

A close-up photograph of a man's torso wearing a grey suit jacket, a white shirt, and a dark blue tie with a small white floral pattern. A small, round, red, white, and blue striped pin is on the lapel. In the background, a woman with long dark hair is visible, wearing a dark, low-cut dress. The overall lighting is soft and warm.

rise
of
The
chulo

James Lee Nathan III

Rise of the Chulo

How Hip Hop spread across the globe

James lee Nathan III

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*To the many friends and family of East Elmhurst and
Corona NYC.*

Of Distress

“No enterprise is more likely to succeed than one concealed from the enemy until it is ripe for execution”. - Niccolo Machiavelli

The East Village of NYC is always busy. Whether it's the dead of winter or humid July, you can always find something to get into. It is early spring 1987, almost 3am, and many tourists and city dwellers alike are looking for after-hours spots to continue their night, hurriedly shuffling passed an alley way unaware of the mischief afoot.

A large multiple-loft brownstone dominated the corner where two figures emerged from a side entrance. The first one is thick and muscular the other not so much. He had a slight build but stood a little less than six feet tall. Raymond Chevis and Charles St Claire had descended from a comfortable loft, about a block away from the newly opened Arthur's Jazz Lounge.

A crisp early spring night greeted the two friends as they walked down the street. The spearmint tasting air soothed their lungs as they inhaled its coldness. Raymond stopped outside of the loft's entrance, to take it in as Charles smiled walking up behind him and out to the street.

“Yo we need to keep it movin' man, otherwise we may be taken for tourists or gay lovers out for a stroll,” Charles remarked as Raymond zipped up his leather Members Only

jacket and pulled up next to Charles, laughing and giving the 6'4 Samoan/ black man a reassuring pat on the back.

They moved two steps closer to danger as the deep dark shadows of the adjacent alley crept up to greet them; Raymond felt cold steel pressed at the base of his neck. Charles didn't move an inch, but his eyes told the same story. One sawed off shotgun each was pressing in his chest and firmly up against his lower back. He would get a double dose, if necessary because of his reputation and size. Three masked assailants had rolled up on them and easily guided them further into the alley, just out of street view.

Suddenly Raymond did something he had never done before, but had witnessed once in his youth. He lowered his head and raised his arms as if to signal a goal or touchdown but his arms were slightly bent. His father did this some fifteen years previously. His eyes closed and in an instant it is 1972. It's his birthday, he has just turned eleven. Uncle Bobby (his father's younger brother) is visiting from the South. They had come into Flushing NY to pick up his brand new five speed bike from Alexander's department store.

In 1972 Flushing is a magnet for commerce in Queens, long before the shopping and strip malls, quite busy with traffic and people. Raymond admired the many diverse cultures and tongues that flourished throughout the congested main street.

If you wanted to go shopping in Queens, you headed to

Flushing. The three walked down Main Street pausing as Raymond's father tweaked a loose bolt on the front fork of the bike. They stood twenty feet from his father's favorite watering hole Wiley's.

- 1 "You would think there's some kind of parade going on or someth
- 2 t all of these people." Bobby had never been out of Birmingham, .
- 3 this was truly a shock for him.

Bobby received an even bigger surprise, as four rough-looking Hispanic men passed. One stopped, turned around and walked over to Gregory Clement Chevis, as he continued to adjust the bolt. The man stopped in front of Greg as his partners waited. He casually lifted up Greg's chin and with one single swift move he planted a hard upper cut. Raymond's dad landed squarely on his ass and Bobby stood at once in front of Raymond. The man laughed as he and his friends walked towards Wiley's and went inside.

"Daddy is you ok?" is about all Raymond could blurt out. The scene kept running back and forth in his mind. Bobby would be more animated,

"Who the fuck is that and what are we gonna do about this?" Greg didn't say a word to Bobby nor acknowledge his son's presence. His gaze fixated on the street and everyone else around them. He observed the crowd for more thugs, and once he had surmised the threat of danger had diminished, he led the boys to a small hallway thirty feet from the bar. He looked down deep into Raymond's eyes and said

“Do not leave this hallway until I return.” His eyes said it would be alright but Raymond also knew those eyes hid shame and fury behind them. “Bobby, you are the oldest so do as I say and you will be ok.” No more words were required. He adjusted his apple jack cap and crossed Roosevelt Ave with a sense of determination and confidence.

