

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

# The Other Wes Moore

One Name, Two Fates

“Startling and revelatory . . . a rocketing real-life narrative” —*Baltimore Sun*

“A moving book . . . a call to arms.” —*Chicago Tribune*

A photograph of a young boy riding a bicycle on a residential street. The boy is wearing a white t-shirt and dark shorts. He is riding away from the camera, looking back over his shoulder. The street is paved and lined with trees and houses. A car is visible in the distance. The overall tone is warm and nostalgic.

Wes  
Moore

**The Other**

# **Wes Moore**

**ONE NAME, TWO FATES**

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For Mama Win, Mommy, Nikki, Shani, and Dawn

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the women who helped shape my journey to manhood

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## **Reader's Guide**

This is the story of two boys living in Baltimore with similar histories and an identical name: Wes Moore. One of us is free and has experienced things that he never even knew to dream about as a kid. The other will spend every day until his death behind bars for an armed robbery that left a police officer and father of five dead. The chilling truth is that his story could have been mine. The tragedy is that my story could have been his. Our stories are obviously specific to our two lives, but I hope they will illuminate the crucial inflection points in every life, the sudden moments of decision where our paths diverge and our fates are sealed. It's unsettling to know how little separates each of us from another life altogether.

In late 2000, the *Baltimore Sun* published a short article with the headline “Local Graduate Named Rhodes Scholar.” It was about me. As a senior at Johns Hopkins University, I received one of the most prestigious academic awards for students in the world. That fall I was moving to England to attend Oxford University on a full scholarship.

But that story had less of an impact on me than another series of articles in the *Sun* about an incident that happened just months before, a precisely planned jewelry store robbery gone terribly wrong. The store's security guard—an off-duty police officer named Bruce Prothero—was shot and killed after he pursued the armed men into the store's parking lot. A massive and highly publicized manhunt for the perpetrators ensued. Twelve days later it ended when the last two suspects were apprehended in a house in Philadelphia by a daunting phalanx of police and federal agents. The articles indicated that the shooter Richard Antonio Moore, would likely receive the death penalty. The sentence would be similarly severe for his younger brother, who was also arrested and charged. In an eerie coincidence, the younger brother's name was the same as mine.

Two years after I returned from Oxford, I was still thinking about the story. I couldn't let it go. If you'd asked me why, I couldn't have told you exactly. I was struck by the superficial similarities between us, of course: we'd grown up at the same time, on the same streets, with the same name. But so what? I didn't think of myself as a superstitious or conspiratorial person, the kind who'd obsess over a coincidence until it yielded meaning. But there were nights when I'd wake up in the small hours and find myself thinking of the other Wes Moore, conjuring his image as best I could, a man my age lying on a cot in a prison cell, burdened by regret, trying to sleep through another night surrounded by the walls he'd escape only at death. Sometimes in my imaginings, his face was mine.

There's a line at the opening of John Edgar Wideman's brilliant *Brothers and Keepers* about the day he found out his own brother was on the run from the police for an armed robbery: “The distance I'd put between my brother's world and mine suddenly collapsed. . . . Wherever he was, running for his life, he carried part of me with him.” But I didn't even *know* the other Wes Moore. Why did I feel this connection with him, why did I feel like he

“carried part of me with him” in that prison cell? I worried that I was just being melodramatic or narcissistic. But still, I couldn’t shake it. Finally, one day, I wrote him a simple letter introducing myself and explaining how I’d come to learn about his story. I struggled to explain the purpose of my letter and posed a series of naïve questions that had been running through my mind: Who are you? Do you see your brother? How do you feel about him? *How did this happen?* As soon as I mailed the letter, the crazy randomness of it all came flooding in on me. I was sure that I’d made a mistake, that I’d been self-indulgent and presumptuous and insulting, and that I’d never hear back from him.

A month later, I was surprised to find an envelope in my mailbox stamped with a postmark from the Jessup Correctional Institution in Maryland. He had written back.

“Greetings, Good Brother,” the letter started out:

I send salutations of peace and prayers and blessings and guidance to you for posing these questions, which I’m going to answer, Inshallah. With that, I will begin with the first question posed ...

This was the start of our correspondence, which has now gone on for years. At the beginning of our exchange of letters—which was later expanded by face-to-face visits at the prison—I was surprised to find just how much we did have in common, aside from our names, and how much our narratives intersected before they fatefully diverged. Learning the details of his story helped me understand my own life and choices, and I like to think that my story helped him understand his own a little more. But the real discovery was that our two stories together helped me to untangle some of the larger story of our generation of young men, boys who came of age during a historically chaotic and violent time and emerged to succeed and fail in unprecedented ways. After a few visits, without realizing it, I started working on this project in my mind, trying to figure out what lessons our stories could offer to the next wave of young men who found themselves at the same crossroads we’d encountered and unsure which path to follow.

Perhaps the most surprising thing I discovered was that through the stories we volleyed back and forth in letters and over the metal divider of the prison’s visiting room, Wes and I had indeed, as Wideman wrote, “collapsed the distance” between our worlds. We definitely have our disagreements—and Wes, it should never be forgotten, is in prison for his participation in a heinous crime. But even the worst decisions we make don’t necessarily remove us from the circle of humanity. Wes’s desire to participate in this book as a way to help others learn from his story and choose a different way is proof of that.

To write this book, I conducted hundreds of hours of interviews with Wes and his friends and family, as well as my friends and family. The stories you will read are rendered from my own memory and the best memories of those we grew up with, lived with, and learned from. I engaged in extensive historical research and interviewed teachers and drug dealers, police officers and lawyers, to make sure I got the facts—and the feel—right. Some names have been changed to protect people’s identities and the quiet lives they now choose to lead. A few characters are composites. But all of the stories are painstakingly real.

The book is broken up into eight chapters, corresponding to eight years that had a decisive impact on our respective lives. The three parts represent the three major phases in our coming of age. Opening each of these parts is a short snippet of conversation between Wes and me in the prison’s visitors’ room. It was very important to me that we return

again and again to that visitors' room, the in-between space where the inside and the outside meet. I don't want readers to ever forget the high stakes of these stories—and of all of our stories: that life and death, freedom and bondage, hang in the balance of every action we take.

