Everyone pacing about, listening between takes to the scrabble of rats in the wall. Restless as hell. Could be we wasn't so rotten, but I at least felt off. Too nervous, too crazed, too busy watching the door. Forget the rot. Forget the studio's seclusion. Nothing tore me out of myself. Take after take, I'd play sweating to the end of it only to have Hiero scratch the damn disc, toss it in the trash.

'Just a damn braid of mistakes,' Hiero kept muttering. 'A damn braid of *mistakes*.'

‘We sound like royalty – *after* the mob got done with em,’ said Chip.

Coleman and I ain’t said nothing, our heads hanging tiredly.

But Hiero, wiping his horn with a blacked-up handkerchief, he turn and give Chip a look of pure spite. ‘Yeah, but, *hell*. Even at our *worst* we genius.’

Did that ever stun me, him saying this. For weeks the kid been going on and on about how dreadful we sound. He kept snatching up the discs, scratching the lacquer with a pocket knife, wrecking them. Yelling how there wasn’t nothing there. But there *was* something. Some seed of twisted beauty.

I didn’t mean to. But somehow when the kid turned his back I was sliding off my vest, taking the last disc – still delicate, the grooves still new – and folding the fabric round it. I glanced around, nervous, then tucked it into my basscase. The others was packing up their axes.

‘Where’s that last record at?’ said Hiero, frowning. He peered at the trash bin, at the damaged discs all in there.

‘It’s in there, buck,’ I said. ‘You didn’t want it, did you?’

He give me a sour look. ‘Ain’t no damn point. We ain’t never goin get this right.’

‘What you sayin, kid?’ said Chip, slurring his words. ‘You sayin we should give it up?’

The kid just shrugged.

We lined up the empty bottles along the wall, locked up real quiet, gone our separate routes back to Delilah’s flat. Curfew was on and Paris was grim, all clotted shadows and stale air. I made my quiet way along the alleys, dreading the sound of footsteps, till we met up again at the flat. Everyone but Coleman, of course, Coleman who was staying with his lady. We collapsed onto dirty couches under blackout curtains.

I'd set my axe against the wall and it was like I could feel the damn disc just sitting in there, still warm. I felt its presence so intensely it seemed strange the others ain't sensed it too. Its wax holding all that heat like an altar candle.

It was the four of us living here. Delilah, Hieronymus, Chip and me. Couple months before we'd spent the day nailing black sheets across the flat's windows, but damn if that grim sun didn't flood through anyway. The rooms felt too stale to sober up in. We needed to sweat it out in the fresh air, get our heads about us. Ain't been no breeze in weeks.

Hiero was draped in his chair, his scrawny legs dangling, when all a sudden he turn to me. His face dark and smooth as eggplant. 'Christ, I feel green. My guts are pure gravy, man.'

'Amen,' I said.

'Man, I got to get me some *milk*.'

'Amen,' I said again.

We talked like mongrels, see – half-German, half-Baltimore bar slang. Just a few scraps of French between us. Only real language I spoke aside from English was *Hochdeutsch*. But once I started messing up the words I couldn't straighten nothing out again. Besides, I known Hiero preferred it this way. Kid hailed from the Rhineland, sure, but he got old Baltimore in the blood. Or talked like he did.

He was still young that way. Mimicking.

Something had changed in him lately, though. He ain't hardly et nothing since the Boots descended on the city, been laid up feverish and slack for days on end. And when he come to, there was this new darkness in him I ain't never seen before.



I gave my old axe a quick glance, thinking of the record tucked away in there. It wasn't guilt I felt. Not that exactly.

Hiero sort of half rolled onto the patchy rug. 'Aw, Sid,' he groaned. 'I need milk.'

'In the cupboard, I reckon. We got milk? Chip?'

But Chip, he just open one brown eye like a man half-drowned. His face dark as cinder in this light.

Hiero coughed. 'I'm tryin to clean my stomach, not rough it up.' His left eye twitched all high up in the lid, the way you sometimes see the heart of a thin woman beating through her blouse. 'It's *milk* I need, brother. Cream. That powdered stuff'll rip right through you. Like you shittin sand. Like you a damn hourglass.'

'Aw, it ain't that bad,' I said. 'Ain't nothin open at this hour anyway, kid. You know that. Except maybe the Coup. But that's too damn far.' We lay on in silence a minute. I tossed my arm up over my mouth and man if my skin didn't stink of rancid vinegar – that was the rot, it did that to you.

