

Author of BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME

Ta-Nehisi Coates

A MEMOIR

The Beautiful Struggle

“A brilliant coming-of-age story.”—PEOPLE

the
beautiful
struggle

a memoir

ta-nehisi coates

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Contents

[TITLE PAGE](#)

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[MAP](#)

[THE COATES CLAN](#)

[CHAPTER 1 THERE LIVED A LITTLE BOY WHO WAS MISLED...](#)

[CHAPTER 2 EVEN IF IT'S JAZZ OR THE QUIET STORM...](#)

[CHAPTER 3 AFRICA'S IN THE HOUSE, THEY GET PETRIFIED](#)

[CHAPTER 4 TO TEACH THOSE WHO CAN'T SAY MY NAME](#)

[CHAPTER 5 THIS IS THE DAISY AGE](#)

[CHAPTER 6 FLOAT LIKE GRAVITY, NEVER HAD A CAVITY...](#)

[CHAPTER 7 BAMBOO EARRINGS, AT LEAST TWO PAIR](#)

[CHAPTER 8 USE YOUR CONDOM, TAKE SIPS OF THE BREW](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[Other Books by this Author](#)

1. **The Breaking**
Where Murphy Homes took us down
2. **The Ruins of Murphy Homes**
An unholy den of cutthroats, crooks, and ex-cons
3. **The Citadel of Tioga**
The light on the hill, central outpost for the Coates clan and home of our wayward narrator
4. **Mondamin Mall**
The Fertile Crescent of my fallen town
5. **Fortress Lemuel**
The very name chilled the blood of Excidiers and county boys
6. **Haunted Druid Hill**
... by black folks mostly
7. **Baltimore Polytechnic**
The Crystal City
8. **Leakin Park**
Body dump for those taken by murder most foul
9. **The Blighted Hotels of North and Pulaski**
Shock trauma was their calling card
10. **Duketland Hill**
Disputed territory, a constant battlefield in flux
11. **Garrison and Liberty**
Where the orcs cold-played me for my scallie
12. **The Forgotten Manse of Barrington Road**
The breakpoint from child to child-man
13. **The Backwoods of Park Heights**
The cradle. My first home.
14. **Lexington Terrace**
Overrun by the plague of gonorrhoea
15. **Wabash and Sequoia**
Where Big Bill first pulled his sword
16. **Woodlawn**
The peaceable green fields, though the madness was only steps away
17. **The Road to Mecca**
The way out. The great escape.

Old Baltimore

t h e c o a t e s c l a n



Douglas Cryer and
Edna Coates

Anna White and
Raymond Waters

William Paul
Coates

Cheryl Waters

Ta-Nekia Coates
(1973)

Meneik Coates
(1987)

Kelly Coates
(1968)

Kristianez Coates
(1969)

Damani Coates
(William Coates Jr.)
(1971)

Johnathan Coates
(1971)

Patsy Combs

Melik Coates
(1972)

Sola Branch

Linda Coates

Will Newkirk

Jason Newkirk
(1981)

CHAPTER 1

There lived a little boy who was misled...

When they caught us down on Charles Street, they were all that I'd heard. They did not wave banners, flash amulets or secret signs. Still, I could feel their awful name advancing out of the lore. They were remarkable. They sported the Stetsons of Hollis, but with no gold. They were shadow and rangy, like they could three-piece you—jab, uppercut, jab—from a block away. They had no eyes. They shrieked and jeered, urged themselves on, danced wildly, chanted Rock and Roll is here to stay. When Murphy Homes closed in on us, the moon ducked behind its black cloak and Fell's Point dilettantes shuffled their boots.

It was their numbers that tipped me off—no one else rolled this deep. We were surrounded by six to eight, but up and down the street, packs of them took up different corners. I was spaced-out as usual, lost in the Caves of Chaos and the magic of Optimus Prime's vanishing trailer. It took time for me to get clear. Big Bill made them a block away, grew tense, but I did not understand, even after they touched my older brother with a right cross so awkward I thought it was a greeting.

I didn't catch on till his arms were pumping the wind. Bill was out. Murphy Homes turned to me.

In those days, Baltimore was factional, segmented into crews who took their names from their local civic associations. Walbrook Junction ran everything, until they met North and Pulaski, who, craven and honorless, would punk you right in front your girl.

Above them all, Murphy Homes waved the scepter. The scale of their banditry made them mythical. Wherever they walked—Old Town, Shake and Bake, the harbor—they busted knees and melted faces. Across the land, the name rang out: Murphy Homes beat niggers with gas nozzles. Murphy Homes split backs and poured in salt. Murphy Homes moved with one eye, flew out on bat wings, performed dark rites atop Druid Hill.

I tried to follow Bill, but they cut me off. A goblin stepped out from the pack—

Fuck, you going, bitch?

—and stunned me with a straight right. About that time my Converse turned to cleats and I bolted, leaving dents and divots in the concrete. The streetlights flickered, waved as I broke ankles, blew brains, and when the bandits reached to check me, I left only imagination and air. I doubled back to Lexington Market. There was no sign of Bill. I reached for a pay phone.

Dad, we got banked.

Okay, Son, find an adult. Stand next to an adult.

I'm in front of Lexington Market. I lost Bill.

Son, I'm on the way.

I had crossed a border. This was more than Dad's black leather belt—I knew how that would end. But word to Tucker's Kobolds, this thing filing out across the way, lost boys with a stake in only each other, stretching down the block in packs, berserking everywhere, was awful and random. I stood next to a man about Dad's age waiting at a bus stop, like age could shield me. He looked over at me unfazed and then back across the streets at the growing fray of frenzied youth.