The book also features a resource guide listing more than two hundred “Elevated Organizations” that young readers, their caregivers, and anyone who wants to help can use as a tool for creating positive change. One of the true joys of this project has been learning about and creating bonds with some of the organizations that are on the front lines of serving our nation's youth.

It is my sincere hope that this book does not come across as self-congratulatory or self-exculpatory. Most important, it is not meant in any way to provide excuses for the events of the fateful day February 7, 2000. Let me be clear. The only victims that day were Sergeant Bruce Prothero and his family. Rather, this book will use our two lives as a way of thinking about choices and accountability, not just for each of us as individuals but for all of us as a society. This book is meant to show how, for those of us who live in the most precarious places in this country, our destinies can be determined by a single stumble down the wrong path, or a tentative step down the right one.

This is our story.





# Fathers and Angels

Wes stared back at me after I'd asked my question, letting a moment pass and a smirk flicker across his face before responding.

"I really haven't thought too deeply about his impact on my life because, really, he didn't have one."

Wes leaned back in his seat and threw an even stare at me.

"Come on, man," I pressed on. "You don't think about how things would have been different if he'd been there? If he cared enough to be there?"

"No, I don't." The lower half of his face was shrouded by the long beard that he'd grown, an outward sign of the Islamic faith he'd adopted in prison. His eyes danced with bemusement. He was not moved by my emotional questioning. "Listen," he went on. "Your father wasn't there because he couldn't be, my father wasn't there because he chose not to be. We're going to mourn their absence in different ways."

This was one of our first visits. I had driven a half hour from my Baltimore home into the wooded hills of central Maryland to Jessup Correctional Institution to see Wes. Immediately upon entering the building, I was sternly questioned by an armed guard and searched to ensure I wasn't bringing in anything that could be passed on to Wes. Once I was cleared, another guard escorted me to a large room that reminded me of a public school cafeteria. This was the secured area where prisoners and their visitors came together. Armed guards systematically paced around the room. Long tables with low metal dividers separating the visitors from the visited were the only furnishings. The prisoners were marched in, dressed in orange or blue jumpsuits, or gray sweat suits with "DOC" emblazoned across the chests. The uniforms reinforced the myriad other signals around us: the prisoners were owned by the state. Lucky inmates were allowed to sit across regular tables from their loved ones. They could exchange an initial hug and then talk face-to-face. The rest had to talk to their families and friends through bulletproof glass using a telephone, visitor and prisoner connected by receivers they held tight to their ears.

Just as I was about to ask another question, Wes interrupted me.

"Let me ask you a question. You come here and ask me all these questions, but you haven't shared any of yourself up with me. So tell me, what impact did your father not being there have on your childhood?"

"I don't know—" I was about to say more when I realized that I didn't really have more to say.

"Do you miss him?" he asked me.

"Every day. All the time," I replied softly. I was having trouble finding my voice. It always amazed me how I could love so deeply, so intensely, someone I barely knew.

I was taught to remember, but never question. Wes was taught to forget, and never ask why. We learned our lessons well and were showing them off to a tee. We sat there, just a few feet from each other, both silent, pondering an absence.

Nikki and I would play this game: I would sit on the living room chair while Nikki deeply inhaled and then blew directly in my face, eliciting hysterical laughs on both sides. This was our ritual. It always ended with me jabbing playfully at her face. She'd run away and bait me to give chase. Most times before today I never came close to catching her. But today, I caught her and realized, like a dog chasing a car, I had no idea what to do. So, in the spirit of three-year-old boys everywhere who've run out of better ideas, I decided to punch her. Of course, my mother walked into the room right as I swung and connected.

The yell startled me, but her eyes are what I remember.

"Get up to your damn room" came my mother's command from the doorway. "I told you don't you ever put your hands on a woman!"

I looked up, confused, as she quickly closed the distance between us. My mother had what we called "Thomas hands," a tag derived from her maiden name: hands that hit so hard you had to be hit only once to know you never wanted to be hit again. The nickname began generations ago, but each generation took on the mantle of justifying it. Those hands were now reaching for me. Her eyes told me it was time to get moving.

I darted up the stairs, still unsure about what I'd done so terribly wrong. I headed to the bedroom I shared with my baby sister, Shani. Our room was tiny, barely big enough for my small bed and her crib. There was no place to hide. I was running in circles, frantic to find a way to conceal myself. And still trying to comprehend why I was in so much trouble. I couldn't even figure out the meaning of half the words my mother was using.

In a panic, I kicked the door shut behind me just as her voice reached the second floor. "And don't let me hear you slam that—" *Boom!* I stared for a moment at the closed door, knowing it would soon be flying open again. I sat in the middle of the room, next to my sister's empty crib, awaiting my fate.

Then, deliverance.

"Joy, you can't get on him like that." My father's baritone voice drifted up through the third floor. "He's only three. He doesn't even understand what he did wrong. Do you really think he knows what a woman beater is?"

My father was in the living room, ten feet from where the incident began. He was a very slender six foot two with a bushy mustache and a neatly shaped afro. It wasn't his style to yell. When he heard my mother's outburst, he rose from his chair, his eyes widening in confusion. My mother slowly reeled herself in. But she wasn't completely mollified.

"Wes, he needs to learn what is acceptable and what is not!" My father agreed, but with a gentle laugh, reminded her that cursing at a young boy wasn't the most effective way of

making a point. I was saved, for the moment.

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My first name, Westley, is my father's. I have two middle names, a compromise between my parents. My father loved the sound and meaning of *Watende*, a Shona word that means "revenge will not be sought," a concept that aligned with his gentle spirit. My mother objected. *Watende* sounded too big, too complicated for such a tiny baby. It wasn't until later in life that she understood why it was so important to my father that *Watende* be a part of me. Instead, she lobbied for Omari, which means "the highest." I'm not sure what was easier or less lofty about that name, but I was well into elementary school before I became comfortable spelling either.

My parents' debate continued downstairs, but their words faded. I went to the room's only window and looked out on the world. My older sister, Nikki, and I loved to look through the window as families arrived at the swap market across the street. Our home was on a busy street that sat right on the border of Maryland and Washington, D.C., stuck confusingly between two different municipal jurisdictions, a fact that would become very significant in the near future. I pulled back the thin diaphanous curtain that covered the windows and spotted my friend Ayana outside with her mother. She was half Iranian and half Italian, with long, dark hair and warm eyes that always fascinated me. They were light green, unlike the eyes of anyone else I knew, and they twinkled as if they held stars. I wanted to tap on the window to say hello as she walked past our house to the tenement building next door. But I was afraid of making more trouble for myself, so I just smiled.

