Appalachian Prison Book Project Book Club
FCI Hazelton, West Virginia
Holding onto Sand

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July 2016-May 2018
List of Readings

Books
Alexander, Michelle: *The New Jim Crow*
Alexie, Sherman: *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*
Baldwin, James: *Go Tell it on the Mountain*
Butler, Octavia: *Kindred*
Coates, Ta-Nehisi: *Between the World and Me*
Coen, Ethan and Joel Coen: *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Screenplay)
Ehrenreich, Barbara: *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*
Ellison, Ralph: *Invisible Man*
Erdrich, Louise: *The Round House*
Foer, Jonathan Safran: *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*
Haley, Alex and Malcolm X: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*
Kennedy, Adrienne and Adam Kennedy: *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*
Orwell, George: *1984*
Palahniuk, Chuck: *Fight Club*
Parks, Suzan-Lori: *Venus*
Rogers, J. A.: *From Superman to Man*
Stevenson, Bryan: *Just Mercy*
Vonnegut, Kurt: *The Sirens of Titan*
West, Cornel: *Race Matters*

Poems
Alexie, Sherman: “Captivity”
Angelou, Maya: “Life Doesn’t Frighten Me”
Angelou, Maya: “Caged Bird”
Atwood, Margaret: “Variations on the Word Sleep”
Brooks, Gwendolyn: “The Crazy Woman”
Clifton, Lucille: “homage to my hips”
Cummings, e e: “You are Tired”
Eady, Cornelius: “My Mother, If She Had Won Free Dance Lessons”
Eliot, T. S.: “La Figlia Che Piange”
Erdrich, Louise: “Captivity”
Espada, Martin: “Imagine the Angels of Bread”
Espada, Martin: “The Saint Vincent de Paul Food Pantry Stomp”
Hughes, Langston: “As I Grew Older”
Hughes, Langston: “I, too”
Kincaid, Jamaica: “Girl”
McKay, Claude: “America”
Neruda, Pablo: “If You Forget Me”
Sandburg, Carl: “A Father to His Son”
Sandburg, Carl: “Curse of a Rich Polish Peasant On His Sister Who Ran Away with a Wild Man”
Sandburg, Carl: “Working Girls”
Sexton, Anne: “Her Kind”
Shakur, Assata: “Affirmation”
Walker, Frank X: “Li’l Kings”
Walker, Frank X, “Statues of Liberty”
Whitman, Walt: “I Hear America Singing”
Williams, William Carlos: “The Red Wheelbarrow”
Wright, James: “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota”

Short Stories & Essays
Baldwin, James: “Going to Meet the Man”
Baldwin, James: “Sonny’s Blues”
Bradbury, Ray: “There Will Come Soft Rains”
Ciscernos, Sandra: “Never Marry a Mexican”
Danticat, Edwidge: “Night Women”
Errachidi, Ahmed: “A Handful of Walnuts”
Fanon, Franz: “Introduction” and “The Man of Color and the White Woman” from Black Skin, White Masks
Faulkner, William: “A Rose for Emily”
Gilman, Charlotte Perkins: “The Yellow Wallpaper”
Gilman, Charlotte Perkins: “Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper”
Hurston, Zora Neale: “Spunk”
King, Shaun: “Race, love, hate, and me: A distinctly American story from Shaun King”
Kingston, Maxine Hong: “No Name Woman”
Le Guin, Ursula K.: “She Unnames Them”
Le Guin, Ursula K.: “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”
Lyons, Andre: “What I’ve Learned Cutting Hair in Jail”
Mills, Charles: “Introduction” and “Overview” from The Racial Contract
Morison, Toni: selections from Playing in the Dark
Mukherjee, Bharti: “The Management of Grief”
Oates, Joyce Carol: “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”
O’Brien, Tim: “How to Tell a True War Story”
O’Connor, Flannery: “Good Country People”
Sanders, Scott Russell: “The Men We Carry in Our Minds”
Wicomb, Zoe: “You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town”
Introduction

It’s often said, “Words are power!” In our case, it has taken a diverse cast of positive thinkers to produce this anthology.

I am very fortunate to be apart of such an amazing group of thinkers working diligently to create social change, rather than supporting the negative stigmas associated with prisons, criminals, and social justice in ways that far exceed the norms.

Today it’s perfect legal to discriminate against “convicted felons” in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against people of color… once labeled a convicted felon, the old forms of discrimination – how folks view you, denials of 2nd chances, mercy, and other privileges along with exclusion of freedom – are suddenly LEGAL!!!

In the era of Barack Obama, the United States’ first black president, colorblindness was at an all time high. #7 Caring-N-Brace individuals inherited that colorblindness, choosing to ignore these Racist-N-Discrimination stigmas to enter federal prison and use the “power of words” to engage, reach, and teach many who society have supposedly Forgotten-N-Left Behind… These folks, “The Magnificent 7” I like to call them: Katy, Yvonne, Valerie, Delia, Alex, Counselor Morerro, and Elissa were all smiles, Bright-N-Very eager to talk, joke, teach, and see our human existence…

What did their initial visit mean for me; a convicted felon serving a life sentence with black skin who will never know a world littered with iPhones, text messages, and discriminations against convicted felons in the United States…

I was beyond thrilled after their visit. I felt like the negative eclipse in my life was slowly being removed…

When the moon passes in front of the sun, the world goes still. The wind dies down. The temperature drops. Birds are silenced mid-song. You feel the shadow of the moon pass over you… And you really feel that something is wrong. The sensation is akin to what tiny mammals must feel in the shadow of a circling hawk – it yanks you back to your most primitive evolutionary past.

The moon moves. The darkness is lifted. The eerie sense of vulnerability evaporates with the sun’s renewed warmth on your skin – that’s where the Magnificent 7-N-The Appalachian Book Club comes in… All they have done to lift the darkness from my Life-N-Make this course nothing less than Stunning-N-Memorable is greatly appreciated.

I’d say our book club fits the ideal personality of a super think tank study group in that we kept a balance of peer development while at the same time worked tirelessly to achieve the best in life.

There’s a short window in life where you can be the best you can be and a lot of young folks throw this opportunity away… The APB Club helped me to rediscover my passions for Reading-N-Writing.

Prison is a Wild-N-Fearsome place, characterized by raging stigmas and violent criminals, where their actions bombard our free society and trigger the lights of their darkest fears!!
People who lobby to lock us up and toss away the freedom keys, are known as ignorant opinionated judges—who really need to know more about the lifestyles-activities that lead to such mass incarcerations, because they pose serious threats to humanity’s growth on the Earth.

A simple thought or idea of a human being can generate massive electrical currents in the atmosphere that can ultimately ignite the spark in other that may change the world.

We may not have a good understanding of where our talents come from, but understanding the fundamentals process to hone those talents will help us understand these mass penal colonies better, despite it’s drab, dark-n-lonely conditions... The stigmas of prison, do not define us—it does not block out the glare of tremendous change, revealing even the innermost part of human thoughts in brilliant details. That’s what makes our book club so thrilling to the thinkers—because the magnificent 7 moves-n-travels across hundreds of miles of landscape to motivate-n-nurture our talents with reading, writing, and informative group discussions. It’s remarkable learning with thinkers who are excited to teach about the whole world that’s moving on without us “convicted criminals.”

Q.) Why does society spend billions of dollars to keep building prisons?
A.) Fear! And money are the only logical answers to keep building places that eclipse people’s Lives-N-Growth similar to the moon’s total eclipse of the sun.

Thoughts-N-Ideas are the roots of many positive changes... The Appalachian Book Club instructors embedded that ideology in me during the months we spent together forming educational bonds to become greater than we were yesterday. This experience had moments that overwhelmed me with fuzzy feelings—to the point where I only think about the desires to be a better person for whoever I encounter.

Our book club can’t actually bring you inside a real federal prison to see how humans live who make mistakes, because clearly all the security red tape is just too much. But through Writing-N-Poetry we can show you many specialized talents and characteristics of humans who are labeled as prisoners, criminals, and the scum of the earth... I still remember some of the hilarious and not so funny jokes about “The Fart Club” – oops I mean “The Fight Club,” a selected reading we shared with the magnificent 7 who always see us as humans, which means a lot, especially when the majority in free society look at prisoners as the worst of all humanity. It’s still a culture shock to learn with positive thinkers from various ethnic backgrounds that ultimately created this inspirational anthology.

The Writings-N-Poetry bound together in this beautiful anthology that you can Read-N-Be Read for insight into human’s inner thoughts is the culmination of a 12-month course as a success, saying the aggressive round-the-clock education can reroute-n-repair the perception of negative stereotypes in record numbers to a free society that has frowned upon and turned their backs on the incarcerated over the past 100 years or more.

Written prose, designates status-n-positions in the lives of many—it bespeaks who you are. Writing gives you a feeling that you are blessed with the right talents to entertain the masses—with those talents comes an etiquette that allows no deviations.

I cannot close without acknowledging the invaluable gifts I received from my Peers-N-The Magnificent 7, who ultimately made this book possible by teaching me “the power of words.”

I want to thank all the members of our group, who astound me with their abilities to overcome extraordinary obstacles to attend every session with fresh optimism. I owe my growth
for positive change to all you guys, who never ceased in challenging me to become better for the many Encounters-N-Bright future that lies ahead.

Though, I suspect many will move on with their lives as Father Time intercedes for greater memories, always remember the Visions-N-Harmony our book club created with the allotted time we shared on Burger-N-Fries day…

This is our club… Our history created from diverse intellect, Talent-N-Ideas… Our determination to push past our limits to be the best no matter what curveballs life tosses our way… From our hearts, and minds, we give you a part of us – The Appalachian Book Club Anthology… Hope you enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed creating it…

A.P.B.C. Member-4-Life,

Nate
2018
Freedom

A foreshadow of something that was
Never for me.
An illusion that every man like myself whose
Sentenced to countless decades in
Prison reach for,
But aren’t quite able to
Obtain--so it remains
A figment of my imagination.

She is the controversy of black and
White...rich and poor...you
And me…
A word frequently articulated but never
Truly experienced…
A dream that died in its sleep.

Her eyes are full of deception, yet and
Still I fantasize about her
Day and night;
But some say I’m naive for believing
That tomorrow will give birth to
A better day,
When in fact, today is no better
Off than yesterday.

Inebriated with frustration, I buck against
The system..."systemic depravity;"
But my rebellion is
Misinterpreted.

I am NOT a “menace to society!”
But I am a hurting man whose
Tantrum is merely an outward
Expression of my soul being asphyxiated
By the the stranglehold of despair,
And disappointment
--Disappointment in those who continually
Turn a blind eye to my suffering.
Now I understand what “2 Pac” meant
   When he made statements like
      --”Against all odds” and “Me
      Against the world.”
I echo that emotion because I didn’t
   Ask to come into this world,
      Neither did I give permission
      For this world to come
      Into me.

I was taken by force and deal a
   Bad hand from the very beginning,
      Yet I still tried to play that
      Hand as best I could,
Only to later realize that my best
   Wasn’t good enough.

But then came the day when I stopped
   Living for others and started
      Living for myself.
That’s when I discovered what true
   Freedom is really all about…
      A state of mind
      --”And NOW I’m free!”

— Antonio
How

How do I love a woman...
Whose hand I never held
And lips I never kissed,
And how do I begin to
Desire more of her,
If never there’s been
Reason for her to
Be truly missed

How can she feel my pain...
If she’s not around to see
Me when I cry,
And how can I be all that
She imagined me to be,
When in fact, our
Hearts don’t see
“Eye to eye”

How can I be the breath
She breathes…
When I myself find it
Difficult to exhale,
And how can we possibly
Have a bright future
Together,
If both our hearts stay
Hidden behind the veil

“How can I love a woman?”
--Tell me how...so I can love you!

— Antonio
You Don’t Understand My Pain

You don’t understand my pain
   So you don’t say that you do,
I’m that rose that grew from concrete
   --Struggled so hard to break through…
You still not free and you say you understand,
   Well try being me…
Don’t stroke my ego because I can’t go
   With the flow,
I have to go by with what I feel
   And with what I know…
Now I know your hear may be in the
   Right place,
But experience has been my guide
   --I now sit here wounded
   “Mentally and emotionally”
Which I try so hard to hide…
   “You don’t understand my pain!”

You don’t feel my pain nor have
   You the slightest clue,
The only pain you feel is that
   Which you’ve been
   Through…
See I’m a story that needs to be told
   And a book that’s never been
   Read,
I live amongst the living--yet surrounded
   By visions of being dead…
Imagine what it’s like growing up
   Without both parents
   And on your own at the age of
   Fifteen
Roaming the “Streets of Evil”--you
   Can only imagine all the things
   I’ve heard; “done;” and seen…
Imagine what it’s like being addicted
   To drugs and alcohol that
   Motivated you to do things
You’d eventually come to regret…
   “HOLD UP!”
Where you going?
I ain’t finished yet…
Imagine what it’s like being convicted
And sentence to 4 consecutive life
Sentences for crimes you
Didn’t even commit,
If you can’t imagine that
--Then you can’t tell me shhh…
Imagine what it’s like being “IN Love”
With someone
--whose love for you has fallen
Asleep,
Leaving you emotionally dehydrated
A feeling better known as incomplete...

Imagine what it’s like being
“Molested by family members”
--Starting at the age of
“THREE,”
I told you…you don’t feel my pain…why?
“Cause you ain’t me!!!”

— Antonio
Her Eyes Are Open

Her eyes are open--as the sun
rises above the horizon,
She now knows her “Woman’s Worth” that’s been neglected and
Infiltrated by so many disguises…

Before her eyes were open
the woman’s soul was as the abyss,
Taking in every man for what she [thought] he was--
‘til she realized he was just another
“unfamiliar kiss”...

But she now has a smile that showcases her
new found “Happiness and Relief,"
But the soul of her eyes still tell the story of when she was once a--prisoner of grief..

“NEVERTHELESS, HER EYES ARE OPEN!”

Through all of the “humiliation and compromising”
she’s managed to prevail,
She’s waited her whole life to seize this
moment--(*sigh*)--a moment of
“Waiting to Exhale”...

She now takes pleasure in having her mind,
body, soul, and spirit replenished
and set free,
And I “Thank God” for
“Her Eyes Being Open,” because without woman…
truly there’s no [me]

“HER EYES ARE OPEN!”

— Antonio
Don’t Judge Me

Don’t judge me!
If you judge me who judges you?
You don’t know me and I don’t know you!
I was told that I was innocent until proven guilty,
But before I was dealt my hand I was considered to be guilty!
Don’t judge me!
And I won’t judge you.
Have you taken time to think if I have a family?
Just like yours needs you, that mine needs me?
I don’t know you, and you don’t know me.
I wonder if I were you, and you were me, would
You want me to judge you as you did me?
Don’t judge me!
I smile, I frown, I laugh and cry, there is
No difference between you and I.
I don’t know you, and you don’t know me!
I won’t judge you so please…..
“Don’t judge me”

— Bryan
You Matter to Me

On the wings of the mind He walketh abroad,  
and performeth His will  
through all the regions of unlimited space.

So it is my pleasure to see you...As is...  
I am...You are,  
and everything besides us is an adjective.

Some people fall in love. Many people stumble into it. And still, it is on purpose,  
therefore,  
I never needed a reason for you when I was already with savages  
looking for H2O...  
I mean chemistry. I mean marriage  
was never an option,  
because if Life connected us  
how could I get any closer to you when you came.  
You matter to me.

He said, “Let there be light,” and then there came you...  
wearing the same shoes you had in a dream I had.  
I could not believe my eyes.  
So I put my faith in Knowledge of Self to decide  
that I didn’t have to understand.  
I should graze heaven looking into your eyes.  
I mean this is simply beyond.

I am...With...You are...  
Today...Tomorrow...  
The DNA of His Heart  
stretching the Truth of His Thought  
and touching before, during, and after.

You matter to me.  
Yes, you matter to me like the idea of perfection  
introducing word to flesh.  
So we could not be lost unless  
you missed the sign by my rib saying you belong here when I am.

Time could never tell us
the definition without us.
I mean you mean more to me right now
than hope.
This is why you matter to me.

— Antoine Beach-Bey
DEAR MR. GRINCH,

THANKS 4 SHARING THE HOLIDAYS BECAUSE
YOU HAVE THE POWER 2 DO SO - ABUSE OF UNGUIDED POWER IF YOU ASK ME?
   BUT WHO AM I TO COMPLAIN? A LOW-LIFE
CONVICTED CRIMINAL WHO SOCIETY FEELS IT’S OKAY FOR ME
TO BE TREATED LIKE A SLAVE… DO NOT SAY YOU DO NOT AGREE
- THE U.S. CONSTITUTION AND THE WAY YOU VOTED
IN DONALD TRUMP - THE 45 PRESIDENT STRONGLY
EXPRESS HOW AMERICA HAS SPOKEN TO ME…
   NOT BEING ABLE TO LIVE LIFE TO THE
FULLEST DOES GET TO ME AT TIMES, ESPECIALLY WHEN
MR. GRINCH CALLS FOR MASS LOCKDOWN BECAUSE WE DON’T
WANT A HUMAN’S MIND TO BLOOM AND SHINE…
   I THOUGHT OUR GREAT COUNTRY WAS BUILT ON
2ND CHANCES - FROM THE INSIDE - LOOKING OUT, I BELIEVE
IT’S ALL A DREAM - A BLATANT SMOKE SCREEN - 2 KEEP
THE EMPATHETIC PROBERS BLIND -
   WHILE HUMANS WITH SO MUCH
TALENT AND IDEAS WASTE AWAY
DOING TIME IN A PLACE VERY
FAR AWAY FROM A FREE SOCIETY OF
YOUR KIND…

— NATE
JUST IMAGINE

JUST IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE THERE’S ALWAYS ORDER-
STRICT CURFEWS AND EVEN STRICTER RULES -
JUST IMAGINE A WORLD FREE OF A WOMAN’S
INTIMATE TOUCH - WHERE HUMANS TURN INTO MONSTERS
WHEN THEY GET THEIR PANTIES IN A BUNCH…
JUST IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE 2 COMMUNITIES
CO-EXIST - ALTHOUGH WE’RE ALL HUMANS - SOME
FEEL SUPERIOR TO MY COMMUNITY - INMATES, PRISONERS,
CAPTIVES - HUMANS WHO NO LONGER EXIST TO A EVER-CHANGING
Society - WHERE iPHONES AND SOCIAL MEDIA RAISE THE
NEXT GENERATION OF KIDS - MORE HUMANS WHO I MAY
MEET AS ADULTS WHILE DOING LIKE IN PRISON 4 WHAT
LIFE DID…

I BLAME NOBODY FOR MY MISTAKES, I JUST
DON’T UNDERSTAND HOW THIS WORLD IS FILLED WITH SO
MUCH HATE?
JUST IMAGINE A SYSTEM OF CHANGE….
AND IF U REALLY CAN SEE THAT,
THEN U MUST REALIZE ALL OF US -
THE HUMAN RACE IS ALL THE SAME !!

