Monkeyman

Walter Dean Myers
The Tigros hit the 'hood gradually, like the turning of a season. First we saw some tags scrawled on the wall near the Pioneer Supermarket. Then we heard that a kid on 141st Street got stabbed and they arrested a member of a gang called Tigros.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Fee asked.

"What's a Tigro, anyway?"

I didn't know. I didn't even want to talk about gangs. Some people said—okay, it wasn't some people, it was my uncle who runs the barbershop—Uncle Duke said that I had a bad attitude about Harlem.

"You're so anxious to leave you're not even giving your homeland a chance," he said.

"Africa is my homeland," I said.

"That's the easy answer, isn't it?" he said. He was sweeping the floor of the shop. "Like running away from the neighborhood."

He was right, really. Fee, who is my main man, said that I had black skin and white dreams, that all I wanted to do was to get away someplace and be with white people.

I liked a lot of things about Harlem, especially the block, which was how we talked about 145th Street. There were good people on the block, but what I wanted was to be more than what I saw on the block. Uncle Duke said I could be more, but if I put Harlem out of my heart I could end up being a lot less, too.

Yeah, well, I was ready to take my chances. What I wanted to do was to be a doctor and have a nice crib, and a Benz, the whole nine. Then the thing happened with Monkeyman.

Monkeyman was always quiet. He was down with the books and everything, but he kept to himself a lot and didn't get into anybody else's business. We used to call him Monkeyman because sometimes he would go to the park, climb up into a tree,
and sit up there and read all day. We weren't dising him, we just gave him the tag and he seemed to like it, so it stuck.

Anyway, the Tigos turned out to be a new gang that were trying to build a rep in the 'hood. They were biting all the stuff they read in the papers about wearing colors and flashing signs and whatnot. It wasn't a real big thing until they started terrorizing stores and then they beat up a lot of people and stabbed that one kid. After that you saw their tag all over the place, like stabbing a kid was something to be proud of.

What usually happens when a new gang makes the scene is they jump bad as a posse for a while until they step too far and their leaders get busted. Then, when they realize that their reps and tattoos and colors don't keep them out of jail, they chill and their colors fade. But that hadn't happened yet with the Tigos. They were still wilding and messing with people and putting out squad tracts. A squad tract is when somebody messes with a posse and they let everybody know they're going to kick his butt. When the word comes down that a gang is after you it's scary, and one of the reasons I wanted to leave the area.

Okay, so here's what happened with Monkeyman and the Tigos. It started when one of the Lady Tigos got into a beef with Peaches. The Lady Tigos were just as bad as the dudes and one of them slapped Peaches in the face. Peaches and the girl got into it pretty good and Peaches won the fight. Then, on the way home, two of the Lady Tigos went after Peaches and one of them had a razor blade. Monkeyman was coming from school and had stopped off to buy a soda on the ave. He saw the girl trying to cut Peaches and he ran out and knocked the blade from the girl's hand. Bingo, the fight's over because neither of those two girls wanted to mess with Peaches without a blade and they weren't on their turf anyway. But one of the Lady Tigos went to the same school as Monkeyman. She went back and told the Tigos and before you knew it everybody on the block was talking about how Monkeyman was in big trouble.

There were signs painted on the walls—MONKEYMAN MUST DIE! and MONKEYMAN GOT TO FALL! It was all signed by the Tigos.
Uncle Duke saw Monkeyman in the barbershop and told him to lay low for a while. Fee told him the same thing but everybody figured that Monkeyman was going to get beat up and maybe even worse.

"You know any karate or anything?" I asked Monkeyman when I ran into him on the corner.

"I read a book on it once," he said.

"That's not good enough," I said.

He shrugged and gave me this little grin. Okay, let me back up a little. Monkeyman is six feet tall, maybe even six feet one, and thin. He plays a little ball but he's really not kicking hoops and he's kind of mild-looking. He's not lame or anything like that but he's more down with his mind than his hands. So we worried about him.