On the dresser by the window sat a framed picture of me with Nikki. I sat on her lap with my arm wrapped around her neck, a goofy smile on my face. Nikki is seven years older, so in the picture she was nine and I was barely two. Colorful beads capped the braided tips of her hair, a style she shared with my mother, and large, black-framed eyeglasses covered half of her face.

Nikki's real name was Joy, like my mom's, but everyone called her Nikki. My mother was obsessed with the poet Nikki Giovanni, in love with her unabashed feminine strength and her reconciliation of love and revolution. I spent nearly every waking moment around Nikki, and I loved her dearly. But sibling relationships are often fraught with petty tortures. I hadn't wanted to hurt her. But I had.

At the time, I couldn't understand my mother's anger. I mean this wasn't really a woman who was punching. This was Nikki. She could take it. Years would pass before I understood how that blow connected to my mom's past.

My mother came to the United States at the age of three. She was born in Lowe River in the tiny parish of Trelawny, Jamaica, hours away from the tourist traps that line the coast. The swaths of deep brush and arable land made it great for farming but less appealing for honeymoons and hedonism. Lowe River was quiet, and remote, and it was home for my mother, her older brother Ralph, and my grandparents. My maternal great-grandfather Mas Fred, as he was known, would plant a coconut tree at his home in Mount Horeb, a neighboring area, for each of his kids and grandkids when they were born. My mom always bragged that hers was the tallest and strongest of the bunch. The land that Mas Fred and his

wife, Miss Ros, tended had been cared for by our ancestors for generations. And it was home for my mom until her parents earned enough money to bring the family to the States to fulfill my grandfather's dream of a theology degree from an American university.

When my mom first landed in the Bronx, she was just a small child, but she was a survivor and learned quickly. She studied the other kids at school like an anthropologist, trying desperately to fit in. She started with the way she spoke. She diligently listened to the radio from the time she was old enough to turn it on and mimicked what she heard. She'd always pull back enough in her interactions with her classmates to give herself room to quietly observe them, so that when she got home she could practice imitating their accents, their idiosyncrasies, their style. Words like *irie* became *cool*. *Constable* became *policeman*. *Easy-nu* became *chill out*. The melodic, swooping movement of her Jamaican patois was quickly replaced by the more stable cadences of American English. She jumped into the melting pot with both feet.

Joy Thomas entered American University in Washington, D.C., in 1968, a year when she and her adopted homeland were both experiencing volatile change—Vietnam, a series of assassinations, campus unrest, rioting that tore through the nation's cities, and an American president who no longer wanted the job. Joy herself was caught between loving the country that offered her and her family new opportunities and being frustrated with that country because it still made her feel like a second-class citizen.

At college, Joy quickly fell in with the OASATAU, the very long acronym for a very young group, the Organization of African and African-American Students at the American University. The OASATAU was rallying AU's black students into engagement with the national and international, and campus issues roiling around them. The battling organization elevated her consciousness beyond her assimilationist dreams and sparked a passion for justice and the good fight.

A charismatic AU junior named Bill was the treasurer of OASATAU, and two months after they met early in the exciting whirlwind of her freshman year, Joy was engaged to marry him. Despite the quick engagement, they waited two years to get married, by which time Joy was a junior and Bill a recent graduate looking for work. Marriage brought the sobering realities of life into focus. The truth was, they were both still trying to find their feet as adults and feeling a little in over their heads as a married couple.

As the love haze wore off, Joy began to see that the same qualities that had made Bill so attractive as a college romance—his free and rebellious spirit, his nearly paralyzing contempt for “the Man”—made him a completely unreliable husband. And she discovered that what she had foolishly thought of as his typical low-level recreational drug use was really something much worse. In a time of drug experimentation and excess, Bill was starting to look like a casualty.

As the years passed, Joy kept hoping that Bill's alcohol and drug use would fade. She was caught in a familiar trap for young women and girls—the fantasy that she alone could change her man. So she doubled down on the relationship. They had a child together. She hoped that would motivate Bill to make some changes. But his addiction just got worse, and the physical, mental, and emotional abuse he unleashed became more intense.

One night things came to a head. Bill came home and started to badger Joy about washing the dishes. His yelling threatened to wake up one-year-old Nikki, and Joy tried to shush him.

He kept yelling. He moved in on her. The two of them stood face-to-face, him yelling, her pleading with him in hushed tones to lower his voice.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and threw her down. She sprawled on the floor in her white T-shirt and blue AU sweatpants, stunned but not completely surprised by his explosive reaction. He wasn't done. He grabbed her by her T-shirt and hair, and started to drag her toward the kitchen. He hit her in the chest and stomach, trying to get her to move her arms, which were now defensively covering her head. Finally, she snapped. She screamed at him without fear of waking Nikki as he dragged her across the parquet floor. She kicked and scratched at his hands.

Bill was too strong, too determined, too high. Her head slammed against the doorframe as he finally dragged her body onto the kitchen's linoleum floor. He released her hair and her now-ripped T-shirt and once again ordered her to wash the dishes. He stood over her with a contemptuous scowl on his face. It could've been that look. Or it could've been the escalating abuse and the accumulated frustration at the chaotic life he was creating for her and her daughter. But something gave Joy the strength to pull herself up from the floor. On top of the counter was a wooden block that held all of the large, sharp knives in the kitchen. She pulled the biggest knife from its sheath and pointed the blade at his throat. Her voice was collected as she made her promise: "If you try that shit again, I will kill you."

Bill seemed to suddenly regain his sobriety. He backed out of the kitchen slowly, not taking his eyes from his wife's tear-drenched face. Her unrelenting stare. They didn't speak for the rest of the night. One month later, Joy and Nikki were packed up. Together, they left Bill for good.

My mom vowed to never let another man put his hands on her. She wouldn't tolerate it on others either.

My parents finished their conversation, and it was obvious that one of them was heading up to speak to me. I turned from the window and stood in the middle of the room, mentally running through my nonexistent options for escape.