— NATE
EVERYDAY I WAKE FROM MY COFFIN - I
SEE 2 WORLDS;
WHITE - N - BLACK -
I SEE OPPRESSORS AND THE OPPRESSED -
MODERN DAY SLAVERY - TO THWART THE WALKING
DEAD'S BRAVERY...
I SEE TRIBALISM, SEPARATISM, AND RACISM -
TO SEE THIS DAY IN - N - DAY OUT FOR 21 YEARS
STRAIGHT WITH NO PLACE TO HIDE - I HAVE NO CHOICE
BUT TO BELIEVE THE TRANSPARENT HATE EVOLVING
BEFORE MY EYES, WHICH MAKES ME WANT TO CRY
BUT TO CRY IS TO RELEASE PART OF THE
BEAST THAT HAS BEEN CREATED BY THE WICKED STREETZ
AND VARIOUS PENAL COLONIES...
SEEING IS BELIEVING - HOW T.V. - N - SOCIAL
MEDIA IS DECEIVING THE MASSES - PLACING
ALL HUMANS IN CERTAIN CLASSES; POOR, MIDDLE CLASS,
UPPER CLASS AND FILTHY RICH - SEEING IS BELIEVING HOW
ALL THOSE CLASSES WILL PERISH ONE DAY AND BE
DUMPED IN THE SAME LONELY DIRTY BROWN DITCH -
IF YOU SEE ENOUGH, I TRULY BELIEVE YOU WILL
AGREE THAT LIFE IS A DIABOLICAL BITCH!!!
A Familiar Soul

As soon as you meet one another, there’s not even a shadow of a doubt that this encounter was meant to be. It’s as if the universe stops, just for a moment, to acknowledge this union, and cast a warm smile upon a small portion of destiny realized, and you both feel it in your core. Your eyes connect with one another’s, and instantly you feel this sense of peace, comfort and safety. Flashes of intuition bring forth images of the two of you in your mind’s eye, and you not only know this person, you know this person intimately. This person understands you deeply, and you know that the connection the two of you share is so deeply rooted in the cosmos that this couldn’t just be a figment of your imagination. And as your eyes meet once again, you’ve never been more sure of anything else in your life.

— Jonas
**Perspective**

Who are you?
You unfamiliar feeling I can’t seem to identify,
With-in me you lie;
Yet you - I was taught to deny,
Any sign of life, you had to die,
Never allowed any room or time or thought,
Simply just a clone, following someone else’s - not my own
Book Club opened the door and allowed home,
Through it I learned the only difference between us is our own.
“Perspective”

— Maurice
Blessed

When I awoke from the sleep I cut the cord
of control from the hands of Goliath the beast.
Like David’s Victory I feel blessed
I am empowered now and like a breath
of fresh air, I am refreshed.
To dream again while I watch my vision
come true as I create.
Tear down the walls that divide and conquer
which was built for us to hate.
We must uplift, encourage, love, & motivate, to
show the world we are better builders when
we cooperate.
So many people have been fooled that
they are powerless.
I say the sky is the limit where
possibilities are infinite.
I AM WE AND WE R 1 = SUCCESS
That’s my vision that burns brightly from
the fire of passion sparkled inside, and with that I am BLESSED.

— Steven
Hold Our Memories Close

As I lay in this chaos I’m thinking about you,
With pure feelings of love that’s so true.
When I close my eyes to imagine your beautiful face,
It’s thoughts of loving you that take me away
from this place.
I know I can’t be there physically to keep
you warm when you’re cold,
But, if you close your eyes and think of me, the
warmth will arise from deep in your soul.
I just wanted you to know that I love you
the most,
Until together again hold our memories close.

— Steven
Destiny

Life is one experience that we get better with, each one we go through.
Like a snake that sheds his old skin, we become refreshed and brand new.
Negative things used to happen until I realized it was the perception from my point of view
Now I counteract negative thoughts with positive ones as I see the glass half full.
Success is inevitable now as I focus with a clear mind
Destiny never retires, it only gets better with time.

— Steven
Negroes were breaking their backs trying to imitate white people. Any black family that had been around Boston long enough to own the home they lived in had to rent out rooms to make ends meet. Usually, it was the Southerners, and the West Indians whom the New Englanders called, “Black Jews.” They prided themselves on being incomparably more “cultured”, “cultivated”, “dignified.”

What I was really seeing was only (boot blacks) acting, and living differently. When it was time for me to go to work around the neighborhood. Educated, important negroes looked down their noses at the negroes of the black ghetto. This was the snooty-black neighborhood.

— Rick
MY FATHER

My father had most-
Believe me when I tell you that those Negroes were in bad shape then.

They are still in bad shape—though in a different way.

I don't know a town with a higher percentage of complacent and misguided so-called “middle-class” Negroes—

The typical status-symbol-oriented, integration-seeking type of Negroes.

A Negro came to me

I thought he was someone I should remember.

He was one of those bragging, self-satisfied, “middle-class” Negroes.

I wasn't integrated in those days,

I was growing up.

The real “elite”, the “big shots”, the “voices of the race”

The only Negroes who really ran the Masses.

When the war came along

The bulk of Negroes were on welfare, or they starved.

Our family was so poor that we raised much of our own food.

Negroes shout

For the pie-in-the-sky.

The white men had his on earth.

I knew

My father

He

Made me remember

“Death!”

The best of my remembrance

The Garvey U.N.I.A meetings.

These meetings were

Intense

Intelligent, and down to earth.

I remember hearing of

Europe

Africa

Ethiopians

“Awake!”

Africa

Negroes

“Black men”

The phrase he always used

No one knows

The hour

One day, like a storm, it will be here.

I remember

The big Marcus Garvey

A big black man

He had black followers

All around the world

I remember.

—K.B
“The Fight”

because a good brother
walked between seats
scared
so scared he knocked
my reputation
I whipped lesser Negroes
When I show my face
I knew my humiliations
Was attitude
Never looked
Avoided looking
Trained and sweated
To fight again
The rematch was hardly grateful
Moment later the “fight”
Lay listening to truth
That boy beginning
Became a fight
Allah’s ordered

—Jonathan
“Birth of a Nation”

Pregnant
Hooded Ku Klux Klan
Brandishing their shotguns and rifles
Pregnant
Alone
Three small children
Klansmen
“the good Christian white people”
“back to Africa”
(Universal Negro Improvement Association)
disciples as
raising the banner of black-race purity and
exhorting the Negro masses
controversial black man
Klansmen
Shattering every windowpane with their gun butts
Until I was born
Only one eye
Freedom, independence and self-respect
Negro should leave America
Return to his African land
Die by violence
Killed by white man, including one by lynching
Die by violence
Born
Born
Born
Born
White
White
White
Shame
Hate every drop of that white rapist’s blood

— Yvonne
Untitled

Wilfred, her angel
Would tell me to shine
I treated
Accomplish
My brothers, mother
Think so nice
If you want something
Noise
My father loved
Asked her
My own
I loved
I was proud
Would pull out
Hands
Knees
Bury them
Blue sky
Think
No problem
Didn’t threat

—Delia
“Homeboy”

Home boy, I spent my first month, on the corners and in the bars, hair was straight and never even smoked a cigarette. Black children playing grown-ups, things like that. Every night was shocking, you’d occasionally see a white girl strolling along slipping off to some corner. I wanted something many in fact never held. But I was standing around this particular afternoon, standing there made me inconspicuous. I slipped around the side avoiding people where shorty would enjoy teasing.

— Moe Gayles
“3 beers in”

we felt strange
waking
screaming
living
all of us knew something terrible
the police
the hospital
a room
a sheet
always whispered
almost lived
born simply to survive
children at the funeral
Oddly, I remember
And I remember
And I wish for good friends

— Alex
“Alone”

neon lights, poolhalls, bars, the cars
streets smell rich
jukeboxes blared
somebody told me to believe.

I saw for the first time
couples
arm in arm
people such as I had never seen
they threw their souls and bodies wholly
into worship
but I found I couldn’t.

restlessness
restlessness
to think about the way I had felt there.
the sense of being real for the first time
people noticed the change.
“You’re acting so strange.”

I kept close to the top
I remember, shifting
between a girl and a boy
it went on that way
I became
restless
disturbed
and then one day something happened.
I happened.
alone.

—Valerie
**My Play Date**
**Nate**

I jump after hearing the door slam. I know the Beast is close to me… There’s nowhere to fun… There’s nowhere to hide… All I can do is mentally prepare to adapt and try to survive.

My bedroom door opens. A sliver of light invades the darkness and the Beast enters. I cringe under the blankets as the Beast moves closer to me.

No! Not tonight!

“Go away!” I scream inside, wondering why the Beast always picks me.

I hate that the Beast likes playing with me…

“You know what time it is.” The Beast grumbled before snatching the blankets away. I scurry to cover myself with the Superman t-shirt. I feel the goosebumps sprouting up all over my legs and arms. I wish I was Superman right now – just to keep the Beast from having his way with me. The Beast plays too rough, and he always chooses me! Life sucks when playtime comes around…

“At least the Beast is not drunk” I think as I’m being snatched up roughly.

“Come here you lil’ bitch!” The Beast growls, pulling me up on all fours.

I tremble in Fear-N-Excited anticipation of the game the Beast plays with my rear-end. Next, the Beast touches my pee-pee, squeezes my bottom, and slides something Warm-N-Hard between my legs. When his pee-pee touches my pee-pee, I try to scream, but I can’t.

The Beast is choking me…

I try to cry, but no tears will fall while the Beast gropes all things that are off limits: my tush, mu bush, and my shhh…

The Beast whispers in my ear as his pee-pee penetrates my dooky-hole. I nearly faint from feeling so much pain as the Beast begins his maniacal game. I know it’s bad to play like this, but I can’t let anyone know because the Beast will hurt my mommy. I am so scared for my mommy that I will never say a word about the painful playtime with the nasty Beast… I wonder how long will these playdates go on? I want to die!!!
Choice of Words
Antoine Beach-Bey

Again, the master spoke, he said: “The highest heights are gained by those who reach the greatest depths; and you shall reach the greatest depths.” [MHK (13:16)]

America, with its fifty shades of grey, is a corporation found by strategists. There is a system made of adjectives and these are the fifty shades. Although an adjective describes a noun, it diminishes the nature of the noun. Evidence reveals: the business of America is labeling, categorizing—or should I say slander? Mental warfare requires strategy.

Personally, I am the victim of kidnap, slavery, molestation, and trauma, yet, I am recognized as the scum of society, criminal, fugitive, piece of shit, inmate...etc. As an incarcerated individual, this is how they want you to perceive me. So in a basic conversation I'm in combat to prove myself innocent of being less than a man. Why impress your ignorance? You aren't allowed to be my friend.

As a man thinketh, so is he. If I were to accept this circumstance as a stipulation, I'd become a volunteer for inhumane treatment. I'm not with politics. No politician is to be trusted, The best thing for the oppressor to have is the mind of the oppressed. In exchange they give us entertainment. So now my life is a must-see movie because this is something to which you can relate. We see this everyday. But since we don't think, understand, reason, and will for ourselves, we fail to notice these symptoms of paralysis. America is sick indeed.

It is wise to be careful what you say because an angel may be listening. The selection of words we use are recognized by those familiar to its surface, and the depth of reaction is like a premeditated murder.
The guy with one boot on, no sock on. His jacket, if you can call it that, has five colors: red, purple, yellow, orange, and blue. The colors are separated from each other due to the stitching. It looks like a quilt with sleeves. His pants, which is name brand, goes for about a hundred in the store, but on him it looks like it cost about one dollar and fifty cents. He keep putting his hands inside of his pants and the reason that it is interesting is because every time he takes his hand out of his pant, he puts his fingers to his nose. It seems to me that he is getting high off his smell and I’m wondering did I just find a new way to get high. This place is small but big and as I look around I see many faces of me. Now look at this guy over there who look like he haven’t ate a decent meal in years. He has about seven “sandwiches”, which is two hard pieces of bread, green “process” meat and off yellow mustard packets. My man is really the chef up north. He is putting those sandwiches together like a food administrator will come and grade his artistic skills. He is chopping the “meat” in octagon shape, putting a dab of mustard on each piece of “meat”, then after that he is putting the pieces of “meat” on the “toasted” bread. As he attempt to cut the sandwiches, he realize he doesn’t have anything to cut with. So he looks around, his eyes scanning it, rest on me, and pass me by realizing he couldn’t cut his sandwiches. He start eating it like he was at grandma house on a Sunday afternoon. “Do you think I got time for this shit?” That is what I heard a couple of feet from me. So what is surprising about what I heard is the nuance of the voice it gave me, or I should rather say I felt rather confuse on many levels. I start asking many questions about who I am. “Bitch, listen, I don’t need you, you need me.” Showing no emotion on the outside, my inside is sharing the laughter with me. This person next to me smell like he bathed with the liquid that is found under the trash in a garbage can. Damn! It’s no possible way you can smell like that. And on top of that he has clean clothes on himself.

I have a piece of candy in my mouth and it is kind of helping me to stay focus until I hear my name, Riggins, Riggins, Riggins.
Hello Friend,

I know what you're thinking already, as soon as you read the envelope you began judging me. When we judge people without giving them a chance, what does that say about who we are?

All is well though, my friend. I hear it all the time, so by now I've become used to it. I think they call that a self-fulfilling prophesy or some kind of mumbo-jumbo. I used to be ashamed, because of it and anytime someone would look at me different or say something about it, I would let my emotions get the best of me.

I still remember when I first came to prison and how embarrassed I was to write anyone. I didn't know if they would just cast me off as an illiterate, stupid felon or send me soft, sweet words of encouragement of ways to do better next time. I remember that young boy I was then and how I kept trying to be the “man” my ego kept trying to make me believe I was.

Eagerly, I wrote to people that were supposed to be my family and friends, hoping to gain comfort away from the world filled with hate and anger that I was living in. Then the letters started to come back, or should I say for the most part, the jokes started coming in. Some of the letters were supportive, but most were cruel and hysterical. I guess it all depended on from whose view you were reading from.

Only if they knew how embarrassed and labeled I felt. It's close to how I feel now, but I think you may be different, my friend. We'll see. I have faith in you my friend. You wouldn't judge me, would you?

Back to the story though. Next thing I knew, my hurt, embarrassment, and false sense of pride turned into anger. Then, there I was fighting people for no reason.

They say I may be labeled for life because of this and I just don't understand why people would choose to judge me on something that so many people struggle with anyway. It's not uncommon, it happens every single day, all over the world, but here I am the one being stigmatized.

I guess everyone has their own way of seeing things, so who am I to tell someone how to think? Let me ask you this, my friend, and be honest. What was the first thought that came to mind when you read this envelope? Be honest.

I've come a long way since I was that young boy just coming to prison. I would like to say that I have grown out of my feelings of hurt and embarrassment. That it doesn't bother me anymore, but at times I'm still no so sure.

I am proud of the man I am today and the man that I've become, regardless of the labels that have been bestowed upon me. I have to learn to accept who I am and no matter how big or small a part of me it is, it's still me. It's a part of me and, trust me, sometimes its not so easy for
me to deal with either. I’m ashamed of myself at times, too, and ask myself, “what the fuck made me do this?”

The crazy thing is, I was so worried about being judged or labeled by others that I already had judged and labeled myself before anyone else had the chance to. Then there are people like you, who are intimidating and perfect without blemish. Just look at your type, never a flaw and how everyone just “gets” you. We understand you perfectly. Then, here I am, the joke. The one people laugh at and make fun of. I’m tired of people squinting their eyes at me, always trying to read me. Trying to use me as an example of what “not” to do. That shit hurts, why can’t I be more like you?

Why can’t I be a good example? It’s always me that people say bad things about. Like, “we can’t understand him.” Or, “there he goes, fucking up again.” I’m sure you can assume how that makes me feel.

Now, I feel kind of weird going on such a rant. It almost makes me feel like some jealous ex, talking a lot, but about nothing. So, I’m sorry. The think about it is, now I need your help. Me being in prison and all I have a “tough guy” image I need to maintain. You know how it is in prison. Well, really you don’t, but I’m sure you hear stories and watch TV and that’s what everyone else thinks about prison. So, we’ll go with that.

Back to my point, in prison we must always look tough and show no signs of weakness. So lets spin this conversation for my sake. We’re going to say, yes we, that I am just an apprentice of yours trying to learn how to lose this stigma that has been a part of me for so long. Then maybe I can even become perfect, too. Well, maybe. Ok, probably not. Either way it sounds way tougher and better than the jealous ex thing.

All jokes aside, I need your honest opinion and advice on this. I’ve taken many classes and have tried to better myself in many ways and I’m still just about as bad as day one. Does that make me a lost cause? I try to follow the rules (well, mostly, I think), I try my hardest, I do my best and I take advice. Will I ever become better? Am I so horrible, that everyone will give up on me? Where am I supposed to go or what do I do from here? Answer me my friend…

I get that you aren’t some counselor or someone that even has the time to help over something you could care less about, but can you at least share with me your thoughts, opinions or advice? Plus, if you’re still reading this, you have to be somewhat interested. :-) At 36 years old, still making mistakes like I was at the age of 14, I need HELP. Is there help for me? Would you?

I have to thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking your time to listen to this craziness I call a letter. You truly are my friend and a great listener. I almost didn’t write it, I was scared of what you would think or label me. I decided to give you a chance. No, that’s not right, I decided to give ME a chance.

I have, but one last request my friend. Please don’t be like everyone else with all of the labels, stigmas, the jokes, the looks and the superiority. After all, we’re only talking about my horrid handwriting here…

Is my handwriting really as bad as this letter describes? What did you think I was talking about?
You have yet to make it to this world, but I am patiently awaiting your arrival. I don't know what you'll look like, how you will sound, or what your first words will be. The best thing about it is that, it doesn't matter. You will be the most beautiful, your voice will warm my heart and your first words will be remembered for a lifetime.

