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There Are No Children Here

The Story of Two Boys Growing
Up in The Other America

Alex Kotlowitz

ALEX KOTLOWITZ

_____ **There Are No Children Here**

The Story
of Two Boys Growing Up
in the Other America



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To my mother and father

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

—LANGSTON HUGHES

Ah! What would the world be to us
If the children were no more?
We should dread the desert behind us
Worse than the dark before.

—HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

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Preface

I FIRST MET Lafayette and Pharoah Rivers during the summer of 1985. Lafayette was then ten. Pharoah was seven. I was working as a freelance journalist at the time and had been asked by a friend to write the text for a photo essay he was doing on children in poverty for *Chicago* magazine. He'd met the two boys and their mother through a local social services agency and had spent a number of days taking photographs of them at the Henry Horner Homes, a public housing complex.

Before I ever met Lafayette and Pharoah, I had seen their likenesses. One photograph in particular struck me: Lafayette stood in a dark hallway of his building. He was wearing a striped tank top, baggy jeans, and a Kangol cap that was too big for him; his high-tops were untied. In his hands was what appeared to be a baseball. And yet, despite the youthful attire, he looked like an old man. There seemed bottled up inside him a lifetime's worth of horror. His face revealed a restless loneliness.

When I went to meet him and his family, the interview didn't last long—maybe a few hours—because I was writing only a short essay to accompany my friend's photographs and had over a dozen families to interview in a couple of weeks' time. But even during my short stay with Lafayette, I was unnerved by the relentless neighborhood violence he talked about. In fact, I had trouble believing it all. And then I asked Lafayette what he wanted to be. "If I grow up, I'd like to be a bus driver," he told me. *If*, not *when*. At the age of ten, Lafayette wasn't sure he'd make it to adulthood.

Two years later, I returned to the Henry Horner Homes to write a story for *The Wall Street Journal* on the toll inner-city violence takes on the children who live there. I spent the summer at Henry Horner, playing basketball with the kids, going to lunch with them, talking with their parents, and just hanging out. Over those weeks, I became good friends with Lafayette and his brother Pharoah, and our friendship lasted long after the *Journal* story appeared and, I'm sure, will continue well beyond the publication of this book. We have spent time together nearly every weekend. We visit museums, play video games, take walks in the country, go to the movies, and browse in bookstores. Each summer we take a fishing trip to northern Michigan. And we keep talking. I've been encouraged by their resilience, inspired by their laughter, and angered by their stories.

In 1988, I suggested to their mother, LaJoe, the possibility of my writing a book about Lafayette, Pharoah, and the other children of the neighborhood. She liked the idea, although she hesitated, and then said, "But you know, there are no children here. They've seen too much to be children."

One of every five children in the United States lives in poverty—an estimated twelve million children, according to the Children's Defense Fund. In cities like Chicago, the rate is considerably higher: one of every three children. Many grow up in neighborhoods similar to Lafayette and Pharoah's. By the time they enter adolescence, they have contended with more terror than most of us confront in a lifetime. They have had to make choices that most experienced and educated adults would find difficult. They have lived with fear and witnessed death. Some of them have lashed out. They have joined gangs, sold drugs, and, in some cases, inflicted pain on others. But they have also played baseball and gone on dates and shot marbles and kept diaries. For, despite all they have seen and done, they are—and

we must constantly remind ourselves of this—still children.

LaJoe was not only agreeable to the project, she felt it important that their stories be told. She had once said to me that she occasionally wished she were deaf. The shooting. The screaming. Babies crying. Children shrieking. Sometimes she thought it would all drive her insane. So maybe it would be best if she couldn't hear at all. Her hope—and mine—was that a book about the children would make us all hear, that it would make us all stop and listen.

This book follows Lafayette and Pharoah over a two-year period as they struggle with school, attempt to resist the lure of the gangs, and mourn the death of friends, all the while searching for some inner peace. During this time, both boys undergo profound changes. They are at an age when, through discovery of themselves and their world, they begin to form their unique identities. Consequently, it is a story that doesn't have a neat and tidy ending. It is, instead, about a beginning, the dawning of two lives. Most of all, it is a story about two friends.

_____ Summer 1987 _____

NINE-YEAR-OLD Pharoah Rivers stumbled to his knees. "Give me your hand," he ordered his older brother, Lafeyette, who was almost twelve. "Give me your hand."

Pharoah reached upward and grabbed hold of his brother's slender fingers, which guided him up a slippery, narrow trail of dirt and brush.

"C'mon, man," Lafeyette urged, as his stick-thin body whirled around with a sense of urgency. "Let's go." He paused to watch Pharoah struggle through a thicket of vines. "Make you slow." He had little patience for the smaller boy's clumsiness. Their friends had already reached the top of the railroad overpass.

It was a warm Saturday afternoon in early June, and this was the children's first visit to these railroad tracks. The trains passed by at roof level above a corridor of small factories on the city's near west side. To reach the tracks the children had to scale a steep mound of earth shoved against one side of the aging concrete viaduct. Bushes and small trees grew in the soil alongside the tracks; in some places the brush was ten to fifteen feet thick.