In the bad light I could just make out the room's last few chairs huddled by the fireplace. They looked absurd, like a flock of geese hiding from the hatchet. Cause they was the last of it, see. This been a grand old flat once, to go by Lilah's stories. All Louis XIV chairs, Murano chandeliers, Aubusson tapestries, ceilings high as a damn train station. But the count who lent Delilah the place, he done urge her sell what she could before the Krauts come in. Seemed less bleak to him. And now, the flat being so empty, you felt only its depths, like you stranded at sea. Whole place nothing but darkness.

Across the room, Chip started snoring, faint like.

I glanced over at Hiero, now all knotted up in his chair. 'Kid,' I said thickly. 'Hey, kid.' I put a hand to my head. 'You

ain't serious bout givin up on the record. We close, buck. You know that.'

Hiero opened his mouth, belched.

'Good mornin right back at you,' I said.

He didn't seem to have heard me. I watched him heave hisself up on his feet, the chair moaning like a old mule. Then he sort of staggered on over to the door. Least I reckon that was his idea. Looked more like he heading for the fireplace, stumbling all about. His shoulder smacked a wall.

Then he was on the floor, on all fours.

'What you doin?'' I said. 'Hiero, what you doin, kid?'

'What you mean, what my doin? You ain't never seen a man put on his shoes before? Well, stick around, cause it's bout to get excitin. I'm gonna put my damn coat on next.'

Hiero was wrestling his old hound's-tooth coat. It'd gone all twisted in the sleeves. He still ain't stood up. 'I need me some daylight right bout now.'

I pulled on my fob, stared at my watch till it made damn sense. 'This ain't no kind of hour, kid. You ain't youself.'

He ain't said nothing.

'Least just wait till Lilah wake up. She take you.'

'I ain't waitin till my *foot* wake up, never mind Lilah.'

'You got to at least tell her what you doin.'

'I ain't got to do *nought*.'

A soft moan drifted over from the window, and then Chip lifted up onto one dark elbow, like he posing for a sculpture. His eyes looking all glassy, the lids flickering like moths. Then his head sunk right back on his shoulders so that, throat exposed, it like he talking to the ceiling. 'Don't you damn well go out,' he told that ceiling. 'Lie youself down, get some sleep. I mean it.'

'You tell it, buck,' said Hiero, grinning. 'You stick it to that ceilin.'

‘Put that old cracked plaster in its place,’ I said.

But Chip, he fallen back and was snoring along already.

‘Go on into Lilah’s room and wake her,’ I said to Hiero.

Hiero’s thin, leonine face stared me down from the doorway. ‘What kind of life you livin you can’t even go into the street for a cup of milk, you got to have a nanny?’ He stood under the hat rack, leaning like a brisk wind done come up. ‘Hell, Sid, just what you expect Lilah to do, you get in real trouble? She got a special lipstick I don’t know bout, it shoot bullets?’

‘You bein a damn fool, buck.’ Pausing, I glanced away. ‘You know you don’t got any damn papers. What you goin do you get stopped?’

He shrugged. ‘I just goin down the Bug’s. It ain’t far.’ He yanked open the door and slid out onto the landing, swaying in the half-dark.

Staring into the shadows there, I felt sort of uneasy. Don’t know why. Well. The Bug was our name for the tobacconist a few blocks away. It *wasn’t* far.

‘Alright, alright,’ I muttered. ‘Hold up, I’m comin.’

He slapped one slender hand on the doorknob like it alone would hold him up. I thought, *This kid goin be the death of you, Sid.*

The kid grimaced. ‘You waitin for a mailed invitation? Let’s ankle.’

I stumbled up, fumbling for my other shoe.

‘There won’t be no trouble anyhow,’ he added. ‘It be fine. Ain’t no one go down the Bug’s at this hour.’

‘He so sure,’ I said. ‘Listen to how sure he is.’

Hiero smiled. ‘Aw, I’m livin a charmed life, Sid. You just stick close.’

But by then we was slipping down those wide marble stairs in the dark and pushing out into the grey street. See,

thing about the kid – he so majestically bony and so damn grave that with his look of a starving child, it felt well nigh impossible to deny him anything. Take Chip. Used to be the kid annoyed him something awful. Now he so protective of him he become like a second mother. So watching the kid slip into his raggedy old tramp’s hat and step out, I thought, *What I done got myself into*. I supposed to be the older responsible one. But here I was trotting after the kid like a little purse dog. Hell. Delilah was going to cut my head off.