I will hold you and laugh with you. Sing to you and cuddle you. Teach you and guide you. Feed you and protect you. There are unlimited amounts of things I will do for you, but most importantly, I will love you. I will love you for who you are and not for who I think you should be.

I will prepare you for this world, not by showing or providing you with one side, but always showing you both. This world is full of opposites in which there is always a choice. When you learn cold, I will show you hot. When you learn right, I will show you wrong. When you learn pain, I will share with you joy. When you become selfish, I will show you how to be selfless.

With so many labels, stigmatizations and influences that this world has become accustomed to, I will help you see the value of your heart. I will support your dreams, passions and aspirations and help you to see. While people will try to pull you down, teach you hate and harden your heart, I will help you to see the good, provide them with a helping hand and to soften your heart even more.

I want and hope, that you will understand. Not just me, but people, yourself, this world, and love. Everyone seems to understand something, but most never find the understanding they seek. Not because they aren’t trying, or because they don’t want to, but because they still don’t understand. I know, this is confusing, right? But that is exactly what I mean. To understand, is to be okay with not understanding.

Everyone views life through different eyes, has a different story, different beliefs and creates a different outcome. Once we realize that humanity is made up of differences and these differences do not make someone right or someone wrong, then we begin to understand.

We begin to understand how to open up our hearts more, how to build up instead of tear down, how to give instead of take. We understand how to live and not just be. And most importantly, we learn how to spread love and acceptance instead of festering in hate and power.

I am almost afraid to bring you into this world, because of the chaos, hate, selfishness, anger, segregation, and separation that has consumed our society. Humanity has grown in so many scientific, electronic, creative, and knowledgeable ways, that it’s astounding.

But with this growth, there has also been a decline. The cure and concern of others. The love and peace in life. The take your time to savor the moments are now nothing but rushed accomplishments to be able to say, “been there done that.” The reasons behind the actions are caring less and less about others, but more and more about a feat to accomplish.
Yes, I’ve made many mistakes and have done many wrongs. To this I am not proud, but I do accept responsibility for the pains, anguish, harm, anger, sadness, disappointment and so much more that I have caused. I have been labeled a lost cause, a monster, a danger and a failure, to say the least. I was told I would never make it out of prison. They even tried to give me the death penalty for a crime I did not commit. I’ve been diagnosed with mental disorders and have been on numerous amounts of medications.

These are some of the many things you may hear about me, but always with the bad comes the good. The man you will enter this world seeing, will be smiling. You will not recognize the person from the previous paragraph and that is thanks to hope.

Hope is what drove me from the brink of giving up, to the successful, selfless, loving person you know now. Hope is the light I thought I could never reach, in an ocean full of darkness. Hope is trusting and believing in your actions and that they are for a greater good. Hope is you. Something that has yet to exist, but is still so powerful. Full of potential, possibilities and love. Hope is what keeps us going when we have absolutely nothing and HOPE things will get better.

You will see just how beautiful this world is, when you take your time to enjoy each step, each touch, each memory and each smell. Too many people have too many places to be or things to do, and they miss so many things that are right in front of their faces. I want us to savor each moment and create memories.

Our society is founded upon our communities, the quality of life not as one, but as a collective whole, equality and love. That foundation is shaky at best, but there’s still hope. The values of society have drastically changed and not in a good way. When I see or hear the inhumane and unjust ways of our human culture, my heart cries as my eyes break.

But then that word hope comes in and cheers me up. I begin to think of the endless possibilities, I can fight through the bad and see the good. I can be an example instead of fighting negativity with negativity, expecting a positive outcome. And those that use the power positions they are in to take advantage or manipulate, we can help to change the culture. To help put the right people in the right positions.

Which all leads me back to you, who’s perfectly imperfect. You are the next generation and the new hope of this world. You can change the culture of society, build our communities, and lead selflessly. You can love, let love and bring love together. There’s a void in this world and it’s waiting on you.

I believe in you so much. I know that you will not only make me proud and happy, but this world too. I know what I’m going to name you, because you have been mine for quite some time. Welcome to our world, HOPE.

Love, Peace, and Unity...
Jesse
Illusions of Manhood—Finding My Own Way
Jonas

“That boy’s 15 goin on 30!” is what my old heads used to say about me. I filled with pride anytime I heard those approving words coming from these older men that I respected and admired. From a street cultural perspective, one was considered a man once he began to support himself, and aid and assist his loved ones financially, and protect them when necessary. In the streets everything was a hustle, and we were encouraged to get money by any means necessary early on. Those who could hit the corner and turn 50 into 500 dollars in a day were highly respected for their ambition and discipline. Those who could fast talk, “swindle” or “finesse” another in some way, shape, form, or fashion, resulting in their financial gain, were admired for their quickness of mind and way with words. Those who could turn up in a trap house, or other place of business, robbing them of all they’ve got, were respected for their boldness, aggression, and unpredictability. By the age of 15, I had proven that I could be successful at all of the above. But despite all of the illusions I was under as far as manhood was concerned, however, the reality was that I was just a kid trying to figure things out with practically no guidance. So many of the lessons I learned came the hard way, and this situation was no different.

It was a lively summer evening in the hood when I met Ashley. My cousin Will and I were walking down the street toward our apartment buildings when we spotted a group of girls sitting on the front porch of their building. We knew one of them, a heavy set, dark skinned girl who was usually sitting there. She was always bumming cigarettes from us when we passed by, but it was cool because when she did have her own she never hesitated to offer. Her name was Mona. The other two girls we’d never seen before. We decided to go and get acquainted.

“Whas up Mona?” Will greeted as we came up the stairs toward them. Mona smiled knowingly, with a look on her face that said, “I see what’s happening here.”


“Whas up.” I responded. I was always more reserved, preferring to observe for a second before I made a move. Will was four years older than me and very much the opposite, he would dive right in with his naturally charismatic personality and I was very comfortable letting him take the lead.

“Damn Mona, you aint gonna introduce us to your friends?” Will asked. She laughed, still with that knowing look in you eyes.

“This is Alicia,” Mona said, pointing to the shorter girl, “and this is Ashley. Ashley, Alicia, this is Jonas and Will.” They both said hello. Ashley was beautiful. Tall, slim, with a light brown honey complexion. She had shoulder length hair and big, bright, penetrating brown eyes.

“All of yall are related?” Will asked.
“No,” Alicia chimed in, “we’re good friends though.”

“So yall just came around here to holla at Mona?”
“We live right here boy!” Alicia said, like Will had just asked a stupid question. Mona started laughing, Ashley was smiling too, and we locked eyes for a moment. I took that as my cue. I proceeded up a few more steps to where Ashley was sitting and took a seat beside her.

“Whas up?” I greeted.

“Hey.” Ashley responded, still smiling.

“How come I aint never seen your ass then?” Will asked.

“Maybe you don’t pay close enough attention,” Alicia responded, rolling her eyes, becoming very sassy, “boys tend to have that problem.” They were quickly warming up to each other.

“How long yall been stayin right here?” I asked Ashley.

“Like 2 months.”

“For real?” I was a little surprised that they could live right here for that long without us noticing, and she must’ve read my reaction.

“Yeah, but we don’t really hang out around here much. Our mother still lives in Maryland where we grew up, that where we grew up, and where all of our friends are. But our aunt lives right here, we’re staying with her for a while.”

“How you like it around here so far?”

“It’s cool, I guess. I mean, I know Mona,” Ashley said, nodding her head in Mona’s direction, who was laughing again, very entertained by the flirty, witty, loud exchange taking place between Will and Alicia, “but other than that I still don’t really know anybody.”

“Well, now you know me.” I said. She dropped her eyes for a second, a half smirk forming on her face.

“I always see you comin and goin. You’re a pretty busy dude, huh?”

“You be watchin me?” I asked playfully.

“No! I mean, yea. I mean,” she took a deep breath to compose herself. “Sometimes I sit in the living room window, you know, just relaxing, and I happen to see you comin and goin.”

“Let me find out I got a stalker on my hands.” I said, teasing, still laughing at how flustered she’d become.

“Don’t play, it’s not even like that.” She said, playfully punching me in the arm.

Will and I sat there with them for three hours laughing, flirting, and just getting to know each other. The fun came to an abrupt end when their aunt, a commanding older woman in a sky blue nightgown and headscarf, came to the door. We were in the moment so much that we didn’t even notice her at first.
“Uh hum.” She cleared her throat. We turned to look, and Ashley, who was now sitting on my lap, immediately jumped off, and Alicia, who was wrapped up in Will’s arms leaning against the railing, followed suit.

“You girls know what time it is? And it’s a week night, get yall behinds in this house.”

“We’re just right here on the front porch though auntie.” Alicia protested.

“I don’t care, it’s past midnight. You’ll see your friends tomorrow, come on.” Everyone reluctantly stood up to leave.

“How you doin Miss?” Will greeted their aunt. She didn’t respond, she just stared at us.

“See you tomorrow Jonas.” Ashley said in a half whisper.

“A’ight.”

Alicia waved at Will as they disappeared into the building.

“Well, I guess I’ll head in too. See yall tomorrow.” Mona said as she went inside. For Will and I the night was still young, and we still had some product to move. There was still a lot of activity, people out and about chasing their drug of choice. Across the street in front of our buildings a few of our friends were catching sells left and right. We went over and got in rotation.

The apartment was completely vacant, except for the carpet and the blinds that came with it. The water and the electricity was still on, so it was cool in the summer and warm in the winter, and I could cook something if I wanted to. It was clean too, freshly painted white walls, no foul odors, and my men and I kept it that way because we often would bring girls in, or just come in to chill. We had a couple lawn chairs and a few crates to sit on. This was our lay low, hide away spot, though it was right in our apartment complex. It was 7-something in the morning and the sun was shining brightly through the window as I sat there in one of the two bedrooms with seven grams on a plate. It looked like a rally dry, ashy piece of candy. I took my razor and began cutting it up into 10 and 20 dollar pieces (dimes and dubs) and placing them into little jewelry bags. My dimes went into blue bags and the dubs went into slightly bigger green bags. The tedious, mechanical work of bagging up easily allowed my mind to drift off into thoughts of Ashley. It had only been two days sine I’d seen her, but I wasn’t able to keep my mind off her. When I was with her it seemed like nothing else mattered. We just seemed to get each other right from the jump. She was shy, soft spoken, but very aware and perceptive. She was smart and inquisitive, but seemed to have a certain innocence, a certain vulnerability about her that stroked the cords of my protective instincts. I wanted to take care of her, shield her from any kind of harm. But first I simply wanted to spend more time with her, get to know her better. I wanted to take her on a date. I never got her number, but I knew what building she stayed in, so I’d just go over there later on to see if I could catch up with her. It took me about two hours to bag up the work, but today was Friday, which meant that it was a pay day, which meant that the money would be pouring in. I put 2 dubs to the side for Woods, our crack head land lord whom we compensated periodically for allowing us to use these vacant apartments, and I left out excited about my possible date for the evening. Our set of buildings were shaped like a giant
horse shoe, with a corridor running through the basement connecting all 5 buildings. There were
apartments on the basement level as well and that's where Woods lived. I came out of the
vacancy and walked down the two flights of stairs into the basement and around toward his
place. I stopped at one of the flights of stairs, careful that no one saw me, and went behind them
where there was this cabinet type area built into the wall with a wooden board covering it. I
removed the wooden board, it was dark inside, and there was dirt on the floor, as if it was under
construction but they'd forgotten about it somewhere along the line. Spider webs were
everywhere and it was the size of an average dog house. I placed my stash at the top of this
cabinet area where there was a shelf-like ledge out of sight, and placed the board back in it's
place. I would drop these rocks off to Woods and then go out front and open up shop.

I was hesitant to knock on Ashley's door. Her aunt was kind of intimidating, but what the heck, I
thought, here goes nothing. To my pleasant surprise, Ashley answered the door.

“Hey.” I said with a smile.

“Hey.” She said in a hushed tone, but clearly happy to see me.

“Whatchu got goin on today?”

“Nothin much,” she said as she looked behind her nervously, still speaking in that hushed tone. I
knew her aunt had to be in there too. “I was just cleaning up a lil bit.”

“I had a lot of fun hangin out with you the other night, and I was wondering if you wanted to go
see a movie?” She began to blush.

“Ashley who’s at the door?” Her aunt yelled from somewhere inside.

“It's Mona!” Ashely said as she came all the way into the hallway closing the door, but leaving it
cracked.

“I don’t have any money to go to the movies.”

“I didn’t ask you if you had any money, I asked you if you wanted to go to the movies with me.” I
said, taking on her hushed tones. I didn't want her to get in trouble, and I wasn't trying to feel the
wrath of auntie either.

“When?”

“Tonight if you want.”

“Okay, but I have to be back by eleven.” She said seriously.

“Cool. We have plenty of time, it's only 4:30. Get ready, I'll be back to get you at six.”

“Okay.” I could hear the excitement in her tone and see it on her face. I was super excited as
well.
“Bring my shit back by in the morning, you hear me?” Claudette, a very feisty, loud woman ordered. She was one of my clients.

“I gotchu. Promise.” I assured her as I handed her the two dubs.

“Uumm hm. Last time I let will see my truck I didn’t see it again for 3 whole days! I was about to call the police!”

“Don’t worry. I’m a have your truck back to you no later than ten-o-clock. Have I ever lied to you?”

“Aight now,” she said, lighting all the way up and tossing me the key. “Give me another piece and you can keep it till noon.” I reached into my dip retrieving another dime piece from my stash and handed it to her.

“Thank you sweetie.” She said, totally amiable now, beginning to start another conversation, but it was time for me to go, I was on the clock. Not meaning to be rude, but Claudette wasn’t one to take note of your subtle social cues.

“See you later Claudette.” I made my way out of her apartment while she was in mid sentence.

I was feeling fresh and fly and ready for my date, and Ashley looked as gorgeous as ever. She was simple but sexy in her white sandals, blue jean skirt and blue and white top.

“There she is.” I said, not able to control the big smile that covered my face as she approached me.

“Hey!” She said, smiling just as broadly as me, spreading her arms for a hug. We embraced. “What are we gonna see?” She asked as we began to walk. I parked the Jeep Cherokee around the corner so my mom wouldn’t see us and so her aunt wouldn’t see us either.

“I was thinking this scary joint called What Lies Beneath. I think Michelle Pfeiffer’s in it. You like scary movies?”

“I love ‘em.”

“Cool. You look really nice by the way.”

“Thank you. You don’t look too bad yourself.” She replied as we walked up to the jeep and I opened the door. She stopped, looking very unsure.

“Is this your truck?”

“Nah, it’s a friend of mine.”
“You got a license?” She asked with her eyebrows raised, as if she already knew the answer.

“No, but we’re good.”

“What if we get pulled over?”

“We won’t. I always do the speed limit, use my turning signals and everything, I follow the rules. And it’s not a stolen car so the police’ll have no reason to bother us.” She was still looking a bit uncertain. “I drive all the time, I never have a problem. No worries, I promise. C’mon, everything will be okay.” She hesitated a second longer, then got in the Jeep and we pulled off. The movie was great, the parts of it we did see, we were far too busy making out in the back of the theater. After the movie we went right next door to the Hard Rock Café inside of Union Station to eat. It was like we had stepped into a scene straight out of the 50’s.

“Oh my god, these bottles are cool! I think I wanna take it with me.”

“I know,” I said, observing the classic, glass CocaCola bottle we were sipping from.

“These are like antique souvenirs or something.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.” I said as I ate a couple of French fries.

“Why me?”

“Why you what?”

“Why you like me?”

“Like you? Who says I like you?” I asked, teasing. She laughed, hitting me in the arm.

“I’m serious! I mean, I know you have other girls you could be with, so why me?”

It took me a second to answer. It was hard for me to put it into words, but I wanted to try. “I don’t know, I mean, I know we just met, but it feels like we’ve known each other forever. I can’t stop thinking about you, and you’re beautiful, that’s why.” It was her turn to be speechless for a second.

“Right back at you babe.” She said bashfully.

I was very precise about getting Ashley home on time. I didn’t want her to get in trouble on my behalf. We were back around the way with a few minutes to spare. We stood at the corner of her block, out of sight of her aunt.

“So I guess I’ll see you tomorrow?” I asked, really not wanting the night to end.
“Yeah, my aunt will be gone all day tomorrow, her friend is getting married, so if you want, you can come over.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Okay. I had a really good time tonight. Thank you.” We kissed and had a long hug before parting ways. I stood right there until I saw her enter her building, and right before going inside she turned around and waved one more time.

It had been over three months and Ashley and I were still inseparable. The chemistry we had was off the charts. We studied each other closely, learning and anticipating each other’s moves and moods. I was maybe even a tad bit possessive, but it was cool because she found it cute and flattering. She was sometimes a bit clingy, but it was cool because of all the trust and admiration she poured on me. But lately I had been changing. Will and my other older cousin, Corey, had really been on my case about my relationship with Ashley. The were getting in my head, and that was causing me to become increasingly difficult and disrespectful toward Ashley.

“Whas up yall?” I greeted Will and Cory as I walked up. They were sitting on our front porch. They returned the greeting.

“You aint got Ashley with you! You would've thought yall two was joined at the hip! Yall the 2 most touchy-feely mothafuckas I ever seen in my life!” Will said sarcastically.

“Don’t be mad at me because you and Alicia only lasted like 3 weeks.” Corey, who was older than both of us, was just laughing at us.

“You already know how I do, I fuck’em, duck’em and leave’em alone! You, on the other hand, you a tender-dick-ass-nigga! You too nice to them bitches you sentimental ass nigga! You be on some sucka for love type shit!”

“Nah, my lil man aint on no sucka for love type shit!” Corey said, instigating.

“Yeah he is! And he aint even fuck the lil bitch yet! Listen Corey, he had her in my father house not too long ago, butt-ass naked, ready to go! And guess what happened? Will asked, fully animated now.

“What happened bruh?” Corey asked eagerly, enjoying this far too much.

“You know what, you tell him.” Will said, redirecting his attention to me. “Tell him what you told me.”

“She said she wasn’t ready yet.”

“What?” Corey said, with a look of confusion on his face. “Yall ass naked, and she aint ready?” Will burst into laughter.

“You actin like a chump, so she treatin you like a chump!” Will said through his laughter.
“Aint nobody treatin me like no chump!” I said, becoming angry, which only made Will laugh harder. Corey, sensing my emotions rising, became a little more serious about the situation.