We'd come out that night in search of the wrestlers, who were our latest sensation. They elevated bar fights to a martial art, would rush the ring, all juiced on jeers and applause, white music blaring Van Halen hair waving in the wind, and raise their chins until their egos were eye level with God. Moves were invented, named, patented, and feared—heaven help Bob Backlund in the camel clutch—and we loved that, too, the stew of language that gave a beat down style and grace, that made an eye gouge a ritual.

You could find us, noon on Saturdays, sprawled out on the living room floor, adjusting the hangings behind our secondhand color TV, until the Fabulous Freebirds, Baby Doll, and Ron Garvin emerged from the wavy lines and static. The wrestlers barnstormed the country perfecting their insane number of moves. They were confused. They ranted with the rhythm of black preachers; wore silk robes, bikinis, and spangled belts; carried parasols; and recited poetry. Glossy mags sprung up from nothing, spread the gospel, their scowling mugs, their hollow threats and lore. They gave dressing room interviews punctuated by jabs at the air. Whole histories were pillaged, myths bastardized, until Hercules Hernandez stepped off Olympus and the Iron Sheik delivered the Mideast to the Midwest. They held summits and negotiations, all of these ending in a rain of blows.

Other fans had their Hulksters or the golden Von Erichs. But for me only the American Dream could endure.

He waddled down the aisle, bathed in applause and fireworks. His gut poured over bikini trunks. His eyes were black histories.

The Horsemen would tie the Dream to the ropes, beat him until his hair was a mop of bloody blond. I'd cringe and pound the floor, yelling for him to get up. But Bill always rooted for villains, and cackled as Ric Flair strutted the ring, flipping his wig of platinum blond. Then the Dream would do the in, reverse figure fours, throw bionic elbows and Sonny Liston rights. In the midst of his fleeing adversaries—the battered Tully Blanchards and shattered Andersons—he'd look out at the crowd go mad and snatch the mic like KRS—

It's me, the Great. The king of the ring. Like I told you, the Dream *IS* professional wrestling. I have been to the mountaintop, and it will take a hell of a man to knock me off.

We had to see them. But that road went right through Dad, whose only point in life was toil. He worked seven days a week. Big Bill called him the pope, for weekly he issued sweeping edicts like he had a line to God. He outlawed eating on Thanksgiving, under pain of lecture. He disavowed air conditioning, VCRs, and Atari. He made us cut the grass with a hand-powered mower. In the morning he'd play NPR and solicit our opinions just to contravene and debate. Once, over a series of days, he did the math on Tarzan and the Lone Ranger until, at six, I saw the dull taint of colonial power. I am sure this is what brought him comically to our side.

With two tickets to live pro wrestling, he offered a gift and a joke—

Go see Kamala the Ugandan Giant. And you will understand, as I do, that that nigger is from Alabama.

At the Baltimore Arena we were in full effect. We peered down from cheap seats so high that the ring was our own gift box. There were white people everywhere, and this was the most I'd ever seen of them. They wore caps and jeans sliced into shorts; herded kids, hot dogs, and popcorn. I thought they looked dirty, and this made me racist and proud.

I'd like to tell you what immediately happened next. But I don't remember. I was open, and wanted to cheer the Birdman, resplendent in wraparound shades, a Jheri curl, and fluorescent gold-and-blue spandex. He was always oblivious to his theme music. His tune was internal, and maybe that night he dipped and glided toward the ring, flapping his arms and talking to the parakeets perched on each of his shoulders. I wanted to see the Dream, who was at the height of his feud with the Horsemen, and outnumbered, had taken to guerrilla warfare—masks, capes, ambushes, beef extended into parking lots, driveways and dream dates. But I lost it all out there, and when I dig for that night, all that emerges are the tendrils of Murphy Homes, how they dug into my brother's head. He was already a kid of the streets. But this highway robbery, this thievery of your own person, pushed him toward something else. He was touched by the desperate, and now fully comprehended the stakes.

I know that Dad and Ma saved me, pulled up in their silver Rabbit, some time after I made the call that Dad ran off into the swarming night to find his eldest son, and for the first and only time, I was afraid for him. I know that Bill's mother, Linda, swooped down to the harbor and found Bill first and shuttled him back out to their crib in Jamestown. I know that Bill returned to Tioga days later, and when I told him how I'd dusted Murphy Homes, how I was on some Kid Flash shit, he was incredulous.

Fool, they let you get away so they could chase me.

If the newspapers Dad left around the house were true, the greater world was obsessed over *Challenger* and the S&L scandal. But we were another country, fraying at our seams. All the old rules were crumbling around us. The statistics were dire and oft recited—1 in 21 killed by 1 in 21, more

us in jail than college.

A cottage industry sprung up to consider our fate. Jawanza Kunjufu was large in those days, his book *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys* promised answers and so was constantly invoked. At conferences, black boys were assembled. At schools we were herded into auditoriums. At home, mothers summoned us to dinner tables, and there they delivered the news: Our time was short.

We lived in a row house in the slope of Tioga Parkway in West Baltimore. There was a small kitchen, three bedrooms, and three bathrooms—but only one that anybody ever wanted to use. All of us slept upstairs. My folks in a modest master. My two sisters, Kris and Kell—when back from Howard University, in an area where Dad also stored his books. There was a terrace out back, with a rotting wooden balcony. I almost died out there one day. Leaning against the crumbling wood, I tumbled headlong, but caught myself on the back door roof and came lucky feet-first to the ground.