Greg seemed to grow in stature with each stride. His coolness had returned as he reached the end of the block and headed towards the gas station. There a phone booth stood. Greg waited there for a second and shortly thereafter assumed a curious position. Raymond studied it intently. Greg raised his arms as if he was a referee signaling a goal, but his arms were slightly bent at the elbow. He stood facing East, then West, remaining in this position for ten minutes. He then made a call, came out of the booth and resumed the stance.

“What is he doing Bobby, and why doesn’t he come back?” Bobby looked as confused as Raymond but had a better idea of what this token of distress meant. “I’m not sure; I have only seen that signal once. It is a sign of distress that Masons use. My grandfather used it in Bessemer when he was dealing with sharecroppers. They were bad people, but Gramps put up this sign and before I knew it there were five men next to him talking with the sharecroppers. The argument ended shortly after that. I never asked him about what it meant.”

“What’s a mason and is Dad one?”

“All of our family is masons, I don’t know if Greg is one, but Gramps and our father are Prince Hall Masons”. Raymond replaced his confusion with frustration.

“You still didn’t answer the question, what is a Mason?” He returned his gaze back to an empty street corner.

The assailants did not speak initially they simply motioned to Raymond and Charles to move forward. Raymond knew he must be visible to the main street. He moved, slowly, toward a sliver of light. *Where are you? These crews usually have at least one minder, or boss, watching them from a vantage point; watching for cops, or any civilian who might walk up on them.* He was hoping the minder was a mason. The light given off by the street lamp wasn’t very bright you could barely see the entrance to the alley. Raymond stumbled into the light and then resumed his position.

“Hey! You trying to die tonight?”

Finally they spoke!!! Raymond’s first thought: *What was that accent?*

“Maybe we should off these pieces of shit right here, right now Pauly,” as the shotgun dug deeper and harder, into Charles’s back.

“Thanks to you, these pieces of shit now know that one of us is named Pauly, you dumb fuck.” the one called Pauly said. He moved in front of Raymond. Raymond deduced they were white men, Italian with the accents, even though they wore ski masks. Across the street in plain sight of the

alley, a small but well-dressed man lit a cigar with a match. He puffed on the stogie for about a good minute before whistling a tune. He whistled as he crossed the street. The tune is familiar to Raymond, it is strangers in the night. A childhood friend had an uncle who whistled that tune all of the time.

The goons got the signal. They stepped back off of Raymond and Charles as the well-dressed man entered into the alley. "Raymond Chevis, you're in the wrong place." It was Uncle Vinny Lucrema.

Raymond immediately reached out to shake his hand.

"Pauly, Jackie, Benito, stand down, these aren't the marks. Get off of the street. I will see you shortly." Barked Uncle Vinny. The crew disappeared into the shadows of the alley. He watched them patiently, and took a slow drag on his cigar before turning to Raymond.

"So you understand Raymond, I am no traveling man, but in my unique business one must know the non-verbal signals an adversary may employ." Uncle Vinny is the epitome of cool and dapper. His fedora svelte and his overcoats were always dry cleaned fresh. Yet make no mistake, he was a thug.

"Uncle Vinny what the fuck is this all about?" Raymond blurted out as he tried to regain his composure. Vinny continued to smoke on his cigar as he sized up the black Samoan.

"The game against Christ the king was a classic, how many

tackles did you have?" Charles pulled his shoulders back, and pushed out his chest, before responding.

"I had 10 solo tackles and 4 sacks."

"Ah yes it very good. That performance alone got you a scholarship to Penn State. It was an awesome performance." Vinny continued to reflect as he walked down the side walk and into the light.

"Raymond walk with me for a minute, and Charles do your fucking job better this time."

"Ok so you are no mason, yet, you came to my assistance, why? That one question burned a hole in Raymond's mind. Uncle Vinny deflected it again, choosing to mentor for the moment.

"Ya know I have been watching this enterprise of you and Chulo's for a little while now. It didn't come across my radar until my nephew Joseph mentioned how much you were distributing all on your own. You know that's a quick way to get noticed and make enemies of those who see such endeavors as encroaching." Uncle Vinny smiled as he caught Raymond's gaze.

Had Uncle Vinny made me an offer based on no future reprisals? Or am I tripping?