Pharoah clambered to the top, moving quickly to please his brother, so quickly that he scraped his knee on the crumbling cement. As he stood to test his bruised leg, his head turned from west to east, following the railroad tracks, five in all, leading from the western suburbs to Chicago's downtown. His wide eyes and his buck teeth, which had earned him the sobriquet Beaver and kept his lips pushed apart, made him seem in awe of the world.

Looking east, Pharoah marveled at the downtown skyline. With the late afternoon sun reflecting off the glass and steel skyscrapers, downtown Chicago glowed in the distance. As he looked south a few blocks, he glimpsed the top floors of his home, a red brick, seven-story building. It appeared dull and dirty even in the brilliant sun. Farther south, he could just make out his elementary school and the towering spire of the First Congregational Baptist Church, a 118-year-old building that he'd been told had been a stop on the Underground Railroad. The view, he thought, was pretty great.

But he soon was distracted by more immediate matters. A black-and-yellow butterfly wove effortlessly through the wind. Fixed on its dance, Pharoah stared silently for minutes, until a rising summer breeze carried it away. The abundant clumps of white and lavender wildflowers that grew along the rails soon won his attention, so he bent down to touch the soft petals, to finger the vines as if to measure their growth. He breathed in the scent of the blossoming wood anemones, then licked a salty drop of perspiration that had dropped from his brow. The humidity had already begun to tire him.

Lafeyette jostled his brother from behind. "Stop it," Pharoah screeched, swatting at his brother as if he were an annoying pest. Lafeyette reached for Pharoah, but the younger one scampered away. Lafeyette laughed. He could be rough in his play, which annoyed Pharoah. Sometimes, their mother called Lafeyette "Aggravatin'," as in "Aggravatin', get over here," or "Aggravatin', stop aggravatin' your brother." Lafeyette took the ribbing good-naturedly.

He thrust a crowbar into Pharoah's hands, one of four they and their six friends had dragged to the top of the viaduct. They had ventured onto these railroad tracks only once before, and then just to explore. Back then, though, they hadn't had a mission.

The eight boys split into pairs, trying to be soft afoot, but in the excitement their whispers quickly turned to muffled shouts as their arms hacked away at the high weeds. One boy

walked tightrope along a rail, his young limbs bending and twisting with each gust of wind. His companions ordered him down.

Pharoah glued himself to his cousin Leonard Anderson, whom everyone called Porkchop. A couple of years younger than Pharoah, Porkchop was unusually quiet and shy, though filled with a nervous energy that kept him in constant motion. He grinned rather than talked. The cousins were inseparable; when they met after school—each attended a different one—they frequently greeted each other with a warm embrace.

Lafayette wandered off with James Howard, a close friend, who lived in the same building. They had grown up together and knew each other well, though James, a wiry, athletic boy, was a year older than Lafayette and was much more agile. He also was a more easygoing boy than Lafayette; his mischievous grin spanned the width of his face in the shape of a crescent moon.

Lafayette and James found what they thought might be a good spot, a small bare patch of the brown dirt. Lafayette plunged the short end of the crowbar into the ground. He dug again. And again. The soil gave way only a couple of inches with each plunge of the makeshift shovel. James fell to his knees. His small hands unearthed a few more inches, taking over for Lafayette and the crowbar. Nothing.

“Daaag,” muttered James, clearly disappointed. “There ain’t nothing up here.” Again, the boys noisily plowed through the weeds.

The boys were looking for snakes. For another hour, they dug hole after hole in the hard soil, determined not to go home empty-handed. They figured that a garter snake would do well at home as a pet; after all, they thought, the snake neither bites nor grows to a great length. The boys had got the idea for this urban safari when last year an older friend named William had nabbed a garter snake and showed it off to all the kids. William let them touch and hold it and watch it slither across the brown linoleum tiles of their building’s breezeway. Lafayette had never touched such an animal before, and he and the others had eagerly crowded around William’s pet, admiring its yellow-and-black coat and its darting orange tongue. William died a few months later when a friend, fooling around with a revolver he thought was unloaded, shot William in the back of the head. Lafayette never learned what happened to the snake.

The boys’ search turned up little, though that might have been expected; they had never seen a snake in the wild and didn’t really know where to look. But they did find three small white eggs resting on the ground, and debated whether they held baby reptiles or birds. James spotted the only animal of the afternoon, a foot-long rat. It had scampered alongside the tracks, sniffing for a treasure of its own.

Bored by the fruitless search, Pharoah and Porkchop had long ago wandered to a stretch along the tracks where there was a ten-foot-high stack of worn automobile tires. The cousins scrambled in and out of the shallow rubber tunnels created by the tires. Porkchop, the more daring of the two, climbed to the top of the pile, bouncing off the tires with abandon. Pharoah stood to the side, watching his cousin’s antics, until a sparrow began to fly over his head in what seemed like threatening loops. Pharoah screamed with a mixture of fear and delight as he tried to avoid the dive-bombing playmate.

James, who had also given up the hunt, hoisted himself into an empty boxcar on one of the sidetracks. As Lafayette tried to follow, a friend sighted a commuter train approaching from

downtown. "There's a train!" he yelled. James frantically helped Lafayette climb into the open boxcar, where they found refuge in a dark corner. Others hid behind the boxcar's huge wheels. Pharoah and Porkchop threw themselves headlong into the weeds, where they lay motionless on their bellies. "Keep quiet," came a voice from the thick bushes. "Shut up," another barked.