My room was the smallest, and always checkered with scattered volumes of World Book, Childcraft, Dragonlance, and Narnia. I slept on bunk beds made from thick pine, shared the bottom with my baby brother Menelik. Big Bill, as in all things, was up top. By mere months, he was my father's first son, but he turned this minor advantage into heraldry. He began sentences with "As the oldest son..." and sought to turn all his younger siblings into warriors. Big Bill was seldom scared. He had a bop that moved the crowd, and preempted beef. When bored, he'd entertain himself, cracking on your busted fade, acne, or your off-brand kicks.

Bill: Ta-Nehisi, get the fuck outta here with those weak-ass N.B.A.s. Know what that shit stands for? Next time buy Adidas. And, Gary, I don't know what you laughing at in those four-stripe Cuga. Know what that means? Nigger, can u get Adidas...

In those days, crazy Chuckie threatened our neighborhood. When we lined up for five on five, even tackle he took personally, every block was an invite to scrap. Once he pulled a metal stake from the ground, swung it at fat Wayne until he retreated all the way into our living room. That's when Dad came out and revealed the face of This Is Not a Game. Chuckie cursed and waved the stake. Then he stalked off. That night I lay on the bottom bunk, replaying it all for Bill.

Me: Man, Chuckie is crazy.

Bill: Fuck Chuckie. If he ever step to me, I'll fuck him up.

That fall, Chuckie killed his father, got gaffled by the jakes, and disappeared into the netherworld of Boys' Village or Hickey Juvenile.

Private school Stevie lived two doors down. I'd sit outside playing with his G.I. Joes until I realized that this made me a target. Across the street was Mondawmin Mall, the fashion seat of West Baltimore, the pit of sex, beat downs, and cool. Every window glittered with leather, fur, sterling, and stickers with large red numbers and slash marks. But the price tags and fat-ass honeys made boys turn into killers. One misstep onto suede Pumas, and the jihad begins. In those days cocaine was the air, and though I never saw a fiend fire up, the smoke darkened everything, turned our homey town into a bazaar of cheap ornaments bought expensively, a Gomorrah on the inner harbor. A young man's worth was the width of his blond cable-link chain. The space between two, three, then four finger rings marked footmen from cavalry, cavalry from the great gentry of this darker age. In all our dreams we cruised the avenue in black Cherokee Jeeps, then parked at the corner of Hot and Live, our systems flogging eardrums, pumping "Latoya" and "Sucker MCs." Even I shared those dreams, and I was only ten.

While I was hobbled by preteen status and basic nature, Big Bill was enthralled by the lights. That was the summer of '86. KRS-One laid siege to Queensbridge. I would stand in my bedroom, throwing up my hands, reciting the words of Todd Smith—"Walkin' down the street, to the hardcore beat/While my JVC vibrates the concrete." Bill and my brother John spent all summer busing tables. Bill schemed on a fat rope, one that dangled from his neck like sin. Still, his money was young, and he could not stomach the months of layaway. So he returned from the mall with two mini-ziplock bags, each the size of a woman's fist, each glimmering, like him, in the light. They held massive rings, one adorned with a golden kite, another spanning two fingers, molded into a dollar sign.

He flashed them before me, and I was caught by how the glowing metal made him swell inside his own skin. He was profiling, lost in all his glory, when Dad stepped to him.

Dad: Son. They're fake. Son, you've been had.

Bill: You're bugging. This is fourteen-karat. I paid cash money.

Dad: Son, Son. Let's have them smelted down and tested. If it's ten karats or more, I will pay you for the rings. With interest.

Bill's head went reeling, the dream within reach: He saw a gold herringbone spread over his Black BVD, and when he bopped through Mondawmin, jennys would jump on his jock and soldiers would

collapse or salute. In the order of Slick Rick, Bill would wear the scarlet robe. So he agreed to my father's proposition, convinced he was on the better end. We were young, drunk on ourselves, and could not know that all the alleys we took as original, he'd stepped through before. He found a place to smelt the gold, do the math. And I don't know what was worse—the negative results or Dad's rueful chuckle and sermon. Afterward, Dad went over to Mondawmin and had Bill point out the merchant. Then he walked to the glass counter, brandished the results, and spoke magic words. The magic words were “fraud,” “Black community,” and “State's attorney.” Bill never felt the same about gold again.

My father was Conscious Man. He stood a solid six feet, was handsome, mostly serious, rarely angry. Weekdays, he scooted out at six and drove an hour to the Mecca, where he guarded the books and curated the history in the exalted hall of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. He was modest—brown slacks, pale yellow shirt, beige Clarks—and hair cut by his own hand.

But at night, he barbecued tofu, steamed basmati, and thought of sedition. He'd untuck his shirt and descend into the cellar, then comb through layers of ancient arcana. He collected out-of-print texts, obscure lectures, and self-published monographs by writers like J. A. Rogers, Dr. Ben, and Drusilla Dunjee Houston, great seers who returned Egypt to Africa and recorded our history, when all the world said we had none. These were words that *they* did not want us to see, the lost archives, secret collections, folders worn yellow by water and years. But Dad brought them back.

From the day we touched these stolen shores, he'd explain to anyone who'd listen, they infected our minds. They deployed their phrenologists, their backward Darwinists, and forged a false Knowledge to keep us down. But against this demonology, there were those who battled back. Universities scorned them. Compromised professors scoffed at their names. So they published themselves and hawked the Knowledge at street fairs, churches, and bazaars.

For their efforts, they were forgotten. Their great works languished out of print, while those they sought to save grew fat on integration and amnesia.

Dad tracked the autodidacts and relatives of the ones who'd passed. Over tea in their living room he unfurled his ambition. Dad proposed restoring these lost geniuses to their esteemed chairs in the university without walls, through a publishing operation he built from saddle-stitch staplers, a table-top press, and a Commodore 64. Never had republishing been so radical. He called this basement operation Black Classic Press, and for the Coates family there was no escape. All of that house was bent by the mad dream of mass resurrection.