"You are aware of my business young Chevis, and you know I am quite good at it. Tonight I will need to explain why I did not take out the mark, and how come I came home less 50gs...

“Do you have any idea how I’m going to explain this?” This time as Uncle Vinny turned to face Raymond, his gaze murderous. This is not the look one wants to see from a made man.

“I have no clue Uncle Vinny; we never intended to short change or circumvent anyone. We are not in the business of pissing off folks who we can’t deal with on our own” Raymond believed humility and ignorance is best served up to gangsters without hesitance.

“Well Mr. Mutha fucka you are lucky that I know my shit, else you would be in a real bad way, especially since you didn’t have any money on you. Why is that you may ask my young man? No need to answer or even ask how I would have information as to the whereabouts of said coin or its whereabouts on your person.”

Uncle Vinny let that sit with the young mark just long enough to pose yet another mind numbing question. “Have you even considered over these last minutes, Why you? Why now? Where did I get my information from?” Uncle Vinny stopped his lambasting of Raymond enough to observe that the Samoan had become visibly agitated with the questioning. “It’s ok Charles; I’m lecturing and mentoring now. I don’t want this mistake to occur again. You understand?” Charles fists uncoiled and he eased back a foot or two.

1 "Raymond, in this business we get a call, they say who, where a
2 ey say the take, they say **if** they want them to walk away or to d
3 ut tonight they said to send a message. You two marks should hav
4 and after your meeting, and one of you should have left that all
5 bulance. Your very next question to me should be **why** you? The an
6 s with whoever set you up **for** this, and I think you already have

Raymond's eyes looked back and forth up the busy street but he could not locate his dad. Fear crept in. Bobby had become anxious and began to seem a little scared as well.

"Bobby what if daddy doesn't come back? What will we do?" Bobby had no immediate response. But then he stood up looked out into the street, and then turned back to Raymond.

"When has he ever not done what he said he would do?" The two stood in the hallway looking back towards the gas station. A car pulled up in front of Wiley's and six men filed out of it. They walked into the bar. In the hall next to the bar, four more men passed the two boys and out onto the street, the last one turned and winked at them as they entered into the bar.

The Hispanic thugs milled around harassing people. When they finally decided to sit at the bar, other patrons left. Wiley's always had some nefarious sorts in it during this early part of the decade. The bar regulars ranged from cops, ex cops, tradesmen, players, pimps, hoes, the usual suspects.

The thugs sat doing shots at the bar, oblivious to all others

in the establishment. An older hoe looked them up and down. She had to be no more than 37 tops. But all of the years of whoring, and booze had taken a toll on her face. Wrinkled and older than her actual age, yet her body still remained alluring as she walked toward the bar. Brown hip hugging shorts gripped her curvaceous glutes and long shapely thighs. A very well groomed afro wig adorned her head to perfection. She planted her white patent leather boot on the bar rail and glanced over at the men.

“Somebody gonna whupp yo azz mutha fukkas”. The thugs waved her off and threw a drink in her face.

Now at the far end of the bar, a lone black man sat in a booth and enjoyed a full view of the entire establishment. A wall protected his back and five quick steps separated him from the rear exit and two cars. He wore a blue Guyavera with matching Kangol. The man lit his cigar. His name of is unimportant now, but one should pause to observe this man. His manner, poise, how the others are taking their cue off of him. All of the subtle characteristics of a leader in total command of his surroundings.

A cigar sparked and plumes of smoke billowed up from the dark corner, as if the portals of hell had opened up. In the same moment, a stool slammed across one of the thug’s back and head, his scalp opened up. The man seemed in shock as he just stood there grasping at his T-shirt, blood from his torn cranium oozing down and covering his white V- neck. Three men ascended upon him, and in an instant, he vanished into the dirty floor under an endless stream of

punches and kicks.

Wiley's had a unique full plate-glass window that looked out facing Main Street and Roosevelt Avenue. One thing which was definitely not part of this picture was a bar stool. One flew through the big glass portal, and onto the sidewalk. Two men escaped and braced the door, as all hell broke loose inside of the bar. Spanish could be heard amongst a whole lot of "mutha fukkas."