“Look, you can’t never be too nice to these broads young nigga. When you too nice to ‘em they lose respect for you, start tryin you, seein how far they can push you. Sometimes you just gotta get on some bullshit for no reason. Give her a hard time just cause, let her know ‘bitch, I don’t need you! Don’t ever get beside yourself like you runnin somethin! Just like I picked your ass up, I’ll drop your ass off! Don’t get it twisted!’ You gotta do it. Don’t let her try you no more, cuz she definitely tried you. Got you all naked, dick hard as a rock, then she talkin bout she aint ready, and you as just cool with it.” When saying that last sentence he had a look of pure disgust on his face. I was so mad I couldn’t say anything, nothing that wouldn’t probably end violently.

“I told you slim.” Will said, “I aint gonna tell you nothin wrong. Get that shit in check.”

“Enough with all yall girl problems, we’ll get back to that. I got this sweet move for 3 pounds however much money the nigga got on him. Yall wit it?” Corey asked, showing us the Glock 40 he had on him.

“You already know!” Will responded excitedly.

“Yeah.” I said, trying to contain my emotions.

“A’ight, lets go.”

Everything Will and Corey had been saying to me had been weighing on my mind heavy. I mean, maybe they were absolutely right. Maybe I was way too agreeable all the time and she would start to think I was some kind of push over. But I wasn’t, was I? I mean, I wanted Ashley to always feel comfortable with me, so when she told me she wasn’t ready for sex I didn’t second guess her. Of course I tried to talk her into it, but she wasn’t having it, and that was cool. I didn’t feel disrespected or insulted, I felt like she was a little scared and needed a little more time, and that was fine with me. In the back of my mind I was fully aware of how, in certain ways, I was more advanced than Ashley though we were the same age and I never felt the need to pressure or rush her on anything. When she was ready she’d let me know. That’s how it had been. I had no reason to think it would change. But would it, though? Was I going about this whole thing wrong? Would she lose respect for me because I was too soft? I was so confused! But I didn’t want Ashley to start thinking I was weak.

Things between Ashley and I were rocky. We’d been arguing non-stop over practically nothing. I had been starting shit, giving her a hard time just cause.

“What’s wrong with you?” She screamed one day as we stood on the avenue right after school arguing.

“What the fuck is wrong with YOU!” I retorted. “What, you think I’m stupid or somethin?”
“I know you’re not stupid!”

“You tryna give one of them niggaz some pussy aint you?”

“What! Now you sound stupid!”

“Then why you was on the front smokin with all of them when I pulled up last night?”

“They’re your friends! It’s not like I was chillin with a bunch of random dudes. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“I mind!”

“Okay! I won’t do it anymore.”


“Where you goin?” I asked as I began to follow her. She spun around, disdain also in her tearful eyes.

“You’re crazy! I hate you! Stay away from me!” I stopped in my tracks, stunned, speechless as she hurried away from me. I started in the opposite direction knowing almost immediately that I’d screwed up big time.

For the next couple of weeks I tried to talk to her, but she wouldn’t answer my calls, and she surely didn’t want to see me. I desperately wanted to apologize, let her know that I was being a fool, that I didn’t mean none of that shit! But time was running out. Ashley was moving to Florida with her dad at the end of the month. I had to do something. One day I was standing on my front carrying on as usual when I saw her coming across the street toward me. On the inside I was elated just at the sight of her, but I didn’t let on.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” She responded dryly.

“I-“

“No, let me talk,” she cut me off, “this’ll be quick. I’m leaving for Florida in the morning so don’t call my aunt’s phone anymore. And I thought you’d like to know, I’m not a virgin anymore, me and Will had sex.” She stood there with a look of triumph on her face. I didn’t respond right away. I felt like I’d been hit in the solar plexus. I seriously thought about breaking her jaw. Fortunately for the both of us I wasn’t under the influence of alcohol or PCP because then I very well may have tried.

“I know. What? Oh, you thought you did something slick? Nah, see, wee pass bitches around just like we pass these blunts. You just like this blunt bitch.” I said as I took another drag of the blunt I was smoking. It took all of the self control I could muster to stay calm.
“Fuck you!” She screamed, losing all of her poise in an instant.

“Fuck you.” I retorted as she stormed off. That was the last time I saw Ashley.

For the next few months I felt like the dumbest guy in the world. Honestly, I was somewhat depressed. How could I have been so stupid! Why didn't I just listen to my own intuition? Instead I had to let others influence my thoughts and behavior for the worst, turning me into the very creep that I would have like to shield her from. I was trying to be someone I wasn’t and what good had that gotten me. I was just about to pour my heart out to her, tell her how incredibly sorry I was, tell her that I didn’t mean anything I’d said, tell her that I’d been letting Will and Corey get in my head, ask for her forgiveness and promise to make it up to her. Then she dropped the bomb on me. We had passed the point of no return. I had to stand my ground, at least that’s how I felt, my pride wouldn’t allow me to do anything else. I surely didn’t know that she and Will had hooked up, and when I asked Will if it was true he brushed it off like “yeah cuz. But fuck dat shit, shorty was rollin out anyway. I got some new broads uptown.”

I wanted to put a few hot bullets in his ass, but I refused to let him see how affected I was. I just wished I could press rewind and have a do over. I missed her like I’d never missed anyone before and I hated the way we parted ways. Anytime I would hear Aliyah’s song “I Miss You” on the radio I’d be close to tears. I resented Will and Corey, but especially Will because I would have never betrayed him like that. I knew neither one of them had my best interest at heart and I viewed them differently because of it. I actually liked the girls I chose to deal with. I loved the pursuit, I enjoyed courting them, really getting to know them. I loved the whole process of connecting. That was me, and if that made me sentimental or too soft in other people’s eyes, well, that was their problem. Though it still took some time for me to fully understand and appreciate my qualities, the process was taking place.
My journey and experience with cancer was very dramatic and emotional. I abandoned all belief in a higher being, which proved to be a mistake. This story is filled with trepidation, anxiety, love, extreme fear, and many tears. I’ll begin by reassuring you that fortitude is very important. The strength to endure adversity was one of my greatest obstacles. Survival was fifty percent mental, and I was blessed to have so many individuals instill in me belief that I would conquer and come out victorious. The reading, I hope, will be uplifting to others who may experience questions of Faith and Divine Intervention...

The year is 2009. I call home to check on the family as usual, but something seems wrong because my sister is being evasive. Finally, the blow is delivered after constant inquiries. Mom has cancer. I’m the last to know because everyone believes I have enough on my plate, having only served fifteen years of a life sentence.

As we talk, more is disclosed. This is her second bout with cancer, and she has declined treatment. She’s ready to go home. My pleas were unavailing. A month later, she’s gone, and I’m lost beyond words. I cry everyday for three months. I would be watching television and see a mother, and immediately go to my cell ashamed at the tears that would run down my face.

A Christian friend, who lives in Chicago, writes me a long letter telling me to get myself together, and to open my photo album and remember all the wonderful times I shared with my mother. My tears turn into smiles, and eventually, I call Ms. Loretta in Chicago and thank her for the love and advice.

My peace is short lived. I’m hit with another tragedy six months later. My only son is murdered in an attempted robbery. Twenty-eight years old, and a victim in so many aspects. I refuse therapy and counseling, and rely on family and friends to get me through.

I curse God daily. I am also reminded of my lack of parenting skills because of my self-destructive behavior. I’ve been incarcerated most of my life. I begin to blame myself, and make a concerted effort to be the best grandfather I can be. Again, I find comfort and inner peace.

Well, it’s the beginning of 2010, and I make an appointment to see the dentist. The assistant prepares me for the exam, and I’m relaxed as usual. She rushes off to get the dentist, who in turn gets the doctor after he examines my mouth. At this point, I’m starting to get a little concerned, so I ask if there is anything wrong. In response, they ask me if there is a history of cancer in my family.

I respond with, my mother passed away last year, and a river of tears begin to flow. They tell me not to panic. Can you believe this? I’m facing a death sentence for sure. How can I not panic? I flash back to my youth when I was smoking, and I wish I could take it all back. I can barely stand at this point, so I take a seat, and try to relax while they schedule me for a biopsy.

I leave medical and report to Unicor to inform my supervisor that I’m quitting due to a medical emergency. I’m trying to prepare myself mentally for this heavyweight fight. My superior
suggests I take a thirty day leave instead of quitting. His exact words were, *this is fifty percent mental*. Now this is the second time in the same day that this is told to me.

Now I’m struggling with whether or not I should disclose this information to my friends and family. I hate being the bearer of bad news, and I’m trying to decide if I can do this without them. My family surely doesn’t need the burden of worrying. Once I’m transferred to Butner Medical Center, I can concoct a story which will hopefully keep the visitors away until I’m finished with treatment.

The dentist and medical staff are truly a blessing. They make calls to get me in route within a week. I arrive at Butner by jet, and I immediately feel the change in the atmosphere. Things seem so serene and calm. I’m not familiar with the peacefulness or the respect from the officers.

My medical team of doctors schedule a plan for me. The first operation is a feeding tube which is much needed because the radiation hinders you from eating. It also kills everything in its path. The tumor in my mouth had grown due to the biopsy. Once it hit the air, it spread like wildfire. This causes a change in plans, and I am administered my first dose of Chemotherapy to shrink the tumor.

Now I understand why my mom refused treatment.

Everything seems to be going great until they have to fit me for the “mask.” It fits like a glove over your face so that you can’t move during the radiation treatment. I feel as if I’m going to pass out once they snap my face to the table. My heart is beating too fast. I throw my hand up so they can see me on the monitor, and they rush in and unsnap the mask. I run out of the room so fast you’d think I’m on fire. I had experienced my first anxiety attack. I sit by the window and cry openly until the doctor wraps her arms around me.

She refuses to accept my refusal to treatment. Instead, she cuts eyes into the mask and prescribes medication to calm me down before treatment. The next day, the staff is so understanding. They allow my roommate, Vernon Boykins—may he rest in peace—to accompany me in the radiation room with his wheelchair. Without the love from him and the staff, I doubt seriously that I would’ve been able to endure the treatment.

While he was holding my hand during treatment, I couldn’t even wipe away my tears, and I really didn’t care to at that point.

...  

Sometimes in life we overlook our blessings because of other things we are experiencing. Words can’t begin to describe the love and respect I harbor in my heart for all who were instrumental in my recovery. I lost over forty pounds during my treatment. My only nourishment was two cans of Ensure three times a day for three months.

I was so glad to be able to get rid of the feeding tube, but it came with a price. I should have waited for surgery, but that was months away. I asked my primary doctor to remove it. Instead of just yanking it out, he tried to be gentle, but I suffered through the pain for over five months.
It had been three months since my last treatment, and time for my CT scan to determine my status. My favorite nurse, Mrs. Whitlaw, called me to the medical station to deliver the news. No signs of cancer. I hadn’t cried that much since I was a baby. I took time and gave thanks to God, and now I show my appreciation by assisting others in any way that I can.

I eventually gained most of my weight back. I’m running track, lifting weights, and playing basketball while adhering to a strict diet and taking two-thousand milligrams of Vitamin C daily.

I guess God has a plan for me. Yes, this is the same God I cursed when I had no understanding. He never gave up on me though. Some would say He was there all along. For sure He heard my cries, when I needed Him most…
Chapter 1: My Own Hands

In the shadow of my son's arrival into the world, I found myself fixed in the midst of millions of Americans and Black families whose spirits were lifted from the news that the United States of America had elected its first black president, Barack Obama.

Two Years Later


As I lay there, seeing the happy faces of millions of Americans on the screen, I thought to myself, “What a way to bring in the New Year.” A sense of claustrophobia had captured me, and the room seemed to be getting smaller. A pounding headache slowly crept its way to the top of my head as I began to come to, still a little confused as to why I was in the hospital.

Through my own pain, I instantly began feeling gratitude for all the nice nurses and doctors who were attending to me and my injuries, when they could have been out enjoying cocktails, dancing the night away, or relaxing at home and enjoying the company of their loved ones. I'm sure it would have been better than being stuck at work, pushing enemas up my ass to help release backed up stools my body had been greedily holding since the night I was admitted into the hospital. Allah knows best, though.

Disinfectant flooded my nose as a world of hurt suddenly ripped at my stomach. Slowly, I pulled my hospital gown to the side, not knowing what to expect. I just wanted to see why in the hell I was in so much pain. Seeing my stomach held together by staples overwhelmed me but also humbled me. The various tubes and pieces of equipment they had hooked up to my body were the first things to indicate how serious my situation was.

I thought back to that night. That one night. What did I do to cause this? Allah says, “Whatever of evil befalls you is from yourself.” Was the evil that led to that one night brought by my own hands? Perhaps, I should go back to answer this. Back to my birthdays shared with my first cousin Quiet Storm.

Since my mid-teens, I've hated that my birthday was on Christmas. It was my gift and my curse, it seemed. It never really felt like a birthday to me, just another lame holiday in which people got to share my gifts.

My 21st birthday passed as I lay in a hospital bed. It was my second birthday without Quiet Storm. Quiet Storm was more than my first cousin. He was a brother to me. He had been arrested during the beginning of the previous year before my 21st birthday. His sudden absence
had a huge impact on my life, mostly because of the impact it had on our Na-Na and his mom, my Aunt T.

Quiet going to prison out of the blue, the way he did, led me to feel like a stranger to a city I thought I’d known my whole life. The moment Quiet went to prison, our circle of friends changed on us. I isolated myself from everybody. Communication with my family decreased. Maybe they felt that I was supposed to be there to change what had happened to Quiet.

Quiet and I are our own men. But while I can never take responsibility for his actions, I often do wish I could have done something to change what happened. In reality, I had my own issues and my own demons I was fighting. This didn’t stop the growing disconnect I felt from my family.

When Quiet left and went to prison, I kept telling myself that if Quiet’s fate was prison, then my fate would be death. It always happened that way with guys like us. I remember Kenny and Rex, cousins close like Quiet and me. One day, Kenny was gunned down, likely over neighborhood rivalries. Rex took it hard. Soon after Kenny’s death, Rex went to prison, fighting multiple homicides. We were kind of like them, or them like us. Similar bond. So, when Quiet went to prison, I felt my fate would be Kenny’s, to be murdered in the streets. I wasn’t scared of the idea. If it was true, I knew that I couldn’t run from it. I had to face it.

Ummy once said that I was moving about life like I had a death wish. Maybe I did. I was drowning in evil set by my own doing. My own hands. It all caught up to me that night I got stabbed.

It was Christmas Eve. The next day was my 21st birthday. I woke up with anticipation on what the day would bring. I grew up in a big family, where, at one point, everyone was so close that everyone would celebrate everyone’s birthdays. Seeing that growing up, I couldn’t wait for my birthdays to roll around, but Christmas always upstaged my birthday. Each year, I grew angrier and angrier and angrier around the holidays. I cried a lot on my birthdays. The end of the year went from fun moments with my sisters and cousins to me fighting all the time. I’d be sad and disappointed. I took out my anger on my uncle Nardo, or whoever was around. Each year, I’d be secretly hoping and wishing that this year’s birthday would be better than the ones before. But they just kept getting worst.

I told myself that I wouldn’t go back to my old neighborhood. No, I’d stay with my son, Fatman, his mom, Ronetta, and her two sons. My new family. Optimistic about the day, I’d decided to get wings and fries from Eddie Leonard’s carryout on Alabama Avenue in the hood. On my way back to Netta’s apartment, I stopped at my neighborhood liquor store and bought a bottle of Rosé Champagne and a fifth of some cheap Russian Vodka for anyone who wanted to drink.

I was a few blocks from Netta’s when I spotted Peanut and Joff, two guys from my old neighborhood. They were both walking up the sidewalk in my direction. They looked like they were on a mission, looking for anything to get into, though they didn’t seem to be heading anywhere particular. Was I being tested by Allah on my word? Nut, Joff, and I talked for a bit. Where were they coming from, where was I headed, that sort of thing.

“Your birthday tomorrow?” Nut said.

“What's the move 7?” Jeff added.
“Nuffin’ much man, I’m cooling it withda fam at my baby muva joint. That’s where I’m headed now. Ya can roll if ya want. I got some lil drank and shit,” I said, inviting them back to Netta’s spot to chill. I felt that doing so was a bad move, considering how strange things had gotten since Quiet’s absence and how I’d just wanted to be on family time that day. I ignored that inner-voice, my conscience, which had told me to spend the day with Netta and the kids.

I dropped the food off with Netta, for her and the kids, and headed out to get high on PCP and drink with Joff and Peanut. My hands brought forth the very evil I would find myself in later that night.

A couple hours later, I’m drunk and high, out of my mind, not trippy high but spaced out. Nut, Joff, and me posted up in front of some buildings on a side street around the corner from Netta’s apartment. Time had gotten away from me, and when I realized how high I was, my heart instantly overflowed with guilt. I made my way back to Netta’s spot, not recognizing that this would have been Netta’s and my first holiday together under one roof. I owed Netta and the kids that one day, that one night.

I walked into Netta’s house with Nut and Joff on my heels. I was completely unaware of what I’d just walked them into. Before I could even make it over to the sofa to sit my high ass down, Netta was up in my grill, ready to go zero to one hundred. I can imagine that Netta ran to the window, or perhaps the balcony, and watched me, Joff, and Nut walk around the corner, wondering what I was up to. My leaving earlier the way I did must’ve gotten her upset. It had to, because before I left, we were cool, but when I returned with guests, on top of disappearing and returning high, she was on a hundred.

The kids were running around, playing with their toys and each other. Netta’s friends, who happened to be there, sat off in the distance across the living room, as Netta sized me up.

“Where have you been? And why in the hell you go out and get all wasted?”

I stood there, facing her with a dumb expression on my face, lost for words, not knowing how to calm her. She wasn’t wrong for being upset. Before I could offer her an explanation, she was throwing punches at me. I tried to block as many of the punches as I could, holding her. Her friends rushed over and grabbed her. All of us tried to calm her down and control the situation.

At this point, the kids were standing around watching, and I felt like shit, because they were looking at me as though asking, “What did you do to upset Mommy?” High and already an emotional being, I began to weep. Sad tears crashed into the ground.

When I’d first seen Netta’s reaction, I’d thought, “Why is she mad? She knew I self-medicate.” But then, I empathized with her and realized that maybe she’d had plans for my birthday. Maybe she’d had plans to play some holidays games with the kids and me. She had a way of being silly and fun. Or maybe not.