The youngsters had heard that the suburb-bound commuters, from behind the tinted train windows, would shoot at them for trespassing on the tracks. One of the boys, certain that the commuters were crack shots, burst into tears as the train whisked by. Some of the commuters had heard similar rumors about the neighborhood children and worried that, like the cardboard lions in a carnival shooting gallery, they might be the target of talented snipers. Indeed, some sat away from the windows as the train passed through Chicago's blighted corridors. For both the boys and the commuters, the unknown was the enemy.

The train passed without incident, and soon most of the boys had joined James and Lafayette in the boxcar, sitting in the doorway, their rangy legs dangling over the side. Lafayette and James giggled at a private joke, their thin bodies shivering with laughter.

Pharoah was too small to climb into the car, so he crouched in the weeds nearby, his legs tucked underneath him, and picked at the vegetation, which now reached his neck. He was lost in his thoughts, thoughts so private and fanciful that he would have had trouble articulating them to others. He didn't want to leave this place, the sweet smell of the wildflowers and the diving sparrow. There was a certain tranquillity here, a peacefulness that extended into the horizon like the straight, silvery rails. In later months, with the memory of the place made that much gentler by the passage of time, Pharoah would come to savor this sanctuary even more.

None of the boys was quite ready to call it a day, but the sun had descended in the sky, and nighttime here was dangerous. Reluctantly, they gathered the crowbars, slid down the embankment, and, as Lafayette took Pharoah's hand to cross the one busy street, began their short trek home.

THE CHILDREN called home “Hornets” or, more frequently, “the projects” or simply, the “jects” (pronounced *jets*). Pharoah called it “the graveyard.” But the never referred to it by its full name: the Governor Henry Horner Homes.

Nothing here, the children would tell you, was as it should be. Lafayette and Pharoah lived at 1920 West Washington Boulevard, even though their high-rise sat on Lake Street. The building had no enclosed lobby; a dark tunnel cut through the middle of the building, and the wind and strangers passed freely along it. Those tenants who received public aid had their checks sent to the local currency exchange, since the building’s first-floor mailboxes had all been broken into. And since darkness engulfed the building’s corridors, even in the daytime the residents always carried flashlights, some of which had been handed out by a local politician during her campaign.

Summer, too, was never as it should be. It had become a season of duplicity.

On June 13, a couple of weeks after their peaceful afternoon on the railroad tracks, Lafayette celebrated his twelfth birthday. Under the gentle afternoon sun, *yellow daisies* poked through the cracks in the sidewalk as children’s bright faces peered out from behind the windows. Green leaves clothed the cotton-woods, and pastel cotton shirts and shorts, which had sat for months in layaway, clothed the children. And like the fresh buds on the crabapple trees, the children’s spirits blossomed with the onset of summer.

Lafayette and his nine-year-old cousin Dede danced across the worn lawn outside the building, singing the lyrics of an L. L. Cool J rap, their small hips and spindly legs moving to the rhythm. The boy and girl were on their way to a nearby shopping strip, where Lafayette planned to buy radio headphones with \$8.00 he had received as a birthday gift.

Suddenly, gunfire erupted. The frightened children fell to the ground. “Hold your heads down!” Lafayette snapped, as he covered Dede’s head with her pink nylon jacket. If he hadn’t physically restrained her, she might have sprinted for home, a dangerous action when the gangs started warring. “Stay down,” he ordered the trembling girl.

The two lay pressed to the beaten grass for half a minute, until the shooting subsided. Lafayette held Dede’s hand as they cautiously crawled through the dirt toward home. When they finally made it inside, all but fifty cents of Lafayette’s birthday money had trickled from his pockets.

Lafayette’s summer opened the way it would close, with gunshots. For Lafayette and Pharoah, these few months were to be a rickety bridge to adolescence.

If the brothers had one guidepost in their young lives these few months, though, it was their mother, LaJoe. They depended on her; she depended on them. The boys would do anything for their mother.

A shy, soft-spoken woman, LaJoe was known for her warmth and generosity, not only to her own children but to her children’s friends. Though she received Aid to Families with Dependent Children, neighbors frequently knocked on her door to borrow a can of soup or a cup of flour. She always obliged. LaJoe had often mothered children who needed advice or comforting. Many young men and women still called her “Mom.” She let so many people through her apartment, sometimes just to use the bathroom, that she hid the toilet paper

the kitchen because it had often been stolen.

But the neighborhood, which hungrily devoured its children, had taken its toll of LaJoe as well. In recent years, she had become more tired as she questioned her ability to raise her children here. She no longer fixed her kids' breakfasts every day—and there were times when the children had to wash their own clothes in the bathtub. Many of the adults had aged with the neighborhood, looking as worn and empty as the abandoned stores that lined the once thriving Madison Street. By their mid-thirties many women had become grandmothers; by their mid-forties, great-grandmothers. They nurtured and cared for their boyfriends and former boyfriends and sons and grandsons and great-grandsons.

LaJoe, in her youth, had been stunning, her smooth, light brown complexion highlighted by an open smile. When she pulled her hair back in a ponytail, she appeared almost Asian, her almond-shaped eyes gazing out from a heart-shaped face. She had been so pretty in her mid-twenties that she briefly tried a modeling career. Now she was thirty-five, and men still whistled and smiled at her on the street. Unlike many other women her age, she hadn't put on much weight, and her high-cheek-boned face still had a sculptured look. But the confidence of her youth had left her. Her shoulders were often hunched. She occasionally awoke with dark circles under her eyes. And her smile was less frequent now.