"We need to get together and help Monkeyman," Peaches said.

"That's hip," Fee said. "It's hip to help a brother in trouble and everything, but what you're talking about is getting a posse together to go down with the Tigras and that's heavier than it is hip."

"We can tell the police," Peaches said.

"A guy I know went to the police when he got into trouble with a numbers runner," I said. "The numbers runner said he was going to cut him a new place to pee from. He went to the police and the police told him they couldn't do anything until something happened."

"They're into cutting people," Peaches said. "That's serious."

"Yo, Peaches, I didn't know you were sweating Monkeyman," Fee said.

"Lighten up, lame," Peaches came back with her quick mouth. "Monkeyman had the heart to help me when I needed some help. If you don't have the heart to help him that's cool, but don't try to finesse it off like it's no big thing."

"He needs a gun," Fee said. "That's the only thing they respect."

Just blow the word and I was ready to split. From a scrap in
the street the jam was jumping to nines. On the way home I tried thinking about what Monkeyman could do. If the Tigros came on him and just beat him up it would be cool. I mean, that was sick but it was better than being cut or shot. And the thing was that a lot of kids were talking about being down with gangs and trying to make themselves large by going to wack city and offing somebody. That was the danger big-time. To me it was like some moron jumping off a big building and styling for the camera on the way down. They would be throwing away their life, and taking somebody else's life for some moment they imagined would happen. This craziness filled my nightmares. And it might have been sad but the truth was that I was glad it was Monkeyman on the line, and not me.

Two weeks passed from the time that Monkeyman had stopped the girl from cutting Peaches and it looked as if things might blow over without anyone getting hurt. Then a guy called Clean entered the picture.

Ralph J. Bunche is the best school in the 'hood but every so often we get in a guy who doesn't fit. That's what Clean was. He wasn't a big dude, more small and wiry. He wore his pants low in hip-hop style with about four inches of his shorts showing. You're not allowed to style down in the school but he kept at it and the hallway teachers got on his case. He told everyone he was from LA. and used to run with the Crips, but Fee peeped his school record and the dude was really from some place in California called Lompoc.

Clean hooked up with some folks who told him about the Tigros posse. Check this out, to get into the Tigros you either had to slash a saint in public, meaning cut somebody who wasn't involved in nothing, just walking down the street, or make something that was foul righteous. According to the Tigros posse, since Monkeyman had messed with them and that was foul, getting even with him was making it righteous.

It got around in the cafeteria that Clean was going to do up

1 offing: killing

Walter Dean Myers
Monkeyman. Peaches was still trying to settle things peacefully.

"Let's just go up to the dude and see if we can talk a hole in his ego or whatever else it takes," she said. "Because I got to be watching Monkeyman's back the same way he turned out for me."

A few other kids said they were willing to try to talk to Clean. But the truth is that some dudes you can talk to and some you can't. In the first place Clean was not into brain surgery. I mean, his favorite sentence was "Huh?" Clean was in a class called ZIP. ZIP was supposed to stand for Zoned for Individual Progress, but all the kids called it the Underground Railroad because it was the last stop you made before you dropped out of high school.

Okay, besides Clean not being a brainiac he was also like nine shades of serious wack. He was the kind of kid who made you wonder what his mama had been smoking when he was in the womb. But, hey, give it a shot, right?

We found him on the street, and Peaches took the first shot at Clean. "So," she said, "there's no use in us, as young black brothers and sisters, getting into the same violence thing that's killing us off and messing up our dreams. If we can't respect each other, how are we going to expect people to respect us?"

"He messed with the Tigros so he got to be messed up!" Clean answered.

"Why?" came out of me before I could stop it.

"Because that's the way it goes!" Clean said. "He got to be messed up!"

I could see that Clean was getting off with everybody standing around trying to cop a plea for Monkeyman. We split the session and I was still hoping that things would blow over for Monkeyman's sake and for Peaches' sake, too.