A beating ensued but was administering it? Ten minutes later, two police cars showed up and the cops ran into the bar. Raymond only saw the Hispanic thugs being brought out in cuffs, all bloodied up and shit. The man who had hit his father looked worse than any of the rest. *What just went down?*

"I guess Greg knows a few folks huh?" Bobby said as he finally let out a smile. The cop cars loaded the thugs inside, and sped off. The others who had raced into the bar appeared at the other end of the block. They gathered and exchanged dap (handshakes. Some of the daps were longer than others. Raymond made mental note of that too. Then sure and steady, his dad walked up to the group. He knew them, it appeared. He walked passed them and back towards the hallway where Raymond and Bobby awaited.

"Ok are we ready to catch the bus. Oh wait we haven't had a slice from Gloria's. Let's go there and then catch the bus."

Greg would never speak of these occurrences to any of them. Raymond made a note of that too. Some things are better left unsaid.

Back in the village, Raymond and Uncle Vinny had walked about a half block, before they turned around and headed back.

“Do not worry about the money, I always have a back-up and I can score that on another mark tonight uptown. A message has been given to you. The message is watch your back my little prince. However, there is something more.” With that Raymond embraced Uncle Vinny, who whispered something into his ear. He walked off whistling into the night.

Raymond turned to Charles, “Let’s go get a slice; we need to think this over.” They headed towards Seventh Avenue on foot. Raymond continued to run the scenario through his head. The what, who and why of it all wasn’t adding up. He had sage advice from Uncle Vinny; “Chulo wasn’t the mark.”

I am the mark. Raymond gave birth to these words in his mind for his own consumption; however he had actually spoken them aloud.

“We are the marks, and whoever put it out, knew I would protect you, hence the sending of the message.” Charles quickly pointed out. “To send the message you only need one sawed off and a couple of bats. The guns were meant to intimidate and to say next time you are dead.”

“Who set this up in the first place? Aren’t you and Chulo the ones that meet with the record distributors? I mean that’s how it’s been done since we branched off into this

endeavor. Why did we switch it up tonight?” Charles felt ready to bash some heads over this, Raymond too.

He contemplated his response with the hopes of not tipping him over the edge. *How to break this down for a blunt instrument?* Came into his thoughts, yet Mr. St. Claire was no blunt instrument. This mound of mocha muscle graduated high school and college early with 3.8 grades! He majored in engineering like his pops.

Raymond’s mind went back to their summers in the park playing chess on the cement tables in the park. Charles would every now and then employ a tactic in which he would sacrifice a bishop, both rooks, and his queen and still put Raymond in checkmate.

“Charles when we played chess, you sacrificed many pieces in various gambits and counter gambits in order to win. What was your thought process in doing so?”

Charles grinned, and then pondered, before a response.

“Considering how much better I was than you, I did it to underscore how I only needed two active pieces instead of so many inactive ones.”

1 So now the question remains who in their inner circle had decide
2 were no longer necessary in order to proceed with the group's g
3 d's eyes met Charles with a knowing glare.

4

5 "Someone has made a move, but it wasn't successful. We need to
6 d think about how we can gain an advantage based on this knowled
7 s agreed. They entered the little pizzeria, ordering two cheese
8 two cokes. They talked **for** a good 30 minutes and left the pizzer

"So you cool with this?" asked Raymond. Charles took in the air, and turned to him.

"I love you man," and those loving words preceded a sharp left hook to the ribs, taking the wind out just enough for Raymond to bend and kneel setting him up for a quick hard upper cut to his chin, and a hard right cross to the chest. Raymond swung around into Charles's waiting arms. A body slam is administered. Raymond ended up sprawled across some garbage cans outside of the pizzeria. Charles walked over and stomped him good for another 15 seconds.

He looked up, and saw an empty street. Adjusted his jacket, and began to walk. He turned the corner then sprinted full out for two city blocks, five long strong strides and another turn before he bolted up an alley. Charles was now just a few feet from the subway, he reached into his pocket and read the instructions that he and Raymond had agreed upon.

1 Get package from Saul

2 Get to docks and move goods

3 Leave crates as discussed with load master and give him three grand

4 Get yo ass to Cambria Heights and wait

5 If all goes well you and Yolanda meet me at Jackson heights subway stop, on the uptown side, tomorrow at 430am.

Back at the pizzeria, Raymond struggled to gain his footing. No one stopped to assist. It is now 430 am. Raymond heads over to Lexington Ave, to put his part of the plan in play.