Soon I could tell by the sound of the steps it was my father. His walk was slower, heavier, more deliberate. My mother tended to move up the stairs in a sprint. He lightly knocked on the door and slowly turned the knob. The door opened slightly, and he peeked in. His easy half smile, almost a look of innocent curiosity, assured me that, at least for now, the beating would wait.

"Hey, Main Man, do you mind if I come in?" I'm told that he had many terms of endearment for me, but Main Man is the one I remember. I didn't even look up but nodded slowly. He had to duck to clear the low doorway. He picked me up and, as he sat on the bed, placed me on his lap. As I sat there, all of my anxiety released. I could not have felt safer, more secure. He began to explain what I did wrong and why my mother was so angry. "Main Man, you just can't hit people, and particularly women. You must defend them, not fight them. Do you understand?"

I nodded, then asked, "Is Mommy mad at me?"

"No, Mommy loves you, like I love you, she just wants you to do the right thing."

My father and I sat talking for another five minutes before he led me downstairs to apologize to my sister, and my mother. With each tiny step I took with him, my whole heart

wrapped tighter around his middle finger. I tried to copy his walk, his expressions. I was his main man. He was my protector.

That is one of only two memories I have of my father.

The other was when I watched him die.

My dad was his parents' only son. Tall but not physically imposing, he dreamed of being on television—having a voice that made an impact. Armed with an insatiable desire to succeed—and aided by his natural gifts, which included a deeply resonant voice—he made his dream come true soon after finishing up at Bard College in 1971.

As a young reporter, he went to many corners of the country, following a story or, in many cases, following a job. After stints in North Carolina, New York, Florida, Virginia, California, and a handful of other states, he returned home to southern Maryland and started work at a job that would change his life. He finally had the chance to host his own public affairs show. And he'd hired a new writing assistant. Her name was Joy.

Their working relationship evolved quickly into courtship, then love. She appreciated the up-and-coming reporter and the professional partnership they shared. Wes was calm, reassuring, hardworking, and sober. In other words, the antithesis of Bill. Wes was intensely attracted to this short woman with a broad smile who mixed a steel backbone with Caribbean charm. And he loved Nikki. Despite her not being his own child, he forged a sincere friendship and, eventually, an unbreakable bond with Nikki. It all became official when my mother and father married in a small ceremony in Washington, D.C. I entered the world two years later.

On April 15, 1982, my father ended his radio news broadcast on WMAL, a stalwart in the Washington, D.C., market, with his traditional sign-off—"This is Wes Moore, thanks again, and we'll talk next time"—as the on-air light faded to black. His smile was hiding the fact that for the past twelve hours he'd been feeling ill. His every breath was a struggle.

He came home to the smell of his favorite meal, smothered lamb chops. It was almost midnight and we kids were already in bed, but my parents stayed up, sat together, and ate. That night he couldn't get to sleep. He tried taking Tylenol, hoping it would help his severe sore throat and fever, but the pill lodged in his throat, refusing to dissolve. At 7:00 A.M., he woke my mother to tell her he thought he should go to the hospital. He threw on a tattered blue flannel shirt and a pair of worn blue jeans. He got in his red Volkswagen Rabbit and drove himself to the hospital. After my mother took Nikki to school and dropped Shani and me off with the babysitter, she rushed to meet my father. In the emergency room, she was shocked by the disoriented man before her. My father could not keep his eyes open. His head flopped from side to side. The doctors thought the cause of his discomfort was a sore throat and blamed his lack of neck control on a lack of sleep. To reduce the pain, they anesthetized his throat. In retrospect, that was the worst thing they could have done. He could no longer feel it closing.

The doctors didn't know what to make of his symptoms. They questioned my mother about my father's medical history, then shifted to questions about his mental state. "Does he have a habit of exaggerating?" "Is there anything going on in his life that would force him to make up symptoms?"

At 4:40 P.M., my father was released from the hospital and told to get some rest at home.

By six that evening, my mother was in the kitchen with Nikki, holding Shani as she cooked potato pancakes for our dinner. I sat at the dining room table adding colors to the black-and-white clown in my coloring book. I was months away from my fourth birthday. I heard my father coming down the stairs. His steps were slower than usual. I got up from the chair so I could be picked up as soon as he reached the first floor. Then I heard a crash.

His body was sprawled and writhing at the foot of the stairs. Hardly any sounds came from his mouth. I heard another crash, this one from the kitchen. The clatter momentarily stole my attention from my father. My mother heard his collapse and, in her rush to see what had happened, dropped the sizzling cast-iron skillet and potato pancakes on the floor. I looked back up to my father and saw him gasping for air, holding his throat. His normally strong features sagged in exhaustion, as if he were in the final hours of a battle he had been fighting for years. I stared at him, looking but doing nothing.

Mommy pushed past me and told Nikki to call 911. Nikki rushed to the phone and began speaking with the emergency personnel on the other end. I could hear her repeating again and again: "I don't know what county we're in." Minutes passed. Shani was crying hysterically. My mother attended to my father, improvising her own version of CPR while also minding Shani. My baby sister's screams only seemed to get louder. And I just stood there, staring.

Finally my mother told me to go outside with Nikki and guide the ambulance crew in. My older sister took my hand and led me out to wait. Minutes later, police and ambulance crew arrived. Nikki ordered me to stay outside while she led them into our home.

At this point my memories get less distinct. It was like standing in a field when a powerful gust of wind suddenly blows: everything around you vanishes, all you hear is the wind filling your ears, all you feel is the wind on your skin. Your eyes tear, and sight blurs. Your mind empties but empties.

I stayed outside with the collection of neighbors who had come to see what was going on. Through my uncertain eyes I saw my friend Ayana holding her mother's hand. When Ayana caught my eye, I could see she was trying to force a smile, but all she got out was a look of uneasy confusion, which I mirrored back to her.

The ambulance crew loaded my father onto the gurney and raced back out. By this point dozens of people lined the street. They watched as he was placed in the back of the ambulance. The doors slammed shut behind him. The loud sirens and flashing lights broke the silence of the neighborhood. Mommy quickly loaded us into the car and followed the ambulance to the hospital. The car was full of sound—Shani crying and Nikki making goo-goo noises to try to calm her down, and the roar of the ambulance in front of us—but it felt as silent as a tomb. No talking. No questions. Just the white noise of the ambulance, one sister crying, and the other struggling to comfort her without words.