We usually went all of nowhere in the daytime. Never without Delilah, never the same route twice, and not ever into Rue des Saussaies or Avenue Foch. But Hiero, he grown reckless as the occupation deepened. He was a *Mischling*, a half-breed, but so dark no soul ever like to guess his mama a white Rhinelander. Hell, his skin glistened like pure oil. But he German-born, sure. And if his face wasn’t of the Fatherland, just bout everything else bout him rooted him there right good. And add to this the fact that he didn’t have no identity papers right now – well, let’s just say wasn’t no cakewalk for him.

Me? I was American, and so light-skinned folks often took me for white. Son of two Baltimore quadroons, I come out straight-haired, green-eyed, a right little Spaniard. In Baltimore this given me a softer ride than some. I be lying if I said it ain’t back in Berlin, too. When we gone out together in that city, any Kraut approaching us always come straight to me. When Hiero’d cut in with his native German, well, the gent would damn near die of surprise. Most ain’t liked it, though. A savage talking like he civilized. You’d see that old glint in their eye, like a knife turning.

We fled to Paris to outrun all that. But we know Lilah's gutted flat wouldn't fend off the chaos forever. Ain't no man can outrun his fate. Sometimes when I looked out through the curtains, staring onto the emptiness of Rue de Veron, I'd see our old Berlin, I'd see that night when all the glass on our street shattered. We'd been in Ernst's flat on Fasanenstrasse, messing it up, and when we drifted over to the curtains it was like looking down on a carnival. Crowds in the firelight, broken bottles. We gone down after a minute, and it was like walking a gravel path, all them shards crunching at each step. The synagogue up the block was on fire. We watched firemen standing with their backs to the flames, spraying water on all the other buildings. To keep the fire from *spreading*, see.

I remember the crowd been real quiet. Firelight was shining on the wet streets, the hose water running into the drains. Here and there, I seen teeth glowing like opals on the black cobblestones.

Hiero and me threaded through Montmartre's grey streets not talking. Once the home of jazz so fresh it wouldn't take no for an answer, the clubs had all gone Boot now. Nearly overnight the cafés filled with well-fed broads in torn stockings crooning awful songs to Gestapo. We took the side roads to avoid these joints, noise bleeding from them even at this hour. The air was cool, and Hiero, he shove his hands up so deep in his pits it like he got wings. Dawn was breaking strangely, the sky leathery and brown. Everything stunk of mud. I trailed a few steps behind, checking my watch as we walked cause it seemed, I don't know, slow.

'Listen. This sound slow to you?' I yanked the fob up and held the watch to the kid's ear.

He just leaned back and looked at me like I was off my nut.

As we walked, tall apartments loomed dark on either side of the street. Shadows was long in the gutters. I was feeling more and more uneasy. ‘Nothin’s open this hour, man. What we doin, Hiero? What we doin?’

‘Bug’s open,’ said the kid. ‘Bug’s always open.’

I wasn’t listening. I stared all round me, wondering what we’d do if a Boot turned the corner. ‘Hey – remember that gorgeous jane in Club Noiseuse that night? That dame in a man’s suit?’

‘You bringin that leslie up again?’ Hiero was walking all brisk with them skinny legs of his. ‘You know, every time you drink the rot you go on bout that jack.’

‘She wasn’t no leslie, brother – she was a *woman*. Bona *fide*.’

‘You talkin bout the one in the green suit? Nearest the stage?’

‘She was a *Venus*, man, real prime rib.’

Hiero chortled. ‘I done told you already, that been a leslie, brother. A *man*. It was writ plain as day all over his hairy ass.’

‘I guess you’d know. You the man to see bout hairy asses.’

‘Keep confusin the two, Sid, and see what happens. You end up in bed with a Boot.’

We come round the corner, onto the wide square, when all a sudden my stomach lurched. I been expecting it – you need guts of iron to ride out what all we drunk last night. Iron guts I ain’t got, but don’t let that fool you bout other parts of my anatomy. My strength, I tell you, is of another stripe. I shuffled on over to a linden tree and leaned up under it, retching.

‘You get to know this here corner a bit better,’ said Hiero, smirking. ‘I be right back.’ He stumbled off the sidewalk, hopped the far curb to the Bug’s.

‘Don’t you be takin no fake change!’ I hollered after him. ‘With you eyesight, the Bug like to cheat you out of you own skin.’ A white sun, tender as early fruit, stirred in the windows of the dark buildings. But the air, it still felt stale, filled with a grime that burned hot in you nostrils. I stamped my feet, then doubled over again, heaving. The goddamn rot.