The next day Clean got busted bringing a knife to school. If you bring any kind of weapon to Bunche it means an automatic suspension and then you have to go through the bring-in-your-parents bit to get back in. When Mr. Aumack, the principal, called the police, Clean got mad and walked out of the school. But before he left he sent word that he'd be waiting for Monkeyman when we got out at three-fifteen.

Monkeyman
Three-fifteen came. When we looked out of the windows, we saw about a dozen Tigos outside. They were all wearing their black do-rags and some of them had jackets with their tags on them.

Mr. Aumack called the police again and in a few minutes the whole block was filled with squad cars. Their lights were flashing and police were snatching everybody wearing Tigos gear. One of the Tigos spotted Monkeyman and got up in his face. He said, “When we catch you we’ll cap you.”

“How about tomorrow night, eleven o’clock in Jackie Robinson Memorial Park?” Monkeyman said.

“Bet!” the Tigos dude said. “Tomorrow night in the park. Be there, sucker, and wear something that’s going to look good at the autopsy.”

“And bring your whole posse,” Monkeyman said.

Whoa. Monkeyman had called out Tigos big-time. I grabbed his arm and we started walking away.

If you’re going to get into somebody’s face you got to know they got a mind somewhere behind their eyebrows. Then maybe they’ll do some heavy thinking and settle for a chill pill.

“What you doing, Monkeyman?” I asked.

“What’s got to be done,” Monkeyman said. “just what’s got to be done.”

The word bounced around: Be in the park to catch the go-down at eleven. Some kids said they didn’t want any part of it.

“Let’s kidnap Monkeyman,” Fee said. “He don’t show and nothing can happen.”

It was all gums and teeth because nobody really knew what to do. I was all for dropping a dime to 911 but everyone else said no.

“I’m going to be at the park,” Peaches said.

Fee said he would be too. So did Tommy Collins, Debbie, LaToya, Jamie, and me. I didn’t want to show, but Peaches made it clear that anybody that didn’t would be punking out.

++++

Walter Dean Myers
We hadn’t seen Monkeyman all day and rumors were that he had left town.

“Maybe he’ll show at the last minute with an Uzi and start blowing away all the Tigros,” LaToya said.

Nobody said anything when we headed up the hill to the park. I wondered if everybody else could hear their heart beating. I was wearing my sneakers, ready to run if I had to.

When we got to the park there were maybe twenty-five guys in their Tigros gear and ten girls.

My knees got real loose and I was having trouble swallowing.

“Where Monkeyman?” Clean asked. He was wearing a heavy jacket and had his hands in his pockets. “Where Monkeyman?”

“We thought he was here,” Fee said. I noticed Fee’s voice was kind of high.

We waited for another ten or fifteen minutes with all the Tigros posse calling us suckers and stuff like that. I was hoping they didn’t turn on us.

“Yo, here he come now!” A girl pointed toward the uptown side of the park. “Who he got with him?”

I turned and I saw Monkeyman coming down the street. He had a man and a woman with him. The man looked old. Monkeyman brought them right over to where we were and I recognized his grandfather. I didn’t know the woman.

“Hey, this is my grandfather,” Monkeyman said. “His name is Mr. Nesbitt. And this is my godmother, Sister Smith."

“What you bring them for?” Clean said, edging closer to Monkeyman.

“They came to see you mess me up!” Monkeyman said.

He took off his jacket as if he meant to fight Clean. For a moment I thought maybe it would be a fair fight. But then Monkeyman took off his shirt and just stood there in his bare skin and held his hands out and his head to one side.

Clean didn’t know what was happening. He looked around.

“Kick his butt!” one of the Tigros called out. “Waste him!”

Clean took his hands out of his pockets and started circling Monkeyman, but Monkeyman didn’t move. Clean hit him in the
back of his head and he didn’t say nothing.

"Please don’t do that, boy," Monkeyman’s grandfather said.

"He made us promise not to help him, but please don’t do that."