After I’d isolated myself from my community and family, Netta was all I had left in my corner. It seemed to me that everyone was turning their backs to me because of the monster I was turning into behind my depression and substance abuse. Broken relationships, failed brotherhoods, the streets and the lifestyle had backed me into a corner. I was going through it. Netta, in the midst of her own obstacles, had opened her arms to me with a crazy kind of love and affection. She was there for me the way I needed her to be. I was just too damn selfish.

As Netta finished letting all of her frustration out on me, a big ball of emotions welled up inside of me. Putting my hands on her was not an option, so I walked out of her apartment,
feeling sorry for myself. I fucked up what should have been a good day. In my selfish thinking, I was upset with Netta for not knowing or understanding that I was hurting and depressed.

So there I was, leaving Netta’s apartment, headed to my old neighborhood with an attitude. All of my hate and anger at the world, at disloyal friends, at lost loved ones, at distant family members became my focus. My hands had caused this. The fight with Netta triggered it. Losing Quiet showed me a colder side to the game. Trust no one.

It was all about me and my hurt. I overlooked what that day meant for Netta. One thing is for sure, neither of us suspected how that day would end once I walked out her door.

I thought I was a man. I didn’t want to show any weakness in front of her, our guests, or the kids. I used the fight as my way out, slamming the door behind me, Rosé in hand. The die had been cast. I would be bringing in my birthday with my homies in the hood after all. My inner voice told me not to. In my intoxicated mind, I’d convinced myself that everyone was against me. I was a stranger to the city, the community, that I thought I’d known my whole life.

I could not see the monster I’d become. I could not see the wedge I’d driven between my family and me. I became someone else. A shadow of the warmhearted, talented, and smart person I’d always been. Somewhere, the poisons of poverty and social pathology began coursing through me. I was on autopilot, comatose in a chaotic state of mind.

“Fuck everybody. I can figure things out on my own.”

A beginning to an end.

It was Christmas Eve, so everybody was lit on some type of narcotic, talking trash. Joff, Nut, and me had made our way to the hood and stumbled upon a craps game. A bunch of fellas, about twenty of us, out back of my neighborhood corner store were drinking, smoking weed, PCP, shooting dice, talking shit to one another.

“Bet ten?”

“Man, sit your broke ass down. You don’t got no money.”

You had some homies on the sidelines, cheating, and making what we call ass-bets, offering bets with or against the shooter that they knew they couldn’t cover. Everybody’s betting and trying to get in on the dice. After a couple of rounds being the shooter, the fader, and the better, I ended up breaking even.

Unfazed by winter’s gaze, lit on drugs and alcohol, I contemplated my next move. I stepped off from the craps game, and as I turned the corner, I saw Black, an old friend. He’d helped me transition from the porch to the streets. He’d been disloyal to me.

I’d respected and loved him, until one day when I thought he’d played me. I’d gone with Black to a nearby neighborhood, right into the middle of a dangerous situation of hood rivalry. Knowing Black, it was probably unintentional, but someone from that hood placed a gun to my head. I was so high on drugs that I couldn’t make out who that person was, and I was never told why I had a gun against my head. I didn’t panic. I played it calm and got the dude to let me go. The dude thought I was from a neighborhood that was beefing with his community. In my mind, Black owed me an explanation, but I never was able to catch up with Black after that night. Black had left me there.
Now, here we were, face to face. Between my high and buzz from the alcohol, I became angry. Angry at the streets. Angry at my family. Angry at myself. Brand against my skin kind of angry. I needed to let it out. My voice came out in heated waves. His avoidance of me had convinced me that the betrayal was real.

“Damn Black, I thought we was better than that,” I said.

“Man, what the fuck you luncheon off, K-dogg?”

“That bullshit from the other night.”

I smacked him. I went to turn my back, and between the liquor and adrenaline, I never felt the knife slip into my back and my side. The stab to my side punctured my liver, crushing me.

I didn’t realize he’d stabbed me at first. I walked for nearly twenty feet to the 32 bus stop in front of my neighborhood market. Something felt wrong. People were standing all around watching me. I remember a woman crying out to me. I remember my clothes became real heavy and wet as the blood soaked through. I remember seeing my blood pour out of me, enraging me more.

I didn’t know if I would die or make it. Guilt set in instantly. I slurred comments at onlookers, “Fuck is ya just standing around watching for?”

The woman, who’d been crying, begged me to stop moving. “You’re making the blood flow more,” she yelled.

In that moment, she became dear to me, though her words made little sense to me. I couldn’t stop moving. Everyone’s faces blurred. The sidewalk came closer. The world became black.

I came to in the ambulance. The EMT pressed little irons against my chest. My body jerked upwards. I vomited. The world returned to black. When the world against had color, it was Christmas day, my 21st birthday. The evil within me had caused this.

Chapter 2: Recovery

I woke up in confusion. Extreme pain and discomfort flowed throughout my body. I looked to my left and saw Ummy sitting in a hospital chair. Next to her, my step-pop Charles Jr. sat. Ummy’s eyes were red and puffy. She had no make-up on, was dressed in her black clothes, and had unstraightened hair. Her presence and the aroma of cigarette smoke made me remember the events of Christmas Eve. I’d almost died. This must have been the worst Christmas and celebration of birth a mother could have.

No one spoke. We stared at each other, back and forth. Ummy watched grievingly as I fully adjusted in the small hospital bed, observing my surroundings. There were tubes hooked up to my throat, nose, and private part. IVs were hooked up to my arms, along with some other needles that were attached to multiple packages of blood, which the doctors were feeding back into my body to make up for the blood I’d lost.
With all the pain I was feeling, hardly able to move, it hurt more to see the look in Ummy’s eyes. I felt guilty. I felt guilty for almost losing my life for something so stupid. It didn’t seem stupid at the time, because revenge had seemed more important to me.

After watching me come to, I noticed Ummy cheering up a bit. She began smiling. Not a happy smile but one of relief, of answered prayers. Still, no words were spoken, just body language and facial expressions. Not wanting to overwhelm me, she stayed seated next to my step-pop, watching my movements. She peeked at me, almost like she was afraid that she’d discover I hadn’t fully recovered.

Loosening up, Ummy stretched her legs forward in her seat. She looked up to the ceiling and glanced at my step-pop as he held her hand in his. I imagine she was praising and thanking Allah for sparing her child’s life and giving me a second chance. Ummy’s presence and silence were sufficient and comforted me. No words were needed. Our souls were conversing, agreeing to disagree, I suppose.

“See, look at you. I told you something like this would happen,” her soul said.

“I know, Ma,” my soul responded, “And I’m sorry, but the streets is the streets. I never asked for none of this!”

“You so damn hard headed, my child.”

“Ma, I never meant for none of this to happen. As much as I hate it, you was right.”

Our souls would have spoken the truth of our sorrow. There aren’t many times when I felt like I let Ummy down, but the look in her eyes that morning, after that one night, I knew I had let her down. Allah knows best.

I stayed in the ICU for about two days after waking up, before the doctors moved me to a different care level unit. I underwent surgery for a liver laceration, in which the doctors cauterized my liver with a laser. I was cut about four inches below my navel, and about nine inches above it, so they could access my liver. I ended up with twelve staples lining my stomach. There were staples holding the two stab wounds in my back as well. To say that these staples hurt would be an understatement. They hurt like shit. It was a struggle getting to the restroom on my own. I had backed up stool. A machine was attached to my penis that sucked the urine from my bladder, releasing it into one of those clear plastic containers. I was amazed at how I didn’t feel the urine flow from my bladder to the container. I didn’t know my body the way I thought I did.

It took me three days to get comfortable getting in and out of the hospital bed. I had to mentally prepare myself to get out of the bed. I would turn on my side, laying down very slowly like a rotisserie chicken on one of the wheels. I would ease my legs out of the bed, one leg at a time. I’d pause, holding onto the bed rails, pulling myself up into the sitting position with my feet hanging from the side of my bed. I breathed slowly in between each move. I’d manage to get up in the standing position, find my balance, and creep over toward the hospital bathroom, like a little old man using a walker.

In the condition I was in, I knew I had some choices to make. On the one hand, I needed Black to feel what I felt. I needed his family to go through what my family went through. I contemplated my revenge and the good and bad consequences. I had no choice. The rules to the game said that I had no choice. I couldn’t go out like no sucker. People would think I was soft if I didn’t retaliate.

My dreams of being famous, of becoming a superstar, would go out the window. My life would become everything my family tried to prevent it from becoming.

I thought of my brother. “Sorry, brother, that it came to this. I didn’t ask for this. I’m left with no choice,” I imagined saying to my brother.

I would become another senseless killer, or possibly another victim to foolish black on black crime, or even another DC federal inmate, with a 007, facing murder chargers. All for what exactly?

Detectives came to visit the hospital and asked me to tell who stabbed me. Without a second thought, I said, “I don’t know who stabbed me.”

Call me a fool, but I didn’t make the rules. Just like America has its laws, the streets have them too.

1. Don’t snitch on no one.
2. Don’t hustle where you sleep.
3. Keep the guns separate from the money.

In both worlds, there are consequences for breaking the law. I’m sure the two detectives already knew who stabbed me and why before they even came to visit me. I lived in a crime and drug infested community. Cops got paid to watch and learn whose who and whose doing what. The laws allowed them to spy on young black men all day long. Cops kept informants on payroll. The detectives were only there, because they needed me to confirm what they already knew. I wouldn’t. They didn’t care either way. Most of them disliked snitches anyway.

Family and friends called me on my hospital phone, telling me how destructive I’d become behind my drinking. Quiet called me collect from the DC jail while in the process of court proceedings to reason with me. All the sense these people were drilling into me made me dizzy. I became nauseous while on the phone with Quiet. I dropped the phone and threw up on the floor. Pain shot through my belly. I was stuck for a few minutes. As I started to panic, my body returned to normal.

“Hello?” I said.

No reply. Quiet’s jail call must’ve expired.

It was hard hearing the truth, but it was my duty to listen. I owed at least that to those concerned about my well-being. I wasn’t allowed to play the victim. I was forced to face reality. My friends begged me to wake up. Accountability came into the picture.

I’m the one that caused that evil to happen to me. All my life, I’d been groomed to look at things from a different angle. This was no different.

They say for every action, there is a reaction. At 21 years old, I learned that the hard way. I’d been pre-waried about this from my older brother’s mistakes. It was the hardest lesson, but the lesson taught me the art of forgiveness. Forgiveness with the exception of my wrong. My evil. I had a second chance at life.
After several weeks, the doctors decided my recovery was going well and moved me to another care level unit.

Overall, I was doing well mentally and physically, walking around the hospital in my gown. Sometimes, I’d go down to the cafeteria to grab lunch. When I’d get bored or depressed, I’d go grab some snacks from the vending machine. After the second move, I was allowed family visits. A few of my cousins and my G-Ma (godmother) came to see me. G-Ma had a way of putting me at ease.

At this point, Netta had been by my side consistently. I imagined that she was hurt over what happened. Maybe she felt some guilt or fear that I’d almost lost my life following our fight. I’d never seen a more caring or softer side to Netta than the days she spent with me at the hospital. Her presence made me feel safe and well. She’d been the perfect crutch. I didn’t feel ashamed or responsible around her like with Ummy. I was grateful to have her in my life.

Netta, for the first time, showed that she cared about me, that she had love for me. I was impressed by her ride-or-die attitude. We’d only known each other for a year and a half before I’d gotten stabbed. We’d been moving fast since the day we met, never really taking the time to get to know each other.

We met at a Halloween party in 2007. That we met on Halloween should have been a sign. Both of us were wearing masks. We covered up the hurt we felt inside. My cousins had hosted a Halloween party, and I invited my best friend, Tre, who’d been seeing this girl, named White-gurl, from uptown. White-gurl was cool and super sweet. She brought her sister Netta. Tre had set up the play for me to get with Netta. Netta and I hit it off.

Throughout the course of our relationship, it seemed we could never find the right balance between us. She was a young woman who had to grow up too fast. She was tough and guarded, but she had a beautiful sweetness about her. There were times I’d be doing bad with no money or food, and she’d risk her freedom and go steal food from a store in her hood to feed us. I never asked her to. She just did it. She had some motherly instincts that reminded me of Ummy. I was too far into the streets and caught up in my own things to stop and figure out Netta and her situation. Something, I bemoan to date. At least for Allah’s sake, I bemoan. Because of the precious baby boy we share together, I bemoan.

I look back from where Netta and I are today: distant with broken communication and anger and mistrust between us. I look back to where we were before: two young parents, internally wounded, clumsily trying to find our way into adulthood. My mind gets caught up in “what if.”

I always pictured myself on the side where young men break the cycle of being the leading cause to single parent homes. I pictured myself being the man to make my family work. Like a young girl planning her dream wedding, I grew up wanting to create a full family with a lot of kids and two parents. I felt that was what Netta wanted too. We were both young, without guidance. I often like to believe that she could have helped make a man out of me. The same way that I was in the position to make an honest woman out of her. That could have been our story. But it’s not. And probably never will be.

Netta coming to my side at the hospital, taking care of me, helping me shower, and feeding me gave me strength. The strength she showed meant everything to me. I’d be almost willing to
relive my nightmare over again if it meant that I could witness that side of Netta once more. But that’s just me dreaming in a world of redemption.

Getting stabbed, fighting with Netta, and spending my birthday, Christmas, and New Year’s Day in the hospital put me in a deeper state of depression. I trusted no one. I pushed everyone away. I became silent. I became alienated. I dimmed my own light. I didn’t know how to handle the present and move past the people I’d lost in my life. I didn’t know how to move past the opportunities I’d walked away from. I turned to the streets and drugs and almost let them take me. Almost.
The Hole

Jonas

There I sat in the “hole,” also known as the security housing unit. The cell was small and dim. The bed was maybe a foot off the floor, and it felt like I might as well be sleeping on the floor. There was a window in this particular cell, and though it was caged off, and I really couldn’t see anything except for the barb wire fence [of the juvenile prison I was being housed in], and the occasional patrol van slowly cruising around the compound, I still would stand there, sometimes for hours, just gazing out the window at nothing. Longing for the day I’d taste freedom again, imagining everything I’d do given half the chance. Gazing out of that caged off window helped me escape, at least for a little while, the torture of being confined to that cell 23 hours a day. The tier was loud as usual, filled with the [adolescent] voices of boys joking, tell war stories, making plans for the future, and threatening each other’s lives. On this day in particular one of the boys started kicking and banging on his door, which wasn’t unusual at all. Here and there guys would get restless, or just break down from being locked in a cage like a wild animal, and kicking and banging on the door, and sometimes screaming at the top of your lungs was the only means of releasing some of the trauma we were experiencing. I walked to the cell door to look out of the window and saw that it was the boy across the hall from me. I knew him. We were both in Juvenile Cognitive Intervention Program Unit, it was known for housing most of the kids with mental health issues. He was 14, and he was on some type of medication. He kicked and banged on his door for maybe 2 hours before one of the C.O.’s, or “youth counselors” (YC’s) as they were called there, came down the hallway.

“What’s your problem?”
“I need to talk to somebody!” The boy screamed.
“It’s after 4-o’clock, the psyche department is gone, the chaplain too.”
“What? Man, I need to talk to somebody!”
“Well, too bad.” The YC completely dismissed the situation and walked off. The boy yelled every obscenity at him, cursing and calling him everything but a child of God. And he continued to kick and bang. Maybe another hour went by and now the YC’s were starting to serve dinner trays. When the YC got to his door with his dinner tray he opened the tray slot and asked,

“Are you gonna keep bangin and being disruptive?”
“Man, fuck you!” The boy responded.

We had hot dogs and tater tots this night, and the YC took both of the boy’s hot dogs off his tray and licked all over them then placed them back on his tray and slid it into the tray slot and locked it back.

“Enjoy.” He said, as the boy exploded with new found energy. He kicked, banged, and screamed like the devil was in the cell with him. An hour or so passed, the YC’s had come and picked up our empty dinner trays and the boy was still going off. For a minute he refused to give them the tray back, while he cursed them out. Maybe a half an hour later the two YC’s working the unit came down the hallway to the boy’s cell, along with 3 or 4 other patrolmen. We could hear their keys rattling way before they got down the hallway. A few boys yelled “Good Squad coming!” “Here come the good squad!” They went into the boy’s cell and restrained him while
they removed his mattress and bedding from the cell. He tried to fight, but to no avail. So angry now he began to cry, but he kicked and banged and hollered continuously. Maybe another hour passed, and the goon squad returned. This time they restrained him and stripped him completely naked and removed the clothes from the cell. He stood at the door continuing to cry and scream for maybe another five minutes, then he suddenly stopped, and disappeared from the window. It was winter time, and I knew he had to be cold as ice in that cell with nothing on and nothing to cover up with. Everyone else I could see from my window, including myself, was wrapped up in the blanket because of how cold it was in the cell. The boy remained silent. I imagined he was shivering and his teeth were chattering. More silence.

"I'm sorry!" the boy screamed frantically. He was sniffling and his voice was cracking. “I ain’t gonna do it no more! I’m sorry!" He kept yelling this out until the YC’s eventually returned his clothes and bedding. Afterward a strange silence covered the tier. The whole this situation was taking place I was trying to ignore it, but I couldn’t. I was all too familiar with the rage, confusion, and panic I knew the boy was experiencing. I tried to fight it, but it was rising up within, and my defenses were not yet string enough. I broke down. Thoughts of the past haunted me. I was forced to confront and acknowledge all of the terrible things I’d done, all of the horrible things I’d experienced. Not even sleep could offer me an escape half the time, because I would often have dream where either I was just falling deep into darkness, or unidentified people were trying to kill and I was either fighting or running for my life. In either scenario, I would always jump up out of my sleep breathing hard, sometimes sweating. I was forced to navigate the wilderness of my own mind. Through my tears and quiet sobs I began to find myself. I began to accept my past for what it was, and recognize the disguised blessings it had left me with. I began to accept the fact that these so-called YC’s were doing everything in their power to alienate us from our humanity, however through a gift of understanding, I realized that they were only debasing themselves. I began to understand the fact that the only way out of the fire was through it, and a certain contentment came with this realization. I began to find peace, despite the circumstances, for perhaps the first time in my life. I decided right then and there this wasn’t going to define my life, and that I would not be defeated. More importantly, I decided that I wanted to change. I wanted to be better. I made up my mind that the time I spent in prison would not be in vain, and I knew I was strong enough to handle whatever came my way. Thoughts of my future all of a sudden became that much brighter, and with this new found resolve I wiped the tears from my eyes, took a deep breath, and opened my book and started reading.
Ring Ring Ring!

