Willis Avenue Bridge and the Wino

The wino had me bent over the railing of the bridge. It was nighttime, and it was dark. I pleaded with him.

"Please, Mister, don't kill me. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry. Please, mister."

Everything was moving slowly. I didn't know where my friends were — the ones who started all this. All I knew was that they got away, and I was too slow and got caught. Now I was hanging backward over the Willis Avenue Bridge between Harlem and the Bronx, and I was too busy pleading for my life to think about anything else.

He kept dangling me and threatened to drop me.

"I didn't mean to call you a name. I'm sorry. I promise I'll never do it again."

"No, you won't ever do it again. How would you like it if I dropped you, you little shit? How would you like to be called names and made fun of? Huh, kid?"

"You're right. It was dumb. It's wrong to call someone names. I will never do it again. I'm sorry, Mister."

He looked at me, shook his head, and pulled me back over the railing. I was never so happy to have my feet on solid ground.

"Okay, now get out of here and tell your dumb shit friends I better never catch them because I might not be so kind. And kid — never call someone a name you wouldn't want to be called."

He let me go. I ran as fast as my legs could carry me, heart pounding so hard I could hear it in my ears. I didn't stop until I reached my block. I looked for my friends. They were nowhere. They had taken off and left me there, and I was pissed. I went home and didn't tell my mother what had happened.

That night I lay in bed and couldn't sleep. I had crossed the Willis Avenue Bridge dozens of times with my mother on the way to shop on 125th Street in Harlem. It was just a bridge. But lying there in the dark, replaying every second of what had just happened, it felt like a different place entirely.

Earlier that evening, Papo, Jesus, and Colon had talked me into walking out to the bridge. Two of them were older than me and bored. We crossed the pedestrian walkway laughing and joking — just another night in the neighborhood. At the top, we stopped and looked out over the river. The city lights made a beautiful reflection on the water.

Then somebody got an idea.

We started throwing rocks to see who could throw the farthest. Then Papo spotted a wino sitting near the stairs on the Bronx side and started in on him.

"Hey, you filthy wino, get the hell out of there."

We all joined in — taunts, laughter, daring him to catch us. He'd make a move like he was getting up, and we'd laugh harder. We kept escalating until Jesus suddenly yelled.

"He's coming, run!"

Everyone bolted across the bridge. I was last. I hesitated — I didn't think he'd actually run up the long stairs to the top — so I was going through the motions, well behind the others. Then, out of the dark, he was on me. I tried to fight him off, but he was stronger. He dragged me back to the section over the water, picked me up, and hung me over the edge.

I believed I was going to die.

I lay in bed that night, going over it again and again, the last part playing back more clearly than all. We grew up on the street with almost no adult supervision. We did things that seem unbelievable now. That night, it caught up with me.

I finally fell asleep with his voice in my head.

"And kid — never call someone a name you wouldn't want to be called."

I carried that with me longer than I carried most things people tried to teach me on purpose.