A real racket started up across the street. I looked up to see Hieronymus yanking on the Bug’s door like he meant to break in. Like he reckoned he got the power to pop every damn lock in this city. When it didn’t open, what do he do but press his fool face up to the glass like a child. Hell, though, he *was* a child. Stupid young for what all he could do on a horn. You heard a lifetime in one brutal note.

He run on back over to me. ‘Closed,’ he said, breathing hard. ‘You reckon all these stores be closed? What time is it?’

‘Half nine or so.’

‘Check you watch.’

‘Half nine.’

‘Don’t make no sense.’ Frowning, he looked all around. A white car passed through the shady street like a block of ice skimming a river, its pale driver turning to us as we turned to him. I shivered, feeling all a sudden very exposed. That gent looked dressed for a funeral, all that black and white plumage.

‘Hell, it’s Sunday, fool,’ I said, hitting Hiero’s arm. ‘Won’t nothin be open. You got to go to Café Coup you want milk.’ On Sundays, the streets belonged to the Boots.

Hiero gripped his gut, giving me a miserable look. ‘Aw, man, the Coup’s so *far*.’

'You right,' I said. 'We got to go back.'

He got to moaning.

'I ain't goin listen to that,' I said. 'I mean it. Aw, where you goin now? Hiero?'

I got a hard knot in my gullet, watching the kid wander off. I just stood there in the road. Then I swore, and went after him.

'You goin get us both pinched,' I hissed at him when I caught up. I could feel my face flushing, my shoes slipping on the slick black cobblestones. 'Kid?'

He shrugged. 'Let's just get to the Coup.'

'Coup's halfway to hell from here. You serious?'

He give me a sort sick grin, and all a sudden I got to thinking bout that disc I'd took and hid in my case. I was thinking of it feeling something real close to guilt. But it wasn't guilt. I give him a quick look.

'Tell me somethin,' I said. 'You serious bout quittin that record?'

He didn't answer. But at least this time he look like he taking it in, his eyes dry and hard with thought, two black rocks.

Lucky for us, Café Coup de Foudre done just open. The kid slunk in gripping his gut like he bout to spew his fuel right there. Me, I paused on the threshold, looking. I had a strange feeling, not sickness no more, but something like it. The low wood tables inside was nearly empty. But the few jacks and janes here made such a haze with their cigarettes it was like wading through cobwebs. Stink of raw tobacco and last night's hooch. Radio murmuring in the background. At the bar it smelled, gloriously, of milk, of cafés au lait and chocolats chauds. The kid, he climbed up onto a flaking red stool and cradled his head in his hands. The barkeep come over.



‘A glass of milk,’ I said in English, with a nod at Hiero. ‘Milk,’ Hiero muttered, not lifting his head.

The barkeep propped his thick forearms on the counter, leaned down low. We known him, though, it wasn’t menacing. He spoke broken German into the kid’s ear: ‘Milk only? You are a cat?’

Hiero’s muffled voice drifted up. He still hadn’t lifted his face. ‘Ain’t you a laugh factory. Bout near as funny as Sid here. You two ought to get together. Take that show on the road.’

The barkeep smirked, mumbled something more into Hiero’s ear. Something I ain’t caught. Then I seen the kid stiffen in silence, lift up his face, his lips clenching.

‘Hiero,’ I said. ‘Come on, man, he kiddin.’

Going over to the icebox, the barkeep stare at me a second, then glance on up at the clock. I check my own watch. Five to ten. He wander on back with a glass of milk, his voice cracking against the silence like snooker balls hitting each other. ‘But I warn you,’ he said. ‘You drink all the milk in France, you still not turn white.’ He laughed his strange, high, feathery laugh.

Hiero brought the glass to his lips, his left eye shutting as he drank. A sad, hot feeling well up in me. I cleared my throat.

The kid, he suddenly reached back and touched my shoulder. ‘Might as well do another take,’ he said. ‘The disc ain’t all bad. And my damn visas ain’t come yet. What else I got to do?’

I swallowed nervously.

Then he give me a long, clear look. ‘We goin get it right. Just be patient, buck.’

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Sure we will. But wasn’t that last one any good, kid? *Good* good? Would it make us?’

The kid set the glass down on the counter, and pointing at it, hollered, 'Encore!'

My stomach lurched, and just holding it together, I said, 'I be right back. You ain't goin' leave without me?'

In the basement john, I got down to business. I felt sick as hell, the bile rising in me. For a second I stood there clutching the filthy basin, yellow grime all caked up on its porcelain. Head down, just breathing. I ran the faucet and splashed my face with cold water. It smelled of hot iron, the water, making my face feel alien to me, like I ain't even in my own skin.