The hospital was only five minutes from where we lived, but it seemed like a long ride. We rushed out of the car and ran inside. They were already working on my father, so we were sent to the waiting area. Shani had quieted down and was playing with her shoestrings, which Nikki put me on her lap. My paternal grandfather and my aunts Dawn, Tawana, and Evelyn had all arrived to join our vigil.

Eventually an ER doctor walked into the waiting room. He asked to see my mother alone. "He's dead, isn't he?" my mother said before he could begin speaking. "I am sorry. By the

time he got here, he was gone,” the doctor said. “We tried, we tried hard. I am so sorry.”

Then my mother passed out.

My father was dead five hours after having been released from the hospital with the simple instruction to “get some sleep.” The same hospital was now preparing to send his body to the morgue. My father had entered the hospital seeking help. But his face was unshaven, his clothes disheveled, his name unfamiliar, his address not in an affluent area. The hospital looked at him askance, insulted him with ridiculous questions, and basically told him to fend for himself. Now, my mother had to plan his funeral.

He died on a Friday night. We were told at first that the hospital wouldn’t be able to determine the cause of death until Monday, when they would perform the autopsy. But my father’s radio station wanted to issue a news release about his death, so it leaned on the morgue to perform the autopsy sooner. The morgue acquiesced, and by Saturday afternoon we found out that he had died from acute epiglottitis, a rare but treatable virus that causes the epiglottis to swell and cover the air passages to the lungs. Untreated because of the earlier misdiagnosis, my father’s body suffocated itself.

Nikki took his death worse than the rest of us. Not just because she was the only one old enough to really understand what was going on but because her biological father, Bill, changed abruptly after my father died. While my dad was alive, Bill supported Nikki financially and took the time to see her. After my father died, Bill no longer called, wrote, or bothered to check up on her. My father’s love of Nikki had forced Bill to step up to his parenting responsibilities—it was almost as if Bill cared more because another man did. With my father no longer in the picture, the pressure was off. It was as if my sister lost two fathers that day.

While I knew something bad had happened, I still wasn’t sure what it meant. All weekend people came in waves to our home. The phone rang nonstop. I saw the hurt on people’s faces but didn’t fully understand it. I was still in the wind tunnel. I heard that my father had “passed on” but had no idea where he’d gone. At the funeral, my uncle Vin escorted us to the mahogany casket in the front of the church to have our final viewing of the body. The celebration of my father’s life took place at the Fourteenth Street Baptist Church, the same church my parents had been married in six years earlier. We stood in front of my father’s body for the final time. He lay in the casket with his eyes closed. It was the first time I had seen him in days. He looked more serene than he appeared at the bottom of the stairs. He looked at peace. I was holding my uncle Vin’s hand when I looked into the casket and asked my father, “Daddy, are you going to come with us?”

Wes, get up here and get your backpack together. You’re going over to your grandmother’s house.” Mary Moore’s raspy voice echoed through the house. Wes was in the living room watching television with the volume turned almost all the way up. *Speed Racer* was almost over. Packing his backpack could wait.



“You hear me talking to you?”

Wes reluctantly got up from the red plaid couch and turned off the television, but the truth was that he liked going over to his grandmother’s house. He had never met his father, at least not that he remembered. But his father’s mother spoiled him. She also had a rabbit living under the kitchen sink that he always played with when he visited.

He climbed the stairs and caught the scent of his mother’s perfume before he even hit her doorway. He saw her sitting on the bed with her back to him. She was wearing the white dress he liked. Clearly, she was going out tonight.

Wes asked her what he should bring to his grandmother’s house, but he was losing the battle with the radio, which was blasting George Benson’s “Turn Your Love Around.” He reached over and turned the volume down.

“Ma, what do I need to bring?”

When she saw Wes standing there, one hand flew to her face to wipe her eyes. The other slid a sheet of paper under her leg. Something was wrong.

“Ma, you all right?”

“Yes, Wes,” Mary automatically responded. “Just bring some stuff to play with for tonight. Hurry up, go pack your stuff.”

He wanted to ask what was wrong but decided against pressing his mother. He slowly turned around and headed toward his bedroom to pack.

The letter Mary was hiding explained that the federal budget for Basic Education Opportunity Grants—or Pell Grants—was being slashed, and her grant was being terminated. Pell Grants—need-based financial awards for college—were part of a larger federal budget cutback in 1982 (during his eight years in office, Ronald Reagan reduced the education budget by half). Mary realized the letter effectively closed the door on her college aspirations. She had already completed sixteen hours of college credits and would get no closer toward graduation.

Mary was the first in her family to even begin college. After graduating from high school, she enrolled in the Community College of Baltimore. When she completed her associate’s degree, she decided to pursue her and her parents’ longtime dream of completing her bachelor’s.

Johns Hopkins University was only five miles from where Mary grew up, but it might as well have been a world away. To many in Baltimore, Johns Hopkins was the beautiful campus you could walk past but not through. It played the same role that Columbia University did for the Harlem residents who surrounded it, or the University of Chicago did for the Southside. It was a school largely for people from out of town, preppies who observed the surrounding neighborhood with a voyeuristic curiosity when they weren’t hatching myths about it to scare freshmen. This city wasn’t their home. But after completing her community college requirements, Mary attempted the short but improbable journey from the neighborhood to the campus. Her heart jumped when she received her acceptance letter. It was a golden ticket to another world—but also to the dizzying idea that the life she wanted, that she dreamed about, might actually happen for her.

She worked at Bayview Medical Center as a unit secretary in order to supplement the grant that was helping her pay for school. The \$6.50 an hour she was making at Bayview was enough to keep the balance of her tuition paid, the lights on, and the kids fed, as long as her

Pell Grant was in place. But with that grant now eliminated, it wouldn't be enough. The next day she called Johns Hopkins and let them know she was dropping out. That part-time job at Bayview would become permanent.

Wes got himself ready and went to check on his mother again. He felt he had to take care of her: his father had been a ghost since his birth. His older half brother, Tony, spent most of his time with his maternal grandparents or with his father in the Murphy Homes Projects in West Baltimore. Wes was the man of the house.