He covered the crib with Knowledge, until rooms overflowed with books whose titles promised militant action and the return to glory. *Wonderful Ethiopians* and *Black Egypt and Her Negro Pharaohs*. He found others like him, formed collectives, held festivals in honor of Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey and the taking of arms. Brothers and sisters would drum and dance the unearthly rhythms, poets revealed words with teeth. Even the food was conscious—wheat bread and veggie burgers, cookies sweetened by fruit. Dad just played the back, peering from behind his table covered with African cloth and the awesome spread of books brought back from the dead.

This bounty drew the survivors, the ones who outlasted Hoover and COINTELPRO. They approached the tables with expectations so great that they dispensed even with English, opting for Swahili, Arabic, or Twi. All week they swept streets, worked day care, drove buses, taught piano, counseled the high school youth. You would know them by their dreads, their stoicism, the scent of sandalwood and licorice.

They would see me hustling books at these affairs with Ma or Big Bill, and go to school, because the Movement was all that they were. They'd start with the significance of Nkrumah or assail us for not carrying books by Dr. Clarke. They'd pause for libations, shout for Bunchy Carter, Nat Turner, and Aunt Grace. Then mellowed by the ancestors, they would smile. I was Coates's boy, though they did not know which one. I was young, and unconcerned with why Denmark Vesey did not come off, how the Belgians tackled Lumumba, or the slave-king Sakura's return.

But out on the block, the hoppers draped themselves in Starter, Diadora, and Lottoes. Then they roll onto corners and promptly clutch their nuts. Big Bill was there. He rolled through the streets in brown puff leather, and captained a minor gang of Mondawmin kids. When bored, they brought the ruckus, snatching bus tickets and issuing beat downs at random. They gave no reason. They published no manifestos. This was how they got down. This was the ritual.

They spent summers hunting for girls. The jennys would catwalk through Mondawmin in stonewash with wide red hands spray-painted across their asses. They gilded their namesakes in triple bamboo earrings, and when they heard your call—hey, yo, shortie, come here—they did not look back to flip the bird. They did not crack smiles for anything. Their focus was on hair, mounds and mounds of hair gelled, fried, french rolled, finger waved, extended into a dyed and glittered crown. They were of the moment. They took one look at West Baltimore and understood that they were the best of it. So they walked like they were all that mattered, like they had no time.

You had to be harder then. You could not bop through Park Heights like the second coming of Peanut King. Even the skating rinks demanded six deep. Lexington Terrace was hot with gonorrhoea. Teen pregnancy was the fashion. Husbands were outties. Fathers were ghosts.

Here's the cast of my last name: My father has seven kids by four women. Some of us were born best friends. Some of us were born in the same year. My elders come first, in chronology: Kelly, Kri, William Jr.—all born of my father's first marriage to Linda.

John was born to Patsy, Malik born to Sola.

Then me and Menelik, the children of my mother, Cheryl. This is all a mess on paper, but it was a love to me, and formed my earliest and still enduring definition of family.

Big Bill and John were both born in 1971. Dad was married and two daughters deep. He was a veteran, and must have seemed to Linda to be a stand-up ordinary guy. But he lurched radical and enlisted in that subgeneration overwhelmed by the rigid ethics of picketing elders and the creaking pace of change. He joined the Black Panther Party, rose to lead the local chapter. He lost his union job

He went to work overtime for the impending revolution. His family went on relief.

Dad missed the birth of Kris and Kell, and was away again when Linda went into labor with Bill. Something always seemed to happen—a phone was off the hook, one of the Panthers took a shoddy message. On the day of Bill's birth, Dad pushed Linda's 1966 Mustang across town to South Baltimore General. He was carrying some measure of spiritual weight. He was twenty-five, at the height of all his vigor, and out to get his share. He lived with Linda and the kids at the top of a winding road out in South Baltimore's Cherry Hill. But he wore no rings, felt marriage was day-to-day, and was out to fulfill the general destiny of young men, and the particular one of his father.

The Panthers brought politics to match his studly quest. They lived in a commune, shared socks and swapped beds. They were comrades, partners in the great unmaking, the fall of families and governments, economies defined by systems of profit and greed. In this new world, nothing was stamped as exclusive. Dad took to this naturally, and soon it seemed whenever a woman smiled his way, she'd already begun dividing her life into trimesters.

What Linda knew of the Panthers was that Dad had gone from honorable, hardworking vet to someone who justified food stamps and the projects. Dad arrived at the hospital the night Bill was born, and found his wife laid up and lovely in all her postpartum glow, and that made him confessional and bold. He had planned no speech, or special way, but just blurted it like bad soup. Linda, I have another child on the way. There was no good time to drop this, but there were many really bad ones and Dad had picked from this lot.

Even young, Dad had more vision than most for the big picture, but paired this with a stunning blindness for the intricacies of actual people. So he performed this ignominious feat again. The October, he came to the hospital to see Patsy and newborn John. Again he found a mother of his child laid up. Again he dropped the same load but with a twist. He had another child on the way, by Patsy's best friend and comrade in the party.

My father knew how to hurt people without knowing how he'd hurt them. And maybe in the end that is what saved him. He was shameless in his pursuit of women. He was perpetually broke. But he never shirked when his bill came due. He hustled for his baby's new shoes, while his frayed at the seams. Among the Conscious, he was known for the books he exhumed and breathed back. But he was known just as much for the constant presence of his brood, even as the specific makeup of the brood rotated. This is a low bar, I know. But we lived in an era of chronic welchers, where the disgrace was so broad that niggers actually bragged of running out on kids.