Then I could hear something through the ceiling, sudden, loud. I paused, holding my breath. Hell. Sounded like Hiero and the damn barkeep. The kid was prone to it these days, wired for a fight. I dragged in a long breath, walked over to the dented door.

I ain't gone out though. I just stood there, listening to the air like a hound. After a minute I reached for the knob.

The talk got softer. Then the whole place seemed to shudder with the sound of something crashing. Hell. I couldn't hear the barkeep's voice. My hand, it was shaking so bad the knob rattled softly. I forced myself to turn it, take a step into the stuffy corridor. I made it up three steps before stalling. The stairs, they was shaded by a brick wall, giving me a glimpse of the café without betraying my shadow.

All the lights was up. I ain't never seen all the lights up in the Coup, *ever*. I never known till that moment how nightmarish so much light can be.

The place went dead quiet. Everything, everyone, felt distinct, pillowed by silence. One gent turned to me, slow. He got creases like knife wounds in his face. I glanced under his table – only one leg. His hands gnarled like something dredged from a lake, they was both shaking like crazy. He

was holding dirty papers. I watched ash from his cigarette fall onto his pants.

I looked around sharply. On every occupied table sat identity papers. A few crisp as fall leaves, others almost thumbed to powder. A young brunette slapped hers down so nervously she set it in a puddle of coffee. I stared at the bloating paper. She was chewing a loose thread on the collar of her heavy tweed coat, her jaw working softly. I remember thinking, ain't she warm in that.

The barkeep begun cleaning quietly, rubbing down the bar with a gingham towel.

There was this other chap, though. Sitting in the window's starched light, his expression too bright. A coldness crept over me.

Then the talking started again, and I glanced up.

Two Boots, in pale uniforms. Used to be just plain black: at night you seen nothing but a ghostly white face and an armband the colour of blood coming at you over the cobblestones. But Boots was Boots.

One was tall and thin, a tree-branch of a man. The other, he short and thickset. With his back turned to me, I could see a fat roll of muscle at his neck.

I dropped my eyes, and like I was letting it occur to me for the first time, I looked for Hiero. He standing on over at the front door, staring at the Boots. Another kid stood at his side, Jewish I reckon, a look of terrified defiance on his face. The taller Boot was making a real show of thumbing slow through his papers, not saying nothing. Just licking his thumb, turning a page, licking his thumb, turning a page. Like that Boot could pass a summer's day doing it. I looked at his quiet grey face. Was a face like anyone's. Just going bout his business.

'Foreign,' the shorter Boot was saying, his voice so calm

and soft I almost ain't heard it. 'Stateless person of Negro descent.'

Hiero and that Jewish kid, they stood there with their hands dangling at their sides, defiant schoolboys. It ached to watch, the both of them so helpless, their hearts going hard. With the broad pane of glass shining bright behind them I couldn't see too clear. But even from here I could hear them. Their breathing.

The tall Boot done soften his voice, too. It was odder than odd: these Boots was so courteous, so upstage in their behaviour, they might've been talking bout the weather. Nothing like how they'd behaved in Berlin. There was even a weak apology in their gestures, like they was gentlemen at heart, and only rough times forced them to act this way. And this politeness, this quiet civility, it scared me more than outright violence. It seemed a newer kind of brutality.

'Foreigners,' said the short Boot calmly. 'Hottentot.'

'Stateless,' said the other. 'Foreigner,' he said. Jew, he said. Negro, he said.

I wanted to close my eyes. My legs was shaking softly, I couldn't feel nothing in my feet. Don't you drop, boy, I told myself, don't you damn well drop. Get you wits together, for god's sake, and go out there.

I stood there, rooted to the spot.

Hieronimus, he stared down them Boots. When their hard gazes forced his away, he look at the tiled floor. He never once look in the direction of the toilets, and I understood. Hell. *He*, of all people, protecting *me*. I couldn't let him do it.

But just then the Boots yanked wide the Coup's door, its chain singing. Taking Hiero's arm, they led him and the other boy out into the street. I stood there. Stood there with my hands hanging like strange weights against my thighs,

my chest full of something like water. Stood there watching Hiero go.

The front door shut with a clatter. The lights was all still up in the café. Silence, no one talking at all.

Then that gent, the one I seen before almost smiling, he got up and walked to the bar. Counting out his francs, he stacked them on the mahogany bar. He said something in French to the barkeep.

The barkeep just swept up the damp francs and turned to put them into the register. The man skirted the tables, his heels scraping the worn floor. No one spoke, all of us watching. And then the door jangled cheerfully shut behind him.