LaJoe had watched and held on as the neighborhood slowly decayed, as had many urban communities like Horner over the past two decades. First, the middle-class whites fled to the suburbs. Then the middle-class blacks left for safer neighborhoods. Then businesses moved some to the suburbs, others to the South. Over the past ten years, the city had lost a third of its manufacturing jobs, and there were few jobs left for those who lived in Henry Horner. Unemployment was officially estimated at 19 percent; unofficially, it was probably much higher. There were neighborhoods in Chicago worse off than Horner, but the demise of this particular community was often noted because it had once been among the city's wealthiest areas.

Ashland Avenue, a six-lane boulevard just east of Henry Horner, was named for the Kentucky estate of Henry Clay. By the mid-nineteenth century, it had become one of the city's smartest thoroughfares, lined with dwellings constructed of elegant Attic marble, fashionable churches, and exclusive clubs. "People would parade along the sidewalk to ogle the notables and to be seen themselves; to watch the fine carriages spin along the macadam boulevard, to see the latest manifestation of changing fashion," read one newspaper account. But the neighborhood slowly changed. As immigrants, primarily German, Irish, and Eastern European Jews, settled on the west side, the city's glitter moved eastward to the lake, just north of the Loop, a strip now known as the Magnificent Mile and the Gold Coast.

The Ashland Avenue area quickly lost its luster. Jane Addams's founding of the renowned Hull House in 1889 signaled the west side's growing decline. It was one of the nation's first settlement houses, delivering various services to the poor of the area and acting as the advocate in housing, health care, and children's rights. Soon, the mansions on Ashland were transformed into headquarters for local unions or rooming houses for the transients of Skid Row. By 1906, the neighborhood had deteriorated still further, and tuberculosis claimed 10 percent of the west side's population. The Chicago Lung Association, then called the Chicago Tuberculosis Institute, opened its office on the west side, where it is still located.

The blight has continued and is particularly evident today west of Horner, a section of the

city that, along with the south side, during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s became home to over a half-million blacks who migrated from the South, displacing the earlier immigrants. Western Avenue, now a strip of fast-food outlets, car washes, and family-run stores, bordered Henry Horner to the west, though it is not a boundary of much significance, since on the other side the rubble continues. The two- and three-family tenements sag and lean like drunkards. Many of the buildings are vacant, their contents lying on the sidewalk.

To LaJoe, the neighborhood had become a black hole. She could more easily recite what wasn't there than what was. There were no banks, only currency exchanges, which charged customers up to \$8.00 for every welfare check cashed. There were no public libraries, movie theaters, skating rinks, or bowling alleys to entertain the neighborhood's children. For the infirm, there were two neighborhood clinics, the Mary Thompson Hospital and the Milwaukee Square Health Center, both of which teetered on the edge of bankruptcy and would close by the end of 1989. Yet the death rate of newborn babies exceeded infant mortality rates in a number of Third World countries, including Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, and Turkey. And there was no rehabilitation center, though drug abuse was rampant.

According to a 1980 profile of the Twenty-seventh Ward—a political configuration drawn ironically, in the shape of a gun and including both Henry Horner and Rockwell Gardens, a smaller but no less forbidding public housing complex—60,110 people lived here, 88 percent of them black, 46 percent of them below the poverty level. It was an area so impoverished that when Mother Teresa visited it in 1982, she assigned nuns from her Missionaries of Charity to work at Henry Horner. They had set up a soup kitchen, a shelter for women and children, and an afterschool program. Where there used to be thirteen social service agencies there were now only three: the Missionaries of Charity, the Boys Club, and the Chicago Commons Association. The latter two provided recreational activities as well as tutoring, counseling, and day care, but they had limited funds. A Chicago Commons' program called Better Days for Youth targeted children under thirteen who were having problems in school or with the police, but there was money to serve only twenty-eight children at a time.

LaJoe sometimes believed that the city had all but given up here. A local billboard warned **NEEDLES KILL. There was a time when such a message read DRUGS KILL.**

And despite Horner's proximity—one mile—to the city's booming downtown, LaJoe and her neighbors felt abandoned. Horner sat so close to the city's business district that from the Sears Tower observation deck tourists could have watched Lafayette duck gunfire on his birthday. But city residents never had reason to pass the housing complex unless they attended a basketball or hockey game at the Chicago Stadium, just a block away.

Exacerbating the isolation was the fact that nearly half of the families in Henry Horner, including the Riverses, had no telephone. Residents also felt disconnected from one another; there was little sense of community at Horner, and there was even less trust. Some residents who didn't have a phone, for instance, didn't know any others in their building who would let them use theirs. Some neighbors wouldn't allow their children to go outside to play. One mother moved aside her living room furniture to make an open and safe place where her children could frolic.

But though the isolation and the physical ruin of the area's stores and homes had discouraged LaJoe, it was her family that had most let her down. Not that she could separate the two. Sometimes she blamed her children's problems on the neighborhood; at other times

she attributed the neighborhood's decline to the change in people, to the influx of drugs and violence.