As Mary wiped her still-damp face, she told herself she was down but not out. She just had to quickly recalibrate her ambitions. She still had big dreams—maybe she could become an entrepreneur, open a beauty salon or her own fashion company. Growing up, she'd worked at a grocery store in West Baltimore owned by an older black couple, Herb and Puddin Johnson. She remembered looking up to them and wanting to own something the way they did. The Johnsons had achieved a level of independence that others in the neighborhood didn't know existed, let alone understood how to obtain. And their example had long driven her. But she couldn't deny it: without schooling she was worried.

She gazed out the window, down the same streets she'd been staring out at her whole life. The same streets she'd walked down when she began her first days at Carver High School. The same streets that had cared for her family, taught her family, looked out for her family for so many years. She wondered how long she would have to call these streets home.

This section of Baltimore had never fully recovered from the riots of the 1960s. After the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Baltimore burned. No street saw more destruction than Pennsylvania Avenue. Mary could remember the days after the assassination when her parents forbade her and her seven siblings from leaving the house because just outside the windows a war was unfolding. The bitter riots were sparked by King's assassination, but the fuels that kept them burning were the preexisting conditions: illegal but strictly enforced racial segregation, economic contraction, and an unresponsive political system. Looters ran free as the city exploded with anger. White neighborhoods in Baltimore blockaded the streets, attempting to confine the damage of the Riots to its poorer, darker jurisdiction. National Guard troops patrolled the communities, but their presence created more resentment, not to mention fresh targets for rock-toting kids. Soon it became clear that the Riots were about more than the tragic death of Dr. King. They were about anger and hurt so extreme that rational thought was thrown out the window—these were people so deranged by frustration that they were burning down their own neighborhood. The Riots in Baltimore, particularly West Baltimore, got so bad that “Little” Melvin Williams, a legendary drug dealer and one of the most powerful men in the city at the time, was recruited by the mayor to help quell the violence. Tellingly, his influence had considerably more effect than the efforts of any politician or soldier.

By the end of the Riots, Baltimore stood eerily quiet. Almost \$14 million in damage was recorded, and nearly five thousand men, women, and children were arrested, injured, or dead.

Mary was only a kid, but she made a pact with herself at that moment: she would get her education and leave the neighborhood no matter what it took.

Wes watched his mother as she moved from the window to her closet to look for a pair of shoes to wear with her white dress. She yanked the already stretched telephone cord a few feet farther so she could keep talking while digging through her closet. Mary was planning on doing what she always did to celebrate, commiserate, blow off steam, or just kill boredom. She and a couple of her friends would head out to Thirty-second Street Plaza, a popular nightclub where Mary knew the owner. She was only twenty-seven years old, and despite having two sons, Tony, who was eleven, and Wes, she was still young enough to enjoy partying, dancing, and being noticed by men—and noticing them back—much to the chagrin of her family and friends who ended up watching the boys so many nights. She noticed Wes walk back in her room. She sighed and told her sister she would call her back.

“Wes, didn’t I tell you to go get ready?”

Wes stood undeterred and again asked her what was wrong. Being the man of the house, he wanted answers, and he wasn’t leaving until he got them.

“Mommy got some bad news about school, and I want to go see some friends and talk about it.”

Wes gave her an unsatisfied look, as if he knew that the story didn’t end there. Finally, she sat him down at the edge of the bed and shared with him, in language he could understand, why school was so important. He listened intently as she explained to him the significance of being the first one in the family to go to college. She told him how much it meant to her parents that she finish. Then she explained why she had to quit.

Mary and her family had spent the years after the Riots in a house on McCulloh Street, one of the central arteries in West Baltimore. The home was a large, three-story, five-bedroom row house with a jagged gray brick façade. It sat on a relatively quiet block lined with similarly well-appointed houses, each by trees and grass. But, like so much in Baltimore, even this beautiful house was bloodstained.

After the Riots, Kenneth and Alma, Mary’s parents, decided they wanted to move to a larger home with their ever-expanding family—they’d had eight children in eleven years. One night Alma said to Kenneth, “Did you hear about what happened on McCulloh Street?” He asked her to explain.

“A man killed his wife in their home. Chopped her up. She was there for a few days, and when the cops came looking for him, he decided to try to hide in the chimney. That’s where they found him.” Kenneth got the point. “I wonder if they are renting it out now.” After a bit of inquiry, the landlord placed the home on the rental market with a severe discount in account for the sensational circumstances of the prior tenant’s eviction. Kenneth and Alma proudly moved their family into their new home.

After their move, Alma’s kidneys failed, and she began dialysis treatments three days a week. The painful and tiring treatments took their toll on her physically and emotionally. She maintained a cheery outlook, her hair pulled back into a bun that revealed her smooth, dark skin and bright smile. She was always a small woman, but her dialysis was forcing her to lose weight fast, and soon her short, gaunt frame was an almost comical mismatch with her husband’s bulk.

When Mary told her mother that she was pregnant, at age sixteen, Alma said, “I don’t care. You are going to finish school and go to college.” Alma had never been to college, the great regret of her life, and like Mary, she became a mother well before she entered her twenties.

As tears rolled down Mary's face, her mother told her she would be there to support her no matter what happened. Always the optimist, Alma kissed her daughter's forehead and gave her a reassuring smile.

One morning soon after, Alma got news: it looked like they had found the matching kidney she had been waiting for, praying for. Kenneth was elated. Alma was his heart. He needed her. But Alma seemed disturbed.

Alma called her mother before she went to the hospital and for the first time opened up: "I don't trust them, Mommy. They have never really given very good treatment, so I just don't feel like I will get it now." Her mother told her not to worry and launched into a diatribe about the medical technologies of the seventies until Alma interrupted her. "Mommy, I need to know that if something happens to me you will take care of my babies. I really need to know that." Without hesitation, her mother replied, "You know I will, baby."

Alma went to the hospital for the transplant, and the family did its best to maintain the routines. Mary longed for her mom's return. Learning the basics of child rearing is difficult at any time. When you are only three years past the start of puberty, the challenge is exceptionally daunting. Tony cried too much. He required so much attention. He was awake when she was trying to sleep, and he slept when she was awake. She could no longer see her friends, and her father wasn't much help. The baby's father was a neighborhood boy who had no interest in helping out with his son. Mary needed her mom back.