“Hello”

“You have a collect call from “Malala” -, an inmate at a Federal Bureau Institute, this is a prepaid call, you will not be charged for this call, to block press “7”, to accept dial “5” now.”

“Beep”

“Ya habibi, as salamu alaikum wa rahmen tu allah.”

“Wa laikum as salam wa rahmen tu allah wa barakatuhu Zawj (wifey). I miss you lovely, how are you holding up in there?”

“I'm good. I miss you and Maleek so much, and Allah knows I can use me some of you right now, Malala said, smiling at the thought of her hubby, her partner, pleasing her.”

“You gotta be strong babygurl. You'll be home before you know it and I'ma give you all of me that you want.” Khalil spoke assuringly to his wife.

“How is Maleek?”

“He’s ite. I gave him his shaahada (testification that the is only on true god, worthy of worship). He asked me if he would have to stop eating cake and candy now that he’s officially a Muslim” Khalil mentioned to Malala, laughing at his son’s biggest worry of becoming a Muslim.

“You gave him his shahada without me? I can't believe you did that! Why couldn't you just wait, I wanted to share that moment with you all,” Malala said as she began to cry on the phone.

“Lovely don’t start that crying, you know just as I do, that the sunnah requires that the deen be taught at the age of seven, when the child reaches puberty” Khalil spoke, with an assertive, but calm and empathetic tone.

He knew that Malala wasn’t crying and upset because he gave their young son his shahada without her, she was more so crying because the thought of being away from her family was getting the best of her.

She hated missing such important moments of young Maleek’s life.

Malala was far from weak, and could handle any environment, and any situation, and she’d been remaining strong through her prison bid although 24 months seemed like forever, considering she had never been to prison before.

In her eves, she was profiled and set-up one day, while she was at an airport, getting ready to board a plane to Chicago, for a certain training class so that she could start her own Fashion and Home Designing Business.

As Malala was waiting in lines to go through the metal detectors and x-ray machines, she was approached by TSA. They first asked her to remove her veil. She explained that the
veil was a part of her First Amendment right and that she would not be removing it, and asked TSA what the problem was. They then asked her to step out of line and go with them, when she refused to do so, one of the agents grabbed her by the arm, and in her defense, she broke free from the agent, but in the midst of her breaking free, the agent fell back, hit his head on one of the machines and went unconscious. The rest of the agents then used force to subdue Malala, and they took her to a back room for questioning, as the waited for the authorities to come. They searched her belongings, she had nothing but clothes, fabrics, sketches of her designs, and other documents. They questioned her about going and coming. She told them she was from Washington D.C., a post graduate on her way to Chicago for a business meeting. Malala couldn’t believe what was happening to her, it happened so randomly and out of the blue. She was scared, and felt violated, wishing Khalil was there to tell her that everything would be O.K.

Malala a 29-year-old African American woman, became a Muslim at 15 years old, after she met Khalil, who brought her into the fold of Islam through the mercy of the creator. Malala, like Khalil was from the hood, and they grew up in poverty, but they didn’t let the hood define who they were, and they worked hard to outgrow their environment and create decent lives for themselves and their beautiful son Maleek.

Being from the hood, Malala knew firsthand what it was like to be harassed by the police, harassed just for being black, where police seemed to be managing crime, more than preventing it. It was different being a Muslim in America, even an elite figure of your culture, educated, intelligent, principled and ambitious, not to mention beautiful enough to make stone cry, and Malala just as many of her black and Muslim brothers and sisters could not escape the stereotypes here in America. Ever since America took its focus off of the Soviet Union, they have made Islam the new Boogeyman, making things difficult and unfair for Muslims everywhere.

Police had finally arrived at the airport, and because airport authorities didn’t want to admit that they made a mistake, and hoping to dodge an evil law suit, they had Malala falsely charged with aggravated assault and sentenced to 24 months in prison. Of course, the government put some of the toughest prosecutors on Malala’s case, so even with a private attorney, Malala still lost her trial’s, the first on being a mistrial. Khalil’s world shook up, and he dreaded having to tell Maleek that his mom wouldn’t be coming home for two years. Khalil and Malala debated on whether to tell Maleek what happened to his mom, and they both agreed that the best thing was just to tell him that Malala had to go to college for two more years, out of the country to keep Maleek from worrying and wounded by his mother’s imprisonment.

Maleek looked up to his mom, she did no wrong in his eyes, and with her gone for a while, he had no one to love up on.

“So how are the girls treating you up in there? You make any friends yet?” Khalil asked changing the conversation to a lighter topic. Malala’s duties as a guardian had been suspended for now, and she had to accept that.

“I mean- I deal with da sistas. You know I don’t do the friend thing. I deal with a couple of the girls from around the way that’s here, you know Von, Val, and Dal from the “AP” projects, but for the most part, I stay to myself babe”

“You sure you good?”
“Yes I’m sure dear!” Malala says convincingly, sensing the game Khalil is beginning to play with her.

“Yeah ite, cause I be watching the lil “60 Days In” reality prison show on T.V. and I be seeing how those females be getting down in prison. They be trying to turn everybody and their mothers out” said Kahlil.

“Ill, don’t play with me Khalil, that’s nasty” Malala said cracking up at Khalil and the truth of the joke.

Women in prison bid completely different from the men, Women tend to create more of a family environment, it’s part of their nature and in the midst of it all, they become sexual towards one another, and for those women outside of the circle, may even be transgressed upon by other women for sexual favors.

Malala was on her “deen”, she feared and strived to love Allah. She feared Him enough to refrain from displeasing Him, for she knew that displeasing her husband, is an act that would also displease Allah. Of course she had her moments, and like most people in prisons, she became vulnerable at times, but Khalil has been riding out her bid with her 100%, giving her the strength she needed to stay focused.

Khalil a 29 years young New Afrikaan, African American man, turned Sunni Muslim, and University of the District of Columbia student had to change the course of his life for the past months in order to be there for Malala and carry the extra duties in taking care of their son Maleek. Khalil visited Malala every weekend. He didn’t bring their son Maleek during the visits, and it was always a downer for Malala.

He sent her cards, pictures, and letters almost everyday of the week, sometimes he wrote her poems, and sent her emails using the corrilinks email system for inmates. He kept her books laced with money for commissary, phone and email. The experience made Khalil grow and mature in many ways, being a young full-time dad, doing a prison bid with the love of his life. He got up each morning to make lil Maleek breakfast and got him prepared for school. Once Maleek had ate and was ready for school, he put cartoons on the television for him, while Khalil ate and got dressed for work and school. After that, he would drop Maleek off at school, and then he too would go to school and then works for a few hours. Normally, he would drop Maleek off depending on the day of the week.

At work, Khalil drove his company van for his own small business “Khalil Quality Services”, detailing cars, moving logistics, some landscaping, and green cleaning. He does this up until it was time to get Maleek from his after-school program. Monday Tuesday, Wednesday, Khalil had Maleek enrolled in boxing, piano, and Arabic lessons and activities. The rest of the week after school, Khalil would take Maleek to the local Madjid to worship their lord, learn the religion and bond amongst his brothers and sisters of the Salafi Ulama.

Maleek’s grandparents from both sides, all offered to step in and watch after Maleek, but Khalil declined the offer, he enjoyed the extra time with Maleek. Maleek was showing him a side that he didn’t know he had. The only time he utilized Maleek’s grandparents was on the weekends, when he took the solo drive out to see Malala in West Virginia. He hated nothing more than the idea of having to travel to a prison and seeing his Zawj, the mother of his child, caged up like an animal.
“So, how are things with the bills and stuff?” Malala asked.

“Maannn- let me tell you, the other day, I was sitting here filling out a money order for the rent at the same time I was on the phone paying the Pepco bill, and messed around and payed our rent amount on the Pepco bill. They got an extra $800 up out me” Khalil sighed to his companion.

“Oh my god, baby, how in the world did you do that crazy?”

“I was speeding, not paying attention, Khalil told her.”

“Um, well did they return the money to you?”

“Nah!”

“What?”

“I didn’t wasn’t the money back. Our Pepco bill is paid for up to a year. We might not make it to the grocery store, but at least the lights will be on” Khalil joked.

“Yeah right- you betta feed my baby Khalil” Malala joked back.

“Oh, and I had to reschedule Maleek’s Dr. appointment, I couldn’t find his Medicaid information.”

“Khalil, I told you that all ya document stuff was in the drawer with my panties and Bra’s” Malala said seductively.

“Damn I completely forgot babe, that’s why I need you home Lovely. You know that usually handle all of this. Other than that, everything’s cool in the gang, Maleek is doing well in all of his studies and Mrs. Katy told me to send you her love also. She said she looks forward to completing your piano lessons with you” Khalil spoke softly to his Zawj.

“Awe, tell Mrs. Katy I said hello, and thank her for all her kind words, and warm support. Also, babe, I have a couple books I want you to order for me please”

“Anything for you babygurl!”

“Yes- Thank you baby, I will send you the list through Corrilinks” Malala said.

“Dang, the list is that long that you have to send me a list” Khalil said playfully.

“Be quiet and just do what I asked you to do puck” Malala said graciously.

Beep-Beep-Beep

“Okay baby the phone is about to hang up. I love you sooooo much” Malala said as if she didn’t want to phone call to end.

----------6 Months Later----------

“Okay, umm Malala, you are all ready to go. There are your belongings your ID, which is good for 21 days until it expires, there is your finances and transportation fare” the butch looking correctional officer said, handing Malala her things.
“Thank you” Malala told the guard as she was escorted to the lobby of the prison by another guard.

Malala was shaking with anxiety, she could not wait to see Maleek and kiss her young prince and be able to be back in the embrace of Khalil’s arms. She yearned the touch of Khalil more than anything, her protector her lover.

Khalil held Malala down on her bud, and he took on extra duties in the home. In his eyes he wasn’t doing anything more than what the woman had been doing since the beginning of time. Malala couldn’t wait to repay Khalil for his loyalty. Malala knew that Khalil was not looking for a pot on the back for his loyalty, he sought his reward from Allah, insha Allah.

“Okay Malala, you take care out there, remember what we talked about, use your story to make a difference”

“I will. Bye!” Malala said shyly, as she was seen off by one of the less hostile guards.

The moment Malala hit the double doors, onto the opposite side of the wired fences, she teared up instantly at the sight and taste of physical freedom. The tears welling in her beautiful wide eyes, blurred her vision of the short medium build, muscular figure she saw off in the distance of the parking lot, who she knew was Khalil.

Khalil dressed in a fly casual lenon outfit, sponsored by Versace, wearing dark shades, a fresh Caesar cut, with his shirt un-buttoned at the top, wearing Malala’s favorite “Firdaus” cologne, sat, with his butt against a brand new LF-1 2018 Lexus, with a pink bow wrapped around it, as Malala took off running towards him in her custom made pink, purple, and black hijab he sent to her through the mail to wear for her release.

Khalil parked the car insight of the prison recreation yard, where he knew Malala’s prison family would be standing, waiting to wave her off through the wired fences.

Khalil knew that Malala had been working hard before her prison bid, working and going to school trying to get her business off of the ground. He knew that the prison bid set her back a little, so the new car was one of his ways to make Malala feel on top, like she never left the community.

It was 2.5 hours before Khalil and Malala reached D.C. as Khalil jumped off of 495 onto 295, exiting onto the M.St. Bridge.

“Baby, why did you get off 295? You need to be getting me to my baby.” Malala said half-jokingly.

“I got you baby, I’ma get you to your young prince, I just need to make a quick stop in Eastern Market. It is this lil boutique spot I’ma take you to, I need you to run in there and buy you something exotic to wear for our little private meeting in the bedroom later on tonight” Khalil confessed to the love of his life.

“OMG Khalil, you are so ridic” Malala stated, turned on by Khalil’s approach. She was ready to put her proposal down on the table or the floor, or the bed, at their little meeting.
Jamal, Triple H, has already made flap-jacks, or also known as John Cena. Triple H body slammed John on the bed and put him into a figure 4 until he tapped out.

Every Saturday morning my best friend Jamal, my little brother Mikey, my older step-brother Todd, and I play WWE wrestling. Todd may be the oldest at 9 and me by a year and a half, but I still hold the Championship belt.

Next match up is The Rock, me, versus Todd, Stone Cold. Upon entering the ring, two beds put together, I lift one brow, unlock the Championship belt from my waist, hold it in the air, then hand it to Mikey.

The good news for me is, John isn’t athletic and moves slow. Advantage me. There is one way he can beat me though, which is why I’ll never let him get a good hold.

“Fight,” Jamal, the ref says.

We take a few steps circling the ring, then cross the middle with our arms locking up. I move lightning fast, putting Stone Cold in a head lock. I squeeze, but squeezing airborne as I’m being body slammed. We smack a ring, but I spring back up. “I love this ring,” I mumble.

Stone Cold’s on his hands and knees trying to stand when I land the people’s elbow on his back, and flatten him. He says, “Ow, shit. My back.”

All I care about is keeping my belt, so I slip to the side throwing him in a half-nelson turning him over. Jamal jumps on the bed and begins the pin count as Stone Cold runs back into Todd, “Get off me Timmy or I’m telling,” he says struggling and flailing his legs.

“ONE.”

I glance over at Mikey and wink. John Cena hops up on the ring and onto Stone Cold’s legs, going for a ride.

“TWO.”

“STOP! LET ME GO, IT HURTS!” John screams.

“THREE.”

Jumping up, I bring my arms down flexing. “Can you smell what the rock is cooking!” I say over top of Todd who is crying and running out of the room. Jamal lifts my hand up as Mikey slaps the belt around my waist and we all give each other hi-fives.

The three of us go into the kitchen where my Dad’s girlfriend, Miss Pat, is drinking coffee and listening to Todd snitch us out. “Good morning boys.” She says keep her attention on Todd.

“Good morning Miss Pat.” The three of us say almost in unison.

“What are you boys doing to John?” She asks us, looking directly at me.

“We were just wrestling ma’am. Look, I’m the people’s champ.” I say showing her my belt.
Dad walks in smiling as he usually does, but sees the situation and asks, “What’s wrong?”

Everyone tries to answer at once, but Miss Pat is hear over all, “the boys were just apologizing to John for playing too rough.”

“Sorry,” we say. I absolutely, super-duper hate disappointing my Dad. When I do, it hurts more than the hardest punch to the arm in the world. I keep my head down peeping through my arms.

I guess Dad wasn’t too made as he and Miss Pat made us some sandwiches and we scarfed them down. All of us go to run back to the room to play when Dad stops the three of us, “have fun, just not too rough, okay?” He then winks.

We all laugh, nodding our heads and I say, “Sure Dad.” I run over and give him a hug, then slide back over to Mikey and Jamal who are smiling. “Man, your Dad is cool,” Jamal says as I lead the way through the door.

Todd jumps on my back as I walked into my rec room and I fall hard onto the ground. Todd’s on top of me; I can’t move. He rolls me over as I kick, punch and wiggle as much as I can, but he’s too big and I’m trapped, pinned to the ground. So he tells Mikey, “You’re the ref, count to three.”

My anger is boiling, “I’m going to get you as soon as I get up.” I yell, but none of it matters. I look up at Jamal laughing and Mikey laughing and counting.

“1-2-3, and the new champ is Stone Cold.”

Todd slowing gets up and tries flexing over top of me. I jump up hearing all three of their laughter echoing in my ears. I begin feeling lightheaded and feel as though my head may burst. My heart is now beating in between my ears and my vison becomes blurry and full of water, and then everything turns to black…

…my eyes flutter. Blurred images of light are coming from out of focus, but something doesn’t feel right. I try to wipe the tears from my eyes, but my arms aren’t moving. Attempting to wiggle free, I notice that in a bear hug sitting on the floor with my legs stretched out in front of me.

“Relax Timmy, its okay. Just calm down, I have you.” I hear my Dad’s voice say. I search out in front of me puzzled and see Mikey far in the corner halfway behind the chair, peeping over at me. To the left, Jamal’s standing there his mouth wide open, frozen still. Looking to my right Pat’s tending to Todd whose lip is bleeding.

A million though race through my mind as my heart begins its decline to the pit of my stomach. I muster up all of the courage I have left turning my head around, staring up at Dad whose heart is broken through his eyes.

All of the fight, strength, and curiosity leaves my body and mind with one exhale. Dad let’s go of my arms and sits next to me. I’m slouched over with no energy whatsoever. “Why were you so mad Timmy?” He asks.
I found a spot on the floor to stare at. Confused and at a loss for words I ask, “What happened?”

I can feel Dad staring at me, his lets me know how bad this was. Groggily I say, “I'm tired Dad. Can I go to sleep?” I still haven't taken my eyes from my spot on the floor when I feel him pick me up.

He lays me on his bed as I find a new stare spot; I can't look at him. “You don’t remember punching your brother?”

Trying my hardest to remember, I can't. Shaking my head I say, “I'm sorry, I'm so tired.” He kneels down beside me, kisses me on the forehead, and says, “I love you Timmy, now get some sleep.” Then pulls the covers over me, tucking me in.
I'm Only Human
Michael

The Homo Sapien who walks upright on two legs, not hind legs and whose vision extends before them and not to the side. The Homo Sapien that has two arms and two hands that rest at the side of this being, who stands upright on two feet. I'm only human, we are only human. Did you say extraterrestrial? No, I’m only human, we are only human.

As mere mortal beings we share multiple qualitative attributes that confines and constricts us within the human race. One needeth not go far or look beyond the constitution and anatomy of the human being to see the many similarities. Similarities of which clearly places us in a category different from that of animals.

Diversity is a qualitative attribute that is threaded throughout the universe. On this planet that diversity could be observed everywhere you turn. From the multitude of different colors of birds, fish, plants and various different kinds of animals to the different types of and colors of trees, fruits, vegetables and insects.

What has blinded mankind with his intelligence and splendor as a miraculous creation of God, what has blinded us to where we fail to see, failing to take note and acknowledge the potential that every human being possesses regardless of ethical background or geographical location of one’s birth.

Arrogance has not only blinded the human being, but it has caused him to become puffed up with pride, mislead him/her into thinking themselves to be something other than human, something more, something better. Is it a demi-god or is it God that one believes themselves to be?