Her three oldest children, to whom she felt she'd given everything she could, had all disappointed her. All had dropped out of school. All had been in jail at least once. All had been involved with drugs. The oldest, LaShawn, a slender twenty-year-old, was so delicate she featured some called her "China Doll." She worked as a prostitute from time to time to support her drug habit. The next oldest, nineteen-year-old Paul, named after his father, had served time in an Indiana prison for burglary. Terence, now seventeen, had been the most troublesome problem for LaJoe and, because of their extraordinary closeness, her biggest disappointment. He began selling drugs at the age of eleven and had been in and out, usually in, trouble with the law ever since.

LaJoe also had a set of four-year-old triplets: Timothy, Tiffany, and Tammie. The two girls so resembled each other that not even their father could tell them apart.

All eight children had the same father, Paul, to whom LaJoe had been married for seventeen years. But the two had long ago fallen out of love. He lived at home only sporadically.

LaJoe wanted it to be different for Lafayette and Pharoah, different from the way it had been for her three oldest children and different from the way it had been for her.

In her husband's absence, Lafayette had become LaJoe's confidant. She relied on him. So did the younger children. Lafayette watched after Pharoah and the triplets. He wouldn't let anything happen to them. He had been a carefree child, a bit of a ham, in fact. For a photograph taken when he was about four, he shoved a big cigar in his mouth and plopped a blue floppy hat on his small head. It was Christmastime, and Lafayette's cousins, who in the photo were all crowded behind him, seemed amused by his antics. When he got older, around eight or nine, he'd hop on the Madison Street bus by himself to visit his grandmother, who lived in an apartment farther west. And he loved to draw, mostly pictures of superheroes. He boasted that his name appeared on all seven floors of his building. He was a boy bubbling with energy and verve.

But over the past year Lafayette had begun to change, LaJoe thought. The past spring, he had been caught stealing candy from a Walgreen's downtown. It was the first time he'd gotten into any kind of trouble. He had been hanging out with a youngster, Keith, who was known among the neighborhood kids for his ability to swipe expensive bottles of cologne from the display cases at downtown department stores. Lafayette was placed in the Chicago Commons Better Days for Youth. One of the first children in the new six-month program, Lafayette received help with his school work as well as counseling. Keith moved out of town, and Lafayette made friends with Chicago Commons' staff members, whom he'd periodically visit after his completion of the program.

Lafayette still laughed and played with Pharoah and friends, but he could be bossy, ordering around his younger brother and the triplets with cockiness and the fury of a temperamental adult. He had inherited his mother's temper and could turn on the younger ones in an instant. It wasn't that Lafayette and they didn't get along; it was that he worried about them, like a father worrying about his children. He admonished them for hanging out with the wrong people or straying too far from his sight. He cared almost too much about everything and everybody. Sometimes the strain of responsibility showed in his thi

handsome face; it would tighten, like a fist, and it seemed as if he would never smile again. He'd purse his lips and clench his jaw; his deep-set, heavy-lidded eyes would stare straight ahead. His face revealed so little, his mother thought, and yet so much.

Pharoah was different, not only from Lafayette but from the other children, too. He didn't have many friends, except for Porkchop, who was always by his side. LaJoe had given him his name but, like his brother's name, spelled it in an unusual way. At the time, LaJoe hadn't known the story of Moses and the Pharaoh, but in later years when she found out she laughed. Pharoah was anything but a king.

Pharoah clutched his childhood with the vigor of a tiger gripping his meat. He wouldn't let it go. Nobody, nothing would take it away from him. When he was two, Pharoah would run around the apartment naked; sometimes he'd be wearing just small white shoes. When he was four or five, he told LaJoe that he wanted to live on a lake so that he could always feel the wind on his back. At the age of five, he had an imaginary friend, Buddy, whom he'd talk to and play with in his bedroom. Frequently, Pharoah got so lost in his daydreams that LaJoe had to shake him to bring him back from his flights of fancy. Those forays into distant lands and with other people seemed to help Pharoah fend off the ugliness around him.

Now, at the age of nine, he giggled at the slightest joke; he cried at the smallest of tragedies. He had recently developed a slight stutter, which made him seem even more vulnerable. And he listened to classical music on the radio because, he said, it relaxed him. He sensed that his playfulness delighted the adults, so he would tease them and they him. He wanted to be recognized, to know that he was wanted. At the age of eight he wrote a short letter to his Aunt LaVerne, one of LaJoe's sisters.

Jan. 1986

Pharoah Rivers

I love you do you love me. You are my best aunt verny. I love you very much. The people I love.

Verny
Grandmother
Linda
Randy
Moma
Dad
Brothers
Sisters
Cousins
Aunt

"Oh, that Pharoah," family and neighbors would say to LaJoe, recounting some enchanting incident involving the nine-year-old. They adored him.

Pharoah liked to tell people he was big-boned "like my mama," though she was, in fact, a small woman. He had LaJoe's open and generous smile, and, like his mother, who was only five feet two, he was short, so that LaJoe could, until he was nine or ten, pass him off as a five-year-old to get him on the bus without paying fare.

Where the adults found Lafayette handsome, they found Pharoah cute. The women would josh both of them, saying that someday they'd be lady killers. The local Boys Club used a photograph of Pharoah in one of its fund-raising brochures. In the picture, Pharoah, along with four other young boys, was dressed in marching cap and cape with a drum set, almost as large as Pharoah himself, slung around his neck. As he often did, he had cocked his head to one side for the camera and grinned cheerfully, a pose he must have known made him look even cuter.