You could find my father at the kitchen table shaking his head at the Sunday paper, in the living room stewing over the evening news. His charges were five boys and two girls, and when he died, that would be his only words. He was called to fatherhood like a tainted preacher. The root was his own alcoholic father, who seeded so many children that Dad simply lost count. He impregnated three sisters, and so Dad had aunts doubling as stepmothers.

His father was intellectual, forced him to recite Bible verses, lectured from the morning paper. But anger and cheap wine soiled the best of him. He'd snap on a dime and fling five-year-old Dad cle across the living room. Aunt Pearl would step up and take the beating for him. When he was nine, Dad

came home from school and found his life out on the sidewalk. He spent the following weeks living in a pickup truck with his father, two brothers, and Aunt Pearl. Later his father dropped him and his brother David off at his mother's house and faded out.

Now Dad had woven his own tangle of mothers and children spanning fourteen years. His passion was sons, if only because the odds and stakes seemed so high. We held him in this weird place somewhere between hatred and complete reverence. All our friends were fatherless, and Dad was some sort of a blessing, but he made it hard to feel that way. He was a practicing fascist, mandating books and banning religion. Once he caught Big Bill praying at the kitchen table and ordered him to stop—

You want to pray, pray to me. I put the food on this table.

Another time, in the middle of dinner, Bill pronounced that he couldn't wait to grow up so he could move out, make his own rules. Dad stared hard—

You don't have to wait. You can go now.

All of us knew he was flawed, but still he retained the aura of a prophet. On our life map, he drew a bright circle around twelve through eighteen. This was the abyss where, unguided, black boys were swallowed whole, only to reemerge on corners and prison tiers.

Dad was at war with this destiny. He was raising soldiers for all terrain. He preached awareness, discipline, and confidence. He went upside heads for shirking chores, for reaching across the table for the hush puppies, for knocking over a pitcher of juice. His technique was random—you might get away with a sermon on the virtues of Booker T., or a woman he left behind in Vietnam. Or you might catch the swinging black leather belt.

Once, Bill and me got to wrestling on Ma and Dad's bed, and some of the boards in the frame snapped in two. We engineered a sloppy resetting. Dad and Ma wouldn't be home till after we'd gone to bed. If Dad asks, Bill instructed, just tell him you don't know what happened.

Dad woke me up first. What happened to the bed?

I shrugged. I don't know...

He woke up Bill. What happened to the bed?

We broke it wrestling.

I glared, but only inside.

You had to make it worse by lying, Dad said.

He took us downstairs to the back door. Both of you get out. Go out back. You want to wrestle, go out in the backyard right now and wrestle.

Then he shut the door. We stared at each other for a moment, then Bill grabbed me and threw me to the ground. We tangled out there on the dirt for Dad's benefit for who knows how long, before we realized that he probably wasn't watching.

Ma came out later, sent us back upstairs. Dad had gone to bed.

My father scared me, but not even fear could alter the basics of nature. I brought home mediocre report cards: *Is not working up to potential, Needs to apply himself, Discipline is a problem.* Ma would go up to school and come back with migraines—that she passed on to us. Her eyes would go white. She'd dig nails into my arm—

I am not raising nothing niggers. Where is your head? What are you thinking, boy?

I am thinking of Sunday waffles and Morning Star. I am grieving for Lynn Min-mei, apatosaur, Tom Landry, and Cowboy blue. I am staring three desks over and dreaming of Brenda Neil, dancing in a pink and white gown.

Dad would see me coming like some great lost cause, and clap his hands thrice—

Wake up, boy. Walk like you got business. Walk like you got somewhere to be.

I had my chances to turn this story another way. In fourth grade, Ma and Dad sent me off to apply for scholarships at private schools. I went through the rounds of class visits, noted how much better the lunch was, and then dawdled my way through the standardized tests. I was bigger than multiple choice and bubbles, so I picked answers at random and acted shocked when months later I was rejected by every school.

Now two years later Dad's methods grew radical. William H. Lemmel Middle School sat on a hill off Dukeland. From its depths, wild rumors spewed—vice principals body-slammed on open fields, atrocities perpetrated in lunch lines, boys walking home in socks. But at Lemmel, the teachers waged Dad's kind of fight. Across the state, better jobs, better salaries, better living called out to them. But in the midst of Reconstruction's second collapse, Lemmel fought back. The headmasters arranged the students into teams, and named each one after the Saints—Douglass, Tubman, Woodson, King. They mandated uniforms, formed classes for the ghetto's gifted, and trumpeted their ostentatious mantra—Lemmel Middle School Is a School for Winners. This redoubled Dad's efforts, reinforced his mission to ground me in history and struggle. But when Big Bill heard this, he gave me the only words that mattered: Lemmel niggers don't play.

Big Bill was now a permanent fixture at Tioga, having been remanded from the good graces of his mother. His time was running out. He was entering tenth grade. He was tall and smooth as Karla touching "All Night Long." He pulled shorties with all the effort of a long yawn, and, like so many, believed that he would make a living off his jumper.

It must have been that summer of fool's gold, when Bill and John went extreme. They worked

together busing tables at a local deli. One Saturday they left work and went riding in a stolen car with our cousin Gary. That evening Dad was informed that his sons were in the custody of the Baltimore county police. Dad drove out to get his boys, and when he had them back at home, he administered legendary thrashing. The next morning, Dad unfurled a list of labors, and Tioga turned into a work camp. More so even than usual. About that time Bill was permanently assigned a bedroom, which he shared with me and Menelik, who was four. He laced the walls with autographed posters of his favorite ballers, the Human Highlight Reel and the Big Smooth.