Three days later, Kenneth received the news that Alma's body had rejected the new kidney and she had died earlier that morning. Kenneth had to tell his children what had happened. But how do you share something with kids that you have not fully absorbed yourself yet? Kenneth, usually a gregarious and fun-loving person, also fought the demons of alcoholism. He would spend Thursday through Sunday getting drunk. Then he would spend the rest of the week recovering from a monster hangover, waiting for Thursday to arrive again. He was a "weekend alcoholic"—in his case, a long-weekend alcoholic—who battled over which version of himself he preferred, the drunk one or the sober one. He drank especially heavily when he needed drunk Kenneth to engage in conversations that sober Kenneth wouldn't dare.

He took one final swig of rum before calling the kids together.

"Sorry, guys, Mom's dead," he finally blurted out, blunt to the point of absurdity.

The silence that sat over the room wasn't broken until Mary ran out with Tony, tears streaming down her face. Weezy went over to hug their father, and the rest of the children simply sat in their places, still not sure if they fully understood what they had just heard, and not knowing how to react.

The morning of the funeral, Kenneth did an admirable job of trying to comb the girls' hair. He made sure all of the kids were dressed and ready to go on time, and he cooked breakfast, all jobs normally reserved for Alma. A few pieces of burnt toast later, the family was ready to pay their final respects.

Kenneth held everything together until he saw the casket at the altar. It was the first time he had seen his wife's body since he viewed her at the morgue. Something had changed, but not what he had expected. Now she looked more like his Alma. The makeup made her cheeks rosier, her skin more even, more alive. It looked almost as if she was flashing her trademark smile as she lay in the brilliantly polished wooden casket.

When he saw his partner of sixteen years stretched out in the coffin, Kenneth's eyes welled

up. All of his strength evaporated. The weight that sat on his shoulders—the burden of losing his partner and raising this family without her—became unbearable. He wept, choking for air. He reached into the casket and grabbed her shoulders. He yanked Alma up and supporting her head with one arm, tried to pull her body out of the casket. Some of the other mourners ran over to him, trying to loosen his grip from his wife's lifeless body. After a struggle, Kenneth was pulled from his wife's small frame and she was laid back down in her casket. He screamed as he was escorted out of the church. The congregation began to sing "Blessed Assurance."

Alma's parents soon moved into the home Alma and Kenneth shared, and they didn't leave until the last child was out of the house.

Mary was the first of the kids to leave home. Education was her escape in more ways than one.

After listening to his mother describe her letter, Wes quickly volunteered to get a job and help out. Mary laughed. "You can work later and make money. Right now I just need you to go get your bag so I can drop you off." Wes, finally satisfied, moved from his mother's bed so he could put the last of his toys in his backpack. Mary watched as he walked out of her room. Tall for his age—he was over four feet tall at six years old—and muscularly defined, he looked amazingly like his father. They were the same shade of dark brown and even wore the same short, even haircut. Like his father's, Wes's grin stretched across his entire face and had a way of putting everyone at ease. Where they differed was in personality. Wes carried himself with a reserved, quiet dignity, while his father was always loud and rude. At least he was like that when he was drinking, which seemed to be all the time.

Mary met Bernard, Wes's father, at her job after he showed up to visit one of her co-workers at Bayview. Bernard was struck by Mary's figure. She had that new-mother thick skin and still-young-enough-to-flaunt-it confidence. Her smoky voice and welcoming smile attracted Bernard. Within minutes of meeting her, he asked if she would see him again. She agreed.

It turned out that for most of their lives they'd lived only a few blocks apart. Bernard's parents lived on McMechen Street, which ran adjacent to McCulloh. A few months later Mary was pregnant with her second child. In 1975, Wes came into the world.

But the relationship between Mary and Bernard didn't even make it to their child's birth. Since leaving high school years prior, Bernard hadn't found a steady job. He spent most of his time searching for himself at the bottoms of liquor bottles. Mary was left with two alcoholic abusive men who shared the DNA of her two children but no husband or dad for her boys.

Once, Bernard tried to be involved in his child's life. About eight months after Wes's birth, Mary was awakened by a loud banging on the front door of the home she shared with her sister on Pennsylvania Avenue.

"Mary, what the hell is going on?" her sister asked.

"It's Bernard's crazy ass out there. I ain't going out to talk to him. He's drunk and crazy."

Bernard continued to bang and scream. He stood on the other side of the door in faded jeans and a plain white T-shirt, his beard scruffy and his eyes bloodshot. He was slurring orders and demands to see his son. Mary simply sat on her bed, peeking through the blinds at the father of her younger child. All the noise woke Tony up, but when he arrived at Mary's bedroom

door asking what was going on, she snapped her fingers and hushed him, telling him to go back to bed. Wes, not even a year old yet, slept on peacefully. Bernard kept up his racket for another twenty minutes, while Mary just peered out at him, disgusted. Finally, admitting defeat, he stumbled back home. That was the last time he tried to see his son.

Wes waited downstairs for his mother to take him to his grandmother's house. It was already late, almost six in the evening, so he wondered how long he would have to stay there. Mamie, Wes's grandmother, liked Mary, but she loved her grandson. Wes always felt true love when he went to her house. Despite the fact that her son had nothing to do with Wes, Mamie didn't want Wes punished for the circumstances through which he was brought into the world.

Wes sat in the front seat of the car for the short drive to Mamie's. Mary ran down the rules of the house, as she did every time Wes visited. No running indoors, no talking back, don't eat too much. Wes nodded at each commandment.

Minutes later, they arrived at McMechen Street. Wes ran up the three white marble stairs that led to the front door. He got on his toes and reached up to push the doorbell. Mamie's scintillating eyes met Wes's as she opened the door and her arms for a big hug. Wes loved the house. It was large, three stories, which gave him plenty of things to get into and out of. He sprinted inside the house and made a beeline for the kitchen. The smell of fried chicken cooking and the excitement of playing with the pet rabbit under the sink increased his pace.

He was running through the living room when he saw someone he had never seen before. A man sat on the couch leaning precariously to the side, his right elbow supporting his body and his head nearly flat against his shoulder. The strong smell of whiskey wafted from his clothes and his pores. Wes and the man returned each other's quizzical looks.