The boys got along, and for that LaJoe was grateful. The two shared a room and, on most mornings, walked to school together. Occasionally, Lafayette played rough with Pharoah and told him off, but LaJoe knew that if Pharoah ever needed his older brother, he'd be there. Older and bigger, he offered Pharoah some protection from the tougher kids in the neighborhood.

LaJoe knew that Lafayette and Pharoah were like millions of other children living in the nation's inner cities. She knew that she was not alone in her struggles, that other women in other cities were watching their children grow old quickly, too. She had heard of some mothers who moved their families to Milwaukee or to the suburbs, some of which were poorer than Henry Horner, in an effort to escape the neighborhood's brutality. In the end, LaJoe would almost always learn, these families were up against the same ruthless forces they had faced in Chicago.

It wouldn't happen to Lafayette and Pharoah, she had vowed to herself. It just wouldn't happen. They would have a childhood. They would have a chance to enjoy the innocence and playfulness of youth and to appreciate the rewards of school and family. They would bring home high school diplomas. They would move out of the neighborhood. They would get jobs and raise families. She had made mistakes with the older children that she was determined not to repeat with her younger ones.

But during the summer of 1987, when drugs and the accompanying violence swept through the neighborhood, she lived in daily fear that something might happen to her young ones. Though she would never say as much, she worried that they might not make it to their eighteenth birthday. Too many hadn't. Already that year, fifty-seven children had been killed in the city. Five had died in the Horner area, including two, aged eight and six, who died from smoke inhalation when firefighters had to climb the fourteen stories to their apartment. Both of the building's elevators were broken. Lafayette and Pharoah knew of more funerals than weddings.

So that summer LaJoe wanted to be prepared for the worst. She started paying \$80 a month for burial insurance for Lafayette, Pharoah, and the four-year-old triplets.

Lafayette had promised his mother he wouldn't let anything happen to Pharoah. But for a brief moment, he thought he had lost him.

Three days after Lafayette's birthday, gunfire once again filled the air. It was two-thirty in the afternoon; school had just let out. As Lafayette and his mother hustled the triplets on the floor of the apartment's narrow hallway, a drill they now followed almost instinctually, they caught glimpses through the windows of young gunmen waving their pistols about. One youth toted a submachine gun.

The dispute had started when two rival drug gangs fired at each other from one high-rise to another.

From his first-floor apartment, Lafayette, who had left his fifth-grade class early that day, watched hopefully for Pharoah as the children poured out of the Henry Suder Elementary School, just a block away. Panicking, many of the youngsters ran directly toward the gunfire. Lafayette and his mother screamed at the children to turn back. But they kept coming, clamoring for the shelter of their homes.

Lafayette finally spotted his brother, first running, then walking, taking cover behind trees and fences. But then he lost sight of him. "Mama, lemme go get him. Lemme go," Lafayette begged. He was afraid that Pharoah would run straight through the gunfire. Pharoah would later say he had learned to look both ways and that's why he'd started walking. "My man told me when you hear the shooting, first to walk because you don't know where the bullets are coming," he explained. LaJoe refused Lafayette's request to let him go after his brother. She couldn't even go herself. The guns kept crackling.

Lafayette's friend James, who was cowering behind a nearby tree, sprinted for the Riverses' apartment. Pharoah saw him and ran, too. The two frantically pounded with their fists on the metal door. "Let us in!" James wailed. "Let us in! It's James and Pharoah!" James's heart was beating so hard that he could hear it above the commotion. But with all the noise, no one heard their frenzied pleas, and the two ran to a friend's apartment upstairs.

Meanwhile, the police, who at first thought they were the targets of the shooting, had taken cover in their cars and in the building's breezeway. Passersby lay motionless on the ground, protected by parked vehicles and a snow-cone vending stand. Then, as suddenly as it began, the battle ended. No one, amazingly, had been hurt. Lafayette learned later that one errant bullet pierced a friend's third-floor window with such force that it cut through a closed door and lodged in the cinder-block wall.

The police made no arrests. And when a reporter called the police department's central headquarters the next day, he was told that there was no record of the shoot-out.

But Lafayette knew. So did Pharoah.

THOUGH ONLY four years old at the time, LaJoe forever remembered the day she and her family moved into the Henry Horner Homes. It was October 15, 1956, Monday.

The complex was so new that some of the buildings had yet to be completed. Thick patches of mud ran where the sidewalks should have been. A thin, warped plank of wood substituted for the unbuilt steps.

But to LaJoe and her brothers and sisters, it all looked dazzling. The building's brand-new bricks were a deep and luscious red, and they were smooth and solid to the touch. The clean windows reflected the day's movements with a shimmering clarity that gave the building an almost magical quality. Even the two unfinished buildings, one to the west and one to the south, their concrete frames still exposed, appeared stately.

It was quiet and peaceful; there were not even any passersby. On this unusually warm fall day—the temperature topped 70 degrees by noon—LaJoe could even hear the shrill songs of the sparrows. The building, 1920 West Washington, stood empty. They were to be the first family to occupy one of its sixty-five apartments.