Now Ma checked my and Bill's homework every night. Dad ran a compulsory book-of-the-month club selected from what we considered obscure and irrelevant. Bill requested back issues of *Sports Illustrated*. I don't even remember Dad replying. But I do remember *Flight to Canada* and Dad's attempts to inculcate us with Ishmael Reed's unique brand of humor. Bill had his own jokes—

Look at that guffed-up trim, he said, pointing to Reed's back-cover portrait. This nigger's got a hair afro.

On weekend evenings, released from Dad's yoke, we would sit out on the front porch with the radio pumping New York straight talk. Frank Ski would take to the one and twos, and drive off Whitney and all the feminized rhythm and bullshit, until Afrika Bambaataa owned the night. Bill would pop a tape into the second deck of his boom box. He'd tagged his moniker—M.C. Destiny—to both speakers with white out. Some nights Dante, from two doors down, would step past his staggering father and congregate. Once, when lifted, Dante's Dad tried to fit his key into our front door. Dad opened and politely directed him home, then silenced Bill, who'd gone up the steps cackling.

Dante would give Bill some dap—I was not yet worthy—and sit down on the brick steps, nodding to “The Show” or “Paul Revere.” He had it bad for our older sister Kris, and he would groan and razz Bill about this fact. But Bill was too cool. He'd just laugh and search Dante for imperfections—ears like the Hawaiian Islands, a scuffed pair of Adidas—and crack on him for an hour. Then he'd punch Dante in the arm, Get off my porch, punk. They were like all the neighborhood laughing boys. Around the corner, the gaping maw of the world waited and they had no idea.

Dad would be in the basement working with his books. He could not understand that we too were unearthing, that we were beholders of sorcery—Phil Collins mixed with the Biz, Ofra Haza, and The God.



Dad left the Panthers in '72 and was awarded the lofty title “Enemy of the People.” This was shortly after he first met my mother. He would pack his car with Knowledge of Self and drive over to Howard University. He set up a table, and on it displayed many volumes of concealed history and radical lore. In those days, Howard was the fountain of all things right with the Race. The school had grown strong under Jim Crow, feasted on the minds of students and teachers color-bound to a handful of school until it was more than a University but a Mecca, and was known as such by all who were down. In the

'50s and '60s Brothers came to the Mecca, thinking only of their nether selves, for it was said that no point in history had there been more beautiful women in one place than at any random day on the campus. But somehow they were changed there, and left possessed by the spirit of Howard's legendary professoriat, of Eric Williams and E. Franklin Frazier, and they fled South to be flogged by sheriffs and Klansmen.

Now in the days after Malcolm and Martin, the Mecca was changing again. Dad sold books and conferences that promised a new order, ushered in by poetry, independent schools, and bricks. But more than all the new slang and ways of being he beheld, it was an elder who gave the lesson that pointed out the path for his kids. This man had worked at Howard in a low honorable way, sweeping the floors, raking the grass, sanctifying the toilets. I know nothing of his life, except that he found great peace that the Mecca's bylaws granted a free education to all children of the school's employees. Dad heard this and was struck. Now many years later, he'd procured a job working in Moorland Spingarn. With seven kids the need was extreme. But already my sisters Kris and Kelly were enrolled. What was left were five boys, two of us sitting out there nodding to this new and lovely noise.

It was the sound of our era, and in it we beheld all our wants and great fears. Big Bill was under pressure. Murphy Homes had left him exposed and open to the knowledge that there were many moments when all he would have was himself. This was 1986 onset of the Crack Age. People started dying all around us—Nana, Aunt Joyce, Bill's grandmother Ms. Verla, and then the record 250 other Baltimoreans gone missing by murder. That year, my man Craig was butchered on his way home from work. He was the poorest kid in a class where everyone was on lunch tickets. His shoes talked; he wore a red plaid lumberjack shirt many days out of the week. He had several siblings. Now the order had ambushed and taken him out.

I came into all of this dazed by the lack of shade, by the quickness between child and child-man. But, as always, Big Bill was clear, and after Murphy Homes he probed his connections until he found a merchant of arms. He stashed it in our bedroom, in his brown puff leather jacket. He showed it to me without bravado, its weight gave it authority, and I knew it was real. And from that point forward when walking the land, my brother Big Bill was strapped.

CHAPTER 2

Even if it's jazz or the quiet storm...

When crack hit Baltimore, civilization fell. Dad told me how it used to be. In his time, the beefs were petty and stemmed from casual crimes: bopping too hard down an alien street, spitting game at somebody's little sister. There were gangs who lived to throw down, and, true, every full moon or so a killer would reach into his houndstooth coat and make it rain. But there were rules and even when Dad was caught off guard and faced with a hostile crew, he knew he could throw up his dukes and yell "face me one," and tackle their champion one-on-one. The bad end of a beef was loose teeth and stitches, rare shock trauma and "Blessed Assurance" ringing the roof of the storefront funeral home.

In Dad's days, we were a close-knit circle, but a circle surrounded by dire wolves. All we had to hold us up was the next man. But as time went on, we forgot ourselves and went cannibal—the next brother became a meal to feed our rep. At night, *Action News* unfurled the daily scroll, and always amid the rescued dogs, the lost toddlers, the scandalous bankers, there was us, buckled by the pop-psychology of a.22, laid out on a sad stain of blood.

I didn't fully get it then, but this was an inglorious turn. The world was filled with great causes—Mandela, Nicaragua, and the battle against Reagan. But we died for sneakers stitched by serfs, coats that gave props to teams we didn't own, hats embroidered with the names of Confederate states. We could feel the falling, all around. The flood of guns wrecked the natural order. Kids whose minds should have been on Teddy Ruxpin now held in their hands the power to dissolve your world in a flash of white. But Dad pledged to sire us through. With the aid of many mothers we were pushed through science camp, music lessons. Thick books were hurled at us from across the room.