Mary entered the room and stopped in her tracks. She would have recognized the "hangover lean" anywhere. The man looked through his partially opened eyes and saw Mary.

A wide smile appeared on his face. "Hey, Mary. Damn, you look good," he loudly announced.

"Hey," she responded, her voice as emotionless as she could make it.

Wes looked at his mother, hoping she would explain who this man was. He moved closer to his mother's hip. Not only did he feel safer there than in the middle of the room but also because the smell coming off the man was beginning to bother him. The man on the couch looked up at Mary and asked, "Who's this?" Mary smirked and rolled her eyes. She could not believe his audacity.

Wes didn't understand why, but he felt a tension in the room. Mary looked down at her son and uttered the words she had never said before and never thought she would have to say.

"Wes, meet your father."

The phone was up to its eighth ring. It was nine in the morning, and Wes hadn't seen nine in the morning since his summer break started. He climbed out of bed slowly, irritable, his eyes still half-masted when he picked up the phone in his family's narrow hallway.

"Hello?"

"Where's Mom at?" Tony asked.

"Probably at work already. Try her there." Their mom was usually out of the house by 8:30 and didn't come back until well into the evening. Wes, now eight years old, was free from any adult supervision till then. His brother, six years older, was the closest thing Wes had to a caretaker during the daylight hours and was fiercely protective of the little brother who idolized him. But lately even Tony hadn't been around much. Tony was spending most of his time in the Murphy Homes Projects, where his father lived.

The Murphy Homes were built in 1962 and named after George Murphy, a legend in Baltimore for his work as a groundbreaking educator, but just as often they went by a self-explanatory nickname, Murder Homes. The seventeen-story monoliths were among the most dangerous projects in all of Baltimore. The walls and floors were coated with filth and graffiti. Flickering fluorescent tubes (the ones that weren't completely broken) dimly lit the cinder-block hallways. The constantly broken-down elevators forced residents to climb claustrophobic, urine-scented stairways. And the drug game was everywhere, with a gun handle protruding from the top of every tenth teenager's waistline. People who lived in the Murphy Homes felt like prisoners, kept in check by roving bands of gun-strapped kids and a nightmare army of drug fiends. This was where Tony chose to spend his days.

The conversation between brothers quickly turned to school. Tony knew Wes had just finished elementary school and asked him what he was doing to get ready for the start of middle school at Chinquapin, pronounced "Chicken Pen" by all of its students. Chinquapin Middle was 99 percent black. Close to 70 percent of the kids were on the school lunch program.

Wes mumbled the verbal equivalent of a shrug. Tony was enraged. "Yo, you need to take this shit seriously, man. Acting stupid ain't cool!"

Wes sighed into the phone. He had heard it before. He loved his brother but had learned to ignore his occasional "do as I say, not as I do" tirades. Tony, by contrast, was desperate, trying to give his little brother information he thought he needed, the kind of information that Tony never got. Tony felt his brother's life could be saved, even if he felt his own had already, at age fourteen, passed the point of no return.

To Wes, Tony was a "certified gangsta." Tony had started dealing drugs in those shadowed hallways of Murphy Homes before he was ten. By the time he was fourteen, Tony had built a fierce reputation in the neighborhood. Despite his skinny frame and baby face, his eyes were

lifeless and hooded, without a hint of spark or optimism.

Tony's dead-eyed ruthlessness inspired fear. He spent much of his time in West Baltimore but had decided to try to open up a drug sales operation in East Baltimore as well. Baltimore is a territorial and tribal city. Once the boys in East Baltimore heard that a West Baltimore guy was attempting to take over their corners, tempers flared. Tony ended up in a shoot-out with a few of the corner boys. Ten minutes later, it was Tony's corner. But no matter how tough he was, or how many corners he controlled, what Tony really wanted was to go back in time, to before he'd gotten himself so deep in the game, and do it all over. He wanted to be like Wes.

There's a term in the hood for a face like Tony's, that cold, frozen stare. The *ice grille*. It's a great phrase. A look of blank hostility that masks two intense feelings—the fire evoked by the *grille* (which is also slang for *face*), and the cold of the ice. But the tough façade is just a way to hide a deeper pain or depression that kids don't know how to deal with. A bottomless chasm of insecurity and self-doubt that gnaws at them. Young boys are more likely to believe in themselves if they know that there's someone, somewhere, who shares that belief. To carry the burden of belief alone is too much for most young shoulders. Tony had been overwhelmed by that load years ago. Now he wanted to help Wes manage his. Like a soldier after years of combat, Tony hated the war and wanted Wes to do whatever he could to avoid it. He was willing to risk seeming like a hypocrite.

When Tony finished his rant, Wes hung up the phone and went back to bed. As soon as he was comfortably under the covers, the phone rang again.

“Yo, you coming out today?” a gruff voice barked out.

“It's too early, man!” Wes replied. “Wait, okay, okay, give me ten minutes.”

Wes was talking to his new friend, Woody, one of the first people he'd met when Mary moved the family to this neighborhood a year earlier. It was their third move since Tony was born. The first was from Pennsylvania Avenue to Cherry Hill to get away from Wes's father. The move from Cherry Hill to Northwood was to get away from Cherry Hill.

Wes spent his earliest years in the Cherry Hill Apartments, a planned construction built after World War II to provide housing to returning black veterans. A neighboring development, the Uplands Apartments, was the white counterpart, built at the same time under the city's “separate but equal” policies. The Uplands became home to a thriving middle class, while the over 1,700 units in Cherry Hill became a breeding ground for poverty, drug, and despair. There was never a question that Cherry Hill wasn't built as a sustainable community for its families. Isolated and desolate, it had no main streets. Small, poorly constructed, faux-brick homes lined the streets like dormitories. There were three swing sets in the middle of the complex that sat vacant at all times because all of the children had been taught to stay clear of them. The rest of the courtyard remained busy with drug activity. If you're not from Cherry Hill, you don't go to Cherry Hill. Over half of the eight thousand residents lived below the poverty line.

Mary shuddered every time she left the house and was plotting her escape from Cherry Hill almost as soon as she got there. When she moved from public housing to a three-bedroom home in a suburban area in the Northwood section of town, she was trying to create more distance between her and the city's imploding center. Compared with the chaos of Cherry Hill, Northwood was a paradise of neat houses with fastidiously maintained lawns. Black



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