LaJoe's father, Roy Anderson, pulled the car and its trailer up to the building's back entrance. He was a ruggedly handsome man whose steely stare belied his affable nature and his affection for children. He and his wife, Lelia Mae, had been eagerly awaiting this move. They and their thirteen children, including three sets of twins, had been living in a spacious five-bedroom apartment, but the coal-heated flat got so cold in the winter that the pipes frequently froze. On those days they fetched their water from a fire hydrant. The apartment was above a Baptist church, and there were times when the rooms overflowed with the wailings of funerals or the joyful songs accompanying baptisms. And the building canted to the east, so whenever a truck passed, the floors and walls shook vigorously, sometimes scaring the children into thinking the entire structure might collapse.

For Lelia Mae and Roy their south side apartment seemed adequate enough. Both had come from the shacks and the shanties of the South. Lelia Mae had left Charleston, West Virginia, at the age of twenty in 1937. Her father had been a coal miner and a part-time preacher for the Ebenezer Baptist Church. She headed for Chicago, where she'd been told she could make good money. Her older sister, who had moved to Chicago a few years earlier, promised Lelia Mae to get her a job in the laundry where she worked. Once in Chicago, Lelia Mae, already divorced and with one child, met her second husband, Roy, who worked in one of the city's numerous steel mills. Roy hailed from Camden, Arkansas, where his father had been the deacon of a Baptist church. Roy was a spiffy dresser whose trademark was a small Stetson; he balanced with astounding ease on his large, dignified head.

The two had raised their family in the second-floor Chicago apartment above the church, but their home was to be demolished to make way for a university building, part of the new Illinois Institute of Technology, and they had to move. They were given the opportunity to move into public housing, the grand castles being built for the nation's urban poor.

In the middle and late 1950s, publicly financed high-rise complexes sprang up across the country like dandelions in a rainy spring. In 1949, Congress, in addressing a postwar housing crisis, had authorized loans and subsidies to construct 810,000 units of low-rent housing units.

nationwide. At the time, it was viewed as an impressive effort to provide shelter for the less fortunate.

But the program's controversial beginnings were an ominous sign of what lay ahead. White politicians wanted neither poor nor black families in their communities, and they resisted the publicly financed housing. In over seventy communities, public housing opponents brought the issue before the electorate in referenda. In California, voters amended the state constitution so that all public housing projects required their approval. In Detroit, a 14,350-unit public housing program was reduced when a public housing opponent was elected mayor. In Chicago, the opposition was fierce. The city's aldermen first bullied the state legislature into giving them the power of selecting public housing sites, a prerogative that had previously belonged to the local housing authority.

Then a group of leading aldermen, who were not above petty vindictiveness, chartered a bus to tour the city in search of potential sites. On the bus ride, they told reporters that they were out to seek vengeance against the Chicago Housing Authority and the seven aldermen who supported public housing, and they chose sites in neighborhoods represented by these aldermen. Like prankish teenagers, they selected the most outrageous of possibilities, including the tennis courts at the University of Chicago and a parcel of land that sat smack in the middle of a major local highway. The message was clear: the CHA and its liberal backers could build public housing but not in their back yards.

The complexes were not, in the end, built at these sites. Instead, they were constructed on the edges of the city's black ghettos. Rather than providing alternatives to what had become decrepit living conditions, public housing became anchors for existing slums. And because there were few sites available, the housing authority had no alternative but to build up rather than out. So the ghettos grew toward the heavens, and public housing became a bulwark of urban segregation.

On the city's near west side, on the periphery of one of the city's black ghettos, was built the Henry Horner Homes. The complex of sixteen high-rises bore the name of an Illinois governor best known for his obsession with Abraham Lincoln and his penchant for bucking the Chicago Democratic machine.

The buildings were constructed on the cheap. There were no lobbies to speak of, only the open breezeways. There was no communication system from the breezeways to the tenants. During the city's harsh winters, elevator cables froze; in one year alone the housing authority in Chicago needed to make over fifteen-hundred elevator repairs. And that was in just one development.

The trash chutes within each building were too narrow to handle the garbage of all the tenants. The boiler systems continually broke down. There were insufficient overhead lighting installations and wall outlets in each unit. And the medicine cabinet in each apartment's bathroom was not only easily removed, but was connected to the medicine chest in the adjoining apartment. Over the years, residents had been robbed, assaulted, and even murdered by people crawling through their medicine cabinet.

When a group of Soviet housing officials visited Henry Horner in October of 1955, while it was still under construction, they were appalled that the walls in the apartments were made of cinder block. Why not build plastered walls, they suggested. "We would be thrown off our jobs in Moscow if we left unfinished walls like this," I. K. Kozvilia, minister of city and urban

construction in the Soviet Union, told local reporters.

“In the American way of doing things,” huffed *The Chicago Daily News* in an editorial the next day, “there is little use for luxury in building subsidized low-cost housing.” It was no surprise, then, that thirteen years later a federal report on public housing would describe Henry Horner and the city’s other developments as “remindful of gigantic filing cabinets with separate cubicles for each human household.”

But on this day, LaJoe and her siblings were bubbling over with joy at the sight of the new home. It was, after all, considerably prettier and sturdier and warmer than the flat they’d left behind. Before their father could unload the rented trailer and hand his children the picnic table, which he planned to use in the kitchen, and the cots, which he hoped to replace soon with bunk beds, they ran into the newly finished building. He and his wife could only smile at the children’s excitement.