I’m only human and the many shades of skin color is just a testament to God’s creative power and his ability to do what he wills. These shades are also a gift, giving one a variety to choose from in terms of one’s preference when it comes to selecting and/or choosing a mate, partner, friend, etc. …because there are multiple layers of attraction and ones skin color may in fact be just one of the things that attracts the eye or attention of the opposite sex.

I am only human but when I look at things with spiritual vision from a divine perspective or through the eyes of God I see a humbled creature who needs the same necessities of life to support, sustain, and maintain his existence as every other living, breathing organism on this planet. The human being cannot cause the sun to rise in its place of setting. I am only human. The human being is subject to the same laws that govern this planet as every other creature.

In the Holy Qur’an Surah 96 verse 2 (96:2) God says that “he create man from Alaq which means a clot of congealed blood or; a leech or; that which clings. Here God is describing and reminding mankind of his lowly beginnings so that he may reflect on God’s power and give praise and thanks to him. This verse also points to the pre-developmental stages that all human beings undergo as they begin to forming the womb of the woman.

Once the perm fuses with the ovum (egg) immediately the process of forming an embryo is initiate where it will lodge itself within the lining of the uteri wall of the woman where it will cling
and attach, while the placenta is formed and through the blood which carries the nutrients via
the placenta, this becomes the vehicle by which the fetus is nurtured and receives its
nourishment to sustain its life.

When we reflect on our lowly beginning it should humble us and help us to become more
grateful towards our creator for the blessings and many bounties he’s bestowed on us. Instead
we become arrogant, believing ourselves to be better than another based on status, wealth and
all material gain and superficial things. Blind to the fact and failing to see that in the process of
our creation in bringing us into this world is the same for all of humanity, placing no one above
anyone else. The different shades of skin color, the many textures of hair and the multitude or
diversity in eye color is a testament to the creator’s power.

In conclusion: There’s one last verse I wish to share that puts all of humanity on equal footing
and humbles us. In the Holy Qur’an God asks a question: “He says: If I were to cease in
upholding the heavens and the earth, who else but he could do it.”

This impossible feat that was asked of the approximately 7 billion human beings on the planet
could not be carried out. Collectively we will exhaust all manpower and resources and still would
never come close to accomplishing this. This humbles the mind and spirit of man/woman upon
deep reflection. Who will we call upon if we attempted to or ever needed to uphold the heavens
and the earth…will we call FEMA, NATO, NASA, The European Union, the United Nations, US
Intelligence, Israeli Intelligence, Prime Ministers, Presidents, Ayatollah, Chinese Ambassador.
Who is up for the task and capable of carrying it out. Who are we going to call community
leaders, civil rights activists, the Pope, a priest, Iman or Jewish Rabbi. Who? Black Power,
White Power.

We are rendered powerless by this verse and question, which humbles us to our very humanity
that’s dependent on one who is mighty in power. When God addresses us he doesn’t say White
man or Black man, rather he addresses us collectively, making us a single entity by saying “O
mankind be dutiful to your guardian Lord who created man and from him he created his mate
and from them two he created many men and many women, so do not sever the ties of kinship
for God is ever a watcher over you.”

I’m only human. We are only human.
Reflections on Liberty
Michael

What does it mean to be free, live free and to liberate ourselves from self-imposed prisons that restrict us as we tread upon our evolutionary path of development.

In one of my poems entitled “Liberty,” I quote a verse that says: “What about the invisible chains some have yet to break, that prevent thee from being all they can be.” In another part of this same poem and I quote: “knowledge is the key, to break free, of the psychological chains, that’s help to enslave me”...Knowledge is a key that could be a determining factor that could decide one’s fate, and in this delicate balance lies success or failure, wealth or poverty, freedom or slavery, and life or death.

For example, our perception governs our reality and that perception is predicated upon knowledge and belief. What we know or don’t know will be a determining factor on how we choose to act in any given situation. It’s been said that if you want to control a people then control their sources of information and you can control their destiny.

Ignorance or the lack of knowledge is the equivalent of being in darkness, thereby restricting one’s capability and thus limiting your opportunities for advancement and success and/or survival.

There are many forms of slavery and the worst of them all is mental slavery or mental imprisonment. People are imprisoned inside their own mind, alienated from their own humanity. If we lack knowledge we become dependent on those who possess knowledge and the possessors of esoteric knowledge can play the role of self-proclaimed masters of the universe or supermen. This reliability from lack of knowledge could handicap a nation.

What is belief? Belief is nothing more than a thought one continues to think and which acts as a filter which shapes the way we see the world, thus determining how he or she will act in that world.

By gaining knowledge of ourselves and the world in which we live enables us to evolve and advance, thereby assuring the survival of our species, which ultimately has contributed to mankind’s evolution on this planet.

The superior knowledge that we’ve gained as it relates to our spiritual selves and the ability to manipulate the forces of nature has allowed us to establish comfortable and safe living quarters to protect us from these same elements in nature, such as cold, heat, wind and rain, as well as fire. If we were deprived of such knowledge and understanding it would have made our living conditions much harsher and in some cases lessen our chances for survival and success.

This brings me to a most important point. Mental chains are nothing more than self-defeating ideas and limiting belief and understanding about oneself and the world in which we live.
Our own self-image and self-identity is very important. What we think and believe about ourselves is what we become. Knowing and believing you are great will propel you to do great things…the opposite holds true as well. If you have low expectations of yourself or value yourself too low, the fruits of your toil will yield little or low grade production and you will only accomplish very little.

The weight and restraint of the invisible chains (i.e. self-defeating and limited ideas about oneself) will begin to weigh heavy on you, hindering you in multiple ways, paralyzing your initiative. You make the bed that you would have to lie in. The British Prime Minister and writer Benjamin Disraeli said: “Men are not the creatures of circumstances; circumstances are the creatures of men.”

We must and can rise above our current plight, whatever it may be, so that we may “break free of the psychological chains that’s help to enslave me.” “Knowledge is the key.” It is said that “man can never rise above his level of thought,” so therefore he or she must busy him or herself with the task of elevating one’s thinking which knowledge and the pursuit thereof will do."
1446 Newton Street NW, set in the heart of mid-town D.C. 1978. I was 5 years old, stuck with nothing to do on a beautiful, hot summer day. It is 12 something in the afternoon. Why couldn’t I be with my father like Pri and Rob? Yet here I am sitting on our front porch, throwing marbles at our tent and seeing how far they could bounce onto the sidewalk. I couldn’t stand being the only male home around females. It’s not that I didn’t like them, they are my family and I love them. It’s just different. I can’t have the fun with Pri and Rob that I would have with Anya and Marnice. Just as I can’t have the time I would with my uncles than I would with my mother or aunts. With males, males seem like they could follow any thought that comes to mind and don’t have to worry about getting in trouble. It’s just too many worries with females. There has got to be something for me to do. So many things come to mind, however they are not the same doing them alone. Pri, Rob, and I are a team like on TV. Larry, Carly, and Moe. While deep in thought throwing my marbles, my disappointment must have made me strong. I was snapped to by the sound of my marbles hitting a car. People close by all turned and looked to see where the sound came from. No one noticed me on the front porch. Mr. Joe two doors down was steering right at me.

“Uh oh! I have to go.”

I broke into the house scared. “Man, I am about to get a beatin’. Nah, I’m going out back, I’ll say I was in the treehouse. It wasn’t me.” I thought to myself.

“Boy why are you running in this house?” My Auntie yelled out.

I didn’t pay her no mind and kept running. I hid up in the treehouse for a while and no one called looking for me. I felt safe, so I came down. I couldn’t help but to keep thinking that a knock was going to come to the door. As soon as I walked into the backdoor, my lil heart dropped.

“Boy what is your lil sneaky ass out there doing?” my Aunt Birdie called out.

I jump, then freeze in my tracks.

“Nothing” was my response.

My look and actions must have said different.

“Boy you lying I see it all in your damn face.”

“Huh?” I said.

“Boy if you ‘huh’ you can hear.”

“Could I have some food?”

Boy you didn’t eat nothing?

“No, I’m hungry.”

“Where is your mother?”

I just shook my shoulders. I ate, and even though I just lied, I was actually hungry.

“Run upstairs and ask your grandmother and grandfather if they’re hungry too.”

“Okay.”
I took off. I spotted a large figure approaching the front door right as I turned the corner into the hall.

I thought, “Oh, I know he was coming to tell. I’m about to get a beating.”

The door swung open; the sun beamed in around the giant.

“Nephew I hear as the figure became clear. What are you up to, punk?” my Uncle leered.

I became overwhelmed with joy. Yeah, I know uncle isn’t going to leave me if he leaves.

I laughed as I said, “You’re a punk.” My strive was slowly building up.

“What?” he said jumping towards me.

I just knew I was fast, he was just too big. By the time I ran up three steps, with one hand he snatched me in the air. He pinned me to the wall with one hand and went for my body with the other. The punches were playful yet hurtful as always. I was used to them. I tried swinging back but my arms were too small. I could only hit his arm. I couldn’t do anything really but take his punches.

I tried lying to get myself free, “Birdie told me to go do something, you’re going to get me in trouble.”

“I’ll beat her up like I’m doing you if she says something!”

Shoot, that didn’t work.

“You’re cheating, you’re cheating!”

He laughed at me and said, “There’s no such thing as cheating in fighting. Everything goes. And if you can’t beat someone with your hand, pick up something.”

I don’t know if he understands the power his words carry with me.

“You got that?” He asked as he gave me a few more punches.

The last blow was hard and knocked the out of my lil soul. He walked off to the kitchen, leaving me there trying my best to catch my breath. I can’t wait to get bigger. After gathering myself, I run up to my grandparents’ room.

“Granny! Grandad!” I called out, stepping into their room.

Grandad turned around and just looked at me. Though he never said much, everyone in the family feared him. Well, except for Granny.

“Yeah baby?” Granny cooed.

“Aunt Birdie asked if y’all wanted something to eat.”

“Tell her to bag me some lunch to take with me.” Grandad replied.

“Tell her yeah and make me a fresh pot of coffee.” Granny said.

“Okay” I answered and left.

I told Aunt Birdie as they told me. My mind was wandering. I started making my way through the house. No, no, please no. I wasn’t gone that long. Man, what am I going to do now? When I went back into the kitchen I see the basement door is now open.

“Oh, that’s where you went!” Cowboy was grabbing a drink from the fridge, looking like he was about to leave.
When he turned, my face must have been saying all I was thinking. He said, “Nephew, get you something to go, you with me today.” I got a Capri Sun and was ready.
Monsters
Bryan’s Story

I wake up, looking behind myself and to my sides thinking that the monsters were still in pursuit of me. They were not, and I was safe within the confines of my home. Thank Goodness, because I thought they were going to capture me again! Today was a normal day for the most part, with the exception of this weird feeling I was having in my belly which, at first, I thought was me having to use the bathroom. It wasn’t that, it was something else. I tried to shake off the uneasy feeling and go into the bathroom, running some warm water in the tub. I shaved and then took a nice long bath. When I was done, I got dressed for the day and it was then that I saw a notice on my countertop. I pull out the letter inside.

“Oh shoot!” I can’t believe it, I forgot I had a court date this morning at 10:00am! Maybe the monsters chasing me so much last night had helped, because I had awaken three hours earlier than usual, and it was now only six in the morning. While I was in the kitchen making my breakfast, I looked out the window like I do every morning, but I noticed something different today. The Pepsi truck and the water trucks were just parked outside like there were businesses near, but there weren’t any stores for blocks! Were the monsters coming for me again? That uneasy feeling came back and suddenly I had to use the bathroom again. Once I had finished, I was ready to go to court. I asked my wife to look outside and tell me what she thought about the trucks and she replied, “You are tripping, that is just paranoia you’re having.” I simply replied back, “You have never been captured by the monsters so you can’t say paranoia, now precaution maybe, but you can’t know how it is to be in the grasp of such a ugly creature.”

As we leave the house, I can see movement in the trucks, and it’s as if a still picture came to life; as soon as I stepped on my front porch, the street filled up immediately with cars, and the sky was occupied by helicopters. Out of nowhere the monsters were here, and there was nothing I could do about it.
Little Brother, do you really believe there’s a Santa Claus? Why would you ask me something so silly Mac... Because our cousin Tim told me that all our gifts came from Mom and Dad, and if we stayed up late enough and act like we’re sleeping we would see them putting the gifts under the tree! So what are we going to do? And if there really isn’t a Santa Claus should we tell our baby sisters?

I don’t to spoil Christmas for them. What really bothers me though is the deception. What does “deception” mean Mac? In this matter, it’s Mom and Dad causing us to believe in something that isn’t true. They love us, so why would they do that? I’m not sure, but I’m sure they have a good reason and we’re going to find out tomorrow.

I don’t want to grow up if being a parent is going to be so difficult. They teach us to never steal, and never lie so I’m confused as to why they would trick us. Which now has me wondering what else isn’t true...do you see where I’m going big brother? I think better in the dark, turn off the lamp and let’s think about this a little more ok... First of all, do we want to question them about this?

Mac I’m only 8 years old and you’re 9, we were taught to live with certain principles and never go against them so where does deception fit into this lesson? You’re very precious little brother and I’m thrilled that you’re always asking questions when things aren’t clear. Before I forget please explain to me what the word means.

I got you little brother...it means to be exceptionally early in development. Now do we proceed without upsetting Mom and Dad, or should we just pretend we’re excited that Santa brought us all the presents?

I’m sorry Mac but pretending would only make me feel like a fraud. I have a better idea, let’s put ourselves in their shoes for a minute. If we had children would we deprive them the joy and happiness of Christmas and waiting on Santa Claus? I can still remember writing letters to Santa and leaving cookies and milk on the table, and waking up early without brushing my teeth just to see what Santa left. Those memories will last a lifetime! I suggest we go along with the charade until after the holiday so our little sisters can fully enjoy the experience, then we have a sit down with Mom and Dad.

Hopefully in their eyes they’ll see growth and be proud of us for the way we handled the situation. But guess what’s the real punchline? Being that you’re the oldest by 15 months means that you should be the vocal leader here. I’ll support you with enough nods and smiles from the sidelines to solidify my agreeing to all and everything you’re saying!

I can’t believe you tried me like that. Rest assure, that’s not going to happen because we both will do this together. Now turn the lamp off and let’s go to sleep. Good night little brother, and remember who loves you.

I love you too Big brother... Good night.

B. Palmer
A True Love Story for Mary
B. Palmer

The score is tied up, (72-72) with just 2 minutes left when I notice one of the cheerleaders for Ballou High School glancing my way, I’m so tired that I can’t appreciate her beauty. This game is too important, we would solidify home-court advantage throughout the playoffs with the win. We go up 4 and never relinquish the lead. After the win and shaking hands with the opposing players, I introduce myself to the sexy bow-legged vixen.

With D.C. only having a little more than 500,000 people, it wasn’t difficult to inquire about her character. I don’t know what it was, but Roz captivated me, and I wanted more. After a couple of months of dating I was tired of the cat and mouse games she was playing. I gave her an ultimatum and she promised the wait would be worth it and something I’ll cherish for a lifetime. The kiss I received that night fueled my desire for her and extended the relationship. I was falling (in love) for the first time and she consumed my every thought and dream. The following weekend we went to see Patti Le Belle and afterwards suggested we get a room. I couldn’t believe my ears and I damn sure wasn’t going to ask her if she was sure.

I guess she know the power of her sweet nectar and wanted to be certain I was worthy of her and the magic she possessed. She had me doing things I swore I would never consider doing. Today we laugh about this. We spent (everyday) visiting the museums, zoo, parks, memorials or shopping in Georgetown, and spending each and every night together. Two months later she tells me she’s pregnant and I feel like the luckiest guy alive. I rented and apartment on the 2800 block of Pennsylvania Ave and told her to furnish it to her liking!

I didn’t think there was a better feeling in which could compare to the love we shared! Witnessing my son enter this world in the operating room on March 25th, 1981 was an exception and quite a tearful moment! I was so proud being the husband and father I was and wanted the world to know of our happiness.

Even though I had a great paying job, I had an affinity to hustle which allowed us to live an extravagant lifestyle. Being an athlete contributed to Roz maintaining her figure after the pregnancy and she was more beautiful than ever. I couldn’t get enough of her and refused to share her with anyone besides our son. A love beyond words!

After we enrolled in the Brookwine Business Institute my mother agrees to babysit for us. Everything in my life was falling into place, until the police knock down my door. 6 months into my incarceration I get the shock of my life, which is an understatement in describing the pain I felt. Playing around on the phone one night pretending to be someone else I got the shock of my life. When all was revealed she admitted to going on a date with the same mailman that had been delivering my letters. It felt like all the air had left my lungs and I couldn’t stop the tears from flowing. She came down to visit the following day and explained how she had only been on a couple of dates but there was no reasoning for my heart. I removed my wedding rings and asked her not to return, explaining my family would bring my son to visit. It seemed like the right thing to do, but my heart was torn, and I was miserable because I still loved her. Crazy huh? For
the next 18 months she consumed my thoughts, my other half was missing. Too stubborn to forgive!

I made parole the next summer of 1984 and the mere sight of her drove me insane, I wanted the love I was fortunate enough to experience. The picnics, parties and family gatherings were pretty awkward because I would do my best to distance myself while secretly eyeing her. I know it sounds crazy, but the love I still harbored for this woman was spellbinding and foreign. I would intentionally bring women with me when I picked my son up, now I see how out of control my love made me. But I wasn't alone with the mind games because on many occasions she would answer the door half-dressed or come out with only a towel wrapped around her and smile. With every encounter I was getting weaker and weaker and we both knew it. The mere thought of someone physically touching her induced crazy feelings within.

We attended a wedding celebration together because two of our closest friends required our assistance. Surprisingly we ended up sharing a room and till this day I believe it was staged and a concentrated effort by many. I knew in my heart that if I ever was to even allow myself to kiss her that (all) the buried feelings of love would resurface. Yet, my inner feelings and desire for the only love of my life took center stage and we made passionate love, like our lives depended on it. We held each other for hours and promised to never allow anything or anyone to come between our happiness. The following weekend we took our second honeymoon together and the world seemed so much brighter in every aspect. Our son wouldn't stop smiling, our parents and friends were also full of joy and pleased with the reunion.

Love hurts at times, but it’s also the greatest gift I’ve ever known…

Sincerely Yours,
B. Palmer
The Coloring Box

When opening up the coloring box I ask that you keep an open mind, and use the colors with care. Every color has a story. Also every color is beautiful. Some of us may find some colors better on the eyes then other; But when bleded right they can create a masterpiece.