In his tenth grade year, the year after the Murphy Homes incident, Dad enrolled Big Bill in Upward Bound, one of the remnants of the Great Society and the days when bureaucrats dreamed of free gas, free water, and Ph.D.s for all who wanted. Bill was caged by a backward psychology. He saw himself strictly in the mode of athletes and rappers, and put no value on his own intellect and bookish wit. My father struggled to make Bill see what he covered with a street pose, what he didn't even know was there.

Saturday mornings, Upward Bound pulled Bill and a bevy of West Side kids up to the local community college to reinforce Pythagoras, Fitzgerald, and Newton. There was a freedom here—

Upward Bound kids were sent by their parents, not ordered by the state, and so a certain level of bullshit was immediately cut out. Then in the summer, after weeks of taking college classes, they were treated to the full-blown campus experience out at Towson, where they stayed in dorms for the week.

This was Bill's first taste of university, the first time that it occurred to him that higher ed may not be beyond him. But this new idea didn't exactly exert a radical influence on him. My brother was immovable back then. He could be dead wrong and still steady talking to you like you'd never lace up Jordans or dribbled left. Once we spent the day at his mother's crib out in Jamestown, trying to destroy each other on Atari boxing. Presumably, I was left in his care, and though he knew the laws of Tioga banned the consumption of beef, he managed to convince me that a can of spaghetti and meatballs would pass Dad's muster.

Bill: Man, it's no big deal. When Dad comes he won't even know. And if he finds out, I'll just tell him. It's only once. What will he care?

Me: Okay.

But my brother's wits trailed his will, and when Dad came, he saw the emptied can, the two dirty bowls still in the sink. Of course, he went off, did not start swinging but let us know that we had violated. I sat on Linda's couch, absorbing the verbal onslaught, cursing how wrong my knowledge of everything brother Bill was. Bill sat next to me, impassive, another lesson failing to connect.

He listened selectively, and cared most about his own internal compass, which he believed was attuned to the way the world should work. He was a bull, thought in straight lines, and though I found this trying, and I wasn't alone, his certitude engendered great respect. My brother was not reflective but that made him unafraid. He would see you in a brawl, leap in swinging, but take many days to ask you what the fight was all about. Bill was a constant and this won him allies wherever he dropped his B-more Bad-boys cap.

In the dorms of Towson over that summer, he expanded his affiliations. He started hanging out further north up Liberty Heights, at the corner of Wabash and Sequoia, about a mile from Mondawmin. He did not abandon Tioga, but an aspiring king needed vassals from all over. Your arm was all you had, and the speed with which they appeared when it went down, boosted or pruned your rep. Bill's new friends—Marlon, Joey, Rock—were boys of our ilk, stuck in that undefined place between the projects and the burbs. They did not live in squalor. Their mothers tried their best. But still they had to confront the winds of the day. The most ordinary thing—the walk to school, a bike ride around the block, a trip to the supermarket—could just go wrong. And when it happened, we were only hands, and those hands pledged to us, and then the fire some of us kept between the belt buckle and waist.

When Bill was burned by Murphy Homes, he promised to never again be helpless. A rep was

preventive medicine. If you were from one of the lucky slums that struck fear, you could walk where you pleased. It was what we all wanted, even tender me, to be seen out there, and, on the strength of my pedigree, turn any street into home field.

This was the motive for even Wabash, with its modest lawns, brick homes, and absent public housing, to expect or incite beef. Conflicts bloomed from a minor remark or misstep, and once in motion everyone stayed cocked and on alert. This is what beef is: Baltimore was too primitive for gangs, everything relied on natural or man-made borders. The duchy of Wabash and Sequoia was marked off by train tracks. North of there was Tawanda, a parallel world, that saw Wabash like Wabash saw them. You only crossed those tracks if you were out of your mind. Whatever you needed—cheesesteak, dish detergent, girls—you had on your requisite side.

It was night, and like all the others, Big Bill, Joey, and Marlon were out on their home corner. There was the normal high that comes from the hormones of youth, that fresh sense of being unchained. But also there was the omnipresent feeling that It could go down. In those moments—which back then were all of our moments—your neurology was always code red. Bill's crew was hyper-tensed—their laughter was controlled, smiles had edges, and no one stared too long at one spot.

And then It happened. Someone—no one ever remembers who—yelled, Yo, it's them, coming across the tracks.

There was no math. Bill just reached in his dip, and, like his friends, shot out in the appropriate direction.

He could have been a headline, some fool whose stray ripped through a bassinet. The rush blinded them, not one of them got eyes on a clear target. But in the yellow glare of streetlights, phantoms fed before them. Someone screamed "five-oh!" and there was a hectic dash down the now-quiet streets, up to Marlon's porch, and then down into his basement. They took a few breaths, settled some, and then got to yelling, high-fiving, and beating their chests. Yo, I hit one. Hell, yeah, I got at least two of 'em. When I heard about it, it sounded like something out of Looney Toons or the farcical West—a lot of gunfire, no blood or injuries. But that was not the point.

Bill heard the admonishments of my father, but Dad couldn't walk the path for him. We were divided—one foot in America, the other in a land of swords. They told us to act civilized, but everywhere bordered on carnage. Bill became uncomposed. To be strapped was to grab the steering wheel of our careening lives. A gun was a time machine and an anchor—it dictated events. To be strapped was to master yourself, to become more than a man whose life and death could be simply seized and hurled about.