LaJoe’s older sister, LaGreta, then seven, urged the others into the apartment. As LaJoe scurried through the open doorway, they counted off the five bedrooms in delighted giggles. They were struck by the apartment’s immensity; the hallway seemed to go on forever, one room following another and another and another. What’s more, the freshly painted walls shone a glistening white; even the brown linoleum floors had a luster to them. The youngest children found the coziness of the doorless closets inviting; LaJoe’s infant twin brothers spent much of the first day playing in one. And because of the apartment’s first-floor location, the older children quickly learned, they could exit through the windows, a route they would use in their teens when they wanted to leave unseen by their mother.

In those early years, the children of Horner thrived. LaJoe and LaGreta joined the Girl Scouts. They attended dances and roller-skating parties in their building’s basement. They delighted in the new playground, which boasted swings, sliding boards, and a jungle gym. Their brothers frequented the project’s grass baseball diamond, which was regularly mowed.

All of them spent time at the spanking new Boys Club, which had a gym and in later years an indoor Olympic-size swimming pool. On Friday nights, the family attended fish fries. LaJoe joined the 250-member Drum and Bugle Corps, a group so popular among the area youth that some came from two miles away to participate. The marching teenagers, attired in white shirts, thin black ties, and black jackets, were a common sight in city parades.

The Anderson children were exposed to politics as well. Their mother was active in the local Democratic Party, and politicians, from aldermen to United States senators, would visit the complex and on occasion stop by the Andersons’ home. Elected officials paid attention to the people’s concerns. They had to. People were well organized. In the 1960s, area residents formed the Miles Square Federation, which vigorously fought for better schools and health clinics. The Black Panthers’ city headquarters was only a few blocks from Horner. Martin Luther King, Jr., on his visits to the city would preach at the First Congregational Baptist Church.

Nurtured by a strong sense of community as well as the programs at the Boys Club and other social agencies, Henry Horner boasted numerous success stories: an executive at a *Fortune* 500 company, a principal of one of the city’s top parochial schools, the medical director of a nearby hospital, and a professor at a local university.

On that first day at Horner, the Anderson family knew only hope and pride. The future seemed bright. The moment, particularly for the children, was nearly blissful. Lelia Ma

made doughnuts to celebrate and played Sam Cooke and Nat King Cole albums on her hi-fi through the evening. That night, in one of the back bedrooms, the sisters lay on their narrow cots and stared out the windows. Because there was no one yet living in the building and few streetlights, they could clearly see the moon and the stars. They had their very own window on the universe.

LaJoe held on tightly to those early memories because so much had since gone sour. By the 1970s, the housing authority ran out of money to paint the apartments. The cinder-block walls became permanently smudged and dirty. The building's bricks faded. The windows had collected too heavy a coat of grime to reflect much of anything. In 1975, someone, to this day unknown, strangled one of LaJoe's grown sisters in her bathtub. The oldest brother, home on leave from the Marines, died of a heart attack that day on hearing the news. LaJoe's parents moved out of Horner because of the murder. Roy died of bone cancer in 1982.

LaJoe hadn't moved far since that fall day in 1956; she was just down the hall, where she now lived with Lafayette, Pharoah, her two oldest sons, Paul and Terence, and the triplets.

"When I got my apartment I thought this is what it was meant to be," she said thirty-one years later. "I never looked any further than here. It wasn't like it is now. The grass was greener. We had light poles on the front of the building. We had little yellow flowers. We had it all. I really thought this was it. And I never knew, until I lost it all, that it wasn't."

By 1987, the thirty-four acre Henry Horner complex wasn't the largest of the city's nineteen public housing developments. That title went to the two-mile long Robert Taylor Homes, which was home to fifteen thousand people. Nor was Henry Horner the most dangerous. That distinction alternately went to Rockwell Gardens, a neighboring complex, and Cabrini-Green, which in 1981 was the site of so many shootings—eleven killed and thirty-seven wounded in the first two months—that the city's mayor, Jane Byrne, chose to move in. Along with a contingent of police and bodyguards, she stayed for three weeks to help restore order. Some, including LaJoe, viewed the move as gutsy and brave. But this single act by Byrne, more than any murder or plea for help, highlighted the isolation and alienation of these poor, mostly black inner-city islands. It was as if the mayor, with her entourage of police, advisers, and reporters, had deigned to visit some distant and perilous Third World country—except that Cabrini-Green sat barely eight blocks from the mayor's posh Gold Coast apartment.

Henry Horner's buildings range from seven to fifteen stories and cover eight blocks. The architect surely had an easy time designing the development, for it is only one block wide, leaving little room for experimentation with the placement of the high-rises. The buildings, with a few exceptions, line each side of the block, leaving the corridor in between for playground equipment, basketball courts, and parking lots. A narrow street once cut through the development's midsection, but that has long since been displaced and is now part of the concrete play area. At first that pleased the parents, who worried about their children getting hit by speeding cars, but later it served to isolate parts of the complex even more, making it easier for criminals to operate with impunity.

In the summer of 1987, six thousand people lived at Horner, four thousand of them children. They would quickly tell you that they dared not venture out at night. At Horner, for every one thousand residents there were approximately forty violent crimes reported, a rate nearly twice that of Chicago's average.

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