So many of us seeks justice when it comes to being an American with out a true understanding of it. Most of us don't know that "seeking justice is always a gamble; Because justice don't exist in nature. Just the use of force, backed by self-righteous judgment". So that don't make justice. Right. However I'm just a color in the box.

As a color in this box my understand on life is different then most. Some will understand, while I look to help others understand. There is a color wheel we use in this box called America. The wheel go's from darkest to lightest with only five colors Black, Red, Brown, Yellow, and White in that order. So I will give you some insight on my home. Starting from the oldest to the youngest.

Black (‘Blak\ adj [ME Blak, FR OE Blaec; akin to OHG blah black, and prob. To L Flagrare to burn, GK phlegein) (Bef 12c) ¹ very dark in color. Having dark skin, hair, and eyes. Of or relating to any of various population groups having dark pigmentation of the skin. ² Relating to the Afro-American people or their culture. Reflecting or transmitting little or no light. ³ The achromatic color of least lightness characteristically perceived to belong to objects that neither reflect nor transmit light. Compare RED.

If your not Black you could not truly understand what it is to be Black. The oldest color in the box making it the first. However being the oldest or first do not mean respect. Before this beautiful color made it way inside this box called America it belonged to the biggest box in the coloring world “Africa”. Shiped here as slaves that later got the name African-americans, Afro-Amercican, or just Black, in (1856). What so many don't know about this color is it's the only one in the box that have never been nationalized. All that mean is the box don't see Black like it see the other colors here. Black has yet to see or understand how powerful it could be. Black can change any color Black but. You can't get a color to change Black. They made the one drop rule because of Black. Witch mean if Black is mix with any other color then that color has now became Black. That's not my Rule it the way of the box. Now moving up the color wheel.

Red (‘Red \ adj, Redder,; reddest [ME, FR, OE: Read; Akin to OHG: rôt red(L: Ruber, rufus. GK: erytheos) (Bef 12c). ¹ Being or havin skin of a coppery hue. The condition of showing a loss – usu. Used with the <in the ~>; compare Black.
Unlike Black that was shipped to this box. There was an aboriginal color that was here in the Western hemisphere before the box got here. However the respect for Red is just a little better then that of the Black. Today Red is called the American Indian a name that was first used in (1732) in the (14c) A Belief held by Columbus that the land he discovered were part of Asia. So they got the name Indian from that day on. The word Indi means dark so now you should understand why they compare RED to Black and Black to Red.
Reflections on “A Small Needful Fact,” Or, What helps you breathe?

A Small Needful Fact
Ross Gay

Is that Eric Garner worked for some time for the Parks and Rec. Horticultural Department, which means, perhaps, that with his very large hands, perhaps, in all likelihood, he put gently into the earth some plants which, most likely, some of them, in all likelihood, continue to grow, continue to do what such plants do, like house and feed small and necessary creatures, like being pleasant to touch and smell, like converting sunlight into food, like making it easier for us to breathe.

What helps you breathe?

“Feelings of Love… Memories…”

“The thought of getting home to those I Love and Need to care for.” —Ricardo

“Nature! I would have to say that Allah’s creation helps me breathe. Pleasant thoughts about people, places and things, helps me breathe. Survival helps me breathe.”—Kevin B.

“Air in the form of ‘hope’ created by the love and undying support of my family and friends, along with my unbreakable spirit. (I joked at first and said: ‘Air Mother-fucker’)”—Maurice

“As I sit here on the shoulders of time thinking about ‘What helps me breathe?’—mental images of my wife comes to mind! Her radiant smile that says… ‘I love you,’ her tender touches that reminds me how special I am; and that happy look in her eyes that sees the best in me—are all elements that make up the oxygen in the air I breathe…and it feels so right.”—Antonio Desby

“When I eat dry lucky charms and drop one of the marshmallows on the floor sometimes, I question why I woke up today. In a joking manner. On a serious tone the thoughts of everything I plan to do for my daughter helps me breathe. The luxury of wiping my greasy chicken fingers on a piece of bread like a napkin helps me breathe. You know what really helps me breathe? …being able to listen to someone else’s thoughts.”—Antoine Beach

“What helps me breathe?
Top 5…
1) Building positive bonds with other people.
2) Making others laugh.
3) Getting fulfillment from others who read my books and really enjoy them.
4) Helping others.
5) Last but not least, FOOD!!"

“The power of change. Dreams of hope of life. Uncaged and free. Love of understanding, but understanding the rights and wrongs of the breath of life. Hope of my future lets me breathe life.”

“What makes each of my breaths I take easier and fresher is the love of my life. She makes me feel vibrant and alive. I love her and I thank God for the fresh air I breathe and for my awesome girlfriend. Both are very important parts of my life.”—Steven Bruce

“What helps me breathe is the will of Allah. From the womb of a mother unto the milk that I suckled. The nurturing of a family pact. The excepting the life skills that ere taught to survive on one’s own. To live life without looking back, but yet learning from my mistakes. Being able to know, comprehend, and reciprocate the love that was placed inside of myself lets me breathe.”—Marquette Murchette

“What helps me breathe is my family, love, and just being able to live my life for the betterment of others. Life is precious and I am grateful for every day I awake and breathe another breath of life.”—Bush

“Knowing that ‘Real Queens’ know how to keep a ‘King’ in check…”—Jonathan Riggins

“P.S. What makes me breathe also is the fact that my voice is not an echo.”

“An unwavering, unbreakable faith in my inner ability. Knowledge of self. My constantly evolving understanding of the Principles that govern this world and universe, regardless of how the customs of men change. My family, my friends.”—Jonas
Fragments

“Dreams are dreams, wishes are wishes. I give God all the praise and glory for creating you so precious.” Steven

“Up never down, blessed never stress, feel like a billion bucks, look at least like a million.” Steven

From April 2017 Interactive Forum

What can the group agree on?
At one time we have all detached from reality; we have to do it to survive. It’s not possible to not detach from reality.

What does the group disagree on?
Whether or not children have a different reality

April 11, 2018

“Some kids have grass to play in, some kids have concrete.” Rick

“You have bullets, I have guns--they don’t work together, but you could adapt or I could adapt.” Rick

In response to glass ceilings: “Sometimes you need to find another elevator.”

“Use your jail face.” Antoine

December 2017

“Let me take my coat off, this is weird.”

“Anyone want this banana?”

November 1, 2017

“What would happen if we got nickel and dimed?”

“What does it mean to respect a lifestyle?”
Reflections: Holding onto Sand

THE IMPACT THAT THE BOOK CLUB HAS HAD ON ME IS ENTIRELY TOO PROFOUND TO BE PUT IN WORDS, BUT IN MY BEST ATTEMPT TO DO SO I’D HAVE TO SAY--”IT HAS BREATHED NEW LIFE DEEP WITHIN THE RECESSES OF MY SOUL.” I FEEL ALIVE IN WAYS I HAVEN’T EXPERIENCE IN A LONG TIME. BEING PART OF THE BOOK CLUB HAS ENAMORED ME TO THINK BEYOND THE SCOPE OF MY LIMITED UNDERSTANDING AND REALITY--AND DISCOVER THE BEAUTY OF OTHER’S SHARED PERSPECTIVES, OPINIONS, AND SOUND WISDOM. I’VE BEEN “MENTALLY, EMOTIONALLY, AND SPIRITUALLY EMPOWERED--” AND IT FEELS RIGHT.

— Antonio

The experience of a book club inside this institutional environment granted me an opportunity to gain a more perspective in understanding humanization. I was able to express my thoughts productively with the help of the volunteers who dedicated themselves to helping us come up with ideas to extend our creative talents through writings. I appreciate this book club more than the programs offered here to be honest, and I hope that it will remain an opportunity in the institutional environment.

— Antoine

The book-club was my platform to be heard, read, and more importantly; valued for the individual opinion I offer in discussions.

— James

Being a part of the book club has and continues to be therapeutic in more ways than one. It has allowed me to grow and open up, it also taught me about the effectiveness of group discussions, learning and open dialogue on diverse topics and I don’t think I ca find something as unique and equally mentally stimulating and intellectually challenging as the book club.

— Michael

WEALTH!
This is a some up of my life, and an awesome way to expose it. Its called WEALTH! So, this thing called WEALTH creates and holds on to things for a long time throughout our (my) journey of life. Most importantly the things that matter and allows us to grow. With that being said the book club is one of those things that I feel is helpful to that growth.

— Steven
The book club allows, for me, a degree of normalcy that I don’t otherwise get to experience on a regular basis. When we read these books and/or have a writing workshop, the conversations are always so amazing. All the different ideas and perspectives expressed in a respectful way make for a very positive learning experience. But more importantly, it also creates this safe space where everyone is comfortable and relaxed. These 2 book club sessions each month are my highlights and I’d never miss one. The benefits of this book club are too many to count, but they’ve definitely been a huge part of my growth and development here at F.C.I.Hazelton.
— Jonas

The Book Club is beyond words, the magnitude is monumental in the peace and camaraderie I experienced during those months. Also the effort cause me to share and reach out to others and encourage them to read. I’ve always enjoyed reading, and no I find myself engaged daily and looking forward to our next upcoming reading. Thanks to everyone involved and hopefully we together can enhance the next generation to read.
— Palmer

THIS SEMESTER OF THE BOOK CLUB HAS BEEN A HUGE EYE-OPENER IN A WAY WHERE I LEARNED SO MUCH MORE THAN WHAT I’M USED TO DEALING WITH AND READING ABOUT. THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN THE BOOK CLUB GROUP HAS GIVEN ME INSPIRATION, ENCOURAGEMENT, AND MOTIVATION TO GET OTHER PEOPLE READING THE MATERIALS THAT I’VE READ IN THE BOOK CLUB. ALL THE INSTRUCTORS HAVE BEEN SUPER HELPERS IN THE PROCESS OF LEARNING AND I’M VERY GRATEFUL TO BE A PARTICIPANT IN SUCH AN IMPACTFUL PROGRAM. I THINK I HAVE BECOME A BETTER LEARNER, A BETTER READER, A BETTER ANALYZER, AND A MUCH MORE BETTER PERSON WHO WILL USE ALL I’VE LEARNED TO BECOME A BETTER AUTHOR IN MY PURSUIT FOR CHANGE...
— Nate

This bookclub has been a very good experience for me. I was never a reader of many books. Then the types of books I read was limited. Being a part of this bookclub opened my eyes to different things and broadened my outlook on a lot of things and people. Being inside and having these types of resources or outlets can be the difference that makes someone stay here a lot easier.
— Adrian

The F.C.I. Hazelton: Book Club. This book club has challenged me to have deeper perception into everything that I read or write. The friendships that are built by having in-depth, intellectual
conversations about books we’ve read together is amazing! I have found comfort now in reading were as before it was for study only. The family feeling we created in this book club has made me a stronger writer and also an “expert” analysts on every I read.
— Bryan

The club to me is something super beautiful and is very much needed it help those like myself want to read write and better myself. I look forward to helping others all because I see that there are those who want to help me. The book club member help me see that there is more to life than those who don’t know us might think. This club has helped me open my mind to allot of things that I would not have ever looked at.
— Anonymous

Books are avenues to the soul of others. They open us up to experience different lives--and in experiencing different lives, we understand those lives, connect to those lives, and feel compassion for those lives.

A book club, such as this, is a communal engagement with our humanity. Through a novel, a poem, a play, a short story, we see each other--and ourselves--in unexpected and profound ways.

Reading and talking about books has always brought people together and brought up thought-provoking questions about humanity--what better place, where greater a need for such conversations than inside concrete walls?
— Mark

This book club has added something in my life and heart that will never chip away. It's taught me that I used to put limitations on compassion and humanity. It destroyed those limitations. It forever change how I see Harper Lee’s To Kill A Mockingbird, and the criminal justice system, and race in the United States. It forced me to face the fact that there are good, smart, talented writers locked in places where they need opportunities like this--where they need tools and books and feedback to tell their stories. It cemented those stories in my mind. I'm desperately glad I had the chance to hear them.
— Lydia

Simply put, this experience, getting to know these men on fire, has changed my life—my worldviews, my pedagogy, my reactions to the characters I meet in fiction, the ways I talk to my children, and the ways I value life, freedom, and choice. I carry the voices and stories of my friends with me outside of these walls. Every meeting, I hope that we arrive to one less person in our group—that a man has gone home, though, selfishly, I also dread the empty chairs of my
friends. So many clichés apply here—I learn more than I teach; I take more than I give. I am so grateful.
—Valerie

The book club has been amazing for me—as a teacher, a writer, and as a person on this planet. I have learned to think more broadly and compassionately. I love especially the diverse perspectives generated by our readings—the way one person can hear a word or phrase so differently, and in explaining that difference, open up all of our minds. The greatest gift to me has been witnessing the kindness and generosity that members of the book club extend to one another. You don’t see that everywhere. I see it at Hazelton all the time.

One last thought—I love that there is both humor and urgency in our discussions. Time is precious—and ours.
—Katy

I would move mountains--and metaphorically have--to come to book club. My work with the men at Hazelton shaped the final year of my PhD candidacy, a year that was full, painful, exhausting, and always shifting. No matter how I felt about my work outside, inside I could smile, breathe, and talk about books, which became (ironically) a luxury for an English major. The men are passionate, thoughtful, kind, and above all, the type of intellectuals every scholar hopes to work with as a teacher. However, book club is not just about books--it’s about sharing thoughts, ideas, and feelings, and because of that we have created a community; really a family of sorts.

I cannot imagine not coming to FCI every other Wednesday, and refuse to think about a time when that may not be my reality. For now I treat the book club not just as a class, but as a sacred space worthy of every moment of my attention and time.
—Yvonne

From the very first meeting with these brilliant men, a beautiful, living, breathing circle of energy was born. No matter the book, no matter the topic, our friends on the inside come to our group fully engaged, and eager to share insight. Our conversations go deep, and each and every voice offers perspective that bring forth vision, curiosity and a fuller understanding not just of literature and writing, but of ourselves. I liken this circle to the Dead Poet’s Society, beautifully portrayed in the film that moved so many. Magic unfolds here, and our collective conscious knows no walls. It is my honor and pleasure to be a part of this group, an experience I will treasure always.
—Elissa
Dear Family:

As I sit here on the shoulders of time reflecting back on our last “Book Club” gathering, there’s a hemorrhage of emotions flooding my soul. To say I am highly disappointed by the daunting news that the umbilical cord to our lifeline of “humanization” is being prematurely severed, is indeed an understatement. I am that (times three), because the Book Club was/is and has become an essential element to my social growth and development – while inside the belly of this beast (prison!).

The establishment of the Book Club (dating back to 2016) was like a breath of fresh air to me…expanding the lungs of my open-mindedness to new cultures, belief systems, perspectives, ideas, and honest, meaningful intellectual relationships – which I consider to be freedom in motion. I remember the very first session we had just like it were yesterday. Initially I had butterflies in my stomach because I really didn’t know what to expect, because my notion of a Book Club (back then) was something that “only” women did. But boy was I wrong. I have since discovered that a Book Club is something that “human beings” do…People with extensive exploratory minds who simply enjoy taking long walks through the well-kept garden of other people’s minds.

It was an experience that had to be experienced, in order to experience an experience worth having! Like a symphony of harmonious sounds, collectively as well as individually, we became the lyrics to a song that meant something…stood for something…and cared about something more than just ourselves. Our song told the story of what humanization is virtually all about…A kaleidoscope of different colors, shapes, and sizes coming together as one race of people…only to discover that we actually have more in common than we thought. It’s amazing how effective and contagious change can be, when given the opportunity and room to grow.

Delia, Yvonne, Valerie, Elissa, Alex, and Paul, the contribution that each of you made in giving birth to this melody – was in no way in vain. No one, and I mean absolutely “NO ONE” – can undo or erase the success and human nexus that’s been accomplished through “our” Book Club, nor can it ever be duplicated!! So even though our time together has come to an abrupt end, “we, the lyrics to this beautiful song must continue singing in harmony.”

In closing, I want to say…”Thank You” to each of you for enamoring me to flap my wings a little harder, so that I may soar a whole lot higher. May the LORD’S peace and blessings be upon you now and forever more.

Sincerely,

Antonio (a.k.a. Emotional Poet)
When I think of the book club freedom is the first thing that comes to mind. It’s not every day that someone like myself gets to interact with those outside of the prison and gets treated like a human is born to be. As it stands I have 30 years, and at the age of 22 I was told that my probation officer had not been born yet. That was 10 years ago. I was told that there is no hope for me, and I was a waste of life from the same people that we suppose to call for help. There are things that I may not ever get to do in life but life could be worse. Knowing that no two days are alike I have always kept on fighting for myself.

Who says hard work don’t pay off. In 2017 I was blessed with the chance to be a part of the Appalachian Prison Book Project (APBP) volunteers who came inside the prison and expanded opportunities for men like myself. Giving me something to look forward to. Shining light in this dark place is more than I can ask for. Name’s I will never forget Elissa, Valerie, Yvonne, and Delia from being there from the first time I stepped in our classroom. Angels is an understatement when it comes to these beautiful ladies. To be seen for what you can do and not what you done is something so many wish for.

Rick

Reflections on our Last Day
Moe

I really don’t know how to clearly express my thoughts and feelings. Right now I’m at a point of confusion. Here we are, we got something started that's so amazing and life changing. Yet, it's being faded out for having such an effect on change lives for the better. Book club has truly blessed me with a different perspective on things in all aspects of life. I thank all of the outsiders for y’all support. And know if this is the end for book club at FCI Hazelton, know that it's because of y’all that I Maurice R. Gayles has transformed my life. I promise to forever move forward in life as a positive mentor to those that come behind me. And once you think you have heard the last of me, up I come. I really think my calling is to get out and do something about what is taking place behind these walls. I don’t speak much on it because I believe it unwise to reveal your vision on issues that could affect those in control. People seem to fear change, especially when that change affects their position of power. If there is one thing that should be clear to us, it’s: “power corrupts.” However, the main thing we should take from book club is love is truly the key. Once and when we all unite as one, regardless of our differences—skin, belief, perspectives, etc.—Respect is Love, Love is Respect. By simply showing you respect, even though we don’t share the same skin color, the same background, the same views and so on, that is me showing you love. True, there are different levels to love. However, that’s a whole other talk. Just think how much better would the world be if we display the togetherness and respect to each other on a worldly scale, just as we do in book club. “Change a mind, change the world.”