Bill's logic was taken from the Great Knowledge, the sum experience of our ways from the time Plymouth Rock landed on us. To this compendium each generation added its volume. Our addition was the testament of the broken cities—West Side, Harlem, the fifth ward. The Knowledge Man knew that death was jammed in us all, hell-bent on finding a way out. So he never measured his life in years but style—how he walked, who he walked with, how he stepped to jenny, where he was seen, where he

was not. This man turned his life into art and pledged himself to the essential truth: No matter what Civilization says, academic intelligence is overpraised and ultimately we are animals. When I saw one of these true disciples, almost-men like my brother Bill, I knew there were vital things that I had missed.

The Knowledge was taught from our lives' beginnings, whether we realized it or not. Street professors presided over invisible corner podiums, and the Knowledge was dispensed. Their faces were smoke and obscured by the tilt of their Kangols. They lectured from sacred texts like *Bas Game*, *Applied Cool*, *Barbershop 101*. Their leather-gloved hands thumbed through chapters, like "The Subtle and Misunderstood Art of Dap." There was the geometry of cocking a baseball cap, working theories on what jokes to laugh at and exactly how loud; and entire volumes devoted to the crossover dribble. Bill inhaled the Knowledge and departed in a sheepskin cap and gown. I cut class, slept through lectures, and emerged awkward and wrong.

My first day at Lemmel, I was a monument to unknowledge. I walked to school alone, a severe violation of the natural order of things. I got my first clue of this standing on my front porch, my canvas backpack slid across one shoulder, watching as small groups of kids make their way down the green hill that sat at the end of the Mondawmin parking lot. All the way to school, everyone rolled like this—three deep or deeper. There was a warped affection among them, the kind born from a common threat. They constantly looked around. They tossed ice grills like there was no other choice. They exchanged pounds with each other frequently, as if to say I am here, I am with you. All their Start caps were cocked at the appropriate angle. Everyone moved as though the same song were playing in their heads. It was a song I'd never heard. I shrugged my backpack a little tighter on my shoulder and made my way.

Later I'd understand that the subaudible beat was the Knowledge, that it kept you ready, prepared for anyone to start swinging, to start shooting. Back then, I had no context, no great wall against the fear. I felt it but couldn't say it.

I paid little heed to great injustice, despite my mother showing me blueprints of slave ships and children's books tracking the revolution of Dessalines and Toussaint. Still, I could spot even small injustices when they shadowed me personally. I knew that to be afraid while on the way to school was deeply wrong.

I walked the hill alone, the error of my way now dawning on me, but reached the doors of Lemmel with everything intact. I climbed the long flight of concrete steps and stood in a corner of the school, waiting on the bell, staring at the ground, trying to vanish.

I emerged into a morass of numbers and bureaucracy. Lemmel was partitioned into three grade four tracks, and sixteen classes, ranging from special ed to gifted. Each track was then given the name of a champion—Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington, Carter G. Woodson. My class was 7-16. We were one of six gifted classes on the Thurgood Marshall Team. I don't know how gifted any of us were—more likely we had parents in the race, mothers who worked for the city, got their degrees from Coppin State. They'd gone far enough to know what was out there and what they'd missed in the manner of their coming up. These are the parents the intellectuals erase in their treatises on black pathology. But I saw them in effect at Lemmel, that and teachers always with an eye for children who

were two seconds faster and seemed to be bound for something more than the corner or Jessup. From the hallway's rafters these teachers hung propaganda: *It is by choice not chance...that we choose advance, The Marshall Team; We can achieve...We will achieve.*

The many problems of the city came to rest at the Lemmel's doorsteps. Kids hailed from the projects, foster care, from homes without lighting, from parents who still shut down Odells while the children ran the streets. Lemmel stood out, because all the chaos of West Baltimore swirled around but never inside. The school's guardians believed in the vocabulary of motivation and self-help. The favorite phrases featured words like "confidence," "push," and "achieve." They saw Lemmel as barracks, themselves as missionaries called to convert us to the civilized way.

My homeroom was ruled by the crusader, Ms. Nichols, who traded her government name of Eleanor for the freed handle of Sadiqan. Dreads flowed down her back. Her skin was dark and smooth. She was like the women Dad and the rest of us sold books to, the ones who'd pore through the selection on the tables, convinced that something between their covers could close the gap. I could not have been in her class more than twenty minutes before she started to curse. It flowed from her natural—Oh, that bullshit; fuck that. I giggled like the rest of the class, but not too hard because she bore the seal of black matrons. Her eyes held razors; she sliced into boys who talked out of turn. You could see she came from somewhere hard like Walbrook Junction, that she'd risen off the block, even if the block had not risen off of her. But she was a philosopher. She used the great breadth of social studies to hold forth on sex, vegetarians, Reagan, apartheid, Akhenaton, and the origins of God.

This was all my father wanted—for the long struggle to wake us up to be present in class as it was at home. The struggle infused all his dealings with me. Whenever he could, he violated my weekend with his latest pet lesson.

Dad: Ta-Nehisi, cut off the cartoons. You're coming with me.

Me: Can I have another hour?

Dad: (*The Look of Not Playing.*)

Me: (*Cutting off the TV*) Okay. I'm getting my jacket.

And then we were off in the brown minivan, across the city, public radio our soundtrack, my father telling me again the story of black folks' slide to ruin. He would drive down North Avenue and survey the carryouts, the wig shops, the liquor stores and note that not a one was owned by anybody black. We would stop at Brother Kinya's printing shop, and Dad would sit down and talk that brotherhood/black talk.

When we got home, I'd go upstairs and flop on the bed. But Dad never knew when to quit. Instead

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