"We’ll kick your butt, too," a girl said.

Everybody turned and looked at her and she held out her chin like she didn’t even care. But she didn’t say anything else.

Monkeyman’s godmother was praying.

It was dark but there was a moon out and the park lights were on. More people came into the park to see what was going on. What they saw was Monkeyman standing with his arms outstretched and Clean hitting him. He hit him in the face a couple of times and an old man asked, "What’s going on?"

"That’s the Tigros gang," Fee said. "They’re beating up Monkeyman because he stopped one of their girls from slashing somebody in the face."

"I ought to kill you!" Clean shouted.

"They just waiting for the police to come," another Tigros guy said.

It grew quiet. There had to be fifty people watching now, watching Clean standing in front of Monkeyman, not knowing what to do, watching the rest of the gang not knowing where to take it, watching Monkeyman with his arms still out from his sides, his nose bleeding, his body quivering from the pain and from the growing cold. The high streetlamps outside the park cast a pale glare on Monkeyman’s dark skin. The shadow on the ground, of Monkeyman’s body being offered up for a beating, was long and thin and disappeared into the shifting knot of people watching.

"That’s what’s wrong with the neighborhood now," a man said. "We got it hard enough without this kind of thing."

"He ain’t nothing but a punk." A short, squat guy stepped out from the Tigros group. "If he don’t fight he a punk!"

"I ain’t even going to waste my time on him," Clean said. "If I was back in the Crips I wouldn’t even waste my time on no punk."

The Tigros were outnumbered now, and began drifting off.

Walter Dean Myers
When they got down to the last five or so someone yelled that the cops were coming and they all ran.

Monkeyman put on his shirt. His grandfather put his arm around him and they started out of the park. The wind picked up a little and I began to shiver. Around me others were slowly starting to move and I pulled my jacket shut and started home.

I saw Monkeyman two days later.

“You were wrong,” I said. “You took a chance and you could have been killed.”

“I was hurt,” Monkeyman said. “I was hurt but they were wrong, not me.”

“What if they had killed you?” I said.

He just looked at me. “I know,” he said. “I know.”

He said it with a sadness that just got all into me. He had been looking down but now Monkeyman looked up, right into my eyes, as if he expected me to say something that was right for the moment. I couldn’t think of anything.

“Yo, Monkeyman, what did you think was going to happen that night?” I asked.

“I just thought that some people were going to show wrong, and some others were going to show right,” he said. “No matter what happened to me, everybody was going to know the difference.”

I couldn’t see it. I wouldn’t have let them beat on me like that. What I would have done I don’t know.

It didn’t end there. Three weeks later another guy in the Tigros stabbed Monkeyman in the back. Monkeyman was in the hospital for three weeks, hanging on between life and death, but finally he made it.

The guy who stabbed Monkeyman had been arrested before for possession of drugs and was on parole. They gave him ten to fifteen years for attempted murder. So Monkeyman got hurt and the guy that hurt him would be in jail until he wasn’t a kid anymore.

It was all so scary. All so sad.
I went to visit Monkeyman in the hospital. We talked about what was going on in school, and what was going on around the 'hood.

"Man, I can't wait to go to college," I said. "I need to put some serious distance between me and 145th Street. How about you?"

"I got accepted at an art school in Pittsburgh," he said. "When I get finished I'll probably come back and open a studio or something. How about you?"

"I don't know," I said. "When I get to be a doctor maybe I'll come back and take care of guys like you."

Monkeyman grinned.

When I left I looked back over everything that had happened. What he did in the park wasn't smart. As a matter of fact it was dumb. Maybe. But as Peaches always said, when you have a friend like Monkeyman, somebody has to watch his back. I thought about what had happened in the park for months afterward. That night in the park Monkeyman had seemed so small, but now, in my mind and in my heart, he has grown. Yeah, Monkeyman.

**Literary Lens**

What do you think the narrator learns from Monkeyman?